

PRACTITIONER PAPER

**“I Never Thought I Could Accomplish Something Like This”:
The Success and Struggle of Teaching College Courses in Jail**

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**“I Never Thought I Could Accomplish Something
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The Success and Struggle of Teaching College
Courses in Jail**

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opportunity, Merrimack College has been providing for-credit college courses at a nearby county jail since the spring of 2017. Our faculty conduct classes one-to-two times per week, while traditional Merrimack undergraduates and graduate students work as Teacher’s Assistants, helping incarcerated students in the jail’s computer lab. Our program and courses have been well-received by all stakeholders. Jail administrators welcome efforts to enrich educational programming. Our students, both incarcerated and not, enjoy and value the work they do together. As faculty, teaching in jail is some of the most fulfilling, fun, and worthwhile teaching that we do. Nonetheless, there are specific challenges to teaching in a jail context. Here, we discuss the challenges and benefits of teaching college courses in jail.

Introduction

The Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 effectively ended higher education programs in U.S. penal facilities when it declared incarcerated people ineligible for federal funding for education. This is unfortunate for many reasons, not the least of which is that educational programming is highly correlated with reduced recidivism (Davis et al., 2013; Delaney et al., 2016). To serve our community, engage with incarcerated people, and provide our traditional students with a hands-on experiential learning

The Jail Context

Several colleges and universities have attempted to fill the void left by the 1994 Act by offering private higher education programs in penal facilities. Many of these programs are run in state prisons rather than county jails. There are good reasons for this. The challenges to providing college coursework in jail are many. With rapid turnover and relatively short sentences, it can be difficult to establish and maintain class membership over the course of several months. The conflict that results from a constantly changing population presents additional challenges related to jail culture and punishment. The constant flux of the population has also meant that jails are often overlooked as research sites (Richie, 2003). As



a result, both research and higher education programs are less likely to happen in jails than prisons.

Yet, it is important that researchers and educators pay attention to jails. Jails are the gateway to the criminal justice system because they house pre-trial detainees as well as those serving short sentences. Nineteen times as many people rotate through jails as prisons, and there are roughly 12 million jail admissions per year in the United States (Rabuy and Wagner, 2015; Subramanian et al., 2015). Consistent with the increase in incarceration over the past 30 plus years, jail use has also increased dramatically since the 1980s (Minton and Golinelli, 2014). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore society's relationship to jails, it is important to note that there is a high prevalence of mental illness among those incarcerated in jails (Bronson and Berzofsky, 2017). Furthermore, while prison populations have decreased slightly in recent years, women in *jail* are currently the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population (Glaze and Kaeble, 2014; Kaeble et al., 2016). If we intend to serve the incarcerated population, we simply cannot neglect jails.

Our Program

The Merrimack College Jail Education Program grew out of a focus on experiential learning and a commitment to social justice at the college. We began a pilot program in the fall of 2016 by offering a non-credit course, funded by Merrimack through a Faculty Development Grant. The following semester, we began offering for-credit courses, fully funded by the college. With the assistance of jail staff and administrators, we conduct an application process for students who have a high school diploma or equivalency. Potential students fill out an application in which they describe their educational and work history, motivations for applying for the course, and expectations for college coursework. From these, we screen for writing ability and potential commitment to the course. At the conclusion of each course, we conduct a course evaluation in which we seek to understand if and how the course changed their outlook on higher education and their plans for the future.

We recruit traditional Merrimack College

students to work as Teacher's Assistants for each course, earning course credit. We hand pick these students based on their maturity, open-mindedness, writing ability, and experience with the material in the given course. To some extent, this is a self-selected population of students who are interested in the criminal justice system, have a working knowledge of the social justice issues related to incarceration, and are willing and eager to spend time in a penal facility.

Challenges

Massachusetts jails hold pre-trial offenders as well as those serving sentences of up to 2.5 years. Over four semesters, we have learned that flexibility and creativity are necessary to navigate the uncertainties this heterogeneous population presents. We want to provide an equal opportunity for all interested and qualified prospective students (see Blount, Butler, and Gay, 2017), and thus a candidate's status—pre-trial or sentenced—has no bearing on a candidate's eligibility for college coursework. Students must simply have a high school diploma or equivalency and a reasonable expectation that they will remain in the facility for the duration of the course. But while jail administrators use their years of experience to screen for viable candidates, even their "best guess" can't guarantee that candidates will be able to finish out the class. There are many variables at play, particularly for pre-trial students, for whom bail adjustments, cases dismissed or won, or transfers to other facilities make it difficult to predict their stays.

