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Beyond Recidivism Identifying the Liberatory Possibilities of Prison Higher Education

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Radical Departures: Ruminations on the Purposes of Higher Education in Prison

Abstract

In 2016, the Obama administration launched the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, an Experimental Sites Initiative that provides funding to eligible people in state and federal prisons as they pursue undergraduate coursework during the period of their incarceration. The administration justified the restoration of education programs in prison in terms of recidivism rates, citing research demonstrating that educational attainment decreases the odds that a person is reincarcerated for new crimes or parole violations following their release. While recidivism is a desired outcome from the restoration of higher education in prison, it is not and should not be the only one. We argue that a focus limited to recidivism obscures the relationship between education and democracy and diminishes the radical possibilities of higher education for fostering peaceful and just communities. In this essay we highlight some of our experiences as faculty and administrators of Villanova University's undergraduate degree program at State Correctional Institution—Graterford to illustrate how the benefits of higher education can extend beyond market participation to include community building, expansion of social capital, and political action.



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In 2016, the Obama administration launched the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, an Experimental Sites Initiative that provides funding to eligible individuals in state and federal prisons as they pursue undergraduate coursework during the period of their incarceration. Sixty-seven colleges and universities were initially chosen for the initiative and administration officials estimated the pilot program would enroll up to 12,000 incarcerated people in 100 different correctional institutions across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This initiative represents the first meaningful effort, on behalf of the federal government, to restore some of the postsecondary educational opportunities eliminated from state and federal prisons when Congress, in 1994, amended the Higher Education Act to exclude incarcerated individuals from Pell Grant eligibility. In a press release issued by the Department of Education (2015), the stated goal of the Second Chance initiative is to assist incarcerated persons to “turn their lives around” by improving their odds on the job market. Additionally, administration officials emphasized the positive impact of education on recidivism, citing a wide-ranging meta-analysis conducted by the RAND Corporation (2013) which reports that individuals who participate in correctional education have 43% lower odds of returning to prison than individuals who do not (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles). Research suggests that the protective benefit of education is further enhanced when incarcerated persons pursue college degrees (see Hall, 2015; Tewksbury, Erickson, & Taylor, 2000; Winterfield, Coggeshall, Burke-Storer, Correa, & Tidd, 2009; Rose 2004; Steurer & Smith, 2003).

Villanova University is one of the original 67 colleges and universities selected to participate in the Second Chance program. For the last 45 years, the university has offered an undergraduate degree program at State Correctional Institution—Graterford (Graterford), the largest maximum-security men’s prison in Pennsylvania. As social science professors who study mass incarceration and who have spent the last decade teaching undergraduate courses at Graterford, we strongly support public policy initiatives that facilitate access to quality secondary and postsecondary education for people incarcerated. We further recognize the value and significance of research that examines the relationship between educational attainment and recidivism. Too often, however, recidivism serves as the lone justification for educational initiatives in prisons (Castro, Brawn, Graves, Mayorga, Page, & Slater, 2015). A singular focus on recidivism obscures the broader relationship between education and democracy, relies on a neoliberal logic that individualizes social problems, and diminishes the radical possibilities of education for encouraging political participation and fostering peaceful and just communities.

The Limits of a Neoliberal Model in Prison Higher Education

The overarching emphasis on recidivism is closely tied to the decades long ascent of neoliberalism. While ostensibly an economic program operating through the vehicles of deregulation, austerity, and privatization, neoliberalism is also fundamentally about social discipline and self-regulation (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Wacquant, 2009; Garland, 2001). Market logic dictates the ends to which human development and purpose are directed. Individuals who cannot be adequately fitted into the role of consumer, worker, or both, are problematized as threats to the social order and subject to various forms of state surveillance, criminalization, and carceral control (Gottschalk, 2016). Reform and rehabilitation in this context are driven almost entirely by market needs and norms (McCorkel, 2017; 2013). Consider, for example, that work rather than need is now the pre-condition for access to the US social safety net. To access benefits, recipients must offer proof of their participation in the labor market rather than demonstrating other forms of productive citizenship like

participation in elections (Tach & Edin, 2017 ; Grogger & Karoly, 2005). As Tach and Edin (2017) observe, work is the “primary litmus test by which deservedness is judged.” (p. 542).

