
VOICES OF REENTRY

Embracing Education on the Inside

Voices of Reentry is a series of profiles of people making good on second chances after they return from incarceration. Articles in the series tell individual stories to highlight the impact of programs funded under federal Improved Reentry Education grants.

Brandon Schroder was new to Ellsworth Correctional Facility and eager to take advantage of every educational opportunity offered. He had finally gotten clean and was eager to turn around a life that had gone terribly off track. When he learned that the Central Kansas prison offered a welding program, he was ready to sign up. Not so fast, counseled Career Advisor Nicole Serpan. She drew him out on his interests, asked what he liked and disliked about his previous jobs, and probed his hopes for the future.

“She made me realize that it would be a waste of time to do welding because I didn’t see myself as welder when I got out. I wanted to own my own solar panel business,” recalled Schroder, 33. Instead, Serpan suggested that he enroll in the facility’s Introductory Crafts Skill Certification program. Her rationale was that the certification is recognized by four industries, including electrical, and would provide a stronger foundation for his future endeavors. She also encouraged him to enroll in Ellsworth’s Certiport program, where he would learn some of the requisite computer skills to run a small business.

Schroder took Serpan’s advice, performed well in his classes and got a job working for a pallet supply company in Kansas. “It’s physically demanding and some days I come home exhausted, but it’s rewarding because I like a good workout,” said Schroder, who spent most of his teens in foster homes and now lives with his mother. He hopes to eventually leverage his people skills and move into sales, and his sights are still set on some day owning his own company.

Offering College in Prison

Serpan works for [Barton Community College's](#) Correctional Education Services, which provides its re-entry education program— [Building Academic Skills in Correctional Settings \(BASICS\)](#) — to the Ellsworth and Larned Correctional Facilities. Between the two prisons, certifications are offered in five vocational tracks— Introductory Craft Skills, plumbing, welding, carpentry and Certiport (computer literacy)— as well as an Associate's Degree in General Studies. With a three-year [Improved Reentry Education](#) grant, the college hired Serpan, who has expertly guided hundreds of Ellsworth and Larned inmates into prison education programs in which student success has become the norm. Armed with knowledge, skills, and industry-recognized credentials, these inmates' chances of finding a job post-incarceration are greatly increased. The educational program also has a very positive effect on the prison culture, according to Ellsworth Warden Marty Sauers. "It's constructive time for our offenders and benefits them and the facility. It's more than likely that the people who are involved in the educational program are not going to get in trouble," he said. "We take advantage of every opportunity we have to get more offenders involved in education."

The grant was also used to bring the [Accelerating Opportunity Kansas](#)— or AO-K— program into the corrections system, by hiring an adult basic education instructor who works at Ellsworth, teaching students GED pre courses in the morning and then team-teaching the same inmates in their afternoon vocational programs. Barton intends to hire a second AO-K instructor for Larned. IRE funds were also used to hire a welding instructor and an IT expert who runs all of the educational technology at both prisons.

Barton's Commitment to Prison Education

It's about a 40-minute drive from Barton Community College to each of the two correctional facilities it serves. The issue is more than geography. Barton's mission is to decrease the distance of expectation between a college education and its incarcerated residents.

"We're located in the middle of Kansas in a very rural area, which makes it surprising that we had three — and now two—correctional facilities in our catchment area," said Jane Howard, Barton's executive director of business, technology & community education. "When we began working with the facilities about 15 years ago, we were just doing random classes and the arrangement was pretty informal. It wasn't a secret, but we didn't publicize the work because we were worried about the reaction of the public."

Times have changed, as there is a growing consensus (and the [research](#) to back it up), that post-incarceration employment dramatically decreases recidivism. After a new warden took the reins at Ellsworth in 2003, he asked Barton to provide education programs that would lead to certifications and diplomas, improving inmates' prospects for jobs upon release. Barton's Building Academic Skills in Correctional Settings (BASICS) program developed general education and business classes and later on several vocational offerings. "Ellsworth is where we did most of the work in the early years," commented Howard. "They tended to have forward thinking wardens there, and we had a good partnership with them."

Several federal educational grants provided the infusion of money needed to beef up the BASICS program, including developing additional vocational programs. And the additional four staff members hired with Improved Reentry Education (IRE) grant funds has enabled Barton to continue with those improvements.

"Our mission is to provide basic education, skills, and industry certifications so when inmates are released, they will become productive members of society. They will be our neighbors, they will pay taxes like we do and it's in every one's interest to make sure

Matching Inmates to Educational Program

Upon arrival at Ellsworth and Larned, everyone takes the [O*NET® Interest Profiler](#), a career assessment exploration tool. Serpan, who was named Ellsworth's Contract Employee of the Year in 2018, meets individually with inmates to delve more deeply into their past work experiences, preferences, and aspirations and then lays out the educational offerings. She makes the abstract concrete by reviewing course syllabi, sharing textbooks, and explaining how the credentials will benefit them in different industries when it's time to look for a job.

