

Needed Specialists for a Challenging Task: Formerly Incarcerated Leaders' Essential Role in Postsecondary Programs in Prison

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Abstract: *U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1967 Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice called for a massive increase in teachers prepared to assist in the delivery of academic programs for incarcerated people. "Substantial subsidies are needed to recruit needed specialists," they wrote, "and to provide them with the training required to make them effective in their complex and challenging task." Half a century later, the persistent educational deficits and need for empowering postsecondary academic programs in prisons across the United States and the world are being addressed by a wide range of responses from specialists in higher education, corrections, and research. Too often overlooked, however, are the perspectives of those specialists whose expertise comes in part from lived experience: directly affected people leading successful and meaningful interventions in rehabilitation and reentry. This paper examines the development and administration of Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, an in-prison college program run and staffed primarily by its own formerly incarcerated graduates. The importance of foregrounding the voices of directly affected people by placing them in positions of true leadership and authority—not merely as symbolic gestures or tokens—in Hudson Link's program design and implementation is explained. Finally, the paper explores the impact of lived experience on managing and teaching in the program, as well as strategies for academic partners looking to best support interventions led by those who are closest to the problem and, in turn, closest to the solution.*

Keywords: *Prison education, prison-college programs, prison education administration*

In November of 2017 the three authors of this article met in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to participate in a roundtable discussion at the 41st Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, the theme of which was "Crime, Legitimacy and Reform: Fifty Years after the President's Commission". The "President's Commission" refers to United States President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1967 Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration: a group of 19 lawyers, educators, law enforcement officers, social workers, and others who had been appointed to study the American criminal justice system and make recommendations for its improvement. As practitioners involved in the delivery of higher education in prisons, we were curious to read—and eager to respond to—one of the commission's recommendations in particular: the call for a massive increase in teachers prepared to assist in the delivery of academic programs for incarcerated people. "Substantial subsidies are needed to recruit needed specialists," they wrote, "and to provide them with the training required to make them effective in their complex and challenging task" (1967, p. 175). Our panel in Philadelphia explored the ways in which lived experience could and should be privileged as a source of expertise when recruiting these specialists. The commentary found herein comprises content developed through that panel and subsequent discussions.



The fifty years since these recommendations were made were tumultuous for prison education in the American correctional landscape: After the fairly widespread implementation of higher education in prisons across the country, the majority of these programs were dissolved after 1994 legislation rescinded incarcerated students' eligibility to receive federal tuition grants. Persistent educational deficits in the nation's prisons along with increasing awareness of and active resistance to the causes and consequences of mass incarceration (National Research Council, 2014) have since led to a wide range of responses from specialists in criminal justice, higher education, and research.

Too often overlooked in these responses, we believe, has been the expertise of specialists with lived experience: directly affected people leading successful and meaningful interventions toward rehabilitation and reentry. Though the value of "credible messengers" (Austria & Peterson, 2017) has become more commonly understood and accepted in the world of prisoner reentry and alternatives-to-incarceration, the influence of such messengers often remains lacking in the space of postsecondary education in American correctional institutions.

This paper, co-authored by three practitioner-activists in the education-in-prison space, explores the impact of lived experience on the work of leading, managing, and teaching in postsecondary programs in prison. Our reflections and experience are rooted in work done over the last two decades by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, along with their allies, at a small nonprofit organization called Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison in New York. Founded inside Sing Sing Correctional Facility in 1998, Hudson Link is now one of the oldest continuously operating programs of its kind in the United States.

We begin with a brief history of Hudson Link's founding and development, and its context in a broader tradition of informal teaching and learning inside American prisons. This is followed by reflections on the impact of lived experience on the work of managing in-prison postsecondary programs, teaching inside prison as a formerly incarcerated person, and being involved in the release and reentry component that is now included in many such efforts here in the United States. Our hope is that this article will encourage academic institutions and others administering educational programs to include directly affected people in the work they do with currently and formerly incarcerated students, so we end with a list of suggested actions for those looking to do this.