A privileging of education’s impact on recidivism, via its presumed effects on work readiness, hews closely to such neoliberal logic. Indeed, a direct equation of work to deservedness exists within the criminal justice system. Work is a condition of parole in many jurisdictions, the loss of which can trigger revocation and a return to prison (Thomas & Reingold, 2017; Klingele, 2013; Wacquant, 2010a; Travis, 2000). Progress on parole is measured primarily in terms of employment acquisition, on the job performance, routine reporting, and tests for illicit substances (Klingele, 2013). It is not measured according to other aspects of personal development such as participation in the political process, the acquisition of skills that seemingly have no immediate market payoff, education for its own sake, and the restoration of relationships with family, friends, and community organizations.¹ Work is also a heavily weighted marker in the risk assessment tools used by sentencing authorities and correctional administrators (Hannah-Moffat, 2013; Guastaferro & Daigle, 2012; Simon, 2005). Institutional measures of reform, rehabilitation, and even culpability for a criminal offense are influenced according to whether a given defendant or currently incarcerated person is ready, willing, and able to work. In this system, individuals are preferably self-correcting and responsive to market incentives, as the onus is on them to solve the problem of their own economic and social marginalization, a process Hannah-Moffat (2001) refers to as “responsibilization.” But if not, the option of prison eagerly awaits. Recidivism then, is not a measure of how the system may have failed the individual, but rather how the individual has failed to acquire the necessary capital (human, economic, and social) to persevere in the labor market. The concept of a social contract is shredded.

Thus, in the context of mass incarceration, higher education in prison runs the risk of existing as a mere shadow of itself. The pursuit of knowledge does not so much serve the needs of the individual or the community; rather, it is responsive to the demands of market and state. Neoliberalism threatens to limit higher education in prison to the conferral of vocational skills associated with the low wage labor market.² Notions of citizenship, democracy, community, social solidarity, and social justice are stifled.³ The core features of U.S. higher education—knowledge of self and community, clarity of thought and expression, the development of moral and ethical frameworks, the cultivation of communication skills, civil dialogue, creative thought, engagement with political process, and the encouragement of intellectual curiosity (to name but a few)—are rendered irrelevant by neoliberal regimes absent a market outcome (e.g., employment) or state expectation (e.g., reduction in recidivism). The erasure is further complicated by the emergence of an “evidence-based” paradigm which is, as Clear (2009:6) noted in his presidential address to the American Society of Criminology, “extraordinarily conservative.” The paradigm not only imposes a set of narrow expectations on what “counts” as evidence (i.e., recidivism, employment, payment of fines, etc.), it penalizes correctional administrators and higher education programs that aim to do anything other than cater to the bottom line that is recidivism. However, the penetration of market logic is not an inevitable process. Higher education can and should work against the larger forces of neoliberalism. Rethinking prison higher education as a key element of

¹ As Haney’s (2017) research with incarcerated fathers demonstrates, when family relationships are considered at all by state actors they are rendered in terms of fiscal obligations, most notably payment of child support.

² It should be noted that the transferability of such skills can be tenuous due to outmoded equipment and learning materials, unqualified instructors, and institutional barriers to licensing (Mastrorilli, 2016). See Phelps (2011) for review of content shifts in educational programming in correctional facilities.

³ For a general overview of the processes, actors, and driving influences of neoliberalism see (Cahill & Konings, 2017). For analysis of neoliberalism’s specific impact on higher education see Giroux (2014).

participatory democracy is part of a larger struggle to reclaim the very idea of society that neoliberalism has sought to crush.

