

## **Bridging a Gap of Understanding: A Model of Experiential Learning for Incarcerated Students and Non-Incarcerated Undergraduates**

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**Abstract:** *Service learning has evolved as a primary experience-based curriculum for undergraduate students. But much of what universities put forward as service learning is not a genuine engagement with community partners to help advance meaningful social change to address social problems. In this paper, we outline our preliminary attempt to do just that—what we call The Bridge Model. The discussion that follows occurs in the context of a semester-long project between undergraduate students at a Midwestern University (MU) and incarcerated participants from the university’s prison education program. First, we briefly situate the partnership in terms of its theoretical background in experiential learning and focus on critical service learning. Second, we explain the nature of our collaboration in terms of its aims and framework. Third, we position our Bridge model as a helpful alternative on a continuum with another prominent form of alliance—the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Fourth, we provide project samples that typify our model. Fifth, we outline the value of our approach to service learning using data derived from student reflection papers and lay out some of the challenges we faced in the project’s implementation. Finally, we contemplate the road ahead.*

**Keywords:** *experiential learning, community engagement, service learning, Inside-Out*

Experiential learning is an enduring component of undergraduate education across disciplines. John Dewey (1938) believed education was best achieved through experience rather than strictly classroom knowledge. Service learning has evolved as a primary experience-based curriculum for students. Many service learning projects do not require or permit students to have direct experience with social inequalities. For example, students working with feeding programs are engaged in charity work rather than directly confronting poverty by working with poor people (Stoecker, 2016). As Pompa (2002) writes, “service-learning—different from charity—involves becoming conscientious of and able to critique social systems, motivating participants to analyze what they experience while inspiring them to take action and make change” (p. 75). Much of what universities put forward as service learning is not a genuine engagement with community partners to help advance meaningful social change to address social problems. In this paper, we outline our preliminary attempt to do just that—what we call *The Bridge Model*.

The discussion that follows occurs in the context of a semester-long project between undergraduate students at a Midwestern University (MU) and incarcerated participants from the university’s prison education program. First, we briefly situate the partnership in terms of its theoretical background in experiential learning and focus on critical service learning. Sec-



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### **Theoretical Background**

As with any educational partnership, ours is a product of our backgrounds, experiences, and discipline-specific knowledge. The interdisciplinary nature of our project (combining tenets from sociology, philosophy, and education) has challenged us to navigate differences in language and perspective that stem from each branch of academic inquiry. While no translation will be perfect, we have found that many ostensible differences between these branches speak to the same ideas. And though the various approaches to experiential learning are often listed separately in academic texts for conceptual clarity, we’ve found that experiential learning in practice often plays out in different combinations—and on multiple levels (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009).

Thus, in terms of our pedagogical approach, our collaboration is experiential learning on one level and (project-based) service learning on another level. On the level of experience, we simply brought our students together to explore the power of open and honest dialogue. But our collaboration sought to accomplish more. On the level of service-learning, our project partners also spent a majority of their time together engaging in individual collaborative projects, for which students planned, created, and (in some cases) implemented something in the world concerning some issue of social justice.

Stoecker (2016) criticizes the practice of experiential learning that focuses on college students’ wants and needs rather than expanding the knowledge base of community partners. He posits that knowledge is power, and that a better way to support social change is by increasing community partners’ knowledge base. Stoecker (2016) underscores the need to liberate service learning by prioritizing social justice for the community and not supporting the student needs first.

Mitchell (2008) suggests that service learning is:

A community service tied to learning goals and ongoing reflection about the experience. The learning in service-learning results from the connections students make between their experiences and course themes. Through their community service, students become active learners, bringing skills and information about community work and integrating them with the theory and curriculum of the classroom to produce new knowledge. At the same time, students’ classroom learning informs their service to the community...Critical service-learning programs encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice. (pp. 50-51)

Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law (2012) advocate for critical service learning to tackle the “whiteness” of many universities’ experiential learning approaches. Service projects are often from a white benevolence perspective rather than focusing on social justice for community citizens—what Pompa (2002) might call “patronization.” Service learners are coming from a position of relative privilege as university students. The pedagogy used in the classroom often reinforces students’ centrality and their needs versus critical engagement with and empowerment of community partners through service initiatives (Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker, 2016). Castro and Gould (2018) refer to this type of exchange as academic tourism: “using higher education in prison as a way to benefit the learning experience of the non-incarcerated

undergraduate students” (p. 6).

