

Rethink, Reform, Reenter: An Entrepreneurial Approach to Prison Programming

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to present a description and first-stage evaluation of the impact of the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program on the learning experience of participating prerelease inmates at a Mississippi maximum-security prison and their perception of the transfer of skills learned in program into securing employment upon reentry. The Ice House Entrepreneurship Program is a 12-week program facilitated by volunteer university professors to inmates in a prerelease unit of a maximum-security prison in Mississippi. Participants' perspectives were examined through content analysis of inmates' answers to program Reflection and Response Assignments and interviews. The analyses were conducted according to the constant comparative method. Findings reveal the emergent of eight life-lessons and suggest that this is a promising approach to prison programming for prerelease inmates. This study discusses three approaches to better prepare inmates for a mindset change. The rethink, reform, and reenter approaches help break the traditional cycle of release, reoffend, and return.

Keywords

entrepreneurial education, growth mindset, reentry, prerelease inmates

In the United States, a large number of men and women are released from prison each year. At yearend 2011, approximately 854,000 adults were on parole, and about 1.1 million offenders transitioned through parole during that year (Maruschak & Parks, 2012). Upon release, however, many ex-prisoners quickly learn that although they may no longer be incarcerated, they are far from free. They face many restrictions

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that are commonly referred to as “collateral consequences,” the legal sanctions and restrictions imposed upon people because of their criminal record (Katzen, 2011; Travis, 2002). One of the most significant collateral consequences facing offenders upon reentry is unemployment. Ex-prisoners are legally barred from a growing number of jobs and face an explicit unwillingness of many employers to hire them for unrestricted jobs (Graffam, Shinkfield, & Hardcastle, 2008). In addition, employers willing to hire former inmates in entry-level jobs are often unwilling to advance them to positions of responsibility.

Unemployment poses a significant risk to public safety. When unemployment is high, prison releases have a positive correlation with crime (Hannon & DeFina, 2010). Research has empirically established a positive link between job stability and reduced criminal offending (Tripodi, Kim, & Bender, 2010). As more prisoners are released without prerelease, transition, and postrelease assistance, they often resort back to their old lifestyles (Austin & Hardyman, 2004).

Most experts believe that securing employment is critical to successful reentry. In a recent study, Bahr, Harris, Fisher, and Armstrong (2010) found that successful offender reentry was predicated on the ex-offenders spending time engaged in enjoyable activities with law-abiding citizens—working at least 40 hours per week. Employment enables ex-prisoners to be productive, take care of their families, develop valuable life skills, and strengthen their self-esteem and social connectedness. Lockwood, Nally, Ho, and Knutson (2012) conducted a 5-year follow-up study (2005-2009) of 6,561 offenders who were released from the Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) in 2005. Their results revealed that an ex-offender’s education and employment were the most important predictors of postrelease recidivism. Similarly, Visher, Winterfield, and Coggeshall (2005) reported, “barriers to gainful employment coupled with the likely public safety consequences of high level of unemployment among ex-offenders create an immediate need to identify effective interventions that might increase employment for this population” (p. 296).

Although in-prison vocational training should be viewed as the best opportunity to prepare offenders for reentry employment, the literature has provided mixed to negative support on the effectiveness of in-prison job training programs (Visher et al., 2005). Likewise, Lipsey’s (1995) meta-analyses of nearly 400 studies and Bushway and Reuter’s (1997) “Labor Markets and Crime Risk Factors” report to the U.S. Congress revealed an ambiguous relationship between employment and crime. Although Needels (1996) found ex-offenders with jobs commit fewer crimes than the ex-offenders without jobs, she emphasized that no in-prison training has consistently been adept at decreasing recidivism through employment intervention programs, in or outside of prison.

Employment interventions in prisons have mainly relied upon teaching inmates vocational skills. Although teaching vocational skills is an important step in increasing employability, it does not address personal and cognitive factors necessary to adapt to environmental changes, for example, high unemployment. Entrepreneurship education may help ex-offenders to think beyond employment skills. While there has been success with entrepreneurship programs in prisons, there are few studies evaluating

their effectiveness. The purpose of this article was to present a description and first-stage evaluation of the impact of the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program on the learning experience of participating prerelease inmates at a Mississippi maximum-security prison and their perception of the transfer of skills learned in program into securing employment upon reentry.

