

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/increasing-interest-in-and-passion-for-learning-throughout-the-prison-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Former intern Monnero Guervil interviews Baz Dreisinger for this blog post.

What inspired you to create John Jay College of Criminal Justice's [Prison-to-College Pipeline \(P2CP\) program](#)? How does it differ, if at all, from other college in prison programs?

I was volunteering in an educational capacity in prisons. This started because I was getting letters from people in prison who read my articles and, eventually, began inviting me to give talks. In that context, almost a decade ago, I was asked by a superintendent, Why doesn't John Jay or CUNY have any programs in prisons? **[John Jay College is part of the CUNY City University of New York public university system.]** My response was that I didn't have an answer, but from then on I decided to start a program in prison. Pipeline is the key word that sets the program apart. Although now there exist slightly similar programs, at the time my idea of creating a pipeline where students get the best of both worlds through college instruction inside, in addition to the benefits of college on the outside, was totally unique to this program.

What were some of the priority objectives of the program and has the program achieved its goals?

There are many goals and one of them is getting people to pursue higher education, both in prison and when they come home. Our program has achieved this goal by, for one, offering credits on the inside. Of the men who have returned home from prison, more than a third of them are now in college and others are still very much in close contact. Another one of our goals is to increase interest in and passion for higher education and learning throughout the prison system. We have achieved this by hosting information sessions about college and building a film screening program through our partnership with the Tribeca Film Institute; our goal is to generate interest in intellectual discourse and beef up the intellectual life of prisons more generally. Overall, I think we are doing a great job of pushing the banner of learning, higher education, college attendance, and the benefits of college in a broad way throughout New York State.

What challenges do educators and colleges face when trying to implement college programs in prison?

The number one challenge is cost. The lack of eligibility for financial aid faced by incarcerated students is a major challenge, and struggling to find funding is always a hurdle. Logistics are enormous dealing with bureaucracy. I always joke that I deal with the biggest bureaucracies in New York: the City University of New York and the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. It's a lot of red tape and meticulous labor. And limited technological access makes the work even more labor intensive.

What three pieces of advice would you give to college-corrections partnerships selected to participate in the Second Chance Pell initiative?

I would advise similar programs to choose faculty carefully, because not everyone can teach well in a correctional setting. It does not require a special set of skills, but teaching in a correctional setting does demand flexibility and spontaneity, which is not related to the population but the setting things happen that can't be controlled and a professor has to be prepared to shift his or her lesson plan at a moment's notice. There are many pedagogical skills that come in handy, because of the way that teaching happens with the lack of electronics. I screen faculty carefully, although I do think overall it is generally a gift for a faculty member to teach in prison simply because of how incredibly brilliant and motivated and passionate the students are.

I would also say: find a way to involve students in some capacity. We developed Learning Exchanges, in which we bring students into the prison, but there are other ways, like bringing students from the prison to the campus when they come home. The flow should really go both ways, creating awareness among a student population about this. Constructing a bridge between those two communities is really important in terms of changing the minds of future leaders. I would also say, know what you're getting into, emotionally speaking. I don't think I quite did. The relationship you have with incarcerated students can be very different from relationships you have with students on the outside it's a beautiful and intense relationship. The more you can be prepared for the emotional ups and downs of doing this work, the better.

Lastly, always think about the reentry piece, as I find it to be the most challenging one. Running a college program on the inside, in many respects, is the easy part. You're privileged to work with brilliant students who remain committed in a contained environment but face all kinds of challenges when they come home. The lack of support systems is astounding, no matter how much we try and how much we work. So it is important to have that reentry piece in place.

Beyond academic achievement, how do students benefit from taking college courses while in prison?

It's about the degree, yes; it's about the credits, yes but it's really much more than that. Even students who don't end up coming to college when they get home for whatever reason life, family, work can complicate someone's game plan have benefitted from being a college

student. They gain more than professional benefits from developing communication skills, beyond professionally, in family relationships, in interpersonal relationships, and in dealing with the many challenging situations that await them coming home. Those kinds of skills, alongside critical thinking skills, are enhanced in a profound way in a college classroom environment.

