

Assessment of the Grinnell College Prison Program¹

December, 2011 (revised May 2012)

Overview

The Grinnell College Liberal Arts in Prison program was started in 2003, and has been a joint student² and faculty effort from the beginning. Since 2009, courses have been offered at the Newton Correctional Facility for Grinnell College academic credit. This assessment effort was undertaken in the fall of 2011 to examine the effectiveness of the program, and to inform decisions about the continuation of the pilot for-credit program. The results of this assessment, which relied on surveys of college participants in the program, were exceptionally positive, and demonstrated lasting effects on students and faculty alike. For many, perhaps most, participants, the program had a transformative effect. The Liberal Arts in Prison program clearly deserves to be placed in the category of other “high impact practices,” to use current jargon, such as internships, student research projects, and study abroad. Moreover, the program’s ability to reinforce the values of a liberal arts education is surprisingly strong, and makes it certainly unusual, if not unique, among the other categories of high impact practices.

This study looked at all participants in the program, not just those who participated in for-credit courses. This seemed the only reasonable path, for at least two reasons. First, the number of individuals who have participated in the for-credit courses is small, which would unavoidably lead to large statistical uncertainties in the results of surveys of them alone. Second, those faculty participating in for-credit courses are highly self-selected, having already had positive experiences in a much more limited number of visits; surveying only those faculty would likely skew the results as all of the for-credit faculty are strong advocates for the continuation of the program.

At this point, thirteen for-credit courses have been offered at the Newton Correctional Facility, for a total of 40 credits. No courses for credit have been offered at the Mitchellville facility. The only regular full-time classroom faculty who have participated in the for-credit program have been on leave at the time of participation (one faculty member accounting for four of the 40 credits). Twelve credits were offered by part-time faculty in addition to their on-campus teaching. Math Lab and Writing Lab faculty have offered a total of eight of the 40 credits. Finally, Emeritus and Senior Faculty Status individuals have offered courses totaling 16 credits. By division, four courses in the Humanities have been offered, one course in Science, and eight courses in the Social Studies Division (four of those being College Writing, which is formally assigned to the Social Studies Division).

¹ The surveys described here were developed in Fall 2012 by Emily Guenther and Mark Schneider, and implemented with Vovici with the assistance of Stephanie Peterson. Extraction and analysis of the data was done by Mark Schneider, Carlie Van Willigen, and Stephanie Peterson. The first draft of this document was written by Mark Schneider in December 2011. Detailed comments from Emily Guenther, the Assessment Task Force, and Executive Council have led to several drafts culminating in this final version of May 3, 2012.

² For the purposes of this report, “students” and “participants” refer to on-campus college students, faculty, or staff. In this document, prisoners participating in the program are always referred to as “incarcerated students” or “prisoners.”

The funding for these offerings have come almost exclusively from the Prison Program budget, the vast majority of those funds coming from designated gifts and grants from Bard College and from an alumnus donor. There are arguably two exceptions to this: 1) two SFS faculty have included participation in the Prison Program in their SFS contracts, and therefore they receive no additional remuneration from the college, and 2) one of our experienced laboratory lecturers felt that she could participate in the program without sacrificing any of her regular responsibilities in a typically slower semester and without exceeding a full-time work schedule, so she requested no stipend for overtime work for the program. It is therefore reasonable to assert that the Prison Program has incurred no costs for on-campus instruction either financially or in terms of classroom offerings, in fulfillment of that requirement for the pilot project. Given the strong positive effects seen in this study, reconsideration of this limitation is reasonable.

Motivation for, and Design of, this Study

There are few who doubt that the efforts of Grinnell College students and faculty to bring elements of liberal arts education to prisoners at the Newton and Mitchellville facilities are of benefit to the incarcerated students—nearly everyone will agree this is “good work” in resonance with Grinnell’s ideals of social justice. At a recent anniversary commemoration of the program, two recently released prisoners spoke movingly of the effects of the program, and how it made possible their reentry into education and career. As the numbers of incarcerated students increases and time frame extends, these effects will become ripe for assessment.

However, there are many good works that students and faculty could undertake; what makes this program appropriate for Grinnell? The prison program was challenged to undertake an assessment that investigates the benefits that this off-campus program brings back to the campus. In other words, does this program also bring tangible benefits to the faculty and students that advance our mission as a residential college?