A Note on Authorship

It has been suggested to us by our dear friend Dr. Mary Gould that transparency and reflexivity about authorship is essential to the honesty and integrity of a contribution such as this one. With that in mind, we want to briefly share the authors' backgrounds as well as the process of putting this article together.

Dr. Lila McDowell, Development Director at Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, convened and moderated the original roundtable session at the ASC Annual Meeting in Philadelphia and invited the presenters who would sit on that panel. Her original DPhil research on the experiences of incarcerated men pursuing undergraduate degrees with Hudson Link (see McDowell, 2012) informed the framing and contextualization of ideas developed first during the ASC roundtable session in Philadelphia and then further during this article's drafting process. Dr. Samuel Arroyo, the first Hudson Link alumnus to earn an EdD, is the former Program Director for Hudson Link; it is primarily his experience that we draw on in discussing the impact of formerly incarcerated people on the management of in-prison postsecondary programs. Jorge Diaz, also a Hudson Link alumnus, has served since his release as an instructor for accredited Hudson Link classes at Sing Sing Correctional Facility; it is his experience that we draw on in discussing the role of lived experience in the work of teaching incarcerated students. All three of this article's authors have worked in a professional capacity in reentry services, and it is these experiences that we draw on in reflecting on the importance of including directly affected people in the process of reentry and reintegration of incarcerated students back into society after release.

All three authors agreed on goals and distribution of labor before beginning the writing process. We hope the resulting work reflects the kind of productive collaboration that can be achieved between formerly incarcerated scholar-activists and their allies. In recognition of the diverse but equal contributions of knowledge and perspective to the work of this piece, authors have been listed in alphabetical order.

Background and Historical Context

Universities, whose presence was once commonplace in American penal institutions, left prisons across the United States in the mid-nineties following President Clinton's passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. One provision of this crime bill was that it rescinded incarcerated persons' eligibility for Pell grants, a federal form of financial aid that was the primary funding mechanism for institutions of higher education active in prison education. In New York, the loss of federal funding was compounded by the additional loss of state funding, as then-Governor Pataki took away incarcerated students' eligibility for Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) grants (Correctional Association of New York, 2009). The withdrawal of postsecondary institutions from prisons in New York mirrored a national trend: It is estimated that by 1996 the number of college-in-prison¹ programs operating nationally dropped from approximately 350 to less than a dozen (Fine et al., 2001).

Many of those people who were incarcerated in New York during the early-to-mid-nineties remember witnessing a dramatic shift in the atmosphere of prisons across the state: Even those who were not enrolled in college programs before legislation shut them down remember the increased violence and heightened sense of hopelessness that pervaded New York's correctional facilities following the loss of positive programming. A group of men at Sing Sing who had earned their degrees before the loss of Pell grants, led by incarcerated activists John Valverde and John Mandela, reached out to religious volunteers and outside academics for help bringing college—and hope—back to the facility. It was through these efforts that Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison was founded in 1998 (McDowell, 2012). The program drew on the model developed by incarcerated women at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, who used the prison grapevine to share their play-book with the men at Sing Sing, and was implemented with the support of the facility's administration.

The Hudson Link Model

To understand the critical function that Hudson Link plays in the execution of in-prison college programs, it is important to understand its model. Hudson Link is not a college or university itself, nor an entity managed by correctional administrators. Instead it is a third-party facilitator who:

- works with the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to identify prisons where higher education programs are most likely to be successful;
- finds local partner colleges to offer accredited, degree-granting undergraduate coursework inside of prisons;
- recruits, selects, and prepares students to succeed in this coursework, consistent with DOCCS policies regarding disciplinary infractions and other criteria;
- evaluates any prior educational experience and analyzes what credits students still need in order to earn a full degree;
- selects the courses that will be offered by the college partner each semester to move the greatest number of students toward that degree;
- purchases and manages all necessary books and supplies;
- coordinates the completion of DOCCS' required paperwork related to security clearance for educational materials as well as instructors;
- helps recruit and maintain rosters of instructors to teach at each facility;
- serves as academic advisors and guidance counselors for students;
- identifies and trains particularly promising incarcerated alumni to serve as clerks who perform a vital administrative support function to the program from the inside;
- supports released alumni during and after their release and transition back to the community;
- fundraises to cover the cost of instructors, books, classroom supplies, and staff to coordinate each site as well as alumni efforts so that these programs run at no cost to the partner colleges or the prisons.

