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Redefining Lives: Post-Secondary Education for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

Erin-Kate Escobar, Tamia Rashima Jordan, & Emery Lohrasbi

This article provides student affairs professionals with an overview of the post-secondary education (PSE) for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. We review their post secondary education entry points as well as challenges to their access and matriculation. Finally, we offer implications for how student affairs professionals may support the experiences of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.

“Prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings. And the practice of disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities has literally become big business” (Davis, 1998, p.683).

The failure to respond to the plight of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals is a moral challenge and economic drain on our society. Student affairs offices provide one place to begin to respond to the moral and economic need for reform in the treatment of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Upon release, the goal is for these individuals to assume practices and a path that result in a successful livelihood. However, more often than not, these individuals

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commit new crimes and return to prison. This “...habitual relapse into crime” is called recidivism (Wordnet, n.d.). The cyclical recurrence of recidivism is one factor in the creation of a *permanent underclass* defined as a significant number of individuals with no conceivable way to be anything other than poor (Alexander, 2012; Western, 2007; Wilson, 1985). These individuals will continuously struggle to meet society’s expectations.

Recidivism, poverty, and permanent underclass status are all cycles of oppression that need to be broken. Tackling any one of these epidemics is daunting, but there is hope. For currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, PSE is a powerful tool to reduce recidivism and achieve positive life outcomes (Holding, Dace, Schocken, & Ginsberg, 2010; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Fine et al., 2001; Boulard, 2005;). However, a criminal record often prevents these individuals from obtaining the educational opportunities and essential skills to overcome the stigma of their criminal records. This article presents the issues and offers recommendations for addressing the needs of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals hoping to redefine themselves within PSE.

Benefits of PSE for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

Investing in PSE benefits currently and formerly incarcerated individuals and society as a whole. Williams and Swail (2005) stated that, “successfully pursuing a college degree is potentially the best investment an individual can make” (p. iii). Erisman & Contardo (2005) argued that, “nationally, the income of those workers with a bachelor’s degree was, on average, 93 percent higher than those with only a high school diploma” (p. 8). Furthermore, those who have a two-year degree experience more “non-wage economic benefits” (Williams & Swail, 2005, p. 6).

The reduction of recidivism is perhaps the most referenced argument for the support of PSE for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Studies proved that, “participants in prison education, vocation and work programs have recidivism rates 20-60 percent lower than those of non-participants” (Aborn, 2005, p. 1). These lower rates of recidivism illustrate the beneficial role of PSE. Without support and access for PSE in prison systems:

Prisons are likely to become merely overcrowded holding cells, which release inmates without alternatives and tools and skills to apply for jobs, and become legitimate members of the community. This trend more than likely guarantees these inmates become repeat offenders and return to prisons reinforcing the cycle of crime and punishment. (Granoff, 2005, p. 1)

Granoff (2005) implies PSE for currently incarcerated individuals is a critical element in rehabilitation. While opportunities such as college sponsored prison education programs, correspondence courses, and post prison rehabilitation programs currently exist they are limited at best.

Availability of PSE for Currently or Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

The following is a review of one presently inaccessible and several limited accessibility PSE options in existence for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.

Online Education

Access to PSE through online educational resources is limited for currently incarcerated individuals. “Online courses would expand access to a large number of inmates, but concerns about allowing prisoners to gain access to the Internet have kept them out of such courses” (Sieben, 2011, n.p.). In a few states, lawmakers have argued for online education for prisoners, but according to correctional-education specialists, “lawmakers’ ideas, particularly about online programs, show a lack of understanding about prison life” (Grissom, 2011, n.p.). In order to provide online education, budget, security and prison infrastructure reforms would have to take place. Perhaps a first step would be to design a pilot program to provide Internet access to a small sample of incarcerated individuals. With all the trepidation regarding cyber security, online education for incarcerated individuals in the United States may not be an option that will profess itself in the near future.

Inside Prison Systems

Only five percent of incarcerated individuals have access to PSE and an even smaller percentage complete a degree (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). According to Gorgol and Sponsler (2011), the most common method for delivery of education within the system is through on-site instruction. Challenges affiliated with this method include limited physical space for hosting classes, security concerns, and lack of qualified instructors—especially due to the rural locations of prisons. Correspondence courses, an alternate method of delivery, do not share these same challenges. However, they are less accessible because most often students must finance courses themselves (Ohio State University eCampus, 2012, n.p.). Lesser-used methods of instruction include college level examination tests, taking incarcerated individuals offsite to participate in programs on post secondary campuses, and video instruction (Gorgol and Sponsler, 2011).

Programs vary in structure and content. These range from liberal arts programs

to rehabilitation projects, some of which include arts, writing, and opportunities to nurture self esteem (Bard Prison Initiative, n.d.; Ohio State University eCampus, n.d.; Aborn, 2005). One prominent example of PSE for incarcerated individuals is a mail based correspondence program through The Ohio State University (OSU). OSU faculty design associate and bachelor degree courses specifically tailored for incarcerated individuals. In order to facilitate this unique program, study guides are sent to help students learn and understand the material. Assignments are submitted to the instructor for evaluation and feedback via postal mail (Ohio State University eCampus, n.d.).

Outside the Prison System

Formerly incarcerated individuals may view community colleges as an appropriate entry point to PSE. There are many community colleges (such as Community College of Denver in Denver, Colorado, Santa Rosa Junior College in Windsor, California, and Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio) that offer resources for formally incarcerated individuals (Community College of Denver, n.d.; Santa Rosa Junior College, n.d.; Montgomery County, n.d.). Additionally, formerly incarcerated individuals may experience community colleges as a practical option because these institutions are generally more responsive to obligations of this population. In many cases, individuals who are formerly incarcerated have probation responsibilities that may include curfew, which makes the transition back into society difficult.

