

Opportunities for Higher Learning and College Degrees

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The path I took to earn an undergraduate and a graduate degree while serving my 45-year federal prison sentence. Suggestions for steps others may take to work toward academic credentials and preparations for release.

In 1987, at the time of my arrest, I was 23 years old. I had been only a mediocre student in high school, and didn't pursue much learning once I graduated. After my judge imposed a 45-year sentence, I realized that I had better try to make something of my life while I served time in prison. For me, pursuit of education was the answer to any questions about how I would adjust.

While I was making those bad decisions that led to my imprisonment, I had not been much of a reader. Indications of who I was then suggested that I was not well prepared for an independent study program. Yet I was confined inside a high security penitentiary. There were many gangs, high levels of tension, and violence was a part of life inside the penitentiary's walls. With such a long sentence to serve, I knew that if I did not learn to communicate effectively on paper, my life experiences would be limited to what went on inside the prisons that held me. To transcend those walls, I knew that I would need to learn how to reach out.

Within weeks of my arrival at the penitentiary, I sought out work in the education department. The penitentiary had been recovering from a riot that made national news during the fall of 1987. Because of the rebuilding efforts, there was not much of a library in place and no classes were being offered. I worked as a librarian, checking out books and cleaning the floors. It was not a very fulfilling job, though it did give me access to other prisoners who enjoyed reading. By talking with them, I learned about a correspondence program at Ohio University.

An amazing feeling came over me when I learned about the correspondence program at Ohio University. Suddenly I didn't have to focus on serving a lengthy sentence. Instead, I could

channel all of my thoughts on steps I could take to earn a college degree. The possibility seemed almost surreal in that desolate environment. Many times I walked through puddles of blood. Most of the other inmates were enmeshed in some kind of hustle. The prison did not resemble a community of scholars, yet I would have to make it my monastery, avoiding the madness as best as I could.

I did not have financial resources available to me. That obstacle did not stop me from writing a letter to Ohio University. In that letter I inquired about the possibility of my enrollment. I informed the school that I was serving a lengthy sentence in federal prison and that I did not have any money. Nevertheless, I expressed my enthusiasm and hopes that we could find a solution that would allow me to enroll in the academic program. A few weeks later, someone from the university wrote me back.

Mail call was a big deal in prison. That was the time that officers passed out incoming mail. I always enjoyed receiving mail from home, but nothing compared to the feeling I had when I saw that envelope with Ohio University as the return address. I opened it eagerly, as if it were news of my release.

In a way, that envelope from the university was a kind of release. It brought news of release from the ignorance that had been a part of my life. The person who wrote me back was the coordinator of a special program Ohio University had set up for those who were incarcerated. She informed me that as a federal prisoner I would qualify for the Pell Grant. Congress had authorized those funds for low-income students, and as a federal prisoner, I certainly qualified as a low-income student. I filled out the necessary paperwork and I returned it to the college coordinator. I also selected four courses that I wanted to study. They were going to be the first steps on the ladder I was building toward my degree.

A few weeks later, the Supervisor of Education at the prison called me into his office. He told me that he had received a box with all my books and the supplies I would need to complete

the courses. He told me that I was supposed to check with him before I enrolled in college. Since I worked as his librarian, however, he was willing to overlook my proceeding without his permission. He passed me the box of books.

I was thrilled. I had a course in philosophy, psychology, English, and algebra. I began reading through the lesson plans of each course. What I liked about them was that they were clearly defined. I knew exactly what the professors expected of me. Once I worked through the lesson plans, I would earn credit for the course. Suddenly I had some control over my own destiny. Either I could succeed or I could fail. What I really saw was an opportunity to work toward a meaningful credential. I really wanted that degree, as somehow I believed that the distinction of a college education would make me more than simply a prisoner.

Prisons were not ideal places for study. There were no desks in the cells. Quiet time was not possible until after eleven in the evening. Studying toward college courses required an extraordinary amount of self-direction. I had to work within the institutional schedule and within the curious suspicions of my fellow prisoners. Nevertheless, the payoff I envisioned made the struggles worth the effort. I was fully committed to completing my courses.

