

# Tommy Thompson: Why we need to improve prison education

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I first started thinking about prisons during my early years in the Assembly, more than 50 years ago. I believed then, and I believe now, that we need to give people who have committed a crime a second chance.

I've been thinking more about this lately as I reflect on my accomplishments in political life and as I work to renew the Wisconsin Idea for the 21st century as president of the University of Wisconsin System. It's clear to me now that our state hasn't done enough to give prisoners another shot at a good life, and it's equally clear that the UW has an opportunity to offer a solution.

That's why I'm so passionate about the UW System Prison Education Initiative, our new plan to put qualified prisoners on the path to a bachelor's degree. This initiative has the potential to change thousands of individual lives. Two-thirds of prisoners have less than five years to serve, which means they will be returning to society in the relatively near future. The initiative is an opportunity to make that return more successful.

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It also can build Wisconsin's workforce and economy, save tax dollars, and make communities safer by reducing recidivism. Currently, 37 percent of those released from prison will return within 10 years, and for most it's not because they've committed a new crime. And consider that it costs between \$35,000-45,000 per year to house an adult prisoner. Funding for corrections now exceeds funding for the UW. When prisoners take advantage of a second chance, we will all benefit.

The greatest deterrent to re-incarceration is a good job, and the key to a good job is a good education. According to the state Department of Corrections, about 70 percent of the roughly 20,000 people in prison have a high school degree or equivalent. About a quarter of them have some college education. Our plan is to create a pilot program involving three prisons, three universities, and UW Extended Campus to educate several hundred prisoners so they can earn their bachelor's degrees. I want to be so successful that eventually Wisconsin will want to turn a prison into a university. Imagine what that commencement would look like. This is the Wisconsin Idea in action, another example of how the UW System finds solutions to some of our state's thorniest problems.

We have already begun working in partnership with the Department of Corrections, the Wisconsin Technical College System, UW-Madison's Odyssey Beyond Bars program, and Wisconsin's business community, building on some of the great work they are already doing in educating and training prisoners. We have received encouragement from many elected officials on both sides of the political aisle. Our Board of Regents has offered encouragement and support.

It's early, and we have a lot of work ahead of us. There will be many obstacles. But I am encouraged, excited even – for the first time the glimmer of hope I've carried for a decade has the hint of reality.

Back then, I was enjoying a steak dinner in Madison with my friend, lawyer Steve Hurley. Steve said, "What if we went really radical? What if we turned a prison into a university?" I've carried that thought with me ever since, and I am glad we are finally getting started. I am also proud that Steve has been helping guide our efforts.

No question. This is a big, bold idea with plenty of minefields. But it will save money. It will help Wisconsin's economy. And it's the right thing to do.

*— Thompson is UW System president and served as Wisconsin's 42nd governor.*