



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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Letter from the Executive Director

Over the last decade I've had the wonderful opportunity to get to know many of the people who run higher education programs in prisons around the country – in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, Washington, and other states. We're like a scattered tribe. When we're together we share stories and advice – about teaching research without the internet; or creating lab science classes without blades, sinks or flames. We compare the range of attitudes of prison staff, and the rules and regulations of the institutions where we work. We reflect on the impact of race and class in the classroom, on the role of trust in learning, on the therapeutic impact of compassion on the effects of trauma. We contemplate higher education in prison as a social movement. And we talk about the challenges of fundraising.

In the last couple of years a number of larger foundations have begun to take an interest in the field of prison higher education. Their arrival on the scene is both thrilling and daunting, as we all begin to confront some of the vast professional-cultural differences between us. The perspectives of people working in the field of philanthropy are as diverse as the human race itself, but I am learning that some especially dominant voices are particularly utilitarian in their approach. They are not just "data-driven," or "results-oriented," but almost entirely quantitative – and they expect results very fast. Some are quite comfortable making sacrifices to program quality for the sake of meeting these types of institutional demands.

To many people in the philanthropic community – and in other policy and activist circles – "effecting systemic change" means directly influencing public policy, and influencing public policy means enticing the state or federal government to invest funding in specific programs. This is commonly achieved through the use of incentives such as seed or matching grants. Only programs for which public funding can ultimately be secured are considered "sustainable" and "replicable." Any program that does not fit this model is not considered viable and thus not worthy of large-scale philanthropic investment.

An important problem with this theory of systemic change is that it largely forecloses the possibility of those foundations ever tackling problems that the general public – or the State – fails to recognize as legitimate. In certain cases, they may seek to alter public attitudes by funding pilot projects and research that demonstrate effectiveness, but only if they believe that empiric research can be constructed that will simply and rapidly achieve this purpose. This also means that the only type of disagreement that can be negotiated between the provider and the public is over "effectiveness," rather than over the value, purpose or goals of the work itself.

Lately I have had the opportunity to observe what happens when this mindset converges with the world of prison higher education. In the realm of program design, some argue that programs should exclude particular groups within the prison population that are likely to draw the wrath of the public, or whom some might consider it a waste of money to educate – for example, people whose crimes are considered especially "heinous," or are above a certain age, or who have more than a certain amount of time left to serve.

In the realm of evaluation, some argue that the priority should be simply demonstrating the impact of such programs on the outcomes about which the public cares most: recidivism and cost. In my experience, people who oppose prison higher education do so not because they don't think it "works," but because they object to it as a matter of principle. Thus it's unclear whether more of this type of data will actually change minds. But perhaps more importantly, I wonder about the implications of representing recidivism and cost reduction as the central purpose of this work.

The core values of prison higher education lie in the creative, intellectual, professional, social, psychological, economic and civic development of the student, and the positive impact that these effects on the individual have on family, community, and the larger world. Framing the public discussion as if the wellbeing of the non-incarcerated public were all that mattered dismisses both the most meaningful effects of a quality liberal arts education, and the intrinsic value of each incarcerated student's life. Both gestures further dehumanize everyone who is incarcerated. This is troubling in its own right, but especially to those of us who see dehumanization as the heart of the incarceration crisis.

A far more productive alternative to this entire approach would be for all of us to clarify the principles and priorities that we want to guide our work, and to then fearlessly seek out partnerships that allow us to put them into practice. We should create inclusive, rigorous academic programs, and measure their impact as we would any other enterprise in which the participants' lives mattered to us.

There is no sound reason for any philanthropic institution to rely on the profoundly impaired moral imagination of the mainstream American public, or of the political process itself, to demarcate the terrain of its own potential great work. Indeed, some of the most critical humanitarian crises of our time are not just overlooked by the State; many of them are *caused* by the State. Foundations should embrace the gift of their own independence and set an example of intellectual and moral leadership, for the country and for the world.

*With warm regards,
Jody Lewen*

RESPONSES TO A SKEPTICAL EMAIL INQUIRY

A few months ago we received the following inquiry from a student in Virginia, which we shared with some students; below are a few of their responses.

Subject: why

Date: December 4, 2013 10:54:34 AM PST

To: info@prisonuniversityproject.org

I am doing a persuasive speech on why prisoners should get a college education. Can you explain why you believe these people should get a free college education when all other citizens that aren't in prison should pay for it?

Sean Hall

While I cannot say why a college education should be withheld from citizens who cannot pay, I can say a higher education ought to be provided to needy people as it could prevent desperate people from making bad decisions that may lead to incarceration. Moreover, educating prisoners for free, like the Prison University Project does, will have a profoundly positive impact on society because the ex-cons will have a better chance of being productive members of society. Similarly, these educated inmates can potentially break familial or environmental incarceration cycles by encouraging the next generation to pursue an education, instead of criminal activities, in order to achieve their goals.

Danny Nha Ho

Prisoners are handicapped people. They cannot work, or earn money; therefore, they cannot pay for their education. Education for prisoners means a better society tomorrow because there will be less recidivism. It benefits you because if there is less crime in your neighborhoods then it will put you at ease. Prisoners are also mankind not animal-kind. Education helps them learn to correct their past mistakes. They are also someone else's sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, grandpas, grandmas. Their loved ones do pay taxes. One last thought to ponder... just because you are an upstanding citizen today doesn't mean you are not going to be a prisoner tomorrow. God knows, life is full of surprises. There is a possibility you may get arrested someday even if you did not do it.

