The title is misleading … I have never served time in prison. But last semester I had the privilege of teaching in one. I say “privilege” because the experience became without question the best classroom experience of my twenty years as a teacher. Don’t get me wrong—teaching Ph.D. candidates, theology majors, and undergraduates in our honors program has been stimulating and engaging—but never before have I taught the intellectually-starved. It is hard to write about this because the experience evoked so much pleasure. Would I feel the same way if I had spent the past semester feeding the physically emaciated?

Yet that is the intellectual equivalent of what I did. Teachers crave, even long for the experience of students who walk into their classrooms with eager smiles and open minds. Imagine assigning texts that baffle the brightest undergraduates on the main campus and find a room filled with students who have read the text three and four times, outlined the argument and struggled until they had conquered the riddle of words and syntax. Try to picture fifteen students sitting for almost three hours engaging in intense discussion and debate on topics that you have posed and who are eager for your instructional guidance. Conjure up the image of a student returning his paper to you … because he wants more correction and guidance as a writer. Consider what it feels like to have a group of students in the final assessment tell you that the experience in your classroom has given them hope—a sense that life has purpose. What I have described is just a pale reflection of my experience of teaching in prison. What I learned in prison is that the privilege to learn, when withdrawn, creates desperation and despair, a loss of hope that is hard to revive and a smoldering anger that is difficult to extinguish.

America’s prisons were not always an intellectual wasteland. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s a network of over 350 college-in-prison programs existed in forty-five states. Numerous studies confirmed that college education in prison dramatically reduced recidivism rates. The more undergraduate education received while in prison, the less likely an inmate would re-offend once released. When recidivism rates nationwide averaged around 65%, college-in-prison programs produced results in the 15% to 0% range.

Yet in 1994 a Republican senator from North Carolina and a Democratic representative from Missouri helped champion a campaign to bar inmates from access to Pell grants. They argued that if hard-working, law-abiding citizens struggled to educate their children, why should the government subsidize criminals in pursuit of college degrees? Jesse Helms and Dick Gephardt succeeded. Their legislation effectively shut down
undergraduate education in American prisons. In many states even vocational training and GED programs were treated as luxuries that prisoners did not deserve.

The results for the United States have been devastating. In an atmosphere that shifted from rehabilitation to retribution, the last fourteen years has seen our prison population explode. Although we are 5% of the earth’s population, we house and feed 25% of the world’s inmates. One in every one hundred adult Americans is behind bars. The construction and operation of prisons has become such a burden that states have slashed funding of state-run universities and colleges. This has resulted in higher tuition at these institutions and reduced access to higher education for the country’s working poor—further exacerbating the cycles of behavior and despair that result in criminal behavior and more prisoners.

When the Saint Louis University Prison Initiative, funded in part by the Incarnate Word Foundation, solicited applications from the prison population we serve, over 300 men applied for fifteen places. The applications were compelling and often heartrending. Most of the men came from impoverished backgrounds, with little parental guidance (often because one or both parents were in prison), and found affirmation and nurturing for a criminal life on the street. In prison they now have time to think and reconsider their priorities in life. They long for guidance. Yet the recurring theme in applications was that programs did not exist to address this constructive desire. Many described the SLU Prison Initiative as their first opportunity to pursue post-secondary education after years—sometimes decades—of incarceration. In the end, selection of students focused on those who were using what they had to make a difference inside. The students in our program are GED tutors, facilitators in restorative justice groups, and several are autodidacts—one reads his New Testament in Greek. Another has become an award winning script writer. There are self-taught musicians and artists. One student’s academic skills are so advanced that he could easily pursue graduate studies. In prison I learned there is great talent and extraordinary ability behind prison walls—human potential that we as a nation are wasting because we chose not to redirect and reshape it toward productive and positive purposes.

College education offers a key. I have long known that students will live up to my expectations. If I create demanding goals in a course, those who persevere tend to excel and achieve beyond their ordinary patterns in other settings. This is what I did in the prison course. Assignments that are selections from a book on the main campus became book assignments for my prison students. I marked their essays severely, but added notes of encouragement at signs of progress. While this practice often is met with grumbling and complaints on the main campus, prison students rose to the occasion and spoke in triumphant terms about their struggles to understand a text and how they conquered it. They discussed the pain of writing four and five drafts of essays assigned until they achieved the desired result. The passion and commitment astounded me.

What I learned in prison is that there are men and women aching for the opportunity to be pushed to their limit and receive praise for achieving hard won goals. These are human beings—like us—who crave respect and restoration of their dignity. I learned that despite
their crimes, often heinous, there is a core of humanity that responds when respect is given and judgment is suspended. When I consider that 95% of the women and men in prison will one day be back on the streets, it is only prudent to ensure that they will leave with their dignity and sense of self-worth intact. College education on the inside is the only proven way to achieve that goal.

I learned in prison that the best students and most fervent learners are to be found behind bars. If you would like to experience the guilty pleasure of teaching the intellectually-starved, develop a college-in-prison program in your area. You may be surprised, as I was, that the help to do this is waiting for your call. While others may praise your altruism and commitment to serve a despised population, your greatest challenge may be living with the guilt of knowing that you are enjoying the best teaching experience of your life!