Taking cues from these authors, we seek to provide a service learning experience that strikes a balance between the benefits accrued to incarcerated students and those accrued to non-incarcerated students. We strive to cultivate an understanding, that is, that attends to the dignity, needs, and desires of both the incarcerated and non-incarcerated students (Allred, 2009; Castro & Gould, 2018) while putting a priority on expanding the knowledge base of our community partners.

### **Reflections**

The discussion of our Bridge model for service learning projects is indeed a reflection of ourselves as teacher-scholars. Our analysis and report of our findings employ qualitative methods of participant observation, engagement in conversation with our students, and a narrative assessment of students’ critical reflections. In keeping with qualitative research, we provide reflexive statements to locate ourselves within the project and elaborate on our engagement with our respective students. We identify ourselves as Author 1 (A1) and Author 2 (A2).

#### **Author 1 Reflections**

Like too many others, I grew up in poverty with alcoholic and abusive parents. I left my household as soon as I could, spending many years as a wayward soul. In many ways, I was untethered from society and could have easily ended up as a participant in the justice system. As a result of luck and privilege, I reconnected with higher education as an adult learner, benefitting greatly from its transformative powers. Such powers allow me, in part, to recognize suffering and injustice in others. My experience as an adult learner who came from poverty, one who genuinely cares about issues of social justice, has helped foster meaningful discussions and classroom experiences with incarcerated individuals. These characteristics have partly, but of course not wholly, helped bridge significant racial and carceral divides between the incarcerated individuals and me.

A prison warden once asked me if I ever thought that I would teach in prison. The truth is that I never thought I would be teaching anyone anywhere, given my upbringing. I was a terrible student in high school—a wayward youth, to put it in a misleadingly endearing sort of way. Mostly, I was not too fond of the day in and day out of school. The traditional experience, I felt, was intensely and utterly dull. My education was primarily a dogmatic, lecture-style indoctrination led by passive instructors. I was introduced to an active, participatory-style learning experience when I returned to college many years later. And I remain convinced that experiential learning is superior to conventional instruction methods—or, at the very least, a powerful supplement to them.

#### **Author 2 Reflections**

This project came about as an extension of other teaching and research that I developed over time to keep instruction fresh and relevant for undergraduate students. I have engaged in curriculum development to create and expand experiential learning for my department’s undergraduate majors, including service learning, internships, community-based research, and study abroad. I have engaged my students in a variety of service learning projects for over 15 years. My service instruction has changed a great deal over the years, moving from a co-curricular, volunteer/charity type of model to focusing increasingly on inclusion and striving for social justice. Stoeker’s (2016) and Mitchell’s (2008) work provides a great deal of interest and a challenge for me. I reconsidered how I might genuinely make a community-driven service-learning course and provide real engagement and collaboration between MU students and a community partner.

My scholarship is influenced and informed by convict criminology, which focuses on the words, experiences, and insights from formerly incarcerated persons (Tietjen, 2019). Con-

vict criminology elevates incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals' voices to be the primary sources of knowledge about justice-involved people's experiences. Outside scholars and activists play a role in advocating but not creating the theory. I use the service learning engagement as a means by which traditional undergraduates and students inside a correctional facility may engage in a mutual exchange of ideas without privileging the voices of university students.

One of the challenges for me has been how to bring justice-involved people into a service-learning project with undergraduate students. I became aware that A1 was providing college-level non-credit courses at a men's correctional facility. I reached out to him to see if there might be interest in a service-learning project with my undergraduate students in a corrections class. Together, we launched the following pilot project.

### **The Nature of the Collaboration**

For a 15-week semester, ten students from a MU undergraduate course taught by A2 worked on an experiential learning project with 13 participants from a medium-security prison in a Midwestern state. The incarcerated individuals involved in the collaborative group were a subset of a larger group of participants from A1's philosophy course at the correctional facility called Education and Human Flourishing. The group of incarcerated learners comprised males between the ages of 25 and 65, of whom six were Black, two were LatinX, and five were White. The group of non-incarcerated learners comprised four males and six females, all of whom were white and between 18 and 45.

Before we began the process of writing about this collaboration, we sought clarification from our institution's IRB on whether we needed to pursue a full consent protocol. The IRB informed us that since we were drawing upon anonymous data from critical reflection papers in an effort to improve instruction and means of collaboration, our project did not meet the federal definition of research and as such did not require IRB oversight. That said, we were careful during the entire process not only to explain the nature and possible implications of the collaboration, but also to seek incarcerated students' permission to continue and, most importantly, to shape the project itself. A1 made it clear that participation in the collaboration was completely voluntary and opting out would not impact incarcerated students' grades or standing in the course.