Because as many as 200 inmates may apply for one of the 10 to 12 coveted spots in each educational program, the inmates take the interviewing process seriously. Barton's Coordinator of Correctional Education Services Chris Baker has sat in on interviews and been astounded by how seriously inmates take the process. "One inmate I saw was waiting for his turn, reading through notes he had made to prepare for the interview," recalled Baker. "Their motivation and desire are palpable. You can feel them craving the educational opportunities."

Serpan stays in touch with the inmates she has counseled, checking up on them about two weeks after classes begin to see how things are going, and then periodically after that. "Some of these guys haven't been in a school setting in 20 years so they may not remember how to sit in a classroom taking notes or how to study," she said. "I seek out their constructive criticism and if there are things that would make things go better for them, I take that to the instructor."

Not every inmate is successful in the education programs, but Serpan said most inmates know that they're being offered a singular educational opportunity and complete their programs successfully. Serpan recalls an inmate who was able to transform himself through education. He was known as a "troublemaker" and was on Ellsworth's "high profile" list, which required more frequent cell searches and other heightened scrutiny. She admits that she was wary about his commitment when she first met with him to talk about educational opportunities. He told her that he was trying to turn over a new leaf, and really wanted to get into the welding program. He persisted in showing Serpan his interest in the program and eventually was granted an interview. "During the interview, he started crying and told me that he had a teenage son who was going down the wrong path and he had lost his daughter to the Department of Children and Families." He was admitted into the welding program and "passed with flying colors," said Serpan. She asked him to speak at the [learning celebration](#) — the college graduation held in the Ellsworth facility — thinking that as a feared and respected figure among the inmates, his endorsement of the educational program would send a powerful message. "He did an amazing job with his speech and asked if he could speak at the next learning celebration," said Serpan. He is now in a minimum security unit, and she is confident that when he is released, he will find a job.

Students find that the education pays off even if they don't stay in the field. Dominic Voelker, a 39-year-old Wichita resident, also successfully completed the welding program, but found that when he was released from prison in July 2018, the welding jobs weren't paying enough in his home community. Instead, he found employment spraying cabinets in a factory during the week and at a gas station on weekends. But he eventually quit both to start his own landscaping business. Yet he doesn't regret the months he spent learning to weld. "My teacher was a master of his craft and there was a camaraderie in the class that I enjoyed," said Voelker. "The teacher was also a safety hound and I learned a lot about safety — drop hazards, fall hazards —and how paramount it is. I have people working for me now and I teach them what I learned."

Rethinking the 18-25 Demographic

James Hill, 24, arrived at Larned in June 2017, part of the first cohort of inmates serving time in the prison's newest incarnation as a facility focusing on men ages 18-25. He acknowledges he got off to a rocky start: like some of the other inmates, he was resentful of having to move to a new place and learn its routines. His disruptive behavior soon landed him in segregation. There, with a lot of time to think, he had an epiphany. "If I were on the street, I would never have seen myself as a community college student or been offered the opportunities I have here," said Hill, who was raised by his grandmother because his father died before he was born and his mother struggled with addiction. "I decided I was going to get as many credentials as I could. I love learning and finally feel like I'm doing something with my life."

Larned's transformation reflected a growing recognition in Kansas of the unique needs of younger adults – who tend to have lower educational levels and fewer job and coping skills than their older counterparts. "We want to give them the tools to be more successful when we release them," said Larned Warden Don Langford. The switch also reflects the growing [understanding](#) of brain development – that brains are still developing well into the 20s - and the implications for criminal accountability. Corrections systems in [Connecticut](#) and [Massachusetts](#) have also responded to this research with young adult programming.

Ellsworth Learning Celebration



<https://youtu.be/dIam49dQFzc>

A New Approach to 18-25 Year Olds at Larned Correctional Facility

Before inmates arrive at Larned Correctional Facility, they've been through a four-day screening and orientation process to make sure it's the right setting— from their perspective and Larned's. They've learned about the [purpose](#) of the facility—to do a better job of addressing the needs of 18-25 year-old inmates —and the ways it's different from regular adult prisons. Having lots of needs and some darkness in your past doesn't necessarily make you ineligible. “The main things that disqualify you are having a long sentence and being a behavior problem at another institution,” said Warden Don Langford.