¹In this article the American usage of the word "college" is employed interchangeably with "undergraduate education" or "undergraduate institution", depending on context.

Just as President Johnson's commission described, these are indeed complex and challenging tasks that require intimate knowledge of prison procedures and administration, the idiosyncrasies of the correctional environment, and the ways that incarcerated allies on the inside—without whom our program could not run—can be empowered to provide essential program support as part of their prison-sanctioned work assignments.

Using this model, Hudson Link has grown over the past twenty years from one class of sixteen men at one facility to a student body of over 600 male and female students at facilities across the state. Most unique about the program is the fact that it is run and staffed primarily by its own formerly incarcerated graduates; more than 60% of Hudson Link's overall staff are formerly incarcerated and most are also Hudson Link alumni.

It may be hard to conceive of a degree-granting college program put together by a group of incarcerated people who had no funding, no government support, and little connection to the outside world. But we are sure that it comes as no surprise to anyone who has witnessed the resourcefulness, ingenuity, and motivation of incarcerated students. Those of us who were students in these programs, know the hunger for knowledge that exists behind the walls, while those of us who have been teachers know the unique drive and stamina that incarcerated students show in the pursuit and achievement of their goals.

The truth is that while higher education is tremendously valuable and transformative, the pursuit of formal academic degrees is just one incarnation of a larger tradition of teaching and learning that has existed within American correctional facilities for decades. One needs only to look as far back as the late seventies and early eighties to see unofficial, prisoner-led learning cooperatives such as the *Non-Traditional Approach: Resurrection/Conciencia* (NTA) study group movement that existed in men's prisons across New York State. Diaz shared during the roundtable discussion in Philadelphia about participation in NTA, where he was taught that in order to change one's destructive behavior, one has to change their mindset—to challenge and replace their criminogenic thinking patterns with positive, pro-social thoughts and beliefs. The content of these groups, taught by other incarcerated men who acted as facilitators and mentors, mirrored the cognitive behavioral models that are so often seen today in evidence-based recidivism reduction programs.

This teaching and mentoring demonstrated another tenet of NTA: "Each one teach one". In prison, for those individuals who were conscious agents of change, the practice was to reach out and pull up those who were in search of knowledge and help them along the way. This is something still practiced today, both personally and professionally, by those of us who followed in our NTA teachers' footsteps.

Hundreds of allies without personal lived experience of incarceration have contributed to the reinstatement of prison college programs over the past 25 years, and much of the progress in this field could not have been made without their willingness to marshal their human, intellectual, and financial resources. All three authors of this article come to our work with the belief that currently and formerly incarcerated people must collaborate with those from outside the walls to break the cycles of intergenerational poverty, mass incarceration, and institutional racism. What follows are reflections on some of the contributions that directly affected people are particularly equipped to make to the prison education and reentry space.

Relationship building. Relationships are imperative in the work of providing accredited undergraduate education in prison. In our experience it can be more comfortable for incarcerated students to share the struggles or challenges they are facing with someone who has sat in their seat and already knows what life is like from their vantage point. In his time as Program Director, Arroyo found that students who were struggling academically often had an easier time opening up to him or a formerly incarcerated member of his staff than they did to their professors or in front of their classmates, with whom they may not have felt safe expressing vulnerability.

This relationship building extends not just to students but also to correctional administrators, with whom a strong rapport is essential. One might think that those who used to be under the custody and control of corrections officials would be hard pressed to cooperate with them in facilitating empowerment through academic work; however, we have found the opposite to be true. Arroyo, Hudson Link's Executive Director Sean Pica, and the majority of men and women who have served as Hudson Link academic coordinators over the years began their relationships with today's correctional leadership team decades ago, when these superintendents and commissioners were new officers. Rather than play to the adversarial roles expected of us, we

find that most officers who knew our formerly incarcerated staff as young people in their custody are proud of their transformation and pleased that we still come back in to help others make the same changes in their lives. The willingness on both sides to work together toward a productive partnership has made it possible for Hudson Link to grow and flourish as it has.

