

PLANNING A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE SEMINARY  
AT THE LOUSIANA STATE PENITENTIARY

by

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

LSP.....Louisiana State Penitentiary

NOBTS.....New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

HERI.....Higher Education Research Institute

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Preparing for the doctoral dissertation is a long process. During the early stages of the preparation process, it is important to choose a topic to research. Once a topic is chosen, a question to be researched must be refined.

The author of this paper is considering a dissertation project to research the undergraduate college program at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP) in Angola, LA. The program is conducted by the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS), a post-secondary institution accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges.

The author was a student at NOBTS during the 1999-2000 academic year. During the spring 2000 semester, the author volunteered as an assistant to a professor in the LSP college program. The author was enrolled in Advanced Leadership, a course taught by Clay Corvin, Vice President for Business Affairs at NOBTS. Corvin was also teaching the introductory Leadership course at LSP during that spring semester. As part of the Advanced course, the author spent one day each week in Angola.

In the summer of 2004, the author came across a magazine article about the LSP seminary program. It was while reading that article the author considered the possibility of performing dissertation research on the program. This paper is an effort to further investigate the possibilities of researching the program involving LSP and NOBTS.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE LSP SEMINARY PROGRAM

In the early 1990s, the Louisiana State Penitentiary was a dangerous place. There were numerous murders inside the prison walls every year. The dangerous nature of the inmates at this maximum security prison was compounded by the prison's size. With a population well over 5,000, the LSP is the largest prison in America (Frink, 2004). One prison guard described the situation by saying, "It was not uncommon for us to have multiple knife fights within a single day" (Severson, 2004). Among those in the correctional profession, LSP was regarded as one of the worst prisons in the nation (Baker, 2000). The prison's horrific nature had become nationally known through films, such as *Dead Man Walking* (The Angola Story, 2001), and a documentary, *The Farm*—a title taken from the prison's nickname (Keough, 1999).

The prison is located in the remote Louisiana bayou. Situated on 18,000 acres, the Farm has a long history dating back to the antebellum South. These acres were once a slave plantation and have continued to be a place of captivity. It was into this environment that Burl Cain was brought in as the new warden. Cain described the area as a place of "more human suffering than any land in America..." Cain committed himself to making changes (Frink, 2004).

As a Southern Baptist, Cain was familiar with a Bible study program, produced by the Southern Baptist Convention, known as *Experiencing God*. Cain introduced the program at LSP and more than one-quarter of the inmates completed the study.

According to Cain, “It helped the prisoners accept they’re in prison and that it’s God’s will that maybe they don’t get out—and that while you’re in here, you do your best for him” (Frink, 2004). The lesson learned about the frequent reality of spending their lives in prison was important at LSP. More than half the inmates are serving life sentences; in Louisiana, life sentences are truly life sentences. Many of those inmates without life sentences are serving such long sentences that the sentences are effectively life sentences. Ninety percent of the inmates at LSP will never leave the prison (Severson, 2004).

When the federal government cut funding for educational rehabilitation programs, Warden Cain began thinking of new ways to educate the prisoners (Frink, 2004). Partnering with Judson Baptist Association, Louisiana Baptist Convention, and NOBTS, Cain brought a privately funded theological education to the prison (Baker, 2000). In 1995, the college program began as one of NOBTS’s 16 satellite campuses (The Angola Story, 2001). Chuck Kelley, president of NOBTS, has expressed that Cain was concerned about inmates being evangelized and developing spiritually (Myers, 2004). Outcome goals of the program included the spiritual transformation and self-actualization of inmates (Rehabilitative Services, n.d.). Cain believes that the rehabilitation of inmates requires more than ‘the three Rs.’ “I can get you education. I can get you to read and write. But if I don’t change you morally, you don’t change morally; you’re still a criminal,” Cain says (Severson, 2004). Graduates become ministers within the prison religious community, serving with prison chaplains, teaching inmates about the Bible, and even leading inmate churches (Rehabilitative Services, n.d.).

