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# Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration: Possibility Under Constraint

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# Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration: Possibility Under Constraint

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Erin L. Castro is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Utah and an Instructor Affiliate with the Education Justice Project, a program providing higher educational opportunities to students who are incarcerated at Danville Correctional Center, a medium high security prison in central Illinois. Michael Brawn, Daniel E. Graves, Orlando Mayorga, Johnny Page, and Andre Slater are advanced undergraduate students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign through the Education Justice Project. All authors welcome comments and critique of the essay. Erin L. Castro can be reached at: [erin.castro@utah.edu](mailto:erin.castro@utah.edu). Michael Brawn (R48901), Orlando Mayorga (K82578), and Andre Slater (K55214) can be reached at Danville Correctional Center, 3820 East Main Street, Danville, IL 61834. Daniel Graves (B52497) can be reached at Robinson Correctional Center, 13423 East 1150th Avenue, Robinson, IL 62454. Johnny Page can be reached at: [pagejohnny73@yahoo.com](mailto:pagejohnny73@yahoo.com). Statement from the authors: We kindly ask that the reader not think of what follows as prison writing, but as scholarship to be engaged and critiqued. Thank you.

## **Authors**

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## Abstract

In this essay, we explore the purposes of higher education in prison during an era of mass incarceration and contend that the potential of postsecondary educational opportunity in carceral spaces is undermined by a single-minded focus on reducing recidivism. Among the over 2.2 million individuals behind bars in the United States, only 6 percent have access to formal postsecondary educational opportunities, and as a result, most incarcerated students are not on an educational pathway likely to result in academic degree attainment. We must move beyond a recidivist paradigm not because certificate-based and vocational training is not valuable, but because it is simply not enough of what college-in-prison programming can be or do. Drawing upon the experiences of higher education students who are incarcerated, our analysis reveals how even well-intended practices in prison spaces pose obstacles to seeing incarcerated individuals as potential postsecondary students and degree completers.

## Keywords

incarceration, liberatory education, prison, recidivism

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The United States boasts the highest incarceration rate on the planet, with over 2.2 million people stored behind bars and effectively removed from the realm of social consideration (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). The current rate of incarceration is unprecedented. For the first time in history, nearly one in every 100 adults in the United States is currently sitting in a jail or prison, making the United States home to more incarcerated people than any other country in the world (National Research Council, 2014). Among the total incarcerated population, only six percent have access to formal postsecondary educational opportunities (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). While such opportunities range from GED programming, adult basic education, career and technical education, and academic-based college courses, an overwhelming 75 percent are certificate-based or vocational in nature (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). Consequently, the majority of students who are incarcerated are not on an educational pathway likely to result in academic degree attainment.

Contemporary higher education policy and infrastructure disregards incarcerated individuals as potential postsecondary students. A quick look at prevalent research on higher education leadership and policy is striking: innovations in multiple pathways (e.g., Oakes & Saunders, 2010), expanding the role of career and technical education (e.g., Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson & Lamback, 2014), increasing readiness for college and career (e.g., Dougherty, 2014), implementing common core state standards (e.g., Conley, 2014), and scaling stackable credentials (Ganzglass, 2014) all fail to consider the over 2.2 million incarcerated people in the United States as potential beneficiaries of postsecondary degree completion efforts. Even amid important conversations around diversity and equity in higher education,

incarcerated students are not considered as potential postsecondary students. Omni-present diversity mission statements on college and university campuses espouse commitments to inclusivity, but they too fall short of explicitly including incarcerated and felony disenfranchised individuals as part of these efforts.<sup>1</sup> While advances continue in the creation of viable postsecondary educational pathways for chronically underserved and systemically disadvantaged students, incarcerated individuals are rendered invisible, as evidenced by their exclusion in dominant higher education discourse, policy, and research.

The absence of a national systemic infrastructure that provides accredited pathways out of prisons and into higher educational institutions suggests, too, that incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and felony disenfranchised individuals are not yet considered as potential postsecondary degree completers.<sup>2</sup> The United States does not currently have an integrated system, one where incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are included together in national conversations and policy agendas. The Department of Corrections facilitates the provision of postsecondary educational opportunity inside jails and prisons, and as a result, access is erratic, constricted, and nonexistent. The lack of an integrated system and infrastructure to facilitate communication and collaboration among federal, state, local, institutional, private, and not-for-profit agencies may lend insight into why incarcerated and felony disenfranchised people are not yet considered members of a growing national conversation around degree completion efforts.

At issue in the present analysis is the kind, quality, and scope of college-in-prison programming made available for people who are incarcerated. Relative to the overall incar-

<sup>1</sup> Our criticism is not to discredit the important work being done in these areas by listing the aforementioned authors and research, but rather to point out that even well-intended higher education policy efforts and discourses fail to include incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations.

<sup>2</sup> Developments are being made in this area, but they are far from mainstream. The Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project, lead by the Vera Institute of Justice, provides an example of a degree-completion pathway for students who are incarcerated. You can learn more about their program here: <http://www.vera.org/project/pathways-prison-postsecondary-education-project>

cerated population, there exists entirely too few postsecondary educational opportunities in prisons. The vast majority of incarcerated individuals, roughly 2,068,000 people, do not have access to postsecondary education of any kind, and restricted access is due in large part to the removal of need-based federal funding. Two decades ago, the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act eliminated Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals and prompted most university-in-prison programs to close because of lack of sustainable federal funding (Scott & Saucedo, 2013). The steady withdrawal of higher education programs from United States prisons effectively severed access to educational opportunity for incarcerated people, and as a result, severely limited future educational access as formerly incarcerated individuals find themselves without the necessary educational credentials to successfully pursue postsecondary opportunities upon release. A 2011 investigation by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) revealed that support for postsecondary education in prison, or “postsecondary correctional education,” decreased from nearly \$23 million in 2008 to \$17 million in 2009 as a result of provisions made to the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315) (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011).

The presence and shape of postsecondary education programs within prison remains greatly under examined, particularly from a higher education perspective.<sup>3</sup> Despite staggering rates of incarceration, there exists a dearth of rigorous and trustworthy research on the topic (Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, & Wilcox, 2005; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). In 2005, IHEP released a report examining national postsecondary correctional policy, which prompted the United States Department of Education to review partnerships between community colleges and prisons.

Four years later in 2009, the United States Department of Education released, *Partnerships Between Community Colleges and Prisons: Providing Workforce Education and Training to Reduce Recidivism*, which aims to assist community colleges in providing education and training to all local residents. Since 2009, IHEP released a follow-up report in 2011 unveiling the results of a national survey of postsecondary correctional education that relied upon the self-reporting of prison programs.<sup>4</sup> IHEP’s research revealed that of the participating states, approximately 71,000 individuals were enrolled in vocational or academic postsecondary programs in the 2009–2010 academic year. They found that incarcerated students are not earning degrees in significant numbers at either the two- or four-year levels. In the 2009–2010 academic year, 9,900 incarcerated people earned a certificate, 2,200 earned an associates degree, and nearly 400 students earned a bachelor’s degree.

The lack of material infrastructure and viable pathways for incarcerated individuals to access postsecondary education presents a problem for the field of higher education policy and leadership. Currently, the viability and vibrancy of postsecondary educational programs in prisons hinges on a very specific and compelling rationale: College-in-prison programs reduce recidivism. An overwhelming majority of the extant literature on college-in-prison programming focuses on post-release effectiveness as measured by rates of recidivism (e.g., Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, & Wilcox, 2005; Chappell, 2004; Cho & Tyler, 2010; Gehring, 2000; Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knutson, 2012; Vacca, 2004). The reduced recidivism rationale is an important site of political, ideological, and social contestation because it governs the scope of educational possibility. In their meta-analysis of programs that provide

<sup>3</sup> The Prison Studies Project, a non-profit organization, is currently compiling the first nationwide directory of postsecondary education programs in United States prisons. The project provides a state-by-state directory of primarily on-site, degree-granting postsecondary programs in United States prisons and estimates that every state has at least one degree-granting program, with the exception of Michigan, Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. Thirteen states have one program, seven states have anywhere from 2 to 5 programs, and two states, New York and Indiana, have more than five programs (<http://prisonstudiesproject.org/directory>). The Project’s work is an important step in the direction of learning more about what, if any, postsecondary educational opportunities exist for incarcerated people.

<sup>4</sup> The following states did not respond to IHEP’s survey: Alabama, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

education to adults who are incarcerated, the RAND Corporation (2014) underscored the empirical relationship between access to postsecondary education during incarceration and reduced recidivism and found that access to education while incarcerated reduces an individual's "risk of recidivating" by 13 percent (p. 1). The provision of postsecondary education in prison is regularly framed and regulated within a recidivist paradigm, where the sole or primary reason to provide access for incarcerated individuals is to decrease their likelihood of returning to prison. When the purposes of higher education in prison contexts are anchored in a rationale of recidivism, a vision for the educative possibilities within carceral spaces can become constrained. Yet, the social currency of recidivist logic is a function of what Michelle Alexander (2010) might call part of the machinery of mass incarceration, where rationing educational opportunity to incarcerated individuals is reasonable insofar as it prevents future offenses. While reduced recidivism is an important outcome of college-in-prison programming, it is a problematic foundation upon which to design the scope of all postsecondary educational opportunity for incarcerated students.

Our aim in this analysis is to consider what higher education should look like within prison spaces during an era of mass incarceration. In order to imagine what is possible, we detour from a recidivist paradigm to redirect vision and interrupt commonsensical thinking around who deserves access to higher education and for what reasons. Using Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power, we critique anti-recidivist discourse as motivation for providing access to postsecondary education in prisons and turn to a liberatory framework (Freire, 1970) to highlight some of its limitations.

### **Prisons as Places of Discipline and Docility**

Foucault's emphasis on discipline and docility (1977) undergirds our exploration of the

purposes of postsecondary education in carceral spaces. Foucault positions prisons as social institutions that are invested in the organization and management of power. Prisons accomplish management through the administration of people and, specifically, of bodies. For Foucault, prisons aim to produce disciplined bodies that are subject to control through surveillance and regulation. Regulation occurs in subtle and sometimes invisible ways within prisons, which he argues helps to justify their existence. Widespread acceptance leads to the normalization of particular regulations and, consequently, people and bodies become docile and able to be ruled.

The provision of postsecondary education in prison can be understood as a type of discipline in that it also produces certain kinds of bodies. For Foucault, the more obedient the body, the more useful it is to society in terms of economic utility. He states that the practice of discipline functions by disassociating power from the body by turning it into an "aptitude" or "capacity" that the state, via the prison system, seeks to increase (p. 138). He argues that economic exploitation separates force (e.g., regulation) from the product of labor and that "disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination" (p. 138). In other words, a regime of education can serve as a normalized regulatory mechanism that functions to produce docile bodies by increasing certain capacities and aptitudes within individuals that have economic value.

When the overwhelming majority of postsecondary education programs in prisons are vocational in nature, the ideological undercurrent of discipline is revealed. There exists a desire to produce labor-ready bodies, bodies that are ready to work in practical areas that support dominant power interests and structures. If obedience is tied to economic utility, then a specific type of education regimen is needed to cultivate docility. A liberatory education is one that aims to raise critical consciousness, which would be

incongruent with the mission of prison and its associated narrow provision of education and training.

## Methodology

This article is a co-written project and the culmination of a three-year scholarly collaboration among the authors. In 2012, Erin Castro taught a Foundations of Higher Education course at Danville Correctional Center, a medium-high security, all-male prison in central Illinois. The students, Daniel Graves, Michael Brawn, Johnny Page, Andra Slater, and Orlando Mayorga were enrolled in the course through the Education Justice Project (EJP), a program providing higher educational opportunities at the prison, and have been students in EJP since 2007. EJP students have taken a number of advanced undergraduate courses on the study of higher education as a field, and their scholarship has been published and presented at refereed conferences. The foundations course was the impetus for an engaged scholarly collaboration around the aims and purposes of higher education in prison that is ongoing. In 2012, Erin presented the scholarship at the American Educational Studies Association annual conference and in 2013 presented a more developed version of the work at the annual conference for the Association for the Study of Higher Education. After each conference, all authors communicated either in-person or via correspondence to address feedback and suggestions. The present manuscript is one product of ongoing participatory action research and analysis.

All authors participated in bi-annual workshop sessions at Danville Correctional Center to brainstorm, share ideas, and discuss next steps for engagement and publication. One of the workshop sessions surfaced a question guiding the present essay: What should postsecondary education look like in prison? Each of the authors then wrote papers in response to that question, and Erin provided feedback and facilitated the sharing of additional reading materials. The constraints

of incarceration pose challenges, but to the extent possible, all authors worked collaboratively to intellectually build, write, and edit this essay. Erin and the students exchanged edited drafts and additional resources via email with the generous help of EJP staff and volunteers for the last two and a half years.

## An Introduction to the Essays

The authors who are incarcerated hold a number of postsecondary certificates, trainings, licensures, and associates degrees. Together, we have decided to include information about their length of incarceration and academic accomplishments because we feel that this descriptive information provides insight into who they are as college students and their general perspectives regarding the purposes of higher education. It is also valuable information for readers to have in their attempt to reimagine the possibility of postsecondary education under constraint.

The following scholarly essays function in multiple ways, providing a glimpse into the personal and affective nature of new knowing as well as critiquing well-intended progressive approaches to prison pedagogy. The analyses, when taken together, aim to ground us in the deeply human endeavor that is teaching and learning, and the emancipatory potential of purposeful critical thinking and reflection via postsecondary education in prison. The first essay is by Johnny Page who after serving 23 years in prison was released in October, 2014. The second essay is by Michael Brawn who has served 9 years in prison. The third essay is by Daniel Graves who has served 21 years in prison. The fourth essay is by Orlando Mayorga who has served 17 years in prison. The final essay is by Andra Slater who served 18 years in prison and was released in December, 2014.

## The Social Good: Why Postsecondary Education for the Incarcerated Needs the Liberal Arts



*Johnny Page*

Although vocational training and certification provides the incarcerated student with the requisite skills to make a living, the breadth of knowledge and accompanying consciousness that students may develop as a result of a liberal arts education provides that same student with the necessary utensils to make a life. As a student who has been incarcerated for over twenty years, I can personally speak to the transformative nature of a liberal arts education. The direct benefit of the skills I obtained through the many vocational training programs in which I have participated is still yet to be seen (i.e., obtaining gainful employment); however, the impact that the liberal arts has had on me is visible in my everyday walk.

I have spent the better part of my young life, 41 years, as an incarcerated person. Incarcerated as a teenager, I spent the first few years of my incarceration engaging in many of the same socially destructive behaviors that subsequently led to my incarceration, yet, behavior that would also lead to my liberation. Ironically, it was my involvement in gang culture that ultimately led to my becoming an incarcerated student. Prior to my incarceration I had been a member of one of the larger street-prison gangs, and while incarcerated I continued this affiliation. As a member of this particular group, school was mandatory for young members new to the system, and as such, I was “encouraged” to take advantage of the many educational opportunities that existed. At the time, I think my decision to choose an educational program was not unlike any other college student: to satisfy my parents, or in this case, the gang. I also wanted to make myself employable, although at the time, obtaining a job upon release was not foremost on my mind.

My life as an incarcerated student began with vocational education at a local community college that offered classes to the incarcerated at the maximum security prison in which I was housed. Motivated by “making a living,”

I took as many vocational classes as were available. Although I had obtained a variety of skills that would create some hope of obtaining a job upon release, I was still making decisions that were reflective of the choices that led me to prison in the first place. It wasn’t until I was challenged by an older incarcerated person and scholar to challenge my thinking that I began to take classes in the liberal arts. He told me the name of some books that he thought that I should read, books that he thought would challenge me as well as broaden my perspective. He also suggested that I take an academic course, an idea I was initially resistant to. I couldn’t see how taking classes in English, philosophy, art, western civilization, or any of the other classes traditionally associated with the liberal arts would translate into me being able to feed my family. However, after some insistence from him, I decided to give the liberal arts a try.

The classes for me were difficult, not because the work was necessarily difficult, but because they required me to look at the world through a different set of lenses. In many respects, I liken this experience to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. For most of my existence, I had been living in a box (cave) and my every action, behavior, and attitude was reflective of this box, a box that I wasn’t even aware existed. As I began taking classes in the liberal arts, awareness of the box began to surface. The struggle of those earlier classes, in many respects, lifted the lid off this box exposing me to a world that I didn’t know existed.

In his address to educators in 1963, James Baldwin states that “the paradox of education is precisely this: that as a person becomes conscious, they begin to examine the society in which they were educated,” and I can state unequivocally that this is what happened to me (para. 2). Upon becoming conscious, I could no longer walk the path that I had previously traveled. Wearing these newly acquired lenses, I began to examine the society in which I was educated. I could no longer willingly or unwillingly live in a box, and exposure to the liberal arts was the catalyst. I



remember sitting in a rhetoric class some sixteen years ago, some five years after my first academic course, when the instructor asked why education was important to me, and my response was that I wanted to ensure that I was never again a prisoner of the cave. When asked what I meant, I began to explain Plato's allegory of the cave. Over these twenty-plus years, I've acquired a number of vocational certifications such as custodial maintenance, print and press operating, and cosmetology. The skills I obtained through these programs will one day lead to my employment. However, through the liberal arts I have increased my consciousness, which has allowed/forced me to challenge my thinking and how I perceive the world and my place within it today.

We can no longer afford to allow segments of the population to continue to merely exist in caves or simply equip them to manage while within these caves. We have to give them—us—the opportunity to live, to see the world beyond the shadows, and to challenge thinking patterns. Access to the liberal arts gives those similarly situated like myself an opportunity to move outside of the cave, to be enlightened, to think critically, and to recognize the shadows for what they are. How we educate is just as important as who we educate. We can no longer ignore the value of a liberal arts education on underserved populations, particularly the incarcerated.

### **Transformation Through Postsecondary Education in Prison: Edification, the Catalyst for New Men**

*Daniel E. Graves*

Imagine a man who has been convicted of a crime in which the state requires he serve no less than five years in prison. Imagine upon committing this offense, his first, he has no high school diploma and reads at a 7th grade level. Imagine instead of being sentenced to five years in prison being sentenced to a

bachelor's degree.

Imagine this man being released from prison as if he, on a beautiful day, graduated from college.

Imagine education being the one aspect of his new life that will keep him free.

Amongst long-term convicts, of which I am one, there is a universal feeling that we don't count. We have been forgotten. This landfill (prison) is where our America throws its trash, and simply hopes it never has to look upon that rubbish again. Because society tends to rid itself of things that are no longer useful—trash, we trapped bodies, men of all hues, have been placed here, thrown here, discarded, forgotten, or as one of my friends says, “consciously dis-remembered.” Some say, one person's trash is another's treasure. Here, in these landfills, America's trash, once cleaned up (with education), once repaired (taught—in academic settings), once embraced and given new worthiness (free and productive), trash becomes elements to be treasured.

To educate is a humane act. To deny education, to an attentive student, is immoral. As an American who has taken advantage of all available higher educational programming since the onset of my incarceration, I write with the voices of many men who have done similarly. Here, however, I don't speak for the need of higher education for trapped bodies. All of the numbers show us that recidivism is greatly reduced if, during incarceration, the imprisoned take part in college-in-prison programs. I, instead, speak of the transcendent quality of higher education in prison and the greater need for the trapped population to experience that transcendence.<sup>5</sup>

As a trapped body for over 20 years, I, like two dozen close and also confined friends, have all served at least a dozen years, obtained a GED, earned several vocational certificates and an associate's degree, and have

**19** <sup>5</sup> Here I differentiate between those who are trapped incarcerated men who have firsthand experience of the transformative quality of higher education in prison from those who are in prison either serving their time unproductively, or those who are treated and respond as caged beasts.

all changed and transformed while imprisoned. These transformations were not due to the excessive sentences given to these men, many who are first-time offenders, nor the countless hours spent unnaturally locked in a cell. Rather, the transformations were due to postsecondary educational opportunities and accomplishments.

In-depth conversations with these men have revealed their epiphanic moments of change, moments when one awakens from an intellectual slumber. These moments are moments of revelation, when one awakens from a deadness to realize that education was a myth to you for a long time, long before you were locked up, and you suddenly realize you are living in an environment that boasts some of the highest levels of education on the planet. One man's moment was due to the studies on a course about feminism; another's happened during a lecture covering critical pedagogy. All were moments of reflection, moments of thoughtfulness, moments when these men knew that they would never commit another crime; moments when they were sure their debts to society were paid; moments when we no longer represented that which fills landfills but were now, if given the chance, productive members of society.

Teaching, for me, is merely intensified learning. As I stood at the front of a class and taught fellow trapped men, and several staff members, I knew I would never return to prison. I knew as I held their attention that I was a new man, a changed man. That same evening, when I returned to the cell that has been assigned to me and laid in the bunk with my eyes closed and my mind wide awake, I knew many of my failures and many shortcomings were due to a lack of education. This realization is significant because it represented a true learning experience, critical pedagogy, active listening, growth, and a consciousness that now exists where ignorance is no longer acceptable. Oppression—in any form—is offensive. My transformation was the instant I knew that I hated it here not just for me, but for all of us—and I was instantly

enraged. Enraged because I realized that critical educational transformation should not have come to me as I deteriorated in a landfill; enraged because I did not love education long ago; enraged because I see hundreds of men daily, zombie-like figures, who will not pick up a book for the extent of their prison sentence; enraged because even though I knew I would never commit a crime again and I had learned from my mistakes, I still had to serve the rest of my sentence.

Imagine facilities where people who commit crime can go and, through education, become rehabilitated—transformed.

Imagine what once was considered a piece of waste, now a renewable resource.

### Why We Need to be Critical of Critical Pedagogy in Prison Classrooms

*Michael Brawn*

I write this essay from the point of view of a student, a voice that, unfortunately, is at times loudly silent in academic writing around education. I write not from the comfort of a classroom, dormitory, or apartment, but rather from the confines of a prison cell. My college exists inside a medium-high security prison located in east central Illinois, and it is here where I take upper division undergraduate courses through a program with a strong commitment to social justice and one that shares many of the same guiding principles found in critical pedagogy. As a student in a progressive college-in-prison program and as someone who has had a number of classroom experiences with instructors who espouse critical pedagogy, I have found myself critical of this approach as it is applied in prison classrooms.

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy that traces its lineage to early 20th century progressive philosophy as well as those who developed the Frankfurt School of social critique.

Teachers who embrace critical pedagogy aim to engender a critical awareness on behalf of students, what Freire (1971) refers to as conscientization, in order to foster a deep understanding of social hierarchies that are impediments to the free exchange of ideas in the broader society (Freedman, 2007). The liberatory aspects of critical pedagogy occur when a reciprocal learning relationship is developed between teacher and student, a relationship that encourages both parties to learn from each other and with each other in order to interrupt and act upon the world around them (Freire, 1971). Critical pedagogy views the classroom as inherently political, an environment where through the dialogical process, structures of power and positions of privilege are named and problematized (Kincheloe, 2008). This type of educative philosophy works well in the prison environment for it helps to shed light on those social and economic policies that have led to over 2 million incarcerated citizens.

Over the last five years, I have taken several courses in the broad field of educational studies and in each course the use of critical pedagogy functioned as the overriding philosophy used by those teaching. The first class, *Political and Historical Perspectives on Education*, introduced me to Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and after reading the book and discussing critical pedagogy within the class, I found great value in Freire's approach to teaching. However, I was reluctant to fully embrace what I was learning in the course. I was unfamiliar with the material provided to me and because this was my first course in educational philosophy, I felt ill-prepared to challenge the readings. I lacked the background and resources to question some of Freire's assumptions and positions. In subsequent courses I was provided with literally thousands of pages of text, and while I gained a better understanding of the philosophy, it was one paper that grabbed my attention because it was the first and only critique of critical pedagogy I had ever been given by an instructor. Ellsworth's (1989) *Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Work-*

*ing Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy* showed me that there were scholars who had reservations about critical pedagogy. I began seeking out other critiques, relying on family members to find them online and mail them to me, and as I studied each one, I began to formulate what had been troubling me about this pedagogical practice.

My hesitancy toward critical pedagogy stems from the feeling that I was being taught what to think rather than how to think. The social issues we were exploring in class were framed in such a way that they only made sense when examined through the lens of critical pedagogy and engaging other viewpoints was perceived as supporting the status quo. I began to realize that there existed a tension in my learning experience, one that led me to feel constrained to engage issues from multiple perspectives because the person framing the argument was providing the information available to me. If critical pedagogy is meant to be liberatory in that it frees one from their oppression through informed critical praxis, then why was I experiencing such tension? After much reflection and study, I am now able to articulate some of this tension, which is that the central tenets of critical pedagogy are challenged in prison spaces because these classrooms are enwrapped within a network of power imbalance and control. When students are wholly reliant upon teachers for access to information, can the goals of critical pedagogy be achieved?

Information in prison is provided to us as it is deemed necessary by authorities in charge of the facility. As one can imagine, living in this kind of informational vacuum can be very frustrating. Unintentionally replicating this power dynamic in the classroom creates an oppressive space that works against the spirit of critical pedagogy. I believe this philosophy can be very useful in prison, but there needs to be more attention paid to the politics of space and inability of students to access other forms of information. Interestingly enough, this is exactly how I was able to develop my own formulation in regards to the use of crit-

ical pedagogy in this space. By studying both proponents of and critiques of this pedagogical practice, I was able to gain a much richer understanding of what the goals of critical pedagogy are and how they can be achieved in the prison classroom. However, my ability to do this was only possible because I was able to have access to those competing and challenging points of view.

As I write this, I am struck by an odd coincidence. Currently I am enrolled in a course entitled, *Media and Democracy*, the crux of which focuses on how media concentration in the United States is having adverse effects on the ability of our democracy to function properly for all of its citizens. Critical media scholars argue for a more egalitarian media system where citizens would have access to a broader range of information so as to be able to be better informed and active participants in the republic. In a sense, this is exactly what I am arguing for in this space. I want to be able to walk into a classroom that embodies the very nature of what critical pedagogy tries to achieve: a classroom where students and teachers learn to name and challenge the very structures of power that underlie the prison classroom. In short, I argue for a pedagogical practice in prison that is not immune to its own critique and simultaneously provides students with the tools needed for agency, something that prison tries desperately to destroy.

### **From Stigma to Students: Changing the Way We Look at Higher Education (In Prison)**

*Orlando Mayorga*

I am fortunate to be a student in one of the few higher learning prison education programs in the United States, but there are still an overwhelming number of incarcerated individuals who have never and may never have the chance to obtain a college education. Much of the resistance or hesitation that society holds toward providing higher education in prison stems from the belief that

incarcerated people do not deserve such an education. But, the question of whether we deserve higher education is an unproductive one. Society deserves for all people, including those of us in prison, to be educated and afforded the same educational opportunities as those who are not incarcerated. In order to achieve this, we must first examine the labels that are attached to individuals who are incarcerated. Labels such as “inmate,” “prisoner,” or “convict” are damaging because they are antithetical to seeing incarcerated individuals as people.

The contemporary prison system can be described as a process of dehumanization. The labels that are affixed to incarcerated people function in much the same way. By reducing us to one-dimensional beings, labels trap us in a box that prevents growth and development. Labels work to keep us in a permanent state of incarceration and they also prevent us from being seen as human. In Eddie Ellis’s *An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language*, he emphasizes the importance of language when referring to incarcerated people. He states:

- In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms [inmate, convict, prisoner, felon] and simply refer to us as PEOPLE. People currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, People with criminal convictions, PEOPLE. (para 3)

Language is a site of political contestation and struggle, which is why it is an important point of analysis in imagining higher education for incarcerated individuals. If non-incarcerated individuals are unable to see us as people, then how are they able to see us as students? In order for the conversation to move forward, we must first begin to replace the deviant labels that influence our perceptions of a population that has been sentenced to a civil death.<sup>6</sup>

Envisioning those of us in prison as first human, and then as postsecondary students might change our collective view of prison itself. Prisons could be imagined as higher education centers, places of deep learning and engagement, rather than human landfills. Imagining incarcerated people as students could provide the impetus for seeing the system of higher education in a new way, too. Examining comparisons and establishing linkages between the kind of higher education offered inside prisons and the type of higher education offered outside of prisons would illuminate the vast disparities that exist in terms of facilities, resources, and infrastructure. Making connections between these two systems might also push non-incarcerated people to question the entire prison system itself and perhaps question the need for a system of penal incarceration, particularly one that dehumanizes and denies equality of educational opportunity. Exposure to higher education in prison may also encourage non-incarcerated people to move toward a vision of higher learning availability for everyone, including PEOPLE who are incarcerated.

It is not a stretch to imagine how this type of exchange may impact a non-incarcerated student's vision of higher education. Allowing students to see those of us in prison as humans and fellow students may spark their curiosity around the reasons for mass incarceration. They may begin to question why so many people in the United States are in prison and think about the differences in postsecondary opportunities between incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals. These students may find inspiration in their search for answers, and as part of their critical path of inquiry, be compelled to take action: to organize, mobilize, and move towards changing the status quo. How would education on the outside, that is, for non-incarcerated individuals, be impacted if we began to imagine incarcerated people

as students? How would postsecondary education for non-incarcerated people be different if we adopted a mindset that looked at incarcerated individuals as people capable of learning, studying, and embodying the habits of successful students? How might things change in society if we actually talked about—and educated students about—issues of mass incarceration via schooling? Might our prison system be different if non-incarcerated people thought about these issues? Would the way we treat the incarcerated change, and perhaps then change the way we treat other marginalized groups in our society? Much of the focus in this larger essay is on postsecondary education for incarcerated individuals, and this is desperately needed, but as James Baldwin (1963) reminds us, we also need to educate others. We need to educate non-incarcerated people about mass incarceration, about the possible learning opportunities in prison, and about the detrimental effects and stigma associated with derogatory labels.

Could building bridges between incarcerated and non-incarcerated postsecondary education spaces promote deeper thinking about our treatment of incarcerated people? I believe that it could. Seeing the incarcerated as PEOPLE, and ultimately as students, would encourage empathy, not only for those in prison, but for people in general. More empathy is something we desperately need. One of the big problems that prevents access to higher education for incarcerated people is that once a person is incarcerated, that person is no longer seen as a person. Labels work to dehumanize and they mark us in damaging ways because we are then seen as not worthy of empathy. I believe that our vision of education for everyone changes if we imagine incarcerated people as students because people need an education in order to see us in different ways.

### Underestimating Carceral Intellect?: Problematizing the “Wow!” Factor Among Prison Educators<sup>7</sup>

*Andra Slater*

As an undergraduate student in a progressive college-in-prison program for the last six years, I have witnessed many prison educators who are wowed by the performance of learners who happen to be incarcerated. Early on, I perceived these expressions as mere applause for the academic performance displayed by students. But, the consistency of being wowed in so many different contexts has pushed me to critically think about what this reaction really means. What underlies the expressions of amazement on behalf of non-incarcerated prison educators toward the intellectual capabilities of incarcerated students?

On the surface, expressions of admiration may appear to be a good thing, perhaps even healthy in teaching and learning contexts. Yet, there is something about the surprised nature of these frequent remarks that I find troublesome. In his essay about teaching in prison, Scott (2013) describes a version of the “Wow!” factor from the perspective of a prison educator. Drawing from his own experience in teaching in prison, he explains that he frequently heard comments among his educator colleagues such as, “Wow—what an amazing class, I had no idea that was possible in prison” (p. 22). He describes this moment as a clash between what prison educators experience while teaching incarcerated students and the common sociocultural image of prisons as “places of mindless drudgery and decay” (p. 22). Let me provide two powerful examples of the “Wow!” factor from the perspective of a student who has taken a number of courses while incarcerated.

Our college-in-prison program hosts an annual open house event where individuals who are interested in the program or who want to know more about how it works can come into

the prison to experience our classes. Guests can sit in, participate, and observe academic courses while learning about the culture of our program. At the conclusion of one of the open house events, a guest approached a fellow student. This guest greeted the student and then said to him, “Don’t take offense to this, but you guys are really intelligent.” While I imagine this guest had good intentions, his ignorance regarding our academic capability as incarcerated people was revealed in his statement. He was wowed.

On another occasion, our college-in-prison radio program, EJP Radio, broadcasted a show featuring alumni educators. The educators were asked to reflect upon the motivation for their work in prison. In responding to that question, one educator shared the following:

What I was not expecting was to have some of the most amazing discussions I’ve ever had in my entire life. Some of them intellectually challenging...It’s been an interesting experience in finding my own limitations in trying to push them a little bit. So, really not only do I not know everything about me, I realize there’s so much I don’t know about being a human being. (Troger, 2014)

The above examples reveal perceptions that some educators bring with them into prison classrooms; namely, that critical engagement is near impossible in prison contexts. Educators are wowed because incarcerated students surpass their expectations about what they think they are going to find on the inside. The response of surprise is a natural one, but it reveals a deeply problematic and unspoken assumption: Incarcerated students are not capable of deep analytic thinking, at least the kind of thinking that exceeds your imagination.

The image of an “inmate” in the social imaginary is routinely a negative one: a thug, someone who is prone to violence, and someone who is in need of correction. These images are rarely if ever constructed by



incarcerated people themselves. The way that non-incarcerated people see and understand prisons, then, even the most enlightened among them, may uncritically bring with them perceptions and stereotypes about who inhabits these spaces. They may believe that incarcerated people, even if implicated in a discriminatory system of mass incarceration, are not smart, let alone, intellectual. Notions of race, ethnicity, and class likely tie into why educators underestimate the intellect of incarcerated minority students.

It has been my experience that prison educators share some common characteristics. Most often they are white, politically liberal, and come from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Naturally, they enter the prison with a set of assumptions and must adjust to this setting and its residents. Many come from a university, a predominantly white space, to the prison, a predominantly black and brown space (with the notable exception of people who are in positions of power). Upon entering prisons, white prison educators come into contact with people and communities of color who have radically different backgrounds than their own. I wonder if they have ever grappled with their own deeply held ideas and assumptions about those of us who are incarcerated. I am not sure if prison educators wrestle with coming into this environment or if they reflect upon their own preconceptions about who we are. When witnessing their consistent moments of surprise, I am inclined to think that they don't. I encourage prison educators to take a thoughtful look inward and reflect upon the implicit biases that they bring into the prison.

Traditional colleges and university settings are viewed as sites of learning and knowledge acquisition, while prisons are not. Prisons are underestimated as sites of learning and knowledge acquisition, when in fact they can be. Lowered expectations about what students know and could possibly know encourages what Freire (1971) calls "the projection of ignorance" onto others. He identifies the projection of ignorance as a characteristic of

oppression because it negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry (p. 72). When prison educators take this approach, they have little or no expectation of learning reciprocally from us, hence the exclamatory expression when they actually do. Situating the "Wow!" factor within Freire's paradigm reveals that the prison instructor must present themselves as the incarcerated students' necessary opposite and this is discouraging to students who believe that they can teach instructors as well. Students can and do teach and I observe this on a daily basis.

In order for prison educators to imagine the possibility of incarcerated students as teachers, I invite educators into the informal carceral learning spaces that exist outside of the classroom. We carve out classrooms in our cells, the yard, the gym, the dining hall, and the library. We dialogue about history, life, religion, spirituality, politics, and general world issues. We talk about big ideas and we think through them together. In these spaces, many of us become critical in our own awareness. The pockets of self and collaborative education make it easy for us to transfer these skills into the formal classroom. As prison educators become aware of these informal settings, it may become easier to conceive that some of us come to class equipped with a toolkit of critical learning skills and habits. It may become easier for you to recognize that you can learn from us, too.

The assumption that we are in some way inadequate will affect your engagements with us. You may tend to take a less rigorous approach in providing instruction. You may uncritically project your ignorance upon us because you haven't acknowledged your own biases. In order to authentically teach and learn within these spaces, I encourage prison educators to critically reflect upon their "Wow!" moments and how it might feel to witness these expressions as an incarcerated student.



## Postsecondary Education in Prison as a Process of Liberation

*Erin L. Castro*

When taken together, the above essays speak to the liberatory and transformative power of postsecondary education within carceral spaces. While each different, they reflect deep engagement with ideas and a growing critical consciousness regarding some of the most essential questions of human life and existence. Whether it's understanding the world in which you live as a bounded cave, experiencing epiphanies that cause you to question fundamental assumptions about the world, recognizing the damaging and degrading function of human labels, wanting more from your classroom teachers and experiences, or realizing that even well-intended others are judging you before they hear you speak, they are all examples of an awakening that cuts across the essays. These moments are transformative because they cause one to question and reflect upon seemingly commonsensical ideas and norms, attitudes, and dispositions. In answering the question of what postsecondary education should look like within prisons during an era of mass incarceration, the students go deep inside themselves to share personal, critical, and hopeful perspectives regarding human worth and possibility. Through compassion and understanding, evidence and intellect, they seek to educate others by challenging dominant perspectives of incarcerated people and what they seemingly deserve. Encaged each day in a space that is hostile to their dignity (let alone the development of critical consciousness, concern for others, forgiveness, and love—all themes evident in their scholarship), their education is a radical act.

The awakening of consciousness, fostered through a liberatory educative experience, is what Freire (1970) referred to as conscientization. Conscientization, loosely translated as critical awareness, is a disposition where one recognizes systems of oppression and domination, reflects deeply about the intercon-

nectedness of these systems, and then works through praxis to dismantle them. For Freire, conscientization is about humanization: "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (p. 47). The ultimate goal of education for Freire is humanization and this process occurs through liberatory educational experiences as students become empowered to recognize their agency and act upon the world. He writes that conscientization is necessary for oppressed populations in an effort to become more fully human because dehumanization is not a given destiny, "but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed" (p. 44). Each of the students embody conscientization and humanization in their work. Daniel does so vividly when he writes: "...many of my failures and many shortcomings were due to a lack of education. This realization is significant because it represented a true learning experience...a consciousness that now exists where ignorance is no longer acceptable." Andra wants something similar for the very people who volunteer to teach inside prisons. He wants for prison educators to critically reflect upon their own assumptions and biases about incarcerated people and intellectual ability. Similarly, Orlando desires that postsecondary education provided outside of prisons teach about prisons, to awaken the non-incarcerated public about the prison-industrial complex and its collective role in dehumanization through the use of derogatory labels. In describing what he refers to as an "informational vacuum," Michael is also calling for a type of humanization when he cautions prison educators from dogmatically subscribing to critical pedagogy without thoughtfully recognizing the very hierarchies they aim to critique. Johnny explicitly calls attention to liberation in his essay as an experience of exposure, writing that for most of his life he had been living in a box (cave) that he did not know existed. He states that, "As I began

taking classes in the liberal arts, awareness of the box began to surface [and]...in many respects, lifted the lid off this box exposing me to a world that I didn't know existed." The theme of education as a liberatory process of humanization, as a fundamental human right and moral issue, is carried throughout the students' scholarship.

On one level, the critical engagement shown here is dangerous because it threatens a powerful system of exploitation and control. Through conscientization and education as a process of humanization, the least powerful in society could begin to undermine dominant structures and assumptions about the world. This is precisely what Freire desires. Incarcerated people may begin to criticize the need for mass incarceration as a potential result of a liberatory education. Prison privatization, the prison-industrial complex, the school-to-prison pipeline, income inequality, racism, and more—elements of an infrastructure upon which society is built, are threatened through critical inquiry. The systems that delegitimize people, such as mass incarceration, are threatened because if incarcerated individuals as oppressed people begin to question the inequities inherent in a system that exploits them, their ability to be docile and manipulated is threatened. If you empower students who are incarcerated, you run the risk of undermining systemic inequality. Without systemic inequality, mass incarceration could not thrive.

### **Discussion: Education Beyond Recidivism**

The analysis thus far brings us to an important question: Why should we prioritize recidivism as the purpose of higher education in prison simply because the students happen to be incarcerated? In the following section we argue that it is imperative to move beyond anti-recidivist logic for higher education in prisons because (a) certificate-based and vocational training alone is an example of Foucault's disciplinary power, (b) emphasizing individual productivity through the training

of people will not inherently address social structures that create inequity in the first place, and (c) the rationale is dehumanizing and constructs the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated as eternal criminalized subjects.

A Foucauldian critique of anti-recidivist discourse reveals a conceptual incompatibility with liberatory and emancipatory approaches to postsecondary education in prisons. Currently, the provision of postsecondary education in prison is narrowly focused on certificate-based and vocational training, limiting educational experiences for students. The emphasis is narrow because the dominant justification for its existence is anti-recidivism. The focus on career and technical education, as currently conceived, is rooted in a Foucauldian disciplinary paradigm through which disciplinary subjects are produced within the educational institution in order to become productive bodies within society. Disciplinary power focuses on the individual as a body and an object of power, which speaks to a theme consistent among the student essays: dehumanization.

If we understand higher education in prison as only anti-recidivistic, then the main focus is to make incarcerated individuals productive. It could be argued that productivity in this regard (i.e., employment post-release) is transformative. From a certain angle, this perspective is accurate, but productivity is narrowly defined within the current hegemonic power structures and does not incorporate a liberatory framework in which the dominant paradigms that disadvantage disenfranchised segments of the population are challenged. Therefore, if the goal is to challenge power structures that maintain dominant interests, and we believe this is the goal, then we must move beyond an anti-recidivist paradigm, not because certificate-based and vocational training is not valuable, but because they are simply not enough. Johnny captures this sentiment when he writes:

We can no longer afford to allow segments of the population to continue to

merely exist in caves or simply equip them to manage while within these caves. We have to give them—us—the opportunity to live, to see the world beyond the shadows, and to challenge thinking patterns.

What we need is not an individual anti-recidivist focus through individual productivity by training people, but a societal-level transformation that questions the entire prison enterprise, from educational pipelines that funnel lower income students and students of color into prisons to gross racialized inequality within the justice system. Because our aim is to challenge systems of oppression, we must think of higher education in prison as liberation and not solely anti-recidivism. Anti-recidivism will also occur, but it should not be a primary justification for access because it is limiting and dehumanizing.

The provision of postsecondary education via recidivist logic is limiting because it necessitates the incarcerated as eternal criminalized subjects; if reduced recidivism is the primary goal, then it only makes sense to provide higher education to individuals who are incarcerated because they are criminals. Providing postsecondary education in prisons through anti-recidivist logic is parasitic upon a criminalized subjectivity, where the reasons for providing access are to ensure that incarcerated people will not return to prison. Even if formerly incarcerated people never return to prison, however, they will continue to embody a criminalized subjectivity. They are forever measured by the recidivist metric from the moment they enter the prison system, and their criminalized subjectivity is only fueled through the use of anti-recidivist logic because they will continue to be assessed and judged according to their criminality (real, imagined, or predicted).

Because incarcerated people are always placed as “at risk” for recidivating, they are perpetually positioned as criminalized subjects. The incarcerated and formerly incarcerated are always a statistic: They are considered a “success” if they do not return

to prison and a “failure” if they do. This assessment is made within a recidivist paradigm that requires incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people be judged according to their “criminal” or lack of “criminal” activity. This subjectivity is eternal because even if formerly incarcerated people never return to prison, they are still likely to be seen and treated as criminals.

The student co-authors of this manuscript have felony records, and these will likely stay with them for their entire lives. They will likely be on house arrest for three to six months and parole for at least three years post-release. Like other felony disenfranchised people, they will be restricted in their ability to apply for federal funding for higher education and other social services, secure employment, gain admission to a college or university, apply for social benefits, participate in jury duty, vote, or work or volunteer in public institutions. They will face additional challenges related to civic engagement and full participation in social life. Because of these reasons and others, incarceration is forever with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and becomes part of their identity. Even amid higher education’s best intentions, reduced recidivism as a rationale for access does not allow formerly incarcerated people to be seen as people, but only as criminals: former criminals, reformed criminals, relapsed criminals, criminals. They are an eternal criminalized subject, in part because of anti-recidivist logic.

## Implications

At minimum, we see four broad implications of this scholarship. First, postsecondary education provided in prisons should be grounded in critical liberatory frameworks predicated upon possibility and hope for the human condition. Individuals can overcome great obstacles, and there exists an entire body of research and literature to help guide curricular and pedagogical approaches to providing access to higher education in carceral spaces via critical paradigms. Moving forward, the

development of new college-in-prison programs and alterations to ones that currently exist should pull from liberatory frameworks that seek to raise critical consciousness and cultivate humanization.

Second, rationales for providing access to postsecondary education for incarcerated populations that extend beyond a narrow focus on reduced recidivism are needed. The basis for extending access to higher education in prisons must be more empowering and enabling than anti-recidivist logic. Reduced recidivism is a likely byproduct of a liberatory education, but it should not be the ultimate goal nor the sole benchmark for postsecondary educational success in prisons. Because the students happen to be incarcerated does not warrant their educational experiences be dictated by an anti-recidivist paradigm. As we have shown, emphasizing reduced recidivism above all else will not disrupt inequitable power structures that fuel unfettered growth of the prison-industrial complex. Higher education has a role to play in opposing the growth of mass incarceration and it can do so by (a) shifting the conversation around access for incarcerated people through research, advocacy, and outreach and (b) explicitly including incarcerated individuals as populations deserving of higher education in the development of mainstream postsecondary education policy and programming.

Third, it is imperative that robust conversations about the purposes of postsecondary education in prisons during mass incarceration begin within the field of higher education. These conversations are currently taking place on traditional colleges and university campuses, but incarcerated people are not included as members in these discussions. We must ask ourselves, as non-incarcerated people, why we are not including potential students in our thinking, research, and scholarship. Mass incarceration works to render individuals who are incarcerated

invisible and the fact that incarcerated people are not included in mainstream postsecondary degree completion efforts and discourse is evidence that the system is working. As non-incarcerated critical scholars and human beings, we have a responsibility to resist the inertia and commonsense of mass incarceration by pursuing lines of inquiry and discourse that call attention to the “human landfill” that is the prison-industrial complex. Our conversations about the purposes of higher education in carceral spaces should explicitly address racialized inequity, exploitation, dehumanization, and neglect of a population of people who, in almost any other circumstance, would be considered an underrepresented population in higher education discourse and policy.

Finally, our scholarship reveals that much more research is needed. Currently, we know very little about higher education in prisons, particularly related to differences among program types. IHEP’s 2011 report distinguished among the kind of education provided inside prisons (certificate-based, vocational training, or college degree), but little is known about the types of programs facilitating these opportunities. Additional knowledge is needed about who funds, manages, and operates college-in-prison programs as these factors shape and determine the kind, quality, and consistency of education provided. The number of programs across the country that might be considered “independent” because they do not employ individuals who work for the Department of Corrections are important to examine as well because, while they represent an extremely small percentage of the overall college-in-prison programming efforts, they oftentimes have more curricular flexibility and could potentially serve as models moving forward.<sup>8</sup>

Additional information is also needed regarding the various program types and experiences that students, staff, and educators

have within them. Examples of this research might include examining the differences among college-in-prison programs that confer credit and those that do not, the type of college or university providing the instruction (e.g., community college, research university, liberal arts college, among others), the medium through which learning and instruction occurs (e.g., in-person, satellite, Internet, or correspondence), the organization that facilitates the program (e.g., state-based program, philanthropic entity, or religious group), and whether or not the college or university conferring credit is accredited. The physical location of the college-in-prison program makes a difference (e.g., does the program maintain a physical presence at the prison outside of courses for administrative and other support?), as do the regulations around access for non-incarcerated people, resources, and supplies that can vary greatly across prison facilities. Lastly, much more research and evaluation is needed from critical perspectives that privilege the broader societal and humane impact of postsecondary education in prison on incarcerated and non-incarcerated people, and on society.

## Conclusion

If prisons are, as Daniel asserts, where America throws its trash,” then the individuals who occupy prisons are exactly what amasses in landfills: garbage. Those who are not incarcerated are not let off the hook, either, as non-incarcerated people contribute to landfills. It’s a striking metaphor and one that reveals much about mass incarceration as a process of dehumanization. It also provides a vision for what the purposes of higher education in prisons should be during an era of mass incarceration. Because mass incarceration functions to dehumanize, higher education has an opportunity to engage in prisons as a process of humanization. Liberatory approaches to college-in-prison programming can seek to rehumanize and have the potential to empower students, empower educators, and ultimately change society.

Asking every adult in the United States to pursue formal higher educational opportunities means that providing access to individuals who are incarcerated must be part of a national effort to increase postsecondary degree attainment. We must be steadfast in designing accredited pathways for students that recognize the limitations of recidivist rationales and felony disenfranchisement. We must ask what it means to privilege anti-recidivism as a goal for postsecondary education within prisons and what it reveals regarding dominant assumptions about incarcerated people.

For many, seeing incarcerated individuals as people may not be the easiest of tasks. Seeing the incarcerated as people may be difficult because it can defy one’s moral, political, and ideological leanings. Yet, in order to actualize liberatory higher educational experiences for people in prison, educators, policymakers, and practitioners must see individuals beyond their incarcerated state. Any true education demands a re-vision of this nature so that incarcerated people can be seen in light of their potentiality. The dominant ways that we are socialized to think about incarcerated people, the lives they lead, and what they should have access to might make this a challenging task, but not an impossible one. As educators and practitioners, we do this every day; we seek out the potential in human beings and we assist them in imagining and obtaining a better life. We know that higher education is crucial for social mobility for many of our students and that despite the odds, there are some individuals for whom postsecondary education transforms. Our policies and practices need to reflect this potential and possibility and it can only do so if all students—particularly those who are rendered invisible—are included.

### Statement from the authors:

This article is a co-written project and the culmination of a three-year scholarly collaboration among the authors. Erin L. Castro is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Utah and an instructor affiliate with the Education Justice Project, a program providing higher educational opportunities to students who are incarcerated at Danville Correctional Center, a medium-high security prison in central Illinois. Michael Brawn, Daniel E. Graves, Orlando Mayorga, Johnny Page, and Andra Slater are advanced undergraduate students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign through the Education Justice Project. All authors welcome comments and critique of the essay. Erin L. Castro can be reached at: [erin.castro@utah.edu](mailto:erin.castro@utah.edu). Michael Brawn (R48901), Orlando Mayorga (K82578), and Andra Slater (K55214) can be reached at Danville Correctional Center, 3820 East Main Street, Danville, IL 61834. Daniel Graves (B52497) can be reached at Robinson Correctional Center, 13423 East 1150th Avenue, Robinson, IL 62454. Johnny Page can be reached at: [pagejohnny73@yahoo.com](mailto:pagejohnny73@yahoo.com). Importantly, we ask that the reader not think of our work as prison writing, but as scholarship to be engaged and critiqued. We extend our gratitude to Parthiban Muniandy, Stephanie Reider, and the journal reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive feedback throughout the revision process.

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