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Re-inventing college for prisons

Two ex-inmates are trying to bring higher education to the incarcerated, one maximum security facility at a time

BY GRAHAM KATES



(Credit: [Eduardo Ramirez Sanchez](#) via [Shutterstock](#))

This article originally appeared on [The Crime Report](#), the nation's largest criminal justice news source.

At the height of the tough-on-crime era in the mid-1990s, prisoners in New York State seeking access to college-level courses were dealt a one-two punch that seemed to deliver a crushing blow to inmate higher education.

When then-President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994, he revoked inmate access to federal Pell grants. In 1995, New York Governor George Pataki followed suit, eliminating Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) funding for prisoners in the state.



For Kathy Boudin, at the time an inmate of the maximum security Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, it seemed like college programs “disappeared

overnight.”

“When college was removed, instead of having a line of people walking to school, we had people sitting up in the day rooms playing cards, playing dominoes, getting in fights,” said Boudin, now the director of the Columbia University School of Social Work’s Criminal Justice Initiative.

Boudin — a former member of the counterrevolutionary group Weather Underground who served 22 years for her role in an armored truck heist that left three dead — and other inmates were determined to complement the prison’s GED program with a college education.

After the program's launch in 1997, similar initiatives were started by New York's Sing Sing prison and Bard College. Their successful struggle ultimately brought college back to a dozen prisons throughout New York, and helped form the backbone of a decade's worth of inmate education advocacy. Today, there are programs that bring college to prison in half a dozen states.

Boudin and Cheryl Wilkins, also a former inmate at Bedford Hills and the Criminal Justice Initiative's Associate Director, spoke to a group of graduate students and faculty at New York University on Wednesday night about their experiences creating an inmate college program after the Pell and TAP grants were revoked.

From the start, it was apparent that their movement would have its detractors.

Opposition from guards

Corrections officers weren't thrilled that prisoners were trying to get free education while guards had difficulty paying for their own kids to go to college (inmates eventually set up a scholarship fund for one officer's child).

Pataki appeared unlikely to allow any public funding for inmate education.

So inmates crafted a plan to attract donations from the wealthy liberal neighbors of their Westchester prison and set up classes through a "consortium" of different schools. Ultimately, Pace University, Vassar College and others allowed professors to teach. Manhattan Marymount College agreed to confer diplomas to successful inmates.

Inside the prison, administrative support was vital.

Classes inherently violated a prison-wide ban at Bedford on gatherings of more than three inmates, based on concerns that inmates might form conspiratorial groups. With that in mind, inmates presented education to the administrators as vital to the management and security of the prison.

Their efforts to identify and attract key stakeholders — such as the prison's superintendent and local churches — eventually became a template for other start-up advocacy initiatives.

But one stakeholder group was unusually easy to influence: the prisoners themselves.

"We had a captive audience," Wilkins recalled. "You're down in the mess hall; we're going to talk about college. I don't care where you go, we're going to talk about it.

"It became a thing where women were in the weight room studying; women were in the yard studying."

Wary of Public Attention

Women began enrolling in Bedford Hills' new privately funded college program in the spring of 1997. At first, prison officials and the colleges involved kept the program quiet, explaining they wanted to study the program's effects on recidivism.

In September 2001, Boudin joined researchers at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York to publish *Changing Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum Security Prison*. Their study — which was funded in part by the New York State Department of Corrections — reported a 7.7 percent 36-month re-incarceration rate among inmates who attend college in prison.

The re-incarceration rate among those who had not attended college while in prison was nearly four times higher: 29.9 percent.

However, inmates themselves were skeptical at first about the quality of education they were getting. Wilkins remembers wondering whether the courses she took were rigorous enough to equip her for further study after she was released.

“I earned my bachelor’s degree, but did I get a quality education? I was scared to death,” Wilkins said.

But in her first post-graduate class at New York University (NYU), she got an ‘A-’.

Wilkins said many inmate students who followed in her footsteps have also pursued social work after college.

John Molina — a former inmate at Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York and a current NYU graduate student — hopes ex-prisoners who weren’t lucky enough to get schooled while incarcerated, can get the same opportunity outside of prison.

“A lot of (former inmates) want to go to colleges like Empire State College, that give ‘life experience credits,’ but it’s one of those schools that has ‘the box,’ Molina said during a Wednesday phone interview.

Checking the ‘Box’

He was referring to the box on most college applications where prospective students are asked to check “Yes” or “No” next to the question: “Have you ever been convicted of a crime?”

Boudin and Wilkins consider removal of “the box” one of the next challenges in the movement to improve inmate educational access.

Before enrolling at NYU, Molina was a mentor with the non-profit College Initiative, an organization that helps former inmates seek opportunities in higher education, where he helped former prisoners navigate the labyrinthine process needed to get past the box.

It’s a months-long process that involves revealing one’s entire rap sheet, securing recommendations from often-overburdened parole officers and even lengthy interviews with a school’s head of security.

To Molina, who says former inmates are often the most driven to succeed in college, it’s a fundamentally flawed process.

“There really is no empirical evidence (supporting) this policy,” Molina said. “They’re just arbitrarily putting up a roadblock for the incarcerated.”