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University of California, Berkeley

Bright Hopes, Dim Realities:
Vocational Innovation in American Correctional Education

Steven Schlossman, Joseph Spillane

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PREFACE

This report was prepared as part of a continuing effort by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) to examine and understand delivery systems of vocational education and training. It provides a historical perspective on correctional education in America and observes the implications of that history for reform in correctional education in the 1990s. The study should be of interest to researchers and policymakers who are concerned about correctional education issues, and to practitioners who provide that education.

SUMMARY

This Note seeks to shed new light on the history of correctional education in America, and on the implications of that history for reform in correctional education in the 1990s. We address questions such as the following:

- What are the origins of contemporary ideas about correctional education?
- How have educational programs in prisons been implemented in different time periods?
- Are prospects brighter today than in the past for the resurgence of vocational programs in correctional institutions?

This Note consists of three main sections. In Section 1, we identify some general tendencies in the history of correctional education in the 19th and 20th centuries. In Sections 2 and 3, we present a more systematic history of correctional education between approximately 1890 and 1960. In Section 2, we reinterpret the contributions of the famous prison superintendent, Zebulon Brockway, to correctional education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Section 3, via a case study of the New York State Vocational Institution, we examine the enormous difficulties that have bedeviled even the best-designed and well-intentioned efforts to transform prisons into institutions of vocational training.

Our empirical investigations of the past lead us to a number of general conclusions about where the field of correctional education has been and where it seems to be going. We conclude, for example, that:

1. Contrary to widespread hopes at the time, the 1980s were not propitious for innovation in correctional education. In the past, correctional education has thrived only in the context of a broader ideological consensus in favor of rehabilitation rather than punishment as the primary purpose of incarceration. During the 1980s, however, this consensus was probably farther from the mainstream of American correctional thinking than at any time since the 1920s.

2. Corrections has not always been the enormous drain on local, state, and federal treasuries that it has become in recent years. Modern-day advocates of a vastly expanded network of prison industries generally attempt to reinstate a once-operative principle in

American corrections—alert, however, to the operational abuses that helped to undermine legislative tolerance for prison labor toward the end of the 19th century.

3. From its origins, vocational education in prisons has been "sold" in value-laden ideological as well as educational terms. Vocational education, in other words, has been cast as an either-or, inflexible substitute for, not a modification or adjunct of, remunerative prison labor. The debate over vocational training in prisons has too often become precious and divorced from pragmatic financial considerations. We doubt whether vocational training programs can survive without a real commitment to some productive end products, whether organized as traditional prison industries or not.

4. With the advantage of hindsight, it is clear that the 1930s were unique in the degree to which prison officials were willing to follow the lead of outsiders, especially educators, in charting new paths of prison reform. But, any effort to re-create the conditions of the 1930s—when, at least for a brief time, there was serious ongoing communication between educators and prison officials—remains a formidable challenge.

5. Vocational education is intrinsically an unstable innovation in correctional institutions. The historical pattern seems to be that the effective, productive utilization of inmates' vocational skills prompts the creation of key constituencies outside the prisons (especially among legislators and in the corrections bureaucracy) who care more about the products, and their remunerative value, than about preserving the integrity of the training program itself. Many elements inhibit correctional education innovations from taking root initially in prisons. We call attention to several inherent difficulties, including pedagogical problems, expense, staff recruitment, prisoner retention, placement conundrums, and a variety of political considerations internal and external to the prison.

6. Battles for professional prerogative have undermined efforts to make correctional education the driving force in prison reform. We highlight especially the abiding conflicts between correctional educators and therapists (mainly clinical psychologists and psychiatrists) in defining and implementing reform agendas in American prisons. The conflicts between therapists and educators remain an endemic problem with much potential to frustrate innovation in correctional education.

7. We are struck by a certain anomaly: In the two time periods (1890s and 1930s) when vocational education most conspicuously came to the fore in American corrections, vocational programming per se did not dominate the prison reform agenda. Rather, vocational programming was part of a much broader, self-consciously experimental educational plan that included, but was not limited to, more conventional academic education. The past champions of vocationalism, in other words, also upheld the view

that vocational instruction alone would provide an insubstantial curricular and pedagogical base on which to build effective treatment programs. The linkage is clear between this comprehensive view of prison education in the past and more recent efforts to develop integrative models of academic and vocational education.

8. Too often in the past, proponents of correctional education programs, especially those with a vocational focus, have proclaimed the virtues of their ideas as self-evident: as if the greater alleged "practicality" of vocational programs guaranteed them both wider public support and greater rehabilitative effectiveness than other interventions. This is no longer adequate. The corrections field itself, and also legislators, have traveled down the reform road of vocational education too often to be persuaded by superficial invocations of the work ethos as a remedy for recidivism. Unless it can be shown that vocational programming is superior to other educational or therapeutic interventions with prisoners, there seems no compelling reason to assume it is so.

In sum, our reading of trends and tendencies in correctional education does not leave us optimistic about its future. We are led, instead, to emphasize the long-term constraints on reform, many of which still appear to be operative today. If nothing else, our research suggests the advisability of greater candor regarding the proven potential of correctional education to rehabilitate inmates, and increased political realism in assessing future prospects for integrating vocational training into American prisons.

CONTENTS

PREFACE iii

SUMMARY v

Section

1. INTRODUCTION 1
   - Bright Hopes: Recent Reform Ideals and Political Realities in Correctional Education 2
   - Obstacles to Reform: Some Tendencies in the History of Correctional Education 4

2. ZEBULON BROCKWAY AND REFORM IN CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA 8
   - Zebulon Brockway and the Elmira Reformatory 8
   - On Progressivism, Penal Reform, and Vocational Education 13

3. THE AGE OF REFORM IN AMERICAN CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION: THE SURPRISING 1930s 19
   - Correctional Education and the Origins of Penal Reform in New York in the 1930s 20
   - Integrating Vocational and Academic Objectives: The Implementation Experience at the New York State Vocational Institution, 1935-1960 27
   - Conclusion 54

1. INTRODUCTION

This Note seeks to shed new light on the history of correctional education in America (with a particular focus on vocational training) and on the implications of that history for reform in correctional education in the 1990s. By revealing how present-day philosophies, policies, and programs in the field originated and evolved, historical data can clarify similarities and dissimilarities, as well as continuities and discontinuities between the past and the present. We can, for example, address questions such as the following:

- What are the origins of contemporary ideas about correctional education? What is new about current reform ideas, and what is not?
- How have educational programs been implemented in different prisons in different time periods? When put into practice, have reform ideas lived up to their promise? Are recent difficulties in implementing innovative programs greater or lesser than in the past?
- How is the political and economic context for correctional reform today different from the past? Are prospects brighter today for the resurgence of vocational programs in correctional institutions?

To be sure, history rarely provides single or unambiguous answers to these kinds of questions. Nonetheless, historical knowledge can transform how we perceive modern-day challenges in correctional education. By ranging widely over issues in both theory and practice, we hope to prod policymakers and practitioners to think in new ways and perhaps even to refine or reformulate goals and methods in light of past experience. Our goal is not so much to draw concrete "lessons," or to extract specific policy recommendations from the historical data, as it is to stimulate informed and thoughtful discussion about where the field has been and where it seems to be going.

This Note is in three sections. In Section 1, we identify some general tendencies in the history of correctional education in the 19th and 20th centuries. Our arguments derive mainly from several monographic studies that we conducted of northern and southern prisons between the Civil War and World War II. We have chosen not to report here the mass of detail contained in these studies and instead to accent several broad conclusions that bear most directly on policy issues today.

In Sections 2 and 3, we present a more systematic, although highly selective, history of correctional education between approximately 1890 and 1960. We deal primarily with developments in the state of New York, largely because the state was in the vanguard of penal experimentation during our period of investigation. Other states at the time appear to have been both less adventuresome and less successful than New York in putting an educational reform agenda for their prisons into operation. In Section 2, we reinterpret the contributions of the famous prison superintendent, Zebulon Brockway, to correctional education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the so-called Progressive Era. In Section 3, via a case study of the New York State Vocational Institution between the 1930s and the 1950s, we examine the enormous difficulties that have bedeviled even the best-designed and well-intentioned of efforts to transform prisons into institutions of vocational training.

Our reading of trends and tendencies in correctional education does not leave us optimistic about its future. We are led, instead, to emphasize the long-term constraints on reform, many of which still appear to be operative today. If nothing else, our research suggests the advisability of greater candor regarding the proven potential of correctional education to rehabilitate inmates, and increased political realism in assessing future prospects for integrating vocational training into American prisons.

BRIGHT HOPES: RECENT REFORM IDEALS AND POLITICAL REALITIES IN CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

The early 1990s seems an appropriate time to reflect on and reinterpret the history of correctional education. Experience gained during the past decade in attempting to foment major changes in correctional programming has been sobering. Not long ago, prospects for innovation seemed bright. During the 1970s and early 1980s, proponents often portrayed correctional education—and especially vocational training—as a self-evident remedy for high recidivism, i.e., the failure of prisons to prepare inmates for law-abiding civilian life. Vocational training, it was claimed, would relieve inmates of the idleness that bred despair and riot, endow them with marketable skills to smooth post-release employment, and, through cooperative arrangements with private industry, drastically lower corrections costs. A number of major developments heralded the optimistic outlook:

1. The National Advisory Council on Vocational Education, via a series of much-publicized hearings, helped build public and legislative support for new approaches to vocational programming in correctional institutions.

2. The U.S. Department of Education enhanced the status of the entire field by creating a new Correctional Education Program unit.
3. While still in office, the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, the Honorable Warren Burger, lent his prestige to the cause by championing vocational education as the key to inmate rehabilitation.
4. Several important administrative and pedagogical experiments—such as "correctional school districts," collaborative post-secondary education programs, and special education methods to aid handicapped inmate learners—showed early signs of success and gained a constituency among corrections practitioners.
5. Several distinguished criminologists, such as Norval Morris and Gordon Hawkins, challenged the pessimistic tendencies expressed by their academic colleagues during the 1960s and early 1970s ("nothing works"), and argued forcefully for the expansion of vocational training opportunities for inmates.
6. Perhaps the most hopeful development was the Free Venture Project (funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration). It seemed to presage and symbolize a new era in public/private partnerships in which effective, up-to-date vocational programs for inmates would flourish in conjunction with the rebirth of self-supporting prison industries.

As it turned out, the 1980s were an inauspicious era for innovation in vocational or other forms of correctional education. Indeed, during the 1980s—reflecting an unprecedented consensus among spokespersons for both the political left and right—the very notion of "treatment" in corrections came to be seen as intellectually bankrupt. Captured in its starkness by the term "selective incapacitation," the focus of policy was mainly on whom to lock up, and for how long, instead of what to do with, or for, the rapidly growing numbers of inmates once they were behind bars (inmate populations more than doubled during the decade). Correctional education, in short, was largely excluded from the main currents of prison reform during the 1980s.

Could historical knowledge have predicted this failure? Of course not: History is not a predictive science. Yet it might have been helpful (albeit discouraging) to recognize in advance that correctional education has thrived in the past only in the context of a broader ideological consensus in favor of rehabilitation rather than punishment as the primary purpose of incarceration. During the 1980s, this consensus was probably farther from the mainstream of American correctional thinking than at any

time since the 1920s, when a series of "get-tough" policies were enacted to clamp down on a Prohibition-inspired "crime wave" (or so the cause of the "crime wave" was widely perceived). Correctional education programs presuppose that the public is ready and willing to smooth the readjustment of ex-convicts to a law-abiding life centered on productive labor. During the 1980s, however, opinion polls indicated that the American public became increasingly hostile and suspect of all rehabilitative programs aimed at reintegrating prisoners into the social mainstream. The period witnessed a virtual "demonization" of prisoners in public opinion: A stark emphasis on prisoners' destructive tendencies highlighted (often under the rubric of "career criminal") an impassable moral and behavioral gulf that was alleged to separate them from law-abiding citizens. Accentuated by the ever-rising portion of inmates who were from minority groups, the drift of public opinion in the 1980s boded ill for correctional innovations that were predicated upon widespread community acceptance of ex-convicts for the vocational skills they brought back with them. The times, in short, were surely not optimal for innovation in correctional education.

Vocational programs in prisons may be largely irrelevant during periods when the climate outside the prison is so hostile. Leaders in correctional education may have to train their sights as much on changing the climate of opinion *outside* as inside the prison, for it is the former upon which the acceptance of prison-based educational programs will ultimately depend.

OBSTACLES TO REFORM: SOME TENDENCIES IN THE HISTORY OF CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

In addition to tracking changes in the political context for correctional reform, historical inquiry can identify short- and long-term trends in policy design and implementation. Detailed knowledge of this sort can help policymakers isolate some of the constraints on programmatic innovation that need first to be recognized, and then overcome, before sustainable change is likely to take place. In the field of correctional education, a number of entrenched policies and abiding implementation problems have seriously retarded innovation during the past century.

The policy change that most profoundly affected correctional education was the decision in the late 1800s and early 1900s to eliminate or severely curtail contract-driven prison labor. Industrially based prison labor was once solidly established as the preeminent means to occupy and facilitate the discipline of inmates during their incarceration. These enterprises, it is key to recall, were sufficiently profitable to eliminate corrections as a major government expenditure. Corrections has not always

been the enormous drain on local, state, and federal treasuries that it has become in recent years.

The dislodging of remunerative prison labor from the correctional system in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was profoundly dislocative. This was the case not only for the prisons in the north, with their elaborate factories ensconced within prison walls, but also for the prisons in the south, where the labor routines centered (at least initially) on agricultural employments.

Thus, we emphasize that such modern-day advocates of a vastly expanded network of prison industries as Chief Justice Warren Burger and Professor Gordon Hawkins attempt mainly to reinstate a once-operative principle in American corrections, but remain alert to the operational abuses that helped to undermine legislative tolerance for prison labor toward the end of the 19th century. From a historian's standpoint, this is a unique policy effort: a self-conscious attempt to selectively reinvent the past, while learning from its mistakes, on terms that will be congenial to contemporary sensibilities.

