

PART II: Education and training programs

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Cars in varying degrees of assembly fill up the automotive shop at Oregon State Penitentiary, from a classic Porsche to a 1965 Volvo. In the back of the shop is a small classroom. Inside, half a dozen men sit around tables, focused on the textbooks sprawled in front of them.

But learning here goes well beyond the textbook. For many of the participants, the biggest lesson is how to work with others. They face challenges every day that require them to work as a team and communicate with one another.

The two-year program is offered through Chemeketa Community College and gives students in-class and hands-on automotive experience. With the completion of general education classes offered through the college, participants of the automotive class can receive their associate degree in automotive technologies upon completion.

With the assistance of the Pell Pilot Program, many participants of the automotive program are now able to take their general education classes free of charge. This includes math and writing classes needed to earn the automotive technologies degree.

The automotive program itself, while not covered by Pell, costs inmates \$25 per term. Tucker said the small fee helps the participants feel as though they're making an investment and makes them more likely to complete the degree.

Bill Gastoni has been teaching the class for the past 14 years. Gastoni is proud of the success stories that have come out of his shop. His program boasts a recidivism rate of 2.5 percent and an average GPA of 3.8 for those who complete the program.

Altogether, the recidivism rate for graduates of Chemeketa's College Inside is 6 percent, compared with 24.6 percent of inmates in Oregon state prisons who are convicted of a felony within three years of being released.

Inmate Kenneth Taylor, a recent graduate of the program, went right to work in the prison's auto shop after finishing his curriculum. Some Salem residents pay the prison to have inmates repair their vehicles.

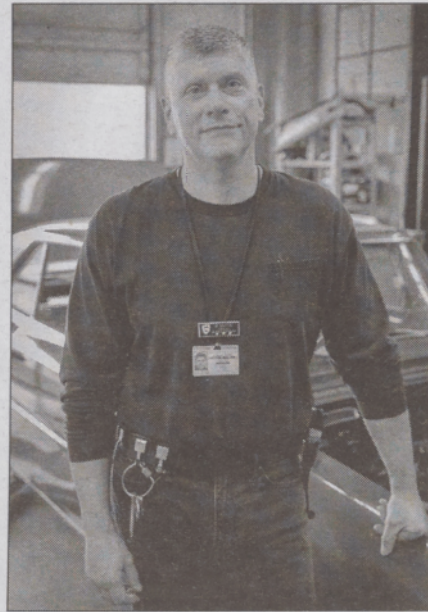
Thanks to the program, Taylor now feels more hopeful about his future and the skills that he has gained.

"It's a great learning experience if you take advantage of it and utilize the tools we have available here," he said. "You can get out of this program fully ready to go out into the real world and work on anything. I feel confident in my abilities at this time considering where we started."

When we spoke with Taylor, he was only a month away from his release date and said he planned on using the skills he learned in the automotive class to pursue an engineering degree.

"Even if we can touch one out of 20 students, that's still a positive thing," Gastoni said. "I do my best. I try to keep contact with them on the outside, and if they have trouble, they can give us a call."

Gerry Lee is partway through the program and credits it for helping turn his life around. He is scheduled to be released in 2019 and hopes to stay in the automotive shop until then.



Bill Gastoni teaches the automotive class at Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, part of Chemeketa Community College's College Inside program

"I was in a very deep, dark depression, and I just wanted to leave OSP," Lee said. "And now with this going on, after the two-year program, there is an option to stay in and become a worker, and I would like to be able to do that for another year or more if possible."

After dropping out of high school at age 16, Lee said he had to get used to the classroom setting again, but now feels more confident about leaving prison and finding a job.

While Taylor and Lee are both dedicated to the program, Gastoni said that's not the case for everyone. Oftentimes students don't give it their all or their hearts aren't in it, Gastoni said.

"Some of them are disappointing. They're just here because they want to stay at OSP and don't have anything better to do but don't have any desire to do this (automotive) afterwards," Gastoni said. "I put a lot of effort into these guys, and then they fail or don't care."

Despite the program's low recidivism rate, Taylor said that people don't jump at the opportunity like one might expect.

"A lot of people do not want to put in the work, and they do not want to let go of the constraint put on you out there and the mentality you have to have in order to be out there," Taylor said.

"It's prison mentality," Gastoni said. "You have to want to change yourself, and a lot of these guys just like being the way they are. That's why they're here."

The kind of skills they learn in educational programs such as Gastoni's are crucial to the success of these individuals once they're released. There are the communication skills that help them work with others and the problem-solving skills that allow them to face problems head on. But more than anything, Gastoni said, is the process of learning that there are options besides criminal activity.

"Once I get that through to them, then they get on the outside and go, 'You know what? I can be a better person. I don't need to go and steal or do crime. I can actually have a job, have an income and make a good living doing

this," Gastoni said.

The program has a 15-student capacity each year. Despite the praise that the program receives from past students, enrollment has been falling below expectations. The program currently has 12 second- and 10 first-year students. This is due in part to the nature of prison, said Gastoni. Inmates get in fights or have other issues that result in them being removed from the program, or are ineligible for it to begin with.

