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Research in Brief - 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

Erin L. Castro is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Utah. Her professional research includes: analysis of higher educational policies and practices in relation to equity and justice; critical investigations of readiness, transition, and transfer to higher education for chronically underserved populations, and; examination of theoretical and methodological opportunities in social science research. Her work is aimed at continuing to engage and serve through building new intellectual relationships, fostering collaboration, and working directly with populations underserved by current policies. She is an Instructor Affiliate with the Education Justice Project.

Daniel Graves: Incarcerated at the age of 18 for my only felony. I was incarcerated for 22 and one half years. Select educational accomplishments since the onset of entrapment include a General Education Degree, two associate’s degrees, and a number of vocational certificates, such as Business Management, Commercial Custodial Services, Construction Occupations, Basic Automotive I, Substance Abuse Counselor Training, Advanced Automotive Technology, and Horticulture. I have successfully completed a range of certificate-based programming including Substance Abuse, Peaceful Solutions, Character Education, Anger Management, Tutor Training, and Time for a Change-Motivational speaking. I am a Certified Associate Addictions Professional and a Certified Peer Educator for Reach-One/Teach-One.

Michael Brawn: During my incarceration I earned an Associates of Arts degree from Lakeland College (graduated Summa Cum Laude) and graduated from the Certified Associate Addictions Program accredited through the state of Illinois. I am working toward a Certificate in Education Studies through the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and have taken a number of correspondence courses through the College for the Incarcerated at Ohio University. I have participated by proxy in several national conferences and co-authored published papers in the broad area of education. I have been incarcerated for the last nine years and came to prison at the age of 34.
Orlando Mayorga: Education has been a priority for me since the age of seventeen. That was also my age upon entering the prison experience seventeen years ago. I am thirty-four now and for the past six years EJP has provided the space for me to engage in the learning process in a way that has provided direction and meaning while awakening in me a spirit of agency for the purpose of making the world a better place. During these seventeen years of incarceration I have accumulated many certificates and two associate's degrees; I have participated in education conferences, volunteered as an ESL instructor, facilitated a trauma focused group (CAVE), and continue in various learning and teaching endeavors. Though my journey in learning has taken on new meaning, I continue to take courses through DACC (Danville Area Community College) and EJP. My University of Illinois transcripts reflect over 30 upper-division undergraduate course credits acquired.

Johnny Page is currently an undergraduate in Psychology at Governors State University in Illinois. Arrested at the age of 18, he spent 23 years incarcerated. During his incarceration he completed a number of vocational certificates and participated in all available postsecondary educational opportunities. He earned a Printing Press Operators Certification in 1993 and a Barber Certification in 1995 from Illinois School District #428. In 2001, He earned a Baking Certification from Illinois Correctional Industries, and an associate's degree in Liberal Studies from Illinois Central College in 2003, he also participated in Ohio University’s College for the Incarcerated correspondence courses from 2007-2009. In 2009 and 2010 he earned certificates in Custodial Maintenance and Substance abuse from Danville Area Community College. In 2011, he received his Certified Associate Addiction Professional license. Mr. Page has participated by proxy at a number of national conferences, including the National Women’s Studies Association and the Association of Black Sociologists, and has won awards for his writing and poetry.

Andra Slater: I was incarcerated at the age of 19 and have been here for 18 years. I hail from the Quad Cities area (Rock Island, Illinois). I received two associate degrees from Lakeland Community College. During my incarceration, I taught English as a Second Language for the Language Partners program and was a facilitator for Chicago Anti-Violence Education (C.A.V.E). In 2011, I completed a 16 month drug education training resulting in a certification as a licensed substance abuse counselor. Through my involvement with EJP I have taken an interest in Education Policy Studies. I have a passion for creative writing, cooking, and learning Spanish.
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 (U.S. 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 U.S. home to more incarcerated people than any other country in the world (National Research Council, 2014). Among the total incarcerated population, only 6 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.

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 opportunities 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 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. 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 its limitations.

Foucault’s emphasis on discipline and docility (1977) undergirds our analysis on the purposes of postsecondary education in carceral spaces. Foucault positions prisons as social institutions that are invested in the organization and management of power 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 normative regulations. Regulation occurs in subtle and sometimes invisible ways within prisons, which he argues helps to justify their existence. 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, one that aims to raise critical consciousness, 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, Andrea Slater, and Orlando Mayorga were enrolled in the course through the Education Justice Project (EJP), a program providing higher educational opportunities at the prison. The course was the impetus for an engaged scholarly collaboration and the present manuscript is one
product of ongoing participatory action research and analysis. 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 following scholarly essays 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 Daniel Graves who has served 21 years in prison. The third essay is by Michael Brawn who has served 9 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

I have spent the better part of my young life, 41 years, as an incarcerated person. 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.

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. 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

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 “at 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-re-membered.”
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 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.

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; a consciousness that now exists where ignorance is no longer acceptable. Opposition—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.

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, 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.

My hesitancy toward critical pedagogy stems from the feeling that I was being taught what to think rather than how to think. 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.

Currently I am enrolled in a Media and Democracy course, the crux of which focuses on how media concentration in the U.S. 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 and 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. 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?
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.

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.

Postsecondary education in prison as 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.

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.

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, then we must move beyond a recidivist paradigm, not because certificate-based and vocational training is not valuable, but because they are simply not enough.

We need not individual level 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; because incarcerated people are always placed as “at risk” for recidivating, they are perpetually positioned as criminalized subjects. 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 it 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.

**Conclusion**

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.