Following the demise of large-scale, profit-oriented prison industries, correctional education advocates in the early 20th century went out of their way to portray vocational training as a self-conscious *alternative* to traditional prison industries or state-use production schemes. From its origins, in other words, vocational training in prisons was "sold" in value-laden ideological as well as educational terms. It was "good guys versus bad guys": vocational education was cast as an either-or, inflexible substitute for, not a modification or adjunct of, remunerative prison labor. Thus from the start, the policy debate—vocational education *versus* remunerative labor —was starkly polarized. Certainly this outcome is understandable, in light of the ugly exploitation that inmates suffered under the brutal and unregulated contract labor arrangements common in the late 19th century. But the polarized rhetoric was also a simple function of politics: of having had to fight fierce and frequent legislative battles to persuade one state after another to eliminate the main source of financial solvency for its prison system.

The ideological polarization of correctional education has not served the best interests of either prison inmates or the larger society. Too often, the debate over vocational training has become precious and divorced from pragmatic financial considerations. Indeed, it has sometimes seemed as if nonproductivity per se was an ideological litmus test for "progressive" thinking about the goals and methods of correctional education. Some advocates seem unwilling to accord educational legitimacy to vocational training programs that involve any coordination with prison industries or state-use production. But how long can vocational training programs survive without a

real commitment to some productive end products, whether organized as traditional prison industries or not? Can prison administrators really be expected to sustain the credibility of vocational training programs for adults without providing genuine opportunity to develop and apply practical skills?[1]

While the credibility of prison-based vocational training may depend on its incorporation of production goals, a difficult dilemma is inevitably raised in proposing to do so. The historical pattern seems to be that the effective, productive utilization of inmates' vocational skills prompts the creation of key constituencies outside of the prisons (especially among legislators and in the corrections bureaucracy) who care more about the products, and their remunerative value, than about preserving the integrity of the training program itself. The history of correctional education suggests, in other words, that there is an inherent tension between production and training goals: The better the prisoners are at performing their work assignments as a result of their training, the more pressure is likely to be brought to bear on prison administrators to forego training altogether and to produce more products. Thus, vocational education appears intrinsically to be a highly unstable innovation in correctional institutions—even if, in the first instance, implementation proceeds relatively smoothly.

A number of more subtle factors have also impeded the operationalization of innovative correctional education programs. Perhaps the most intriguing (and saddest) among these are the abiding conflicts between correctional educators and therapists (mainly clinical psychologists and psychiatrists) in defining and implementing reform agendas in American prisons.

Battles for professional prerogative undermined some of the most determined efforts to make correctional education the central motif in prison reform in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The correctional educators were unprepared for this sort of turf battle. Starting in the 1920s, they had sought to use psychology for their own purposes of individualizing treatment, i.e., determining which of several education programs best fit an inmate's desires and capacities. They confidently expected to subordinate psychological tools to distinctly educational purposes.

Leaders in correctional education assumed that the great majority of prisoners were psychologically normal, however limited their intellectual attainments. As early as

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[1]Our thinking on these subjects has been much influenced by Gordon Hawkins, "Prison Labor and Prison Industries," in Michael Tonry and Norval Morris (eds.), *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 5, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 85-125; Gordon Hawkins, *The Prison*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, Chapter 2; and Norval Morris, *The Future of Imprisonment*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, Chapter 2.

the 1930s, however, prison therapists were becoming more and more professionally autonomous from the educators. Unlike the correctional educators, the intellectual orientation of the therapists increasingly emphasized the differences, not the similarities, between criminals and other adults. The therapists' growing interest in "personality," and their proclivity to describe all variety of criminal behaviors as "pathology," represented a fundamental challenge to the educators' conception of the prisoner as an undereducated but essentially normal adult. The ascendancy of psychological over educational approaches to the diagnosis and treatment of inmates (reinforced by the implicit challenge to educational programs posed by Donald Clemmer's classic 1940 work on "prisonization") became obvious after World War II. This set the stage for very sharp critiques of the entire philosophy and practice of correctional education (vocational or otherwise). By the 1950s, as Professor Gordon Hawkins has argued, vocational education had generally come to be viewed as one of several "naive" treatments that would virtually disappear from the agenda of the corrections profession for an entire generation.

Clearly, the origins and consequences of these professional conflicts within prison walls merit attention. How to integrate the goals of, or at least minimize the overt conflicts between, therapists and educators so that the approach of the former does not lead to the devaluation of the latter remains an endemic behind-the-scenes problem with great potential to frustrate innovation in correctional education. The built-in difficulties need at least to be acknowledged. The sad reality is that there are precious few domains today in which "experts" who have followed different paths in achieving professional competence have worked cooperatively, on terms of equality, to deliver social services to the same clientele. If history may serve as a guide, the therapists will have the initial advantage over the educators and will seek to maintain it.

We turn our attention now from broad reflections on the history of correctional education, to two highly focused, empirically grounded inquiries into the origins and implementation of vocational programs, primarily in the prisons of New York State, between 1890 and 1960.

2. ZEBULON BROCKWAY AND REFORM IN CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

In Section 2, we advance two principal arguments in order to clarify some misunderstandings about the introduction of vocational training into American prisons around the turn of the century.

We will contend, first, that the contributions of the pioneer vocational educator, Superintendent Zebulon Brockway of the Elmira Reformatory, have been both under- and overestimated in much of the scholarly literature. While Brockway's work certainly remains relevant and a source of inspiration to workers in the field today, the reasons for his relevance, we believe, are more complex and interesting than is generally understood.

Second, we will contend that however much Brockway was admired by his fellow penologists in the early 20th century, and however widely trumpeted were the virtues of vocational training, the reality was that vocationalism penetrated hardly at all into prison administration in the Progressive Era. Brockway's work represented not a triumphant first step, but a false start toward more general correctional reform. As we shall indicate in Section 3, the true "age of reform" in American correctional education occurred not in the Progressive Era but during the unheralded era of the 1930s.

ZEBULON BROCKWAY AND THE ELMIRA REFORMATORY

In prior literature on the history of correctional education, Zebulon Brockway stands out as the field's major icon, a towering figure whose contributions to both the theory and practice of modern corrections at the Elmira Reformatory between 1876 and 1900 dwarf those of anyone else.

In our judgment, however, Brockway has suffered from the adulation of his acolytes. In Daniel Boorstin's apt phrase, Brockway has become so "well-known for his well-knownness" that his ideas and practices have received insufficient empirical review. Our analysis suggests a need to revise the conventional wisdom in a number of ways. Our aim is not to challenge Brockway's stature in the field, but rather to locate his ideas more clearly in the context of his times. At the same time, we seek to clarify how his efforts speak most directly to modern-day concerns in correctional education.

Brockway's true originality, in our estimation, lay not so much in his designing a brand-new blueprint for correctional reform as in his extending upward to adult criminals several programmatic innovations that had been developed earlier for juvenile delinquents. This pertains especially to Brockway's advocacy of two key ideas:

indeterminate sentencing and vocational education. The mid-19th century was a fertile period for new thinking and institutional experimentation in the treatment of juvenile delinquents, both in Europe and America. The innovations that occurred then in juvenile corrections embodied the key precepts that would later gain Brockway worldwide celebrity when he applied them to young adults at Elmira. In applying ideas that were originally devised for juveniles to adults, Brockway did indeed establish an important precedent for future reformers in correctional education. The percolating upward of ideas from the juvenile to the adult system has been a recurring characteristic of the change process in American corrections.

Although the ideas may not have been original to him, the vocational programs that Brockway instituted set a new standard for correctional education in American prisons. Again, however, some misunderstanding has attended this aspect of Brockway's career. We need to root Brockway firmly in the late 19th, not in the late 20th century. The common view of his ideas as proto-modern, and as providing an inspiration for practitioners in the field today, has tended to distort understanding of how vocational education was first introduced to Elmira, how it was implemented, and how smoothly and successfully it worked in practice. Even in the heyday of Elmira, the virtues of vocational education were not always self-evident, even to Brockway.

The first point to recognize is that during the first half of his tenure at Elmira, vocational education was, in fact, *not* central to Brockway's correctional program. From Elmira's opening in 1876 until 1889, vocational training was either nonexistent or tangential to inmate work routines. As in the other major New York prisons at Auburn and Sing Sing, work at Elmira was centered on contract-driven, factory-based production of goods for the private market. Brockway shared a fundamental faith, with all 19th century prison administrators, in hard work per se as the touchstone of discipline and rehabilitation, regardless of its rote nature or relevance to civilian employment. As he observed in 1888: "There is not any proper education and test of character that does not include training in industry."[1] Thus, it is incorrect to portray vocational education as central to Brockway's original theory of correctional treatment. It is also incorrect to view his later advocacy of vocational education as a rejection of industrial production, whether for profit or institutional maintenance.

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[1]New York State Reformatory at Elmira, *Annual Report*, cited in Zebulon Reed Brockway, *Fifty Years of Prison Service: An Autobiography* (orig. 1912; reprinted, Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1969), 268.

Second, it appears that when Brockway first introduced vocational education to Elmira's prisoners in the 1890s, his motivation reflected less of a strong philosophical preference than a necessary administrative adaptation in a period of institutional crisis. The roots of vocational programming at Elmira lay in a small manual training department that Brockway had created in the mid-1880s solely for inmates who were physically or mentally incapable of efficient performance in the institution's industrial shops. Brockway was led to expand the manual training department only when the New York State legislature abruptly abolished contract labor in 1889. Elmira and the state's other prisons were thrust into an unprecedented predicament over how to keep inmates busy. Brockway's solution was to mandate trade training for all otherwise idle prisoners. Within a few years, the legislature responded to the protests of prison administrators and restored factory employment as the central work routine in New York's prisons (although now mainly on a state-use rather than a contract-labor basis). However, Brockway chose to retain the expanded trade school and to make required vocational education the hallmark of a revised disciplinary routine that would further distinguish Elmira and (he hoped) other reformatories from traditional adult prisons.[2]

Thus, Brockway's great experiment in vocational education was limited to the last decade of his administration at Elmira. He devoted enormous energy and disproportionate resources to the vocational training program, not only offering inmates a wide variety of related classroom instruction, but bringing in skilled tradesmen from the surrounding communities to conduct most of the teaching and demonstration. Classes were generally kept small (20 to 30 inmates). Upon entry to Elmira, inmates were encouraged to state a trade preference, which was used in conjunction with interviews and some rudimentary aptitude tests to determine placement. Brockway did his best to modernize training equipment and to derive the content of vocational programs from civilian work requirements. Vocational training, in other words, had the express purpose of qualifying inmates for post-release employment. (By design, Elmira did not have to deal with prisoners sentenced for long terms; this would effectively have precluded serious training for outside employment.)

Did vocational education at Elmira "work"—that is, did it successfully inculcate inmates with employment-ready skills, facilitate their entry into the civilian work force, and lead to lower recidivism rates? Certainly Brockway and his many supporters, then and since, have thought so. We have not conducted the types of research that might

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[2]Brockway, *Fifty Years of Prison Service*, 245.

enable us to subject the claims to empirical testing. However, we have identified a number of attributes of the vocational program that, in our judgment, suggest its likely limitations as a rehabilitative tool and that raise doubts, too, about its utility as a model for correctional education today.

Brockway turned to vocational education with a vengeance, requiring it of all inmates and making it the key ladder to "success," that is, to achieving a record of performance that would lead (under indeterminate sentencing) to early release from prison. Even staunch recent supporters of vocational programming have called attention to the dubiousness—on both practical and ethical grounds—of requiring prisoners to participate, much less to perform well, in vocational education, and of conditioning release on successful performance, whether in the classroom or in the shop. That Brockway enforced such requirements seems incontrovertible: He formally used classroom success as an index of "reformation" and thereby made the timing of release contingent on the development of vocational skill.[3] Brockway's formal policy, moreover, was to try not to parole an inmate unless a job for him had already been secured. Perhaps this policy resulted in only minimal extensions of sentence in good economic times; but one wonders what happened following the devastating depression of the 1890s, when employment opportunities for parolees must have contracted substantially. Perhaps most disconcerting, there is strong evidence that Brockway—who in 1894 was alleged as "guilty of unlawful, unjust, cruel, brutal, inhuman, degrading, excessive and usual punishment of inmates, frequently causing permanent injuries and disfigurements"—went so far as to inflict physical beatings on those who progressed slowly in their classwork.[4]

We have also uncovered a number of implementation problems that give a more realistic cast to what actually went on at Elmira under Brockway. The institution's policy of requiring trade education for all inmates had the effect of grouping students of radically diverse backgrounds, temperaments, and educational abilities into the same classrooms. The result would appear to have been slow classroom progress for many inmates and often chaotic classroom scenes. Exacerbating this problem was the propensity of judges to send criminals to Elmira who, in Brockway's judgment, properly belonged in other prisons with less ambitious rehabilitative goals. These included

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[3]See especially New York State Board of Charities, *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report*, "Report and Recommendations in the Matter of the Investigation of the New York State Reformatory at Elmira," 354.

[4]Ibid., 354-355.

recidivists and older inmates; it was on their shoulders, Brockway claimed, that any failures in his educational programs rested. Implementation problems went beyond dealing with inappropriately assigned inmates, however, for by the mid-1890s Elmira suffered from a severe overcrowding problem. Classroom instruction that might once have been effective became increasingly difficult to conduct when Elmira's population reached one-third over capacity.[5]

Finally, throughout Brockway's decade-long experiment with vocational education, the program was stronger in classroom instruction than in the practical opportunities it offered inmates to test their new knowledge in productive work assignments. This was not Brockway's fault—as indicated earlier, the 1890s was a period of major confusion and readjustment in New York's prisons as a result of the curtailment of contract labor. But the effects of this policy change for as ambitious an educational design as Brockway's were nonetheless real: Vocational instruction tended to be limited to "book knowledge" in occupations for which the institution could not supply up-to-date equipment or work assignments. No doubt it was true in the 1890s, as in later years, that those who were less adept at school avidly sought the few required industrial jobs that remained at Elmira. At least this way they would not have their prospects for release conditioned on their proficiency in passing the classroom-based trade tests that Brockway relied upon to assess "reformation."[6]

One additional point regarding the place of vocational education in Brockway's correctional philosophy: For all of the attention that Elmira's vocational programs received at the time (and continue to receive today), they strike us, in retrospect, as one of the least innovative of Brockway's many contributions.

