

DENIED AN EDUCATION

Saturday
August 23, 2014

By now, most people are aware that one of the most important things for an inmate's successful rehabilitation is his or her education. This is a guess hazarded by an inmate advocate who wants to see the inmate population provided with an opportunity to educate themselves while in prison, this is a cold hard fact, supported by years of research and backed up with even more statistics. Perhaps this is why I'm so surprised to discover that the prison system here in California is intentionally creating and enforcing rules and regulations designed to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the inmate population to obtain the education they so desperately need.

For example, take a look at the California Prison Industry Authority (CALPIA, or PIA). Although it's operated as a private company, it's not a division of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), which means that it's essentially operated by the very same people who run the prison system as a whole.

For those who don't know, the CALPIA utilizes the inmate population to produce many of the goods used by the inmate population. For instance, they manufacture everything from the socks and t-shirts worn to the milk we drink and the bread we eat. It's a way for the prison to work on being self-sufficient, to save the State money, all while putting the inmate population to work. At the end of the year, hundreds of millions of dollars worth of items are produced, and for pennies on the dollar.

An inmate (extremely) underpaid inmate employee who doesn't have the right to form a union, we're eligible, after we've been employed for a minimum of 6-months, to participate in a number of self-study courses in which we are awarded certifications. For example, those who are interested can obtain certification as a Customer Service Specialist, while those who are interested in electronics can obtain become a Certified Electronics Technician. Each of these studies is done by the inmate outside of work hours in the inmate's quarters using nothing more than the book provided. When the inmate employee is finished, he simply informs his supervisor that he's finished, and arrangements are made to have someone proctor the test. If the inmate employee passes, he's awarded the certification.

I've worked in the CALPIA's Knitting Mill for well over 6-months, which means that, time-wise, I'm eligible to put in my request to participate in the self-study certification program.

I was hired to work in the CALPIA Knitting Mill to work as a Clerk. My duties are extremely simple: to keep track of the parts inventory that production time isn't unnecessarily lost due to waiting on parts should have been in stock, but I've never been one to do things the easy way. Instead, I took it to a whole new level, learning Access inside and out and could design a database that not only did that, but also kept track of each and every repair made to each and every machine; to show which parts were on a regular basis, how often they were used and how much they cost; to show each and every vendor that carried the parts we needed and their prices to provide the capability to provide as much information as possible, with as few clicks as possible. I didn't have to do it, but it was something I enjoyed, something I know is going to be **extremely** helpful to me upon release.

In the course of designing my new database, I had to do an extraordinary amount of research, not just to learn how to design a database (I'd never used Access, much less designed my own database), but also to find out which vendors carried suitable alternatives. Our machines were all manufactured in Italy or Germany, and many aren't even in business any longer. As a result, we have to go through an exclusive distributor to obtain individual parts, and pay dearly for it.

For example, the Matecs use an ordinary brass washer in one part of the machine. When I submitted my request for some replacements, I learned that the washers would cost us \$20 per washer! Rather than allowing this to happen again, I got out the digital calipers, took measurements and created a separate table to store that information. Now, the next time I need to order replacements, I can take that information and use it to find a suitable replacement from a local company, like Grainger, Newark, etc.

While I was doing this, I also learned that we were paying a fortune to have our circuit boards repaired. In addition to paying for shipping and handling each way, sometimes to Italy, we also had to pay a **minimum** of \$85, just to touch the board! It's ridiculous, and something that really bothered me, even if it's not my money that's being spent for repairs. As I firmly believe in bringing possible solutions and not just the problem, I asked my bosses if they had any problems with me attempting to teach me about electronics. Since I'd already proven myself more than capable of doing something difficult, they agreed, and here I am, several months later, diagnosing and repairing many of our boards, some of them boards that experts who were called in from outside were unable to fix.

