

Dr. Larry Brewster and California Arts-in-Corrections: A Case Study in Correctional Arts Research

AMANDA GARDNER

Southwest Correctional Arts Network, USA

Abstract: *The correctional arts field is strong on supporting anecdotes but light on evidence-based research. In other words, it has more stories than numbers. One exception is the long-running California Arts-in-Corrections program (AIC). Not only does AIC have more studies demonstrating benefit, all but one of those studies were conducted by Dr. Larry Brewster, currently of the University of San Francisco. This case study tells the story of how that body of research came to exist. It juxtaposes the importance of having evidence-based research on correctional arts programs with the challenges of conducting such research. Readers will gain an understanding of how correctional arts can benefit rehabilitation and reentry initiatives for prisoners as well as how rigorous research can aid that effort. This article lays the groundwork for discussion on how an important avenue for rehabilitation and reentry can be developed by making sure the field has numbers to match the stories.*

Keywords: *Arts-in-Corrections, correctional arts, evidence-based research*

Arts programs exist widely and sporadically, if not consistently, in U.S. correctional settings (jail, prison, probation/parole). Given the impermanent nature of many of these programs, it is virtually impossible to gauge exactly how many actually exist. The Justice Arts Coalition lists more than 350 around the nation. No doubt, there could be both additions and subtractions on any given day, not to mention small individual programs that are never formally acknowledged. Regardless, when asked, many — if not most — correctional arts practitioners will quickly tell you that these programs are “successful.” These conclusions are typically based on the transformation of a specific individual. Moving as many of these accounts are, they are like most assessments of the success, or not, of arts-in-corrections programs in the U.S.: they rarely rise above the anecdotal. The YouthARTS Development Handbook (1998) pointed out that despite the existence of hundreds of programs for at-risk youth, “very few rigorous evaluations of such programs have been conducted. Instead, arts agencies have relied on anecdotal evidence of program success to leverage the re-sources needed to support their arts programs for at-risk youth” (p. 123). Similarly, Rachel Marie-Crane Williams writes in *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars* (2003), “There are many successful arts-in-corrections programs across the United States and elsewhere. Many of these programs have never been evaluated, their outcomes have never been measured, and their history has never been documented” (p. 167). While this is true in the United States, it is less the case in Europe, Australia, and other parts of the world.

Although more studies have been published since those two remarks, the trend still largely holds true. Various explanations have been put forward: fear of negative results; lack of resources or perceived lack of resources, and “methodological paralysis” (YouthARTS Handbook, 2001, p. 127). While a well-done evaluation can provide justification for continued or increased funding, as well as point an organization toward better use of existing resources, such a project is also a major undertaking. Many correctional arts programs simply do not

Correspondence: Amanda Gardner, Email: mandyabq@gmail.com

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have the longevity or staff to initiate such a project. The research the field does have tends to be patchwork, says Grady Hillman, prison arts pioneer and co-author (with this author) of the Prison Arts Resource Project, a compilation of all evidence-based studies conducted on U.S. correctional arts programs. “This reflects the nature of the programs: male, female, done in different states with different correctional cultures. It reflects what was available in terms of getting information,” he said (personal communication, Nov. 30, 2018).

One program, however, stands in stark contrast to the trend. The California Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) program, directed by the nonprofit William James Association, is the longest running correctional arts program in the United States and also has the most research behind it. Six studies of AIC document its effectiveness in a variety of outcomes, from saving money and reducing recidivism, to enhancing self-esteem and cultivating skills. All but one can be traced back to one researcher, Dr. Larry Brewster, currently emeritus professor at the University of San Francisco (USF), who produced the evaluations over a period of 35 years. It is unusual not only to have such a long-lasting program, but also to have so many rigorous evaluations and to have the lion’s share come from one interested researcher. As part of my research, I interviewed Dr. Larry Brewster on October 11, 2018 and January 7, 2020; all of his quotations are a result of these personal communications.

The number and quality of formal AIC program evaluations have become their own success story in the field of correctional arts. Practitioners and administrators still rely on Brewster’s seminal cost-benefit analysis, completed in 1983, to highlight the value of correctional arts programs. “An Evaluation of the Arts-In-Corrections Program of the California Department of Corrections,” published by the William James Association, is the first and still the only study of its kind in the United States.

Eloise Smith, arts visionary at the William James Association, first contacted Brewster in 1982, Brewster recalled. She had founded the Prison Arts Program, a precursor to AIC, in 1977 to broaden the number of individuals exposed to what she called “that mysterious life-enhancing process we call the arts, a realm in which patient application and vivid imagination so often produce magic,” according to the William James website. With funding from the San Francisco Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, Smith set up a pilot project at the California Medical Facility at Vacaville which had expanded to five more facilities by the time Brewster got involved. Smith had seen with her own eyes the program’s dramatic effect on participants, but didn’t have any persuasive “hard evidence.” Her idea was to produce a traditional cost-benefit analysis of the Prison Arts Project and take those numbers and charts to the California legislature and California Department of Corrections (CDC) to prove the value of the program.