We have already demonstrated that vocational education per se did not begin at Elmira until the last decade of Brockway's superintendency. From the first, however, Brockway attempted to suffuse the reformatory's entire operation with systematic educational purpose. More novel than the vocational course work was the wide array of academic instruction that Brockway offered to inmates from the earliest years of his administration. Brockway was familiar with the makeshift ways in which academic education had been offered in 19th century correctional institutions: generally by guards, chaplains, or fellow inmates and for short, irregular time periods under conditions that were adverse to efficient learning. Instead, Brockway placed the academic programs (and later the vocational programs) into the hands of professional, full-time teachers who were

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[5]Ibid., 365-366.

[6]New York State Reformatory at Elmira, *Annual Report*, 1925, 41.

drawn from the community. He provided them with decent classrooms during regular daylight hours so that the inmates might truly benefit from the instruction.

In addition, using private resources he secured from local philanthropists, Brockway created an excellent library for inmates to use to supplement their formal learning. He persuaded distinguished literary and artistic speakers to visit the reformatory on a weekly basis so as to stimulate further the inmates' desire for cultural and moral betterment—a kind of prison chautauqua. Drawing upon the best of popular health wisdom at the time—which emphasized the importance of sound physical conditioning to morality, self-esteem, and social success—Brockway also created ample recreational facilities for the inmates. These facilities, he believed, would reinforce the image he cultivated of Elmira as a new kind of quasi-collegiate institution for society's educational failures. Finally—and part of a philosophical package that harkened back to Thomas Jefferson—Brockway began the nation's first inmate newspaper to provide an outlet for the literary aspirations that the overall rehabilitative package sought to nurture.

In sum, Brockway's varied educational program for the rehabilitation of prisoners surpassed in ambition and design any that had previously been contemplated in the field of corrections (whether for juvenile or adult offenders). For Brockway, vocational training was just one component of a rehabilitative credo centered on Education, broadly conceived. It was in the comprehensiveness of his educational vision, more than in the vocational programs per se, that Brockway's originality truly displayed itself.

The relevance of Brockway's regime to current ideas for new program design in vocational education is quite apparent. In recent years, the field has come to recognize the need for generating what Grubb et al. have called "models for integrating vocational and academic education."[7] Brockway concluded long ago that vocational instruction alone would provide an insubstantial curricular and pedagogical base upon which to build effective educational programs in prisons.

ON PROGRESSIVISM, PENAL REFORM, AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

We have systematically reviewed the policies and practices that shaped adult correctional programs in the states of New York, Ohio, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Texas in the Progressive Era. As several scholars have shown, during this period the rhetoric of vocationalism permeated all professional discussion in the fields of education

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[7]W. Norton Grubb et al., "'The Cunning Hand, The Cultured Mind': Models for Integrating Vocational and Academic Education," National Center for Research in Vocational Education, University of California, Berkeley, MDS-141, July 1991.

and penology. We were therefore surprised to discover that innovation of any kind in correctional education—vocational or otherwise—was virtually at a standstill in the prison systems of these major states between 1890 and 1920. Educational programs remained marginal at best, even in the spate of new "reformatories" that were created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Brockway's example at Elmira appears to have little influenced mainstream correctional practice. And following Brockway's retirement, even Elmira lost its worldwide reputation as a paragon of educational experimentation. Contrary to expectation, vocationalism simply did not thrive in the Progressive Era prison.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of major adjustment for American prison administrators, as they struggled to rearrange institutional routines to adapt to the elimination or curtailment of contract labor. Still, our investigation revealed far more continuity than change in the purposes and organization of prison labor, regardless of whether goods were being produced for the marketplace or for state use. In the following pages, we briefly lay out the characteristics of these traditional prison work patterns as they were manifested in the Progressive Era.

In the northern prisons, inmates worked in large industrial shops. Most shops were mechanized, and prisoners were assigned to small tasks on the production line. This work generally required little or no skill and minimal preparatory training.

A small number of industries dominated the shops of most northern prisons prior to the elimination of contract labor. The top ten industries in 1886 were: boots and shoes, clothing, stoves and hollow ware, harnesses and saddles, iron goods, furniture, cooperage, carriages and wagons, brooms and brushes, and cigars.[8] Most prisons attempted to concentrate large numbers of prisoners in shops, while establishing some diversity of industries to avoid dependence on any one product. In New York, which had three main adult prisons (Clinton, Auburn, and Sing Sing), each institution specialized its industrial production so that the prisons would not compete with one another.

Although contract labor gave way in northern prisons to the state-use system (or some variant), the change appears to have had little effect on the kinds of work inmates did. While several industries were eliminated, much of the new work was an extension of older industries, albeit with a new client (i.e., the state). Even where there were major additions of industries (as, for example, when Ohio required its penitentiary to produce license plates and road signs), the impact was minimal on the level of skill that inmates

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[8]Glen A. Gildemeister, *Prison Labor and Convict Competition with Free Workers in Industrializing America, 1840-1890*, New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1987, 54.

needed for the task. One group of mass production industries requiring unskilled labor generally replaced another.

Teaching inmates well-rounded vocational skills for use after release was not a serious concern of most prison administrators. Their principal concern was to prevent idleness, especially during the frightening transition between the abolition of contract labor and the adoption of the state-use system, when prison officials worried anxiously about what to do with their charges (march them endlessly in military drill?). Prison administrators gave little thought to the type of work inmates should do; at most, they sought to instill inmates with "work habits" that were appropriate to the new industrial age. As one superintendent concluded: "It seems obvious that the best way to fit him [the prisoner] for hard work outside is to give him hard work inside."[9]

Nothing more was needed to teach "work habits" effectively, most prison officials believed, than an efficient industrial shop where work tasks were pared to the minimum. At Clinton prison, for example, inmates were assigned machine-controlled, specialized tasks so that "with few possible exceptions, any one of the processes of manufacture could be learned by any one of average intelligence in one hour."[10] The goal was to "confine the men to one machine or machines and to one process in order that what they do and the way they do it may be checked up by the machine itself . . . the whole scheme is to make as nearly as possible the task itself the boss."[11]

Every prison offered some work assignments that were intrinsically more interesting than others; these were generally distributed as part of the prison's reward system. At Sing Sing prison, for instance, work in the print shop was reserved for "A" men, i.e., first-time offenders and long-termers with good discipline records. Even in these more challenging assignments, however, the required skill level was generally minimal so that formal vocational instruction was unnecessary to integrate inmates into the work flow. Guards often doubled as shop foremen; overworked and low-paid as they were, it seems doubtful that they could have served effectively as vocational instructors even had they been given the opportunity.[12]

Prison industries not only provided inmates with little vocational orientation, they also failed to replicate the work conditions common in civilian industry. Particularly after the decline of contract labor, the problem for prison administrators was usually not

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[9]New York State, Superintendent of Prisons, *Annual Report*, 1913, 5.
[10]*New York Times*, "Clinton Prison at Dannemora," November 24, 1895, 25.
[11]New York State Prison Survey Committee, *Report*, 1920, 204.
[12]New York State Commission of Prisons, *Report of Committee on Industries*, 1913, 4-36.

enough work for the inmates to do rather than too much; the overriding concern was "to keep the men busy at something."[13] As the superintendent of Auburn prison explained, industrial output at his prison had not increased, even though his shops had been modernized because of overcrowding: "We overman the shops to keep the men out of mischief, instead of locking them into their cells. In other words, the situation is simply tiding over."[14]

At Sing Sing, prisoners usually worked only four to five hours per day. The amount of labor each man performed was often reduced to maximize inmate participation. At the brush factory, for example, inmates were assigned to operate two or three machines, whereas in civilian life an operator doing comparable work would have been assigned six. In the knit shop, the foreman alleged that it took four inmates to accomplish the work of one civilian—according to other commentators, this estimate was far too generous to the prisoners.[15]

If anything, prospects for vocational training may have declined in American prisons over the course of the Progressive Era. This appears even to have been the case at Elmira, where vocational education came to be treated as a reward for a lucky few rather than, as under Brockway, the raison d'être of the institution's entire organization of work. Those fortunate enough to receive vocational schooling were now required, in a sense, to "compensate" for the privilege by performing a half day's maintenance work for every day spent in vocational classrooms. By the end of the 1920s, Elmira had dissipated the distinctive reputation Brockway had earned for it. In New York, as elsewhere, the very notion of a "reformatory" had become an anachronism: Aside from the slightly lower age profiles of their inmates, there was now little to distinguish the reformatories, in intent or in practice, from the mass of adult prisons.

During the Progressive Era, one notable, if short-lived, effort to introduce vocational instruction into the work routines of adult prisons merits brief notice; we refer to the efforts of the prison reformer Thomas Mott Osborne during his brief tenure as superintendent of Sing Sing prison during the 1910s.

A brief experiment in vocational instruction at Sing Sing had actually preceded Osborne's arrival. In 1897, the superintendent—fearing the effects of unrelieved idleness on inmates during an awkward point in the transition from contract labor to state use—

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[13]New York State Prison Survey Committee, *Report*, 162.

[14]New York State Crime Commission, Subcommittee on Penal Institutions, Hearings, September 10, 1928.

[15]New York State Commission of Prisons, *Report*, 14.

had introduced classes in typesetting and printing, drawing and carving, and cabinetmaking. An informal assessment indicated that these classes were popular with the inmates, and that the work they produced was quite competent. But the experiment was hardly begun before it was brought to an end, as new employments were found for inmates to produce industrial goods needed by other state institutions.[16]

When Osborne became superintendent, he immediately introduced a variety of vocational classes. The classes (unlike those at Elmira) were entirely voluntary and offered only at night. They were designed to be supplemented by civilian correspondence courses, for which the inmates were encouraged to sign up at prison expense. A large contingent of inmates was soon enrolled in courses on barbering, telegraphy, cutting and designing, bricklaying, carpentry, and architecture.[17]

The popularity of these courses notwithstanding, Osborne was rebuffed in his appeal to the state legislature to expand the inmates' ability to participate in them. Soon, Osborne himself was forced out of the superintendency in a major political battle. The vocational courses struggled for survival for several years under sponsorship by the inmates themselves before dying out.

The glimmer of interest which inmates at Sing Sing showed in vocational education clearly did not impress most prison administrators, state legislators, or the various citizen groups who were periodically asked during the Progressive Era to review programs and conditions at state prisons. Indeed, the more that outsiders studied prisons and their inhabitants, the more pessimistic they tended to become—buttressed by the use of intelligence and other rudimentary psychological tests—regarding inmates' ability to benefit from correctional education of any kind. An outside review committee at Clinton prison, for example, left little doubt about prospects for introducing vocational instruction there: "The men at Clinton have not the mental ability to learn a skilled trade."[18]

Other commentators insisted that inmates simply were uninterested in vocational training and regarded it as an imposition. Most inmates preferred farm work, claimed the superintendent of Elmira, because they "like to go out to get tanned up, so that when they come back to the City they can say they have been out to the country, or Coney Island, for the summer."[19] Even a unique prison survey that showed that three of five inmates did in fact want vocational training—but in a different area (especially auto mechanics)

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[16]Sing Sing Prison, *Annual Report*, 1897.
[17]New York State Superintendent of Prisons, *Annual Report*, 1916, 1917, 1918.
[18]New York State Prison Survey Committee, *Report*, 204.
[19]New York State Crime Commission Hearings, 97.

from the one in which they were currently working—could not shake the conventional wisdom of Progressive Era prison officials that vocational education was both a luxury they could not afford and one that the inmates did not particularly want. As one group concluded its review of prisoners' capacity for vocational training: "Men who are laborers have never had the mental ability or vocation interest to be anything else or otherwise they would never have been laborers."[20]

In sum, not even in rhetoric, much less in practice, did the Progressive Era mark a significant turning point in the attention given to correctional education in general, or vocational training in particular, in adult prisons. The vitality of the Progressive movement in the political arena appeared to have little direct or indirect impact on the American correctional system in the early 20th century.

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[20]New York Prison Survey Committee, *Report*, 170-171.

3. THE AGE OF REFORM IN AMERICAN CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION: THE SURPRISING 1930s

If the field of correctional education ever had a heyday, it was in the 1930s. We did not know this when we began our historical inquiry into correctional education. Indeed, we not only surmised that the Progressive Era was the most likely, but that the Great Depression Era was the *least likely* to have seen innovative vocational programming.

For one, Brockway's great experiment at Elmira was long over; there were no working "models" to which advocates of vocational education could point to substantiate their beliefs. For another, it was improbable that the tight government budgets during the Depression Era would be stretched to accommodate vocational programs. On the contrary, prisons would probably have been run with a vengeance "on the cheap," which meant keeping inmates as busy as possible on state-use production and institutional-maintenance chores. Furthermore, we knew from prior scholarship that the 1920s had been a "get-tough" period in American criminal justice. Responding to the widespread perception that crime was more rampant, random, and destructive than ever, lawmakers throughout the nation sought to toughen penalties for criminals and to assert the primacy of retribution and deterrence as the objects of imprisonment. The celebration of retribution rather than rehabilitation within the criminal justice community did not lay a political foundation for reform in correctional education.

Nonetheless, we were led to investigate further because of the publication in 1931 of Austin MacCormick's *The Education of Adult Prisoners,*[1] a book long ago elevated to the status of a "classic" in criminology, yet neglected and virtually unread (except by devoted practitioners) for the past 40 years. Who was Austin MacCormick? Why did he write *The Education of Adult Prisoners* at this seemingly inauspicious moment for correctional innovation? How influential were his educational ideas on the theory and practice of prison administration in his own time?

As it turned out, these questions led us to uncover an intriguing reform movement in the history of American corrections that has gone largely unchronicled by scholars, but which is, in fact, key to understanding the origins of the modern-day field of correctional

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[1]Austin MacCormick, *The Education of Adult Prisoners: A Survey and a Program*, orig. 1931; reprinted by New York, NY: AMS Press, 1976.

education. At present, we can only chart the broad outlines of the subject as a whole. We have chosen two foci to guide our preliminary investigation.

