

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/the-importance-of-education-for-incarcerated-women>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Former intern Monnero Guervil interviews Vivian Nixon for this blog post.

What is the story behind your passion for serving incarcerated women?

My passion for serving incarcerated women started when I began to tutor and teach GED classes in prison. It was there that I saw the economic disparities and barriers that exist for many incarcerated women in this country. I was fortunate enough to have a good upbringing, graduate high school, and even attend some college classes before my own incarceration. However, being able to use my fortune to help fellow incarcerated women educate themselves was a real turning point in my life. When I was released from prison, I went back to school and finished my degree. That was thanks in large part to the non-profit I now run, [College & Community Fellowship](#). CCF helped to change my life from a spiral of addiction, low self-esteem, and shame. My education opened doors for me, helped me become the leader I am today, and gave me the self-confidence to know that the sky is the limit when it comes to my own success. I want every woman with criminal justice involvement to have access to the transformative powers of education, and to be given the fair chance to better her own life for herself, for her family, and for her community as a whole.

In your experience, what is often the biggest gain for incarcerated people who have participated in correctional education programs, particularly postsecondary education?

Despite recent calls for criminal justice reform, incarceration in America is still riddled with stigma and collateral consequences. Participation in in-prison education helps incarcerated students better prepare for the harsh realities that are associated with reentry. Not only does education make a job applicant more competitive for potential employers, but it is important for formerly incarcerated people to be able to point to their degrees and future when deflecting potential questions regarding their pasts. There is a reason that participants in correctional education programs show a 43 percent reduction in odds of recidivating, according to a [2013 RAND study](#). Education equips incarcerated students with the necessary tools and self-confidence to stand up in an already competitive job market.

What role has religion or spirituality played in your passion and advocacy for college in prison? How might that translate to others?

Religion can be transformational when combined with critical thinking skills to determine one's own spiritual needs. Critical thinkers find spiritual and religious connections that work for them in the context of the way they live and the cultures they embrace. To me, spirituality is an added dimension in one's ability to overcome obstacles.

What is one of the major challenges incarcerated women face that the public might not be aware of?

Not only are formerly incarcerated women more likely than men to struggle with substance abuse and mental health problems that stem from physical or sexual abuse, but women also have a tendency to be a central caretaker for their families as well. That is why CCF provides trauma-informed and gender-responsive support for our students. Despite the fact that women are being incarcerated at nearly double the rate of men, the overall population remains small, which makes organizations like CCF who specifically cater to women a rare but vital presence in our society. By tailoring our program to the specific needs of our women, we try and give them the tools they need to better market themselves, and to help them feel a sense of self-accomplishment.

Why is it particularly important for the formerly incarcerated to receive resources to help with higher education, leadership skills, and reentry supports such as childcare, employment, and housing?

Education is the difference between giving formerly incarcerated people a life in which they can sustain their existence, and one in which they can thrive, and break the cycle of incarceration for generations to come. Reentry is hard, especially without the education and skills to be competitive in today's job market. Without the skills to succeed, it may seem easier to let rejection from potential employers or housing get you down, making sliding into old habits of illegal activity that much more tempting. When you educate a person, however, you give them the self-confidence to know that they can be competitive, and better able to deal with both rejection and old temptation. Our students at CCF are living proof of this. The national recidivism rate, at which a person is likely to be rearrested within three years of release, is about 44 percent nationally; for CCF students, that drops to just 2 percent. Education truly instills the necessary confidence in a person to be able to deal with rejection, to truly stay out of trouble, and begin a career they can be proud of.

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

Given the fact that 95 percent of those in prison will one day be released, it makes sense that we want returning citizens to be as equipped as possible for the often tumultuous and stigmatized road of reentry. In-prison education has been proven to ease that burden, and it is by no means a novel or new concept. In fact, up until the mid-1990s, incarcerated students in prison had access to more than 300 in-prison college programs across the country. However, that right was taken from students in prison thanks to the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which banned Pell grants to currently incarcerated individuals, and immediately crippled the once

thriving in-prison college programs to just 12 by 2005. This May, President Obama in part reinstated Pell grants for students in prison using an Experimental Sites Initiative through the Department of Education and Department of Justice. However, the ESI program is only temporary, which is why CCF and the Education from the Inside Out Coalition support the [Restoring Education and Learning \(REAL\) Act](#). If passed, the REAL Act would permanently reinstate Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students across the country, and once and for all give all students fair access to an education in this country.

What affect does postsecondary education have on the next generation? How does a mother's education impact her child's education?

At CCF we know better than most the issues formerly incarcerated women face when reentering society. More often than not, our women struggle with histories of substance abuse, rape, violence, childhood trauma, domestic violence, mental illness, and poverty. Often times, these traumas span back generations in families. However, [we have learned](#) that education helps to transcend past the multi-generational cycle of incarceration within families. Such an impact spans beyond just mother to child. Our students care for and support children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, sisters, and daughters-in-law, and by tailoring our program in a two-generation approach, we've found the success of our students really does impact all members of a family. In short, by providing comprehensive educational opportunities to formerly incarcerated women and the people they care for, we can ensure a legacy of opportunity passes from one generation to the next.

What are examples of how incarcerated mothers stay involved with their children's education? How does it differ during incarceration and after?

A parents incarceration takes a toll on children. In fact, studies show that parental incarceration can be more traumatic on kids than even a parents death or divorce. Such trauma can not only negatively affect childrens education, but their health and social relationships as well; not to mention, it can increase the likelihood that they may one day become incarcerated themselves. At CCF, we believe the best way a formerly incarcerated woman can help her child is by being a role model. When women have the self-esteem to invest in their own education, suddenly the child sees a future of personal potential as well. For many of our students, they are the first to earn a degree in their families; however, they will not be the last. Having a parent that has turned their life around using education shows their family and community that they are worth investing in too.

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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