Our positive and productive relationships with corrections are built not only on personal history but on the knowledge of and respect for security procedures that come as second nature to those previously under the rule of those procedures. Understanding the structure, hierarchy, and areas of purview of various correctional administrators, being accustomed to the timeline on which corrections can work and make program-related decisions amidst a number of competing priorities, and knowing instinctively how to comply with facility rules that may be unfamiliar to outsiders all make for smooth relationships with our correctional partners.

Role modeling. One of the most important functions that formerly incarcerated activists serve in the college-in-prison space is that of a role model. Arroyo and Diaz both recall men they knew inside (“mentors, though I did not have the language to call them mentors back then,” Arroyo explained in Philadelphia.) who encouraged them to go to school when they did not yet believe in the value of formal higher education or their ability to complete it. They recall that the men who pulled them into the classroom were leaders amongst the population at Sing Sing, which lent weight to the pedestal on which they placed education and the amount of respect they expected others to show for it. “The men I looked up to inside revered education to such a degree that they demanded complete commitment and devotion from all students,” Arroyo shared during the panel. Having learned the most about the value of education from other incarcerated men, those who went through these programs now feel compelled to serve as role models for those who come behind.

Formerly incarcerated educators and activists working behind prison walls are also in a unique position to prepare students for the reentry process. Students anticipating release have questions about what transition is really like: challenges they will face, potential pitfalls to be aware of, how to successfully complete parole, how they will be received when they have to explain their background during a job interview. People who have succeeded in that transition themselves represent walking, talking models of the transformative and lasting power of education and the possibilities that lie on the other side of the wall.

Maintaining standards while navigating nuance. Demanding high standards from college programs and the students who participate in them carries on a long tradition of expecting and striving for excellence in the educational space. Diaz, who facilitated and taught a wide variety of classes on the inside including HIV/AIDS Education, Health Education, and Conflict Resolution, shared in Philadelphia that he knew when he returned post-release as an instructor for the Hudson Link program that he would have to come prepared:

Many of the men in those classrooms read enough to be experts on topics that attract their interest. So, I learned early on that if I was going to do a presentation, I had to make sure I had all the facts. As an incarcerated facilitator and now as a college instructor I know one thing for certain: there is always someone in the prison classroom audience who is widely read and incredibly knowledgeable on the topic presented, and if I falter or provide inaccurate information I should prepare to be humiliated. With that in mind I make sure I am well versed on any subject matter I plan to present.

This experience is echoed by so many educators who work with incarcerated scholars and have to ask students to hold their questions on material that has not even been assigned yet until later in the semester.

Arroyo affirmed these sentiments in reflecting on his personal commitments to program management: As an incarcerated student I did not want to be involved in a college program that was not equally rigorous to what I would have attained on an outside campus. I had a desire to transform my life in a way that was not just meaningful to me, but to my family, my community, and the world of academia. I believed that maintaining our program’s academic standards was paramount to a successful rehabilitative process.

One way in which formerly incarcerated people can make a significant contribution to the work of program management is navigating nuance while maintaining these high standards. Practitioners with lived experience may be able to see potential in students that is not obvious to those with a different frame of refer-

ence. Arroyo shared his experience working with one correctional administrator who was prepared to approve nineteen of the twenty students Hudson Link had recommended for entry into the next year's cohort. The one they planned to reject, he said, had been in prison for two decades and had a file two inches thick with disciplinary write-ups. "I looked at that file and I saw myself," Arroyo said. "I saw the men who I initially respected because of the chaos they caused—and whose own transformations were what convinced me. I too could change." Arroyo pointed out that the student had been free of disciplinary tickets for an entire year, which is one of the criteria for applying to the Hudson Link program and something one would never have imagined possible given this applicant's otherwise storied institutional record. "If he was allowed into the classroom", Arroyo argued, "who might follow him? What younger men might be looking to him to set an example?"

