

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/lessons-from-san-quentin>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Beyond academic achievement, how do students benefit from taking college courses while in prison?

Even after taking just a few classes, their written and verbal communication skills are much stronger. They become more confident. Their self-esteem is strengthened. They have a broader sense of what their professional opportunities might be. They are more able to negotiate complex systems and institutions, both for themselves and for their families even from prison. They are more likely to be active in their communities and involved in various types of advocacy work. They are more engaged with their children's education. To me, these are success stories: if the person is healthy and happy and living a productive life.

In what ways is teaching college courses inside prison rewarding for teachers?

For teachers, prison college programs offer an opportunity to serve communities that are, almost by definition, radically excluded from quality education in the United States. It's also incredibly satisfying to have students who are highly motivated and deeply grateful for the opportunity to go to college! The educational climate is very serious, rich, and satisfying, for both students and teachers.

What challenges do educators and colleges face when trying to implement college programs in prison?

There are massive logistical issues: getting the students to class, getting teachers into the institution, the lack of technology, the simple fact that the institution has completely different priorities and values. You have all kinds of constantly changing constraints on what equipment and materials may be allowed inside. Pedagogically speaking, teachers who've taught only in conventional settings are often not prepared to serve students with such diverse learning styles; they may also not be prepared for the range of psychological obstacles that students might grapple with, particularly at the beginning—for example, self-doubt, anxiety, or shame.

Why do you think some people are against access to a college education for people in prison?

The biggest issue is that in the U.S., higher education is considered a luxury. A lot of people are legitimately resentful that they have not had the opportunity to get a college education, and it makes them uncomfortable or even furious to imagine that people in prison might. It seems unfair. There's also the whole ideology of deservingness. People imagine that if you are a good person, you deserve good things and if you are a bad person, you deserve bad things. What frustrates me about this perspective is not just that it's simplistic and moralistic, but that it essentially ignores the question of what's in the best interest of the society as a whole.

Also, Americans who have not been exposed to the prison system directly—people who haven't been incarcerated, and have not had a friend or family member who's been incarcerated—often have their own ideas of who is in prison and what they are like. Our culture is very invested in its global, generalized hatred of people who are in prison, and very invested in the thought of their suffering. People think of education as a stepping stone to economic opportunity and as a source of pleasure, and a lot of people don't want anybody in prison to have either.

What will it take to change their minds?

People need to see firsthand the transformative power of higher education in prison. They need to be exposed to the real live faces, voices, conversations, and stories that will allow them to recognize people in prison as actual human beings. They need to hear not just statistical accounts of what happens when people in prison have the opportunity to go to school. They need to become emotionally invested in the good that it does for the individual's community, family, and the climate of the prison.

How has the Prison University Project been successful in sharing and changing public discourse around higher education in prison?

Above all, through [publications](#) like our journal of student writing (OpenLine), newsletters, and various special events. Strong communications materials are a way to carry the message of the humanity of the people inside to a much larger audience. If you can bring people into a prison through these kinds of materials, in my experience it's pretty rare that they hold on to their hostility.

What kind of reentry services and resources do students need to be successful once they leave prison?

Affordable housing! People with substance abuse and other special issues need supportive housing. And everyone needs some sort of community—they need people they can really talk to, and ask questions, and ask for help. Also, a lot of people get out and want to continue school but they don't have the money. We need to start creating robust scholarship opportunities for people coming out.

What are the key takeaways that you think any state/prison looking to create a college program in prison needs to consider?

Prison higher education is an educational intervention and not simply a criminal justice intervention. We do this work not simply to make the public safer. We do it because we are committed to educational excellence, and to supporting the personal, professional, and intellectual development of the individual. What you see a lot in this field are people who want to avoid saying or doing anything that might be politically controversial. They say, The public will never go for that. For example, they want to exclude sex offenders, or people serving long sentences, for fear of public outrage.

The fact is that a high quality educational program that is open to the whole prison community has the capacity to change the entire culture of that institution. Conversely, programs that exclude academically eligible people for political reasons just build resentment, weaken the pro-social fabric of the prison, and waste precious resources. If we really want to create high quality programs that generate the greatest public benefit, we need to be unapologetically committed to inclusiveness, and we need to hold our ground. We need to keep reminding everyone: we are building a healthier democracy. We are improving public health. Our students lives matter. They are human beings.

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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