Prison University Project

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

When I first started teaching at San Quentin in 1999, almost no one in California who had received a life sentence for murder was ever granted parole and released. While a number of convergent factors have vastly improved the integrity and hopefulness of the parole review process over the last few years, the hearings themselves nevertheless remain both a politically complex and emotionally grueling experience.

Being questioned for hours about deeply personal topics; sitting in the same room with victims, survivors, or prosecutors; and confronting the memories, grief, and shame that the discussions may evoke; often shakes people to the core, regardless of the hearing's outcome. Some people stay bereft and disoriented for days afterward, as if having been transported back to a severely traumatic event.

One of the great ironies of San Quentin is how many people living there have developed a level of emotional mindfulness and sense of personal accountability that is rarely seen outside of prison. So many people have worked so hard, over years, to understand themselves, to take responsibility for harm that they have caused. Perhaps it is in part precisely that highly attuned sense of personal responsibility that can make the parole review process even more overwhelming.

Structurally, the parole review process reflects mainstream cultural assumptions about prisons and prisoners: the role of the Board is not simply to decide whether a person can be safely released; it is to determine whether that individual has changed from the "bad person" they once were into a "good person" who is now suitable for freedom.

The rhetoric of "rehabilitation" reflects a similarly rigid ideological framework: anything that complicates the narrative of the morally damaged prisoner in need of redemption is likely to be dismissed as evading responsibility or making excuses. Before the Parole Board, people often fear that any attempt to address ethical nuances related to their commitment offense might cast doubt on their character, and thereby jeopardize their chances of release.

This dynamic can create a sadly ironic tension between the mandate to be fully honest, and the risks of doing so. In some cases, the true story of what happened is something other than what the judge or jury believed, or the truth might simply seem implausible if fully explained. People serving time for crimes they did not commit risk being denied parole for failing to accept responsibility for their actions if they continue to maintain their innocence. Wrongfully convicted people who finally "admit their guilt" to the Board are mistrusted for having lied previously, when they truthfully maintained that they were innocent. People who confessed to crimes that someone else committed – often because they were coerced or in order to protect

another person – struggle to present a consistent narrative about the crime every time they go back to the Board.

Some people might feel that the violence they committed was the right thing to do under the specific extreme circumstances – for example, if they acted in self-defense, or to protect another person, or to avenge harm – and they might thus feel disingenuous expressing remorse. Yet genuine remorse is an essential criterion for being found suitable for parole. My point is not to argue about whether violence is ever justified, but rather to highlight how the narrow framework through which "suitability" is determined might at times render both honest communication and meaningful judgments impossible.

I also wonder about the psychological effect on incarcerated people of these tensions, and even of the entire cultural concept of "rehabilitation," which is constantly being imposed by the prison system, media, mainstream culture, and even many recovery programs. Incarcerated people are under extraordinary pressure to adopt the highly formulaic and simplistic personal narrative: I was once bad, but now I'm good.

Because many people inside strongly identify with this narrative, my impulse is sometimes to defer without question. I also recognize the profound sense of rebirth that often arises as a result of dramatic intellectual and emotional growth. At the same time, I can imagine the internalization of this narrative as a form of psychic compliance – born not only out of the urgent hope for release from prison, but out of the longing for social acceptance, and even for escape from shame and self-loathing.

Is there a psychic cost of feeling compelled to repudiate one's own former self? What exactly becomes of the grief, rage, fear, hunger, impulsivity, or even cruelty that might have characterized one's earlier life, often with reason? How could such harsh splitting not leave people feeling fractured, alienated, or fake? I also wonder whether all of this might leave people even less likely to stay connected (internally and externally) at times of psychological crisis, when "negative" feelings or impulses become harder to contain.

Whatever the case, as we all work to effect positive change under enormously complex conditions, I hope we one day create the social practices and institutions that recognize the unique complexity of each individual, and support the growth, integration and healing of every person.

With warm regards,
Jody Lewen

Photos on pages 1 and 2, from left to right: English 99 students Brad Janosky; Chris Marshall, Sr.; James Wortham, Jr.; Clay Long; Jairo Pedroza; Chris Huggins; Andrew Wadsworth; Tim Hicks.

An Early Snapshot of the PUP Student Community

The Prison University Project recently conducted a first-of-its-kind survey of students who have participated in the College Program who are currently at San Quentin. The purpose of the Student Social and Educational Background Survey was to get a "snapshot" of our student body that enables us to support students better, as well as to describe our community of students to others. This survey represents the precursor to a larger research and evaluation project that we are designing in order to improve the College Program, learn about its short- and long-term impact on students, educate the public about our work, and advocate for college programs in other prisons.