Beginning the program at LSP created significant challenges. There is no other

prison in America that offers inmates a chance to attend college classes on-site and complete bachelor's degrees in prison (The Angola Story, 2001). When Warden Cain considered creating ministers from inmates, he abandoned the wisdom of the correctional profession. "They told me that one inmate cannot have power over another. Therefore, he can't preach or even lead a Bible study." Cain thought otherwise. Logistically, NOBTS and LSP ran into problems. In order for the prison's NOBTS campus to be accredited, a suitable college library had to be developed. According to Cain, "We got in touch with Oprah Winfrey's company and, sure enough, they bit like a big fish." After Oprah promoted the seminary program on television, plenty of books were donated (Frink, 2004). Cain's gamble on the seminary program appears to have worked. The program has been producing graduates, and has been celebrated. The Public Broadcasting show, *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, and the magazine *Christianity Today* have featured the program (Myers, 2004).

Being admitted to the seminary program at LSP is not easy for inmates. Although the program is growing, space is too limited for the number of applicants. In 1997, the program's capacity was just 50 students (Moore, 1997). However, the program now enrolls more than 120 (Educational Programs, n.d.). Because the program is sectarian in nature, admission also requires at least one year of active involvement in the prison's religious community (Achord and Moore, 1998). Admission is open to non-Christians, though, and has enrolled Muslims. The allowance of non-Christians was helpful in quelling complaints some inmates made to the American Civil Liberties Union. To be eligible for the college-level program, inmates must have a high school diploma or GED

(Severson, 2004).

Once admitted to the seminary, inmates have the option of earning associate's or bachelor's degrees in Christian Ministry (Rehabilitative Services, n.d.). Students attend classes full-time, enrolling in 15 hours per semester. The program has even expanded to allow students to perform internships, serving 'in the field' with previous seminary graduates. To be eligible for internships, students must be in the senior year of the bachelor's program. According to the Louisiana Department of Corrections, Angola has 67 program graduates and interns around the prison (Educational Programs, n.d.).

The graduates have reportedly had a positive impact on the prison community. Graduates are involved in numerous churches (Moore, 1997). There is even a Christian radio station, JLSP 91.7, 'Incarceration Station,' within the prison. Because of the success, the Angola seminary has begun sending 'missionaries' to other prisons. The missionary program allows graduates to leave the maximum security LSP and relocate for two years to another Louisiana correctional institution. LSP is pioneering once again. While other prisons offer countless religious programs, LSP is unique in offering bachelor's degrees, seminary degrees, and now sending inmate missionaries. Inmates are sent in pairs, following a biblical model (Mark 6:7). With 90 inmate missionaries, the program is rather extensive (Severson, 2004).

Inmate missionaries make sacrifices. They leave behind the place they have known for years, their friends, jobs they held in Angola, and even privileges they have earned. One missionary reported trouble adjusting from LSP, where nearly every inmate was there for life, to a jail, where inmates are always entering and being released



(Severson, 2004). Warden Cain understands the culture shock such missionaries face. “They’re leaving what’s comfortable.” The other inmates at Angola have “become their family.” Missionaries are supported, though, by many people at Angola, including prison staff, who donate money to the missionaries. Each missionary is given a \$50 per month stipend (Frink, 2004).

Cain believes the missionaries and inmate who are ministering provide invaluable work because unlike chaplains, the LSP seminary graduates live with the inmates, and are always available. Gary Pearce, who is chaplain at Dixon Correctional Institute in Louisiana, believes the missionaries have helped his work among 1,400 inmates. “It’s one of the best things that’s happened to this prison.” “These men provide 24/7 ministry.... The guys respect them.” Cain hopes the LSP experience spreads. “I wish other prison wardens could realize what we learned—that the only rehabilitation is moral rehabilitation” (Frink, 2004).

