

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/incarcerated-students-are-at-the-head-of-the-class>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I recently had the privilege of visiting with a group of college students in Michigan to discuss their experiences in higher education. Prior to my visit, I knew that this group of students was impressive on paper: they make up 4 percent of the Jackson College population, yet 27 percent of the schools deans list, and their [average GPA is 3.67](#). As an undergraduate myself, I am in awe of such accomplishments, and even more so given the fact that these students are incarcerated in state prisons.

The students are part of Veras [Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project](#), a five-year, privately funded initiative launched in 2013 to demonstrate that providing incarcerated people with an education can effectively reduce recidivism and increase employment opportunities post-release. Vera partners with education providers in Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina to implement postsecondary education programs in prisons, as well as offer reentry support services once the students are released.

Maintaining a high academic standing is a challenge in-and-of itself; I cannot imagine how difficult it becomes for students who have not set foot in a classroom in decades or who must deal with the added pressures of a life behind bars. I saw, however, how devoted and hardworking these students are. In fact, the professors of Jackson College and other Pathways schools report that the courses they teach in prison are their favorites. For many, these are the best groups of students they work with.

In addition to their academic success, I saw how exceptional these students are in measures not as easily quantified as grades and percentages. For example, one student taught himself calculus while another voluntarily mentored a younger incarcerated student. These anecdotes were the rule rather than the exception. Students at both facilities showed an eagerness and appreciation for education that would surprise those who think incarcerated people are undeserving of college programming. The students wanted courses that would challenge them and they were able to synthesize what they were learning inside the classroom with how it would benefit them in their personal lives. Their confidence soared, not just because of their academic accomplishments, but because they knew it would provide opportunities to succeed after their release.

The federal government has been paying attention. As part of an experiment, the U.S. Department of Education has reinstated incarcerated peoples eligibility for Pell grants after a 20 year ban. However, support for prison education should not stop there. For funding to be sustainable, public attitudes about who deserves and would make use of an education need to change.

People who end up incarcerated often come from our nations most marginalized communities and the vast majority of them will eventually [return home](#). A postsecondary education can equip them with the skills and confidence to effect change where it is most necessary and interrupt the cycles of poverty, violence, and incarceration that have ruined far too many of our best and brightest.

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