

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/changing-the-way-we-think-about-prison-and-education>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Former intern Monnero Guervil interviews Jeremy Travis for this blog post.

You have a long history of criminal justice related work experience, what originally sparked your interest in the field?

My interest in the field was accidental because my first job in criminal justice just happened. I was in New York and I needed a job and the job of a paralegal, working with the [Legal Aid Society](#), was open. Once I started working with the courts in the South Bronx, I fell in love with the field. Working at the Bronx Criminal Court allowed me to see life at its most raw and complicated state. You see people who have done terrible things to each other, police officers, lawyers, everybody working in the court system and its endlessly fascinating. What I came to learn over time is not just that its fascinating but that it deals with really important issues, such as what is the law? What does it mean to enforce the law? What is justice? And how do these issues of race, poverty, and government intersect? It has been a lifelong intellectual journey as well as a very important and personal one on a visceral level.

As a college president, what steps has John Jay College of Criminal Justice taken to provide education to currently and formerly incarcerated people?

Our first big step into this field was to create the [Prison to College Pipeline](#). The program is administered by our [Prisoner Reentry Institute](#) and the two spectacular leaders there are Ann Jacobs and Bianca van Heydoorn. The faculty advisor for the program, who was responsible for putting the idea together, is Dr. Baz Dreisinger from the English Department. The project has been a great success in many ways. It has helped us think about what it means to provide a CUNY education inside of prisons. It has brought our faculty and students to Otisville Correctional Facility, in Orange County, New York. Our students on the outside get to meet our students on the inside by taking a course together.

The program is very good for everyone involved. Based on that experience and its success, we now have the opportunity to be part of President Obamas national initiative on [Second Chance Pell](#) and have been asked by the governor, with funding from the Manhattan District Attorneys Office, to be a part of a statewide initiative to bring back college to prison. The Office of the Mayor has asked us to think about ways to connect people coming out of prison and jail to CUNY colleges. This is a very exciting time on this topic where, for a long time, there was nothing you could do because it was shut down at the federal level. So John Jay is a part of this larger national movement where we think of college education and education more broadly as at the leading edge on that national reconsideration.

How do John Jay College of Criminal Justice students benefit from studying with those currently or formerly incarcerated?

When Debbie Mukamal and Baz Dreisinger first came to me with the idea of running college courses inside of prison, the only requirement that I had was that we involve John Jay students in those courses. That was an easy requirement, because they saw the potential. The potential is for our students here, who are studying at an institution devoted to educating for justice, to have an understanding of the power of educational opportunities for those incarcerated students. Inevitably, those students who return from the classes at Otisville are always impressed by the students intelligence, motivation, and discipline, and how well prepared and how seriously the incarcerated students take their opportunities. So this is, for our students and all of us, an important reminder of the humanity of those individuals behind bars and their potential. That is an important lesson. I think for our students to have that lesson on a regular basis is an important part of their education here.

How important is correctional education, especially postsecondary, to successful reentry?

Postsecondary education is not going to be for everybody. That is true in life and that is also true for the incarcerated population. But, for everybody and those people incarcerated, the idea of going to college is a motivating idea. It can be something that you hold out and say, if I work hard I get my GED and/or a college degree. In Americas society, a college degree unlocks potential. You can earn more, you have upward mobility, you can have a better life for yourself and your family, and you can have a certain status in the community and the society. The reason it is so important for us to provide college education for those incarcerated is to recognize that while they are incarcerated, their future as returning citizens is not diminished because of their criminal conviction. Their future should be every bit as bright as anybody elses. It is saying to those men and women behind bars that when you come home because we know that almost everyone comes home a college education can be a part of your reentry plan. It can be a part of their self-image that they are a student, they can be an accomplished person in an educational sense, and its a signal from society that we value you when you return and we want you to be successful. I havent even mentioned recidivism, but to me the public safety value is there. However, that is not the main value. The main value is unlocking the human potential in people behind bars and sending a signal that we have high hopes for them when they come home.

How do you convince those opposed to college in prison that it is worth the investment?

We used to have college education in many, if not most, of our prisons and that was seen as something that we did as a society for people who are incarcerated. We have to return to this notion that the time in prison is a time to prepare for the return home. That includes drug

treatment, education, staying in touch with family, working on skills for employment, certifications for memberships and unions, everything. We have moved so far from that and the return is going to require a lot of effort. Its not just about education; its about rethinking the dignity of people who are incarcerated, their potential, and their return home. The educational lens on that challenge in some ways has the most promise because its a way of acknowledging that education is part of realizing your potential as a human being. Everybody understands this, which is why we have public education. So the symbolic and actual power of elevating the education initiative to the top of the corrections and reentry agenda is enormous. But we cant say education alone; its part of a larger re-imagination of the purpose of time while incarcerated, which is not to punish you more, not to degrade you more. Its to prepare you to return home. Thats the big reentry idea.

What excites you the most about the Vera Institute of Justice and its Pathways Project?

Vera is this great beacon of hope, common sense, and experimental collaboration of new ideas. I worked at Vera earlier in my career and consider it one of the most professional experiences I had where to this day they remain true to their mission. So its a unique and treasured institution. Pathways is at the leading edge of this national return to common sense about the importance of education, particularly college education, in prisons. What Vera and Fred Patrick (the director of Veras Center on Sentencing and Corrections) are doing around the country is helping correction administrators, legislators, and policy makers reconnect with this notion that this is just common sense. This is not pampering people, it is not a frill. The idea that a human mind that is incarcerated should be challenged to be better will in the fullness of time be back at the center table. Pathways at Vera, alongside a number of states, is working to bring that common sense idea back into mainstream. We have to measure results and understand the implementation challenges and the like. But at a symbolic and values level, what Pathways is doing is just reminding people of the humanity and potential behind bars. Thats the big challenge that our country faces and Pathways is right at the front of that initiative.

What is needed to restore/create a national consensus for postsecondary education in prison?

Whats needed is to create a values framework. It is understanding that education is more than just a program. Every student who walks through the doors of John Jay understands that motivation, that an education is a way to unlock your potential. When we deny incarcerated individuals that same sense of self, that same sense of potential, that same sense of support for their human development, and the notion that education is a platform for the realization of full citizenship, then were denying them their human dignity. The human dignity framework is the most powerful framework that we have available to us. It is embedded in our constitution, its embedded in religious traditions, its certainly embedded in the liberal education tradition that we practice here at John Jay. So we are closely aligned with this values framework. And its this framework that has, in my view, the greatest power and potential for changing the way we think about prison and the world of education and prison.

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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