Since the Angola campus of NOBTS began in 1995, the program has grown consistently. At the first graduation, in 1997, 16 prisoners received their associate’s degrees (Moore, 1997). In January of 2000, the Angola campus awarded its first bachelor’s degrees to 19 inmates, with more completing the associate’s degree (Rehabilitative Services, n.d.). Just months later, at the May 2000 graduation, another 35 inmates completed degrees (Educational Programs, n.d.). Due to security, Angola graduates cannot attend the regular NOBTS convocation in New Orleans. Instead, the convocation comes to Angola. Degrees are conferred by the Seminary president, Chuck Kelley. Cain and Kelley offer remarks of encouragement. The inmate’s family members

are able to attend (Baker, 2000).

Clearly, the partnership between LSP and NOBTS appears successful in many ways. The program, which began as an entirely unique idea, has been in place for nearly a decade, grown substantially, and produced many graduates. The LSP and NOBTS leadership, along with the leadership of other institutions have reported perceived gains. However, these appearances do not necessarily indicate success. If the LSP seminary program is going to be evaluated, a plan of evaluation must be formulated. Issue such as defining the program goals, determining stakeholders and considering possible side-effects must be addressed. Such a program evaluation must begin with reviewing what previous researchers have discovered about prison rehabilitation and education programs.

## **CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A search for scientifically-based research on the LSP seminary program did not reveal any previous studies on the program. Searches were conducted through a variety of databases including Dissertation Abstracts, ERIC, Professional Development Collection, Academic Search Premier, and the general internet search engine Google. Search terms included keywords such as “Louisiana State Penitentiary,” “seminary,” “New Orleans,” “Bible College.” Without any previous research found on the LSP seminary program, literature was reviewed from various other educational rehabilitation programs, from around the country, dating back to the 1970s.

Prison education programs, if available, are normally part of the overall structure and purpose of the penal system. According to Helen Corrothers (1993), prisons exist for the purposes of “retribution,” “prevention,” and “rehabilitation” (p. 13). Corrothers wrote that any rehabilitation efforts must include, “accountability, responsibility, discipline and fairness” (p. 13). Often, prison educational curricula are designed around the core concepts of self-efficacy, accountability and critical thinking (Kelso, 1996). However, because prisoners are often members of socio-economically disadvantaged classes, much of the efforts are directed at helping convicts obtain basic life skills, such as the ability to hold a decent job, deal with anger, and stay out of jail in the future. The focus of most rehabilitation on these fundamental skills leads to fundamental criteria for

evaluating success. Most research on prison education assesses success by the recidivism of program graduates. In other words, researchers ask whether program graduates who are released continue to commit crimes and return to prison (Taylor, 1993). Since all prisons aim to prevent their released inmates from being reincarcerated, investigating program success by recidivism rates is done by comparing the percentage of failures—those who are reincarcerated—between graduates and non-graduates (Kelso, 1996). In addition, some researchers have investigated the ability of graduates to obtain and maintain employment that provides the graduates the ability to be self-sustaining (Taylor, 1993).

Chuck Kelso (1996) investigated the recidivism rates of the educational programs at a Washington state prison. Centralia College, a state community college, provided inmates opportunities to earn high school diplomas, GEDs, vocational certificates and associate degrees in vocational areas or general education. His investigation tracked 278 inmates who graduated during the years 1985 through 1991. The research was conducted in 1993, giving Kelso the ability to look at recidivism rates over several years. According to Washington standards, recidivism is measured up to five years after release from prison. Graduates who were released in the years 1985, 1986 and 1987 had been released for at least five years at the time of investigation. More recently released graduates were evaluated according to the length of time they had been released.