Relevant Literature

Traditionally, education programs have provided a rehabilitative component to incarceration. One of the goals of correctional education is to better prepare offenders (at least make them competitive in the job market) for their return to society and to reduce recidivism. In a meta-analysis of studies evaluating the effectiveness of academic, life skills, and vocational education, Jensen and Reed (2006) concluded academic and vocational education reduced recidivism. In a similar study, the recidivism rate for inmates enrolled in both a GED (General Educational Development) and a vocational program was 6.71% compared with a recidivism rate of 26% for inmates who did not participate in education programs (Gordon & Weldon, 2003).

Education programs, in contrast, that focus only on ex-offenders may not be as effective as programs that start in prerelease. Visser et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of eight random assignment community programs. The results indicated that community programs do not have an effect on reducing the recidivism rate of ex-offenders. Programs are most effective if offered within the 6- to 12-month period prior to release and when supported by the community (Rollo, 2002).

Programs involving content that supports psychological growth may also have an impact on recidivism. Psychological growth is concerned with the personal and cognitive development of inmates (Correia, 2009). Rollo's (2002) 99 Days program focused on teaching inmates to address their mindset and value systems—shifting values from antisocial to prosocial.

Challenging prerelease inmates to change their mindset and value system through entrepreneurship education is practical and brings energy to reentry programs. Research suggests offenders may possess some of the same traits as practicing entrepreneurs (Lockwood, Teasley, Carland, & Carland, 2006; Sonfield & Barbato, 1994; Sonfield, Lussier, & Barbato, 2001). Sonfield and Barbato (1994) measured entrepreneurial propensity among prison inmates. Entrepreneurial propensity was operationalized as (a) a need for self-achievement, (b) a preference for avoiding unnecessary risks, (c) a desire for feedback, (d) an aspiration for personal motivation, and (e) a desire to think and plan. Inmates' scores were compared with slow- and fast-growth entrepreneurs and displaced (i.e., laid-off) workers. Results indicated that inmates and fast-growth entrepreneurs were similar in entrepreneurial propensity. Inmates, however, had a higher propensity toward entrepreneurship than displaced workers and slow-growth entrepreneurs.

In a related study, Sonfield et al. (2001) examined the aptitude of offenders and compared them with practicing entrepreneurs and nonentrepreneur managers. Results indicated that offenders were higher in entrepreneurial aptitude than low-growth

entrepreneur and managers, but they were lower than high-growth entrepreneurs with respect to aptitude. Results of a more recent study examining personality variables of offenders confirmed earlier research, suggesting that they may have a propensity toward entrepreneurship (F. S. Lockwood et al., 2006). The researchers, as a result, called for more entrepreneurship programming in prisons.

Recently, business schools have begun to collaborate with state correctional facilities to bring entrepreneurship education to inmates. Its long-term effect on recidivism has yet to be determined; however, its impact on employment upon release is promising. A Texas Prison Entrepreneur Program (PEP) reported that all of the offenders ($n = 2,009$) who participated in their program were able to find employment (Mangan, 2013). They experienced, after 3 years, a recidivism rate of 7% compared with a 25% recidivism rate for the state (half of the national average). Entrepreneurship programming, therefore, might accomplish much more than teaching academic and vocational skills. By targeting the mindset for change, such programming may potentially help offenders develop the cognitive capacity to navigate the challenges of reentry (Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005; Lindahl & Mukamal, 2007). While some states, including Mississippi, have begun to offer entrepreneurship programs, the evaluations of those programs are in their infancy. In the following section, we describe the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program, outlining how it was adapted for use in a maximum-security prison.

Description of the Program

The Ice House Entrepreneurship Program is a 12-week program facilitated by volunteer university professors to inmates in a prerelease unit of a maximum-security prison in Mississippi. The course is based on the book *Who Owns the Ice House?—Eight Life-Lessons From an Unlikely Entrepreneur* (Taulbert & Schoeniger, 2010). The book chronicles eight lessons learned by Clifton Taulbert, a former sharecropper and now internationally acclaimed Pulitzer-nominated author and lecturer on the critical issues of building community. Taulbert was reared in the Mississippi Delta during the era of legal segregation. During those dire times of his young life, he gained keen insights from an unlikely entrepreneur, his Uncle Cleve, the owner of the Icehouse in his hometown. Taulbert described his Uncle Cleve as an incredible man whose entrepreneurial perspective would alter the course of his life. It was Uncle Cleve's influence that left Taulbert with the impression that, despite his circumstances, he too could choose a different path, one that would enable him to make a contribution to the community and the world. While Taulbert defined the inspirations of his Uncle Cleve, Schoeniger encapsulated the entrepreneurial life-lessons that can empower anyone to succeed.