To find the answer to this question, the prison program developed several separate surveys of all college participants in the prison program: students, alumni and faculty. For students, the questions focused on the ways in which the program enhanced their educational experience, and on the ways in which participation conflicted with or detracted from their on-campus work and experiences. For alumni, the questions focused on lasting changes that involvement in the program made in these individuals work and attitudes. For faculty, the questions focused on the utility of these experiences in the context of faculty development issues. For each of these surveys, which were administered online, respondents gave quantifiable responses to statements in Likert-style format, with ample opportunities for open-ended elaboration of their numerical answers.

The surveys did not presume positive responses, and asked a number of questions that allowed respondents to point out failings of the program, or negative impacts that participation might have had. To maintain a reasonable level of disinterest in the analysis, the summaries of the text responses were compiled by the Dean’s Office, and not by members of the Prison Program staff or volunteers. We have received responses from 69% of alumni, 77% of faculty, and 74% of current students, so the reliability of the survey results is very high.

Numerical Results of Responses

Throughout all sections, average numerical results are based on the following scale:

Likert Scale Responses:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither disagree nor agree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

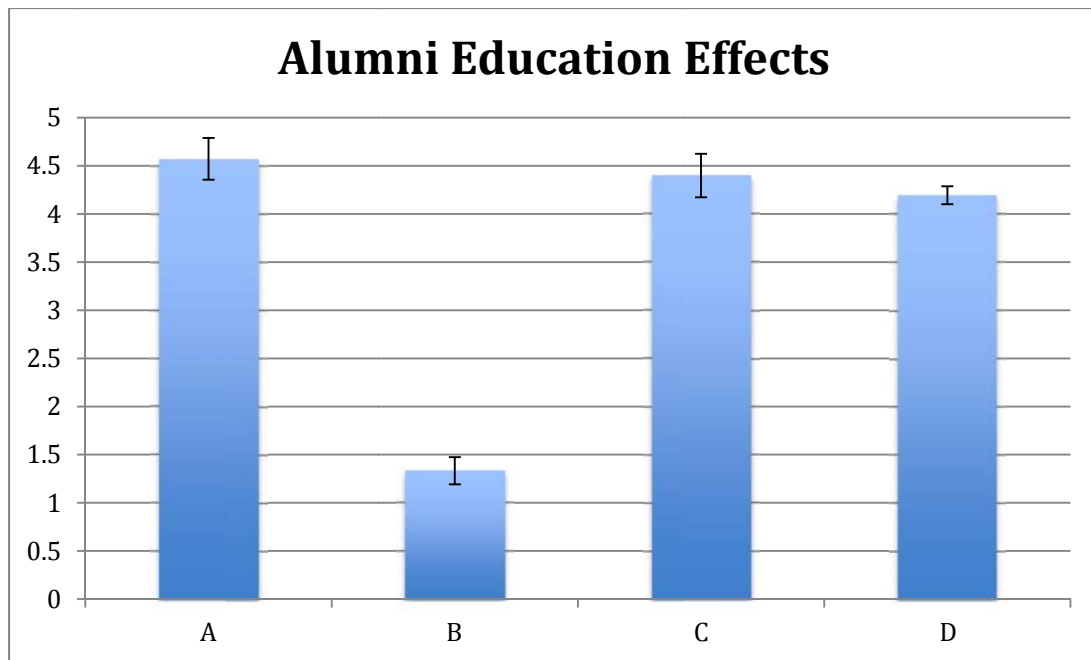
Alumni

We received 108 alumni responses out of a total of 157 participants (69% response rate).

Questions:

- A. Participating in the prison program was valuable to my academic education.
- B. Participating in the prison program negatively affected my academic work.
- C. Participating in the prison program has affected how I think about liberal arts education.
- D. Participating in the prison program changed my beliefs and attitudes.

Height of column indicates average of numerical equivalents of responses.
Error bars indicate the uncertainty in this average at the 95% confidence level.



