INMATE SEMINARIES

How they have positively impacted corrections

BY ART BEELER

Although there was a graduate program in religious programming at Sing-Sing in New York, the real credit for the development of inmate seminaries in the United States belongs to Burl Cain, Commissioner, Mississippi Department of Corrections and then Warden at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola).

In 1994 he entered into discussion with the leadership at the New Orleans Theological Seminary, to determine if there were ways to develop a seminary at Angola. There are prison seminaries in about 14 states at this time including one at the Nash Correctional Institution in North Carolina. This analysis primarily reviews the Angola Prison Seminary and the Darrington Prison Seminary in Texas.

As with many program initiatives, this effort to increase educational opportunities has led to other victories. The most significant has demonstrated reductions of inmate violence and inmate misconduct. While recidivism was generally reduced, these findings were not as robust.

North Carolina initiated a prison seminary with the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary at the Nash Correctional Institution, with its first class starting in August 2017. Of the first 24 students who obtained their degree in December 2021, 17 were deployed as field ministers to some of the 55 institutions within the North Carolina Division of Prisons. Seven of the graduates remained at Nash to assist with the program.

The seminary program has offered classes every August since 2017 with average classes consisting of 30 offenders. At any given time, there are about 120 offenders studying to obtain their degrees.

As Joe Gibbs, a significant contributor to the program has said, if you are going to be successful you need a plan. He has attempted through his interactions with the program to impart to the students the need to have a game plan for life (2009). Warden Drew Stanley and his staff at Nash have been champions for the seminary.

The reason for this is clear: Most inmate programs are measured against recidivism and look at offenders who have a short period of time remaining to serve. The inmate seminary programs are geared toward moral recognition and tend to look at...
offenders who are longer term offenders preparing for the rest of their lives. While the data does demonstrate some success in recidivism reduction, it must be clear inmate seminaries are measuring factors other than successful reentry and recidivism.

Respondents also reported the three most important factors in connecting to the prison community to be: helping others, growth and positivity.

This is seen in the work field ministers accomplish subsequent to graduation. They fall into four categories: 1) Community Services Ministries includes orientation of new arrivals to the institution, mentoring, personal improvement and academic tutoring; 2) Crisis Ministry includes conduct of funeral and memorial services, geriatric care, grief counseling and medical and hospice visitation; 3) Counseling Ministry includes family reconciliation, offenders forgiveness programs, tier talking, visiting with those unable to participate in program or chaplaincy services; and, 4) Faith-based ministry which under supervision provides discipleship courses, inmate preaching and planning and conducting of services (Jang, S., Johnson, B., Hays, J., Hallett, M., and Duwe, G., 2019). The authors use Sutherland’s Differential Association Theory as well as Cressey’s theory of the rehabilitative value of ex-prisoners being placed into trusted positions associated with positive role definition which some call pro social activities. Executive Director of Texas Division of Criminal Justice, Bryan Collier says these factors are important because the offenders who go through seminary programs and become field ministers have credibility.

A long-term analysis of the Texas programs implies it reduces dissatisfaction with correctional staff, which may enhance prison security by reducing the ‘strain’ between legitimate goals and lack of opportunities to achieve those goals. [Merton’s Strain Theory] (Giddens and Sutton (2017). The analysis also demonstrates a positive relationship to an inmate’s sense of meaning and purpose. The program allows Field Ministers the ability to see the big picture and help those involved in possible errant behaviors see the larger issue thus reducing misconduct and perhaps violence, and finally, Field Ministers have the ability to give back to society (Jang, Johnson, Hays, Hallett and Duwe, 2019).

Benefits of inmate seminaries for facilities

It is important to look at the desire of long-term inmates to participate in programs. It is also important long-term inmates are looking not so much for recreational or educational programs but in programs which can provide them resources, self-dignity and worth (Louviere, Spring 2017). Louviere concludes forming connections with fellow prisoners in a positive manner is beneficial to inmate health and safety in the prison environment. Correctional administrators try to keep violence at a minimum. Typically, safety is equated to physical security and keeping offenders busy (Fleury-Steiner, 2015; Mears & Castro, 2006). The cost of keeping the public safe in this manner increases because of the health care needs of offenders and the need for space to house these existing offenders.

There is a gap in the literature concerning what long-term offenders see as their programming needs. The data shows that at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, long-term inmate’s most important activity was educational programs, religious programs and prison jobs in that order. Other surveys were done subsequently, with the most telling point being religious programming was always in the top three (Louviere, 20177).

Respondents also reported the three most important factors in connecting to the prison community to be: helping others, growth and positivity. Louviere’s work was not directed exclusively to seminary programs, but to the impact of program participation on interpersonal inmate connections.