We argue that the value and aim of higher education programs in correctional facilities should not be limited to their impact on recidivism. While reduced recidivism is a desired outcome, the benefits of higher education and the rationale for offering it go well beyond the issue of whether someone will return to prison or not. Indeed, successful community reentry involves not only economic participation, but meaningful social and political participation as well (Heidemann, Cederbaum, & Martinez, 2016; Mears & Cochran, 2015; Visher & Travis, 2003). A broader vision of higher education in prison, one that is not determined or narrowed by market logic, offers not only the possibility of just and safe communities flourishing on both sides of the carceral wall, but of truly participatory democracy where the very communities that have been devastated by economic restructuring, social marginalization, racism, and mass incarceration are better positioned to challenge these oppressive social systems.⁴ Here, higher education in prison prioritizes the broader needs and interests of its students as opposed to the narrow interests of the market by enhancing knowledge of self and community, strengthening social bonds and collective efficacy, enabling critical analysis of social structures and conditions, and igniting creative potential. We argue that access to higher education in prison is a fundamental human right, one that is not compromised by virtue of criminal conviction or incarceration or narrowed by neoliberal frameworks.

In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of the Villanova program and discuss how key aspects of postsecondary programs might challenge neoliberal models. We then provide three examples of student achievement that stand outside of traditional measures of success in prison contexts, like employment and recidivism. In these examples, we highlight the significance of higher education for community building, social capital, and political participation. These projects represent collective efforts directed at identifying and pursuing a common good and, as such, operate outside neoliberal logics. Ultimately, the students and alumni of our program were able to mobilize multiple sets of communities to strategically pursue a set of tangible political outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of how higher education programs in prison might contribute to building more just, safe, and democratic communities.

Villanova's Undergraduate Degree Program at Graterford: An Overview

Villanova is private, Roman Catholic university that enrolls over 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students and is located just outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The university's undergraduate degree program at Graterford was founded in 1972 by a professor in the Sociology department. The program was part of the first wave of newly created postsecondary programs in correctional facilities throughout the U.S. following the passage of federal legislation that extended Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated students (McCarty, 2006). In 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (§ 20411, 20 U.S.C. § 1070a) that, among other things, rendered incarcerated people ineligible for Pell funding. The impact of this legislation on higher education in prison was devastating, with the vast majority of state colleges and universities pulling out of prisons entirely, and private universities substantially reducing or eliminating services and courses (Gould & Spearit, 2014; Tewksbury & Taylor, 1996). By 1998, the percentage of

⁴ Our concept of participatory democracy and the central role of education in its enactment is informed by Dewey (1916) and Friere (2006).

incarcerated people participating in college programs dropped to 3.8% and the number of prisons offering undergraduate coursework was halved (Tewksbury et al. 2000). Ultimately, most first wave programs did not survive this period.

Villanova's program at Graterford is the rare exception of a first wave program (pre-1994) that persisted in its founding form, whereby student tuition was waved, funding levels were maintained, courses carried full academic credit, and teaching in the program counted as part of a faculty member's normal load. Villanova preserved the program in spite of the loss of federal funding and the widespread institutional erosion of the rehabilitative ideal.⁵ The University considers higher education in prison as an outgrowth of Catholic Social Thought and its social justice mission to promote the common good (for a similar example see Parker, 2014). In this position, Villanova draws heavily from the U.S. Catholic Bishops (2000) *Statement on Crime & the Criminal Justice System*, which regards education as vital to ensuring human dignity as is access to food, clothing, shelter, personal safety, medical care, and meaningful work. In addition to including education as a fundamental component of human dignity and development, the *Statement* (2000) conceptualizes crime as a function of needs that can only be addressed in the context of community, a notion reemphasized and expanded upon by DeFina and Hannon (2011). Individual rehabilitation and restoration of public order are two sides of the same coin, possible only if the community as a whole works collectively to rehabilitate, reintegrate, and restore. Higher education in prison is essential to this project, and constitutes both a fundamental human right and a critical component of social justice and participatory democracy.

This vision of higher education, which is not unique to Villanova and flows from alternative ethical and political frameworks,⁶ has several normative implications for the structure of prison programs. We detail three of these structural properties below and offer a brief example of how each operates in the specific case of Villanova's program. First, a program's purpose should not be restricted to reducing recidivism or increasing the likelihood of employment, although these are clearly desirable outcomes when relevant. Whether or not a student will ever be released should make little difference in terms of approach, program structure, and who is admitted. Eligibility criteria should be strictly based on the candidate's academic preparation and potential, rather than their offense history and criminal sentence.⁷ For example, for much of the Villanova program's history, men serving life sentences have constituted a majority of the student body. Periodically, the program's policy of admitting eligible students who are serving life sentences has been raised as a point of contention by some Department of Corrections officials and state politicians. Their argument is that postsecondary education, because it is a limited resource, should be reserved for incarcerated individuals with a release date.⁸ The logic animating their contention stems from a neoliberal vantage: education without a discernible labor market outcome is essentially a wasted endeavor (Smith, 2017).

