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[Sending College Kids to Jail: St. Lawrence University Freedom Project] [loose]

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ST. LAWRENCE
UNIVERSITY
Canton, New York 13617

2 March 1993

Mr. Eli J. Segal
Director of National Service
Room 145 O.E.O.B.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Segal:

I strongly support the President's National Service program (which is one reason I campaigned for him), and I hope that St. Lawrence University can play a part in this national adventure. We are a small liberal arts college in rural upstate New York with a long tradition of community service. Our students are mostly white and middle-class, yet our county is the poorest in rural New York, with a high rate of illiteracy. Our students work as volunteer tutors in local schools, and on the nearby Native American reservation, to reduce the county's high rate of literacy. They also work with hundreds of temporary residents of St. Lawrence county who are here against their will.

Within a half hour's drive from our lovely campus there are three medium-security prisons, populated largely by socially deprived blacks and Latinos from New York City. The high rate of recidivism among these inmates is at the heart of our urban social crisis, since many of them have left behind women on welfare and young children growing up without adequate guidance.

I enclose a description of our prison program, which centers around a history course called "Society, Crime, and Justice". So far as we can determine, the course is unique, at least in New York State, in its premise that inmates have something to teach our students as well as to learn from them. Inmates and students are roughly the same age; they have been divided by huge disparities of fortune, and by mutual suspicions based on race, class, and culture. We believe that by tutoring, counselling, and simply listening

We are now working to co-ordinate and expand our community service activities, somewhat on the model of the Rutgers Civic Education program which you praised on March 1. It would be enormously helpful to us in this effort to have one or more of our students participate in the Summer of Service Program. (Any of the sixty students from our prison course would bring a valuable and fairly unusual perspective to the Service Summit.) At the same time, we could easily place and supervise several volunteers this summer in either our prison or literacy programs.

I look forward to hearing from you how St. Lawrence University can contribute to the success of National Service.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,



William A. Hunt
Chair, Department of History

[enclosed: "Sending College Kids to Jail"]

SENDING COLLEGE KIDS TO JAIL:
THE ST. LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY FREEDOM PROJECT

(Canton, New York, 10 January 1993.)

Up here on the Canadian border, students from St. Lawrence University are taking a history course in the hope of reducing crime in New York City. The course enables the students (mostly white and middle class) to earn credit while tutoring and learning from the inmates (mostly minorities from the City) of three nearby correctional facilities.

We can't yet claim dramatic, or even measurable, results. But every little bit will count: helping one released inmate to stay out of jail for a single year would save society \$30,000 in legal and prison costs alone, not to mention the boon to potential victims. And whatever its impact on the crime rate, our program costs the state nothing. Above all, it has enabled students and inmates to learn something about each other's world, usually for the first time.

The course, the centerpiece of the St. Lawrence University Freedom Project, is entitled "Society, Crime, and Justice in Modern America." Students combine traditional academic study--books, lectures, essays and exams on the recent history of the "underclass"--with practical volunteer work behind bars.

Students and inmates together discuss the causes of poverty, crime, and drug addiction. They explore possible social and political solutions; they elaborate individual strategies for self-development. As a final project, students assist the inmates in composing personal narratives and preparing job resumes. Students receive academic credit; inmates receive a

letter from the Chair of the History Department testifying to their voluntary participation and perseverance in the program.

The course is still evolving, but it has already proven popular with inmates as well as students. Inmates commonly remark that our white students are the first white people they have ever learned to trust, and that our Black and Latino students have given them their first truly positive role models. Most of our students describe the course as a high point of their college education.

Americans do not agree about the root causes of this country's appalling crime rate. Some would blame racism and de-industrialization; others, the Great Society and Original Sin. As for fundamental solutions-- assuming any exist-- the only consensus is that they would be frighteningly expensive.

Yet there is ample evidence that many inmates already long to be free of drugs and violence, to acquire meaningful skills, and to live honest and productive lives. Certainly the demand for education, drug treatment, and occupational counseling far exceeds the present capabilities of most prison staffs.

Here is where the colleges and universities of this country could make a real contribution. As individual teachers and students we can do little, directly, to eliminate the root causes of crime. But by exercising our various skills as corrections volunteers, we can do much to encourage and empower those inmates who have already shown some serious commitment to self-reformation. And each inmate who turns his life around sets a heartening example for those who would follow.

An alliance between colleges and correctional facilities could tap a vast reservoir of youthful energy, and thereby generate-- at a low financial cost and with a high educational dividend-- powerful new resources in the struggle against despair and violence.

--William Hunt
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