An article on U.S. Prison Seminaries: Structural Charity, Religious Establishment, and Neoliberal Connections (2019), emphasized the need for any seminary program to acknowledge the need for certain factors to keep the establishment clause of the Constitution from being
invoked. The complexities of religious establishment in U.S. prisons means administrators need to understand the nuances of First Amendment practice balanced against the security of the institution. Administrators must determine how best to allow intermediaries entrance to prisons and guard against one religion having preference over another (Hallett, M., Johnson, B., Hays, J., Jang, S., and Duwe, G., (2017).

Legislative and regulatory bodies considering seminary programs must: Create statutes or regulations which has a secular purpose; the principle or primary effect of the statutes or regulations must not advance nor inhibit religious practice; the statutes or regulations must not result in an excessive government entanglement with religious affairs.

As long as these factors are followed and the cost of the programs are not paid by the state there have been no successful legal challenges to seminary programs. The purpose of the seminary program is to provide higher education programs to an offender population and targets long-term offenders because of program requirements to complete course work and field ministries. Since these programs were initiated subsequent to the abolition of Pell Grants, any reinitiating of Pell Grants for post-secondary education will need to be reviewed.

A 2015 article on Bible College Participation and Prison Misconduct: A Preliminary Analysis, looked primarily at the Darrington Bible College, an in-house prison seminary located at the Darrington Correctional Institution in collaboration with Southwestern Theological Seminary. The authors of this study used a retrospective quasi-experimental design to determine the affect the Bible College had on disciplinary infractions. The dependent variable in the study is prison misconduct resulting in a discipline conviction that occurred after the time of enrollment in the Bible College. Independent variables included age, race, marital status, education, gang membership, custody level, criminal history, discipline history and institutional program involvement. The other independent variables included were inmate classification, time served, admission type, offense type and type of sentence (Duwe, G., Hatlett, M., Jang, S., and Johnson, B., 2015). After matching the populations of the Bible College population with a comparison group, the following results were found:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of discipline conviction</th>
<th>Bible College</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any minor discipline</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total minor discipline</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any major discipline</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total major discipline</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any discipline</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total discipline</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noted the total discipline convictions over the length of the study was nearly four times greater for the comparison group than the Bible College group. The findings demonstrated that participating in the Bible College significantly improved behavior. The risk of misconduct was lowered by 65-80% and the total number of discipline convictions reduced by more than one per participant (Duwe, G., Hatlett, M., Jang, S., and Johnson, B., 2015).

**Teaching positive criminology**

Inmate seminaries, in addition to the spiritual work they teach, apply positive criminology to the development of curriculum and the teaching the students. According to Sutton, (2022), positive criminology is an approach to crime prevention involving intervention programs to reduce criminal behavior. Traditional criminology identifies some of the causes of deviant behavior, but generally fails to recognize how offenders can avoid or stop this behavior (Sutton, 2022). It is clear positive criminology is essential to understanding deviant behavior, but it is also clear it is more than a single theory. It is a broad perspective toward behavior encompassing diverse roles and aims to distance the individual from behavior associated with crime through therapy programs and interventions designed to build upon the strengths of a person’s development, emphasis on positive social elements such as programs of prosocial behavior, social acceptance, human kindness and reintegration and developing positive personal factors such as resilience, positive emotions and morality (Ronel and Elisha, 2011).
The following components may not be all inclusive but presents positive criminology components.

**Factors of protection and resilience**

Resilience is necessary to help individuals cope with risk and stress and recover from damaging environments. It requires a combination of emotional hardiness, positive adjustment and significant social, family and personal protective factors (Kobassa, 1982).

**Growth out of trauma**

Trauma can damage relationships, values and beliefs and occasionally lead to unacceptable social behaviors. Growth out of trauma emphasizes the development of skills and personal resources to develop post-traumatic growth and can lead to identifying new meanings in life. The growth out of trauma component supports salutogenic theory, where positive and negative experiences give shape and provide coherence (Antonovsky, 1987).

**Interpretation of risk factors**

All of us differ in how we experience risk factors such as abuse, poor parenting, failing schools where individuals may ascribe negative aspects of their lives. Positive criminology takes these risk factors and develops a positive interpretation of stressful events and can help facilitate transformative change.

**Exposure to goodness**

By being exposed to positive human values, positive criminality can assist at-risk individuals from choosing a criminal lifestyle. This exposure to goodness also allows individuals to grow and develop the skills to “do well,” without expecting anything in return. Many people at-risk find by developing skills typically through volunteering they become better at making positive life choices.

**Social acceptance**

Classical criminology focuses on negatives, where positive criminology focuses on the benefits of social acceptance. Replacing exclusion with inclusion can have impactful results. Those released from prison are not viewed as morally disgraced which enhances successful reintegration into the community and reinforces ongoing behavioral change.

