

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/using-education-to-help-others-succeed>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

From your experience at the Fortune Society, how critical a role is education for people who are incarcerated?

Its huge. As a prevention strategy, education is vital to keep people out of the system. Most of the folks that have dropped out have had really bad educational experiences. For people returning home, education is the foundation.

What kinds of pathways does education open for the individual re-entering society?

Before I went to school, all I saw in my life was getting out, going back to the streets, and going back to prison. Thats all I thought my options to be. When I went to school, I started to realize that I had multiple pathways. The biggest one was not to give up on myself. I felt that I was worth fighting for. I was worth investing in. I had power to make the decisions. I got my first job at Fortune as a counselor after many rejections. The ability to stay focused and committed throughout that process was because of education.

How does it feel to realize that a better life is possible?

When I first started having success, I thought, Is this really happening? Then you get to a place where you really believe that it is happening because you are putting in the hard work. You go from all of those messages that you are not going to be anything to Im intelligent. I can do the right thing. I have the strength and perseverance to be successful. You begin to appreciate that and you begin to embrace it.

Whats it like to see that awakening in others?

For me, it is very emotional because I understand the power and transformation of that moment. No one can take away your education. There is power in knowing what you have and are capable of.

What kinds of supports are crucial for people coming out of prison that want to go school?

Having a transparent conversation with their support system and themselves about what it takes to engage in the educational process is critical. Going back to school is a commitment of time and effort. This means discussing that you may not be available in ways that people may expect.

How has your academic achievement affected your own family?

I went to college and my wife went to a technical school. My kids saw my wife and me working all the time and the emphasis we put onto education. By seeing the results of our efforts, they understood the importance of education. We went from a cycle in my family where none of us graduated from high school to all of my kids having graduated high school. My educational and work experience has shown my family that there are multiple paths and opportunities without going down the wrong path.

Why are some people opposed to providing college education to people in prison?

When I wrote my [Daily News op-ed](#), the feedback I received ranged. People who oppose education in prison are opposing it for the wrong reasons. Opponents, even if they believe education is a tool to reducing recidivism, do not want it to take funds that would otherwise provide education to our children in the communities. The biggest driver of this is when President Clinton signed the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act eliminating Pell Grant access to inmates. Financially, it wasnt a big hit, but the way it was presented was that were taking money that we could be investing into education for our children and giving it to cons in prison.

What will it take to change their minds?

This blog series is great. We have to get the word out there about the impact education is having on the lives of men and women who are in prison. We have to show the data around recidivism and people who have higher education. We have to show people that we have a choice as a society to lock people up and bring them home worse off than they were, or better than they were. We can improve their life circumstances and the life circumstances of the community to which they return through education.

How do the benefits of higher education extend beyond the individual?

Stronger individuals help families become stronger. Stronger families help communities become stronger. Stronger communities help larger communities become healthier and safer. The more we can invest in higher education, the healthiermentally, physically, and financiallyour communities will be.

What part of the Pathways Project excites you the most?

The evaluation piece. It is attempting to evaluate the impact of higher education in prison. Part of what we need to do is show the data and outcomes. If we invest in higher education, the result will be a lowered recidivism rate, healthier families, and stronger communities.

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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