Gaps in schooling

Most of our students (92%) had a gap in their earlier schooling. On average, students cited two to three reasons for gaps. Almost half of students (42%) reported that financial problems and/or needing to get a job caused them to leave school. Over a third reported some kind of problem with school itself – e.g., 15% had conflicts with students or teachers, 7% were physically unsafe there, 15% had trouble keeping up with school work, and 21% were suspended or expelled. Another third (38%) reported that arrest or incarceration had something to do with a gap, whether because being arrested stopped them from completing school, or because prison education programs were unavailable, inaccessible to them, of poor quality, or interrupted by policy changes or violence.

Freedom

On February 18, PUP graduate James (JC) Cavitt presented his spoken word piece "Freedom," from inside San Quentin (via video), as part of John Legend's #TED2016 presentation on criminal justice reform. In addition, on January 22, several men at San Quentin gave spectacular presentations in the first TEDxSanQuentin, video of which should be available any day at www.tedxsanquentin.org.

Photos courtesy of The Last Mile.

Challenges in school

A third of participants (33%) appear to have some degree of learning disability, as indicated by their reporting a significant problem with mixing up letters or numbers (16%), thinking they had a learning disability (22%), or having been told they had a learning disability (and agreeing with this) (12%). A smaller number of participants (6%) reported that they had been told they had a learning disability and disagreed with this.

Almost a third of students experienced a bodily challenge that affected their schooling or ability to learn before coming to the College Program. Most common were head injuries (10%), followed by vision problems (7%), injuries from violence (e.g., gunshot wounds) (6%), injuries from car or sports accidents (4%), serious illnesses such as pneumonia or cancer (4%), problems moving their arms or legs (4%), diabetes (2%), and hearing problems (2%).

The survey also asked about earlier life experiences with four school-related skills – speaking in class, concentrating, sitting still, and listening. Over half of students said that speaking in class and concentrating had been somewhat or very difficult for them (59% and 54%, respectively). Forty-six percent found sitting still difficult, and 26% found listening difficult. When asked why this was, responses varied. Some students explained that they couldn't concentrate in class, for example, because of distress related to abuse going on at home or because they were hungry. Many students reported not speaking up in class for fear of being shamed by teachers if they made a mistake or could not speak English fluently, while a few feared bullying by other students if they looked too smart. Several Black students reported no longer speaking in class after experiencing racist put-downs from teachers about their speech.

Life experiences outside school

About half of participants (46%) experienced periods of homelessness, and 36% experienced not having enough food to eat. More than three quarters (86%) of students experienced abuse or violence directed at them. This included physical abuse for 75% of students, emotional abuse for 70%, and sexual abuse for 24%.

The age at which students were first arrested ranged from 9 years old to 45 years old. The average age at first arrest was 18 years old, and 61% have been incarcerated more than once (including for parole violations). Just over a quarter (26%) reported participating in a gang prior to incarceration. More than half of participating students (58%) are fathers. ∎

Sharing Knowledge; Scaling Impact

Denee Pescarmona and Audrey Green, College of the Canyons; Allison Lopez, Amy Jamgochian, and Neil Terpkosh, Prison University Project; Gary Cale, Jackson College, Michigan; and Tony Delfino, College of the Sequoias/Anti-Recidivism Coalition.

On March 6-9, the Prison University Project conducted a three-day training: "Sharing Knowledge; Scaling Impact: Creating Excellence in Prison Higher Education" at the Embassy Suites Hotel in San Rafael. Attendees included staff and faculty from ten California Community Colleges and other colleges and universities, as well as colleagues from the California State University, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, the Office of the Inspector General, various other organizations and institutions from across the state, and as far away as Michigan and Australia.

Session topics included: prison rules, regulations and culture; prison-related logistics and planning; classroom pedagogy; teacher and staff training; and academic and administrative planning. The event also included site visits to San Quentin and a panel discussion on the burgeoning movement that is creating a prison-to-college pipeline.

Those three exhilarating and exhausting days left us more committed than ever to supporting individuals and institutions across California – through trainings, local meetings, shareable resources, and individualized advising and mentorship – in their quest to create quality prison higher education programs. ■

Introducing Julie McNulty, PUP's new Development Manager

Dear Friends,

I recently joined the team at the Prison University Project as the new Development Manager. I've spent the last several years working in the prison and reentry fields, first as a direct service provider and most recently as a fundraiser. What I enjoy most about development work is resourcing organizations I care about so they can continue to create change, and telling powerful stories.

