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# New Study Will Examine Correctional Education in the US

By Jenna Scafuri

In a workshop titled, “An Examination of Correctional Education in the U.S.,” presented at the 141st Congress of Correction in Kissimmee, Fla., Lois Davis, Ph.D., senior policy researcher for RAND Corp. outlined a new study of correctional education that is being funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) through the Second Chance Act. Joining Davis on the panel were Steve Steurer, Ph.D., executive director of the Correctional Education Association (CEA) and Bill Sondervan, Ph.D., professor and executive director of public safety outreach at University of Maryland University College. The panel was moderated by Carl Nink, executive director of Management and Training Corp.

Gary Dennis, senior policy advisor for corrections for BJA introduced the study by explaining that RAND will be receiving the second largest grant from the Second Chance Act, totaling \$2.5 million over 18 months. The study will be conducted through a partnership between BJA, RAND and CEA on the premise that “The more education an offender receives when they’re in [prison], the less likely they are to recidivate,” Dennis said. He went on to explain that there are correctional education programs all over the country that have not been examined, and this study will give BJA the opportunity to identify the positive things that are happening in the field. These areas with known, yet unexamined programs are referred to as “pockets of excellence.” The findings of the study will be given to the attorney general, who will hopefully in turn pass it on to Congress in order to gain additional funding for correctional education programs across the country. The team that will be conducting the study is comprised of experts in corrections, education, reentry and vocational training in order to give a comprehensive overview of the field of correctional education, something Davis cited as one of the major strengths of the project.

“Over two-thirds of inmates are rearrested and half are incarcerated within three years of release,” Davis said. In addition, prison populations have nearly doubled in the last two decades, resulting in overcrowding. “We need to do everything we can to get inmates to return home and make sure they don’t come back,” Sondervan said. “This needs to be done by better assessing inmates’ needs and providing them with skills they need to survive when they leave.” Even if offenders manage not to reoffend after their release, many still struggle with reentry, which includes finding employment. Offenders enter the system with a wide variety of problems, including high illiteracy rates. “How can we expect people to go back home and get decent jobs and not recidivate if they can’t read and write?” Sondervan said.

Since the current evidence suggests that education is directly related to lower rates of recidivism, 90 percent of publicly operated institutions offer some form of correctional education. However, these programs can also be effective in helping offenders with reentry, as well as improve the overall prison environment. The new study will formally evaluate the current correctional education programs to determine if they work and how they can be improved. By doing this, the team hopes to identify which correctional education programs and practices are effective, and then implement those programs in other facilities across the country. “We have to focus our efforts on programs that we know work,” Sondervan said. “We’re not just examining the scientific research,” Davis said, adding, “We’re also really reaching out to states to identify those pockets of excellence.”

The study will help correctional education practitioners determine how to change their approaches to education in the future to keep up with industry standards. One example of a major change that the correctional education field will be adapting to in the next few years is the use of technology. Steurer indicated that in 2014, GED testing within prisons will move to computerized assessments. “As we see technological advances in education, we will see that reflected in prisons,” Steurer said. “The results of this study will help us know how to proceed.”

Another thing that correctional educators will need to consider in the future is the change in the job market. “In the future, we will have more specialized jobs, but less people with the skills to do those jobs,” Nink said. Nink

emphasized the importance of providing inmates with the kinds of vocational training that will propel them into becoming “in-demand hires” through industry-related credentials to fill those jobs. “The more we can focus on the kinds of vocational education that will connect with employers, the better things will be in the future for offenders,” Nink said.

Davis indicated that the study will be conducted in six steps. The team will:

- i Survey the correctional education landscape through telephone interviews and focus groups;
- i Review the current literature on correctional education by searching online databases and unpublished literature;
- i Perform a scientific review of correctional education programs by assembling a team of experts and applying scientific ratings to extant research and evaluations;
- i Perform a meta-analysis by identifying program components associated with positive outcomes;
- i Create a Promising Practices website in collaboration with a group of correctional education specialists to provide information and research-based recommendations for correctional education programs; and
- i Identify case studies of effective and innovative programs by interviewing teachers and inmates and observing programs.

RAND is currently in the scientific literature review phase of the project, which will assess evidence of the impact of correctional education on things such as recidivism and employment. According to Sondervan, the findings will be available in 2012, and the team plans to present these findings at the 142nd Congress of Correction next summer. For more information about the study, contact Davis at [imdavis@rand.org](mailto:imdavis@rand.org).

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