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# FACTSheet

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## Educational and Vocational Programs in New York State Prisons

Academic and vocational programs inside prisons have the power to transform lives, help participants grow and develop, increase opportunities for employment and success upon release, and empower incarcerated persons to become peer leaders, teachers, and role models for other people inside prisons and in home communities. Despite this enormous potential, the number and quality of programs fails to match the need and opportunity, there have been significant *reductions* in staff and resources for these programs, opportunities to participate are limited, vocational and college programs are being closed, and support for peer-run initiatives has declined.

### GENERAL ACADEMIC CLASSES

#### **Key Findings**

##### Lack of Resources to Meet Education Needs

- More than 40% of the annual prison population are without their high school diploma or equivalent
- Less than 7% of people in DOCCS prisons without a GED obtain one in a given year
- More than 1/3 of all people identified to have an academic need never enter a class prior to release
- Less than 20% of people at CA-visited facilities, and 41% of those without a GED, were enrolled in an academic class at the time of our visits
- Since 2000, annual academic enrollment dropped 21% and GED attainment dropped 28%
- More than 21% of authorized teacher positions at CA-visited facilities were vacant or on leave
- Median length of longest teacher vacancy at the time our visit was 16 months

##### Insufficient Matching of Programs to Needs

- The distribution of students enrolled in ABE and GED classes does not match the actual needs in the prison population
- Prisons confining people with similar characteristics have different educational programs offered

##### Other Major Barriers to Academic Progress

- Many ESL teachers do not speak Spanish or any language other than English
- People in the SHU cannot participate in academic programs; cell study is limited and varies greatly
- Lack of updated technology and meaningful computer access

#### **Key Recommendations**

##### Increase Resources to Meet Needs

- Increase & reallocate DOCCS funding for education
- Fill all teacher vacancies, hire additional staff, and prioritize hiring of bilingual teachers
- Update classroom technology and materials
- Enhance support for effective teaching

##### Empower Peer Tutors & Peer Teachers to Meet Needs

- Train and hire more IPAs for one-on-one tutoring
- Facilitate supplemental peer-run educational programs outside DOCCS classrooms
- Utilize qualified incarcerated persons to help teach classes and to run own workshops
- Provide opportunities for formerly incarcerated persons to return as mentors, mediators, and tutors

##### Match Programs to Needs

- With outside experts, conduct comprehensive needs assessment and review of current academic classes
- Reallocate resources to match student needs
- Provide intense individualized instruction & support
- Ensure academic classes meet not only educational needs, but spiritual, psychological, and social as well

##### Address Other Barriers

- Assess challenges facing non-English-language-dominant students, and tailor programs accordingly
- Allow people in the SHU to engage in educational classes, and improve & standardize SHU cell study
- Have outside experts conduct quality assurance
- Return to producing annual reports on education

## HIGHER EDUCATION

### ***Key Findings***

#### A Need for Expanded College Programs

- More than 58% of people in DOCCS prisons have a high school degree and could benefit from college
- Only about 3% of people in prison have a college degree and only about 3% enrolled in college
- College programs were dramatically cut in the 1990s and some continue to be cut today

#### Lessons from Successful College Program Examples

- New York Theological Seminary: Masters degree program graduates co-teach certificate course
- Cornell Prison Education Program: help gain staff support by offering free courses to staff
- Vassar College programs integrate campus students with prison students in class at prison
- Outdated computers and no online access makes research, reading, & typing papers difficult

### ***Key Recommendations***

#### Restore and Expand Funding for College Programs

- Restore eligibility of incarcerated persons for Pell and TAP grants in New York State
- Increase state funding and reallocate DOCCS budgets for provision of college programs
- Create staff buy-in by offering courses to staff

#### Empower Peers to Help Meet Needs

- Expand peer-assisted college programs
- Empower incarcerated persons to run study halls and tutoring programs for students in college
- Expand pre-enrollment college readiness courses

#### Harness Computer and Internet Technology

- Improve existing courses with access to online materials through internet or intranet
- Expand access to college through online courses

## VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS

### ***Key Findings***

#### Lack of Resources to Meet Vocational Needs

- 44% of those who leave prison have not received any vocational instruction
- From 2000-09, vocational participation declined 25% while the prison population declined only 16%
- From 2009-12, 21 vocational programs, or 15%, closed at CA-visited facilities, and only 2 opened
- 16% instructor vacancy rate at CA-visited prisons
- Large and long wait lists for vocational programs

#### Failure to Provide Meaningful Training

- Vocational assignments driven by availability of slots rather than participants' needs or interests
- Most classes are construction & maintenance
- Programs do not provide entry level qualifications
- At most CA-visited prisons, only one/two people each year receive a meaningful labor certificate
- Due to long waitlists, participants cannot stay in a program for 2-4 years to obtain labor certificates
- Types of programs do not match readily available jobs in the community, including human services

#### Other Barriers to Effective Vocational Programs

- Lack of bilingual instructors & non-English materials
- Lack of meaningful quality assessments
- Little job search help for post-release employment

### ***Key Recommendations***

#### Increase Resources to Meet Needs

- Increase & reallocate DOCCS budget for vocational instructors, materials, supplies, & equipment
- Increase DOCCS budget for materials, supplies
- Fill instructor vacancies & prioritize bilingual staff
- Update technology, materials, and equipment to ensure effective and relevant courses

#### Match Programs to Needs and Job Market

- Conduct, with outside experts, regional- and sector-based market employment availability assessments
- Collaborate with community organizations to continuously identify needed skills for current jobs
- Create vocational programs that provide skills needed for available jobs in the community
- Enhance assistance to program participants and graduates preparing for release to search for community employment opportunities

#### Address other Barriers

- Identify challenges for non-English-language participants and create appropriate responses
- Have outside experts conduct quality assurance
- Reinstate annual reports on vocational programs
- Revamp program committee decision-making to ensure vocational placement based on needs, interest, and merit