I also think there is something that happens to the self by having been a college student, whether the degree is obtained or not. Having been in that environment, knowing that you can indeed thrive there, seeing your capabilities all of this impacts you and changes your sense of self, your confidence, and even your vision of the world. And you begin to know that there is something bigger than the daily grind, which is natural for people to get caught up in. So having had that experience changes people for life and expands their sense of place in the world their sense of what's possible. I'm very proud of our alumni network because even the students who are not in CUNY right now are connected to us and check in, attend alumni events at John Jay, and are still part of our P2CP community. Because once a part of this community, always a part of this community, whether you pursued the full degree or not.

Who is eligible for your correctional education program and have you found more of your students earning their prerequisites, such as GED or high school equivalency diploma, prior to or while in prison?

Most of our students have received their GED while in prison not all, but I'd say the majority. As far as requirements, it is the same technical requirements to come to CUNY. We also have very basic regulations as far as disciplinary actions. If someone has been on a disciplinary hold for more than a certain number of days in the past year, he or she is not eligible. Beyond that, the process is, they have to pass the CUNY assessment test in reading and writing, fill out an application, and participate in an interview. It's a rigorous selection process, but the initial eligibility requirements are quite basic.

What effect do you hope programs like yours have on others in the prison community and on post-release success?

It's definitely about the larger mission of increasing access to higher education. Our students serve as ambassadors for that and represent what it looks like to be in a thriving educational situation. It ignites people, even if they don't pursue college, to engage in critical thinking of real and substantive matters. To think critically is a goal in and of itself which is what we want from our citizens, isn't it? As far as post-release success: success is a tricky word. What do we mean by that? There are so many ways to measure that. You could use recidivism rates, because we know there's a correlation between more education and lower recidivism rates. But many are not fans of not using just that measurement, because it is really setting the bar quite low.

At John Jay, education is not about the recidivism rates of my students, wondering whether my classroom is going to keep them out of trouble with the law, so why should it be in a prison classroom? Success, to me, is living a robust life and feeling fulfilled not just getting by. Being a part of a larger community that's bigger than the daily grind is hugely valuable. These college programs do that, bringing people into a world that's connected to ideas and intellectual activity. I think the deepest way to measure success is through surveys on personal satisfaction, personal fulfillment, and the feeling that there are opportunities opened that weren't open before.

What do you look for in students who want to participate in John Jay's Prison-to-College Pipeline?

On the inside, I look for hunger, passion the same qualities I look for in students on the outside: curiosity and engagement with the material. I want to be in a classroom with someone who really wants this and wants it for the right reasons. The love of learning is what makes a good student in any setting. I also look for someone who would really benefit from this experience. Someone who is really passionate about this work but maybe doesn't have a lot of hands-on experience.

What is the biggest difference, if any, between the incarcerated students and those on the John Jay campus who are selected to participate in your program?

To compare them to general John Jay students, the ones in prison are far more committed, do not slack off, do the reading every time, and so on. Likewise, students who participate in the Learning Exchange cohort tend to be really exceptional. I'd say that these two sets of students are really on par with each other. I've heard this from many faculty members who come to teach Learning Exchanges: they will look at the prison classroom, and minus the green uniforms can't tell who's incarcerated and who isn't. There aren't tremendous differences in skills, intellect, background, or neighborhood. In general, I don't see a big difference. In a CUNY classroom the range of skills is always very broad and it's the same way in the prison, except in the prison, the commitment is there in a way that is very intense.

How important are organizations like Vera and the [Prisoner Reentry Institute](#) (part of John Jay Colleges Research Consortium) to expanding access to postsecondary education and related reentry supports to the incarcerated population generally?

Supremely important, obviously for funding and resources, but additionally, the studies Vera has done are critical in pushing the agenda. Vera has also done a great job of convening us all together. One of the things we have been pushing for this year in New York, but also on the national level, is for more unity in the work that we're doing, which is why we launched the New York Consortium for Higher Education in Prisons (NYCHEP). We are all scrambling to run our separate programs and there really should be a more unified and coherent effort nationally. I also think that what Vera and other like-minded organizations are doing is pushing the conversation to the next level at all times. Sometimes those of us in the nitty-gritty, in the trenches everyday, cannot see the forest from the trees. So to have an organization doing big visioning work is really important and Vera does a brilliant job of that.

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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