Understanding the universal message found in "Who Owns the Ice House?" and the vital role entrepreneurs play in the health of the economy, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, The Building Community Institute (BCI), and The Entrepreneurial Learning Initiative (ELI) collaborated to create an online learning program based on Taulbert and Schoeniger's book. The online course was designed to inspire and engage participants in the fundamental concepts of an entrepreneurial mindset and the

unlimited opportunities it provides. Scholars have described an entrepreneur mindset as the “ability to sense, act, and mobilize under uncertain conditions” (Haynie, Shepherd, Mosakowski, & Earley, 2010, p. 217).

The curriculum was constructed with a practical rigor and relevance such that participants could develop a sense of empowerment by identifying with the people in the book, the interviewees, and the lessons. Since its inception, the online course has been delivered worldwide. It was recently introduced to United Nations and adopted as the Kent State University 2013 Common Reading Experience. This is the first time the program was delivered in a correctional setting.

A major obstacle loomed early in the delivery of the program. Before the course could be taught at a maximum-security prison, where access to Internet services was prohibited, ELI organization converted the online lessons to DVD. Certified facilitators, who combine narrated chalkboard presentations from the DVDs with live and video interviews of successful entrepreneurs, taught the prerelease program.

The narrated chalkboard style presentations combined bullet point text, basic diagrams, and video interview segments that featured successful entrepreneurs who overcame adversity by embracing an entrepreneurial mindset. The inmates viewed the presentations in weekly classroom sessions. Upon completion of the presentation, inmates were asked to answer a true/false lesson review. In addition, each lesson contained a Reflection and Response assignment that was completed upon the inmates’ return to their cellblock. While the assignments were intended to be completed outside of the classroom, inmates were encouraged to share their reflections as well as their intended responses during in-class discussions. Rather than discussing the key concepts as they relate to the featured entrepreneurs, inmates were asked to share the application of the knowledge to their own individual circumstances. The true/false lesson reviews and Reflection and Response assignments were evaluated by the facilitators and scored merely acceptable or nonacceptable. Participants were provided an opportunity to resubmit, after receiving facilitator feedback.

Finally, the inmates used an Opportunity Discovery canvas to document ideas, beliefs, and assumptions. The first of the nine-step canvas required inmates to identify a problem that could be viewed as a potential entrepreneurial opportunity. The sequential steps directed inmates to apply the knowledge and resources to attempt solving a problem. It was believed this self-directed, problem-based learning activity was an ideal method to foster entrepreneurial skills. The activity required inmates to use critical thinking and effective problem solving skills. Presentations were graded as acceptable or nonacceptable by the facilitators. Presentations that were evaluated as nonacceptable were revised and resubmitted. At the conclusion of the course, inmates shared their final Opportunity Discovery canvas during an informal poster presentation to institutional caseworkers, educators, and administrators.

Method

A nonrandom sample of prerelease inmates was recruited by prison administrators of a state-level maximum-security prerelease unit in Mississippi to participate in the Ice

House Entrepreneurship program. Eligible participants were those who (a) were recommended by the prerelease unit's Adult Basic Education teacher, (b) had received no more than three Rule Violation Reports (RVR) while in the prerelease unit, (c) could read at a sixth-grade level, and (d) were within 6 to 24 months of their parole eligibility date. While there are studies and reviews discussing the commonly stated position that offenders who score high in psychopathy respond poorly to treatment (Hare & Neumann, 2009), no exclusion criteria concerning the crimes and personalities of the participants were used by the prison administrators.

The descriptive characteristics of the participants were revealed by statistical analysis of Incoming and Outgoing Surveys. A Participant Informed Consent Form was prepared and signed by all participants. The consent form outlined statements of confidentiality, right to withdrawal, lack of risk, and all other ethical issues or concerns. Researchers read the Incoming and Outgoing Surveys to the inmates. It took an average of 15 min to complete the instrument. In the training room, 26 participants completed Incoming and Outgoing Surveys. To ensure anonymity, the inmates selected their own code name and placed the completed Surveys in a group data envelope. Quantitative data from the surveys were entered into and analyzed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 21).

Results revealed that 29 male inmates, with 6 to 20 months remaining on their sentences, were selected to complete the program. Two inmates were granted parole prior to the program's completion. Prison administrators dismissed another inmate from the program after the inmate received a RVR in the housing unit. Twenty-six inmates completed the program. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 55 years. The majority of participants (52%) were incarcerated for drug-related offenses. Other crimes included manslaughter, burglary, driving under the influence, and various weapon charges. The length of incarceration for the offense in which they were imprisoned ranged from 3 to 49+ months.

