

FORUM

When convicts go to college

Higher education in prison is a good deal for everyone



Christopher Zoukis
Guest Columnist

America spends \$80 billion a year keeping criminals behind bars, but research has shown that cost could be reduced by making one thing more accessible to inmates — education.

"We spend all that money on incarceration, but have little to show for it," says Christopher Zoukis (www.ChristopherZoukis.com), a prison-education advocate and author of "College for Convicts: The Case for Higher Education in American Prisons" (McFarland & Co., 2014) and "Prison Education Guide" (Prison Legal News Publishing, 2016).

"It's time for this money to be put to good use by helping to reform prisoners so they can return to their communities as

productive, law-abiding members of society."

Giving inmates the opportunity to earn college degrees can be a hard sell, though, because the average taxpayer is more concerned with educating their own children and grandchildren than with educating prison inmates, Zoukis says.

They want to see prisoners punished, not put on a track toward a degree, but that's short-sighted, he says.

"Most of the public is unaware that educating prisoners can have an impact — a positive one — on our economy and on the safety of our communities," Zoukis says.

Here's how: Prisoners who take classes while incarcerated have a 13 percent lower likelihood of committing another offense and ending up back behind bars, according to a Rand Corp. study in 2014 that reviewed years of data. Those prisoners also are more likely to become employed once they are released.

The Rand report says

that for every \$1 spent on correctional education, there was a \$5 reduction in overall corrections spending.

Right now, though, a high school diploma or the GED equivalent is as far as prisoners can go in most prisons across the country, says Zoukis, who is incarcerated at the Federal Correctional Institution Petersburg in Virginia, a medium-security facility.

"It's better than nothing, and will reduce recidivism, but a GED isn't going to qualify someone for anything other than an entry-level job," Zoukis says. "The further we can go beyond that, the higher the level of education we can bring into prisons, the greater the chances are that an ex-prisoner will have an economically stable life and won't be a repeat offender."

Zoukis has worked on his own college degree from Adams State University in Colorado via correspondence. He expects to earn a bachelor's degree by the end of 2016 and hopes to have an

MBA by the time he is released from prison in 2018.

But Zoukis has faced roadblocks on the way to working toward a degree, and he believes changes need to happen to make the path smoother for those who will follow him. Among the steps Zoukis says are necessary:

*Support from prison culture and staff. Zoukis says he has seen that in some cases, prison guards and other staff members discourage education for inmates. "Prison education won't work unless we have institutional commitment to ensure a culture of support for education in the state and federal prison systems," he says. GED programs, vocational training and access to college courses all need to be promoted. Prison authorities need to prohibit guards and prison staff from refusing to grant release from work details to prisoners enrolled in any educational or college program, Zoukis says.

*Eligibility for Pell grants. Prisoners should

again be made eligible for Pell grants and other need-based student financial aid, Zoukis says. Inmates were banned from using Pell grants in 1994, but President Obama has announced a pilot program in which a limited number of prisoners would be able to use the grants beginning in the fall. That's a start, but Zoukis wants to see that eligibility become more widespread.

*Partnerships with community colleges. Community colleges are valuable allies in the effort to educate prisoners, but in many cases the programs offered are limited to basic education, literacy and non-credit vocational programs, and often they are taught by prison staff rather than qualified instructors, Zoukis says. "What is needed are more of the credited vocational and advanced academic programs," he says. The programs also need to be adequately funded, he says.

Ultimately, it's time for the nation to decide what is more important: mass incarceration or public

education, Zoukis says. Prisons need to be used for more than punishment. Instead, he says, they need to be seen as treatment and education centers where skills can be learned and problems addressed.

"The end goal of corrections is enhanced public safety," Zoukis says. "It's not enhanced punishment for punishment's sake."

Christopher Zoukis, author of "College for Convicts: The Case for Higher Education in American Prisons" (McFarland & Co., 2014) and "Prison Education Guide" (Prison Legal News Publishing, 2016), is a leading expert in the field of correctional education. He is the founder of www.PrisonEducation.com and www.PrisonLawBlog.com, and is a contributing writer to The Huffington Post and Prison Legal News. He is incarcerated at the medium-security Federal Correctional Institution Petersburg in Virginia.