Yes-or-No responses:

Questions:

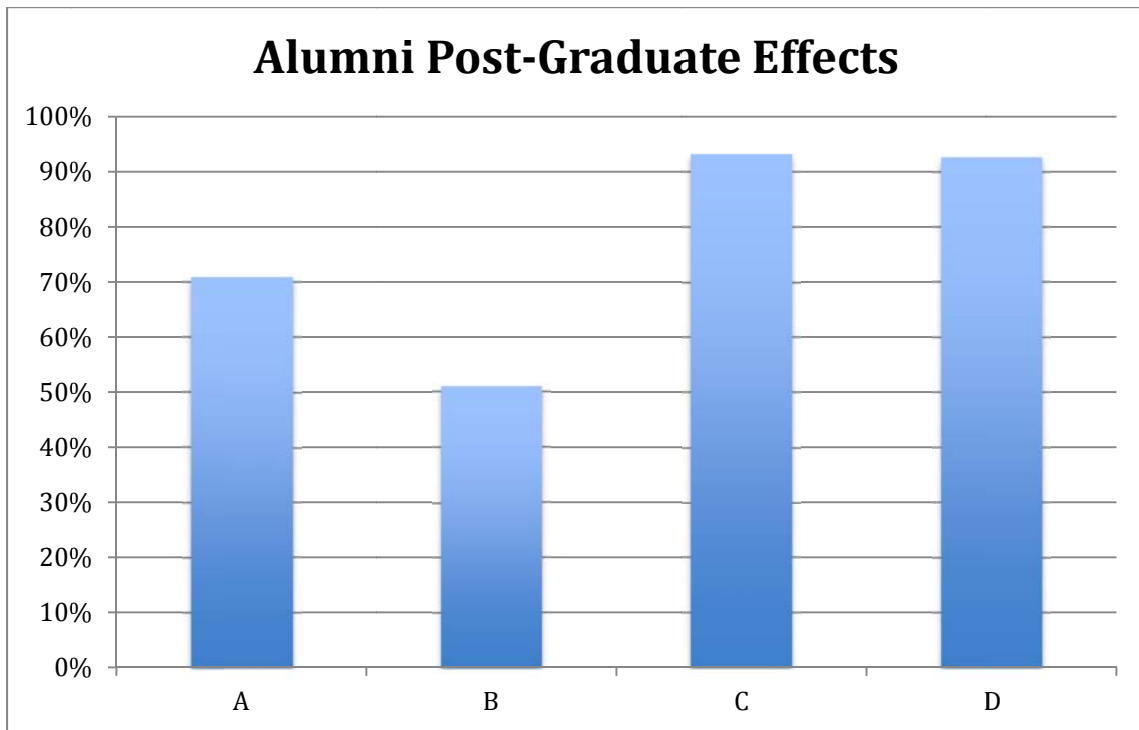
A. Participating in the prison program as a student affected my plans after graduation.

B. I am currently working in a career, attending school, and/or volunteering with an organization that relates to my work with the prison program.

C. I have listed my experience with the prison program in an application for school, work, or a volunteer position.

D. Do you think your application was better received because of your experience with the prison program?

The chart indicates the percentage of "yes" responses.



Current Students

A total of 140 current students have participated in the prison program, and all were surveyed. Of this group a total of 104 current students have responded for a 74% response rate.

The following questions related to the effects of the prison program on students' educational experiences:

A Designing and teaching a class in prison was as valuable to my education as taking a Grinnell course.

B Volunteering in the prison program has positively affected my academic work.

C I would like to tie my prison volunteering to coursework for academic credit on campus.

D Participating in the prison program negatively affected my academic work.

