

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/viewing-prison-education-as-a-smart-investment>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Why do you help fund college education programs in prison?

I like to give people the impetus to change their own lives. I think of everything as an investment.

What impact did attending [college graduation](#) ceremony at Sing Sing Correctional Facility have on you?

I never had an experience as dramatic and traumatic as that. The room was filled with graduating prisoners and their parents, uncles, wives, girlfriends, and children. It was very moving to see the transformation. I challenge anyone to attend one of these and come out the same as they did when they came in. You can't do it. There was a man with a degree in his hand who looked out to the group and said, Mom, I never did anything to make you proud of me. This one is for you.

Everyone dissolved into tears. His three-year-old rushed up with flowers for him. Pathways work brings families back together. It creates individuals who can get and maintain jobs with living wages, thus adding to the tax base in communities. It makes neighborhoods safer. The students are extremely appreciative. This has been an excellent investment.

How do students benefit from having college programs in prisons?

They make all the difference. The students have the brains and willpower to do it. When they get into the workforce, they are polished and mature. Many tell me it's the most rewarding and best thing they have ever done. They say that this has been the best experience in their lives.

I remember talking to a fellow who had a daughter who was in first grade. The teacher made fun of her because her father was in Sing Sing. It was awful. He told me he sent the teacher some of the papers he had written with some of the grades he had received. That changed the teacher's attitude. He told me he showed her that he did more than just pushups while incarcerated. He was actually applying himself. Things like that make a huge difference.

What do you say to people who say people in prison don't deserve access to college programs?

First, I'd say that sending a man to prison is punishment enough. Second, I'd say, I am funding this with my own money. It doesn't involve taxpayers' money. It's my money. My decision. As far as I know, there is nothing in the constitution that says I can't. That's the end of the conversation. That's pretty strong. There aren't enough of us [doing this kind of work]. We should have college education programs in every prison in the United States. You're participating in somebody's redemption. That's a big deal! They won't let you down. Lastly, for individuals returning to the community and that's the overwhelming majority of the incarcerated population, it's clear that quality college programs in prison provide tremendous pathways to escape cycles of crime and poverty.

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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