The outside students are not required to participate in a service learning project for A2's class. A variety of service projects are offered, or a final paper may be completed. The students who indicated an interest in the project met with A2 to discuss the need for confidentiality within the group to protect the privacy of the inside students. A2 also explained that any students participating in the project would be subject to a criminal background check before they would be allowed to enter the prison. A2 assured them that none of the information would be shared with either instructor and the student could still complete the collaborative project without the visit. If a student was flagged by the background check or opted out at the last minute, "I have to work" or "something came up" were suggested as acceptable reasons by A2 as a means of preventing embarrassment. The outside students were also required to present their service project papers to the MU class. The students worked together to share their experiences and did not share personal identifiers about their inside student collaborators.

Near the end of the collaboration, A1 obtained explicit written permission from some of the incarcerated participants to share their project ideas and reflections publicly. Thus, the four project examples used in the "Sample of Project Collaboration" section (below) were drawn directly from those students' writings on what they wanted to be shared generally. Since we did not engage in the collaboration with the primary goal of publishing on it, A1 left it open as to the nature of the public offering (e.g., presentation, publication in academic journal, publication on website, etc.). The incarcerated participants were notified that one of the goals of the collaboration was to improve future collaborations between incarcerated and non-incarcerated

students and that publishing is one way that we might accomplish this goal.

These precautions notwithstanding, we've come to appreciate the value of a more formalized consent process. Whether or not IRB protocols are required and whether or not we intend to write on future collaborations, we plan on implementing a more rigorous procedure for notifying individuals about the possible risks and benefits of their participation, as well as broadening our procedure for obtaining permission about what their participation might entail.

After A2 proposed the project, the two instructors and the respective student groups set about planning the various aspects of the collaboration. A1 discussed the possible collaboration with his students, after which he obtained their permission to share their preliminary ideas with the outside students. Our aims, listed below, derived from that initial conversation with the inside students. They serve as acceptable primary considerations for projects that seek to promote real engagement between community partners in the orbit of American criminal justice. We'd like to note, however, that such considerations may also apply to other types of projects that help advance meaningful social change to address social problems. At any rate, such endeavors need to

- involve a genuine collaboration—a project *with* each respective group, not just *on* or *about* them;
- aim at benefitting both groups, as well as the community and society as a whole (e.g., the projects would address some social issue and be made public in some format); and
- humanize those in the other group, and not just see and stereotype them as the “other”—as a criminal or a convict or a police officer or a corrections official.

The inside students did not receive instruction on this topic; it is interesting to see how well their preliminary list of aims lined up with other guidelines found in the literature surrounding experiential learning and higher education in prison (cf. Pompa, 2002; Pollack, 2014).

The aims listed above were the initial guide for the collaboration. The *framework* for the model was flexible, given the pilot nature of our engagement. We are aware of the differences between our initial *framework*, its overall *aims*, and the *particular collaborations* that emerged. While the next group of student-planners will surely develop a different set of particular collaborations, we don't foresee the aims or framework changing drastically between cohorts. Under our framework, the collaborative learning experience

- must be in the vein of participatory action research (PAR);
- must be project-based;
- will likely be correspondence-heavy; and
- must have a face-to-face component.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) tell us that the ultimate goal of participatory action research is “to engage people in taking action on their behalf as a part of their communities” (p. 58). Unfolding in an iterative four-stage process (reflection, planning, action, and observation) PAR can act as a bridge between the acquisition of academic knowledge and self- and community-transformation (Frank et al., 2012). We removed the official research component, but the projects remained firmly exploratory and entailed student- and stakeholder-involved planning and shared decision-making. Because we chose to focus on student autonomy and building individual relationships, we used one-on-one project-based collaborations. And because the partnership was meant to supplement, and not supplant, the existing courses on sociology and philosophy, respectively, we settled on weekly written correspondences and at least one face-to-face meeting.

With these ideas in mind, the instructors used biographies written by all student participants to match students with similar interests. However, we encouraged the incarcerated

students to select their project partners actively. Both the inside and outside students were encouraged to develop what might be possible project ideas on which they could work together. While the framework crystallized, the students spent several weeks writing back and forth to each other, sharing project ideas, and getting to know each other as people. And they navigated the difficulties of communicating between the two institutions. We strived to provide structure but also limited our intervention to direct the projects. As the semester churned on, the students refined their project ideas and set about working on them, looking ahead to the correctional facility's face-to-face meeting.