First, we examine the ideas of the acknowledged leader of the reform movement, Austin MacCormick, and the agenda for correctional education that he articulated, popularized, and attempted to implement in the 1930s and 1940s. Second, we move from the realm of ideas to their being put into operation by detailing one concrete effort to implement the MacCormick reform agenda: the creation in 1935 of the New York State Vocational Institution. Our case study analysis does not pretend to comprehend the entire correctional education movement, not even in New York State, much less in other states. But New York State, as argued earlier (page 2), is an excellent locale in which to begin empirical inquiry, because it was nationally recognized in the mid-1930s as being among the penological vanguard in its readiness to experiment with new rehabilitative programs. If the MacCormick agenda ran into serious operational difficulties in New York, there is every reason to believe that it met comparable or greater obstacles in other states, where political support for penal experimentation had shallower roots. We leave entirely unexplored the impact of new ideas in correctional education on the federal prison system, where MacCormick himself played a major role as both institution superintendent and system administrator.

CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION AND THE ORIGINS OF PENAL REFORM IN NEW YORK IN THE 1930s

In the history of American corrections, the people who are usually least happy about "get-tough" laws, which mandate longer sentences for inmates, have been the prison wardens. Following the introduction of the Baumes Laws in New York, the wardens' discretion with regard to the release of prisoners was diminished, the prisoners newly sentenced to longer terms were resentful and unusually hostile, and the prisons became severely overcrowded. The superintendent of Clinton prison forewarned about the likely results:

> While I am heartily in accord with both the letter and the spirit of the so-called Baumes Laws, it is apparent to every far-seeing individual connected in any way with the penal institutions in New York state that the longer sentences imposed by these laws have a tendency to make the problem of discipline in the institutions under the control of the Department of Correction much more difficult. It would appear to me that this condition will eventually precipitate a crisis in Clinton prison, although I have done everything possible to prevent serious trouble of any kind. . . . When the inevitable trouble does come, we will be prepared, and trust that, with the

> aid of machine guns, cyclone fences, etc., we will be able to handle the situation in a satisfactory manner. [2]

A year later, the predicted trouble erupted at Clinton prison. An inmate riot led to the burning of three buildings, the sabotaging of the power plant, and the killing of three prisoners who attempted to escape. Riot also overtook Auburn prison and resulted in the destruction of nearly all of the prison industries. A second and more serious riot followed soon afterward in which eight inmates and the chief security guard were killed, and the warden was held hostage for several hours.

In direct response to these prison riots, the wisdom of recent penal policies came under serious review by lawmakers. In 1930, Governor Franklin Roosevelt appointed a blue-ribbon panel (the Lewisohn Commission) to assess the future of prison administration in the state.

New York's situation was not entirely unique. By the late 1920s, discontent with the overtly custodial and punitive goals of American prisons and the fear that longer sentences and overcrowding could breed prison riots were matters that received increasing attention by lawmakers in many states. These concerns were fed by the publications and presentations of the National Society for Penal Information (NSPI), a small group of prison reformers based in New York City who sharply criticized corrections administrators for their indifference to educational and other rehabilitative programs for inmates. The NSPI was headed by Thomas Mott Osborne, the deposed reformist superintendent at Sing Sing prison.

Osborne's crusade at the NSPI to challenge the correctional status quo enjoyed considerable financial support from the Carnegie Corporation. In the 1910s and 1920s, the Carnegie Corporation was perhaps the nation's most influential catalyst for educational reform. It was also a leading proponent of the dual ethos of "science" and "professionalism" as the only sound intellectual bases on which to effect long-lasting institutional change, whether in schools, hospitals, or prisons. In addition to funding the NSPI, the Carnegie Corporation supported the pioneering work of the American Association of Adult Education (AAAE). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the AAAE sought to extend the reach of educational opportunity to adults with truncated school backgrounds, to upgrade the quality of instructional materials and pedagogical methods designed specifically for adults, and, more generally, to help "adult education" achieve professional recognition as a bona fide educational specialty.

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[2]Clinton Prison, *Annual Report*, 1928.

The genesis of Austin MacCormick's exhaustive study of correctional education lay at the interface of the activities of these two foundation-subsidized reformist organizations. In 1928, with joint sponsorship from the NSPI and the AAAE, the Carnegie Corporation hired MacCormick as a consultant to conduct the most comprehensive survey ever undertaken of educational programs for adults in American prisons. Although much of what he had to say was evident in earlier publications of the NSPI, *The Education of Adult Prisoners* established MacCormick as the nation's leading authority on correctional education. Following Osborne's death, MacCormick—who remained professionally active until the 1970s—achieved recognition as perhaps the foremost theorist/practitioner in American penology since Zebulon Brockway.

Like many ostensibly revered but mainly unread "classics," *The Education of Adult Prisoners* has suffered from its early celebrity in two principal ways. First, there has been little serious analysis of the substance of MacCormick's ideas, or of their potential relevance for correctional educators today. Few practitioners appear to have read him. MacCormick tends to be hailed mainly for his observation that there were in the 1920s no educational programs in American prisons worthy of the name, rather than for his own substantive prescriptions on how to reshape correctional education. Second, although MacCormick has been dutifully honored by modern-day practitioners of correctional education, just what it was that he accomplished, or at least tried to accomplish, remains virtually unknown. He has been viewed more as a critic and unsung hero than as a systematic organizer and thoroughly engaged participant in a hard-fought campaign to effect major institutional change in the 1930s and 1940s. In our judgment, neither of these perspectives does justice to MacCormick. More importantly, neither provides a modern-day vantage point from which to assess MacCormick's ideas per se, their influence during his own time, or their long-term interest for the field of correctional education.

Three important sets of influences shaped Austin MacCormick's approach to correctional education. Most concrete was the personal impact of Thomas Mott Osborne. Even as an undergraduate at Bowdoin College, in Maine, MacCormick had viewed Osborne's exploits at Sing Sing in heroic terms and had written his senior thesis on Osborne's penological ideas. Shortly after his graduation, MacCormick—emulating Osborne's prior exploits—had himself committed anonymously to a prison in order to understand the inmate's predicament firsthand. Following World War I, Osborne and MacCormick spent several years together administering the United States Naval prison in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. It was through Osborne that MacCormick, then a professor

at Bowdoin, originally came to the Carnegie Corporation's attention in the mid-1920s. The NSPI hired MacCormick to undertake several preliminary surveys of conditions in American correctional institutions for inclusion in a series of handbooks on prisons which were published by the NSPI. These surveys laid the conceptual groundwork for the more comprehensive research MacCormick would later undertake for *The Education of Adult Prisoners.*

Osborne's impact on MacCormick's ideas and career was profound. MacCormick inherited directly from Osborne at least three basic beliefs: First was his view that most adult criminals were victims, in equal measure, of their vocational inability and their asocial attitudes. Second was his strong but tempered faith in the inmates' capacity for self-transformation—not through punishment but through education, very broadly conceived. Third—an idea that Osborne had assimilated as a young staff member in the 1890s at the George Junior Republic, an innovative private reform school in upstate New York—was MacCormick's commitment to the practice of inmate self-governance in order to prepare prisoners for social adjustment after release. (Interestingly, Osborne's and MacCormick's faith in inmate self-governance turned out to have almost no impact on correctional reform efforts in the 1930s, largely because the prison riots in New York were rather widely, if superficially, attributed to prison-sponsored inmate gangs masquerading as self-help organizations.)

MacCormick's views were shaped more formally by the educational ideas he encountered at Teachers College, Columbia University, from which he obtained a Master's degree in 1916. There he came under the dual influences of the two titans of "scientific" educational reform in early 20th century America, Edward Thorndike and John Dewey. From the former he internalized a lifelong commitment to the principle of "individualization," which he translated into the use of psychological instruments to "diagnose" inmates' needs, desires, and innate capacities in order to provide them with finely calibrated opportunities for rehabilitation. From the latter he absorbed the essentials of the early 20th century "progressive education" movement. Two articles of faith in that movement were especially important to MacCormick: First, the pedagogical principle of "learning by doing," and second, the democratic view that "culture," rather than an elite preserve, could and should be made accessible to all because of its inherently life-enhancing, morally uplifting qualities (the Deweyan notion of popularization without vulgarization).

It may also have been at Teachers College that MacCormick learned to think of himself not simply as a professional educator, but as an *adult* educator. This distinction

carried considerable meaning at the time. In the early 20th century, as suggested earlier, the field of adult education experienced tremendous expansion and popularity, due in large measure to incorporating into the enterprise new bodies of more utilitarian knowledge, modern instructional methodologies, and a wider clientele. The activities of the NSPI and the AAAE were intertwined at the Carnegie Corporation. MacCormick himself, through both his schooling and his work experience, embodied both of these perspectives. From these several streams of influence, MacCormick formulated a seemingly innocuous pedagogical principle—prisoners should be viewed as adults in need of education, not as criminals in need of reform—and transformed it into a powerful critical perspective from which to rethink both the purposes and methods of correctional education.

MacCormick's ideas were widely shared by those in a position to reshape prison policy in New York. This was evident in the work of the Roosevelt-appointed Lewisohn Commission (referred to earlier), and also in the work of its successor, the Commission to Study the Problems of Education in Penal Institutions for Youth (the Engelhardt Commission), which was appointed by Governor Herbert Lehman in 1933. Both of these commissions issued numerous reports that reexamined programs and policies in New York's prisons from an educational perspective. Most interesting for our purposes, the commissions proposed a variety of concrete changes in prison administration that were designed to implement, fairly faithfully, MacCormick's "progressive education" vision. The Lewisohn and Engelhardt commissions brought into being a remarkable, long-lived coalition between public and private agencies (including foundations, which subsidized several programmatic experiments) to stimulate and oversee the process of prison reform. Perhaps more remarkably, several commission members actually went to work in the prisons during the 1930s and afterward to try to translate the new educational ideas into practice. Although MacCormick himself was only minimally involved in these ventures (he was mainly busy during the 1930s superintending a federal prison of his own in Chillicothe, Ohio), he kept in close contact with the New York reformers and considered their experiments as among the nation's boldest in their attempts to transform conventional penological philosophy and practice.

Four basic ideas—all of which were consistent with, if not identical to, MacCormick's—informed the changes that the Lewisohn and Engelhardt commissions tried to effect in New York's prison system. The first idea had two interrelated parts: a) that almost every prisoner could benefit from a well-conceived educational program, and b) that it was possible, even in a prison, to tailor educational programs to meet individual

needs. As the Lewisohn Commission wrote: "The keynote of the educational process is that of *individual training rather than mass treatment.* Each inmate is considered to be a distinctive personality with needs peculiar to himself and capacities which should be carefully studied and developed to the utmost."[3]

The optimism that flowed naturally from this approach was apparent in how the Engelhardt Commission, compared to a predecessor group that had surveyed New York's inmates in 1920, assessed the potential clientele for correctional education. The earlier group had concluded that only 20% of the inmates could benefit substantially from formal educational programs; the Engelhardt Commission, by contrast, put the figure at 65%.[4]

A second key element in the thinking of New York's prison reformers—one obviously related to their emphasis on "individualization"—was the belief that it was both possible and necessary to identify and segregate different types of inmates. The desire for better classification systems was certainly not a new one in the 1930s, but prison reformers in New York State made one of the most concerted efforts to realize this goal. By 1940, the state had constructed five new facilities, each specialized in one way or another. For example, Attica, a maximum security facility, showed the least commitment to educational programs; the New York State Vocational Institution, for young offenders ages 16 to 19, stressed vocational training in the context of a more broadly conceived program of educational resocialization. Wallkill was for men ages 16 to 30 who could be "trusted in a relatively open environment and . . . profit from a special program of rehabilitation based upon educational training . . . men who might be called 'accidental' criminals, men who have violated the law, but whose home ties were sufficiently strong to make them want to get this incident in their career behind them and get back into society."[5]

A third key component of the reform ideology was the concept that for education to be maximally effective in rehabilitating inmates, a common purpose had to infuse the entire prison "curriculum." The several components of the institutional regimen, in other words, had to be made consonant with one another. This had not often been the case in

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[3]Commission to Investigate Prison Administration and Construction (Lewisohn Commission), *A Preliminary Report on an Educational Project at Elmira Reformatory,* New York, 1933, 25.

[4]New York State Department of Correction, Division of Education, *Annual Report,* 1938-1939, 50.

[5]New York State Department of Correction, *Correction and the Young Offender in New York State,* West Coxsackie, New York: New York State Vocational Institution, 1960, 15.

American prison administration: Work, education, recreation, moral instruction, etc. had all been conceived as separate activities without serious concern for integration. A program founded upon "progressive education" principles, however, would keep the "whole man" in view. Every aspect of the prisoner's experience ideally would contribute to the same educational goals: The prisoner was to be kept in a constant state of learning and resocialization.

This general idea acquired more specific meaning when it was applied to the organization of prison work and to restructuring the relationship between work and academic and vocational training. Vocational education, the Engelhardt Commission stressed, could not be confined to shop instruction alone, but had to be supplemented by other educational experiences that would enrich and extend what was learned in shop. "All educational activities contribute in varying degrees to the vocational objective," the Commission wrote. "The ability to speak correct English, write a well-worded application for a job, manifest an intelligent and unbiased attitude toward the problem of capital and labor, all contribute to vocational preparedness."[6]

The final and most amorphous component of the reform ideology involved what MacCormick and the commissions termed "social education." This was to be both an explicit objective of formal classroom instruction, and an implicit lesson conveyed by the entire institutional regimen. At its most basic, "social education" meant instilling in inmates a respect for rules and a clear understanding of the inmate's relationship to institutional authority figures. Peace, harmony, and deference to those in charge of the prison were clearly prerequisites for the entire educational program. But these control objectives do not adequately convey the reach of the reformers' ambitions: The reformers were confident that they could transform the prisoner's entire sense of self, and his relationship to family, community, and the larger social order.

To the Engelhardt Commission, for example, "social education" meant "those educational activities, direct or indirect, which have as their major objective the development of skills, understandings, and attitudes which will increase the individual's ability to live acceptably in his social environment."[7] For the Lewisohn Commission, the most fundamental goal of "social education" was "the growing awareness on the part of the inmate that there is an organized community working for a common good, directed

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[6]The Commission for the Study of the Educational Problems of Penal Institutions for Youth [Englehardt Commission], *Report to His Excellency Governor Herbert H. Lehman*, Albany: J. B. Lyon Company, 1937, 73-74.