Academically, most of the inmates who completed the program had a relatively high level of education (77%). Six of the participants were enrolled in a GED program, 17 completed high school, and 2 had completed some college but no degree. Several inmates had received higher education degrees. For example, 1 held an associate degree, 2 had earned a bachelor's degree, and 1 had completed a master's degree or higher. Finally, 11 inmates revealed that they had professional certifications. Types of certifications were for small engine repair, welding, horticulture, and janitorial services.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research questions were answered by an assessment of course material and interviews with participants to determine the extent to which they perceived the Ice House Entrepreneurship program influenced and impacted their ability to secure employment upon reentry. Because the intent of this study was to provide a description and first-stage evaluation of the program and the unit of analysis was small ($n = 26$), the Incoming and Outgoing survey data were only used for descriptive statistics.

Verification of employment statuses was provided by Department of Corrections. A weakness of the study is that it is unclear whether the impacts described by the subjects actually happened; therefore, a triangulation strategy was used to utilize multiple and different sources to provide corroborating evidence. Participating prerelease inmates' perspectives were examined through content analysis of inmates' answers to program Reflection and Response Assignments. The analyses were conducted according to the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Typical responses were used to illustrate each of the eight life-lessons.

Prison administrators provided contact information for those inmates who had completed the program and had been released on parole. Participating ex-offenders were asked whether they would be willing to participate in an interview designed to explore their perceptions of the impact of the Ice House Entrepreneurship program in securing employment upon reentry.

Data were collected through unstructured, open-ended (Merriam, 1998) and retrospective telephone interviews (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) with the 18 paroled participants. An unstructured interview was selected to provide the most depth and natural interaction with the ex-offender. Since all participants were employed at the time of the interview, there were only three predetermined, or essential, questions asked: (a) Are you employed? (b) What steps did you take to secure employment upon release? and (c) Did the Ice House Entrepreneurship program influence your ability to secure work? Probes, such as "Please tell me more about that." or "What happened next?" were used by the interviewer to protract more complete stories. The interviews lasted approximately 20 min and were transcribed verbatim. Member checking was conducted during the interview process to increase the credibility and validity. The interviewer restated or summarized the responses and then questioned the participants to determine accuracy.

A point of saturation, the stage at which data collection began to repeat itself, was realized after the seventh interview (Patton, 2002). Despite reaching the point of saturation, data collection continued until all who were willing to participate in the study were interviewed. Finally, to conduct a sophisticated examination of electronic text data contextually, QSR NVivo 9 software was used for qualitative analysis. The findings were interpreted through a narrative description and served to answer the research questions. The intent was not to condense the findings to statistical form but to reveal it as descriptively and as richly as possible.

Findings

The two research questions and their related findings are presented concurrently to enable comprehension. The researchers utilized codes and themes as aids in arriving at a narrative description of findings.

Research Question 1: To what extent does the Ice House Entrepreneurship program impact prerelease inmates?

The Power to Choose

The first life-lesson the Ice House program taught was “the ability to choose the way we respond to our circumstances is fundamental to an entrepreneurial mindset” (Taulbert & Schoeniger, 2010, p. 36). Comments such as “I acted just like everyone else in my crowd” and “I thought my life would never change” reflected participants’ acknowledgement that they learned how their environment has influenced their mindset and the decisions they make. Similarly, participants admitted their inability to make good choices resulted from an external, as opposed to, an internal locus of control. An external locus of control was described as the belief that “luck,” “fate,” and the “control of others” determined the outcome of their lives (Rotter, 1954). One inmate reported, “Entrepreneurs don’t complain about things they cannot control, they use an internal locus of control to see they have the power to choose.”

An assessment of the Reflection and Response assignments revealed more than half of the participants believed Uncle Cleve taught them that there is always a choice. According to one inmate, “Little Cliff chose to escape the cotton fields . . . I’m gonna choose to escape a life of crime.” Another inmate wrote,

When Cliff started working for Uncle Cleve his whole life changed. Up to that point, pickin’ cotton was all he knew. Although he was tired of seeing miles and miles of cotton all the time, he figured he would always pick cotton just like all his friends and family. It’s just what they did. But when he CHOSE to go to work for Uncle Cleve, he left all that behind and found a lot of success doing something other than pickin’ cotton.

