

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/unlocking-potential-supporting-students-post-release>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What are the key barriers that people returning home from prison who want to continue their education face?

The main obstacle is access to accurate information on everything from accreditation to licensing barriers, as well as a lack of access to the type of support anyone needs to be successful in college. Practical obstacles can vary from having a check-box on a college application requesting that prospective students disclose their criminal histories, to dealing with an unsupportive parole officer or institutional ignorance. We have had instances of college administrators giving misinformation and telling our students that they are not eligible for financial aid because of a felony conviction, which is only true in very limited circumstances.

How does College Initiative provide information and support to its students?

We have core staff of counselors and coordinators and a very successful peer mentoring program where we have senior students work with incoming freshman students to help them navigate college. We do orientations where we demystify the college-going process. Students go into a one-on-one counseling relationship with a counselor, with whom they work to put together a college application and financial aid application, and discuss school choice options and the barriers that might exist with pursuing a career with a particular degree. We help students with other supports like housing and substance abuse treatment through partnerships with places like the [Fortune Society](#) and the [Osborne Association](#). We have a college readiness program that we run to help students with academic and non-cognitive preparation for college life. CI is first and foremost a community of support where students who share the same educational goals can support each other with the help of a core staff and infrastructure.

Is the idea of a community of support scalable?

Yes, but it's not scalable in the traditional way. People mostly make decisions based on the advice of people who they trust. CI is very consciously building trust relationships with our students. There are a lot of pitfalls along the way to getting a college degree. But if students have a solid trust relationship with our academic counselors and with our mentors, they can make the right decisions. I think that is completely scalable. Look at our mentoring program, for example. We were a tiny program with a tiny budget and we were able to build our capacity using the biggest resource we have: our successful students. Our students designed the mentoring program. You can scale a program that is built around individual trust relationships. In the Pathways Project, you have to look at the first wave of students who go through and are successful. That's your scalability right there. Use those students in a smart way to work with the next generation.

Why is that so important?

The Pathways Project is about allowing people to shift their identities towards being students and full citizens. That identity shift can be very difficult if you don't have a viable, relatable change model in front of you. That's the idea of a peer mentor. I see that firsthand in College Initiative. We have an amazing community of students who are actively involved in the program. They go into correctional facilities to do presentations, they volunteer, they even donate to CI. When you have that sort of commitment, you can really build capacity.

What do people need to see in order to understand why a college education is important for people coming out of prison?

First, there needs to be a changed understanding of who the people in the criminal justice system are. The statistics tell us that they are overwhelmingly poor and have had very limited opportunities in regards to education and full social engagement. But there is a dominant narrative in much of the popular media about the dangerous other who is the prisoner, the criminal. The truth is that there is no other. They are us and they want what we all want: safety, happiness, satisfaction, a life.

What has to happen for that shift to occur?

When I first started doing this work in 2002, the reaction I got from people was shocking. Why would you want to help those people? Now, there are developing narratives that the prison system is broken and we are incarcerating people that really don't need to be incarcerated. There is a new focus on police accountability and serious questioning of the role of incarceration. I think the Pathways Project will bring the national spotlight to the nitty-gritty of what delivering educational opportunities to this population looks like.

Having said that, I think that there's an inbuilt culture of reaction and a lot of political gutlessness (cowardice) in the U.S. Politicians are very risk averse and will not sign up for a reform that could blow up in their faces.

Are there certain policy changes that could help people returning from prison be successful in getting a college education?

The first reform would be to reinstate Pell Grants for people who are incarcerated. I'm very happy to see the Second Chance Pell Pilot happen and expect that it will lead to full reinstatement. That would revitalize the whole prison college system that existed pre-1994.

There also needs to be a shift in how the system sees the reentry process. We see a lot of the resources in reentry going into transitional housing and short-term job placements, which are necessary but short-sighted. The only thing we look at in the long term is recidivism. Policymakers haven't looked at support in the same way. Education isn't really looked at as the equal of housing and job placement. It doesn't get the resources.

How can educational institutions serve as resources for students post-release?

While some colleges have a culture that is hostile to our population, we have also seen the opposite. We have a summer intensive college program that is in its 6th year at Hostos Community College in the Bronx. It offers 90 hours of academic and placement test preparation. We also have about 30 hours of CI programming, which is centered on self-advocacy, finding the right resources around campus, what campus life is really going to be like, and the support needed to succeed. We have support at Hostos from the president's office down. They have looked at our population and said Yes, we want them on our campus. The administration has been very open to suggestions we made about how those students can be supported.

Thinking back on your 13 years with College Initiative, what's been the biggest lesson learned?

Our biggest resource is the students. These students are your greatest advocates and your real board of directors. They are the ones who know what programming is effective and what supports need to be in place. I am not a starry-eyed believer in the transformative power of education in and of itself. A lot of our students come to higher education because they want to build a sustainable life for themselves and their families and they see education as a way to do that. The biggest lesson I've learned is our students make good decisions about their lives and college careers if they have the right information and the right tools to make those decisions. That's been the guiding principle for me. With the right opportunities and the right information and the right supports, people make the right decisions with their lives.

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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