Many four year colleges use the Common Application for admissions which requests the disclosure of criminal records. While a challenge to overcome, disclosure may not lead to denied admission. One example is Norfolk State University, a Historically Black College in Virginia. Their Criminal Record Policy effective since May 2004 is one that requires the disclosure of a criminal record, yet their practice is to approve or deny admission based on their assessment of individual circumstances (Norfolk State University, 2004). While this policy illustrates the ability for some institutions to provide access to formerly incarcerated individuals other institutions are not as willing. This brief review of available PSE opportunities for formerly and currently incarcerated individuals is not an exhaustive list. Furthermore the issue should not be oversimplified as there are many challenges to accessing higher education.

Challenges to Access of PSE

Financial Challenges

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid information site individuals who are in a federal or state prison are not eligible for

federal financial aid or Pell Grants. However, upon release most individuals will regain access to federal funding. In 1998 congress passed an amendment to the 1965 Higher Education Act that eliminated federal aid to individuals with drug convictions (American Civil Liberties Union, 2002; US Department of Education, n.d.). While this amendment is still in effect, its impact has been diminished due to the work of many organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Students for Sensible Drug Policy, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Students for Sensible Drug Policy, n.d.a). Presently individuals with drug convictions will only lose their aid if they were receiving aid at the time of their conviction. These individuals may regain access to federal aid after they have completed certain requirements. However, many of the same organizations continue to call for the full repeal of what is known as the Aid Elimination Provision (AEP). One reason is that drug convictions are the only convictions for which an individual can lose access to federal financial aid (Students for Sensible Drug Policy, n.d.). Many continue to question the role that race and class play in which communities are targeted by police for drug crime surveillance (Alexander, 2012; JFA Institute, 2007; Mauer & King, 2007). Therefore it is believed that those who are most likely to be impacted by the AEP are the poor and people of color. Furthermore it is believed that misinformation combined with the mere presence of the drug conviction question on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, discourages individuals with drug convictions from ever applying (Students for Sensible Drug Policy, n.d., a). This effectively eliminates their access to PSE which Brown, Lane, and Rogers (2002) referred to as “one of this nation’s primary mechanisms to escape the cyclical dynamic of drugs and its concomitant companions—race, poverty, and disadvantage” (p. 234).

Additional Challenges

There are many blatant and covert structural and social challenges that prevent access to PSE. As previously mentioned, mandated criminal record disclosure can be a challenge. According to Roach (2005), a structural challenge also exists when as many as two-thirds of those released from prison and jail are not ready for college due to the lack of a high school diploma. Furthermore, many currently and formerly incarcerated individuals who pursue PSE are adult learners, i.e. a student older than traditional college age (18-22 years). Literature shows adult learners face challenges such as balancing family obligations and full-time employment with school and other commitments (Komives & Woodard, 2003).

R. Dwayne Betts shares his challenging experience as a formerly incarcerated individual. At 16 years old, Betts was convicted as an adult of carjacking and sentenced to nine years in prison. Betts chronicled his crime, conviction, and approximately eight years incarcerated in his 2009 memoir, *A Question of Freedom*.

Recounting his own pursuit for PSE upon release, Betts (2009) shared the following account:

Two years after I was released from prison I sat in Howard University's office of Admissions. This was further away from prison than I'd expected to be. We were all, as a part of Prince George's Community College's Honors Academy, to receive full scholarships to Howard University. It was simply a matter of signing a sheet of paper. When it was my turn to sign the slip of paper, my right forearm weighing down on the brown table, I paused. The scholarship agreement has the dreaded question: have you ever been convicted of a felony? (p. 234)

This anecdote is an example of the impact that policies may inadvertently have on formerly incarcerated individuals. There is a role for student affairs professionals in currently and formerly incarcerated individuals' struggles to begin productive lives for themselves through PSE. How do we discern who deserves consideration for educational opportunities which can provide essential skills after individuals are released from prison? How do we develop new lenses and processes to evaluate currently and formerly incarcerated students seeking admissions, financial assistance, and general support? While not easy, solutions to structural and social problems include concrete actions such as educating staff, creating programs, and amending policies.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals can find a call to action from the experiences of Betts and other currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. We offer the following implications for practice:

- Seek additional resources for self-education. Utilize that knowledge to educate others on campus through dialogue and programming.
- Create and support a student club, residential learning community, or service learning opportunity that promotes PSE for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Review and if necessary amend campus policies and practices inhibiting access and the successful matriculation of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Work within our professional associations to challenge federal policies that purposefully or inadvertently create barriers to PSE for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.

As student affairs professionals who exist in a greater community, we have the

opportunity to commit to the following:

- Volunteer time to programs that provide postsecondary educational opportunities to currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Financially support PSE for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Hold a community forum bringing together different stakeholders (formerly incarcerated individuals, policy makers, and community members).
- Write letters to your local and state representatives expressing the need for PSE options for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.

Conclusion

Efforts focused on access for PSE for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals will cease to exist without continued support. While programs and services are two methods of access, further research should confirm the objective benefits of increasing PSE for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Intentional approaches are necessary to end the status quo and ensure that prisons no longer function as life debilitating institutions. There is certainly more to be said about the rights of individuals with criminal records as well as the conspicuous relationship between race, class, and rates of incarceration (Alexander, 2012; Mauer & King, 2007; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.; The Sentencing Project, 2003). This article only provides a foundation. We aim to inspire additional dialogue and research to support PSE for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals.

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