As the day of the visit approached, the outside students seemed to have a few questions and concerns, but nothing would indicate any serious problems. We traveled separately to the facility and gathered in the waiting area. The first challenge the students encountered was the movement through the security check. While they "knew what to expect," they were not necessarily ready for a pat-down search and the removal of shoes. One student was visibly uncomfortable and nervous about this process, and the others became quieter. Once we were through security and started moving across the open campus, the outside students began to loosen up a bit and seemed surprised by the surroundings. One student said it looked "a bit like a retirement community," while others commented that it looked like a community college.

We entered a building that looks pretty much like any other classroom. When the inside students came in, it was quiet for a few minutes. Everyone was looking at one another, trying to figure out who was who. All the students seemed ready to start putting a face to a name they knew from letters. We started the afternoon with an ice-breaking exercise to get to know one another, and then the students were able to work more collaboratively in small groups. We moved around engaging with the students. A1 had more responsibilities to keep the groups on the topic and track. A2 had more leisure to roam around a bit more, watch body language, listen in on multiple conversations, and just generally observe what was happening. While only a subset of the inside students had outside partners, most inside students joined the various discussion groups. A few older men stood or watched from the side of the room. When asked if they wanted to join in, they smiled and said they were happy just to listen and watch. One man stated, "I am happy to have all these young people here who want to talk with us. That's good that you did this" (speaking to A2).

### **Contrasting our Model with the Inside-Out Model**

One prominent collaboration model for bringing together non-incarcerated college students and incarcerated individuals is the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Under this model, a higher education representative (usually a professor) brings around 15 (Outside) college students to a jail or prison once a week to participate in a college course with approximately 15 (Inside) incarcerated individuals. Inside-Out courses focus broadly on social justice issues and aim to facilitate a meaningful dialogue between the two groups. The Inside-Out model "affords students a total immersion" and provides them with "direct, unadulterated exposure to the exigencies of a particular context" (Pompa, 2002, p. 68).

We argue that our Bridge model of experiential learning is a semi-novel and fruitful way to engage in meaningful collaboration between our respective students. In the effort to promote real engagement between community partners to help advance significant social change to address social problems, we see our Bridge model as an alternative to Inside-Out and other such programs—but not necessarily in competition with them. We see our service learning projects as being on a continuum of collaborative experiences with justice-involved adults and youth. We aren't attempting to replicate or replace Inside-Out-type programs; we are looking at alternative opportunities for engagement between the different groups that provide exchanges of knowledge and collaboration that each of the participants can carry forward in their personal and professional lives. Justice-involved participants gain insight and experiences to reenter society and utilize their knowledge for positive change. University students move on

with their ability to inform their coursework, activities, and professional work.

While we don't take issue with the Inside-Out Program as such, we suggest there are at least four main reasons for considering our alternate model of collaboration given our experience and the aims and framework outlined above. First, beyond the immediate benefits of mixing inside and outside students, it is unclear whether a one-on-one dynamic is significantly better or worse than a whole-group approach. Our understanding is that Inside-Out courses operate primarily on a mix of small group and extensive group discussion. By contrast, our model takes on a more one-on-one-type approach, though we still incorporate small and large group discussion in our face-to-face meetings, just as we did during our collaboration. The Inside-Out program focuses mainly on the integration of the two groups, completing a group project aimed at social justice near the end of each course; our model emphasizes the project itself.

Second, given the difficulties of establishing a course that meets weekly in prison, our hybrid approach (e.g., some in-person meetings, lots of written correspondence) might allow for more overall collaboration. Our model is not dependent on a college or university instructor securing the training and funding necessary to run a course specifically for the Inside-Out program. A2's class is offered regularly to undergraduates at MU. The class has a stable enrollment over time and is not likely to be subject to cancellation due to low enrollment. Instructor training for the Inside-Out program can cost thousands of dollars (Training, n.d.). Though our model might require more time for the instructors than a traditional college course, it does not require many more resources. Inside-Out may not be affordable and/or feasible for most students. With limited resources and time, our model seeks to provide an opportunity to engage, inform, and empower people toward social justice endeavors.

Third, our more direct interdisciplinary approach might yield synergies not found in some Inside-Out programs, typically focused on single subject areas related to issues of crime, social justice, etc. A1's course at the correctional facility was on the topic of Education and Human Flourishing. It covered a range of philosophical issues such as happiness, well-being, human flourishing, moral character, the phenomenology of virtue, and so on. It is worth noting that the course did cover the aims of higher education in prison. Some of the projects, including a character workshop (see project example below), draw more on the inside course than the outside curriculum. The point is that this decision was left to the individual collaborators and might not have come about without this interdisciplinary approach.

