

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/from-prison-to-cambridge>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

#### **What inspired you to pursue education while you were incarcerated?**

One day during lunch, I felt like the voice of God came over me and said, Don't eat your food right now. Put it away and go outside. I put the food in the bin and I was the only person outside. Never in prison are you ever by yourself. I'm sitting outside on the bench and one of the prison teachers came out and approached me. She asked me, What are you thinking about when you get out of prison? I said I'd really like to go back to college. She said, Really, where? I said, Rutgers, possibly. When I said Rutgers, she jumped out of her skin and said, I can't believe you just said that because we have a Rutgers professor who is trying to start a [college program at] Rutgers [for formerly incarcerated students]. Let me introduce you to him. That's how I ended up being part of the [Mountainview Project](#). That was a very surreal experience.

#### **What were some of your biggest challenges taking courses in prison versus taking courses at Rutgers after you got out?**

A lack of access to resources and environments where it was easy to study. Just because I was taking classes didn't mean the rest of the jail was. You still have to study, focus, and concentrate while blocking out outside noise.

My entire first year at Rutgers I was still in the halfway house, so I was still under DOC custody. At Rutgers, you are a student and someone who is motivated and excited about school, but often that has to be checked at the door when you come back to the halfway house because you're in a completely different environment.

#### **Why do you think some people are so unwilling to support postsecondary education in prison?**

People think that people in prison are undeserving of education, are getting a full ride, have had their opportunity and pissed it away. That could not be farther from the truth. I don't think people understand the societal ramifications of having a felony conviction and the lack of resources once released. If education, which is a nominal fee when compared to the cost of incarceration, is something that can reduce recidivism, I don't see why people would look at it as something that isn't saving taxpayers dollars [in the long run].

#### **Why is education in prison, especially college education, so valuable in the eyes of individuals who are incarcerated?**

Most people in prison know that education is a good thing. I recently visited a NJ-STEP class at Mountainview Correctional Facility in Annandale, New Jersey where I served my time. Some of the guys talked about how, despite the conditions of prison, they enjoyed going to class and doing their schoolwork. They felt like a person again. For the period of time each week that they were in school, they forgot that they were in prison. The college curriculum isn't watered down just because you are in prison. The teachers are teaching college equivalent work.

#### **How do you think the landscape around incarceration and postsecondary education in prison is changing?**

It started with some of the speeches that people like President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder have done recently trying to wake people up to the fact that the people that we have been criminalizing aren't hurting America. Putting people in prison is. Education has always been a means of reducing recidivism. That's no secret. It's just that now it costs the country too much to put people in prison and the country is hurting so now we pay attention to it.

#### **How do you think programs like Veras Pathways Project are helping to expand the efforts in postsecondary correctional education?**

I think they are important because they provide hope and inspiration to people who are in prison. I have this one friend who I met through Facebook who just recently graduated from Valencia College in Florida with a 4.0 GPA. He was in prison for 12 years and saw my story and wrote to me telling me how much I inspired him. He's a big success story. There are so many like him out there waiting for an opportunity. Hearing about opportunities makes them more eager to look for their own opportunities and be successful.

Programs like Pathways are happening at a time when the tide is turning in America. These programs are hopefully the models for what should be a standard in all states and prisons across the country.

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.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