Recognizing Opportunities

As the second life-lesson, participants were taught that entrepreneurs are problem solvers and the secret to their success lies in their ability to identify problems and find solutions (Taulbert & Schoeniger, 2010). All of the inmates noted in their Reflection and Response assignments that Uncle Cleve had recognized an opportunity in the Ice House. People in the small community of Glen Allan, Mississippi, needed ice to keep their food from spoiling. The nearest ice distributor was 20 miles away. Reflecting on how entrepreneurs with limited resources transform simple solutions into successful new ventures, an inmate wrote, “Even though Uncle Cleve didn’t have a lot of money, he bought the Ice House because he knew that was a simple way to get people what they need, ice.” Likewise, most participants indicated that they learned entrepreneurs do not need to be an expert or invent a big idea; entrepreneurs can identify opportunities in “their own back yard.” For instance, an inmate wrote, “Even though Uncle Cleve did not have much, and sure didn’t have any business experience, he found a simple solution in his own little town for the need for ice.”

Ideas Into Action

Consistent with the first two lessons, the third life-lesson showed participants that “entrepreneurs are action oriented and they tend to focus their time and energy on

things they can change rather than things they cannot” (Taulbert & Schoeniger, 2010). All but three participants indicated that “action” was a key component of Uncle Cleve’s philosophy. Remarks such as “He understood that it was not enough to merely have a good idea” and “A good idea can’t help anyone if you don’t DO something about it” exemplified the inmates’ perceptions of how entrepreneurs put their ideas into action. Another inmate wrote,

Ideas need action behind them. Uncle Cleve would hear people at the Ice House talk about how they couldn’t find anyone to work on their fancy cars. Uncle Cleve ordered the car manuals. He figured out how to fix the different cars and opened his own garage. I’m sure there were others who could have done the same thing, but he was the one who acted on it.

Most of the inmates acknowledged that they were introduced to the concept of “bootstrapping,” or starting a business with little or no resources. They learned that entrepreneurs often overcome their lack of business capital by bootstrapping their way into business. Participants related well to the video interview clips of successful entrepreneurs who found creative ways to secure loans, pursue outside investors, or find customers to fund their businesses. Most inmates associated putting ideas into actions and bootstrapping with those entrepreneurs who demonstrate a “growth mindset.” Dweck (2006) described how peoples’ mindset—beliefs about the nature of intelligence—determines how they lead their lives and what they will accomplish in life. People with growth mindsets believe that intelligence is dynamic. People with fixed mindsets, on the contrary, believe that intelligence is static or fixed. One inmate wrote, “I have to develop a growth mindset . . . a belief that I can be successful if I work hard and I’m dedicated to the right causes.” Another inmate wrote,

A Fixed Mindset is BAD! Just because I got some talent don’t mean I am going to be successful. A Growth Mindset is GOOD! I gotta get out of my comfort zone, even though I’m starting with nothing . . . I have to do what I say I’m going to do.

Pursuit of Knowledge

The lack of a hunger for learning affects many inmates. The fourth life-lesson demonstrated that entrepreneurs are lifelong learners who understand the power of effort combined with knowledge. Video interview clips, chalkboard messages, and the “Who Owns the Ice House?” book conveyed that entrepreneurship education increases student motivation, self-confidence, and a willingness to learn. Nearly all of the participants responded in their assignments about “aha” moments of inspiration and ways they planned to improve their knowledge while incarcerated and upon release. Most made notations relative to various ways knowledge is gained. Comments such as “When I get out, I’m going to read more on the internet about entrepreneurship [*sic*]”; “Formal learning is not as important as informal learning”; and “If I teach what I’m learning, I will learn more” represented the common sentiment that entrepreneurs find

the knowledge they need by combining traditional classroom learning with real-world experiences.

More than one fourth of the inmates noted that Uncle Cleve recognized gaining knowledge is a challenge for ambitious entrepreneurs. They wrote that people would always be limited by their lack of knowledge. For example, one inmate wrote,

Even though Uncle Cleve did not have formal education, he was always trying to learn new things by reading the newspaper . . . manuals, books, [and] listening to the radio. He set the example for Mr. Taulbert and he's set the example for me. I think my life would have been so different if I had learned as much as I can. I want to now.

Creating Wealth

Creating wealth, the fifth life-lesson, was a foreign concept to most inmates. Participants studied the essential concepts of financial learning from an entrepreneurial perspective. In addition to learning basic financial terms, inmates examined the difference between spending and investing when it comes to creating wealth. In that regard, spending was viewed negatively. Inmates wrote notes that said, "When you get it. DO NOT SQUANDOR [*sic*] YOUR MONEY" and "Invest more than your money. Invest your time too, to ever be wealth[y]." Finally, the inmates recognized that many people work diligently to appear wealthy, but create more debt than wealth. Comments, such as, "Financial independence is more important that social status" was written and underscored by nearly three fourths of the inmates.

