

The Mohawk Consortium College-in-Prison Program (MCC)

(Initiated by Doran Larson, Professor of Literature & Creative Writing, Hamilton College.)

Rationale

The United States today holds 2.37 million Americans in jails and prisons¹—the highest incarceration rate of any nation on earth. A major reason for this extraordinary number is that American prisons fail miserably at the mission of rehabilitation, with recidivism rates that average 67.2% across the nation.²

Post-secondary education has been shown to be the most effective way to reduce recidivism. Recidivism rates for inmates who earn two-year, Associates degrees run as low as 13.7%.³ Community colleges—due to their wide distribution and low costs—are the logical, local sources of logistical support for any comprehensive effort to reduce the size of the prison population through reduction of rates of re-offense. And such reduction-through-education does more than simply reduce prison populations. It can help restore the educated man- and womanpower that the nation’s most troubled communities need in order to help themselves out of the cycle of ghetto to prison to ghetto to prison—a cycle that one critic has characterized as a transfer of labor potential from the “ethnoracial prison of the ghetto” to the “judicial ghetto” of the prison.⁴

The Plan offered below has been conceived to operate at minimal cost so that it can be reproduced anywhere in the nation where there exists a viable geographical proximity between a prison, a community college, and a critical mass of other institutions of higher education. It can thus serve as a model for community colleges, private colleges, universities, and prison systems across the nation.

The Plan

Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC) is the college of academic record for the Mohawk Consortium College-in-Prison Program (MCC). The MCC delivers courses that fit into MVCC’s General Studies curriculum and will lead to students earning an Associate of Science degree.

The MCC started in January 2014 and offered seven courses over three terms: Spring, Summer, and Fall. Each course enrolled twelve men, for a total of eighty-four seats available for incarcerated students in the first calendar year. (There was a combination of full-and part-time enrollees, determined by chosen men’s preparedness for academic work.) Three courses were

¹ See Bureau of Justice Statistics website; rate for 2002.

² See Bureau of Justice Statistics website; rate for 2002.

³ “Review of Various Outcome Studies Relating Prison Education to Reduced Recidivism,” Tracy *et al*, Windham School System, State of Texas, 1994. See Appendix A.

⁴ Loic Wacquant. “The New ‘peculiar institution’: On the prison as surrogate ghetto.” *Theoretical Criminology*. 2008. 4:3Vol. 4(3): 383. On the power of higher education in prison to improve community health, see Human Impact Partners, *Turning on the TAP: How Returning Access to Tuition Assistance for Incarcerated People Improves the Health of New Yorkers*. Oakland, CA. 2015.

offered in the Spring, and four in the Summer of 2015. With new funding from the state of New York, the program will mount four or five courses in Fall.

A Minimal-Cost Funding Plan

MVCC currently offers “dual credit” courses to local high school seniors. Students in dual credit courses do not pay MVCC tuition because the costs of course delivery are covered by high schools. MVCC offers such credit to imprisoned students. On the dual credit model, courses delivered by faculty from regional colleges and universities *other* than MVCC can be run without tuition payments to MVCC. Such faculty are paid by faculty members’ home institutions (as what colleges call ‘course releases’—see below), or volunteer their time, thus incurring no costs for MVCC. However, MVCC’s faculty union contract stipulates that MVCC faculty has first choice of courses within the MVCC curriculum; courses so staffed incur tuition costs. Funding to cover this contingency has been secured from the Sunshine Lady Foundation for a pilot period of four years or eight semesters. It is acceptable to the MVCC faculty union that the MCC entail a combination of MVCC and other, regional faculty, potentially expanding the MCC offerings without going beyond the \$28,080 per academic year needed for tuition to run the program.

Regional Commitments

Hamilton College has already committed to one course release for one faculty member per academic year, and to one summer stipend. This means that one Hamilton faculty member can claim a course taught in the MCC as one of his or her regular five-course annual teaching load, at full pay from Hamilton College, or take a stipend for summer teaching. In addition to the one Colgate University and three Hamilton College faculty that have taught in the program, ten Colgate University and seven Hamilton faculty members have expressed willingness to teach MCC. Colgate University has committed to offering one course release to a faculty member willing to deliver a MCC course.

Doran Larson is working now to engage other area colleges in the MCC. The aim will be to develop a stable pool of faculty to staff at least six MCC courses per academic year.

Benefits

Of the college-in-prison programs now running in the U.S., some—such as San Quentin’s Prison University Project (PUP)—benefit from the labor and spirit of volunteer faculty; others, such as the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), create a different and equally valuable spirit by paying faculty directly for the time they spend teaching incarcerated people. The BPI and PUP, however, also benefit from their proximity to major metropolitan centers as sources of both faculty and donors. Others, such as the Education Justice Project, run through the University of Illinois – Urbana, are beneficiaries of their proximity to a major university. Most American prisons, however, are located in relatively remote, rural areas, far from such resources. The MCC not only presents a model for low-cost prison education, but one that can be reproduced in any region of the country—including predominantly low-population areas, such as Central New York—where community and private colleges, and smaller, four-year state university campuses are often neighbors. By creating a successful model of extremely low-cost higher education in prisons, the MCC may also encourage states to get back into the money-saving business of

funding such programs. For a more detailed analysis of the MCC model, its conception, genesis, and political rationale, see the linked article, [“Localizing Prison Higher Education.”](#)