I worked through the courses as quickly as I could. As a consequence of my not having had prior experience studying at the university level, there were challenges. My vocabulary was insufficient, as was my knowledge of related subject matter. Those challenges required that I devote considerable time to reading. I worked through the night when necessary, though I loved every second of the journey. With each assignment that I completed, I felt myself moving closer to my goal. I wanted to become an educated man.

When I neared completion of my first quarter at Ohio University, I enrolled in the next set of courses. I felt proud of my work when I received my grades in the mail. The grades were much higher than anything I had earned in high school. More importantly, I felt my intellect growing, and I had the tangible benefit of those college credits. No one could take them away.

After I completed my second quarter with Ohio University, Mercer University began a program inside the penitentiary. Professors began coming in to the prison during evening hours to teach courses. I enrolled in Mercer's program as well.

By studying full time at two universities, I sensed that I could earn my undergraduate degree faster. Because of my imprisonment, I knew that I was in a precarious position. Anything could happen. I wanted to complete the requirements for my degree as quickly as possible.

With my eye firmly fixed on the prize of that degree, I had reason to avoid any type of behavior that could lead to disciplinary problems. I did not want to suffer through any problems that could lead to my being taken to segregation or transfer from the prison. The violence around me did not matter. All I wanted was that college degree. Once I had that, I figured, new opportunities would open for me. Besides, the degree was something that those in society would value. It would help me overcome the stigma of my criminal conviction. No one could take that education away once I earned it.

In May of 1992, Mercer University awarded my undergraduate degree, and I earned it with honors. In a population of more than 2,500 inmates, I was the only prisoner to earn the degree. The prison held a commencement ceremony, and administrators authorized my sister to attend. That was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life.

As I approached graduation, I began writing to law schools. I wanted to earn a law degree, not because I wanted to become a lawyer, but because I knew that a legal education would allow me to distinguish my resume. I wrote to every law school in the United States, but without exception, the law schools wrote back with bad news. It turned out that the American Bar Association prohibited law schools to teach the courses through correspondence. The dean at Hofstra University's law school, on the other hand, passed along my letter of inquiry to the dean of Hofstra's graduate school, Dr. Cohen.

Dr. Cohen wrote me back telling me that although I could not study toward a law degree at Hofstra, if I wanted, Hofstra might waive the residency requirement and allow me to study toward a master's degree. Wow! That was big news for me.

All I really wanted was to distinguish myself further through education. A master's degree would suit my purposes just as well as a law degree. I wrote back with enthusiasm.

When Dr. Cohen responded, he inquired what I would like to study. Hofstra had never admitted a student through correspondence before, and he said that we would have to design a special program for me. Since I was a long-term prisoner, I asked for an opportunity to study prisons and the people they held. He agreed to help me structure such a course. I would pursue an interdisciplinary graduate degree, with concentration on cultural anthropology, sociology, and political science. I considered my opportunity to study at Hofstra a privilege and an honor.

The Pell Grant was then available for undergraduate students. As a graduate student, I did not have access to public funding. Since then, there was a public backlash against prisoners working to educate themselves, and Congress disallowed all prisoners from any type of public funding for even undergraduate degrees.

Yet I already had my undergraduate degree in hand. That distinction gave me a level of credibility. As a consequence of my commitment to learning, and the success I had achieved, family members and friends were willing to support me. They sponsored me by paying my tuition and helping me meet expenses. Hofstra professors went overboard to help me. Debbie Willett, a librarian at Hofstra, sent me all books that I requested. Working through that program made me feel as if I were a real person, much more than a prisoner. In 1995, Hofstra awarded my Master of Arts degree.

While studying independently toward my academic degrees, I developed personal relationships with some of America's leading scholars. As I read textbooks they wrote, I felt inspired to write several of them. Surprisingly, many wrote back to me. That correspondence led

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them to become mentors and friends of mine. Over the years many of those professors travelled across several state lines to visit me in the prisons where I was held. Then, upon my graduation, they opened other opportunities. Because of those relationships, I was able to study toward a doctoral degree at The University of Connecticut; I completed courses in the first year of that program, but then prison administrators blocked my ability to continue. My mentors then opened opportunities for me to publish, which led to my receiving several book-publishing deals that have made my writing available to tens of thousands of readers.

