

Mellon's Radical Prisoner Education

By John D. Sailer

At the Stateville Correctional Center—a maximum-security prison in Illinois, which Gov. JB Pritzker ordered closed last year for unrelated reasons—a group of professors offered courses for inmates, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. One course, “Research, Writing, and Mass Incarceration,” began with a workshop run by Bill Ayers—a co-founder of the Weather Underground, a Marxist terror group responsible for dozens of bombings in the U.S. in the 1970s.

The Mellon Foundation has given at least \$60 million to prison education projects since 2015. While many grantees provide liberal-arts courses and vocational training, others have followed the foundation's own recent trajectory, embracing progressive activism as their guiding principle.

Increasingly, these nonprofits, activists and scholars have focused their prison education projects on political education and “shifting the narrative.” The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, which has received \$1.39 million from Mellon since 2019, titled its 2021 conference “What Is to Be Done?,” a title borrowed from a 1902 communist pamphlet by Vladimir Lenin.

“Posed more than a century ago,” the conference booklet says, the question has “inspired generations of revolutionary thinkers and activists to interrogate the intersections of theory and practice, to reflect upon their own positionalities in the

face of power and oppression, and to seek the most effective strategies to organize and build resistance.”

Mellon, despite its original mission to support the arts and humanities, now embraces far-reaching political goals. As the foundation's president, Elizabeth Alexander, puts it: “We support artists, scholars, and thinkers,” both inside and outside prison, “who are countering the inhumanity of incarceration and the broader criminal legal system.”

One goal of the Mellon-supported course at Statesville is building a movement that “centers abolition,” meaning the abolition of prisons, according to the proposal I acquired via a records request. A proposal for a Mellon-supported project of the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign says it assumes “an explicitly abolitionist stance,” has “hosted discussions on prison abolition,” and has referred members to “readings and external workshops on abolition.”

The description for “Writing for Social Justice”—a course offered through the Claremont Colleges’ Justice Education Initiative, which has received \$2.3 million in Mellon support—begins with a quote from Karl Marx and says that students will “challenge common assumptions about race, sexuality, gender, class, and memory” and write about “issues that are absent in a world dominated by profit-oriented capitalist ideologies.”

Even benign-sounding grants may be channeled toward activist purposes. Catherine Besteman, a profes-

sor at Colby College, writes that “a significant Mellon grant to the University of Maine at Augusta” helped provide internet access for inmates in Maine. This, she notes, created “new opportunities for liberatory education based in abolitionist pedagogies,” which “reveal and attack the supremacist, racist, and colonial roots of the contemporary prison industry and master narratives about the need for prisons.” Ms. Besteman’s own organization, which has received Mellon funding, advocates “decarceration and abolition.”

For such organizations, the focus is less on helping individuals than on revolutionizing systems. UC Santa Cruz’s “Visualizing Abolition” project, designed to “shift the social attachment to prisons through art and education,” has received almost \$8 million from Mellon. Its grant-renewal proposal promises to serve “people currently and formerly-incarcerated” and to “change the narrative that links incarceration to justice.”

Left unasked is whether such efforts make it harder for inmates to endure prison life and make the transition from incarceration to life on the outside. An education aimed at political goals all too easily uses students as tools. The Mellon Foundation—now under increasing scrutiny for its turn toward social justice—would be wise to heed this lesson.

Mr. Sailer is director of higher education policy at the Manhattan Institute.