**Op-ed on best practices for structuring and evaluating prison education programs**

**[I like that this appears in op-ed format, which is the best way to get in front of policymaklers’ eyes. And in the best tradition, you make authoritative statements with specific actions, which is incredibly important. That said, I’m not sure why I should take your advice. We do need to spend a few words on who ‘we’ are, why we care about this (apart from the societal need that should spur all citizens, etc...) and what you did to data from where to arrive at your conclusions. This need not be, and in fact shouldn’t be, exhaustive, but I should have some idea of how much credence I should give to your statements]**

Recidivism is one of the most commonly-cited statistics when referencing the failures of the criminal justice system in the United States. Not only does the U.S. incarcerate the highest number of people per capita compared to every other country in the world, but a large majority of those individuals (68 percent) are [rearrested within three years](https://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/pages/welcome.aspx). One form of programming geared toward reducing recidivism is postsecondary prison education programs, which have been shown to lower odds of recidivating by [48 percent](https://www.vera.org/publications/investing-in-futures-education-in-prison).

While there is significant research on the outcomes of a few prison education programs, the field is diverse in terms of the topics that are covered, types of instruction, and length of programming. After examining some of the largest prison education programs in the U.S., we compiled a set of best practices for any programs looking to evaluate their work or are interested in expanding prison education. We know that prison education works, but in order for it to have the desired impacts, programming should be created with specific outcomes in mind and target the specific needs of the criminogenic population. Our research seeks to understand if current programs are investing in the right areas to and provide suggestions for those who are just starting out. [I like this explicit statement of what you’re attempting that’s stated in plain language. I also appreciate that you set up the need from the very beginning.]

Most policy focuses solely on reducing recidivism as an ideal outcome, but recidivism itself is an imperfect measure. Recidivism refers to three different components: rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration. In addition, it only accounts for reported crime, is measured inconsistently, can be misleading when presented as a single data point, and considers returning offenders equally (regardless of offense). In researching effective prison education programs, we searched for those that not only led to reduced recidivism, but also focused on other positive outcomes including better employment opportunities, higher salaries, health care, savings and financial management, housing stability, resource networks, and general well-being. We found that prison education programs at all levels resulted not only in lowered recidivism (across all types), but also positive effects on post-release earnings and employment and lowered the odds of inmates engaging in misconduct. In addition to clarifying measures of recidivism, assessments of prison education effectiveness should be expanded to include additional measures that take these other positive impacts into account.

The most effective prison education programs share a number of characteristics we believe are essential for any successful program. From the outset, any program should have rigorously designed course syllabi that are [geared directly toward the criminogenic population](https://www.ncsl.org/print/cj/sf-kooyppt.pdf). This includes adding activities that might not directly relate to the course material but are important for classroom management, like addressing antisocial behaviors, stress, and past traumas. It also means matching the right instructor to the course. For example, prisoners who have previously completed a course could serve as a valuable asset to an instructor by assisting as a teaching aid or mentoring current students in the classroom. Each prison education course should also be eligible for college credit, so that students can demonstrate their knowledge and value outside of prison with an official document to show potential employers. Instructors should be held to a predetermined standard: they should either be certified by the state (as teachers are) or go through a rigorous training process to ensure they are effectively presenting course content.

Programs should target those who would stand to benefit the most, not those who are already excelling. This helps to limit both selection bias and improve impact. There should be no restrictions by type of offense, highest degree obtained, or limits based on behavior (with perhaps a few exceptions if that behavior is disruptive to a classroom setting). Programs should also create a matched control sample of individuals who match the characteristics of those admitted to the program but are, due to capacity reasons, unable to attend. This allows for an easier comparison as to the effects of the program years down the line, as both populations can be tracked over time. In some states, prisons can recruit students across the entire state network, while in others, education is limited to specific prisons and their populations. This can have a dramatic impact on the pool of potential applicants, and programs should work with their respective state department of corrections to reach as a broad a population as possible.

Program evaluations should be tied directly to course syllabi to ensure that objectives are being met. For example, if a course is geared toward increasing financial literacy and preparing for the job market, the program should administer a pre- and post- evaluation of students’ financial skills. A Situational Judgement Test could be used to estimate students’ knowledge of appropriate business behaviors in different scenarios (e.g., preparing for an interview, writing a resume).

Lastly, to maximize the benefits of prison education, programs should be tied to a post-release component that assists students in building and maintaining positive relationships on the inside and outside. While this would add to the cost of running an educational program, it would significantly reduce the costs of adding people back into that population. All prison education programs should adopt these best practices to make sure they are investing effectively and achieving the outcomes they intend to. [I think this last sentence is self-evident and could be replaced by something that reminds us of the value that reducing recidivism would have to society at large – which would tie nicely back to the first paragraph.]