**Desistance from crime**

Research has demonstrated the successful transition of returning citizens is not one single jump but a series of smaller steps leading to stopping criminal activities. Along the way, these returning citizens work to rebuild their lives from a negative to positive orientation helping to successfully integrate into their communities.

**Criminology as peacemaking**

Positive criminology replaces the punishment model of law enforcement with one of compassion while at the same time understanding public safety. It aims to reduce violent crime by developing calm and peaceful methodologies of changing behaviors.

**Restorative justice**

Positive criminology emphasizes the perpetrator of a crime take ownership for what they have done and the hurt they have inflicted on victims. Mediation, dialogue and conflict resolution make up parts of restorative justice.
**Good Lives Model**

The good lives model originated in the early 2000’s in response to developing rehabilitative efforts to deal with sex offenders. This model has expanded to attempting to rehabilitate all crimes and focuses on an individual’s strengths while reducing risks (Bonta and Andrews, 2011). This is in contrast to the traditional Risk-Need-Responsivity model and its focus on risk management. The Good Lives Model (GLM) is concerned with human dignity and human rights. The individual participant in a GLM program is encouraged to select goals, make plans and act toward their implementation.

**Yoga and mindfulness**

Positive criminology recognizes both yoga and mindfulness have a positive impact upon a prisoners’ psychological wellbeing. Low intensity, long-duration programs have been shown to be more successful than shorter, low intensity interventions which contribute to improving prisoner quality of life, prison culture and outcomes (Auty, Cope and Liebling, 2015).

**Nonviolent communication**

Successfully training prisoners in nonviolent communication demonstrate those engaged in these programs are less likely to reoffend, less angry and display increased feelings of compassion. It was also found those trained in nonviolent communication demonstrated a striking difference in how they communicated with others verses untrained inmates (Suarez, et. al., 2014).

While there are other components to the GLM, those listed above correlate with the positive criminology demonstrated by the inmate seminary program at Angola. The power of positive criminology does not come from ignoring the negative but instead recognizing it while focusing on the positives (Sutton, 2022).

The rationale of having a discussion regarding positive criminology, is to provide context to a 2015 article on Angola’s seminary entitled: “First Stop Dying”: Angola’s Christian Seminary as Positive Criminology (Hallett, Hayes, Johnson, Jang and Duwe). The four themes which emerged in this article:

1. The importance of respectful treatment of inmates by correctional administrators,

2. The value of building trusting relationships for prosocial modeling and improved self-perception,

3. Repairing harm through intervention, and,


When the warden at Angola attempted to find higher education programs, it was characterized as the Bloodiest Prison in America. Of the more than 6,300 inmates at the time of this article, 75% were serving life sentences. The population is disproportionally Black. The relationship between offenders and the administration had been good and bad. Since 1917, most guards at Angola were prisoners armed with shotguns. This use of convict guards contributed to brutality against prisoners. The use of convict guards continued until federal intervention in the 1960s. At the same time the prison was segregated until the 1980s.

It is against this historical perspective the inmate seminary program was initiated. Warden Burl Cain wanted to find some program to replace the higher education programs terminated as the result of the abolishment of Pell Grants for offenders. He also initiated Unit Management which placed inmates in close proximity to the staff working with them.

In short, the inmate seminary program at Angola grew to embrace holistic positive criminology and provide inmate ministers to internal congregations which:

1. Created a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner or criminal,

2. Imbued the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning,

3. Empowered the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God,

4. Provided the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness, and,

5. Allowed a sense of control over an unknown future.
Angola’s seminary graduates describe the message of love and service as their blueprint for change and the inmate minister program as an opportunity to demonstrate change in practice (Hallett, Hayes, Johnson, Jang and Duwe, 2015). One of the most comprehensive studies of Angola’s prison seminary comes from a 2019 thesis, Seminaries in the System: The Effects of Prison Seminaries on Recidivism, Inmate Violence and Costs completed for the Naval Postgraduate School. Dotson’s (2019) analysis demonstrated prison seminaries are reducing both recidivism rates and inmate violence.

The goal of the seminary program was not to reduce recidivism, but to serve as an option to replace college programs affected by the loss of Pell Grant funding. The seminary programs do not focus on reentry in the community but rather develop inmates ministers which look for graduates to become agents of change. The work to develop inmate ministers has fostered a successful partnership between the prison, the department of corrections, the seminary and inmates who participate in the program (Dotson, 2019). This partnership has had the added benefit of reducing recidivism and inmate violence.

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In the three years before the seminary began, Angola reported 1,346 assaults; in 2015 the number of assaults declined to 343 or a 75% reduction (Golberg, 2015). The research suggests prison seminary programs focusing on transformation rather than reformation are viable as rehabilitation programs as well.