The fourth reason is more practical. Certainly now, amidst the global health crisis brought about by Covid-19, it seems worth thinking through the benefits of a more correspondence-heavy service-learning experience. In an Inside Higher Education article, Bard Prison Program director Max Kenner was quoted as saying that "the ethical obligation to leave and not be responsible for introducing the virus into these institutions was clear as day. [But] how we go back will not be clear as day" (Burke, 2020). Prison education programs around the country have radically transformed in the wake of the pandemic. The few programs with the means to utilize technology did so, others with resources switched to a correspondence model, while many others suspended their operations indefinitely. Immediately, it is worth clarifying that we do not wish to advocate for a complete correspondence model because there must be some face-to-face engagement to facilitate a deeper connection between collaboration partners. But until we can ensure the safety of our students and instructors, consideration of a correspondence-heavy model seems prudent.

One main problem with both our collaboration model and the Inside-Out model is that it is often the case that the inside students do not receive credits. In contrast, Outside students typically do receive credits. In both cases, this has to do with the difficulty of raising tuition dollars for the incarcerated students, who are barred from receiving federal funding in the form of Pell Grants. It also has to do with the difficulties of working through the bureaucracy of higher education institutions to get additional sites the proper accreditation. The benefits of

earning even some college credits (to say nothing of earning a degree) while incarcerated have been well documented (*see* Davis et al., 2013; Karpowitz, 2017; Lagemann, 2016). While some programs run entirely on private monies, most programs find it challenging to pay students' tuition. It is safe to say securing funding and accreditation is a necessary goal of any higher education in prison program.

### Sample of Project Collaborations

To get a sense of how the framework and aims of our collaboration played out in practice, we highlight some of the students' projects. As mentioned above, the partnerships were project-based, where the goal was to produce (at least) a plan to create something tangible. Of course, the dialogue and the projects were central aspects of the experience. Still, they were in service of the three main aims of our service learning model: to work as equal partners in creating something of benefit for them and their community while humanizing the other participant in the process. Our data come from critical reflection papers completed by students and also from the instructors' notes on the project.

**Project Collaboration 1, "Let's Reform. Let's Be Responsible."** The project partners created a prison reform and accountability questionnaire for distribution via Facebook group chat for friends and fellow community members. Participants could go "more in-depth with their thinking and how they feel when it comes to...investing their care, concern, time, and effort toward reform." The partners hope to build a grassroots movement to hold officials accountable for their actions and incarceration policies. They are mainly concerned with long and indeterminate sentences and the economics of incarceration. As for his overall experience with the collaboration, one inside student writes:

What became concrete in this MU collaborative experience was gaining an inside-outside perspective and showing that those who are serving time under punishment can work collectively and productively with students from society, forecasting that education is beneficial for the incarcerated too. What was provided was the ability to learn from each other, where common ground was found, where empathy was reached, and where a better more well-rounded understanding became ours. Overall, the very thought of working with actual campus students heightened the desire, the engagement, and the mental stimulation while learning (F, Inside Student).

In other words, the project experience was a genuine collaboration and a humanizing experience, which benefitted both parties (and aimed to help the community).

**Project Collaboration 2, "Character Workshop."** With this collaboration, the project partners proposed a character workshop for and co-facilitated by incarcerated and non-incarcerated people. The workshop's goal would be to facilitate positive moral change in each person who chooses to participate. About the project, the inside participant wrote:

The hope is that each person that finishes this workshop can become inspirations and role models whether they are going back to their communities or their cells...If we want to see true change it must start with us, then our families, our communities, and society as a whole. (J, Inside Student)

The workshop would unfold in three stages: assigned readings on moral character to be completed individually, discussions about the tasks to be completed in incarcerated/non-incarcerated pairings, and an individual reflection paper.

**Project Collaboration 3, "Fair, Smart, and Proportionate Sentencing Reform."** For this collaboration, the project partners worked toward creating a set of talking points for discussions with Michigan elected officials on the subject of sentencing reform. D, an inside student, writes

The fact is that most people believe in some sort of punishment. But where



most people differ is in how to dole out that punishment and what rights should remain for our incarcerated citizens, such as the right to higher education, questions as to should their families have to pay extremely high prices for phone calls, [whether] proximity to home [should] be considered when deciding where one is incarcerated, [whether] rehabilitation [should] be the driving force or mere punishment.

