

Break the Cycle, Break the Cage

TO: The Vermont Legithon

FROM: Jessica Bullock, Helene Combes, Shannon McClelland, Mitch Mender, Amanda Naranjo, Stephen Pilcher, Stephen Berry, Jon Felde

RE: Corrections; Secondary education; Higher education; Economic development; Job training

DATE: November 15, 2015

Break the Cycle, Break the Cage:
Providing Online Education to Individuals Incarcerated in Vermont
Community High School of Vermont
Building Bridges: Vermont Higher Education

Introduction:

On a national level in the United States, 43% of individuals released from incarceration will be reconvicted within three years. Within Vermont the rate of recidivism jumps to 52%. Given Vermont's fragile economic situation, the annual cost of incarceration is too high to be sustainable. Currently, the cost of incarcerating an individual in Vermont amounts to an astounding average of \$50,000 per year for each inmate, rising to \$85,000 for female inmates. Thus, there is an opportunity to reduce cost by breaking the cycle within the criminal justice system. Studies show that inmates participating in education programs are 43% less likely to return into the criminal justice system. Through online courses offered by Community High School Vermont and Building Bridges Vermont (BBVT), "Break the Cycle, Break the Cage" proposes to offer additional educational opportunities to Vermont's inmates in order to reduce recidivism. The project would stimulate the economy by providing online, career focused degrees to inmates in search of a way to enhance professional skills, obtain gainful employment, and successfully reintegrate into the community.

Opportunity:

In the past few years there has been increased attention brought to the success of correctional education programs. Some of the best programs, such as Bard Prison Initiative or San Quentin Prison University Project, show that the recidivism rates of program graduates fall below 20% and even as low as 2%. Vermont is currently facing high needs for professionals within key economic sectors, such as Information Technology and Medical Assistance. By providing inmates with career training opportunities within these current state gaps, Vermont can foster economic growth within the sectors which are the most in need of professionals. Shifting carceral education to online classes can help reduce cost by leveraging existing infrastructures and providing innovative avenues for education. The goal of "Break the Cycle, Break the Cage" and BBVT is to provide for new opportunities to fill educational gaps and provide a better foundation for inmates to rejoin society.

Solution:

Career focused education is the center of the proposed model. This committee proposes using the Chittenden Regional Facility as the pilot program for online secondary and higher education. Chittenden has an ideal infrastructure already in place with functioning computer labs, an in-house library, and supplemental, volunteer programs. Online classes that do not require an in person instructor will drastically decrease the costs of education within Vermont's Department

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of Corrections. The new model of online classes will encourage the use of university students to serve as teacher's assistants (TA) for these classes. Using current students as the online TA will provide three main benefits: 1) TA students will be free facilitators since the students will be working for credit and will not require supplemental payment; 2) TA positions will provide a unique experience to students interested in a wide range of educational fields, such as teaching, criminal justice, and law; and 3) students helping to teach the incarcerated population will act positive public liaisons for participating universities, correctional facilities, the Vermont community at large. This educational program will be specifically tailored to the individual needs of each participant – meeting them where their education left off. Vermont is a national leader in criminal justice reform; “Break the Cycle, Break the Cage” keeps Vermont at the forefront of this movement.

Education is not one-size-fits-all. “Break the Cycle, Break the Cage” provides a curriculum that is integrated and specialized to the specific learning needs of each individual. From the moment that an individual enters into an incarceration facility the individual will have a chance to participate in this career focused education program. The program is “opt in,” portable, and extremely versatile. The online, career focused curriculum will meet the individual at their level of education and work closely with them from that starting point. This legislation has two parts:

- 1) Community High School Vermont (CHSVT) will transition from an in class program to a completely online educational experience. The benefits of this transition would include a significant reduction in annual costs, after the initial infrastructure is established, for the CHSVT down to the average salary of on-sight instructors to be determined by the board. The money saved the program will be able to expand education opportunities to individuals over the age of twenty-three. Mandatory participation by individuals under twenty-three will be continued.
- 2) BBVT will complement the work of Community High schools to provide participants with higher education and vocational training opportunities, specifically tailored to emerging job markets in Vermont. The Vermont Department of Labor will identify “employment gaps” vital for economic growth in Vermont and recommend online courses to address these needs. Potential partners to offer specific degrees would be Vermont Technical College, UVM and Champlain College. Depending on degrees needed and capability of in-state universities to develop inexpensive curriculum there does exist the opportunity to utilize existing out-of-state providers for the needed courses. The BBVT will provide opportunities for individuals to gain an affordable higher level education which has a direct correlation to lower recidivism rates. Lower recidivism rates along with an increase in education will lead to economic growth for Vermont and a decrease in DOC expenditures for incarceration. To ensure a smooth transition from the criminal justice system into society the BBVT requests that a mentorship system be implemented which is modeled after guardian ad litem and COSA programs which will pair the released individual with established

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professionals relating to the field of their BBVT studies. This important connection will facilitate acclimation as a contributing member of society after release.

Evaluation:

The main concerns related to BBVT are initial costs, ability to maintain closed circuit internet use and the general efficacy of online education. If the program started with no existing facilities in all seven correctional facilities the initial costs of BBVT, including course creation, infrastructure and initial training, is estimated at less than \$250,000. This would be equivalent to the cost of five students going through the current high school program. Further this would cover the costs for all seven correctional facilities in the first year—a significant reduction from the current cost of maintain multiple, paid instructors at each facility. However, those costs can also be reduced by utilizing the current computer technology already in place in correctional facilities in Vermont. As computer access is already in place in Vermont questions of closed circuit access and secure computer use have been addressed on the ground by the individual facilities and the correctional department. A national survey of carceral education programs supports the idea that online systems are not only possible but provided better results for inmates than traditional delivery methods. On average in a year's time, the online participants acquired the equivalent of three additional months of education than those in traditional systems. BBVT would also foster the development of multimedia based communications which are necessary in the current economy.

In contrast the advantages to the BBVT are many. The first advantage is created by the online classroom that allows prisoners to be transferred from one facility to another and maintain their academic progress. The second advantage is that individuals participating in the BBVT will allow participants to complete classes at their own pace giving deference to preferred learning methods. The third advantage is that participants who show initiative in the program may be eligible for good credit behavior which will carry influence at parole hearings. Additional advantages include opportunities for loans related to educational opportunities outside of the BBVT such as participants qualifying for no-to-low interest loans. The program greatly encourages that the board establish a fund which will provide two years free tuition or similar low interest loans to the children and spouses of BBVT participants. This final advantage will provide incentives for entire families to be involved and invested in the success of the participant in the program.

Conclusion:

With “Break the Cycle, Break the Cage,” there is an opportunity to shift the prison education system from an expensive and ponderous in-class curriculum to a cheaper, versatile online module. This transition comes at the perfect time to address two core problems: escalating recidivism and ballooning education costs. Higher education will lead to lower recidivism numbers and online programs will lead to lower costs in the Department of Corrections annual educational budget. When educational opportunities increase and recidivism decreases, the practical implication is that less money is being allocated to the DOC while more people in the community are given the ability to obtain employment, earn wages, and provide for their

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families. “Break the Cycle, Break the Cage” provides an ideal foundation for Vermont to build a bridge into the future of criminal justice reform and create sustainable economic development within our state.