“They were seeking more state support,” said Brewster. “They wanted to go into all of the state prisons at that time. I think there were 16 or 17.” At the time, Brewster was a junior faculty member in the political science department at San Jose State University, pursuing tenure and running a small consulting business on the side. “I don’t know how they heard about me, I think mainly because I was so cheap,” said Brewster with characteristic self-deprecation.

Brewster had always loved and appreciated the arts but certainly did not consider himself an artist — more of a “numbers man.” He also had never been inside a prison and had never given them much thought, either positive or negative. He accepted the assignment. In truth, Brewster was more prepared than he will admit, having just completed a cost-benefit study for the RAND Corporation on victim witness programs in Arizona. “The model for my research in evaluating AIC was taken largely from the work I had just completed with the RAND Corporation,” he said.

Brewster selected four facilities for the 1983 evaluation - the original Vacaville site and three others - and looked at costs and benefits from three perspectives: social, taxpayer and individual (p. 5). Not only did Brewster have relatively unfettered access to the data he needed,

he was able to personally visit each of the prisons and interview participants, artist-facilitators, administrators, and CDC staff.

The final report, published in 1983, documented \$228,522 in measurable social benefits offsetting a cost to the California Department of Corrections of \$162,790 (p. 41). Many of those savings came from fewer disciplinary events among AIC participants, as high as 65.7 percent fewer than the general prison population, depending on the facility (p. 29). This, in turn, had slashed disciplinary administration time by 4,553 hours and related costs by \$77,406 (p. 29). The report also noted some of the program's qualitative benefits, notably, that it was "a possible first step of integration into the community [for inmate-artists], improved self-confidence and self-esteem, and improved community institution relations" (p. 41), exactly what Eloise Smith had intended when she started the program.

That ended Brewster's involvement with AIC for 25 years, and marked the end of most research on the program. (One study on AIC conducted by the California CDC and published in 1987 found reduced recidivism among program participants. Brewster was not involved with that evaluation.) "Back in 1983, I was a junior faculty trying to get tenure," said Brewster. "I was focused on teaching, research, service. Then I eventually did get tenure, then I got recruited into administration, and I was doing climbing-up-the-ladder stuff."

Then one fall day in 2007, Brewster found himself sitting in his office at the University of San Francisco metaphorically drumming his fingers. He had just resigned his position as Dean of the College of Professional Studies, capping a successful, 30-year career in teaching and administration. He had indeed climbed the ladder. Now he was casting around for a research project to carry him through the next years, along with his return to teaching. So far, nothing was coming to mind, and he welcomed the distraction of a ringing phone. The voice on the other end belonged to Laurie Brooks, who had been executive director of the William James Association since 2001. Brewster knew of her but had never met or talked to her. In fact, this was the first contact he had had with William James since the cost-benefit report was published in 1983.

Brooks wanted to invite Brewster to the 30th anniversary party of Arts-in-Corrections. "You're our rock star," she told him. This was news to Brewster, who describes himself as old, bald, and unable to "play a lick or sing a note." Brooks explained that the 1983 report not only procured state-wide funding for arts in all the California prisons, it was influential in other states as well.

When Brewster finished the report three decades before, Eloise Smith had taken the cost-benefit analysis to the California state legislature and had indeed succeeded in getting funds to open operations in every state prison. The report had been widely disseminated in the field, and unbeknownst to Brewster, was commonly referred to as "The Brewster Report." He went to the party in Santa Cruz. The connections made and renewed at the celebration would inadvertently set off a second "golden age" in AIC research. It would also make clear Brewster's personal path for the coming decade and beyond.

The year 2007, it turned out, was a bittersweet time to celebrate AIC's birthday. Yes, the program had lasted an astounding 30 years, but in January of 2003, the California Department of Corrections (recently renamed the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) had cut funding due to the state's well-publicized fiscal woes. AIC, one of many victims of California's budget crisis, was still operating, but on a vastly reduced scale. "I learned at the celebration that they were concerned about the future of the arts program which had been so successful and was considered one of the best models of prison arts programming in the country," said Brewster.

But in AIC's funding cuts, Brewster saw an opportunity to not only support AIC but to occupy him for at least the next year. "You know, I'm back to faculty," Brewster told Brooks and Jack Bowers, chair of the board of directors of the Prison Arts Project. "I'm looking for

projects to work on, and I'm happy to work pro bono," (The 1983 report is the only AIC study Brewster has been paid for, he stated.) Brooks and Bowers accepted. Brewster's first thought was to replicate the cost-benefit analysis which had had such a dramatic impact in 1983, but he quickly realized it was no longer feasible. "It was no longer apples to apples," he said. Not only was there a different level of programming than 25 years earlier, new privacy laws made it nearly impossible for Brewster to get the data he would need. "I had access to inmate files back in 1983 that I never would have access to in today's world," said Brewster.