Chemeketa also offers a Computer Assisted Drafting program at Santiam Correctional Institute, with the option of obtaining an associate degree.

One of the most effective ways to prepare inmates for the outside is through education, according to a 2014 study conducted by the RAND Corporation. The study, which examined the effects of prison education programs, concluded that inmates were 13 percent more likely to get a job after being released if they had participated in some form of correctional education.

The study also concluded that inmates who participated in educational programs were 43 percent less likely to experience reoffend within three years than those who didn't participate.

Education assessment is one step in the initial intake process for all inmates. As of 2014, of those who entered prison without a high school diploma or equivalent, 67.1 percent were released having earned a GED.

However, with a statewide prison population of nearly 15,000 inmates, education programs are few and far between. GED and adult basic education programs are standard fare at all 14 of Oregon's correctional facilities. Beyond that, however, inmates are left with few options. Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, the state's only women's prison, offers the widest range of courses, including a hair salon and a barista training program. But at other facilities, there isn't much available to provide inmates with an education that can help them succeed outside of prison.

One of the biggest roadblocks to expanding education programs, as with many state-run programs, is adequate funding. It already costs Oregon \$34,510 to house an inmate for a year, before adding in the cost of college education programs inside.

Prior to 1994, many prisoners nationwide were eligible to receive Pell Grants to enroll in discounted college education programs while incarcerated. That changed when President Bill Clinton introduced the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which included a provision that barred anyone from receiving educational grants while in a penal institution.

The Obama administration has taken steps in the past few months to reinstate Pell Grants as an option for inmates. The Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, which began in July, brings together colleges and prisons across the country to provide degree and certificate programs.

According to the official notice from the U.S. Department of Education, the pilot program requires that participating institutions "only enroll students in postsecondary education and training programs that prepare them for high-demand occupations." They must also be legally able to enter into said occupations or obtain any licenses or certifications despite their status

as an ex-convict.



An inmate at Oregon State Penitentiary works on an car during automotive class.

as an ex-convict.

The U.S. Department of Education estimates in the 2016-17 school year approximately 186 inmates at three Oregon correctional facilities will be eligible for these Pell Grants through Chemeketa Community College. Oregon State Penitentiary, Oregon State Correctional Institution and Santiam Correctional Institution are the only prisons in Oregon that offer the program.

In order to qualify for a Pell Grant, inmates must have one full year without any reported violent behavior or prison rule violation. At Chemeketa, the focus is on those who are within five years of being released.

Some opponents of the program say it takes away from deserving students that aren't incarcerated. Pell's 2016 budget is more than \$32 billion, and the Department of Education estimates that the funds needed for inmate Pell grants make up less than 0.1 percent of the entire budget.

On the issue of money, Jonathan Tucker, Oregon Department of Corrections' Salem-area education manager, refers back to the RAND study, which concluded that for every dollar spent on corrections education, taxpayers save \$4 to \$5.

Tucker currently manages the education programs offered through Chemeketa Community College at Oregon State Penitentiary, Oregon State Correctional Institute and Santiam Correctional Institute.

One of the biggest struggles has been finding adequate resources, Tucker said. While Chemeketa's College Inside program is offered at three correctional facilities across Salem, all program organizing is done by a single person.

"Pell is so great and it's important symbolically, but really, until we put some money towards the actual department funding so we can have some part-time staff to come

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Oregon Corrections Enterprises strives to provide meaningful work opportunities that help inmates develop jobs skills that will help them enter Oregon's workforce after their release. But by law, they must do that without offering products or services that compete with Oregon industries or creating jobs that would undercut the local workforce outside the prison.

Balancing these conflicting mandates "is very, very difficult," said the agency's administrator, Ken Jeske.

The laundry

When we entered the laundry, the first thing we noticed was its size; it's gigantic. Hundreds of inmates appeared to be hard at work in the labyrinth of commercial washing machinery and folding stations. Area hospitals send all their linens to OSP for cleaning.

The laundry floor manager, Damon Plattner, explained that most laundries this size outside of the prison system are fully automated, but he would never be able to assign the nearly 300 inmates he has working for him if the facility were modernized. He said entry-level laundry workers earn about \$70 to \$80 a month.

As we strolled from one end of the laundry to the other, Plattner explained the different jobs inmates were performing. Some of the jobs seemed tedious, but he said they have the ability to switch things up or work for another Oregon Corrections Enterprises operation, such as the furniture factory or welding shop.

"For many of them," Plattner said, "it's having a job for the first time and understanding that there is a requirement of (them) to do that job and keep that job."

For motivated individuals, the laundry offers management positions and a maintenance program, where inmates learn to fix machinery, which Plattner said is a valued skill in any manufacturing plant.

Plattner said he's also reinstating an electrical apprentice program where graduates can earn journeyman licenses, but the six- to eight-year program will take only two inmates at a time.

