



The Promise and Practice of Prison Higher Education

In 2017, we launched a study to evaluate. The study is a partnership between the Prison University Project (PUP) and researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, and is funded through the generosity of the Spencer Foundation.

Motivation

In contrast to the damage done by imprisonment, higher education has been shown to provide a path to personal and generational advancement. This study is a longitudinal, mixed-methodological effort to document the effects of participation in the college program at San Quentin State Prison. The college program is administered by a non-profit called the Prison University Project and has served thousands of incarcerated individuals since its founding.

Research Method

Using interviews, focus groups, surveys, and administrative data, the study is designed to assess whether higher education has the potential to alter the experience of incarceration, as well as trajectories following release. The project matches criminological data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to PUP student records and longitudinal surveys, in order to examine the effects of higher education on a range of outcomes, including in-prison behavior, recidivism, employment, social capital, health, and community engagement.

The project also gathers data on three distinct quasi-control groups, as a point of comparison: individuals at San Quentin who are on PUP's waitlist but have not yet matriculated; those incarcerated at other prisons who have requested transfer in order to enroll in PUP; and a matched sample of individuals at San Quentin who are eligible to enroll in educational programs but have not (yet) done so.

Best Practices for Evaluating Prison Higher Education

The Big Picture

First and foremost, prison higher education is higher education. When theorizing about the effects of prison college programs on student outcomes, look to studies of liberal arts and higher education, not just studies from criminology. Approaching the work solely from a criminological perspective can be limiting and reductionist.

No college outside of a prison would ever be judged solely on whether it helps students avoid incarceration. Many studies of prison programs are exclusively concerned with recidivism, rather than the wide range of outcomes that higher education has been shown to ameliorate. But we should be concerned not just whether participation in a college program helps people stay out of prison—remember, someone can starve to death under a bridge and still not recidivate—but also whether it affects housing stability, employment, civic engagement, educational attainment, mental and physical health, family relationships, and social capital.

The Logistics of Prison-Based Research

Work in partnership with the program you are evaluating, but maintain independence. In-prison program staff are frequently the best resource for understanding the culture and rules of the prison. Generally, they will have experience navigating the often-labyrinthine correctional system and can serve as a guide for how to successfully conduct research inside. At the same time, be careful to maintain independence and objectivity.

Build relationships early on with relevant stakeholders. Conducting program evaluation or other research in a correctional context requires the coordination of multiple entities—from the state department of corrections, to the prison administration where programs are located, to the educational program staff on-site. Begin building these relationships early on, as miscommunications can result in research being halted at critical junctures.

Play by the rules. Be sure to train research staff not just in how to conduct research, but also how to work inside a prison. This means making sure they understand and respect the rules of the institution, even if they (or you) do not agree with those rules. Flouting rules can jeopardize the standing of the program you are working with, as well as your own ability to conduct research in the future. It can also put incarcerated students at risk.

Research Design

Treat education as interactive. Understanding the effects of education requires accounting for and examining the networks between students, and between students and teachers. This approach also points to the need to think about how to deal with various levels of analysis, such as cohorts and classes, and to explore multi-level or clustering methods.

Be creative in identifying a control group. A control or quasi-control group is critical in this work, given the potential for selection bias and other confounders. However, in many cases it is unethical or infeasible to randomly assign individuals to higher education programs. Learn how eligibility, application, and enrollment work. This can suggest plausible comparisons.

Mechanisms matter, not just outcomes. The first-person perspectives of the incarcerated are often ignored in favor of administrative data, because the latter are usually so much easier to obtain. But we need to understand the social and psychological changes that occur as individuals acquire education. This means measuring things like identity, self-efficacy, social influence, and all the other things that we think are shaped by education—and that also impact recidivism.

Be sure you understand what information is sensitive, or even dangerous. Inside a prison, some issues or questions that don't seem especially touchy to most people can be problematic. When considering topics of inquiry, make sure you know how they are viewed within the prison. In addition, be sure you understand any potential legal ramifications of asking individuals to disclose specific behaviors or attitudes.

Recruiting Subjects

Be respectful of students' legitimate concerns about confidentiality. Confidentiality can be especially difficult to ensure inside prison, and those who are incarcerated often rightfully mistrust promises of privacy, given their prior experiences. It is therefore critical to be transparent, explicit, and detailed about all research processes, including data-sharing, anonymity, and confidentiality. Additionally, make sure you know what is and is not confidential inside prison. For instance, surveys or other information sent through prison mail are generally subject to review by prison staff.

Be aware of the potential for unintentional coercion. Prison is a coercive institution by design, and so incarcerated research subjects often do not perceive themselves to be freely making decisions in the same way they could on the outside. It is important to communicate that participation in a research project will not influence standing in the higher education program in any way. Similarly, make sure students understand that engaging in research will not affect the likelihood of release.

If you have questions about the Prison University Project study, please contact the Principal Investigator, Amy E. Lerman (alerman@berkeley.edu), Associate Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley.