

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/the-challenges-and-rewards-of-teaching-in-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What strikes you the most about the college students in prison?

I was wowed by the work ethic of these students. They have such unparalleled desire and a hunger to learn. The stakes that these folks are up against and what they are willing to give is incredible. Almost every one of our professors says the same thing. In almost every way possible these inmates have failed. They are in prison and have spent years in this revolving door and yet they have hope that this time, this time as students engaged in higher education it is going to be different. And we are witnessing that they have grit and determination to make it.

What are some of the challenges that educators face when trying to teach college programs in prison?

As a faculty member on campus, the environment is yours. The rules of the class are dictated by you. When you walk into a prison, you don't have control of those things. You lose your capacity to communicate with your students any time of the day or night. It's a stripped down, almost painfully limited teaching environment. It can be noisy. You don't have the tools that you are used to working with. Corrections officers often have to interrupt you. There are students that are pulled in and out of class in ways that you are not accustomed to at all. Just getting yourself and your materials into and out of the prison to teach is not something you can take for granted. There are a lot of hassles to put up with.

What lessons can we take from history on the importance of higher education initiatives?

The Morrill Act of 1862 led to an unprecedented federal and state investment in education by giving federal land to states for the purpose of creating "land grant" institutions for agriculture, mining, and teaching. Eventually, these institutions became places like Ohio State University, Indiana University, and University of Wisconsin. It was the first large-scale investment in higher education by the federal government, with each state making further investments.

We did the same thing after World War II. We had hundreds of thousands of men coming home who had been at war for years. As a nation we asked, How are we going to transition these men from a fighting force and reintegrate them into society? To answer that question we made the investment of the GI Bill. We had people going to school who had never gone to school before; it forever changed higher education and in the opinion of many, fueled the economic engine of the 1950s.

Higher education in prison should be the economic investment of our time. During the era of mass incarceration, prison contracts, construction, and hiring were investments that one could argue benefited the rest of society. As we begin to imagine a reinvestment in a prison economy, it would be most beneficial if we invested in the men and women that are preparing to re-enter society. Higher education would be a true "economy" of the prisons, since it would finally be a "plan and investment to successfully transition inmates back to their communities. We have literally hundreds of thousands of men and women that are preparing to be released. What are we going to do with them? How are we going to get from where we are now to where we need to be as a society? The answer has to be a national investment in education, training and reentry.

How can colleges be open to students with criminal records who want to pursue education post-release?

Look at policies. Imagine what it would be like to navigate that system as a person who has a felony record and is formerly incarcerated. Think about all the hurdles we throw up in the admissions process. We looked at our own policies on campus. I found a handful of policies that were real obstacles to formerly incarcerated individuals. We will continue to review these policies as we move forward.

How can formerly incarcerated students benefit the college community?

I think because of their life situation and all they have been through and how much they have been hard pressed to overcome, they don't let you, as an instructor, get away with things while teaching class.

What has surprised you about Jackson Colleges participation in the Pathways Project?

Our institution thought that Pathways was going to be this little project we would try, we would play our small part of this larger project and then retreat back to what we knew before. But the program has been so powerful for that there is no going back. I'm watching our institution build the capacity to regularize providing college education to people in prison. This has become an ingrained part of what our institution does and will do in the future. That's change.

Early on I was asked by a member of our campus if this effort to the prison was simply about money. I answered, Well, yeah, we have to pay bills. At some level, initiatives like these do have to have financial viability or they are simply not sustainable. Funding and guidance

from the Pathways project allowed us to try something that would not have tried without the project.

Now we are starting to see competition. Other institutions are looking at this and saying, Maybe providing our services to people in prison is a possibility. It opens up opportunities for students that we never had on our campus before. This idea of the marketplace at work might be the game changer that maybe none of us ever expected.

For community colleges, I see this as a market opportunity as a way to make money. I am fine with them getting involved on that basis, because once they do, they are going to be impacted in probably much of the same ways that we are being impacted in this work.

How do prison education programs impact correctional staff?

The Michigan Department of Corrections is being asked to do a lot. They are being asked to rethink all assumptions. When we went in to do student excellence awards this year, we brought together Pathways students and Jackson Colleges president, provost, and faculty members in regalia to hand awards to our students. I watched correctional officers come in and do a count and watch and hear whats going on. Over and over we heard from corrections personnel how important it was to see and participate in something so positive.

What impact do you hope these programs have on others in the prison community?

Seeing whats possible for their futures. Asking themselves, why am I not doing that? Why I am not in that class? Why do I not want that for myself? I think theres such a rich possibility for the whole prison community as well as the outside world to question our assumptions and to think beyond what we presently think is possible.

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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