Without a doubt, a pursuit of education has eased my adjustment. Since I began studying, in 1987, I have served many, many years in prison. Now I am well into my third decade of confinement. As a consequence of those early efforts I made to educate myself, however, I feel strong, as if I have served my term with dignity and distinction, working constantly to become the best person I could be. More than that, because of those early efforts, I feel as well prepared to succeed upon release as possible. I hope to inspire my fellow prisoners to use their time inside to educate themselves as well.

Correspondence Programs

Throughout the course of my confinement, I have come to know of many opportunities prisoners have to work toward a college degree. As of the time I was writing this article, Pell Grants or federal funding was not available to assist inmates with tuition costs. If that changes, I will update this article and post news on my blog at MichaelSantos.net. Yet I would encourage prisoners to reach out. Those who want to educate themselves may find sources for funding. Following the list of schools to write, I will offer some suggestions for funding.

Excelsior College
7 Columbia Circle
Albany, NY 12203
518-464-8500

While I was held in Fort Dix, my roommate was working toward his undergraduate through Excelsior College. He thought the program was excellent, and especially appreciated the opportunity of taking courses by examination--meaning that he could receive credit as long as he could pass the final exam.

Below I list addresses and contact information for accredited universities that offer degrees through correspondence. I do not have experience with those universities, however, and cannot vouch for them.

Colorado State University
Division of Continuing Education
1040 Campus Delivery
Fort Collins, CO 80523
(970) 491-5288

DePaul University
School for New Learning
Center for Distance Education
25 East Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, IL 60604
(312) 362-8821

Eastern Illinois University
School of Adult and Continuing Education
600 Lincoln Avenue
Charleston, IL 61920
(217) 581-2223

Eastern Oregon University
Division of Distance Education
One University Boulevard
La Grande, OR 97850
(541) 962-3378

Empire State College
Center for Distance Learning
111 West Avenue
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
(518) 587-2660

Ohio University
College Program for the Incarcerated
Haning Hall 222
Athens, Ohio 45701
1-800-444-2910

As I described in my story above, I had an outstanding experience at Ohio University. I earned many college credits at Ohio that easily transferred to Mercer University and were applicable to my bachelor's degree that Mercer awarded. Had the opportunity for me to study at Mercer not opened, I gladly would have continued to study at Ohio until I completed all requirements for my degree.

Pennsylvania State University
Department of Distance Education
207 Mitchell Building
University Park, PA 16802
1-814-865-5403

A close friend of mine, Seth, earned his undergraduate degree entirely through correspondence from Pennsylvania State University. While we were together, I saw Seth's course work. It was as extensive as Ohio University had sent me. Those looking for an alternative to Ohio University might consider Penn. State.

Indiana State University
Office of Distance Support
200 North Seventh Street
Terre Haute, IN 47809
1-888-237-8080

I've known other prisoners who have pursued their undergraduate degree programs through Indiana State. This is a large university, so the course work would certainly be accepted for transfer to other schools.

California State University—Dominguez Hills
Division of Extended Education
1000 East Victoria Street
Carson, CA 90747

When I was searching for graduate schools, I inquired at Cal State, Dominguez Hills. The university advertised a master's degree in humanities.

Indiana University
Office of Distributed Education
Owen Hall
790 East Kirkwood Avenue
Bloomington, IN 47405
(812) 855-2292

Iowa State University
Continuing Education and Communication Services
102 Scheman
Ames, IA 50011-1112
(515) 294-6222

Kansas State University
12 College Court Building
Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-5566

Northern Arizona University
South San Francisco Street
Flagstaff, AZ 86011
(928) 523-4212

Thomas Edison State College
101 West State Street
Trenton, NJ 08608
(609) 292-4000

University of Iowa
Division of Continuing Education
116 International Center
Iowa City, IA 52242-1802
(319) 335-2575 I

University of Maryland
University College
3501 University Boulevard East
Adelphia, MD 20783
(301) 985-7000

University of Massachusetts
Division of Continuing Education
358 North Pleasant Street
Amherst, MA 01003-9296

Washington State University
Extended Degree Programs, Hall 204
Post Office Box 645220
Pullman, WA 99164
(509) 335-3557

Following my work at Hofstra and the University of Connecticut, I resumed my efforts to earn a law degree. Although the American Bar Association did not permit the law schools that the ABA accredited to offer courses through correspondence, I found a few law schools in California that did offer an opportunity to earn a law degree. Since I did not care about sitting for a bar exam, I enrolled in the programs of the unaccredited universities. I was not satisfied with the level of instruction, however, so I did not resume my studies after the first year of my law school program. I Nevertheless, since some readers might be interested, I include addresses for the schools where I inquired.