Anonymous

There are many reasons why a free college education would be of benefit not only for prisoners but also for society as a whole. Paroling prisoners with a college education stand a greater chance of succeeding as opposed to re-offending. Many individuals, not all but many, came to prison as a result of having no education at all.

People can not help but grow as they learn. Academic growth is all-encompassing, all aspects of the individual grow, emotional intelligence, intellectual, and spiritual. To not offer the opportunity to these individuals is tantamount to societal sabotage.

If one considers the social economic class of the greater

majority of the inmate population it is painfully obvious most could never afford college. A college education is something out of a fictional movie to most of these men. Something to think about...

Curtis Carroll

A lot of men in prison grew up in poverty or disenfranchised communities plagued with murders, gangs, drugs, and dysfunctional households. Young men are emotionally disconnected from their families, seeking love outside their homes. Gangs and criminals provide the love, teachings, and family structure. A false sense of love and loyalty molds their identities. A life of crime is the new reality that controls their hopes and dreams.

Men in prison have one thing in common: time to think. Realizing how our lives led to the crimes we have committed has helped explain our past and will dictate our futures. That emotional disconnect has been repaired, allowing us to take responsibility for our actions. We start to shed the mask and view our true identities. We search for new identities using positive influences as inspiration. In the past education was seen as a roadblock, now it's lifesaving. It has become a cure for our criminal behavior. It has become mental freedom.

We've taken our punishment and gained a free college education and use the knowledge to inspire others growing up in our communities. We've learned to sacrifice, be disciplined, work hard, and have patience through education. Education has groomed us to speak to those society can't, because they don't relate to their circumstances. It's a contract that we signed, obligating us to give back to the youth. Actually our college educations aren't free. The lives we help save from prison become paying college students in society, instead of free college students in prison.

Michael Nelson

It's not a matter of "should" these people get a free college education; the real question should be: "how do you want these people to return to your communities?" After all, let's face it, they will return to your neighborhoods (possibly as one of your neighbors); they will shop at your grocery store, stand with you in line, pass by your children on the streets; attend your classrooms, churches, movie theaters, and so on.

I can imagine the possible feelings of anxiety, fear and anger. The need for “justice,” the desire for punishment. As a man who murdered another human being, I don’t feel I have the right to discount anyone’s feelings or opinions. I may even share in some of the sentiments. However, if it were I on your end of this question, I’d much rather an educated person returning to my community than one who is still living in a place of ignorance, insecurities, intergenerational trauma, and grief. Education is the gateway to possibilities. The possibility of confidence, self-worth, of purpose. The possibility of forgiveness, redemption, and healing. The possibility of freedom.

Freedom to be people who navigate the world with knowledge and a deeper understanding, applying classroom experience to everyday life.

I am an educated man. I committed my crime at the age of 15, uneducated, insecure, and full of pain, rage, and grief. Today I am a college graduate who can say I graduated as valedictorian... and actually learned a lot over the years that I now apply in changing the world around me. I would much rather return to your communities as the man I am today than the boy who made your streets unsafe.

2013 Holiday Party Gathering



photos by Aouie Rubio Photography

Photos of alumni, clockwise, from top left to right:

Heracio Harts: I am working on launching my Health and Wellness Start-up called Healthy Hearts Institute. The website is about to launch: healthyhearts.com. **Garry (Malachi) Scott:** I’m leading and co-leading restorative justice trainings, healing circles, peace and justice community walks; working with youth; and giving sports analysis on kpfa 94.1. **Leonard Rubio:** Working as Jody’s executive assistant, co-chairing the Board of Directors for the Insight Prison Project, and a member of the advisory board for the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice. **John Wilson:** I am currently working for a company called LCA (Leaders in Community Alternatives), a re-entry center which provides support for ex-offenders who are currently on probation. **Curtis Penn:** I’m currently working in Berkeley as a Machinist, and also attending SFSU, where I’m taking Urban Curriculum II and

Counseling 280. The course is basically a community service learning course, seeing first-hand the effects of wealth and poverty on people, families, and communities for generations; the governmental policies that keep social constructs in place; and opportunities for advocacy and leadership roles -- all through the lens of human rights and social justice. **Henry Edward Frank:** I am currently enrolled in Econ 102, Comm 525, and Bus Stat DS12 at SFSU. **Hector Oropeza, David Cowan:** I am the Operations Associate at the Prison University Project and the Director of Reintegration for the Alliance for Change, and I am majoring in Criminal Justice at SFSU. **Nathaniel (Shahid) Rouse:** I am presently an intern at Options Recovery Services, working as a counselor. **Tung Nguyen:** I tried hard and got released; I tried even harder now that I have paroled and will soon have a family of my own. Best of luck to everyone.



Prison University Project

PO Box 492 • San Quentin, CA 94964

SPRING SEMESTER 2014 COURSE OFFERINGS

English 99A (Two sections)

English 99B (Two sections)

English 101A, Reading and Composition

English 101B, Critical Reading, Writing and Thinking

English 204, Reading, Writing and Research

Sociology

Philosophy

Communications

Ancient World History (Archaeology)

Latin American History

Math 50A (Developmental Mathematics)

Math 50B (Developmental Mathematics)

Elementary Algebra

Intermediate Algebra

Statistics

Pre-Calculus

Math Study Groups (for Math 50 and Algebra courses)

Study Hall (tutoring in writing and math)

San Quentin-Stanford Law School Seminar (non-credit)

Who We Are and What We Do

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California and across the United States.

We provide approximately 20 courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses in math and English, to over 300 students.

The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland. All instructors work as volunteers; most are faculty or graduate students from UC Berkeley, Stanford, San Francisco State University, University of San Francisco, and other local colleges and universities. We receive no state or federal funding and rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.