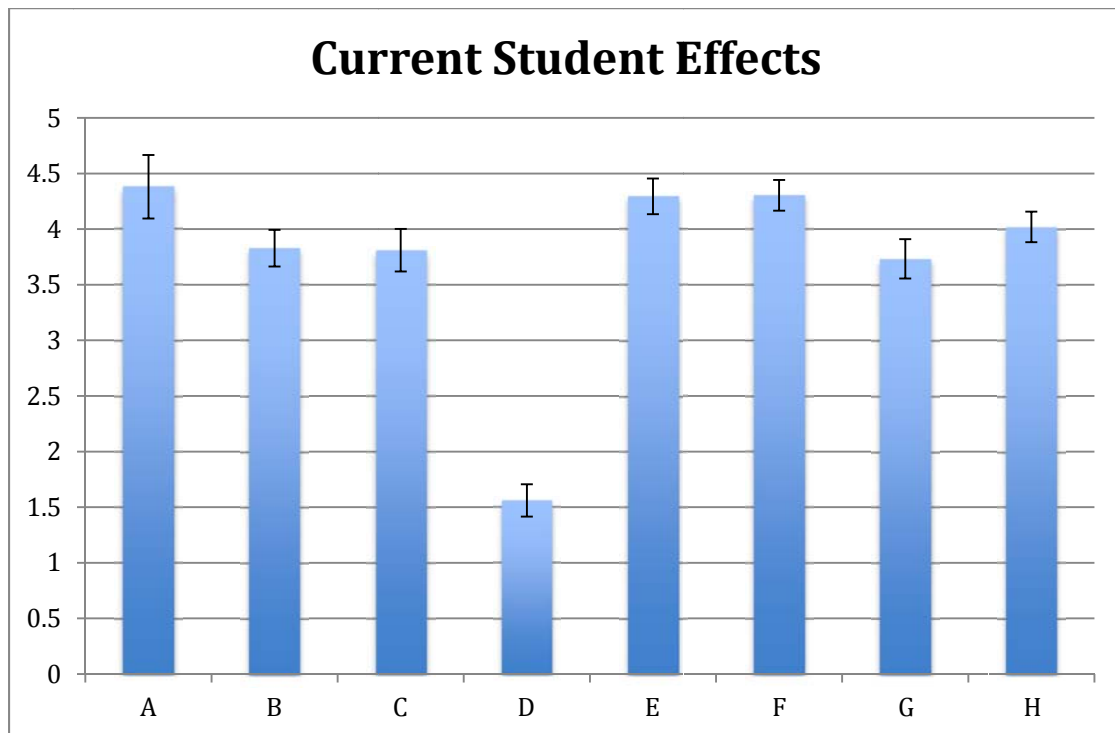
E Participating in the prison program has given me a sense of purpose.

F Participating in the prison program has affected how I think about liberal arts education.

G Participating in the prison program has affected my career/life goals.

H Participating in the prison program changed my beliefs and attitudes.

Height of column indicates average of numerical equivalents of responses.
Error bars indicate the uncertainty in this average at the 95% confidence level.



The following questions related to the preparation of students for participation in the prison program:

I I felt prepared for my experience.

J I would have liked more preparation in procedure and how to negotiate the environments in which I was working.

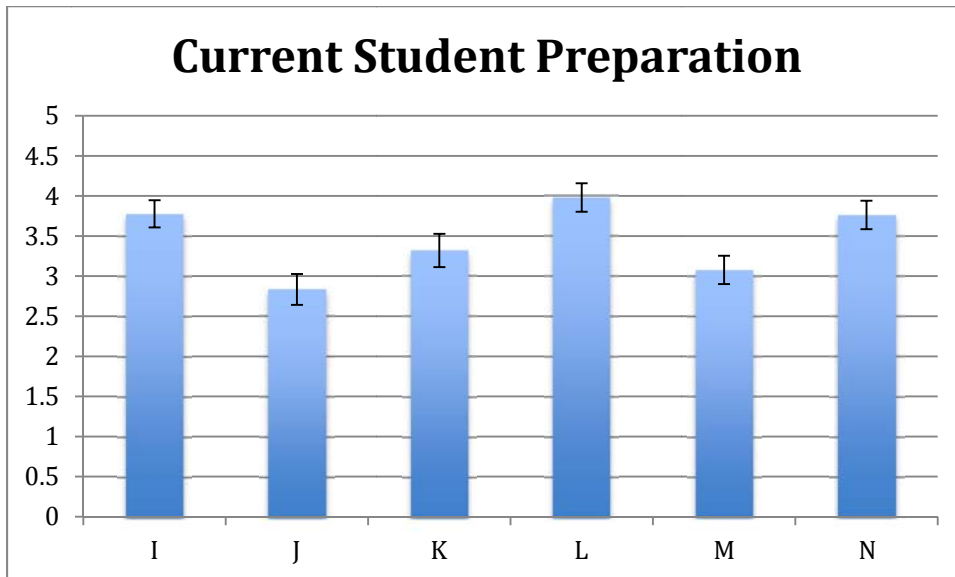
K I would have liked to learn more about the institutions in which I was working.