[7]Ibid., 21, 72.

in many instances by men of upstanding character, knowledge and skill, and that he, too, can become part of the general scheme."[8] Linking the inmate mentally and morally to the body politic was essential to counteract the asocial attitudes that most prisoners had internalized since childhood. Criminals, the reformers believed, were to be pitied more than scorned for their indifference to social norms. As the Lewisohn Commission observed: "The delinquent boy . . . has always considered himself above and apart from the community and he has lost his perspective as to his relationship to it."[9] It was perhaps MacCormick, though, who most forcefully articulated the aims of "social education" and clarified its Deweyan philosophic roots. The aim, he insisted, was not to elicit from inmates abject or mechanical obedience but, rather, "conformity with understanding." "Only when the individual knows what his proper relation to the social order is and wishes to assume it, is he socialized."[10]

In sum, it is clear that prison reformers in 1930s New York conceived of correctional education in bold and liberal terms. Training for productive employment was at its core, but the vocational program was enhanced by, and integrated with, an ambitious curriculum in academic and civic education. Vocational programming per se did not dominate the reform agenda. Prison reformers in the 1930s built upon the innovations championed earlier by Zebulon Brockway, although they refined and elaborated Brockway's ideas by integrating them with those of the Dewey-inspired "progressive education" movement. Correctional education today, with its dual vocational and academic foci, took initial shape during the Great Depression at the interface between ambitious reform agendas in penology and education.

INTEGRATING VOCATIONAL AND ACADEMIC OBJECTIVES: THE IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCE AT THE NEW YORK STATE VOCATIONAL INSTITUTION, 1935-1960

The impact of the Lewisohn and Engelhardt commissions on New York prison reform in the 1930s was direct and immediate. Through the commissions' recommendations to the state legislature, new ideas in correctional education were put to the test—to greater and lesser extent—in a variety of institutional settings. Correctional innovation centered on the development of new programs in vocational, academic, and social education, and embraced both the adult and juvenile branches of the state's penal network.

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[8]Lewisohn Commission, *Preliminary Report*, 1933, 12.
[9]Ibid., 24.
[10]Austin MacCormick, 7.

The two initial showcases of penal reform were the old, but tarnished stalwart of correctional innovation, Elmira, and the newly established prison at Wallkill, which contained the state's most ambitiously experimental and well-developed educational program. But significant innovations were also introduced at Clinton and, toward the end of the 1930s, at Auburn, Sing Sing, and Attica prisons as well. The showcase of reform for juvenile offenders was the newly opened facility at Warwick, to which the bulk of the offenders in the dilapidated New York House of Refuge on Randall's Island were transferred in 1932. In between the juvenile and adult institutions fit the New York State Vocational Institution, which opened in 1935.

As its official name indicated, the Vocational Institution represented a self-conscious attempt to center correctional innovation on the perceived *occupational deficiencies* of young adult offenders. To be sure, the meaning of "vocational education" in the correctional arena was never singular or self-evident. As one commentator observed: "The term vocational education has been applied to everything from hard repetitive labor to correspondence courses in no way connected with the inmate's past or current vocational experiences."[11] Just what vocational education might mean in practice at Coxsackie was, in fact, quite problematic. The first superintendent had been imported directly from Randall's Island, where the purported "vocational" program had amounted to little but maintenance work to keep the deteriorating institution erect in its final years.

Nonetheless, the opportunity to chart an original path in vocational education was presumably much brighter in a facility that did not have to adapt to a preexisting prison structure and program. And the New York prison reformers were quite clear about formulating a vocational education ideal in which, in classic Deweyan fashion, social and cultural learning undergirded and gave meaning to rote work skills. The reformers may not have succeeded in implementing their ideas in a correctional setting, but they did not lack a vision of what an integrated program of vocational and academic education ought to look like.

Popularly known as Coxsackie (it was located just south of Albany in West Coxsackie), the Vocational Institution was targeted at delinquent and criminal youth between the ages of 16 and 19. The age guidelines reflected the Lewisohn Commission's belief that "16 years should be the line of cleavage between the juvenile and adult offender, but . . . that the youths from 16 to 19 years of age should be considered as a

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[11]Walter M. Wallack et al. (eds.), *Correctional Education Today: First Yearbook of the Committee on Education of the American Prison Association*, New York: American Prison Association, 1939, 206.

special group and not committed to the ordinary institutions in the Department of Correction where they would be in close contact with more experienced criminals."[12] According to the New York State Department of Correction, Coxsackie would serve as "a place separate and apart from mature criminals, or those experienced in crime, or of a vicious or at least disturbing nature and disposition." Rather than being carefully selected to fit these criteria, however, the first group of inmates were, in actuality, mainly the "leftover" 16 to 19 year olds who had remained on Randall's Island following the transfer of younger delinquents to Warwick in 1932.[13]

Between 1935 and 1960, Coxsackie embodied, at best, an imperfect implementation of the ideas and practices championed by the prison reform commissions. From the start, a number of extraneous factors constrained innovation and set substantial limits to how faithfully the MacCormick vision would be tested. In addition, the educational program, once in operation in its vocational, academic, and social dimensions, was a good deal less impressive in practice than the pedagogical theory which underlay it. The following analysis of Coxsackie generally eschews chronological precision and seeks, instead, to highlight a variety of endemic problems that the institution officials experienced in attempting to implement its novel program design.

The Setting for Penological Reform at Coxsackie

Perhaps inevitably, Depression Era financial stringencies undercut the reformers' hopes for a model facility in which to implement their correctional program. Complaints about the physical plant were persistent from the start. Half of Coxsackie's initial group of 500 inmates lived in vast, cheaply built, open dormitories rather than the planned individual cells. This arrangement, for reasons that were not openly acknowledged, bred great dissatisfaction among the dormitory boys, who badgered the staff with requests for transfer to the cells blocks; it also compounded the supervisory difficulties of the guards.[14]

More directly relevant to the educational program was the failure to construct any sort of school building. "A year's experience with 12 classes scattered over the Institution in 12 unconnected and small rooms has demonstrated the fact that the educational work cannot be properly supervised under existing conditions," the

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[12]New York State Department of Correction, *New York State Vocational Institution: Its History, Purpose, Makeup and Program*, 6.

[13]Ibid., 7.

[14]New York State Vocational Institution (NYSVI), *First Annual Report*, 1936, 6.

superintendent observed.[15] A school building was finally erected in 1940, along with a new wing that increased inmate capacity by 50%. However, no parallel expansion of dining halls, offices, or workshops accompanied the growth of the inmate population. Administrators never tired of venting their frustrations that the institution was too overcrowded or underbuilt to provide an optimal setting for correctional innovation.

The inmates at Coxsackie were also not quite as "innocent" of criminal activity as the Lewisohn and Engelhardt Commissions had assumed when devising the institution in the first place. After the initial transfer of prisoners from the House of Refuge, most new commitments to Coxsackie arrived by direct sentence from judges throughout the state. Although hard-core, mentally deficient, or psychologically unstable offenders were not supposed to be sent to Coxsackie, judges in fact enjoyed considerable latitude in selecting its clientele. They could commit any male between 16 and 19 found guilty of a misdemeanor or a felony (unless punishable by death or life imprisonment), or who was determined to be a vagrant, a "delinquent," or a "wayward minor." Clearly, there was potential for a highly diverse inmate population (the mean age at admission was around 17.4).

The offense profile of the inmates changed little during Coxsackie's first ten years. (After 1945 it is impossible to classify inmates by offense because a large portion were simply designated as "youthful offenders.") Most were convicted of crimes rather than status offenses: They were mainly property offenses such as petit larceny and burglary rather than personal offenses such as assault and robbery. Around one-tenth were committed as "wayward minors." New York City youth accounted for about one-half, and blacks for about one-quarter of the inmate population.

Thus, Coxsackie was not an institution of first resort for most offenders. Only 16% of the 587 new arrivals in 1938, for example, were committed after their initial arrest; in contrast, 15% had been arrested four times prior to their commitment. Forty percent of the inmates, moreover, had prior institutional experience at such public and private reform schools as Warwick, the State Agricultural and Industrial School, the New York Catholic Protectory, and the Children's Village, as well as at diverse county jails.[16] Institutional officials especially resented the size of this last group, whose presence created the "most baffling problems":

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[15]Ibid.

[16]See NYSVI, *Annual Reports*, 1936-1939.

> They have been repeatedly tried by other agencies and institutions where they have failed, and are finally committed here where we again enter them into a training program. When this institution and its program were originally planned, it was on the basis that there should be an institution in this State where the young delinquents who may be rehabilitated, could be benefited by a well rounded program of vocational, academic, health and recreational education. By the[se] commitments . . . we have been seriously handicapped in the development of our program. It is my sincere hope that the courts in making subsequent commitments to this institution will give careful consideration to the purpose for which this institution was established and by so doing make better selections of their cases.[17]

At least as baffling were the mentally deficient, or "feebleminded" inmates whom the courts regularly committed to Coxsackie. While these young men surely needed help from the state, argued institution officials, Coxsackie's ambitious educational program was simply beyond their limited capacities. On the basis of the Stanford-Binet test, Coxsackie's resident psychologist believed 21.7% to be "feebleminded," and blamed the courts for not exercising more discrimination before committing them because they undermined the institution's distinctive educational mission.

> The courts could serve as sieves and prevent this great influx of poor trade material into a vocational machine that is equipped to utilize only the normal and the teachable. Were the courts to be furnished with psychological services that would enable the judge to direct the feebleminded criminal elsewhere, this institution would more nearly approach its function of teaching every boy a trade that he may use in later life as a honest means of earning a living. [18]

Initially, Coxsackie tried to resolve this problem by transferring inmates it classified as "feebleminded" to the State Institution for Defective Delinquents at Naponoch. However, the use of this safety valve only seemed to induce the courts to send even larger numbers of mentally deficient offenders to the institution. When Naponoch said it would take no more transfers, the Coxsackie psychologist became quite discouraged. He therefore proposed, as a matter of necessity, to adapt the educational program to the "feebleminded" clientele. "We can neither ignore this group nor expect it to conform to standards we have set up for the normal boy," he argued. "The only solution appears to be an early reorganization of the shop and teaching programs so that these individuals will be met at their own levels."[19]

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[17]NYSVI, *Third Annual Report*, 1938, 5.
[18]NYSVI, *First Annual Report*, 1936, 5.
[19]NYSVI, *Second Annual Report*, 1937, 51.

This solution was not acceptable to other institution officials, however. "A vocational program must be expanded to the *nth* degree to adequately provide for the boy with feebleminded intelligence who cannot read understandingly at one end of the scale, and at the other end the high school graduate with an I.Q. of 130," argued Coxsackie's director of education. "The institution has neither the trained personnel nor the physical facilities for meeting this situation." Instead, he opted to fight the courts "rather than attempting to expand or diversify the program to meet the demands of a heterogeneous population."[20] Coxsackie began returning to the courts for recommittal elsewhere of as many "feebleminded" inmates as it could, and solicited cooperation from the State Department of Correction to try to reeducate the state judiciary on this matter. Eventually, it would appear, Coxsackie succeeded in persuading the judiciary to commit relatively few overtly "feebleminded" boys to its care.

Another major constraint on reform at Coxsackie centered on the teaching staff. An innovative educational curriculum, whether in a public school or a correctional institution, depends in the last analysis upon unusually able and committed teachers to implement it. Under the best of circumstances, it would have been very difficult to recruit and retain teachers who knew how to apply "progressive education" ideas and practices in a correctional setting. Severe budgetary limitations during the 1930s inevitably exaggerated the intrinsic difficulties. The result was a series of staffing problems that further undermined the institution's effort to implement its distinctive educational mission.

Compared to the typical prison, Coxsackie's investment in teachers and the quality of the teachers it secured was extraordinary. In addition to a director of education (who also held the rank of assistant superintendent) and a school principal, 13 academic and 17 vocational instructors were employed by the institution. Of the 15 initial academic personnel (including the director and the principal), 4 had graduate degrees, 9 had Bachelor's degrees, and 2 had normal high school diplomas. Although the vocational instructors were hired more on the basis of trade experience than on academic credentials, this was no impediment to effective teaching. As the directors of education at Wallkill prison had argued, "Some of our best instructors are tradesmen without teaching experience."[21] The challenge of teaching at a brand-new, educationally experimental

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[20]NYSVI, *Third Annual Report*, 1938, 39.

[21]Wallkill Progress Reports. Unpublished manuscripts, undated, available in Albany, NY: New York State Library.

prison appears to have attracted a committed and well-trained instructional staff to Coxsackie.

Teachers at Coxsackie were also accorded considerable professional responsibility in evaluating each youth's progress. Unlike the situation at many prisons, the teachers were in charge of most inmates for half or more of each day. Their evaluations of students were crucial with regard to academic and work assignments, disciplinary procedures, and parole decisions. Teachers were even given the task of censoring their students' mail so that they might better comprehend each inmate's personality (no doubt for other reasons as well).

There was, of course, no recognized professional field of "correctional education" in the 1930s to supply the institution with appropriately trained teachers. To help teachers adapt to the special demands of correctional teaching, Coxsackie provided several forms of in-service training. The institution offered vocational instructors a course on how to teach shop to prison inmates. More general extension courses, such as "Applications of Adolescent Psychology," were also made available to teachers at state expense, as were various kinds of summer training courses. In addition, weekly staff meetings and regular curriculum conferences were held to facilitate professional camaraderie and exchange among the teacher corps, and to tighten the links between the classroom and the shop.[22]

Despite these valiant efforts to secure, train, and accord professional autonomy to teachers, Coxsackie's administrators were rarely able to staff the institution's shops and classrooms satisfactorily. Some problems were obviously related to budgetary constraints. In times of budget cuts, the staff positions most likely to be eliminated were those of the teachers, not the guards. Periodic economy moves could be profoundly disruptive. In 1939, for example, four educational positions were eliminated (including the director of education). At the same time, the resident psychologist and psychiatrist were also fired. In rather understated terms, one official complained about the resultant "stresses and strains" that had "offered a real challenge to the entire educational personnel."[23]

Even when the staff remained intact, it usually failed to keep pace with growth in the inmate population. In 1935, with a population of around 500, the staff included 13

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[22]New York State Department of Correction, *A Preliminary Report of Educational Activities at the New York State Vocational Institution*, September 1, 1935-January 31, 1936, 28-29.