Building Your Brand

Augmented by video clips and chalkboard discussions, Life-Lesson 6 showed participants that an entrepreneur's "brand" is the company's or product's reputation. Participants learned that the brand should clearly tell the consumer how the product or business will solve the customer's problem. Furthermore, inmates discovered that entrepreneurs communicate their brand through two distinct means of communication, explicitly and implicitly. Close to 50% of the inmates noted that implicit messages are unspoken or implied. They lamented that an implicit message they frequently communicate is their reputation as a "con," "parolee," "felon," and "thief."

Creating Community

The seventh life-lesson, creating community, helped entrepreneurs understand the power of positive influence and they learned to surround themselves with others who have been where they intend to go. Inmates were shown the power of positive influence (positive peer pressure), how to tap into a network of entrepreneurs and to develop a MBA (Mentoring Board of Advisors) from their community. Recognizing that "old habits die hard" most inmates wrote that they struggled with the possibility of creating a community of support from those who have "made good choices," "succeeded in an

entrepreneurial [*sic*] ventures,” and/or “willing to let [the inmate] in [the entrepreneurs’] networks.”

The Power of Persistence

The final life-lesson, the power of persistence, was paramount for the obstacles inmates face upon release. Video clips of every entrepreneur’s success story and the final chapter of “Who Owns the Ice House?” stressed that behind every entrepreneur’s success is hard work, resolve, and perseverance. “Be Persistent!” and “Don’t take the path of least resistance” resonated in one fourth of the Response and Reflections assignments. Many of the inmates lauded Clifton Taulbert as the entrepreneur who demonstrated the most persistence. An inmate reflected,

Mr. Taulbert’s books were rejected so many times by publishers . . . yet he never gave up. He worked so hard to make it outside of the Delta. It’s like he could here [*sic*] Uncle Cleve telling him over and over again to be persistent. He has had lots of books published and even movies made from his books because he didn’t give up. I wish I had never given up. I will be more persistent!

Research Question 2: To what extent does the Ice House Entrepreneurship program impact ex-offenders in securing employment upon reentry?

Four major themes emerged as the 18 paroled participants commented on the impact the Ice House Entrepreneurship program had on them upon reentry, especially as it relates to each securing gainful employment. The themes included the following: (a) Ex-offenders learned to identify opportunities, (b) branding is a way to communicate abilities, (c) mentors and advisors are invaluable to success, and (d) persistence is powerful.

Ex-Offenders Learned to Identify Opportunities

Fifteen of the 18 ex-offenders reported the Ice House Entrepreneurship course taught them to recognize opportunities that they would have previously overlooked. Ten inmates communicated poignant accounts of how they were inspired by Uncle Cleve to pursue knowledge. The pursuit ultimately resulted in them recognizing opportunities for full-time employment. For instance, an ex-offender told a story of how he made a commitment when he was released from prison to read the daily newspaper and peruse the Internet for current issues to become a “lifelong learner.” While waiting in line to submit a job application, he picked up a newspaper that was in the store lobby. He noted that before taking the Ice House course, he would have never had simply read a newspaper to pass time. While reading the paper, he saw a story about a housing development that was new in town. According to the ex-offender, “I saw the announcement as an *opportunity* [emphasis added]. I got out of line, drove to the housing development and presented myself as reformed. They hired me 2 days later.”

Eleven participants announced that they had identified opportunities while working at less desirable jobs. An ex-offender remarked how “divergent,” spontaneous, free flowing thinking helped him find beneficial employment. In his words,

I learned from Uncle Cleve that I could discover greater opportunities while in motion. So, I took the first job that was offered when I got out of prison and I looked for other opportunities as I worked. I overheard a customer talking about a job that had just opened at a much better paying location. After work, I went to that location. I was the first to apply and was hired.

Branding Is a Way to Communicate Abilities

While enrolled in the Ice House course, most of the inmates expressed concern that an implicit message they frequently communicate is their negative reputation. After being paroled, 12 of 18 participants reported that they secured full-time employment only after they followed Uncle Cleve’s advice to nurture an “internal locus of control,” or a belief that they were responsible for their own behaviors and actions. Several explained how they quickly realized upon reentering their respective communities that they had to be the one to communicate explicit messages about their positive talents to thwart their damaging brands, or reputations. Speaking in that regard, an inmate told the following story:

I filled-out applications everywhere and was afraid that I wasn’t going to be able to get a job because of being a parolee. I remembered the value of packaging or branding. So I cleaned-up and prepared a speech about my skills. I went to [name of entrepreneur] and presented my case. He was impressed. He hired me on the spot!