L I would have liked to learn more about national trends in incarceration and education.

M I would have liked more organized venues for reflection on my experience.

N I would have liked more instruction in pedagogy (teaching methods).

Height of column indicates average of numerical equivalents of responses.
Error bars indicate the uncertainty in this average at the 95% confidence level.



Comparison of these two categories of questions reveal some interesting differences. It is clear that the averages of the “effects” responses are nearly a full point higher than the “preparation” responses. This suggests that students were clearly discriminating in their responses, and that the effects of the program were exceptionally strong even though student participants felt their preparation was not nearly as complete as it might have been. Study of the comments relating to these questions reveal a range of concerns: 1) direct preparation for the experience, which the program has responded to on a regular basis (as reflected in questions J and K), 2) more extensive training for teaching in an on-campus, probably for-credit context, (as reflected in question N) and 3) opportunities to connect the prison experience with classroom discussions (as reflected in questions L and M).

Faculty

The following graphs give the distribution of Likert responses to each of the questions. Responses were solicited from a total of 43 faculty; 33 faculty responded, for a response rate of 77%.

A Participating in the prison program has affected my on-campus teaching.

B Participating in the prison program has affected my scholarship.

C I would like more opportunities to work with on-campus students on projects related to the prison program.

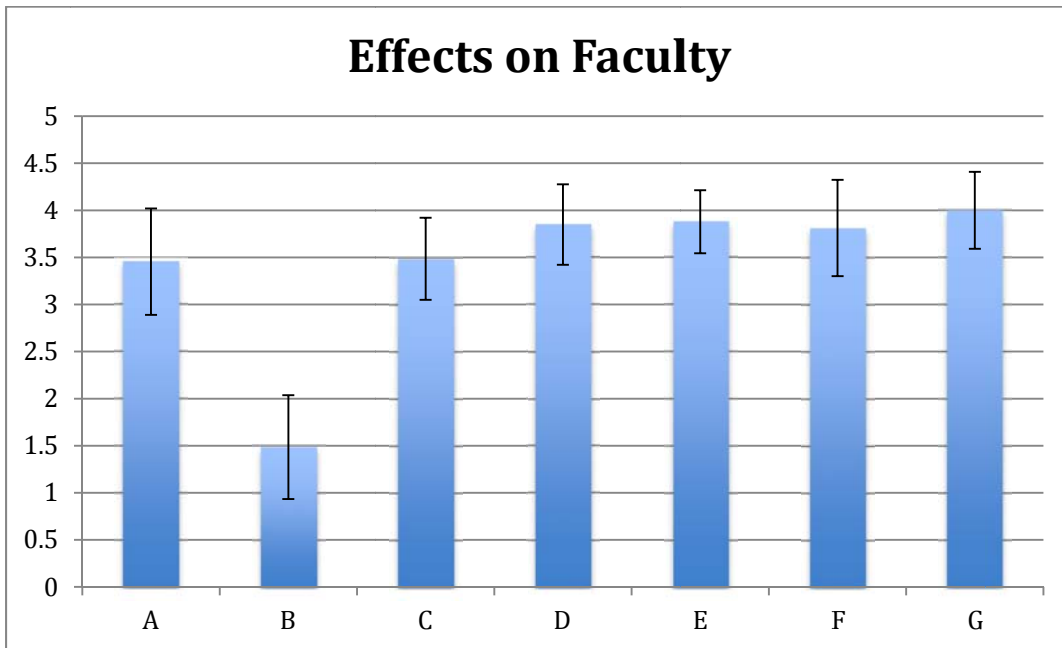
D I would like more opportunities to work with incarcerated students.

E Participating in the prison program has changed how I think about liberal arts education.

F Participating in the prison program benefits my on-campus students.

G Participating in the prison program changed my beliefs or attitudes.

Height of column indicates average of numerical equivalents of responses.
Error bars indicate the uncertainty in this average at the 95% confidence level.



Results of Text Responses

Typically in studies such as this, most text responses are reasonably bland; maybe one in ten is particularly persuasive, or strongly felt. However, in this study, it is more difficult to find the bland responses in the wealth of enthusiastic commentary. One might easily doubt this level of support for the program, so we can make *all* of the text responses in an appendix for the skeptic; we have not attached that material as it is nearly a hundred pages of dense text.

