Factors to be taken into Account when Proposing Changes to a Jail or Prison-Based GED

Program

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Abstract

The Department of Justice reports that only 40 percent of all inmates in jails and prisons have completed high school, whereas between 80 to 90 percent in the general population have done so. With only a 33 percent of prison inmates, and 22 percent of jail inmates completing GED instruction while incarcerated, there is ample room for improvement. This study explored some considerations concerning prison education dropouts, which include dropping out for "school-environment" reasons, students who dropout for "self-environment" reasons, and students who show an inability connect academically, which are "non-environmental" factors. "School-environment" factors force a student to dropout, "self-environment" factors may lure a student out, and "non-environment" factors are associated with overall academic disengagement. These reasons are mirrored by certain aspects of the incarcerated student, which is discussed in detail.

Categorizing Dropouts in Incarcerated Schools

Interviews with inmates revealed interesting insight regarding unsuccessful GED completion, and give us an opportunity to apply the inmate's circumstances to factors that mirror the public education categories just discussed. The first category, which is (theoretically) within administrative control of the "school-environment," and therefore hopefully controlled within the institution, is the social environment in the correctional facility. Interviews with inmates revealed that this is where mind-games abound; where even voluntary access to instruction is subject to manipulation by powerful inmate leaders. Cunning manipulation is at play in every aspect of prison life to reinforce the inmate "pecking order," often if only for self-amusement. Although sometimes difficult to detect or address, it is a force that functions within the mechanics of the institution, placing it within the school-environment category. A dropout occurs not because of

disruptive behavior on the part of the inmate student, but disruptive behavior by the student's peers who force discontinuation because of pressure.

The second category of factors, the self-environment, are those that lure the student away from intellectual pursuits. This is where the stigma an inmate experiences becomes most salient, the effects of which impact inmates in a combination of ways: stigma of racial identity, stigma of being under-educated, stigma of low-income, and the stigma of conviction. These four elements combine to exacerbate negative impacts associated with participation in prison educational programs, because they tend to work against self-confidence. Additionally, the prison environment by nature lacks non-delinquent role-models from whom to derive the incentive to improve. Thirdly, the absence of contact with family members adds weight to the burden that ultimately keeps the inmates insulated from future plans. Together, these forces constitute the public education's self-environment counterpart, which form barriers to academic success.

The non-environmental category of factors, the third category, are those that materialize not by forcing or luring the student away, but through a slow attrition of motivation. This is where the infrastructure of the incarceration environment works against each inmate's psyche, and blocks the desire to finish an education project. The lack of free-will within the prison walls defeats an inmate's ability to focus on long-term educational goals. With all manner of decisions withdrawn from the inmate's power, there is a hobbling of her or his goal-setting abilities, leaving a reduced sense of personal responsibility, or no sense of accountability to the future. Since all activities in a prison are set on a rigid schedule, and most often accomplished in a line of bodies all performing identical movements or functions, there is no stimuli to engage in an independent mindset, so thoughts rarely extend to the possibility of a new future. This is identifiable with the third category (non-environmental) because an inability to connect present

routine with outside world advancement numbs thoughts of academic pursuits. Inmates become apathetic about improvement, and since they are disillusioned with the process, they don't have the will to persevere.

<div align="center">The interplay of Demographic Factors: Race and Gender</div>

We know that changing a program's design can lead to positive results. Research has shown that even casual knowledge about the nuances of culturally and linguistically diverse inmates, who tend to dropout in higher numbers, can lead to improved education experience for them, as well as others in the general inmate population. Awareness of that trend has alerted some program administrators to allow special considerations when educating marginalized ethnic groups, who later attained significant improvement in standardized test scores. Likewise, making adjustments to the structural environment to accommodate differences between male and female inmates has shown improved achievement after the fact.

Applying this knowledge about accommodating demographic differences, may spur program directors to initiate program revisions where applicable. Research findings show that African American students left public schools for school-environment reasons more frequently, citing expulsions, suspensions, or failing to get on well with teachers and other students. This may underscore an investigation into the notion that African American dropouts may be challenged by systemic policies forcing them out of programs aside from their own behavioral problems. Latino students were found to be highest in the second category (self-environment factors), such as job or family-related reasons, in addition to "not feeling safe." This suggests that additional counseling may help Latino students cope with challenges not under their control. Caucasian students numbered highest in the non-environmental category, for reasons akin to "not feeling like they belong," or "not liking school" at higher rates than would be expected by

chance. Therefore, Caucasian students may benefit from program changes that target non-environmental factors, so they can focus more on the task at hand.

We know gender disparities manifest in the areas of pre-sentencing (males were less likely to make bail than females), and sentence length (sentences of male offenders are significantly greater than females). Gender is also a factor that differentiates inmates in their reasons for dropping out. Females in the public schools dropout for self-environment reasons most often, meaning they were lured out in greater numbers than expected. The biggest component there was a dropout rate of 60.0% for leaving because "she became pregnant." While pregnancy is not a consideration for program revision in gender-separated prisons and jails, females dominated the self-environment category for a very important reason that does have implications for program revision: Females reported that they attended courses primarily to engage in "learning for the sake of learning," whereas males found more motivation in attaining the certificate. So while males most often found themselves being forced out of a program for school environment reasons such as "was failing school" or "could not keep up with schoolwork," female students left schooling because they were lured out. This reinforces what they reported in interviews: females attended courses primarily to engage in self fulfilment, males for self-improvement.

Summary

Knowing the three categories of dropouts, and knowing how men, women, and persons from different racial backgrounds tend to cluster in categories, provides administrators with some ammunition when proposing changes to ineffective programs. In the hopes of boosting retention in GED studies, evidence-based findings from solid research provides justification for that effort. When taken together, differences in racial background and gender may clue program

directors to areas where dropout interventions could be differentiated for each treatment group for effective dropout intervention strategies.