

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/prison-education-saved-my-life-and-stopped-an-environmental-cycle-of-incarceration>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Studies have shown that expanding access to postsecondary education for people in prison [improves their chances of securing a job upon release](#).

This in turn decreases the likelihood they will reoffend and equips them to become productive, tax-paying members of society who help build, not break down, their communities.

As a former student in prison myself, I wanted to share some of my thoughts on the profound impact that education and teachers have made in honor of Teacher Appreciation Week.

I had a tough childhood growing up in the inner-city projects of Toledo, Ohio, in the 70s. I never knew my biological father, and all my mothers companions were actively involved in dealing narcotics and illicit firearms. This environment, coupled with the fact that the only real education I had was on the streets, set me on the wrong path.

In 1997, at the age of 18, I made the biggest mistake of my life and initiated a violent confrontation with law enforcement during a traffic stop in Maine. After an exchange of gunfire and a high-speed chase, I was captured the following day and charged with attempted murder of a police officer, among seven other felony charges, and was facing life in prison. Ultimately, I would receive a sentence of 19 years.

While incarcerated in jail for over 16 months awaiting trial, I spent most of time in solitary confinement for misconduct and violent behavior. I believe that access to educational materials at this time incrementally moved me away from violence, kept me sane and probably saved my life by marking a turning point.

During one of the short periods when I was not in solitary for my violent behavior against other inmates or staff, I attended a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) prep program where a young teacher who cared about me and my academic achievement helped me obtain my GED while in jail at the age of 19.

Months later at trial, I received a 19-year prison term and was sent to the Maine Department of Corrections (MDOC) where I was able to receive vocational training and take several different college-level course modules through computers and textbooks. However, I could not get academic credit because I could not afford the cost of college tuition. When people talk about barriers to prison education, this is what they mean.

Toward the end of my confinement, I applied to the University of Maine at Augusta and was accepted for admission with the help of teachers at the prison. I saved enough money to pay for one three-credit correspondence college-level course in psychology and earned an A at the end of the semester. This success empowered me to find other higher-ed opportunities and helped structure my parole release around attending college the following year, where I began my path toward earning my Associate of Applied Science and Bachelor of Arts degrees with honors.

Despite my degrees, I still struggled to find employment due to the serious nature of my criminal convictions. I was unwilling to give up and return to my previous life because of the transformation I had undergone; I was lucky that people were also not willing to give up on me.

Frustrated with my struggles to find a job, I enrolled in a Master of Public Administration program with the Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (UMD). Countless faculty members, like Dr. Tracy Hall, the first person I ever confided in about my criminal history, and others like Dr. Angela Moe and Judge Donald Shelton, gave me a chance when no one else would.

Today, I am not only employed but am a teacher myself. For the past three years, I've taught undergraduate and masters courses in criminology and criminal justice at the University of Michigan-Dearborn while I pursue my doctorate. Teaching provides me the opportunity to give back to my community and give students with a real-world perspective of how our criminal justice system does and should function.

None of this would have been possible had I not received an education that gave me the knowledge, confidence, work ethic and leadership skills required to overcome many of the barriers to reentry that still unfortunately meet many people when they are released from prison. It also would not have been possible without the teachers in my life, to whom I owe an enormous amount of gratitude.

Unfortunately, the beginning of my story is not unique, which is why we must work to remove barriers to reentry that begin in prison. As a starting point, states and the federal government should remove laws like the ban on Pell Grants for people in prison that restrict students ability to receive tuition assistance. My story should also make it clear that we have more work to do in making it easier for people to secure jobs upon their release, because people like myself deserve to be held accountable, but we also deserve a second chance so we can become productive members of our communities. I am who I am today thanks to the education I received and the teachers

who provided it to me.

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