Mentors and Advisers Are Invaluable to Success

During the interviews, each of the 18 participants alluded to their list of mentors and advisors or MBA that they created while incarcerated. Remembering that Uncle Cleve had taught them to avoid those who might lead them astray, they carefully omitted those with whom they had unhealthy associations prior to incarceration. Eleven of the 18 participants acknowledged difficulty in finding mentors and advisers who were willing to provide assistance and support. However, each accredited their MBA in securing employment. Statements such as, “I would have never have found work without my mentor” and “I only got the job because my mentor gave me encouragement and was willing to be a personal reference” reflected the commonality in their recognition.

Persistence Is Powerful

The most exuberant explanation as to how the Ice House Entrepreneurship program impacted ex-offenders in securing employment upon reentry was articulated in one

word—persistence. Throughout each telephone interview, participants would explain how Uncle Cleve taught them the power of persistence in obtaining gainful employment. Unable to secure full-time employment within several weeks of release, 12 of the 18 participants implemented the Opportunity Discovery canvas they created while incarcerated. While “bootstrapping” their way into business, they discovered their “lack of experience,” “fears,” and “money shortage” were barriers that they would have to overcome through hard work and perseverance. By remaining persistent, the participants have continued to grow their businesses but have secured full-time employment to augment their entrepreneurial earnings.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe and evaluate the impact of the Icehouse Entrepreneurship Program on the learning experience of prerelease inmates. Findings suggest that this is a promising approach to prison programming for prerelease inmates. For vocational training to work, correctional systems need to consider the three R’s of programming: Rethink, Reform, and Reenter. The Ice House program provides an alternative to traditional vocational education, by seeking to reform the thinking of participants to assist them upon reentry into the community.

Rethink

For years, prisons have been providing vocational and academic (GED) education programs independently. Ex-offenders have struggled to find meaningful employment. Many, as a result, have failed to handle the rigors and failures of navigating the job market despite their qualifications. Because of employment barriers faced by ex-offenders, prison administrators believed that any attempt at providing inmates with entrepreneurial education should not only stress vocational training but also enhance personal and cognitive development of inmates. To this end, the Icehouse Entrepreneurship Program was facilitated to develop the prisoners’ mindsets to meet the challenges of gaining employment upon reentry. The Program stressed one can achieve entrepreneurial success despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The Ice House program was a much-needed compliment to the existing prison programming. The strength of the program was that the skills were delivered in a format that created a positive learning environment. The implicit and explicit skills they learned, as a result, helped them compete in the traditional job market upon release and helped them identify and seek nontraditional approaches to employment (i.e., self-employment).

The program appeared to be cost-effective. Although Texas’s PEPs have made an impact on recidivism, only a small percentage of inmates are screened into the program (Mangan, 2013). At a cost of about US\$3,700 per inmate (Sonfield, 2008), it is likely that participation in PEPs will remain exclusive. The Ice House Program, however, was implemented at about US\$300 per inmate. Without a matched-sample comparison evaluation, it is not clear the program’s exact cost-effectiveness. The cost of

the program, however, might allow for participation that is more widespread than other entrepreneur programs.

Reform

Once arrested and incarcerated, the correctional system attempts to reform inmates by providing GED education and vocational skills, and then places a tremendous amount of responsibility on them to obtain and maintain gainful employment, especially in a lukewarm economy and with an ex-offender label. The system's attempts at reformation have simply been incomplete. Findings indicated that the participants believed the Program had a substantial impact on them. Several inmates, who initially reported they believed that their environment influenced their decision-making, articulated the need to take personal responsibility for their actions and outcomes. Upon release, ex-offenders expressed they were able to secure beneficial employment once they recalled they had to take control over their circumstances.

Inmates were also impacted by their newfound ability to recognize opportunities, by thinking about solving others' problems. They were able to see that through helping others, they could help themselves. This cognitive change may aid in helping ex-offenders consider others' needs. Finally, the ability for inmates to think about solving others' problems and repairing harm they have caused to their family might have restorative justice implications (Bazemore, 2003; Duncan & Dickie, 2013; Miller & Johnson, 2009) as inmates acknowledged they learned to accept accountability for their actions and were no longer self-serving. Furthermore, parolees believed their full-time employment helped "make-up" for the adverse impact their incarceration had on their family and community.

The difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset was a finding that resonated among the participants. Similar to Haynie's et al. (2010) findings, the inmates expressed they developed an understanding about how their fixed mindset or traditional way of thinking prevented them from acting on ideas. This is important, because one of the first steps toward assuring that inmates can reform and become productive members of society is by believing they have the capacity to change.

