

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/building-leaders-through-education>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Why is access to education for incarcerated individuals important to you?

I had the opportunity to earn a quality two-year liberal arts degree while I was incarcerated and [after I was released] landed at the Legal Action Center, doing administrative work to [eventually becoming] a paralegal. That job opportunity allowed me to encounter hundreds of cases of formerly incarcerated people navigating very similar statutory and practical reentry barriers. Doing advocacy work post-incarceration on that issue feels like a way to give back and create the space for other people in prison to have a positive reentry experience. Without some level of higher education, however, its really difficult to navigate what is a competitive labor market.

What do you think people who oppose postsecondary education in prison need to see in order to recognize its benefits?

I think the majority of people are upset that education in general is difficult to get [so] when they see people in prison having access, they see it as a negative. I think thats an argument for increasing access to education for everyone and not taking it away from people in prison, especially when the evidence shows that it reduces recidivism, builds people and strengthens communities. If you make this a zero-sum game about who gets education and who doesnt, it makes it difficult to make the argument for education in prison. It all has to do with framing.

Opponents of postsecondary education may have preconceived notions of the nature of incarcerated men and women. How do we change those perceptions?

When I entered the system, I had my own stigma about who I would encounter while I was there. After serving six years, the saddest day was the day I left because it was the day that I was reminded that I was leaving behind some of Americas best and brightest.

We have a criminal justice system in the United States that is built on storytelling, fear, and emotions. We have ignored research, evidence-based practices, and instead engaged in tough-on-crime rhetoric and policymaking. If you can build a system based on storytelling then you can also deconstruct the system by telling stories that highlight the truth. It is my hope to humanize the issue by putting a face on the issues. The way you do that is by having people tell their stories.

If you want to get to a tipping point, you need to get America to stand up and say This is wrong. You have to have the voices of people most impacted by crime and incarceration in leadership. Thats not to the exclusions of others, but in collaboration. I want to work to build the leadership capacity of people who serve time, are from the communities, and who are most impacted, to be part of the solution. I often say, People who are closest to the problem are also closest to the solution.

The goal is not to engage policymakers, however. Policymakers have the least appetite for risk. If we think we are going to undo a system that is all about risk by engaging the people who have the least inclination to do anything risky, then I think we are fooling ourselves. The goal is to talk to the American public. The American public has a better understanding of how this system is dysfunctional. Policymakers will follow suit eventually.

How do programs like Pathways which provide postsecondary education to individuals who are incarcerated help change lives?

The idea of providing educational opportunities to people in prison makes sense. You are making up for systems that probably didnt operate properly throughout those individuals lives. Our criminal system within the United States is the repository for people who fail out of our other dysfunctional [systems]community development, economic development, housing, healthcare, and education. When you educate people, you further calibrate their moral compass. People have access to more opportunities. Education changes the way people think about the world and how they fit in to it.

I remember while studying Liberal Arts [in prison] watching a video about the Holocaust [and seeing] a piece of bulldozer equipment pushing naked dead human bodies into a mass grave. It forced me to see how much more we have in common rather than how different we are, and helped to rewrite the narrative that I grew up with in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn about people of color, how they fit into the United States, slavery, and how I fit in. The narrative I created that allowed me to engage in criminal behavior began to dissolve when I saw a video about people who didnt look like me having similar struggles. That was a huge turning point for me.

Its obviously different for different people but education gave me the opportunity to start thinking in a new direction. It does the same thing for other people. I cannot think of one person I went to college with while in prison that went back to prison, period!

The [Unlocking Potential: Perspectives on Education in Prison](#) blog series explores postsecondary education in prison and its benefitsduring and after incarcerationthrough the unique experiences and insight of former students, educators, nonprofit leaders, corrections officials, reentry experts, and more.

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