While working as a reentry case manager at a non-profit in Contra Costa County, I frequently met with men who were approaching their release dates to start creating a plan for their return home. We would talk through logistics – when and where to check in with a probation or parole officer, safe places to stay, what types of work might be easily available. Sometimes we would delve deeper: what would life be like on the outside? Would family welcome them back? How would they begin to make up for time lost? Some took the uncertainty in stride, focusing on the opportunities freedom would afford them. Others were more apprehensive.

When I spoke to one man about his impending release after 21 years inside, he told me he felt like he was being "kicked out" of prison. He and I talked about the challenges he might face on the outside, about the seemingly endless list of stumbling blocks that could prevent him from finding a job and a safe place to stay, from reconnecting with his now fully grown daughter, and from avoiding stepping back through that revolving door of recidivism. He was eager to step into his new identity as a free man, and would often say, "If people knew who I was, they would want something different for me."

I continued to work with this man, and clients like him, for many more months before transitioning into development. I was often struck by the power and potentness of their stories, and reminded of a quote from a favorite childhood author, Madeleine L'Engle: "Stories make us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving." I viewed fundraising as an opportunity to move more people to act by sharing the experiences of my clients more broadly. Giving can be a rush. It's an emotional act as well as an intellectual one, and it may be the culmination of many months or many years of thinking about giving. Storytelling appeals to both sides of our character, giving us a lens through which we can understand the need for and the impact of real action.

At PUP, I'm inspired by our mission to change public perceptions of incarcerated individuals by providing a window into the lives of people at San Quentin. I feel honored to be a part of telling PUP's story. If you have ideas about how we can collaborate, I'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch with me anytime at jmcnulty@prisonuniversityproject.org, or (415) 455-8088, ext. 2. ■

Prison University Project

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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 meaningful public dialogue about higher education access and criminal justice in California and across the United States.

We provide approximately 20 courses each semester leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses, to approximately 350 students. All instructors work as volunteers; most are faculty or graduate students from UC Berkeley, Stanford, San Francisco State, USF, and other local colleges and universities. We receive no state or federal funding and rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland, CA.

Can Computers Think?

Introduction to Philosophy • Instructors Melissa Fusco and Quinn Gibson

Course description: *In this course we examine some famous contemporary and historical philosophical arguments on the nature of the mind, on personal identity, ethical theories, free will, and the notion of meaning. How can a physical object like the human brain give rise to the conscious mind? Is it possible for persons to switch bodies? Is what makes an action good its consequences, or the motives from which it springs? Are we the ultimate authors of our actions? What makes a mark or a gesture not merely informative or misleading, but a truth or a lie? In investigating these questions, we focus on critical thinking, careful writing, and argument reconstruction.*

The prompt: *"Can computers think?" According to Searle, this isn't quite the right question for a philosopher to ask. Why not? What is a "better" question in the vicinity, and why is it better?*

Response (Eddie Herena): *Computers can surely think if one equates thinking with the ability to compute or manipulate information. But according to Searle, the better question is, do computers understand, or have intentions? This of course is the better question. For one, it proves Searle's argument that understanding is only a human phenomenon. Second is the idea of intent; computers do not intend to do anything outside of what they were programmed to do. They do not all of a sudden say to themselves, "I'm not going to do what I'm programmed to do today. I'm going to create something of my own," because obviously they cannot.*

SPRING SEMESTER 2016
COURSE OFFERINGS

ENG 99A:	College Preparatory English I (two sections)
ENG 99B:	College Preparatory English II (two sections)
ENG 101A:	Reading and Composition
ENG 101B:	Critical Reading, Writing and Thinking (two sections)
ENG 102:	Introduction to Literature
ENG 204:	Interdisciplinary Reading, Writing, and Research
MTH 50A	(Developmental Mathematics I)
MTH 50B	(Developmental Mathematics II)
MTH 99:	Elementary Algebra (two sections)
MTH 115:	Intermediate Algebra
BIO 152:	Biology with Lab
COMM 201:	Introduction to Journalism
PHL 271:	Introduction to Philosophy
PSY 221:	General Psychology
SSC 202:	Comparative Religion
SOC 230:	Sociology
SPA 102:	Elementary Spanish II Spanish conversation group
Study Hall	[Tutoring in writing and math Math Study Groups]