[23]New York State Department of Correction, Division of Education, *Annual Report 1939-1940*, 33.

academic and 17 vocational instructors. In 1946, with an inmate population of more than 800, the institution still had 13 academic slots (three of which were vacant) and 19 vocational slots (with two vacancies).[24]

However, budget cuts were not the only recurring problem that confounded teacher recruitment. Coxsackie experienced great difficulty locating a sufficient number of teachers to work at the institution, or, having been hired, to remain at the institution for any length of time. A 1943 report declared that "during the past year, no problem has been more time consuming, and at times, more discouraging, than trying to keep the educational positions filled with adequately qualified persons."[25] The difficulty expressed here was not simply a product of wartime personnel shortages, but one that had been evident from the outset. In the fiscal year 1937-1938, for example, the 15 academic teaching slots were filled by 35 different people, the principal resigned, and the newly hired director of education was fired.[26]

The difficulties in securing a stable teaching staff at Coxsackie are not hard to identify. Low and inequitable salaries surely explained much of the problem. A report to the Engelhardt Commission asserted that "there are many competently trained men available but few are willing to accept the salaries offered at the present time." Moreover, the report forewarned, "a future difficulty, if salaries are not increased, will be to hold on to those individuals whom we have trained."[27] By the early 1940s, the educational staff had organized to represent their interests at the budgetary hearings of the State Department of Correction. As the Department reported their grievances:

> For several years the educational personnel have felt that the salaries provided for teachers and instructors are not at all commensurate with the duties and working conditions inherent in institutional teaching. . . . Experience has convinced us that an adequately qualified staff cannot be maintained, even in normal times, at the salaries now provided. In order to get and hold a well qualified staff, salaries and working conditions must be somewhat comparable to public schools. Because of the nature of correctional institutions, the working conditions cannot be made as attractive as public school work. It is, therefore, necessary to establish a

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[24]Bertram M. Beck, *Youth Within Walls: A Study of the Correctional Treatment of the 16- to 21-Year-Old Male Offender in New York State Institutions with Recommendations for Further Development*, New York: Community Service Society of New York, 1951.

[25]New York State Department of Correction, *Report of Progress in Educational Programs, 1942-1943*, 7.

[26]New York State Department of Correction, Division of Education, *Annual Report 1937-1938*; see also Walter M. Wallack, Glenn M. Kendall, and Howard L. Briggs, *Education Within Prison Walls*, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1939.

[27]Wallkill Progress Reports, undated, 13.

> salary schedule that is at least equal to or even somewhat higher than the average for the public schools to offset undesirable working conditions. [28]

In addition to low wages, the state's rigid pay scale compounded the difficulties of teacher recruitment. Supervisors were often paid no more than classroom teachers. In addition, the vocational instructors were consistently paid less than their academic counterparts, even though their contributions were just as vital to the institution's raison d'être. These pay scale inequities must have been particularly frustrating, since the hope of correctional educators in the 1930s was eventually to attract to prisons, via the lure of comparable salaries, the growing numbers of high-quality vocational teachers who were being trained at professional schools of education.

Problems of teacher recruitment never came close to being resolved at Coxsackie. Plaintive protests about low pay and stressful teaching environments became a yearly ritual at State Department of Correction meetings; the administrators dutifully listened but did not (and perhaps could not) do much to alleviate the problem. Much planned classroom instruction at Coxsackie never took place because of teacher vacancies and absences.

Learning and Doing at Coxsackie: Progressive Education in Action

As indicated earlier, the programmatic innovations at Coxsackie reflected the influence of the larger progressive education movement, which helped transform the goals and methods of American schooling during the first half of the 20th century. As we shall see now, Coxsackie's experiences played out, in the microcosm of a prison, many of the themes that recur in the history of progressive education reform as a whole. If the Depression Era reform agenda did not get a fair or full test at Coxsackie, it was equally true that progressive education rarely received a serious hearing or fair chance to succeed in mainstream educational institutions either.

Incarceration within the wall-less prison at Coxsackie began with a carefully planned orientation program—at the time, the most lengthy and comprehensive orientation at any New York prison. After checking in at the administration building, inmates proceeded to the 44-cell block reception building where they were placed on a three-week "quarantine" schedule. The object was to "break down the prisoner's distrust" and "acquaint him with opportunities for advancement while in the institution." The process involved a tour of the trade shops and interviews with the various shop

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[28]New York State Department of Correction, *Report of Progress*, 7.

instructors, the chaplain, and the chief parole officer. The inmates were also lectured by the superintendent, two assistant superintendents, the principal, the librarian, the director of education, and the music director. Inmates also attended classes designed to acquaint them with regulations governing institutional life (e.g., "securing an interview with an official," "receiving letters and packages") and to introduce them to the vocational and academic curriculum. The ultimate goal of the orientation program was to persuade each inmate "that the quality of his participation in the life of the school is the standard by which his potential success in society will be inferred"—a goal virtually identical to that articulated by Zebulon Brockway at Elmira half a century before.[29]

The basic daily schedule of the inmates was quite simple. Inmates with an afternoon school program would spend the entire morning in a vocational shop. After lunch, they would attend three school classes: One in trade theory that placed their work assignment in historical and sociological perspective; a second in "related education" (English on Mondays and Wednesdays, math on Tuesdays and Thursdays, science on Fridays); and a third in "social and economic relations" that explained the nature of personal and social obligation (including institutional rules) in the modern world. Inmates with morning school programs would do the reverse.[30]

Not every inmate was placed on this schedule. Around 15% of the inmates, according to institutional officials, had "an inferiority complex and a hopeless outlook on life" and/or were of too limited intelligence to benefit from the kind of vocational instruction Coxsackie offered. They were therefore assigned to simple maintenance tasks around the institution. Another 5% of the inmates, it was claimed, were so "decidedly antisocial" that their participation in the educational programs was counterproductive. Institution officials felt that Coxsackie's vocationally oriented curriculum was perfectly appropriate for the remaining 80% of inmates, despite the fact that the great majority of them possessed little native ability and had accumulated substantial crime records.[31]

Every inmate's personal desires were given serious consideration in determining his vocational placement. During orientation, officials tried to help each inmate make the most appropriate choice via tours of the several shops, attendance at classes that provided up-to-date occupational information, and individual "vocational guidance" (a field that had recently gained distinct professional identity in schools of education). Although the

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[29]New York State Department of Correction, *Preliminary Report of Educational Activities*, 2.

[30]Ibid., 3-5.

[31]Ibid., 17; New York State Department of Correction, Division of Education, *Annual Report 1938-1939*, 50.

boys' desires were not determinative—various staff contributed their opinions, and certain trades (e.g., auto shop) tended to be oversubscribed—their first choice was granted if at all feasible.

Coxsackie offered around two dozen potential vocational assignments, from auto shop to plumbing. The shop instructors taught two groups of boys per day, each for approximately four hours. The size of the groups varied between 2 and 18, with an average class size of 11 (these were smaller classes than at Elmira under Brockway). In the shops, the inmates usually started out on the simplest tasks and, more or less as in an apprenticeship, gradually worked up to the more complicated jobs. In the masonry training program, for example, the usual pattern was to "follow the common trade practice. A new apprentice usually starts out as a mortar boy and mortar tender until he is familiar with the work. He then begins actual bricklaying practice and should be allowed to advance as his skill increases."[32]

The kinds of tasks performed by the inmates varied from shop to shop. In trades such as carpentry, the work tasks were primarily instructional; little production or repair was required of the inmates who were specifically tied to day-to-day maintenance needs. In other trades, relatively little shop time could be construed as primarily instructional; recurrent institutional demand for the shop's maintenance services left little time for formal teaching. Painting provided a particularly egregious example. Institution officials acknowledged that endless wall painting supplanted all other instructional activities. Indeed, the shop instructor did not even bother to prepare the course of study and student progress reports that were required of him. Institution officials lamented the lack of training in such aspects of the painting trade as wood finishing, sign painting, and commercial advertising, the latter of which "is valuable as a hobby" and "might conceivabl[y] be a means of making a living without investing very much money." With some reluctance, Coxsackie's administrators acknowledged that several other shops were also stuck in a "morass of maintenance."[33]

These substantial variations in the nature of shop work tasks at Coxsackie highlight a generic problem in analyzing the history of vocationally oriented correctional education. That is, a very wide range of on-the-job experiences has traditionally been enfolded, in practice, under the rubric of vocational education. Even correctional administrators devoted ostensibly to progressive education ideas were tempted to portray

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[32]Ibid., Part II, 3.

[33]NYSVI, *Second Annual Report*, 1937; Commission of Correction, *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report*, 1954, 167.

the performance of mundane maintenance jobs to "keep up" the facility as adequate to realize their vocational objectives. All one can say with certainty about Coxsackie's shops is that there was much variety in the kinds of work that were required of inmates in the name of vocational instruction.

To be sure, the administrators of Coxsackie were not blind to the differences, especially in the early, highly idealistic years. In 1938, for example, the director of education described the pedagogical dangers of failing to protect genuine trade training from the voracious demands of institutional maintenance:

> The plan of having every instructor in the vocational subject to call for all kinds of maintenance work is questionable. The greatest good educationally for the greatest number of students cannot result from this procedure. Much of the instructor's time is wasted on many of the jobs and very often only two or three boys out of a large class receive any value whatsoever from a given project. [34]

Over time, however, these laments were articulated much less often. Correctional officials tried mainly to adapt with minimal complaint not only to the persistent demands of maintenance (in 1956, the paint shop reported without comment that students spent 90% of their time on maintenance), but also to other major constraints on vocational instruction, such as persistent material shortages and equipment failures.[35]

As time went on, moreover, the expectations that Coxsackie's administrators held out for vocational training diminished considerably. To some extent, this was only acknowledging the obvious: namely, that relatively few inmates remained at the institution long enough to become true craftsmen (the average stay between the 1930s and the 1950s was around 15 months). But this inherent limitation had not retarded the officials' aspirations for vocational instruction at the beginning. In 1939, for example, they described their program rather ambitiously as including both "horizontal" training—introducing the less capable students to a variety of occupations to increase their chances of finding employment—and "vertical" training of the more skilled students to the highest levels of their trade. By the late 1940s, however, program expectations had been downgraded: opportunities for "vertical" training received almost no attention from institution officials, while the needs of "slow pupils" were reduced to enable them to "do the shop work on . . . a helper's level."[36] By the 1950s, vocational goals had been

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[34]NYSVI, *Third Annual Report*, 1938.

[35]New York Commission of Correction, *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report*, 1954, 167.

[36]New York Commission of Correction, *Twenty-First Annual Report*, 1947, 74.

downgraded further still. "Few delinquent boys have the mental endowment to become master craftsmen, and since industry requires more of the semi-skilled workers, intensive training in trades, except for the occasional boy, is wasted energy," observed Coxsackie's director of education. "Vocational training should consist primarily of vocational guidance and explorations. . . . In a sense vocational training can be considered preapprentice training."[37]

In sum, the vocational education program at Coxsackie saw a progressive foreshortening of goals and aspirations between the 1930s and the 1950s. By 1960, Coxsackie still remained, as its official name indicated, a "Vocational Institution." But the substance of what ought legitimately to be considered vocational education—especially in a correctional institution—had been diluted considerably from the days when the institution dreamt of providing prisoners with bona fide trade skills to earn a livelihood after release.

Most inmates at Coxsackie spent as much time in the classroom as in the shop. This was very different from the situation at many correctional institutions, where schooling was used as "filler" because not all inmates could be accommodated in one cycle in the shops. At Coxsackie, by contrast, the academic curriculum was viewed as an integral and equally important component of a vocational training curriculum. The pedagogical challenge was to adapt progressive education principles to a correctional setting, particularly to link classroom curricula to shop experiences so as to maximize inmates' vocational learning.

The effort at Coxsackie was three-pronged. First, the teachers tried to correlate instruction in the traditional academic subjects such as English, history, mathematics, and science with the practical work of the shops. The routine was for each trade instructor to submit a summary of current shop work to the principal each Friday. The principal would then distribute the statements to the academic instructors on Saturday, who in turn would plan the next week's curriculum to reinforce the shop-based instructional experience. "Relevance" was the pedagogical watchword, as the following statement by the superintendent made clear:

> We try to give the lad such academic work as is related to his shop work. For instance, in the printing shop we have two instructors who teach the practical printing trade. In the classroom we have a teacher who gives them mathematics, English, history, etc., based on the printing trade. They won't

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[37]John B. Costello, "Institution for Juvenile Delinquents," in Paul W. Tappan (ed.), *Contemporary Correction*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1951, 352.

> get the full course of chemistry that is given in high school and they won't get Latin. What is the use of giving them Latin that they won't use? A print shop lad won't need chemistry to any extent. Let's give him in the shoe shop that part of chemistry that he needs in relation to his trade. Or take drafting. No use taking the lad in the tailoring shop and teaching him drafting.[38]

Two critical observations may be made about this attempt to offer academic instruction in a vocationally relevant manner. First, this was the least strictly original component of the academic curriculum at Coxsackie; many precedents for such activity could be located from the 19th and early 20th centuries, not only at Elmira, but even at the New York House of Refuge. Second, although the available empirical data regarding implementation is meager, it seems evident that the logistics of this arrangement would have been extraordinarily difficult to execute successfully week in and week out. Whether, in fact, the academic instructors could have faithfully and continuously adjusted their teaching plans to the latest requirements of the shops (and on weekends, no less!), and whether a precise calibration of academic and shop knowledge was truly feasible in the first place, are matters of substantial doubt.

The second key component of the academic curriculum was "trade theory," which sought to teach inmates "a comprehensive knowledge of a given trade including trade science, blueprint reading, drafting and shop sketching, trade mathematics, and trade terms." In addition, the course attempted to provide vocational guidance and up-to-date information on the status of different occupations. In one unit entitled "Barbering as a Vocation," for example, detailed information was provided on the duties of a barber, his earning power, how to open a barber shop, health risks, licensing procedures, and relevant legal and sanitary codes.

Instruction in trade theory did not just aspire to provide nuts-and-bolts, trade-specific information, however. It was hoped that the course would help transform the inmates' psychological orientation in ways that served broader rehabilitative goals. As one official observed: "Interests developed in learning the how and why of a worthwhile vocation offer a socially desirable goal and a substitute for morbidity. The hope of developing the capacity to earn a living in a manner acceptable to society may result in a definite shift of attitude."[39]

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[38]Frederick C. Helbing, "Proper Guard Attitudes and Relations Toward Young Offenders," in Walter M. Wallack, *The Training of Prison Guards in the State of New York*, New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1938, 313-314.