As testament to New York correctional administrators' forward-thinking willingness to trust the instincts of formerly incarcerated educational practitioners in evaluating student potential—and to the importance of relationships as outlined earlier—that twentieth man was ultimately admitted to the program, where at the time of this publication he is excelling academically and thriving socially.

Healed people heal people. We have heard a phrase used with increasing frequency in the social services field over the past few years: "Hurt people hurt people." While we applaud the acknowledgment of the role that trauma plays in subsequent antisocial behavior, we prefer a strengths-based approach and propose instead that *healed people heal people*. A huge part of the contribution higher education in prison makes is the formation of community—communities of people who have in many cases caused harm, experienced the justice system firsthand, worked to find more positive ways to navigate the world, and searched for a way to give back. By staying involved in the work of bringing people through the justice system from harm to healing, these communities of formerly incarcerated people and their allies turn into networks of friendship, employment opportunity, and mutual empowerment. As directly affected practitioners, there is nothing more gratifying than gaining a new sense of self and using this progress to help others become the best version of themselves. As allies, there is nothing more rewarding than witnessing, supporting, and learning from this process.

Calls to Action

It would never be our position that formerly incarcerated people are the only ones who should be at the helm of prison education efforts in the United States and across the world. Rather it is our hope that after reading this article, practitioners of higher education will feel encouraged to seek out and privilege the contributions of formerly incarcerated people on an integral level in the work that they do both inside and out of prison. With that in mind, we present three calls to action that we believe will move the needle away from token inclusion and toward genuine agency and empowerment. Rather than offer a laundry list of "shoulds", we frame these as a set of commitments that we strive to honor.

- **We include currently and formerly incarcerated people in positions of real leadership and authority.** While it has become much more common to see formerly incarcerated people included in college-in-prison work, even in initiatives led by elite universities, we still notice that their participation is often limited to frontline direct service positions such as case management. In our work at Hudson Link we commit to rethinking the traditional roles that directly affected people have played, identifying additional roles to which they can bring their expertise—such as program management, teaching, and board service—and making sure that we are providing the professional development they need to succeed in those roles. We do this because we know it to be effective, transformative practice.
- **We work with correctional administration to make it possible for formerly incarcerated people to go back into the prisons we serve.** Over twenty-one years offering college inside prisons, Hudson Link has often been called to help other states replicate the work we do. Our first two pieces of advice are always the same: Identify incarcerated leaders who will help build and develop your programs from the inside, and build the relationships you'll need with your correctional administrators to make sure those leaders are able to participate fully in the work both during and after their incarceration. More than 60% of Hudson Link's staff, including those who go back into prisons to work directly with our students, are formerly incarcerated; some have even undertaken their jobs while still on parole. Our relationships with allies in the

New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision have made this possible

- **When evaluating candidates to serve as professors in our programs, we value “inside” teaching experience.** Hudson Link instructors are employed directly by our college partners, and must be hired through the standard adjunct instructor hiring process. Some of our strongest and most skilled teaching candidates are those whose teaching experience comes from classes they taught on the inside, as Diaz has described above. These educators may not have formal teaching evaluations from their students, which the traditional hiring process expects. So we have committed to working with our college partners, who do the actual hiring, to evaluate potential for teaching roles in the absence of formal evaluations.

We ultimately land in agreement with the conclusion that the President Johnson’s commission came to more than 50 years ago: education in prison is complex, and we need highly trained specialists to execute on the challenges this task presents. We encourage the field to think more broadly, and perhaps more creatively, about what those specialists might look like, and about what kinds of expertise should be considered valuable in the process of recruiting them. Formerly incarcerated practitioners’ formation of relationships with students and correctional administrators alike, their ability to serve as role models, the high standards and expectations they bring for educational quality, and the empowerment gained by helping to heal others are all contributions that may transform the effectiveness and long-term impact of educational programs on the inside.

We leave readers with one final thought: We teach best what we most need to learn. It is a responsibility formerly incarcerated activists share with their allies to remain perpetual students of our field, learning always to be adaptive and use our unique talents in ways that meet the demands of our students, our correctional institutions, our universities, and our communities.

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