Teaching Politics in Jails and Prisons

Introduction: Teaching Politics in Jails and Prisons

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The purpose of this symposium is to proselytize, albeit with provisos. All contributors to this exchange have taught college courses in prisons or jails in the previous decade and have led research and advocacy efforts in support of expanding access to higher education in prison. We are convinced that many more colleges and universities could and should undertake such programs. The organizational and financial challenges are manageable, and the educational payback for students and faculty alike is vast.

In this introduction, we first map the array of college programs across the country—their history, the degrees offered, and their funding sources. We then highlight salient themes addressed in the symposium articles—from the more practical (i.e., how faculty have negotiated the establishment of programs in jails and prisons) to the more theoretical (i.e., what draws teachers to the prison classroom, how diversity in the classroom is approached intellectually and politically, and how the often-autocratic correctional environment shapes the experience of program planning and teaching). Our experiences run the gamut but, more often than not, they are inspiring intellectually, stimulating pedagogically, and vexing politically.

THE NATIONAL MAP OF COLLEGE PROGRAMS IN PRISON

In 1994, the peak of the "tough-on-crime" era, the doors closed to most college classrooms in prison when congressional legislation barred the use of Pell Grants for incarcerated students.[1] Despite the fact that this category of Pell expenditures totaled less than 1% of overall Pell funding, opponents argued that public dollars awarded to these students came at the expense of traditional college students.[2] After the ban was implemented, many students were stranded with only partially completed degrees. The hope of turning prison time into a constructive and promising educational path forward died on the vine. Slowly, however—at the initiative of college and university faculty and with the vital help of foundation funding, private donations, and limited public monies—college programs in correctional facilities have reemerged around the country. Notably, each state can now claim at least one college or university with college-in-prison programs, with some states experiencing more growth than others. New York State, for instance, had only eight struggling programs left in the wake of the mid-1990s siege but is now home to 27 programs. California, New York, Texas, and Washington collectively account for more than 70 programs (Castro 2018).

Slightly more than 200 colleges offer credit-bearing coursework in prisons around the country, roughly 4% of degree-granting postsecondary Title IV institutions in the United States. Of this number, slightly more than half (55%) are public two-year colleges (Castro 2018). With this growth in program opportunity, there has been an opening in political opportunity to move the conversation forward, particularly after an oft-cited 2013 RAND meta-analysis of correctional education highlighted data showing that participation in and completion of educational programs are correlated with lower recidivism rates and increased post-release employment rates (Davis et al. 2013).

In 2016, the US Department of Education selected 67 institutions to participate in the Second Chance Pell (SCP) pilot program. Framed as an experiment to test whether participation in high-quality education classes would increase after expanding access to financial aid for incarcerated students, the program, in effect, waived the 1994 ban on using federal Pell Grant funds for those students enrolled in selected programs. In terms of credential completion, the majority of credentials awarded to date through the experiment were vocational certificates (701) and associates degrees (230); 23 credentials were bachelor's degrees (Boldin 2018).

Institutions that still do not have access to these Pell funds have turned to state funding to subsidize costs. In the 1990s, many states followed suit in the federal "War on Crime" era and instituted their own state-level bans on using state monies. These policies, however, have been increasingly challenged in recent years; in 2017, Washington State repealed a ban that had been on the books for more than two decades. Others have found creative ways to make the investment. New York State, for example, partnered with the Manhattan District Attorney's office to use asset-forfeiture revenue to fund an expansion of higher-education programs.

Nongovernmental funding continues to be critical to the establishment and support of current prison education programs. Faculty and administrators seeking to organize college programs in prisons and jails have relied on private philanthropy and, at times, on corporate generosity. Foundation funding has both seeded and sustained college-in-prison initiatives; the Sunshine Lady, Ford, Open Society, Mellon, and

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Laughing Gull foundations (focused in the South) are among the most active. Support from private family foundations, religious organizations, community foundations, and humanities councils also has enabled the growth of college-in-prison programs. Driving much of the momentum, colleges and universities have subsidized tuition, provided space, and designated staff that, alongside faculty and graduate instructors, provides "the muscle" that has built the major prison programs. Also crucial are social-justice-concerned alumni who have proven to be a formidable resource—particularly in the early stages of program development.

As the credential levels and funding models vary, so do the instructional and organizational models that govern program operation. Whereas community colleges are targeted more often than other institutions by federal and regional funding initiatives to provide workforce education and training to incarcerated individuals, postsecondary credentials offered in programs range from career and technical education to advanced degrees that highlight the importance of a liberal arts education. Programs that are closely linked to their higher-education institutions often can pay their instructors an additional small stipend. They also sometimes turn to volunteer instructors on their own faculty and to experienced community members who are drawn to the mission and vision, writ large.

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Student selection also differs across programs. The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program[3] brings together incarcerated and non-incarcerated students as intellectual and classroom peers, whereas the Prison University Project (i.e., the San Quentin extension of Patten University) teaches solely to incarcerated students. The Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP) enlists 50 undergraduate campus teaching assistants each semester—a commitment that leads many students postgraduation toward related professional or activist engagement.[4]

Some programs admit by exam, interviews, and applications, imposing highly selective standards. Others admit more broadly and offer precollege preparation to maximize potential enrollment. In addition to the variation in student background and class composition are variations in technology availability and implementation. Some programs can afford to provide closely monitored computer labs within a correctional facility; many still use only blackboards and chalk. Examining the scope of pedagogical approaches, specifically, and college programs in prison, generally, requires a high level of nuance and understanding of the distinctive factors contributing to education in an incarcerated space.