Brewster quickly realized, though, that there was a goldmine of information completely outside CDC jurisdiction. "I got to thinking, this is a 30-year-old program, so I asked Laurie, 'Surely there are people out of prison who went through this program. Would you know how to reach them?'" Brooks provided a list. This time, Brewster decided to "do a qualitative study and interview past participants and have them reflect back on what the program meant to them while incarcerated and, equally or more importantly, what it has meant to them since their release." The 1983 "numbers" evaluation was an anomaly in the world of correctional arts evaluations in another way, being heavily quantitative. Most of the 62 evidence-based correctional arts evaluations conducted since the 1970s, when research in the field began, tilted towards qualitative analysis, as described in the Prison Arts Resource Project (2014/2019).

Brewster spent his sabbatical year not in his USF office but driving up and down the state of California interviewing former inmate-artists. "When I first started the process, I thought I'd be lucky if anyone would talk with me, or maybe do a 15-20-minute interview at most, [but] I always had my tape recorder hoping they would let me tape them," Brewster recalled. To his surprise, "Every one of them let me talk with them. Every one let me tape the interview. The average length was two-and-a-half hours. One guy, we went on for four hours. I ran out of tape."

The marathon four-hour interview was with Willy, an accomplished artist and illustrator who had spent 30 years in prison. Toward the end of the interview, Willy turned the tables and asked Brewster how he was doing. Those were the years Brewster was trying to write a children's book on Tourette's syndrome, which both he and his father suffer from. It was not going well. "I said actually, I'm really depressed. I've been trying to write this book. I can't do it. It's no good. I wish I were as creative as you," Brewster recalls. "[Willy] said, 'That's alright.' He started coaching and counseling me. I said 'Maybe I need to go to prison and I can become creative.'" Willy responded. "It's helped a lot of people, but I don't advise it. There are other ways to do it."

Willy and the other former artist-inmates (16 in all) revealed that participation in the AIC program had enhanced their self-esteem, work ethic, discipline and identity as artists. All interviewees had successfully completed parole (astonishing given the 65 percent recidivism rate in California reported by the California Innocence Project) and 31 percent (5 of the 16) self-identified as artists, earning all or part of their living through art. Brewster produced two studies resulting from the research. *A Qualitative Study of the California Arts-in-Corrections Program* was published by William James in 2010. A second study, "The California Arts-in-Corrections Music Programme: A Qualitative Study" was published the same year in the *International Journal of Community Music*.

Laurie Brooks and Alma Robinson, Executive Director of California Lawyers for the Arts, took the results to Sacramento hoping to secure more funding for the suffering program but this time had no luck. In fact, the situation at AIC had taken a step backwards. The same year the two qualitative studies were published (2010), the state of California withdrew all funding from AIC. Thanks to private funding, though, William James continued to employ artists at one institution, San Quentin. "Qualitative research by itself doesn't persuade [legislators] as numbers do," Brewster said. Nevertheless, the evaluative base supporting AIC in particular and correctional arts in general was growing.

The interviews and evaluations had taken up Brewster's sabbatical year, and more, but he was not finished. He said:

I'm now hooked in totally to the AIC program and the folks. I couldn't think of a better gift than to work with these dedicated and talented artists at William James and the people they hired to deliver these programs. I [also] came to know so many really wonderful artists in prison, humans in prison. Many of them are lifers who are now very different people than when they came to prison in their late teens or early 20s having committed murder. So many others were in just because of drugs and not a violent act. I started to open my eyes more fully to the injustices of the criminal justice system and started writing about that more generally independent of art. It just took me down a road that gave my life meaning.

Brewster was now devoting about 80 percent of his time working on behalf of AIC, and Brooks and Robinson were continuing their advocacy as well. They managed to secure enough grant money from private sources for several pilot arts programs in different facilities. In addition to these pilot programs, Brewster expanded his evaluation to include other well-respected prison theater and arts programs. They are: The Actors' Gang, first started as a drama program at California Rehabilitation Center Norco; Marin Shakespeare, initially offered as a classic theater program at San Quentin; the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, which provided programming at New Folsom State Prison.

"These were kind of miniature AIC programs that allowed me to do pre- and post-surveys, observational research, interviews, and secondary data – a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods," Brewster said. Brewster once again gained access to artist-inmates still behind bars. He used the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ). Specifically, Brewster measured time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, emotional control, active initiative, and self-confidence in 110 adult male inmates at the four institutions with pilot programs.

