

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/using-media-to-shift-perspectives>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What led you from the film industry to criminal justice work?

A friend of mine asked me to come to juvenile hall to be a guest speaker in a creative writing class. I was so blown away with the kids I met and the stories I heard that I started teaching that creative writing class in 2003 and have taught it every Saturday since. If they are committed to changing their lives, I was committed to seeing them through the process no matter how long they were there for.

What were some of the challenges you saw your students face while trying to receive an education in prison?

The biggest challenge is institutional culture and getting the correctional officers and the system to realize that [education] is a benefit to the inmates, community, and victims. Once students make a decision to change their lives they have the ability to leave prison and never return and to become active members of society and architects of change in their communities.

In what specific ways do you think a college-educated person is able to give back to his/her community?

Most kids in urban communities don't know anyone who has gone to college. By being the first in their family to go to college, they are paving the way and being a role model. They are showing and giving their family a road to college and not prison. Also, having gone down bad paths, they are the best advisors to young kids to avoid going that route.

How would you convince someone that providing education in prison makes sense?

Around college in prison, everything is about framing. It's very easy for someone to say, Why is this person getting a free college education, but my child in the community isn't? That's a very easy myth to debunk if you make people understand the public safety enhancement and the future savings of getting these folks out of a life of crime. If you properly explain what a small investment in college education for people in prison could yield down the road, even the most fiscally conservative person can understand why this is the right thing to do. You can get an ally from anywhere in the political spectrum if you frame things the right way.

What is the biggest lesson you have learned in rallying support and allies for education in prison?

The biggest lesson is providing somebody with an education alone is not the key to getting someone out of a life of crime. Providing them mentors, counselors, tutoring, housing, and therapy on top of education is important. All of those things added together can reduce recidivism by 50 percent.

How do we get more people to pay attention to what's happening inside of our prisons?

Rather than focusing on the negative aspect of prison, I think taking the real-life stories about incarceration and getting these stories out into the public is what will change hearts and minds for the better. I am starting a film company that deals with all of these issues because with film and the way it is marketed and promoted, you are able to get lots of eyeballs to a piece of entertainment. If you could be both entertaining and socially compelling (and not just preaching and teaching lessons), then that is the magic right there.

What is the key to creating more college programs in prison like Pathways across the U.S.?

We need to make sure we keep great data on the long-term savings of Pathways and show how they vastly exceed what states spend, so you have the fiscal and the human argument. You then highlight those success stories of Pathways through storytelling that goes viral. That's how you take Pathways and scale it to every other state. How do programs like Pathways help those who are incarcerated change their lives and have better future opportunities? Education is an identity shifter. People usually enter prison being told they are no good and cannot accomplish things. You put them on a path to college and they suddenly view themselves as a college student and they see a path for themselves when they get out where there was no path before.

The [Unlocking Potential: Perspectives on Education in Prison](#) blog series explores postsecondary education in prison and its benefits during and after incarceration through the unique experiences and insight of former students, educators, nonprofit leaders, corrections officials, reentry experts, and more.

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