This is an impressive record. However, success will depend on continued public funding and on colleges and universities viewing higher education in prison as central to their own mission and supporting it accordingly.

THE CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION

Despite considerable financial and bureaucratic obstacles, contributors to the symposium have had significant success initiating classes as well as starting and sustaining college programs in both jails and prisons. Molly Shanley (Vassar College) discusses the organizational and financial feasibility of introducing six-week as well as full-semester classes into local jails; integrating outside college students with inside students in classes with different credit arrangements; and financing classes through either college/university funding or the inventive use of commissary/phone commissions—which, by law, are required to be directed to the well-being of jail residents. Marc Howard and Joshua Miller (Georgetown University) narrate their challenging odyssey ("when one door closes, another opens") of having to leave behind a well-established prison program in Maryland, only to find a way to create an ambitious program in DC jails. Indeed, our reason for including both jail and prison teaching in this symposium is that jails have the advantage of their location in the local community and their often greater readiness and flexibility to respond to college initiatives. There are well-known and long-established degree-granting prison programs at Bard, Cornell, University of Illinois, Mercy College/Hudson Link, and the Prison University Program in San Quentin—among many others that have deep experience in program design and fundraising. It is that much more powerful, therefore, that Shanley and Howard and Miller can show what is possible to accomplish by introducing college programs in jails in only a few years.

All contributors to the symposium concur on one claim: the intellectual experience of teaching college classes in jail or prison is exceptionally rewarding. It is not only the "wonder" of teaching students who harbor little sense of entitlement—first-time teachers in college classes in prison also regularly comment on the motivation, focus, and engagement (i.e., no need to ban laptops or hand-held devices) of students in the prison classroom.

However, there are several other reasons that draw many of us to this teaching. As Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Jill Frank (Cornell University) relate, some instructors are acting on their conviction that higher education should be universalized or at least decoupled from economic privilege; others are acting on a sense of political solidarity and/or a determination to inflict "chinks in the armor" of a carceral state. For Katzenstein and Frank, the preeminent motivating force is the teaching itself—the co-immersion *with* students in the production of ideas *in* the type of classroom where freedom and equality are prized.

For Kristin Bumiller (Amherst College), the diversity that "inside-out classes" introduces to college programs in prison challenges instructors and students alike to do nothing less than bring "together those who are held apart by inequality and discrimination," creating an "occasion for the repair and renewal of democratic life." Confronting this challenge in both the prison and her Amherst classroom, Bumiller invokes John Dewey in arguing for the "value of bringing socially diverse groups together in the hope that students with diverse experiences will challenge static and stultified thinking." Matthew Spellberg (Harvard University) also probes the pedagogy of diversity in his account of an exchange with a single student in a single grammar lesson. Identifying the "correct" part of speech (i.e., adjective or noun?) reveals deep differences in cosmologies often present in the classroom. Engaging these differences in cosmic understandings challenges instructors in prisons just as it tests us all in today's politically polarized world.

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Marie Gottschalk (University of Pennsylvania) concludes the symposium with an account of prison teaching stripped of any idealization. She describes her experience doing battle with the arbitrariness of prison rules, eluding the selection of resumé-padding campus students in the inside-out classroom, and the ongoing clash in the classroom in which accounts of personal agency can come to efface the explanatory force of structural injustices. However, as Gottschalk asserts, "My highest highs and lowest lows as a professor have occurred in courses I have taught on the politics of race, crime, and punishment" in the prison and outside.

If there is a single argument to be addressed to political science faculty about the importance of teaching college classes in prison, it is this: prison removes vast numbers of people, particularly people of color, from the community of voting citizens. Until and beyond the redress of this travesty of democracy, it is incumbent on us as political scientists and as a teaching faculty to insist on another form of democratic community: the inclusionary community of educated women and men. ■

NOTES

1. Limited federal funding for incarcerated youth under age 25 (later raised to under 35) was established through congressional programs (i.e., Workforce and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Youth Offender Program, in 1998, updated and renamed in 2008).
2. Available at http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/pell_grants_-_are_prisoners_the_programs_biggest_problem.pdf.
3. Available at www.insideoutcenter.org.
4. Many CPEP graduates have gone on to criminal defense, non-profit advocacy, prosecutorial work, and public service including public health. One former CPEP teaching assistant now holds the position of medical director at Rikers Island Prison Complex. Gottschalk (in this symposium) mentions students who have elected more political routes: joining efforts to eliminate cash bail or ban the box battles and district-attorney campaigns.

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Mary Lyndon (Molly) Shanley *recently retired as professor of political science on the Margaret Stiles Halleck Chair at Vassar College where she taught political theory and feminist theory. She has led a weekly women's writing group at the Dutchess County Jail since 2007. From 2008–12, Molly taught a college course on social issues at Taconic Correctional Facility (medium security facility for women), with half the class drawn from students from Vassar and half from women at Taconic CF. She enjoys singing in a community choral group and backpacking. She may be reached at shanley@vassar.edu.*

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