This collaboration pair has embodied the aims of true collaboration, multi-party beneficiaries, and humanization and directed them squarely at the issue of sentencing reform. They aimed to tackle thorny philosophical problems with well-reasoned arguments and transform those arguments into bit-sized policy positions. At the semester's end, the pair were gathering data to support and refine their platform.

**Project Collaboration 4.** The collaboration pair created a podcast episode to highlight the impact of higher education for similarly situated incarcerated and non-incarcerated people, using oral history as their chosen medium. E writes that:

My collaboration partner and I believe that [the incarcerated/non-incarcerated binary] is an important contrast that can be used to illustrate the value of higher education to demonstrate how everyone's lives—incarcerated or not—are impacted and transformed by the experience [of education].

While some of the projects aimed at specific issues related to incarceration and American criminal justice, this collaboration's central aspect had to do with the transformative powers of education. Using the variables of age, socio-economic status, and incarcerated/free citizenship status, they planned to let individuals tell their own story of how education has changed their lives.

### **The Value of the Bridge Model**

The project examples above serve to demonstrate the value of our approach to service learning: that it can facilitate a deep understanding between various actors typically on opposite ends of a spectrum—in our case, the criminal justice system. On one side of this system, non-incarcerated undergraduates receive formal education in preparation for careers in fields such as law enforcement, corrections, legal and paralegal positions, probation, and the like. On the other side, incarcerated students convicted of violating, or allegedly violating, some aspect of the law. Early on in our collaboration, it became clear that both groups had little knowledge or understanding of the other's experience.

The vast majority of people fundamentally misunderstand incarceration—our non-incarcerated participants were no exception. Link (2016) points out that, “the core of the traditional American criminal justice curriculum typically covers the three c's—cops, courts, and corrections” as well as “a variety of discipline-related special topics courses to satisfy the requirements of [a student's] major or minor” (p. 50). What this curriculum misses, she goes on to say, “is face-to-face interaction with the very individuals they will spend a good part of their careers with” (Link, 2016, p. 50). Even if we were all to agree that people deserved to be incarcerated as a proper punishment for their convictions, we might think differently about what exactly is deserved if we knew what the experience was like—not just of being incarcerated, but also of moving through various points in the justice system. Conversely, understanding students' motivations for studying criminal justice or corrections could benefit those on the punitive end of those fields of study and practice. It is the case that most incarcerated individuals have never had a relationship (to say nothing of a positive relationship) with, say, law enforcement or corrections officials apart from those experienced within the system. Positive peer interactions in this context can foster mutual understanding and respect between the two groups (Link, 2016).

The balance of this section engages with outside students' critical reflections on the

collaboration to further demonstrate how genuine engagement with community partners helps advance meaningful social change. At this point, we'd like to reiterate that our partnership seeks to strike a balance between the benefits accrued to incarcerated individuals and those accrued to non-incarcerated individuals. We believe that it is at once possible to avoid the academic tourism described by Castro and Gould (2018) and the patronization described by Pompa (2002) *and* attend to the needs, dignity, and desires of students, incarcerated or not.

Several of the students noted that the process of writing to and then meeting the inside students was truly eye-opening. For many students, this was the first time they had ever entered a correctional facility. One of the students reported working with formerly incarcerated people in the community, but not inside an institution. One observation made by students was that they were surprised by the level of intellectual engagement, curiosity, and intelligence they heard from the inside students. One student states:

The men in this class all had a desire for learning and making themselves become better in ways they didn't believe could happen. I found it very interesting on how excited they all were to express their opinions on different topics given to them. When learning that these prisoners are doing readings and then also given homework, it surprised me. I did not ever think of a prisoner having homework, this to me shows that these men are not just there to serve a sentence but are also there to help make themselves more intelligent and learn off the other prisoners in the class.

Another student reflects:

Having the ability to have these conversations with [inside student, D] was incredibly eye-opening. [D], despite being incarcerated for many years, communicated and held himself in a demeanor that I certainly did not expect going into this project. I was surprised and delighted to find out that I would have many intelligent conversations with him. The thing that stuck out the most to me, however, was his overwhelming desire to learn, along with the rest of his class at the facility.

A further observation made by the outside students was that they had never really thought about justice-involved people as something other than a criminal, a convict, or a prisoner. It was not until they started corresponding with the inside students that they began to think of them as people, as individuals and students, someone more than just the label of a convicted felon. This encounter was the first time that they thought critically about what it means to be sentenced. One student shares:

My experience with the service-learning project was very eye opening and gave me a new perspective on the way I view our prison system. I have always been more on the tough side of looking at those who are incarcerated and believing that once you commit a crime, you will always commit a crime. A1 treats these men as students not prisoners and I believe that makes a huge difference. These men have all been looked at in some way and by someone as being a criminal and not someone you want to be around, but when they are in the classroom with A1 you see nothing but happiness and excitement to learn.