Larned, historically a prison focusing on inmates with significant mental health diagnoses, was reincarnated in 2017 as a facility to better address the needs of 18-25 year-old men. Part of the thinking is that it's beneficial for these younger offenders to serve their sentences away from older inmates, who are often more entrenched in their criminal behavior, according to Langford. Larned is small—310 inmates versus up to 2,000 at other Kansas prisons— so inmates receive more attention from staff. “Staff spend a lot of time sitting and talking one-on-one with inmates,” said Langford, “and we have a lot of programming.” In addition to the correctional department programs, like the cognitive-based Thinking for Change that every inmate is required to take, Barton Community College offers certification programs in craft skills, plumbing, welding, carpentry, and computers as well as a commercial driver's license class and an Associate's Degree in General Studies.

Langford said it's still too early to tell whether the new approach is working in terms of reducing recidivism and increasing post-incarceration employment. But attending the Barton graduation ceremony, when inmates receive their certificates for program completion, makes it clear the facility is on the right track. “It's an emotional time for the families and they talk about the work we've done with their sons, their husbands, their brothers,” said Langford. “It also helps our staff to understand how important this mission is.”

Since arriving at Larned, Hill, who dropped out of his failing high school in tenth grade, has obtained his GED; a WorkREADY certificate attesting to his mastery of the math and reading comprehension skills needed in the workplace; and his Northstar Digital Literacy Certificate. On

the vocational front, he obtained his Introductory Craft Skills Certification (which included the OSHA 10 certification) and a Carpentry Certification. He hopes to start on his associate's degree in the near future and upon release, his goal is to work with his grandfather, who owns a construction business. He'd also like to eventually earn a bachelor's degree and perhaps take over the business when his grandfather retires. Hill said he's clear-eyed about how difficult the transition can be to life on the outside, but is already plotting how he'll stay on a straight path. "I plan to work, go to school, and get into a routine of working out and staying out of the drama that comes with being in the free world," said Hill.

"When I first met Mr. Hill, he was very motivated," said Serpan. **"He wanted to take advantage of everything to better his chances of not coming back. He pops into my office periodically to ask what's coming up next. We want to serve him as much as we can."** Early on, she was impressed with his leadership qualities. "I remember visiting the computer lab when the GED course was just starting and some of the inmates were clowning around, being loud. He said, 'guys, we're not going to be that class. We're going to get this done.' He's been like that all along."

Hill said he is always telling other inmates that the educational opportunities at Larned are benefits they would never get on the street. He is proud of the fact that he finished his GED in a speedy five weeks. "I would take out my homework when my cellie went to sleep and teach myself polynumerals and fractions — one hour a night minimum. He would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and say, 'You still in that book dude?'"

Hill's carpentry teacher Matt Mazouch, who used to teach wood shop in high school, said that while inmates may be a bit rougher around the edges than his former students, they generally are much more motivated. "They have a strike against them and they know they need this," he said. "And there's not so many other things fighting for their attention." Mazouch said that while he knows that some of his students will not end up working in the trade, they are still learning invaluable lessons from him and other instructors. "Yes, I'm teaching them the basics of how to frame a floor, walls, ceilings, and roofs, but I'm also teaching them the importance of being a good employee, showing up on time, responsibility, and that the world is not going to give them anything so they have to earn it. Education is the best thing you can do for an inmate."

Barton is intentional about creating a college culture in the prisons. Accent walls, windows, and trim are painted "Barton blue." The school's cougar mascot adorns several walls, and there are computers in each housing unit so that inmates can do their GED homework more easily. "In both facilities, the education areas are used exclusively for learning," said Matt Connell, Barton's coordinator of adult basic education. "We want to make the inmates feel that although they're in

prison they're still Barton students," said Jane Howard, Barton's executive director of business, technology & community education.

Moving Into The Workforce

A week after his release from prison, with a couple of credentials under his belt, Schroder got a job at a large pallet supplier. He recalls dressing for his interview in nice slacks, a button-down shirt, and a tie, and being told he was overdressed. But he knew that his past required that he look and sound beyond reproach.

While at Ellsworth, he participated in its Offender Workforce Development Services course, learning how to create a resume and cover letter and conduct himself during an interview, including practicing his so-called elevator speech. That's when he talks about his incarceration and his desire to rebuild his life. And during his job search, the computer skills he learned in his Certiport class came in handy as well. Finally, Schroder said he is a much safer worker thanks to his OSHA training.

Schroder said he, like many other inmates he knew, might not have furthered his education if he hadn't been offered the opportunity at Ellsworth.

"We're scared to fail, so we're scared to even try," he said. "But the Barton instructors are very kind. They care about people learning and succeeding. They don't just look at us and say, 'you're a criminal.'"

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