Kelso's results were that educational programs completed in prison were substantially related to reduced recidivism. The five year recidivism for those released in 1985 was reduced from a rate of 31.9% for all inmates released to a rate of 21.4% for those who completed high school while in prison. Those inmates who completed

associate's degrees in prison had a recidivism rate of 10%. For all years studied, education was positively related to reduced recidivism and the higher level education completed, the more reduction in recidivism was observed. Kelso concluded that society at large received a substantial gain from investments in education due to the reduced costs of reincarceration (Kelso, 1996).

Everhart (1992) investigated the involvement of black prisoners in a college program offered by a Methodist college in a Mississippi prison. Very few eligible black prisoners chose to participate in the widely available program. In fact, while 2.6% of prisoners enrolled in college classes, the black participation rate was only 0.2%. Everhart surveyed currently enrolled students, a sample from the general prison population, and former prison college participants who had been released. Of the 30 former students who had been released, most were either back in jail, on their way back to jail, or in one case a fugitive. There were nine former students found and available. Only two of those nine returned surveys.

Everhart (1992) compared survey answers from blacks with those of other races. Everhart found that most program participants cited a desire for improved career options as a major reason for participation. While a significant portion of both blacks and whites reported aspirations of careers in management, whites were more likely to report so. All black participants reported feeling that the education gave them increased self-esteem and self-confidence. In contrast, 15.4% of whites reported that the only gain was to make the days in prison pass by more quickly. Everhart also found that because the program was strictly a college program, the admissions standard of a high school diploma or GED was

more likely to exclude black inmates than whites. Everhart concluded that blacks experienced important benefits from participation. Due to various reasons, however, blacks were extremely unlikely to take advantage of the free education. Further, Everhart found that blacks were much less likely than whites to report a commitment to continue their education after release.

One study administered the Personality Factor Questionnaire (known as the 16PF) to 90 teachers in correctional education programs. The investigators considered what personality and psychological factors were present in correctional teachers and how such factors compared across teacher subgroups. Interestingly, investigators found from early survey analysis that 15.6% of the teachers gave answers that led investigators to consider the possibility of depression. Closer examination of survey reports led investigators to conclude that 9% of teachers gave answers indicative of depression (Larsgaard, Lauer & Kelso, 1996).

Taylor (1993) wrote a paper extolling the importance of education in correctional rehabilitation. Reviewing the literature of reduced recidivism and increased employment among former prisoners who received education, Taylor wrote that education may help inmates by developing in them the cognitive abilities required for personal and social success. Quality education develops in students the abilities to be independent individuals, contributing citizens, and to think rationally (Taylor, 1993). Being sentenced to prison is usually the result of the convict's lack of ability to function socially or think through future consequences. If education addresses those issues, education should make prisoners more successful upon release from prison.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: DETERMINING A RESEARCH QUESTION**

Most of the literature available on prison education is in many ways very different from the research intended for the LSP seminary program. All the research read was conducted prior to the federal government's decision to end funding for correctional education. Everhart's investigation (1992) considered a strictly college program. However, federal funding made the program generally available, and the program's nature attracted a wide range of students. Whereas Everhart investigated why college program participation was low, the LSP program has a waiting list of applicants. Kelso's research (1996) overwhelmingly focused on prisoners gaining basic skills, such as the GED, or vocational training. Very few of the prisoners Kelso investigated were earning associate's degrees, and most of those were still in vocational fields. The very nature of the LSP seminary is considerable different. Unlike the samples of Everhart and Kelso, the LSP seminary students are probably not seeking careers to be employed in after release.

The fact that very few LSP inmates will ever be released makes many of the rehabilitation arguments moot. Issues of recidivism or the ability to gain employment after release do not appear to make major concerns for the LSP or NOBTS. In fact, Warden Cain and NOBTS president Chuck Kelley express entirely different goals for the prison seminary.

In some ways, the perceived benefits to the LSP seminary are much more basic.

