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**David Skorton and Glenn Altschuler**, Contributor

We have spent our adult lives in higher education and write about it.

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# College Behind Bars: How Educating Prisoners Pays Off

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Ithaca, NY, where Cornell's main campus is located, is less than an hour's drive from four maximum-security state prisons for men. Proximity has led to a partnership among institutions of higher education, New York State and a philanthropic foundation that offers some of these men the chance to earn an associate's college degree—and the benefits extend well beyond improving individual lives.

More than half of all inmates in the United States serve maximum sentences of less than eight years, and many are released well before their sentences are completed. In New York State, forty percent of all inmates who are released will wind up back in prison within three years. An inmate's ability to make it on the outside depends on whether he is returning to a stable family, whether he

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has mental health or substance abuse issues, and on his education a

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Not surprisingly, newly released inmates are far more likely than other job applicants to be high school dropouts — and a high school diploma may not be enough. A Georgetown [study](#) predicts that half of all jobs created this decade will require some postsecondary education.

The stakes are high, and not just for the inmates. A [study](#) of Missouri's prisoners showed that reincarceration rates “were nearly cut in half for former inmates with a full-time job compared to similar inmates who are unemployed.” Every inmate who leaves the system saves that state an average of \$25,000 per year. Nationwide, more than 650,000 people were released from state prisons in 2010. By cutting the reincarceration rate in half, \$2.7 billion per year could be saved. Former inmates with jobs also have less need for public assistance and contribute to society, in the form of taxes and purchasing power.

The Missouri study also shows that inmates' chances of finding full-time employment are greatly enhanced if they complete an education in prison. A 2005 [analysis](#) of 15 other such studies found that, on average, reincarceration rates for participants in prison education programs were 46 percent lower than for non-participants.

Between 1972 and 1995 inmates who were not sentenced to death or life without parole could apply for Pell Grants and state funds such as New York's Tuition Assistance Program to help offset the cost of prison education. Early in the 1990s there were 350 postsecondary prison programs in 37 states. But inmate eligibility was withdrawn in the get-tough-on-crime decade. By 2005, only a dozen prisons had postsecondary programs, most of them a patchwork of volunteer efforts by individual colleges and universities.

Two of those prisons are served by the Cornell Prison Education Program. CPEP sends Cornell faculty and students to [Auburn](#) Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison, and the medium-security Cayuga Correctional Facility. (There are no women's prisons near Ithaca.) The program is the culmination of work begun by English professor Winthrop “Pete” Wetherbee who, without funding, began teaching in the Auburn prison in the mid-1990s.



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In 2008, Cornell made an agreement with Cayuga Community College (CCC): Cornell waives tuition and fees; CPEP supplies instructors and pays for books, school supplies and the program's administration; and CCC grants associate degrees.

Today CPEP offers for-credit courses to nearly 100 men per year at Auburn and Cayuga Correctional Facility, on subjects ranging from genetics and poetry to economics and medical anthropology. In a typical semester, about a dozen Cornell faculty members and graduate students make the two hour round trip to teach the courses, aided by 40-50 undergraduate teaching assistants. All but the graduate students, who receive a small stipend, teach voluntarily.

When visiting the program, we found students hungry for an education and grateful for their efforts. "These men are quite extraordinary," said Richard Polenberg, a Cornell emeritus professor and award-winning teacher who taught a constitutional history course at Auburn. "They are very, very well behaved in the classroom and they ask really good questions."

CPEP is supported by a \$180,000-a-year grant from the Sunshine Lady Foundation, which was founded by Doris Buffett, sister of investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett. Cornell waives tuition, provides office space, and makes a modest financial contribution.

Given the relatively low cost—roughly \$1,800 per CPEP student—and manifold benefits, it's hard to fathom why there isn't a national, fully funded prison education program in every facility.

As Mary Katzenstein, the Government and American Studies professor who secured Sunshine Lady funding, points out, "Ninety-five percent of men and women in prison are released to society. Do we want people returning who have learned only to hone the tricks of the trade, or do we want people coming back to our neighborhoods who have had a chance to learn the kind of analytical skills and be exposed to the ethical values that a liberal arts education is able to impart?"

CPEP also provides administrative and security staff from seven different facilities the opportunity to earn Cornell credits. In addition to this benefit,

prison education appears to increase the safety of the corrections officers  
 b **FORBES** women inmates are productively occupied while  
 incarcerated and recruit other prisoners to the program.

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CPEP hosted its first [graduation ceremony](#) in Auburn last June. During the deeply moving commencement, fifteen inmates received diplomas in front of an audience that included their family members, New York State Corrections Commissioner Brian Fischer, and Doris Buffett.

“I was struck by the dedication of the participants, the faculty, the students and the administration,” Buffett said. “The men are determined to use this opportunity to make better lives for themselves and their families.”

“Education is not the only avenue toward recovering and protecting one’s dignity in prison, but it is a major one,” wrote Matthew Spellberg, who taught comparative literature in a New Jersey prison as a graduate student at Princeton. “Done right, it offers a modicum of the authority required of a person for self-creation: It makes a person in some modest way master of his or her own mind.”

“For once I can prove my ability to do good, to exercise discipline and increase my adaptability,” inmate student Christopher Shaphard declared.

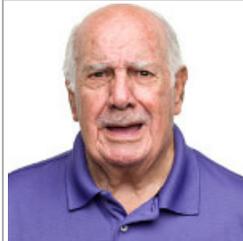
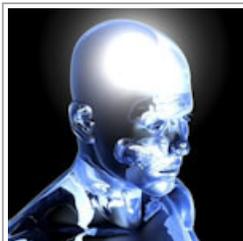
With its stunningly high rate of incarceration (716 individuals per 100,000 compared to 76–154 in Western Europe and 114 in Canada), our country needs more programs like CPEP. They offer a humane, comparatively cheap and effective alternative to the discipline-and-punish approach that all too often breeds only hopelessness and recidivism.

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