Another student is quite candid and admits a lack of awareness:

The biggest realization I had was how I was unaware of the numbers and the statistics relating to those incarcerated. I have been enrolled in Criminal Justice courses since my freshman year, and this has not resonated with me until I gained a personal connection with someone who was part of the statistics.

The students mentioned how much they appreciated the work that A1 was doing. Particularly noteworthy was that A1 engaged with the inside students very much as an instructor

engages with their students.

One common theme developed by the students was how others in society could come to know inside students as individuals just like them. The outside students noted that the mistakes and poor choices made by the inside students were probably not that different from poor decision-making that they had experienced or witnessed. One student writes:

In reflecting on the project my first thought is how unfortunate it is that so many people are institutionalized for mistakes they have made. The overall experience was very helpful and interesting to me. It added to my understanding of the criminal justice system with a viewpoint from the inside. It was very valuable to me personally as I was able to see [inside student, B] and the others I conversed with as the individual people that they are, with their own personalities, goals, and dreams for the future.

One student succinctly notes: “People on the outside need to be educated to reduce the stigma that is associated with the term *felon*.”

The most illuminating observation came not in face-to-face conversations or the critical reflection paper but in a letter.

I would like to add a few things for you. As I have had more time to reflect on this project, I have realized that the impact it has had on me has been far greater than I realized. The day before we went to the facility for our visit, my partner confided in me the reason that he was in prison. He gave me his full name, prison id number, and gave me permission to look him up. I did and I found several reports from his case...I cried when I read the letter, which was ten pages long.

For a brief time that evening, I had decided I was not going to go to the facility. I did not know how to face this, how to face him. As I reflected on everything I know, personally, from classes, from life, about my project partner, and about my goals for the future, I realized I had to go. Not only did I have to go, I felt it was even more important to go now, knowing what I do.

My project partner needed to know that I was sincere in my dedication to our project. I needed to be true to myself and keep my word that I would be empathetic and not pass judgment. I needed my project partner to see and know that there was truth in my words. I also needed to prove to myself that I could handle situations like this. It is a stark reality that I will have to face [in my future line of work].

This letter is a powerful statement of the types of connections being made by the outside students due to the collaboration. We included it here because it combines three main types of connections being made by the outside students: those that were personal, those that were professional (tied to their future line of work), and those that were academic (ones that improved the quality of their studies in some way).

While we don't claim that our model guarantees a complete transformation of students' perceptions of incarcerated individuals, it is clear that students made a transition away from deficit-based thinking about, the othering of, and distancing from such individuals (Pollack, 2014). At least in the project's time and space, the outside students were aware of the inside students as human individuals with unique personalities and identities. Some of the inside students' life histories were not so very different from outside students. The students built bridges over the gaps between “us” and “them.” These results were brought about, in no small part, through the Bridge Model's correspondence-heavy, project-based format.

### **Challenges of the Collaboration**

In speaking of the value of our experiential learning model, we would be remiss not to discuss some of the challenges we faced in its conception and implementation. The inside and outside groups differed in their approach due to the constraints on incarcerated students' technology. The department of corrections—and the administration at the particular correctional facility—was quite supportive of the project in many ways and were exceptionally accommodating regarding our in-person meeting. However, they are particularly hard-lined about restricting the use of technology inside their facilities. For example, it was not uncommon for A1 to receive assignments completed by typewriter or hand-written on the back of a departmental request form.

The lack of technology was a recurring theme that mediated the collaboration throughout. All of the communications that came from the incarcerated group of students were physical, not digital, and had to go through A1. Since it was not convenient for him to simply drop off documents to A2's campus mailbox, the documents were taken home, scanned, and uploaded to a shared workspace with A2's students. Facilitating communication was a time-consuming process in itself. Each round of correspondences had a long turn-around, usually a week or more. Sometimes the inside students were able to respond in that same class period, and sometimes the communications had to wait another week. One outside student offers up the sentiment felt by most of the outside participants:

I felt as if A1 were our pony express rider and we had to wait for him to get our letters to us. With all of the instant gratification that we are used to today, with cell phones, email, and texting, our patience was tested with this slow correspondence. Our project partners mostly wrote letters with pen and paper and sent them with A1. It was sort of like traveling back in time for our partners as they have no access to cell phones, computers, email, the internet, or even dictionaries.