⁵ In the early 1970s, rehabilitative programs in prisons, including education, came under attack from political pundits and some social scientists. This contributed to the collapse of rehabilitative efforts and enhanced punitiveness in prisons and jails (Garland, 2001; McCorkel, 2013).

⁶ Marshall (1973), for example, argued that social rights—things like food, clothing, shelter, and education—must be guaranteed in order that civil and political rights can be adequately exercised.

⁷ Villanova only accepts students who are incarcerated at SCI-Graterford. In a number of instances, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has approved transfers so that qualified students are able to enroll in the program. Unfortunately, the program does not currently enroll incarcerated women and there are no analogous higher education programs for women in the state.

⁸ In Pennsylvania, a sentence of life in prison means just that. Individuals serving life sentences are not eligible for parole or early release (The Sentencing Project, 2013).

Our experience with students serving life sentences challenges this neoliberal assumption. Most notably, students and graduates serving life sentences have proven to be a critical element of the program's infrastructure. They identify and recruit promising candidates for admission, they mentor and tutor current students, they assist university faculty and administrators in navigating the prison bureaucracy, and they are the keepers of institutional memory, providing the program with meticulous (informal) record keeping and organizational continuity. In addition, they serve as leaders in the prison and role models to their children, grandchildren, and members of the community inside and outside prison walls.

A second programmatic element is a commitment to a high quality, liberal arts education that is, within the limits imposed by the carceral setting,⁹ consistent with the courses and academic opportunities that traditional undergraduate students receive on campus. Compared to a more vocationally oriented model, a liberal arts emphasis provides a baseline for a participatory, democratic society. It does so through the creation of a shared knowledge base, enabling students to develop and expand their capacity for empathy and civility, and providing students with the skills necessary to engage in rational discourse, critical analysis, and rigorous, informed debate. For example, the Villanova program strives to have as many faculty from as many disciplines across campus teach at Graterford in order to enhance the variety of course offerings and perspectives on the material. The number of participants has been steadily growing over the last ten years, largely due to the overwhelmingly positive experiences that faculty members have within their prison classrooms. Courses are primarily concentrated in the humanities and social sciences, although the number and availability of courses in math, sciences, and business has recently increased.

Third, programs should aim to model the sort of progressive, democratic practices they endeavor to foster. Utheim (2016) notes that prisons are "ripe with power dynamics that crosscut every direction imaginable" (p. 99). For this reason, the organization of programs should not be a strictly top-down model, with concentrated hierarchies of knowledge. In an effort to overcome some of these issues, the Villanova program works collaboratively with an advisory board comprised of students currently enrolled in the program and program alumni (most of whom are serving life sentences). Our students and graduates run independent elections every three years to determine the advisory board's membership. The advisory board provides regular feedback to the program's director and a faculty oversight panel regarding the effectiveness and desirability of various program policies, recommendations for course offerings, information regarding prison policies and conditions that impact student performance and attendance, and a forum for problem solving and conflict resolution..

In the sections below, we offer three, nested examples of the way in which postsecondary education in prison has produced positive outcomes that exist beyond the more familiar terrain of employment and recidivism. Indeed, each of these outcomes challenges, in ways big and small, the cultural assumptions and structural arrangements of neoliberalism. We feature instances where our students and alumni utilized aspects of the program to facilitate community building, expand social capital, and engage in political action. We do so not to elevate the Villanova program as an exemplar, but rather to underscore the practical and beneficial possibilities of a broader, more radical perspective of higher education in prison.

⁹ It has been virtually impossible to offer courses in sciences, like chemistry and biology, because equipment and/or material associated with the course is considered a security risk by Graterford.