"California Prison Arts: A Quantitative Evaluation" was published in the *Justice Policy Journal* in 2014. The report found positive correlations between participation in arts programs and all of the specified endpoints. In addition, self-reported disciplinary reports declined, and 61 percent of those who participated in AIC for five or more years reported improved behavior. "The study and reports were eventually presented to the state oversight committee," said Brewster. "It's a panel of researchers that are charged with reviewing all research related to the Department of Corrections and so my research was some of that. I made a presentation to this committee."

In 2013, just prior to actual publication, the California legislature allocated an initial \$2.5 million to reboot AIC. As of this writing, the program has been allocated at least \$8 million annually. "We are back in every prison [35] but not in a robust way. We're not offering the widest range of arts programs but we are in every prison," said Brewster. "Who knows what the future budget will look like. Right now, we're re-funded so this program is permanently back in the budget. The artists are being hired."

Arts in corrections programs have expanded into county jails, and Brewster has spearheaded the County Jails Project, a qualitative–quantitative study of arts programs in jails sponsored by California Lawyers for the Arts and William James. This research presents entirely new methodological challenges given that jail populations tend to be highly transitory, unlike prison populations. The multi-year project is assessing behavioral and attitudinal changes among AIC participants in county jails throughout California. Initial results in 2016, and revised results appearing in 2018, were overwhelmingly positive.

The longevity and success of the California Arts-in-Corrections programs must be attributed in some measure, perhaps in large measure, to long-standing efforts to produce ev-

idence-based research. This ever-growing body of research continues to propel the program forward. In December of 2019, California Lawyers for the Arts announced that it had received a \$60,000 grant from the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts to replicate evidence-based demonstration projects in correctional facilities in Louisiana, Michigan, New York, Ohio and Texas. The first demonstration project — in New York — has already begun. Evaluations will be based on pre- and post-surveys provided by students participating in 12-week art classes. Brewster feels a “next step” in correctional arts research is to measure the explanatory power of six theories that have been tested via focus groups. “I think it is important to explicitly articulate and measure the relevance and explanatory power of the six theories: we think help to explain why the arts programs consistently yield positive evaluation results.” Those six theories are Cognitive Behavioral, Social Learning, Resilience, Social Capital, Performance Theories and Desistance. The four top contenders for AIC programs, according to Brewster, are Social Learning, Social Capital, Resilience and Desistance. “Desistance theory supports the Good Lives model, which we think deserves further investigation as a theory/model for explaining positive outcomes in prison fine arts programs,” he said.

Despite its track record in producing evidence-based research, California AIC highlights the considerable challenges facing researchers in correctional settings. It also illustrates an instructive lesson in persistence and flexibility. As Charles Darwin learned, species (and perhaps correctional arts research could be considered its own species) survive and thrive depending on how adaptable they are. The California evidence largely reflects methodologies which were possible at the time. In 1983, Brewster had access to data which enabled him to perform a rigorous cost-benefit analysis, a type of study usually ranked towards the top of the research-methodology hierarchy. Institutional rules inside and among correctional facilities changed, and later studies were forced to rely on qualitative or combined qualitative-quantitative data more from individual participants and less reflective of institutional information. Correctional arts administrators, practitioners, and funders cry for “proof” of effectiveness. Brewster and other researchers have continued to provide such proof, because they have been able to adapt to the often whimsical and inexplicable circumstances in the U.S. justice system.

Given the hurdles, one could argue that any research on correctional arts programs is positive. While certainly randomized, controlled, double-blind studies are still the gold standard in any field, these are rarely possible in jails, prisons, or among probationers and parolees. Other methodologies, however, are possible and the number of methodologies available to both novice and veteran researchers is expanding, whether these be quantitative, qualitative or mixed. All of these methods have been employed in the compendium of California (and U.S.) AIC research. In the case of California, success bred success with research leading to continuation and even expansion of programs leading to more research, more program triumphs, and so on. Practitioners and administrators should not be afraid to explore available methodologies, to undertake their own research, and add to the body of evidence which justifies correctional arts programs, which previous evidence-based research has shown can cut costs, reduce recidivism, bolster confidence, and contribute to the success of offenders when free of the walls of the justice system.

Brewster is now officially retired from USF, though still teaching, and he said he will probably never “retire” from AIC. He considers himself one of the lucky ones, blessed with the opportunity to work with so many extraordinary people inside and outside prison walls. “I’m not an especially religious person,” he said. “I’m a spiritual person, and I couldn’t help but think that this was all kind of meant to be in some weird way. Laurie literally called me within a month or two of stepping down as Dean. They gave me a year’s sabbatical to get retuned and retrained to teach, and so I had all this time to resurrect AIC’s program evaluation.”

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