[39]New York State Department of Correction, *Preliminary Report on Educational Activities*, Introduction.

Furthermore, the course was self-consciously Deweyan in portraying the trades as key to understanding the evolution of modern civilization, in stressing common characteristics of the trades, and in emphasizing the "why" as well as the "how" of the job. Its ultimate object was nothing less than to imbue inmates with a sense of vocational "calling" that harkened back to the original formulations of the Protestant work ethic. As several leading prison reformers observed in an unusually frank assessment, the employment qualifications of parolees would have to be high indeed if they were to compete on the open market in a Depression economy.

> It is evident that the released inmate seeking employment must be better prepared than the average worker, if he is to compete successfully for the job and keep employed. Not only must he acquire superior skill at the occupational level for which he has the capacity, but he must also have that related information which makes him a plastic, adaptable, thinking worker.[40]

Formal curriculum development in trade theory was carried out mainly at Wallkill prison (from which the following examples derive) and then adapted to Coxsackie's clientele. Classes were conducted as informal discussions, with as many as 30 inmates per session. Inmates from two or three shops were usually grouped together. For example, inmates from the auto mechanics, electric, and machine shops attended the same trade theory class, as did those from the clothing, laundry, and tailor shops.

What actually went on in these trade theory classes is difficult to reconstruct empirically. It would appear, however, that they were something of a pedagogical grab bag. Consider, for example, this account of a group discussion in auto mechanics:

> At the first meeting of the class a discussion was started about changing methods of transportation. Near the shop were three things—a cutter sled, an old buggy, and a wrecked automobile—all of which illustrate the change that has taken place.
>
> The National Tool Show is now in progress in Cleveland, and we had a discussion about the kinds of tools which are needed to make cars. The point was brought up that the average life of a machine in the Ford factory is only three years, and by that time newer machines have taken its place. One man suggested that this was the reason for the small number of manufacturers; the cost of machinery could not be justified except by a large production.

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[40]Walter M. Wallack et al., 201.

Another brief account of a session that combined inmates from the tailor and laundry shops further suggested the rather unstructured, hodgepodge nature of the classes.

> This class is a combination of two trades, which presents some difficulty in leading discussion. Both shops are interested in clothing and textiles, so that approach was used. There was a discussion of the reasons for wearing the kinds of clothes we do. Some wanted to know why people in foreign countries dressed in the "queer" way they do.
>
> From Stuart Chase's book *The Economy of Abundance* the chapter on early colonial life in Connecticut in 1750 was scanned and contrasted with present times. Most of the men had never thought of the difference in tailoring then and now. [41]

More structured classroom exercises also took place in these courses, although these too—at least from the little that we can learn about them in retrospect—would not appear to have been particularly imaginative from a pedagogical standpoint. For inmates studying the machinist trade, for example, a typical assignment would begin with the distribution of a short essay on some aspect of the trade, followed by a series of written exercises. One such assignment sheet began with a brief background on the trade:

> We are living in a machine age. Machinery is everywhere. Almost all the luxuries and necessities of life are made by machinery. The machine shop is the center where all of these wonderful machines are produced.
>
> A machine shop is the place in which metal parts are cut and finished to the size required and assembled to form mechanical units, or machines, from specifications and designs prepared by engineers.
>
> The equipment of a typical machine shop consists of certain standard machine tools, the type and size depending upon the product of the shop. The shop's equipment further includes the tools used at the bench or on the floor. It includes adjusting and measuring tools, work benches and tool holding accessories, and the small tools used in the machines.[42]

After finishing the reading assignment, the inmates would respond to such directives as: "List six bench tools and their uses"; "List the names of six machines usually found in machine shops and briefly indicate their uses"; "Which individual do you consider to be more important—the designing engineer or the skilled machinist?

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[41]Wallkill Progress Reports, undated.

[42]Walter M. Wallack et al., 214.

Could one work without the other? Give your reasons"; and "Has the machine age helped or injured the economic progress of man? Give your reasons."[43]

In sum, Coxsackie attempted through its trade theory curriculum to enhance the professional self-image, competence, and readiness of the tradesman/inmate to compete for work after his release from the institution. Regrettably, we have only skimpy data upon which to judge how these courses were planned and implemented. On the basis of the available evidence, however, major doubts arise about how likely Coxsackie could have been in achieving its grandiose pedagogical aims. Moreover, since the aspirations of the vocational curriculum were scaled back in the 1950s to preparing "preapprentices" rather than skilled tradesmen (as argued earlier), the relevance of trade theory to the shop work must have become increasingly beside the point.

In the end, of course, our pessimism regarding this aspect of Coxsackie's curriculum is not surprising. Translating the Deweyan ideal of vocational education into pedagogical reality was extraordinarily difficult even in the high schools that were most committed to progressive education ideals. There was certainly no reason to believe that courses in trade theory at Coxsackie would be more successful in imbuing students with a vocational "calling" than in more optimal school settings.

The third major component of Coxsackie's academic curriculum was "social education." The New York prison reformers set high hopes for the social education curriculum to rehabilitate inmates—morally and civically as well as vocationally—prior to release. They expressed the link between courses in social and economic relations and the institution's broader vocational goals as follows: "Man may maintain himself by many types of industry, but good qualities of character and workmanship are, however, fundamental to any degree of success, and these also are definitely set up as shop goals. Since a boy is not always on the job he must plan, while here, for life in his community. To serve this end the course in social and economic relations has been planned."[44]

How did officials at Coxsackie go about translating the ideals of social education into actual coursework? As with the other components of the academic curriculum, there is only minimal evidence available to assess the effort. The evidence that survives, however, is not encouraging.

Coxsackie's administrators were steadfast in their Deweyan belief that social education was an essential adjunct to vocational training. "Culture, social responsibility,

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[43]Ibid.

[44]New York State Department of Correction, *Preliminary Report of Educational Activities*, 15.

and submission to the 'mores' are correlative with economic and general well-being," they observed. "Upon this basis, it seems necessary to train, educate, culture *[sic]*, or rebuild the several sides of his life for normal participation."[45]

To achieve these goals, inmates received daily instruction in a variety of social education units, such as "The Boy and His World," "Respect for Property," and "Social Protection for the Individual." Each unit set out a series of general principles to be learned. In the "Social Protection" unit, for example, the subject matter included:

> that society does not require the individual to be a law unto himself . . . that many persons would not be able to defend themselves against even one other person . . . what behavior is designated as disorderly conduct, vagrancy, the legal remedy for assault, slander, libel, and failure to perform contract . . . the officers designated for law enforcement . . . that physical prowess is only one evidence of social worth and that one person may not injure another . . . the means and agencies for protecting the rights of the individual. [46]

The main pedagogical method which Coxsackie employed to teach social and economic relations was self-paced instructional units. Each unit contained a detailed essay on a single subject—usually written by the teacher—which the student would read and then be tested upon. One teacher, for example, developed a unit on the "History of Labor Organization." Written in "simple and interesting" language and in "a conversational tone," the essay was followed by 15 true-false and seven short-answer questions. Inmates were to determine the truth of such statements as: "The Secretary of Labor always does what the union wants him to"; "The N.R.A. pepped up the unions"; and "People always stick up for strikers." This mode of instruction made it possible for slower and faster students to complete the curriculum at their own pace, and, equally important, it enabled the teachers to monitor large classes and adapt to persistent turnover.

In retrospect, it seems doubtful that this rather conventional pedagogy could have done very much to transform inmates' ethical and civic attitudes and behavior. After all, even in the most avant-garde private high schools devoted to progressive education ideas in the 1930s, it was no small challenge to get serious consideration of such complex topics from students. At Coxsackie where, in addition to constant inmate turnover and overcrowding, there was a high concentration of socially deprived, aggressive, criminally experienced youth, those teaching social education via such "lessons" must surely have

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[45]Ibid., 7.
[46]Ibid., 16.

encountered herculean problems in communication. Here, as in the other components of the academic curriculum, a chasm remained between the rhetoric of progressive education, in which correctional administrators described their goals and their actual instructional methods. Their curriculum aspirations, in other words, appeared to far outrun their pedagogical inventiveness (or, perhaps more accurately, the inventiveness of the professional educators with whom they closely worked to develop instructional materials).

Of course, these are post-hoc judgments based on admittedly minimal empirical evidence. How did evaluators at the time—including the institution officials themselves—judge Coxsackie's ability to meet target goals in integrating vocational and academic instruction and thereby rehabilitating inmates?

Evaluating an Experiment in Progressive Correctional Education

The early administrators at Coxsackie readily acknowledged the many start-up problems they faced. However, this realistic assessment was generally accompanied by a resolute optimism that the vocational thrust of the institution was sound. Whatever difficulties they were experiencing, they were confident that, in time, they would move beyond the experimental stage and gain widespread public support for their version of integrated correctional education. Typical was the evaluation of the director of education in 1939:

> The educational staff at the writing of this report does so with mixed emotions. On the one hand, discouragement after discouragement appears. Co-workers dropped, salaries cut, in effect, teaching loads increased, the ray of hope of professional improvement blotted out, an atmosphere of unrest thickening. On the other hand, a new school building is being constructed. A great deal of satisfaction comes from extensive public praise of the scope and quality of work being directed in the institution. A deepening conviction that education is a means of rehabilitation is obvious. There is sufficient evidence on every hand to support the conclusion that enough progress was made during the year to justify looking into the new year with confidence that work well done will have its reward. [47]

One source of continuing satisfaction for Coxsackie's administrators was their ability to sustain the basic format of their educational program over several decades. Though maintenance chores often intruded on the vocational instruction, Coxsackie's program was not burdened by insistent pressures from the outside to turn a profit. The three principal structural innovations that Coxsackie introduced into New York's

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[47]New York State Vocational Institute, *Fourth Annual Report,* 1939, 69.

correctional system—an orientation period of several weeks, a half-day program of shop-based vocational instruction, and a half-day program of related academic instruction—were features that remained virtually unchanged between 1935 and 1960.

Of course, form and content are not the same; the permanency of the former can easily obscure the compromising of the latter. The administrators at Coxsackie were sensitive to the difference, especially in the idealistic early years. Despite having their basic program design in place, they were quick to point up the constraints on educational implementation posed by such inadequacies as an unfinished physical plant, unfilled teaching slots, judges who ignored sentencing guidelines, and overcrowded classrooms. Instructional methods designed for groups of 15, insisted the director of education, were subverted when applied to twice or even three times that number, particularly when the oversized groups had nowhere to meet but in small classrooms. The inevitable result was "only one thing, mediocrity in teaching . . . the problem became one of finding some place where the inmate could be occupied rather than planning a program best fitted to his needs."[48]

While the pedagogical difficulties were many, there was, in addition, the more basic fact that most inmates did not remain long enough at the institution to acquire the skills and attitudes characteristic of a skilled tradesman. The early administrators were not blind to this reality, but they were not wont to raise it, either, because it would have cast considerable doubt upon their ambitious educational goals. By the 1950s, however, the stated aims of the institution (as we saw earlier) had been scaled back. Institution officials were then more ready to acknowledge some inherent limitations of vocational education in a short-term correctional setting.

> This institution has always faced a serious problem in the rapid turnover of inmates, which means a great volume of clerical work, the handling of many case histories, continuous training for various maintenance activities, etc. The average length of stay . . . is approximately 15 months, and the youths at Coxsackie are mostly inexperienced when received. As soon as one becomes competent in any field and his attitude is such that he seems willing to work, the authorities feel that it is the time to make plans for his release on parole. [49]

By the 1950s, moreover, vocational education per se had lost much of its earlier appeal as a mode of treatment in American juvenile corrections. This is a much larger

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[48]NYSVI, *Third Annual Report*, 1938, 55; New York State Department of Correction, Division of Education, *Annual Report 1938-1939*, 32.

[49]New York Commission of Correction, *Thirtieth Annual Report*, 1956, 176.

subject than we can examine adequately here. Suffice it to say that a general shift in intellectual emphasis was evident throughout the field, not only toward a more psychotherapeutic orientation, but, interestingly enough, toward a more traditional emphasis based on religiously grounded moral uplift. The main pedagogical excitement at Coxsackie in 1954, for example, derived from a new course dealing with morals and ethics, entitled "Successful Living," which was taught by the institution's several chaplains.[50]

The emerging skepticism about vocational education at Coxsackie during the 1950s was evident in the following assessment concerning where the institution had been and where it ought to be going in the future:

> All of the vocational and academic opportunities are not in themselves a definite assurance against the future without the individual inmate's strength of character. There is no particular magic in teaching a boy to be a good plumber, as this knowledge without the strength of character to adjust himself in the community and resist all kinds of pressures and temptations could very well prove to be a lost investment. Perhaps there has been too much emphasis on the potential of the vocational, without relating to development of the personality and character of the subject generally.[51]

The displacement of vocationalism as Coxsackie's heart and soul was fed by the growing prestige of a variety of psychotherapeutic tools for rehabilitating young criminals. Conflicts between educational and psychiatric personnel peaked in the 1950s, but signs of incipient conflict had been apparent virtually from the beginning of prison reform in the 1930s.

Consider, for example, the criticisms of the psychiatrist at the New York House of Refuge, who argued that few inmates displayed sufficient mental ability to benefit from educational programs. Mixing psychological assessment with sociopolitical commentary, he portrayed the growing interest in vocational programs for young criminals as a waste of effort, if not worse.

> Let us recognize the fact that vocational guidance, as such, has long been seen as a fraud. It does not and cannot offer choice of vocation to the proletarian child. Up to date it has merely served to steer him into one of several manual trades. The environment of poverty and the compulsions of poverty will always be more powerful than any school system in their effects on children. [52]

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[50]New York Commission of Correction, *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report*, 1953, 152-154.
[51]New York Commission of Correction, *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report*, 1954, 167.
[52]*New York Times*, February 27, 1933.