No murders have occurred at Angola since 1999 (Baker, 2002). In a prison where violence was an almost everyday occurrence just a decade ago, violence is now quite rare. One inmate described the seminary's effect by saying, "I can now lay down at night and not worry about what my neighbor is going to do to me or anything like that." Overall violence has declined 40% at LSP since the seminary began. The safer atmosphere at Angola contrasts to what Warden Cain remembers from just a decade ago. "I was getting called every week when I was first warden here. We had murders, we had escapes, we had suicides—loss of hope..." (Severson, 2004). The Louisiana Department of Corrections attributes the change at LSP to the seminary. According to the Department website on rehabilitation and work programs, "The prison in its previous unhealthy condition was known for its violence and frequent escape attempts. Currently, Angola displays a peaceful and safe environment, which is the best evidence of a successful, healthy religious program" (Rehabilitation Services, n.d.). The program is considered such a success that other wardens from prisons in other states have asked NOBTS to consider opening campuses at their prisons (Myers, 2004).

Ultimately, the religious aspect of the program appears to be the most important to many of the primary stakeholders, who include Warden Cain, NOBTS, donors, and the chaplains. Cain clearly appreciates the improvement in security and safety at the prison, but attributes such improvements to the religiosity of the program. Cain has said the improvement is the work of God. "He put an umbrella over us, and it really calmed us down—nothing else should get the credit." "We always had the education programs. The only thing we did different was we brought God to Angola. We didn't really bring him.



He just let us bring him.” Cain contends that he sees the moral and spiritual changes occurring in inmates. “I could tell they were serious when an inmate came to me and asked how he could tell his victim's family he was sorry, how he could ask them to forgive him” (Frink, 2004).

Chuck Kelley also sees the seminary in primarily spiritual terms. Speaking at a graduation, Kelley explained the seminary was proof of God’s ability to work in anyone’s life. “There is no life God cannot redeem.” “God is willing to exchange our evil for his good” (Achord and Moore, 1998). Kelley has said the role of seminary graduates is to be ministers in any way they are capable. In a graduation speech, Kelley told graduates that St. Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, spent much of his ministry in prison (Baker, 2000). Even the Louisiana Department of Corrections maintains that the true measure of the seminary’s success is “the health of the local churches” within the prison. The Department measures such “health” in terms of religious activity, such as church attendance and baptisms (Rehabilitation Services, n.d.).

If the LSP seminary is concerned with spiritual issues more than concrete issues of safety, recidivism, and employment, then any evaluation of the program should also focus on spirituality. While the literature reviewed concerning other prison education programs can provide a strong basis for planning research modes, the ultimate research question and methods will be unlike any previously conducted within the correctional system.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Through this project, a great deal of preliminary information about the LSP seminary program has been learned. Despite the uniqueness of the LSP seminary and its apparent success, the lack of research is indicative of a great need. As the prison seminary send missionaries to other institutions, and as other prisons seek their own seminaries, stakeholders and policy makers need to have reliable information upon which to base decisions.

Before a clear question can be determined, an expanded literature review will need to be conducted. Literature concerning issues of spiritual, moral and value development should be read. Such research may provide ideas for methods, questions, and instruments available. A cursory search led to some possible sources for information. The *Journal of College and Character* publishes information on the spiritual, moral and social development of college students. Hill and Hood (1999) have published a guide to available measurement instruments for spiritual development. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is currently working on a major project titled, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose." The project team developed a new measurement tool. The project will be completed by the middle of 2005.

There is ample room for researching the LSP seminary. Many stakeholders appear

convinced the seminary has changed the violent nature of many LSP inmates. Researchers could investigate the reduction in violence to determine whether the seminary has been a positive influence. The research would necessitate controlling for numerous other factors. Researchers could also focus on a variety of other issues, including the process of program development. If other prisons are determined to implement similar programs, a formal study of what has been learned through the creation of LSP's seminary could be useful to stakeholders off new programs.

The author of this paper is still interested in the project and has determined the focus of the project could be on spiritual development of seminary graduates. The development of a plan will require much more work. The work to date has provided a good foundation from which to move forward.

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