

**Education programs in Florida would reduce recidivism, costs to taxpayers**

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Prisoners are unpopular. We are all aware of this fact—politicians most of all. Therefore it was probably a smart campaigning decision for Florida Gov. Rick Scott to take a hard-line stance on prisons. In fact, he has recently even instituted a policy that forces prisoners to wait five-to-seven years for their civil rights — such as the rights to vote, serve on a jury, and seek public office — to be restored.

However, many of those pesky "human rights" or "democracy" sympathizers seem to believe that he has "overstepped his bounds" a bit. Maybe it's just me, but I think that this is probably a valid point considering that that we supposedly live in a democratic society that values human rights. However, what seems to be lacking in the conversation is the lack of basic rights prisoners receive while still in prison, such as the right to a college education.

A large source of opposition to college-in-prison programs, and the reason public funding for it was cut in 1994, was that people took issue with the fact that inmates were receiving free college educations while hard-working, innocent citizens who couldn't afford college did not receive the same benefits. However, although the logic might be sound, the facts show that eligible applicants for Pell grants did not miss out because inmate educatrions were funded. Pell grants awarded on merit, and costs above the annual appropriations were covered in the following year's budget.

According to the Florida Department of Corrections, the average cost to house an inmate in a Florida prison as of 2011 is about $19,500 annually. Corrections officers are paid about $30,800 annually. Robert Worth, a Charlotte Newcombe fellow at Princeton University, has found education is an effective way to lower prison costs. In addition, with certain types of prison educational programs, Worth found savings in the need for fewer officers and in "reducing recidivism in the long run."

So, while the governor mulls ways to slash $2.3 billion from the Florida Department of Corrections budget so that he can provide more money for schools, he does not realize that the two sects are not necessarily mutually exclusive — one, in fact, provides a solution for the other.

Along similar lines, the Florida Department of Corrections admits that the Florida recidivism rate is a staggering 33 percent, which means that one out of every three inmates released from a Florida prison returns to a Florida prison within three years (and this number does not even include the number of inmates who return to county jails, federal prisons, or prisons in other states). South Florida counties, specifically, top Florida's list of counties in terms of convictions, with Miami-Dade placing first, Broward placing second, and Palm Beach placing seventh. Conservative studies show that these high and expensive rates of recidivism fall to less than 22 percent if prisons offer significant educational opportunity to incarcerated men and women.

Giving inmates a college education, therefore, can be a rehabilitative measure and actually change inmates' outlook on life, making them safe, productive members of a democratic society.

Critics will rail that prison rehabilitation "coddles" inmates by providing too "amenities" and will continue to insist that prison is for punishment and to regard any signs of compassion or humanity as "frills." But Brian Fischer, New York's Commissioner of Correctional Services, hits at the core of the rehabilitative ideal of prison education: "Education changes people … Going to prison is the punishment, once in prison it's our obligation to make [people in prison] better than they were."

So, is education really a "frill" or is it a human right?

Florida's citizens and politicians should support the rehabilitative model of prisons not just because of the fact that it helps prisoners, but because it could also provide a strong model for our public education systems, lower the cost of prisons by decreasing recidivism and necessitating fewer guards and increase the safety of the community.

South Florida's government should set aside its narrow-minded, hard-line policies on prisoners rights and realize that increasing inmate rights are beneficial for the community at large.

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