

Think Progress - Meet The Prisoner On A Crusade To Improve Education Behind Bars

2/24/2016

When he was a high school senior, getting an education wasn't a top priority for Chris Zoukis. He was more interested in booze and cocaine. So when he was busted for downloading child pornography, forced to drop out of school, and convicted, Zoukis wasn't concerned about not receiving a diploma. He likely wouldn't have graduated anyway.

"Looking at substance abuse, the mind of a drug addict doesn't absorb things very well. So it took me a while, even in prison, before I started paying attention to the future and what I needed," he told ThinkProgress. But after participating in rehabilitation classes for substance abuse and addiction, he was ready to make some big changes in his life — starting with furthering his education.

Zoukis is now getting ready to graduate with a B.A. in interdisciplinary studies with an emphasis in business and law. He's written three books about the prison system and founded two websites to help prisoners find education and legal resources.

And he's done it all behind bars.

Besides having limited internet access and minimal connection with the outside world, the prison where he lives has retaliated against Zoukis for his work. He's been thrown into solitary confinement for five months, had his email and telephone privileges taken away for three and two and a half years, respectfully, and had commissary and visitation privileges taken away for months each.

But he wouldn't let the facility bully him into giving up his goals.

"Losing all of my 20s to prison...mentally I wasn't able to allow myself to lose that. I needed to do something to improve my lot in life," he said during a 15-minute, monitored phone call from Federal Correctional Institution Petersburg, a medium-security prison in Virginia.

An Unfulfilled Thirst For Knowledge

Multiple studies identify education as one of the best long-term investments for people behind bars, as well as the general public. A 2013 study from the nonpartisan RAND Corporation concluded that prisoners who took part in education programming were 43 percent less likely to recidivate, or reoffend, than ones who did not. The likelihood of securing a job after leaving prison was 13 percent higher. Similarly, inmates who participated in vocational training programs had a 28 percent higher chance of finding postrelease employment than those who did not. And having a job decreases the likelihood of ending up behind bars again, which then drives down prison costs.

Indeed, for every dollar invested in prison education, the government saves \$5.

In 2003, the Justice Department discovered that 40 percent of state prisoners hadn't completed high school. An American Economic Review study found that for every year a student can stay in school, violent crime drops 30 percent. Completing high school drastically reduces a black student's likelihood of going to prison.

Yet with all of the data pointing to education as a solution to the country's mass incarceration problems, little is being done to help prisoners excel academically. Compared to most inmates, Zoukis is an anomaly.

The prison he ended up in did offer a GED program, which he took advantage of. But that was the extent of the education services the facility had to offer, and he was forced to research outside courses. After an intense search process, which required writing and sending countless letters to schools across the country, Zoukis finally found a distance learning opportunity that would allow him to pursue higher education. Through Adams State University in Colorado (an institution that specifically offers courses for prisoners), he received an actual high school diploma, took theology and paralegal classes, and enrolled in an accredited B.A. program.

He also has his eyes set on earning an MBA by the time he's released.

There are many people in Zoukis' position who have a thirst for knowledge. But the vast majority of prisons don't have a fully functional education system — complete with teachers, books, learning tools, and institutional support.

In the same way that states are in charge of establishing K-12 curricula, every state controls its own prison education program. Most lack the funding to develop robust programs. And outside alternatives, such as Adams State's, cost too much for every prisoner to participate.

Prison education spending was slashed during the Recession. The RAND study concluded that states' prison education was cut 6 percent on average, between 2009 and 2012. Medium-sized states cut their prison education budgets by an average of 20 percent, and large states decreased theirs by an average of 10 percent.

As a result of those cuts, facilities dropped course offerings and teachers. The number of students enrolled in the remaining classes also plummeted.

Until last July, when the Obama administration lifted a Congressional ban that's prevented the government from distributing Pell grants to prisoners since 1994, people in federal and state prisons couldn't access financial aid to complete outside college classes.

Today, the programs that do exist are constantly under threat of budget cuts. The executive director of Maryland's Correctional Education Association, Stephen Steurer, told the Huffington Post that prison education is an "easy" option for states looking to trim their budgets, because prisoners don't have a political voice.

But funding isn't the only barrier that inmates face. Prison education also suffers from a lack of buy-in from people who don't want to use their own tax dollars to fund prisoners' personal endeavors.

"Why does that average American care about a prisoner improving their lot in life? They probably don't — until it affects them," Zoukis said. "It's hard to convince prison staff and guards that education is the answer. Emotionally, it's the question of 'Why should they get a college degree when I can't?'"

Capitalizing on Creative Thinking

According to Zoukis, who's spent years figuring out how correctional education can be improved, reform requires creative teaching solutions and ways to generate support for learning.

College Level Examination Programs (CLEP) are an option, for example. CLEP is a form of "teaching to the test," meaning students learn what they need to pass standardized examinations. While this approach has been criticized for forcing teachers to follow a rigid curriculum in traditional schools and discouraging critical thinking, Zoukis argues that any education in prison is better than none at all. Access is key and CLEP gives prisoners a chance to learn. Students can also minimize costs by sharing books and other materials if they're studying the same coursework.

Technology can also play a bigger role.

Inmates can use computers to take their classes so that prisons don't have to shell out thousands of dollars for instructors. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are easily accessible. And in 2015, an inmate at the Attica Correctional Facility wrote a New York Times op-ed pleading for the opportunity to stream them on TV.

"What if, a few times a week, massive open online courses, or MOOCs, were streamed on the prison's internal station, channel 3?" John J. Lennon wrote. "Companies like Coursera already record university lectures — in subjects like psychology, sociology, existentialism, economics and political science — and stream them online for free. The MOOCs, which are free for the rest of the world, could help American prisoners become more educated and connected."

Prison classes should also be extended to corrections staff, as an incentive to get them on board with expanding education opportunities, says Zoukis.

Ultimately, he believes that change should be top-down. The lawmakers who embrace criminal justice reform should focus on low-cost learning opportunities.

"My pie-in-the-sky idea is to use a program that's already successful, like Adams State University, and find a way to fund it so that prisoners wherever can do it through correspondence, because it doesn't require technology," he said. "The government can certainly afford a \$500 a course for a prisoner, as opposed to spending 30, 40, \$50,000 for a single educator who can only teach 12 people at a time."

Until prisons and legislators prioritize education, people like Zoukis who crave an education have to forge their own paths.

"I have people who come up to me all the time saying 'Hey I want to do something. What can I do?' and my hands are tied," he explained. "All I can really tell them is 'Hey read some of these textbooks. You can get a free college education, only you won't get a credential.' The problem is that there's no great carrot there."

To help other prisoners in search of educational opportunities, Zoukis created PrisonEducation.com — a database of correspondence schools, tips for choosing degrees and coursework, prison news, fact sheets, and useful publications about criminal justice.

“Prison education can change lives. It has done so,” he said. However, “[a] person who’s getting a college degree or vocational certification is the exception, not the rule. How can you compete in the real world with that?”