Finally, without using the internet to conduct project-related research, the inside students were at a considerable disadvantage compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts.

In the future, we will add more structure to the projects, particularly surrounding the students' correspondences. While it was incredibly interesting to see people connecting on unexpected levels, we think it would be beneficial to put some limit on non-project topics of discussion, especially in later weeks. For example, exchanging recipes during week 13 didn't appear to help students complete their projects. This is not to say that it would ever be discouraged entirely—after all, these types of conversations work to humanize the collaborators. We would also add more structure regarding the student critical reflection papers. A1 did not require a critical reflection paper for the collaboration; instead, the exercise was made optional for his students. Thus, only four of his students submitted the assignment as compared to all of A2's participating students. We agree that all students should complete critical reflection papers in the future.

Finally, more than one meeting is needed to realize the collaborations fully. More work will be done to determine the appropriate number of in-person visits. In a perfect world, students would meet face-to-face *and* correspond with each other regularly. Clearly, the world we live in is not perfect. It is essential to remember that, unlike an Inside-Out class (which serves roughly 15 Inside and 15 Outside students), our model accounts for roughly 30 inside and 30 outside students (though not all participate in the collaboration, of course). We want to have more than one in-person meeting, but having fewer in-person classes overall makes logistical sense when aiming to serve such large groups of students and is thus an acceptable trade-off.

### **The Road Ahead**

The face-to-face class meeting was, by all accounts, a success. Inside and outside students could talk to one another and better understand what each might be experiencing. There

was a limited opportunity for the inside and the outside students to communicate one last time to finish the semester. As I (A2) met with the outside students during the full class session and talked to them after class, I became more aware of some of the concerns and questions where people were comfortable and uncomfortable in ways that I would not have anticipated. On one level, the students felt glad that they understood what the inside students were going through. Some anticipated continuing these relationships and thought that it would be a good thing to do. At this point, I realized that I needed to be more proactive and help them think about the wisdom of continuing ongoing correspondence with the inside prisoners after the close of the semester.

We encouraged the students to think quite seriously about why they would want to continue contact with the individuals who are still not free to go about in the justice-involved community and live in prison for some time to come. I think the students, out of humanity and compassion, felt they were an essential link for the inside prisoners. We asked them to seriously think about what would happen in the coming weeks and months when their lives continued as they finished the semester and their college careers. The inside students would stay incarcerated, not out in the world, and perhaps come to rely heavily on the communication with outside students whose interests may wane over time. The last letters from a few inside students to some outside students brought a new awareness of the need to be somewhat circumspect about maintaining relationships. A couple of the exchanges were somewhat provocative. The students felt slightly uncomfortable that the inside students might be thinking about them as more than just a fellow college student. At this point, we were able to talk more openly about possibilities of manipulation and the sense of intimacy created by corresponding with someone at a distance—things that we could share and the emotions that it invokes when we know that the students are pen pals. The same feelings may not be there when we would think about encountering this person daily. We discussed difficult questions: Is this someone you would like to have just show up at your home, at your work? Would you be willing to introduce him to your friends? Setting an appropriate social distance is an area that we, the instructors, give serious consideration for future classes. Students must be more aware of the need to have a relationship for a specific purpose and for a finite time.

Just a few short months after we completed the project, the pandemic halted daily life, education, and research that we traditionally come to expect and possibly take for granted. Since the pandemic began, we are increasingly aware of how institutionalized populations have been devastated by this health crisis. While some people have been released from jails, many incarcerated people remain confined. They have seen much higher rates of transmission and infection of COVID-19 than experienced by outside society.

We have also witnessed the horrors of the killing of black citizens at the hands of police. Protests and violent demonstrations have become a regular occurrence in many cities around the U.S. and the world. It is crucial to keep in mind that the overrepresentation of people of color in correctional populations results from racial inequalities and abuses of power and violence by state agents. It is increasingly critical that we find ways, means, and processes by which we can engage with justice-involved individuals, whether they are incarcerated or living in the community. We must listen to the challenges and needs that they identify. We need to stand ready to provide critical services, technical support, and necessary compassion as required to enable and ensure that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are heard. Our model of experiential learning is but one way of accomplishing this goal.

Coming together is one thing, but understanding each other is another. This understanding gap between the two groups simply cannot be bridged by reading a book or taking a course on the subject. And it cannot be overcome by an experiential learning opportunity that does not promote community partners' genuine engagement. We think this point generalizes. Beyond the pairings of incarcerated and non-incarcerated people, our Bridge model of service learning can benefit other students in higher education and those in the broader community.

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