

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/beyond-the-statistics-and-into-the-hearts-of-incarcerated-students>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Despite the chaos going on in the world around COVID-19 and the fact that I remain incarcerated and more isolated from my family and loved ones than ever before, I woke up today feeling that life is good.

In 2010, I was blessed with the opportunity to enroll in my first college courses from the confines of a maximum-security prison. Just seven months before meeting my professor for our first class, I had been sentenced to serve 17 years for the harm I had caused to another man and to both of our communities. When I began my college experience, the Pell Grant was still suspended; my fortune was thanks to the late Doris Buffetts [Sunshine Lady Foundation](#), which supports people with unmet financial needs to pursue opportunities to advance their education including incarcerated students. As I progressed through my first semester, I could feel something changing within me. Twenty-four years old and uncertain about what my future of imprisonment would hold, suffering under the weight of stereotype and expectation, and feeling as if the confinement ahead of me was an eternity of despair, my heart slowly began to expand. I began to ascend through the thick fog of hopelessness and toward the light.

So here I am, 10 years later, with a newly minted masters degree. On May 22, 2020, I attended a virtual ceremony where I became an official graduate of George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. This is my third college degree obtained from the confines of a prison, and although my journey hasn't been the result of Second Chance Pell's [federal pilot program](#) that provides Pell Grants to incarcerated students, it is parallel to that of everyone who will receive the important benefits access to Pell Grants may provide. In the facility where I obtained my education, I witnessed dozens of men journey through that same murky space I climbed out of, all under the umbrella of Second Chance Pell, and I am here to say that yes, [postsecondary opportunities for incarcerated people open doors](#), but, more importantly, they expand hearts and minds.

Data on educating incarcerated folks is easily obtained; use any search engine, and you'll discover that [recidivism decreases based on education](#). People who participate in educational programming while they're incarcerated are [48 percent less likely](#) to return to prison than those who don't. Lower recidivism means less harm, something that all of society should support, and it also saves money on incarceration.

What the numbers can't tell you, however, is how powerful a story each individual turnaround is. It's no small thing to go from arrest, to court, to prison, to college classroom, and if lucky, eventually to college graduation. For those who are given the second chance that an education can bring, their story is their superpower.

When we say that education prepares incarcerated people to reenter their communities as participating members, what's often left out is that it does so by teaching people with criminal convictions about themselves. Of course, earning a college degree means that you must learn specific information; in my case it's about conflict—the root causes, structural and systemic influences, and narratives that bring conflicting parties together. But to get to a space where I was capable of learning such specific information and all that preceded it (through earning an associate's and bachelor's degree in liberal studies) I had to engage with a process of learning about myself. That process involved confronting the mistakes I had made and the harms I had caused, as well as expanding my worldview and learning to accept that I knew much less than I once thought I did.

Incarcerated people who are involved in postsecondary education are prepared to contribute to their communities because they've taken the chance to learn about themselves and to learn about more than the culture of the prisons they find themselves in. Educating more incarcerated people will create community members who challenge the adversarial nature of the system, moving it toward more productive outcomes that encourage accountability and acceptance and also pave more paths toward healing. The importance of disseminating the quantitative data around fiscal expenditures and reduced recidivism cannot be understated, but I hope that the importance of examining stories and allowing space for the voices of incarcerated people to reach our communities also becomes a focal point for society as we move toward solidifying Second Chance Pell expansion and, ultimately, reinstating Pell Grant eligibility for every incarcerated student.

Brandon Brown holds a masters degree in conflict analysis and resolution from George Mason University. He currently resides in Maine.

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