The findings were also consistent with research that revealed those with a growth mindset are less concerned with measuring their level of intelligence than they are with improving it (Mitchell, 2007). They do not blame failure or setbacks on their lack of intellectual ability. They now see failure or setbacks as opportunities for growth and are concerned with the experience. The findings overwhelmingly indicated the participants recognized how knowledge is important and how their lives were limited by the lack of it. They revealed that gaining knowledge and becoming a lifelong learner was something that they could control, which showed more evidence for a change in mindset.

Reenter

Because of the high costs of incarceration and relatively limited cell space, many states are seeking ways to release more nonviolent offenders to make room for the

recently convicted. The correctional system's obligation is to best prepare them to live a crime-free lifestyle and to give them the tools to find suitable employment. These are the first steps to successful reentry. At follow-up, all but one of the paroled participants was employed. They attributed their ability to obtain employment to their entrepreneurship education—the intangible skills internalized from the lessons of Uncle Cleve.

Ex-offenders were impacted by Uncle Cleve's lesson on perseverance. They acknowledged that they would have to compete for meaningful employment or self-employment upon release and persistence would greatly enhance their chances for successful reentry. Once paroled, several participants started in one job but later secured a better one or moved up the organization's hierarchy. The graduates' perseverance illustrated ambition, which is not the norm for ex-offenders—particularly those with a weak employment history.

An interesting finding was that more than half of the ex-offenders were initially underemployed. This is noteworthy and revealed the program instilled an altered mindset that differed from the traditional narrative where the inmate leaves prison; either is stuck in menial employment or cannot find work, and gravitates back to crime. The paroled participants expressed confidence, boldness, and persistence—qualities that most parolees may not possess upon release. Although they thought about their circumstances, they did not let it prohibit them from being persistent in their pursuit of employment.

A final impacting concept was investing in and building a community of mentors and support. The participants discussed that the only way they were going to move beyond the stigmas or “brand” placed on them was to change their reputation. Ex-offenders revealed support from family and friends was not too difficult to achieve. Family and friends were willing to provide encouragement and support as they faced the uncertainty of parole supervision. They struggled, however, with finding mentors who could help them create a positive synergy, assist them with knowledge, provide resources, and hold them accountable during the early stages of parole.

Implications

The purpose of this article was to present a description and first-stage evaluation of the impact of the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program on the learning experience of participating prerelease inmates at a Mississippi maximum-security prison and their perception of the transfer of skills learned in program into securing employment upon reentry. While not conclusive, the findings support justification to repeat the program and for a future evaluation with matched samples, clearly stated hypotheses, and well-developed criteria to determine program effectiveness.

Notwithstanding the researchers' strategies to enhance reliability and validation in qualitative research, it is cautioned that the efficacy of the program relies primarily on the participants' perspectives. This reliance should be viewed as a weakness and readers should be advised that findings cannot be generalized beyond those who participated in the program.

Because this was a case study, there was no comparison group. The participants may have prior education and vocational training levels that could contribute to positive employment outcomes. While they may perceive their understanding from the program as part of the reason for securing employment, they may also have a propensity to obtain work apart from their participation. The findings, however, illustrate new meaningful ways to prepare offenders for reintegration, because job skills alone may not suffice.

The findings should encourage future attempts at prerelease educational programs that focus on the personal and cognitive aspects of inmates. This research, in addition, has implications for university and prison partnerships with the goal of preparing inmates for successful reentry. With the downturn of the economy, it is imperative that prisons partner with other agencies to increase programming. We recognized that training prerelease inmates was a first step. In terms of next steps, correctional systems need to assure that inmates have the proper supports upon release. Mentors and family support may aid in these inmate's reintegration.

The results of this study warrant additional examination of inmates' mindset, motivation, and locus of control. Because the Ice House Program specifically targets these characteristics for change, it is important to understand the extent to which inmates develop these qualities. Researchers can measure changes by analyzing the Incoming and Outgoing survey measures and comparing them to inmates on the program waitlist or nonparticipating inmates. In addition, a longitudinal study could be beneficial in understanding the long-term impact the program had on recidivism rates.

In conclusion, this study highlights the need for more cognitive-based educational programming with prerelease inmates. These programs are an important first step in increasing employability. The findings suggest that a substantial number of inmates are willing to approach reentry in new ways. Not only did the participants grasp the concepts, they applied them. The evaluation showed the problem may not be that inmates are unable to find jobs, but illuminates poor preparation of inmates to reenter society. Perceived changes in personal and cognitive development helped these inmates secure gainful employment and they may now have the ambition to move forward from there.

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