So, when my minimum time requirements were met, I was asked if I was interested in taking any self-study courses to obtain my certification, and if so, what I'd be interested in. After taking a look at my options, I elected to take the Certified Electronics Technicians course, which consists of an independent examination from a single book, followed by taking an examination proctored by one of the CALPIA supervisors. Imagine my surprise when I was told that I **wasn't eligible**, not because I hadn't worked for the CALPIA long enough, not because they didn't have any need for such skills, but because I had more than 3-years left on my sentence (I'm currently scheduled to get out in January of 2021).

To be fair, this isn't a rule that my immediate supervisors care about, or their bosses for that matter. This appears to be some sort of arbitrary implementation by those in headquarters. In fact, my bosses were just as disappointed as I was. I was upset because I'm not being given the chance to continue to improve my chances for a successful rehabilitation, and I'm frustrated because of the illogical nature of the rule. Were I permitted to take the course, which only costs about \$60, then it would be a win/win for the factory: they would have an employee with a valued, and needed, skill, and I'd be provided with an opportunity to gain the experience I so desperately need.

I've been told by those who claim to know that this rule was created as an attempt to stop inmate employees from taking each and every course imaginable, not stopping until they'd completed each and every single one. My response to that is "so what." To begin with, not only are we being paid for doing practically nothing for our work, while the factories profit from the fruits of our labors, but the courses in question cost practically nothing, especially to someone who makes as much money as the CALPIA. More important than that though is the fact that these courses are actually beneficial to the inmate employee, not to mention the company. So what if they take all the courses offered? Is it going to help him or her get out and stay out? If not, then isn't this a small price to pay? And furthermore, aren't the courses in question courses that make the inmate a better employee during his employment with CALPIA? If so, then by all means, what's the problem?

I know I've been locked up for a little more than a decade, but I don't think things have changed all that much. I'm pretty sure that many companies are still paying for their employees to stay up to date with their training, to take courses in new areas, etc. After all, a properly trained and educated employee is a more valuable employee, to himself (or herself), and to the company.

As I mentioned earlier, the course is only \$60, not much to someone gets paid a decent wage, but a fortune to someone like me, who makes a pennies per hour, out of which the prison now takes 80%. Still, I'd be willing to save up my money to take the course, but I've been informed that there's a small problem with this: I need an approved person to proctor the final. Although CALPIA has no problems whatsoever with doing this for those they enrolled in the course, they can't, or won't, do this for me because I have more than 3-years left on my sentence. The prison proctors exams, but only those classes which have specifically been authorized, and at this time, this isn't one of those courses. So, I find myself between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

To add insult to injury, I took the mandated COMPAS test, designed to see what areas I needed to improve upon in order to increase my chances of successful rehabilitation. According to the results, my weakest areas were family ties and my formal education. The family ties isn't something I can do much about, and the education isn't something the prison seems to want to do with either, leaving me to wonder what the purpose of the COMPAS test is anyway. According to them, our entire rehabilitation program is supposed to be designed around the results of this test, but obviously, this only applies to those with a history of drug and alcohol problems, not those who need to obtain a more formal education.

At the end of the day, I'm going to find a way to succeed, one way or the other. With the right research and plenty of perseverance, I'll find a solution, and when I do, I'll enjoy the fruits of my success, which will be all the more sweeter because of what I had to go through to succeed.

As always, I welcome any comments and suggestions you may have, good or bad. I can be reached via snail mail at the address below, or you can send me an e-mail to shawnlperrot@hotmail.com. Although I don't have access to the Internet, I do have a trusted friend who checks it for me on a regular basis, downloading, printing and mailing me anything that's sent. Of course, you can also just leave a post.

Finally, I'm still looking for people who might be interested in writing to me for possible friendship. If you think you might be interested, just let me know. Don't worry about what to say. I know that introductory letters can be difficult.

Shawn L. Perrot CDCR# V-42461
CMC-East Cell# 6326
P.O. Box 8101
San Luis Obispo, CA 93409-8101