

Taxes at Work: Nonprofits help inmates earn a second chance

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Taconic Correctional Facility inmate Melissa Polonio answers a question March 3 during an anthropology class as part of Bard College's prison education program. / Joe Larese/The Journal News

Written by

Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy

Anthony Cardenales was in solitary confinement for fighting with fellow inmates when his 8-year-old daughter came to visit.

She had been having behavioral issues, and he tried advising her to stay calm.

“But that’s what you do, you get into fights, Daddy,” the Nyack resident recalled her saying.

That was the moment he decided he had to change. At 23, Cardenales was serving a 17-year sentence for homicide.

Now an executive at Mount Vernon-based Hugo Neu Recycling, one of the biggest recycling companies in the world, Cardenales said getting a college degree in prison led to his “internal transformation.”

Last month, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced a statewide initiative to give inmates the opportunity to earn college degrees. New York currently spends \$60,000 a year per prisoner and, upon release, about 40 percent of them return to crime. The state estimates it would cost \$5,000 to provide a year of college education per inmate, over two to three years. Research shows that offering college degrees reduces recidivism rates dramatically. According to the Bard Prison Initiative, a program run by the elite liberal arts college, of which Cardenales is an alumnus, recidivism is less than 4 percent for all students who have enrolled, and 2.5 percent for graduates. Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison has a recidivism rate of less than two percent for its graduates.

In 1999, at Shawangunk Correctional Facility in Ulster County, Cardenales received 36 college credits through a program conducted by the New York Theological Seminary. In 2003, when he was transferred to Woodbourne in Sullivan County, he earned associate and bachelor’s degrees from Bard.

When he was released in 2009, at age 34, he’d spent more than half his life behind bars. By August of that year, he was hired by Hugo Neu as a project coordinator for \$47,000 a year. The owners of the company, John and Wendy Kelman, have been big supporters of Bard’s mission. Since 2009, the company has hired 12 former inmates.

There is a hunger to do better that pushes former prisoners, Cardenales said.

“It’s very difficult. There is always a stigma that remains,” he said. “No matter how much you try, the perception remains. But you also know that failure is not an option. And education gives you hope.”

Funds dry up

A 1994 federal ban on Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, along with a 1995 state ban on Tuition Assistance Program grant eligibility, decimated in-prison education. Nationally, postsecondary correctional education programs fell from 350 to eight, and in New York from 70 to four, according to the Education from the Inside Out Coalition, a national nonprofit that promotes higher education in prisons.

In 1986, when Sean Pica was arrested at age 16 for killing a classmate’s father, he says he assumed prison would be nothing but a “cell and a bed.”

“I was not even sure I could survive a 24-year prison sentence. But to go there and see guys carrying textbooks and having dialogues about Nietzsche, I was surprised by that,” said Pica. “I was also intrigued, and thought that maybe I could do it myself.”

At the Cocksackie Correctional Facility in Greene County, Pica took his GED, and then pre-college and some college programs, all the while thinking he was not “college material.”

By 1994, Pica had amassed 118 college credits. But when the Pell and TAP grants dried up, he was unable to translate his credits into a degree program.

“What we saw was not just the colleges leave, but the hope in the prisons leave. There was a physical feeling of hope being extinguished in those prisons where the colleges left,” he said.

Soon after that, five Sing Sing inmates reached out to religious and academic volunteers for assistance. In 1998, the Hudson Link program — from which Pica received his bachelor’s degree — was created with Nyack College, which donated its services for free. Over the years, the program garnered private donations, and many more schools, including Mercy College, joined the consortium. Pica earned his first master’s from the New York Theological Seminary while still in prison.

“I expected nothing from it. I expected the society I was going back to to see me as someone who spent nearly two decades in prison and not get past that, no matter what I had attained,” said Pica, a White Plains resident who is now the executive director of Hudson Link. “I walked out of that place with only a college diploma. That’s the only thing I needed, and people were very forgiving.”

The proposal

Cuomo’s plan would provide college-level education at 10 state prisons in different regions of New York. There are currently 54,000 inmates in the system, and about \$3.6 billion a year is spent to operate the prisons. The state’s deputy secretary for civil rights, Alphonso David, the governor’s point person for the initiative, said Cuomo was “focused on recidivism and saving taxpayer dollars.”

“We spend \$60,000 on incarcerating an individual. We can reduce that cost because people will not be returning to prison,” said David. “We can either decide to do nothing at all and pay a lot more money, or work collaboratively to reduce the incentive for those coming back.”

Aspects of the initiative are still being fine-tuned before the state solicits proposals from educational associations, said David. For instance, the program will not be available to inmates serving life sentences, he said.

State Sen. Greg Ball, R-Patterson, an outspoken critic of the plan, suggested focusing on GEDs and trade skills for inmates.

“We live in a world of finite resources and, if it’s a choice between helping kids or convicts, that’s a simple one for me,” said Ball. “Instead of creating Attica University, let’s take these resources and redirect them to blue-collar kids from working families who have earned a hand up. I embrace the work currently being done by not-for-profits and not at taxpayer expense.”

Currently, all college programs in New York prisons are funded privately. But that will not last forever, said Max Kenner who, as an undergraduate at Bard, founded the Bard Prison Initiative in 1999.

“We run a college with no endowment, for which there’s no government money,” said Kenner, now the executive director of the initiative. “That’s an insane business model. Every semester is an existential question. We can never guarantee that we can continue the program as it exists.”

Bruce Western, a professor of sociology and criminal justice policy at Harvard, said the proposed initiative was a “great public safety strategy.” He pointed to a RAND Corp. study, released last year, that consistently found a correlation between correctional educational programs and recidivism. The study, which analyzed data from 1980 to 2011, found that, on average, inmates who participated in education programs had 43 percent lower odds of landing back in prison.

“This initiative would be filling a very important need on safety grounds, on cost-benefit grounds, and it is simply the right thing to do,” said Western.

Class visit

On a recent afternoon, Bard Prison Initiative professor Emily Sogn discussed the underlying themes of “The Gift” by the French sociologist Marcel Mauss with a small class of female inmates at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford. A lively debate ensued about the social theories of reciprocity and gift exchange in cultures around the world.

Jennell Nesbitt, who has spent close to 10 years behind bars for burglary and related crimes, said education behind bars had transformed her.

“The first year, I was numb. Didn’t feel anything. I was 20 when I was arrested,” said Nesbitt, who will complete her associate degree in June. “The first two years, I was not really interested in doing my GED, but by the third year, I was motivated, my outlook changed. I was intrigued by the seriousness of the staff. This was not a job, it was for our advancement.

“I finally believe that I am better than my one mistake,” said Nesbitt, who is scheduled to be released in October. “I feel like I am not bound by my past.”