

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/producing-active-informed-and-engaged-citizens-through-postsecondary-education>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What led you to your interests in education and mass incarceration?

I started graduate school in September of 1971. In the third week of my coursework, the Attica rebellion occurred. This significant historical event was an uprising at a New York Correctional Facility derived from prisoners' demands for improvements in living conditions as well as educational and training opportunities. I had gone to graduate school with the idea that I wanted to be a prison warden. The Attica rebellion and its aftermath convinced me that prison was the wrong direction for justice policy in the United States. I devoted myself to reducing the use of incarceration in my career. I have been working on that ever since, with varying degrees of success.

How important is providing college education to people in prison?

Public universities like Rutgers are built around the idea of making college access as broad as possible. In Newark, we have a special agenda of making sure that college is made available to those who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend so they can succeed with support. This is without a doubt especially true for the students who are incarcerated. Here in Newark, we think of serving this group of aspiring college students as a right, and as a part of our mission.

Second, of the various things that have been studied to help people who have been incarcerated live crime-free lives, college education is at the top of the list. Education is more significantly impactful than any other program we can offer in prison.

The third thing is that every person associated with our prison college program has been absolutely blown away by the students inside. They find them motivating, captivating, and energizing. Their energy for education makes us all enjoy our jobs more.

Formerly as provost, what kinds of challenges do you think institutions and educators face when trying to open their doors to formerly incarcerated students. How do you think that those challenges can be mitigated and overcome?

It's easy for people to think, Why should a felon get college education provided to him or her when college is a financial struggle for so many who haven't committed a crime? Speaking to that concern is very important. At Rutgers University in Newark, we see it as our job to reach out to students who would not otherwise be able to go to college, so the prison college agenda fits with us very well. Many of the people who are looking to have college careers at Rutgers University-Newark have criminal justice histories and experiences. Offering the benefits of a research university education to these students is a special part of what we do.

Formerly as provost, I was involved all the time in thinking about the money side of everything having to do with higher education. It turns out that, in fact, those courses paid for themselves. They paid for themselves in reduced recidivism rates, of course, but ironically they paid for themselves in the way that they brought students to the university who wouldn't otherwise be involved in college education. This represented new revenues for the university.

Are formerly incarcerated students valuable assets to the college learning community?

We know that a very significant part of the learning experience for students in universities is experiencing other students. When you have a university where all the students are the same, it's hard for students to learn how to live in a diverse world, which is the most significant challenge in today's higher education world. Integrating diverse populations of students is the right approach to preparation for the real world. Formerly incarcerated students studying among the general student body means that you are strengthening the education for every student that is on campus.

What are the key takeaways that a state or prison looking to scale its college program needs to consider on a policy level?

First, there is, in every state, a collection of institutions of higher education that already see this agenda as an important one for them. The model we have developed here, which uses a consortium of higher education institutions in the state, is something every state can do.

Second, when this is approached as an education reform issue, it has enormous salience. We've been adamant that we think of ourselves in the framework of educational reform and not correctional reform. It enables us to explore what we are doing from the point of view of educational effectiveness, not just correctional effectiveness.

Of course, I do think that the correctional side is important. Part of the story is how significant this is as a correctional strategy, but by turning this into a correctional story, you lose some of the value of what this is about.

One good example is that people often think of correctional programming from the point of view of job readiness, because getting people

ready for post-incarceration employment would be one of the most important correctional priorities, and rightfully so. But from the pure educational point of view, we would say, we are not a job training program. We are an education program. We are inclined to produce educated citizens, people who are ready to take their place in the modern world as informed and active citizens.

For example, we don't do risk assessments. We don't do drug treatment programs. We build a local college support system for students who are released and are accepted to college. We know that support systems work as an educational technique, helping people succeed in the classroom. I think it really is a secret of what we do that we are located in the education community and answerable to the education community.

We have strong, important, and extremely valuable partnerships with the corrections and parole systems here in New Jersey. Without them, we could not operate. But within those relationships, we see ourselves as focused on education.

What do people who don't support providing college education to people in prison need to see in order to change their minds and understand the importance of work?

I think they need to know that we put together a package for anyone who applies to Rutgers University in Newark and is eligible to get in, enabling them to come here. We try to ensure that nobody is turned away just because of finances. People who are incarcerated, we treat them the same way in that we arrange a supportive financial package. It is important to note that the investments being made to attend college here are often coming from the private sector and not the public sector.

What role should colleges play in serving as resources for students who are coming out of prison and want to enroll?

This is something I think we have learned in our work. You begin preparing students who are incarcerated to be students on campus as part of their reentry planning. You create a community in the institution that accepts them, a community comprising people who have faced similar issues. If you do that, then those students who are engaged in post release services on campus will develop an ethic of giving back to society. One of the things we see with our students who have been incarcerated and then come to Rutgers is they tend to engage often times through volunteering on campus. They participate actively in student civic life. Because of that, the campus is enriched and they are able to repay a debt where ordinarily they would not be able to do so.

How does providing college education help make disadvantaged communities better?

College education produces human capital. Human capital is connected to social capital. The level of social capital is the single biggest predictor of quality of life in a community.

How do programs like Veras Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project help to expand the efforts in postsecondary correctional education?

I think Pathways provides a model to the nation for how college education is the key way that policy can approach the issue of mass incarceration.

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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