

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/getting-on-the-same-page-for-prison-education>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What changes do you see in incarcerated students once they begin pursuing a college education?

College education helps instill confidence in prisoners. I was raised in a way where my parents told me, You are going to college. Some of the folks that we deal with were never told that. They didn't even know it was an option.

Why is building trust between prison administration and inmates so important for college education programs?

For people in prison to see that the prison supports their pursuit of a college education is huge. Demonstrating that we took all this time to design the program, write the proposal, and work with Vera is showing them and not just telling them. Prison administrators and their college partners must be committed to fulfilling the commitments made to the students in terms of program quality, curriculum offerings, support services, and related program resources. When changes are required, they should be communicated and discussed with the students in a timely manner.

What has surprised you about the Pathways Project in Michigan to date?

The data that Jackson College and its [Dean of Arts and Sciences Todd Butler](#) provided on our course success rates astounds me. There's a 94 percent course success rate for Michigan Pathways prison students compared to a 76 percent rate for students that actually go to Jackson College. That is a huge demonstration of the potential that we have in prison. Prisoners need that higher level of education to be able to reach their potential.

Have you seen any changes within DOC due to the Pathways Project in Michigan?

The biggest change is how much the facilities have prioritized this project. I wasn't sure how that was going to play out given the various program initiatives already underway in the facilities. The warden prioritizes Pathways so that means the facility staff and facility operations prioritize it. We've done a lot of things to add to the success of the program such as designated housing areas for the students to help foster a learning community, dedicated study hall periods when classrooms are not being used for instruction, and enhanced tutoring services for students in the developmental education courses. Since many of our students rely on institutional jobs as a primary source of funds to purchase commissary items, we decided to provide wages on par with those for facility jobs to students enrolling and participating in the college program so that they would not be disadvantaged in doing so. Via Pathways, we have also been able to mix custody levels to allow interested and eligible students to participate.

What are some of the challenges prisons face when trying to run college programs?

We need to support and prepare instructors on what to expect when they come into this environment, and teach them how to understand facility operations and processes.

At MDOC, we haven't encountered many barriers in successfully collaborating with Jackson College, our higher education partner, in implementing college courses at the two correctional facilities which are part of the Pathways Project. I've found that it is important to have open, honest, and ongoing communication between corrections and college staff and administrators as a way of developing a healthy respect for and appreciation of each other's roles and responsibilities. The MDOC director, his executive team, and facility administrators are also very supportive and that helps.

How important is the role of the prison in the students' transition from being an incarcerated student to attending college post-release?

Our budget this year provides for another 15 employment counselors across the state so we can now adequately service people as they leave prison. The employment counselors will help students secure federal financial aid to pay for continued enrollment post-release. We'll work with college advisors before the students leave prison to make sure they get enrolled in college in the community. The employment counselors also connect the students to community-based reentry service providers who can assist with housing, family support, and other needs.

What are the key takeaways that other states who want to start a college program in their prisons need to consider?

Take the time to engage in careful and thoughtful planning with all the key partners: corrections, colleges, probation/parole, and other service providers in building the program. It is also important to get input from the students as you design and develop the initiative, as well as for ongoing quality improvement, so we created student advisory boards at the two prisons where Pathways operates. Regular, ongoing, and honest communication between corrections and college staff is crucial and helps build trusting relationships that can

withstand whatever challenges emerge. If on-the-ground realities change in a manner that prevents a previously-agreed upon commitment from happening, reach out to your collaborative partners and troubleshoot to develop alternative options and plans. For example, a classroom previously identified during planning meetings as available for a college course at a specific time may turn out to not be available due to higher enrollment in the mandatory GED program. In that instance, timely and thoughtful discussions between college and corrections staff should succeed in producing a matrix of course offerings and room allocations acceptable to all parties. Also, make sure that staff and administrators at all levels are fully informed about the program how it operates, who is eligible, points of contact, etc. as they may get questions, emails, letters, or phone calls about the program. You want as many allies as possible with sound and accurate information.

How do people in prison who are enrolled in college benefit the prison community at large?

We're seeing a big push of students who want to get into the program because they see how successful those in it are. They see them being good role models and making good decisions. That sets the tone for the whole housing unit which then sets the tone for the whole facility. Staff like working in Pathways units. Prisoners see Pathways students interacting with a college professor. That's huge! We recently had the president of Jackson College (our in-prison education provider) and professors come in and pass out awards. The other prisoners get to see and hear about it, too. They see their fellow inmates proudly walking across the yard with their certificates of accomplishment. To me, that speaks volumes. It's a motivator.

What does the future hold for the Pathways Project in Michigan?

The Pathways Project has really set the tone for providing college education to interested students in the Michigan Department of Corrections. It has opened up doors. This is a good way to get our foot in the door for bigger things that we'd like to accomplish such as college opportunities at more correctional facilities throughout the state. Given our early successes to date and what is already known about the impact of education in reducing recidivism, increasing employment, and positively impacting families, I hope we are able to acquire the necessary financial support for the long-term sustainability and expansion of the Pathways Project.

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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