Other psychiatrists in New York's penal institutions in the 1930s were equally skeptical about the ability of corrections personnel to advance the well-being of inmates. One complained that scientific concerns received little consideration in planning rehabilitative programs. Instead, "Each warden learns chiefly from personal experience and from the rather untrustworthy advisors he chances to meet." Even a grudging acceptance of the psychiatrists' expertise could not hide the underlying hostility. "Prison men may be intellectually sympathetic, but emotionally opposed. While they would support penal investigation in public gatherings, they would probably ridicule and sabotage such measures in the intimacy of small groups."[53]

That tensions between professional groups with different philosophies could undermine correctional innovation was all too apparent to New York's prison reformers. One prison warden who was sympathetic to progressive education principles complained about "discouraging setbacks" and "halting progress" traceable to "a few unhappy instances where psychiatrists and prison administrators have worked at cross purposes." Without more consensus on the objects and methods of reform, he argued, "the continuity of the inmate's program will be jeopardized by competition between the medical department, prison school, trade training, and other departments, each seeking in their own way to make some contribution to his improvement."[54] Similarly, the director of education at Coxsackie observed: "An institution program conducted by staff members with many philosophies can result in but one condition, a lot of efforts with little desirable results."[55]

Especially revealing was a dialogue between a group of young men who were training to become guards at penal institutions in New York and two of the best-known proponents of correctional education: Austin MacCormick and Walter Wallack (who had pioneered the development of educational programs at Wallkill prison). MacCormick had just completed a lecture that emphasized the importance of maintaining careful case histories on inmates so that their individual needs might be known and attended to by institution staff. He then asked the guard trainees for questions.

Q: Do you suppose those case histories will be available to us?

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[53]Raymond Corsini, "A Note Towards An Experimental Penology," *Prison World*, American Prison Association, September-October 1945, 12, 25.

[54]Walter B. Martin, "Common Sense Psychiatry," *Prison World*, American Prison Association, January-February 1942, 10.

[55]NYSVI, *Third Annual Report*, 1938, 39.

> *MacCormick:* I think some of the people who are here from other institutions can tell better than I can, but I do say this: Most of the psychologists and social workers would be so dumbfounded if a guard came in and wanted to read a case history they would faint the first time, and the second time would give it to you.
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> *Wallack:* On that same point, I have tried to suggest that diagnostic reports of psychiatrists, psychologists, and others who are doing this work in prisons should be made available to those who have a right to use them. There is a tendency, however, that I am not quite able to understand. It is an attitude on the part of some of those who prepare such information to guard it carefully in their files. It may be that they mistrust the ability of teachers and certain others to make proper use of their findings. . . I see no reason why such important information should be buried or retained for the exclusive use of only a few of those who could use it properly.
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> *MacCormick:* Well, there isn't open warfare between prison officials and psychiatrists, but there is a definite lack of understanding . . . psychiatrists have written in a language that we can't understand. It was always a technical language. Nevertheless, it doesn't take long to learn what a manic-depressive or a paranoid case is like, or what his reactions are likely to be. [56]

MacCormick may have tried to play down the incipient conflicts between educators and psychiatrists, but "open warfare" did indeed emerge in the early 1950s with the publication of the psychiatrist Bertram Beck's blistering assessment of two of New York's showcase institutions—Elmira and Coxsackie. Not only were the educational programs at these two institutions ineffective in rehabilitating inmates, worse still—from Beck's perspective—the educators had added insult to injury by starting to imitate the psychiatrists in an attempt to cover up their own deficiencies in professional training.

> As institutional personnel have become aware of the limitations of traditional practices, new methods have been introduced, described by such borrowed language as "treatment," "diagnosis," and "casework." Confusion arises from the fact that they have borrowed these *terms* from other professions *without borrowing the knowledge.* In this manner, words used in the correctional field have often become cloaks rather than descriptive labels.[57]

MacCormick, not surprisingly, challenged Beck's assessment of what had transpired at Elmira and Coxsackie. It had already been clear for some time, however,

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[56]Austin H. MacCormick, "Trends in Correctional Treatment," in Wallack et al. (eds.), *The Training of Prison Guards*, 223-224.

[57]Beck, *Youth Within Walls*, 24.

that the locus of reform sentiment in the field of corrections had shifted against education and in favor of diverse psychotherapeutic interventions. Increasingly, "The criminal was no longer viewed as a free-willed although deficient being," as MacCormick had portrayed him, "but as a determined one—propelled by neuroses, psychoses, psychopathologies, subcultural commitment, or other problems which occurred in his childhood or teenage years."[58] Psychiatrists, rather than educators, would define the vanguard of prison reform in America in the immediate future.

The correctional educators had little to fight back with—other than blind faith in general progressive education principles (which, to make matters worse, underwent withering challenge in the public schools during the 1950s). Their vulnerability derived in part from their lack of serious interest or sophistication with regard to matters of program evaluation. At Coxsackie and elsewhere, the champions of correctional education never tried to collect detailed or systematic data to examine whether institutional programs had helped inmates after release. Admittedly, the Great Depression was hardly an opportune moment to invest scarce resources in research. Nonetheless, sufficient data on parolees were apparently collected that, in all likelihood, could have been used to conduct preliminary evaluations, had the leaders of the correctional education movement been so inclined. Given the diversity of the penal reform experiments that were underway in New York, a unique empirical opportunity was regrettably lost forever to assess the impact of correctional education on different populations in diverse settings.

Helping inmates to find jobs in a depression economy must have been an immensely frustrating task. Almost from the start, the parole officers assigned to each institution found themselves with much larger caseloads than they could even superficially keep track of, much less serve as employment agents. Moreover, as demonstrated by the stringent restrictions passed by Congress and state legislatures on the marketing of prison goods, the Depression Era witnessed, not surprisingly, rising hostility toward easing the reentry of prisoners into scarce civilian jobs. This trend was profoundly demoralizing to the leaders of prison reform. Edward Cass, president of the Prison Association of New York, observed:

> The simple truth is this, that the fellow who is right-minded will follow what he is taught in the institution, if he can get a start. But those who have

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[58]J. Phillips and L. Surla, *A Review of Corrections Education Policy for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare: Final Report*, 1977, cited in Thomas Gehring, "Summary of Events, 1773-1975," unpublished manucript, 139.

> had to do with men released from the institution, and this from the experience of many years of the men around this circle, know that it is not easy for a man coming out of an institution to make a choice. . . . You have got to revamp the whole public attitude toward the man who comes out of prison. [59]

Labor unions were vocal in their hostility to ex-convicts, a position that infuriated New York's commissioner of corrections, who denounced them for making "extravagant claims" before the public "about what they are doing for the unfortunate individual who has been denied his opportunity. We on the East Side know that it is about 90 per cent bluff." Similarly, asserted a reformist prison warden, "in very few, if any, of the states do we find labor willing to cooperate ever so little in the rehabilitation of men behind bars. Labor does not seem to realize that the criminal problem is as much its problem as anyone's and that it cannot justly claim exemption from responsibility for its solution." The decision by the federal government in 1938 to exclude parolees from the Civilian Conservation Corps further compounded the situation.[60]

At Coxsackie, the primary source of information on the employment of former inmates was the chief parole officer, who in 1937 described his work with social agencies to help parolees find jobs. For all of the difficulties he reported, it is worth noting that he also claimed—albeit with maddening imprecision—some successes as well.

> We have endeavored to have boys continue in the vocation which they have followed in the institution, but have been confronted with serious difficulty in securing employment as a result of present economic conditions. Many boys have been obliged to take whatever employment was offered regardless of their trade training. It has been found, however, that the institutional training has been very helpful in that a fair percentage eventually find their way into the lines they have specialized in, in our training program. [61]

A 1940 survey added some empirical confirmation to the parole officer's claims. According to the survey, the vast majority of the inmates who had been released since Coxsackie opened were working in some capacity, although a much smaller share were using the skills that the institution had taught them. For instance, 24% of those trained as auto mechanics were working at that trade and 92% overall were employed; 60% of those trained as bakers were working at that trade and 80% were employed; 33% of those

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[59]Crime Commission Hearings, 98-99.

[60]Ibid., 105; Walter N. Thayer Jr., "Prison Tendencies in the United States," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work*, 1930, 112.

[61]NYSVI, *First Annual Report*, 1936, 27.

trained as hospital attendants were working at that trade and 100% were employed; and 41% of those trained as farm helpers were working at that trade and 72% were employed. Unfortunately, the survey did not provide enough information to evaluate its methodology or to interpret its implications regarding how Coxsackie's educational programs may have influenced the men's employment options. Nonetheless, at a time when as many as one-third of the working population was unemployed, these data are obviously impressive.[62]

Employment problems for ex-inmates eased temporarily during the manpower shortages of World War II, but reemerged afterward. Some new programs were begun during the 1950s to ease the transition from prison to civilian employment, such as the creation of a pre-parole job application process to locate employment before release (as Zebulon Brockway had done), and a cooperative experiment with labor unions to enable parolees to become union members. By and large, however, correctional educators continued to skirt the issue of how what was taught or done for inmates at the institution affected their employment prospects after release. To the extent that the educators acknowledged problems of post-release employment, they usually blamed others and decried public apathy, rather than reflecting on possible deficiencies in the design or implementation of correctional education programs.

In truth, by 1960 Coxsackie's administrators had no firmer grasp on whether their educational experiment had "worked" than when the institution had opened a quarter of a century earlier. By then, the heyday of educational leadership in prison reform circles had long since passed.

Final Reflections on the Coxsackie Experiment

As our case study suggests, there are many reasons why, from a historical perspective, prison-based vocational programs seem perennially vulnerable to dissolution. Put simply, a lot is required for correctional education innovations in general, and vocational programs in particular, to fall into place and to stay in place (i.e., become institutionalized).

For example, correctional education programs are very difficult to develop from a pedagogical standpoint—a difficulty that many vocal advocates seem loathe to acknowledge, take seriously, or invest resources in. Second, though hardly surprising, it is difficult to locate and keep talented, appropriate staff to teach and supervise vocational courses in prisons (poor pay is only one of the disincentives). Third, it is expensive at the

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[62]Division of Education, *Annual Report 1939-1940*, 37-38.

outset for prisons to afford up-to-date equipment for vocational training, and, after the initial investment, to keep the equipment current with rapidly changing technologies. Fourth, it is often not possible to attract sufficiently talented inmates to participate in the programs, or to retain them long enough to acquire sophisticated work skills. Fifth, gaining, or at least sustaining, the allegiance of correctional administrators to vocational programs is problematic, because vocational courses do little to enhance the control objectives of prisons compared with other labor regimens. Sixth, vocational programs have always been susceptible to multiple political challenges (i.e., they make enemies easily), from labor unions to business executives to legislators. And seventh—not that this list nearly exhausts the matter—it is often excruciatingly difficult to find employment for "graduates" following release. These abiding problems are no more easily resolvable today than they were half a century ago.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is clear that the 1930s were unique in the degree to which prison officials were willing to follow the lead of outsiders, especially those from the field of education, in charting new paths of reform. The leading spokespersons for prison reform genuinely expected that professional educators and educational agencies would play a major, if not dominant role in all phases of future prison administration and planning. The 1930s represented a heyday of belief by American society in the expertise of professional educators, and in the academic discipline of education as a burgeoning science; this was coupled with a continuing deference in social science circles more generally to Deweyan leadership in progressive education.

The 1930s were even more unique in that the educational critics of traditional penology were given a direct opportunity to put their ideas into practice. In New York, as we have seen, they even became administrators of correctional experiments. These innovations were facilitated by being part of a larger shake-up in governmental structures during the Great Depression Era—a mass changing of the guard in many sectors of government.

To say the least, the predicted linkage between education and corrections never came to pass: The expansion of corrections as a relatively autonomous professional field in the post-World War II era came at the expense of severed ties with professional educators. To the extent that corrections administrators developed strong academic ties, those ties were with the fields of criminology and sociology, and to a lesser degree with psychology, not with schools of education. Clearly, Austin MacCormick had it all wrong

when he foresaw an emerging consensus that leadership in prison reform should be in the hands of the educators.

In our judgment, the inability of the field of correctional education to root itself professionally is most unfortunate. There remains a great need for professional educators or some other academic group to exercise leadership in developing a full-fledged pedagogy for prisoners. As MacCormick was perhaps the first to understand, the job of creating adult-appropriate curriculum materials and teaching methods for prison populations is extraordinarily difficult. Until recently, this great curricular and pedagogical challenge has hardly been acknowledged. How to re-create in the 1990s the conditions of the 1930s when, at least for a brief time, there was serious ongoing communication on these matters between educators and prison officials is a formidable challenge.

CONCLUSION

It remains to be seen whether vocationally oriented correctional education can find a secure niche for itself in the 1990s within the growing political movement led by state governments to revive prison industries in order to defray the massive costs of prison expansion. However, the political alignments that in the past have regularly defeated prison industries appear again to be forming. Even the federal prison system's UNICOR system—founded in 1934, and the only sustained vocational education program in American corrections—has begun to receive concerted congressional challenge.[63]

As we indicated earlier, it would be historically unprecedented for correctional education to gain a wide hearing under the aegis of a penal philosophy committed quite openly to the goals of deterrence and retribution rather than to rehabilitation as the primary goal of imprisonment. Under these circumstances, is there anything that leaders in the field of correctional education can now usefully do to increase the prospects for future change? The prudent strategy, we would suggest, may not be to attempt to innovate widely, but rather to encourage small-scale, carefully designed and evaluated experimental studies. Then, when a more propitious public sentiment emerges (as has occurred periodically in the past), the leaders in the field will confidently be able to address policymakers from a training standpoint about "what works."

Too often, we believe, proponents of correctional education programs—especially those with a vocational focus—have proclaimed the virtues of their ideas as self-evident: as if the greater alleged "practicality" of vocational programs guaranteed them both wider

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[63]*Criminal Justice Newsletter*, 21, November 15, 1990, 2.

public support and greater rehabilitative effectiveness than other interventions. This is no longer adequate. The corrections field itself, and also legislators, have traveled down the reform road of vocational education too often to be persuaded by superficial invocations of the work ethos as a remedy for recidivism. This is not to argue against innovative educational programming in correctional institutions, but rather to insist that the development of a persuasive, empirically grounded justification for investment in vocational education ought to be considered necessary before it is decided, as a matter of policy, to choose this educational route rather than some other. Unless it can be shown that vocational programming is superior to other educational or therapeutic interventions with prisoners, there seems no compelling reason to assume it to be so.

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