

INCARCERATION AND THE LAW

CASES AND MATERIALS

Excerpt

BRANDON V. WYATT, REFLECTION ON PRISON EDUCATION

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It could be easy to rest on my laurels of being incarcerated and close to graduating from Northwestern University with my bachelor's degree. But what about all those years when the only school available to me was the completion of a GED? These moments and years deserve just as much examination.

Until I enrolled in my bachelor's program the prison system left me to develop my own paths of study. I would read books by Howard Zinn, Chancellor Williams, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and other intellectuals for the express purpose of fending off ignorance, stagnation and helplessness. But I was learning these things in the restrictive confines of my own cell. During the early days of my incarceration there were no classrooms, no Pell Grants, no prison education programs. Just my zest for learning and the support and sacrifice of my family who ordered my educational materials. But why did I have to be self-taught? Was I not a ward of the state? Wasn't the state of Illinois in charge of protecting me from the violence of ignorance and illiteracy?

I served 10 years before seeing the inside of a formal classroom. This fact demonstrates that carceral spaces create educational voids where prisoners are encouraged and often forced to stay small-minded and uneducated. It is no small feat that I have been able to maintain curiosity and desire for learning and that I did not succumb to the barren of nature of prisons that offer no educational programming.

Yes, it is noteworthy that I am somewhat a success story, but it is equally noteworthy that the same system entrusted with assisting me in reforming myself did little to aid me against the violence of lack of knowledge.