

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/postsecondary-education-is-critical-for-the-formerly-incarcerated>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Its early Tuesday morning and I am on a flight to the Detroit-Metro Airport. Due to weather conditions, the flight is being delayed. As the plane sits on the runway at Newark Liberty International Airport, I am second guessing my participation in this trip. I am accompanying my colleagues Rebecca Silber and Sean Addie to Michigan to meet with our partners and students of the [Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project](#). Thirty minutes have passed and the plane is still grounded. I am beginning to feel anxious. My anxiety is compounded as I think about the two prisons I will be entering: Parnall Correctional Facility (SMT) and Macomb Correctional Facility (MRF). This is my first time entering a prison facility since my release in 2010. I am concerned for my well-being, and I understand that my anxiety is linked to the trauma of incarceration.

Although I've been out of prison for six years, I continue to suffer from the lingering effects of extreme sensory deprivation. As I am sitting on the plane processing this trip, I am aware that going into prison can trigger those lingering effects from my past life. What helps me cope with my anxiety is the ability to put things into context. I understand that my role as the program analyst in the Pathways Project is giving me access to enter these facilities. Knowing in advance who I would be meeting with made the process less stressful. Talking with a group of incarcerated students was easier to process in comparison to talking to people in solitary confinement.

When we arrived at Detroit-Metro Airport, we had to wait nearly two hours for our rental car, so we decide to cancel our first meeting with the Pathways students at MRF. The following morning we arrived at SMT and entered into the facility through the main office. After signing in and walking through the metal detector, we were escorted to a dorm used to house Pathways students. We were then escorted to a minimum security cell block that reminded me of the TV show *Prison Break*. Our last stop was the educational facility, where we met with the group of Pathways students. During this meeting, I wanted to be attentive and listen to the students express their concerns regarding reentry and access to resources upon their release. There was a collective understanding among the students that their participation in the Pathways Project was a positive and transformative experience. Some students were interested in working after their release and others were interested in pursuing their education. There were also concerns about access to employment, housing, and financial aid. As we neared the end of our conversation, I asked the facilitator to allow me a few minutes to share with them the role higher education had in my reentry.

I didn't write anything in advance and I was nervous trying to figure out what to say. I wanted to address their concerns and questions while at the same time sharing with them my experience and the opportunities that higher education has given me. I opened the conversation by telling them I was a formerly incarcerated person and, similar to them, I participated in a postsecondary education program while in solitary confinement. I described how the combination of hard work and available resources allowed me to transition from a postsecondary correspondence course in prison to a Bachelor of Arts degree in ethnic studies from the University of California, Berkeley. I wanted them to understand that a postsecondary education opens doors that are not easily accessible to formerly incarcerated people. I shared how my transition through higher education has allowed me to travel to different states to advocate for incarcerated people, to study at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, and [to work at the Vera Institute of Justice and NJ-STEP/ Mountainview Program](#).

Unfortunately, there was not enough time to talk to them about the correlation between recidivism and education, and how people with criminal records who have higher education levels are less likely to be re-incarcerated and more likely to achieve economic stability.

Access to a postsecondary education for incarcerated people is critical to their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The role of postsecondary education in the reentry process gives formerly incarcerated people the skills and the tools to prepare for the institutional barriers they will confront following their release.

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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