Newport University School of Law
201001 Southwest Birch Street, Suite 120
Newport Beach, CA 92660+1749
(949) 757-1155

Northwestern California University School of Law
2151 River Plaza Drive, Suite 306
Sacramento, CA 95833-4133
(916) 920-9470

Southern California University for Professional Studies
College of Law
1840 East 17th Street, Suite 240
Santa Ana, CA 92705-8605
(800) 477-2254

William Howard Taft University
201 East Sand Pointe Avenue
Santa Ana, CA 92707-5703
(714) 850-4800

Finding Funding

Although federal funding for prisoner education was not available in August of 2008, when I wrote this article, there was hope among many prisoners that the election in November

would bring changes in policy. A more liberal Congress might be more inclined to provide funding for educational and vocational programs that could help inmates prepare for law abiding lives upon release.

Besides federal aid, however, many states made funding for educational programs available. I was confined at Lompoc Camp in 2006 and at Taft Camp from 2007. At Lompoc, inmates could enroll in correspondence programs through Coastline College, and at Taft, inmates could enroll in Taft Community College. Inmates who could prove that they were residents from the state of California qualified for a state grant that was sufficient to cover the tuition costs; inmates were still responsible for paying for the necessary textbooks.

Students who needed access to funding had to think creatively. As a long-term prisoner who constantly worked hard to prepare for release, I always felt confident that I could find support. Some of the strategies I used included writing to friends and families. I did not stop there, though. I also wrote to businesses, professors and nonprofit organizations in search of financial assistance. The more credibility that I created through my work, the more support I found from others. As a prisoner, I needed support from mentors in society, and by asking, I found a fountain of abundance flowing to me. Any prisoner can do the same.

Alternative Education Programs

For those inmates who didn't feel motivated to study toward a college degree, an alternative was to self-educate. Every prison offered a library, and inside those libraries were books that could lead to high school equivalency. Individuals who devoted a few hours of work toward those books each day could master basic math, beginning algebra and geometry. Those skills would prove extremely useful and open opportunities for advancement. An individual who would apply for a trade job upon release would be well served if he armed himself with a mastery of such subjects.

Reading and writing were also excellent ways to self-educate. Those who have spent time on MichaelSantos.net could read of the ways that I was constantly striving to educate myself. Even after earning my degrees, I worked hard to develop my knowledge of the world by reading. All of my reading focused on disciplines that could I open opportunities. I studied business, law, politics, and especially self-improvement. I read newspapers, magazines, and lots of books. Each time I finished reading a book, I wrote a book report. If the book had information that I deemed valuable, I took notes that I typed so I could refer to them later. As a long-term prisoner, I understood that the responsibility was mine to prepare for the challenges that were certain to follow my release.

Finally, any man confined to prison was going to find himself sharing space with more than 100 others. Some prisons held thousands of men. In such large communities, there were always people who had information to offer. I learned a great deal by interviewing others and writing their stories. The knowledge and insight I gained from so many was a way to continue my education.

I learned a great deal from men who used to charge hundreds of dollars per hour for their consultation. Every prisoner had access to such a wealth of knowledge. Too many, however, wasted the opportunity. Instead, they succumbed to the temptations of television, table games, or disruptive behavior.

Final Word

Individuals who expected to serve a stint in prison would always serve themselves well by focusing on self-improvement programs. My focus on learning and preparing for release helped me thrive through more than 21 years of imprisonment thus far. It enabled me to earn university degrees, publish books that tens of thousands have read, build an extraordinary network of support, and reach millions through content I wrote for MichaelSantos.net. I've been

able to achieve these goals from deep within the federal prison system, and because of the blessings I have received, I could say that I always woke with enthusiasm, eager to make more contributions to the world.