We sat down in the back office with Daniel Kirkland, 48. He's serving a life sentence with the possibility of parole, and he said he's found a meaningful career in the laundry as a lead technician.

"There's a gambit of opportunities offered here," he said, citing religious activities, drug and alcohol programs, clubs such as the Toastmasters and educational courses offered at OSP. He's working on an associate degree through Chemeketa Community College, as well.

"It comes to the individual. They have to seize the moment," Kirkland said. "To be honest, I think everything is here and in place. We have to take the initiative and do it."

Kirkland previously spent 13 years at Two Rivers Correctional Institution, where, he said, there are fewer opportunities for inmates.

"I am very grateful, and I carry myself that way, but if I chose to live in that old mindset, I probably would be out in the yard, lifting weights, reading a book, watching TV, and letting life pass me by instead of being a part of it."

As we spoke with inmates, it became clear that in Oregon's prison system, there are opportunities for inmates who want to better themselves. We also heard repeatedly, from inmates and staff, that many inmates have a "prison mentality" and are not motivated to do anything beyond the bare minimum.

Additionally, some prisons have fewer programs than others, making the coveted jobs with Oregon Corrections Enterprises more difficult for inmates to acquire at some institutions.

Compliance challenges

A study of Washington State Correctional Industries, which is set up similarly to Oregon Corrections Enterprises, found that for every dollar spent on its programs, \$4.77 is saved in future criminal justice costs. OCE commissioned a similar report with an expected release at the end of the year.

These programs are already limited in size, making it surprising that two of the most beneficial programs at OSP, the contact center and the automotive training program, were not at capacity.

While Oregon Corrections Enterprises is now engaging with a record number of inmates, that number is only 1,400 out of Oregon's 12,470 work-eligible prison inmates.

And that law requiring that able-bodied inmates all work full time? Oregon Department of Corrections has never been in full compliance with that requirement.

Between January and November 2016, 67 percent to 71 percent of Oregon's work-eligible inmates were in compliance with the law during any given month. One institution was as low as 29 percent in compliance.

Most of Oregon's 8,800 working inmates are assigned directly to Department of Corrections jobs rather than Oregon Corrections Enterprises.

Roberta Angelozzi, who oversees the DOC-run inmate work programs, said: "The number of jobs that we can provide is the biggest issue. You take a small institution that doesn't need 20 people in the kitchen or 50 people to run the maintenance program, and you have 400 inmates, it's hard to come up with meaningful jobs to put people in."

Inmate Jamie Pierce, 40, said he worked various jobs, "anything from line server to scullery, which is washing dishes, to floor crew," during the three times he's been incarcerated.

When asked if he gained any skills from these DOC jobs, he said, "Absolutely not." But then he added that he liked working on a DOC work crew in the forest.

The DOC contracts with the state Department of Forestry, U.S. Forest Service and Oregon Department of Transportation, sending inmates to work alongside firefighters, rebuild trails, clean roadsides and perform other cleanup and landscaping-type duties. In rare cases, it will contract with private landowners in remote areas.

Now he's been working for Oregon Corrections Enterprises in its laundry for five years.

"OCE saw something in me that I didn't know I had. And so they kind of scooped me up, trained me how to do a job back there," Pierce said.

"There needs to be more skills given to

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How do we measure recidivism?

In corrections, the best measure of success is generally agreed upon to be the recidivism rate, or the rate at which people reoffend after their release.

In Oregon, the Department of Corrections uses the percentage of inmates who are convicted of a new felony within three years of their release to count recidivism. Among the most recent group of parolees to reach the three-year mark, 24.6 percent were convicted of a new felony within three years of their release from state prison.

In national comparisons, this makes Oregon appear to have one of the best rates in the nation, but comparing recidivism rates can be misleading.

For one, some states count recidivism as the percentage of parolees who are arrested or sent back to jail or prison for any reason. In the only state-to-state study of recidivism rates done to date, The Pew Center compared the rate at which parolees were returned to prison. Oregon came out ahead, but only because in Oregon, parole violations get you a bed in

prison," Tucker said.

Tucker and Gastoni are starting the new year with cautious optimism. With President-elect Donald Trump soon to be sworn into office, the future of the Pell Pilot Program is unclear.

"We're silently nervous and hopeful at the same time," Tucker said.

jail, not prison like many other states. So technical violations were not counted, explained Kelly Officer, a senior research analyst at the Criminal Justice Commission.

According to the CJC, the state agency responsible for tracking crime statistics, 29.6 percent of inmates released from Oregon state prisons between January 2011 and July 2013 were convicted of a new misdemeanor or felony within the first three years of their release — and 42.3 percent were arrested.

If that many offenders are finding themselves in handcuffs within three years of their release from state prison, Oregon may want to ask itself if it could be doing things better. And, as the Marshall Project pointed out in a report titled "The Misleading Math of Recidivism," those numbers only account for people who committed crimes within three years of their release — and got caught.

— Emily Green

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