We know recidivism rates are extremely high with up to 75% of offenders nationwide returning within five years. We also know prisons have become increasingly violent, which extends to prison staff as well (Dotson, 2019). There are many reasons prison violence is costly beyond dollars and cents, including the emotional, physical and mental strain on offenders and staff. Prison seminaries differ from traditional programs which work to keep released inmates from going back to prison. They look for graduates to become agents of change in the facility.

Recently, there has been a move to reinitiate some Pell Grants. An Evaluation of Seven Second Chance Act Demonstrations Programs: Impact Findings at 30 Months did not reveal a difference in recidivism between the program participants and control group (D’Amico and Kim, 2018). More study is needed to determine if reinitiating Pell Grants will provide avenues for lower recidivism. Other states started to look at prison seminaries given the reduction in inmate violence demonstrated at Angola. As indicated, what the programs were after was moral rehabilitation. In Dotson’s study, moral people do not rob, steal, and take your car or your life. Moral rehabilitation is the direct result of spiritual transformation.

When reviewing inmate misconduct at Angola, Dotson (2019) found that Bible College inmates were 40% less likely to have disciplinary actions than their Non-Bible College counterparts.

Texas initiated an inmate seminary program at Darrington Penitentiary in 2011. To apply for the Darrington program, inmates had to have 19 years remaining on their sentence. Inmate ministers in Texas have been sent to seven correction facilities. The TDCJ Executive Director cites the credibility of the inmate ministers as a factor in making positive change among the inmate populations where they serve. The first seminary class graduated from Darrington in 2016. There were 224 serious acts of violence with a weapon, the next year after the inmate ministers had been given assignments, the serious acts of violence were zero. A study by Baylor showed participation in the Bible College reduced disciplinary convictions significantly, but also reduced reprimands for misbehavior, reducing minor misconduct by 65%, 80% for major misconduct and 68% for any misconduct.

The following graph reveals the reduction in major acts of violence from 2014-2019. Each of the seven institutions where there were inmate ministers stationed in Texas showed reductions in acts of violence.
This information not only demonstrates a sizable reduction of violence, on the face, it demonstrates a significant change of prison culture.

Several other states have inmate seminary programs. The most notable is a program located at Sing-Sing, which partners with New York Theological Seminary, offering a Master of Professional Study degree. It requires applicants to have an undergraduate degree before admittance. This graduate degree teaches students spiritual integration, community accountability and service to others. After graduating, the inmates serve as peer counselors, chaplain’s assistants or tutors throughout the state. Since 1982 the recidivism rate for participants has been under 10%. Since 2014, the recidivism rate has been close to zero (Markus, 2019).

Another prison worth noting is the Calvin Prison in Michigan where a program was started in 2014 after state legislators visited Angola. In 2014, before the first class started there were 853 acts of misconduct; three years later there were 257 acts of misconduct or a 70% reduction (Roelofs, 2018).

One area not discussed is the Establishment Clause. Historically, opponents of faith-based prison programs have successfully challenged these programs when accompanied by government funding. Prison seminaries which have been 100% funded with non-governmental donations, have to date withstood the challenge, but the critics have continued to believe prison seminaries are unconstitutional. In 1971, the Lemon Test modified the Establishment Clause to say it must have a secular purpose, have a predominately secular effect and not foster excessive entanglement. While everyone in the United States, including inmates are free to practice religion, prisons must demonstrate they are free from religious preference. In Agostini v. Felton, the standard was modified to say the government could oversee the programs and regulate them to a certain degree as long as the programs met the requirements regarding content and intent.

While, to date, no prison seminary litigation has made it to court, there have been a number of attempts to have state correctional facilities sever ties with prison seminaries. Generally, challenges have not been attempted because the programs are paid for privately, they are voluntary, and they admit non-Christians (Eckholm, 2013). While no program has been successfully challenged, this remains something which should be monitored.

In conclusion, it is clear prison seminary programs reduce the level of violence and misconduct. In Texas, a study demonstrated reduction of violence in the institutions where inmate field ministers were stationed. The documented reduction of violence at Angola prison was 75%. Similar reductions of violence occurred at other facilities. Critics have indicated the reduction of recidivism has not matched the reduction in inmate violence and misconduct, but the purpose of the inmate seminary programs are for moral recognition and not recidivism reduction. While the reduction of recidivism is not the primary purpose of inmate seminary programs, most demonstrate meaningful reductions.

Programs must continue to make sure they meet the tenets of the Establishment Clause. With a reinitiating of Pell Grants those with inmate seminaries need to make sure offenders are free to meet their educational needs through that avenue should they desire. However, for the purpose of reducing institutional violence both at the home institution where the program is housed and the institutions where inmate field ministers are located, as well as reducing the level of institutional misconduct,
the evidence is clear these programs have been more successful than anticipated when in 1995, they were initiated as a way to provide higher education to qualified offenders.

REFERENCES


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