

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/transformed-by-access-to-college-in-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

"Access to postsecondary education can have transformative power, like it has in my life, and I hope everyone in America, including those in prison, can have this same opportunity."

Twenty-eight years ago, I was sentenced to life without parole and began serving time in California. Around that same time, after the 1994 Crime Bill was enacted ending Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, I saw cuts to all kinds of programs, including educational ones. Going to school and getting a college degree seemed out of the question, especially since I still carried emotional baggage related to having a learning disability growing up and constantly being told I was slow.

In the beginning, I bounced from prison to prison, trying to avoid the violence that got me there in the first place. Once I ended up at the state prison in Lancaster, though, I found a group of men who, despite also being sentenced to life without parole, were taking classes with Coastline Community College. Their interest in education began when they started a book club (anyone could join by buying one book that would be shared among the group) and moved on to textbooks. Eventually, up to 700 people were enrolled in college courses at Lancaster, and there have been more than 200 graduates from Coastline.

When a California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA) professor visited and saw what these men were accomplishing pretty much on their own, he was impressed with their work and tenacity, and he eventually brought in other professors from different schools. I began my college journey in late 2015, and I plan to graduate from Cal State LA either this semester or next with a degree in communication studies and a minor in English.

Last year, the governor of California decided to commute my sentence and let me return home, I think in large part because he was impressed with my educational aspirations and all the achievements I'd made while incarcerated. If you'd told me a few years ago about the opportunities that would be offered to me after I returned home from prison, like writing this blog post, I never would have believed you. I'm currently working as a consultant for an organization called Parole Justice Works, where I get to help incarcerated people prepare for the transition to outside life and parole. Many people with incarceration histories struggle to [join or rejoin the labor market](#), and I know all of this has been made feasible for me because I took the opportunities offered to me while behind bars to work toward something positive and continue my education.

At first, it wasn't about the grades or obtaining a degree. It was the times I got to sit down with professors and receive affirmation that I understood a concept in a way others couldn't that motivated me to become a more productive student and take my learning seriously. I was also receiving a lot of positive feedback about my writing from my classmates and friends.

Another benefit to being able to enroll in college classes when I was in prison is that I ended up studying at the same school at the same time as my stepdaughter, which brought us closer together. We've been able to discuss classes and professors, quiz each other on shared subjects, and even be on Zoom calls together. She will graduate this semester and has plans to become a teacher, and I couldn't be more proud.

I believe that everyone, no matter their current sentence, should have the same opportunities I did to educate themselves and learn more about the world beyond the few blocks they grew up on. Learning different styles of thinking and communication philosophies has completely changed my outlook on life, and I know it will for others, too.

As I sit here today, I feel empowered to advocate for all my brothers and sisters who are still behind bars, some sentenced to life without parole, like I was. [Access to postsecondary education can have transformative power](#), like it has in my life, and I hope everyone in America, including those in prison, can have this same opportunity.

Allen Burnett attends Cal State LA and helps incarcerated people prepare for transitions back to their communities. He currently resides in California.

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