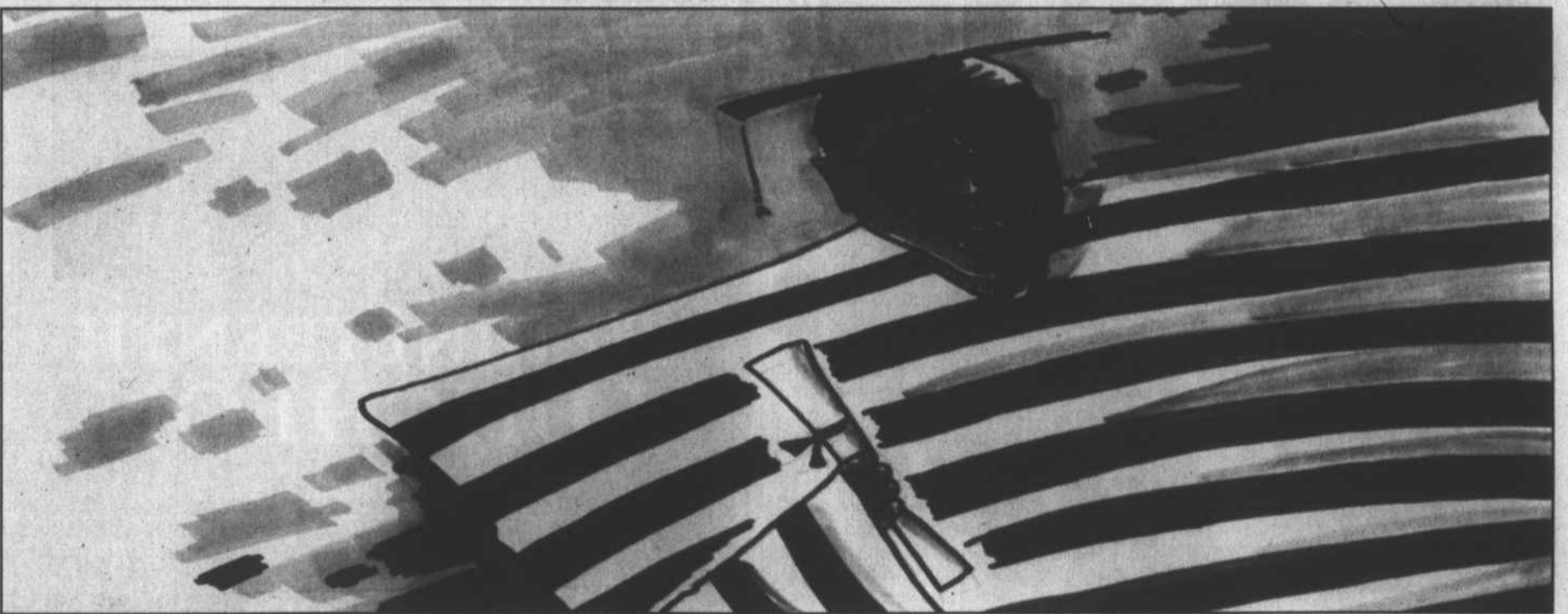


Illustration by Ron Rogers for The Chronicle

People with criminal histories and college admissions: Help is available

On May 9, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) urged America's colleges and universities to eliminate barriers to higher education for an estimated 70 million citizens with criminal records.

The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law (Lawyers' Committee) welcomes DOE's resource guide, "Beyond the Box," which offers alternatives to inquiring about criminal histories during college admissions.

In January 2016, the Lawyers' Committee launched the "Fair Chance in Higher Education" initiative, a national effort to eliminate barriers to educational opportunity for college applicants who may have been stopped, detained, or arrested by the police.

"No one should be denied access to college or university merely because of contact with the criminal justice system," said Kristen Clarke, president and executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. "The inclusion of criminal history related questions on admissions forms has a disparate impact on African-Americans and other minority applicants seeking access to higher educational opportunities. The U.S. Department of Education has taken an important first step with the issuance of today's guidance, and we urge expanded federal enforcement in this area to ensure



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that all schools across our nation lift one of the most significant hurdles faced by minority applicants today. The racial disparities in our criminal justice system and the collateral consequences faced by those brought into contact with the justice system makes this an issue that warrants greater attention."

The first phase of the Fair Chance in Higher Education initiative sought information from 17 colleges and universities in seven states in the South which require applicants to disclose contact with the criminal justice system, including arrests that did not lead to conviction. To date, four colleges have reached agreement with the Lawyers' Committee to revise their admissions policies to eliminate questions related to arrest history. These include Auburn University, Auburn University - Montgomery, Clark Atlanta University and Emory & Henry University. The Lawyers' Committee also issued a call for The Common Application to eliminate the disclosure of convictions and high school dis-

ciplinary violations. The Common Application is used by more than 600 colleges across the country. The Lawyers' Committee is continuing to investigate the practices of other universities across the country.

According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, "Demographic characteristics are now more strongly correlated with sentencing outcomes than during previous periods." Research suggests that minority defendants are treated differently at several stages of the criminal justice process. In addition, many colleges ask prospective students to disclose school discipline histories. Yet according to the Civil Rights Data Collection (CDRC), there are vast racial disparities in the use of suspensions and expulsions to address student behavior. Overly punitive discipline policies can negatively impact minority students by disproportionately contributing to their referral to the juvenile justice system.

"We are particularly concerned that many applicants may be deterred from

pursuing higher education when colleges require the disclosure of arrest or conviction histories or school discipline histories on their application forms," said Brenda Shum, director of the Educational Opportunities Project of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

The Lawyers' Committee understands the importance of safe learning environments. Given the lack of evidence that seeking the mandatory disclosure of arrest, conviction or discipline history improves campus safety, the Lawyers' Committee seeks the elimination of all questions related to such history on college applications. For those institutions that continue to seek such information, however, "Beyond the Box" offers a number of recommendations, including delaying disclosure until after admissions, narrowly tailoring questions, and training admissions personnel on the effective use of criminal history information.

The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law (Lawyers' Committee), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, was formed in 1963 at the request of President John F. Kennedy to involve the private bar in providing legal services to address racial discrimination. For more information about the Lawyers' Committee, visit www.lawyerscommittee.org.