This is far from an ideal system, and the constant flux of the class makes for a challenging teaching environment. Over the course of a semester, a class that started out with 15 students can dwindle, slowly, to four or five. This is frustrating, not only because the class dynamic inevitably shifts with each emptied seat, but also because one must often watch intelligent, promising students—students who often loved the class—withdraw due to circumstances beyond their control. Even when students are released, our happiness for them must coexist with the understanding that their futures are often uncertain, and might very well mark the end of an academic

journey that had barely begun at all.

It makes sense, then, that prisons are often more desirable sites for higher education programs, because students with long sentences can complete several courses, a certificate, or even a degree. At the jail, on the other hand, we might have our students for one, two, or at most three semesters. We have collaborated with two area community colleges to assist students with continuing their education upon release. We invite admissions representatives to discuss the application process, financial aid, areas of study, and other potential resources (see Blount, Butler, and Gay, 2017). Students are often surprised to hear that they are still eligible for aid even if they have a felony record, or that colleges will assist them with the financial aid process directly. We have also revitalized two scholarship programs for post-incarceration students. While we have yet to be successful in transitioning students to college after release, previously incarcerated students who were already enrolled were made aware of the scholarship fund and accessed it as a result.

In addition to managing class enrollments and attrition, we have learned to manage the conflicting priorities of our respective institutions. Teaching and learning are our priorities, but security, dictated by policies and procedures, is the first priority of the jail. While administrators are excited about the program, this is not the case with everyone we encounter. As teachers we may feel very differently about our students than jail staff feel about those they term “inmates.” In turn, we may bear witness to behaviors or expressions that make us uncomfortable. On the outside, we might object or engage people in debate around issues of power and justice, but preservation of the program in the space of the jail changes that dynamic (see Becker and Aiello, 2013).

We have also learned that *when* we teach has a great bearing on our potential success. During the day, class time must compete with other needs like medical appointments, attorney visits, mandatory programs, and court dates, so we teach at night. Finding allies among the staff is equally important. The correctional officer on staff in the evening goes above and beyond to support the program, our work, and students’ successful completion of the coursework.

As a relatively new program, we have enrolled 37 incarcerated students in college courses. Of these, 20 have completed the course and earned college credits; nine are enrolled in the current semester. Our numbers are too small at this point to determine whether this program reduces recidivism in any appreciable way. However, reducing recidivism is only one benefit of correctional education. We have reason to be optimistic that doing college coursework during their incarceration has given our students a new perspective on education and their own abilities. Some students said that achieving success in a college course taught them that they were capable of much more than they thought. One man, who had earned his high school equivalency, said, “It definitely motivated me and took away some anxiety toward college work.” Another, who earned his high school equivalency *just before* he took a course said, “It encouraged me because I never thought I could accomplish something like this.” Others felt they had reconnected with the student in themselves. One high school graduate said, “It has encouraged me and reminded me that I can always learn anything with practice and an opportunity, like this Merrimack College course.” Another, who had completed some college, said of the course, “It has given me the opportunity to reintegrate back into a mind-set of college school work.” Courses also help to pass the time, stay intellectually stimulated in jail, and interact with other incarcerated men in a context they might not have otherwise found. Another student would recommend Merrimack courses to other incarcerated men because, “I found the course a great way to open my mind and get out of here.”

Another benefit of teaching in a jail is that many students hail from nearby communities. This can be of benefit in the classroom, in which common geography often grounds discussion, but also potentially for reentry as well. A key factor in reentry outcomes—whether, specifically, incarcerated students continue their education outside—is the community to which students are released. Often, students go home to a town where there is family or other personal support, and in prison it is often the case that these communities are far from the partnering academic institutions or related programs that they made connections with while in prison (see Blount, Butler, and Gay, 2017). In jail, however, this proximity is, for the most part, built into the system, and so there is great potential for building partnerships with

local colleges to help students continue their education while living in supportive home communities.

Conclusion

It is crucial that colleges and universities continue to provide educational opportunities for incarcerated populations, and that jails are not overlooked as potentially viable and meaningful parts of this effort. While teaching in a jail shares most of the challenges fundamental to teaching in any penal institution, there are unique drawbacks of its own. With rapid turnover and relatively short sentences, it is difficult to maintain class membership over the course of several months, and in a larger sense, to help students invest in any academic trajectory before they are transferred or released to uncertain futures. While the challenges are many, so are the benefits, and the potential to partner with local colleges, whose communities many of our students return to upon release, presents an exciting opportunity.

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