

Why I send college students to prison: Column

Jim Farrin Published 5:02 a.m. ET Dec. 6, 2016

We are, I'm happy to say, part of a larger resurrection of correctional education.



(Photo: Annelise Wunderlich and Richard O'Connell, PBS)

This morning students from Princeton University were waiting to be transported to prison. And it's all my fault.

Nine years ago, at the request of a Princeton classmate, I left a career as a management consultant to start the Petey Greene Program. We named the program after Ralph Waldo "Petey" Greene, Jr., who was a TV and radio talk show host and community activist who overcame drug addiction and a prison sentence to become one of the most

notable media personalities in Washington, D.C. history.

The Petey Greene Program's mission is to support the academic achievement of incarcerated people by training college students to serve as tutors and teaching assistants inside prison classrooms. Our non-profit organization started at Princeton and has expanded to seven northeastern states. In the 2015-16 academic year we sent over 400 students from 23 colleges to prison — to help deserving students prepare for their high school, high school equivalency or college diplomas.

We are, I'm happy to say, part of a larger resurrection of correctional education. The Justice Department last month announced plans to set up a [school system](#) within the federal prison system. And this year marked a return to awarding [Pell Grants to incarcerated students](#). There is increasing recognition that education helps help inmates transition to life outside prison, reduces recidivism and lowers costs to society.

Researchers at Washington University in Saint Louis announced in September that the [total cost of incarceration](#), factoring in social costs such as lost wages, compromised health and increased crime, was a stunning \$1 trillion annually. When I heard this number, I decided that sending volunteer tutors into prisons is one of the best things I've done in my life and perhaps one of my best business decisions. I am convinced that reform of our criminal justice system, which is one of the few issues

that enjoys bipartisan support, is the most pressing issue of our time. Correctional education is the best way to achieve that reform.

Nine in 10 incarcerated citizens will leave confinement one day. Sadly, though, [43.3% re-offend](#) and return again to prison within three years. A [2013 study by the RAND Corporation](#) determined that people who participated in correctional education programs were 43% less likely to return to prison than those who did not. The UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research found that \$1 million spent on corrections [prevents 350 crimes](#), but that same amount spent on correctional education prevents 600 crimes.

It would be a hard case to make that it's unfair to provide incarcerated people with food, clean water or air because those things are necessary to sustain life. The same is true of education; it's necessary to sustain life outside of prison. Denying incarcerated people the very assistance that will sustain their life in society is tantamount to a human rights violation to me.

Many people in our country's correctional facilities have been cheated academically when caught in the school-to-prison pipeline. Forces like poverty, abuse, addiction and lack of guidance act on students to ensure that they don't get the most out of their elementary and secondary education. [Seven in 10 in-school arrests are students of color](#), even though those populations constitute a minority of our overall population.

The tutoring provided by Petey Greene Program volunteers assures that lessons sink in properly and effectively and even correct for the deficits incarcerated students have suffered in the past. A Department of Corrections assessment of the Petey Greene Program in New Jersey found that people in prison classes [jump a full year](#) in their academic achievement with the aid of a tutor. One letter we received from a student said that our tutor reminded him that "he was still a member of the human community." Lawrence Liu, one of our tutors, said he "directly saw how the program transforms lives," how remedial learners — whose self-concept was so damaged that they couldn't believe someone would freely give their time to help them — became able and confident students, ready for their testing.

Many of those who write to us thank us for believing in them, when very few other people have. It's clear that success follows when someone believes you can succeed. These letters have only made me redouble my moral commitment to correctional education.

To quote Fyodor Dostoevsky: "[The degree of civilization](#) in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." Increasing the funding and attention paid to correctional education proves that the United States still stands for liberty, opportunity and an inextinguishable chance at individual achievement.

Jim Farrin is the executive director of the [Petey Greene Program](#), a non-profit headquartered in Princeton, N.J.

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