Alumni

Alumni describe a variety of effects the program has had on them. Not surprisingly, many point to a better understanding of the penal system in the United States. Others also found it valuable to get to know the incarcerated students as people, and not as statistics; many comments referred to a better appreciation of a much more complex map of behaviors than can be accommodated with “right” and “wrong.” Many found the experience of truly teaching valuable, especially with students who were hungry for the opportunity of intellectual engagement. And for a number of alumni, they found this an eye-opening experience that helped them understand the level of privilege afforded by their Grinnell education, and gave them greater appreciation and respect for the value of a liberal arts education, including their own educations.

In terms of negative impacts, only a handful of students felt participation was burdensome. The most negative comments were of the character of the following: “Sometimes I wold [sic] get distracted, and I probably spent too much time on it some semesters.” Even those were often tempered, such as “There was a significant time commitment involved in lesson planning, commenting on poems, and driving to and from Newton, but I would say the overall net effect on my academics was positive.” The most common response was that there was no effect—some were quite protective of the program, such as

Wow. I honesty [sic] can't think of any way the prison program would have negatively affected my education. I DID stay up late one night editing our class poetry book and procrastinated on a class paper. But where is that class paper now? Buried on my computer. And our poetry book? On my coffee table.

Perhaps most surprising is the number of alumni who identified the program as influential in charting career directions. Fully half of respondents answered that they were currently involved in an activity that directly related to their prison program experience, and 45% of alumni gave a detailed written response; typically alumni were involved in teaching, social work, or directly working with prison-related projects or careers. Two thirds of respondents gave written comments describing the effects the program has had on their life goals. Virtually all alumni used their prison experiences on the CV's, and believe their CV's were received more favorably because of this entry.

Current Students

The responses from current students relating to the value of involvement in the prison program were very much in line with responses from alumni. Many students spoke of consolidating teaching skills, and gaining confidence speaking in front of groups. For

some students, they identified this as being the most important experience of their Grinnell education. Time demands are significant, but like the alumni, students took these demands on willingly, and felt that they, of necessity, improved their time management skills. Fully two thirds of the students took the time to write a response to how the program enhanced their understanding of and appreciation for liberal arts education; comments such as “It has made me more grateful for mine.” and “Made me appreciate the immense value and uniqueness of Grinnell’s liberal arts curriculum [sic].” were typical.

A significant number of students credited the prison program with changing their career directions, typically toward career goals in education, social service, or the criminal justice system. Even those for whom the program did not directly affect their specific career goals, they felt the experiences changed their attitudes and beliefs—about prisoners, about education, about the value of volunteer activities.

A number of the questions for current students focused on ways in which the program could be improved by better training for these volunteers. Responses generally felt that some additional training would be valuable, either relating to the prison environment, or more commonly, relating to pedagogy generally. Nevertheless, these responses were in general muted; numerical responses here tended to be much closer to the midpoint of the Likert scale than responses to any of the questions relating to effects of the program on volunteers.

Faculty

The responses from faculty, not surprisingly perhaps, revealed that the prison program did not affect the scholarship of many faculty. However, roughly 40% of faculty respondents gave examples of ways in which their experiences teaching at the prison had affected their on-campus teaching. This is particularly impressive, given that only fifteen of these faculty respondents had given more than a single session at one of the prisons.

Aside from specific effects on faculty teaching, faculty more universally found the experience of teaching at the prison transformative for themselves and for their students. Fifty-five percent of faculty respondents gave comments of how the program had changed their own views of liberal education, and nearly 70% of faculty respondents gave examples of ways in which their experiences changed their attitudes and beliefs. Typical responses related to the power of education, education as a tool of social justice, and the destruction of stereotypes relating to the criminal justice system and prisoners. Virtually all faculty expressed eagerness, or at least willingness, to continue participation in the program to the extent that their time would allow.

Conclusion

While it was anticipated that the response of current students would be strongly positive, it was remarkable that so many faculty and alumni pointed to substantive, lasting effects of the program. It would be difficult to argue that the program is not an important addition to our on campus program that serves our mission and core values directly. Current financial support for the program is assured for the next one to two years; it is timely for the college to consider if and how to ensure long-term continuation of the program.