Building a Community of Scholars on the Inside: The Alumni Association

In Clemmer's (1940) classic study of prison life, he argues that what happens to people following their release is dictated primarily by the extent of their *prisonization*, a concept he developed to describe assimilation to the unique norms, customs, and culture of the prison. Clemmer's focus is primarily on the "inmate code" and what he regards as antisocial aspects of prison life. Individuals who, by virtue of sentence length and primary group affiliation, are highly *prisonized* are more likely to adopt a "criminal outlook" compared to those exhibiting lesser degrees of prisonization. He argues that prisonization ultimately undermines the possibility for reform and rehabilitation. For Clemmer and other prominent criminologists, this is an unavoidable feature of prison life (Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Wheeler 1961; McCorkle and Korn 1954). The organizational structure of the prison forces incarcerated people into degraded and inferior positions that, in turn, give rise to a subculture devoted to self-preservation, an "us versus them" mentality, and an alternative value system that prizes "getting over" on the systems that disadvantage them. At Graterford, incarcerated men typically refer to this assimilation process in the negative, as "not living like a square."

The creation of a formal alumni chapter at Graterford and, prior to that, the emergence of an informal community of (still incarcerated) graduates who held twice weekly meetings devoted to scholarly pursuits, defies the uniformly negative portrait Clemmer (1940) and others draw of prison culture. Further, the existence of both groups challenges the assumption that incarcerated people lack the agency to creatively resist and positively modify the oppressive structure of prison life. Beginning in the mid 1990s, several program alumni who had life or virtual life sentences,¹⁰ began informally meeting in the prison chapel to discuss and debate history, politics, religion, and philosophy. Several of these men had been undergraduate students in the program at or near its beginning and many had recently graduated. They wanted to create a space in the prison that replicated the classroom, one that was dedicated to scholarship and intellectual pursuits. They developed reading lists, often based on materials they came across through their undergraduate studies and in their ongoing correspondence with Villanova faculty. These meetings became increasingly organized around specific topics, themes, and books, and they drew the interest of current students in the program, as well as other incarcerated men, and prison staff. The men who founded these meetings began referring to themselves as the "alumni club." For the better part of a decade, a chaplain allowed them to meet in a small group room adjacent to his office. However, the group was not formally recognized by prison administrators. This meant that their ability to hold regular meetings in a dedicated space with a recognized membership was contingent on the discretion of prison staff. It also meant that they could not expand their membership beyond the ten or so men who could be accommodated in the small group room, nor could they invite other, interested incarcerated men or outside guests to visit their meetings to discuss a particular book or idea.

McCorkel became involved as a faculty advisor with the organization in 2007 as they sought formal recognition by the prison. The students enlisted one of the prison chaplains to serve as a sponsor and supervisor. Formal supervision by a member of the prison staff

¹⁰ Prisoners serving virtual life typically have long-term sentences of fifty years or more. One of our students has been sentenced to over 100 years in prison for a series of non-violent drug offenses and subsequent parole violations.

provided the group with a larger, dedicated space and time to meet, and ensured that members would receive passes allowing them to attend meetings and events. The students convinced prison administrators that having a faculty advisor from Villanova would further ensure that the substance of the meetings would be devoted to intellectual pursuits. At that point, the group had become an official alumni chapter of the University. They were provided with various alumni-related materials, the most notable of which is a large, fabric banner with the University's seal and the words, "Alumni Association SCI Graterford" which they prominently displayed on the wall during their meetings. Adding a faculty advisor not only enhanced their legitimacy as a formal organization within the prison, it also created opportunities to bring in outside scholars to extend the scope of their scholarly community from one that purely existed behind the walls to one that reached out to join outside communities of scholars and progressive activists.

Before discussing the ways in which the alumni chapter provided a bridge from the prison to an external community of scholars and activists, it is important to emphasize the kind of community that this group of incarcerated college graduates created for themselves within the authoritarian context of a maximum-security prison. This is a community that stands outside the rubric offered by Clemmer (1940) and others in that it was not built to overtly defy the prison regime, nor to accommodate it. Rather, the men who founded the alumni chapter as well as those who are actively participating in it today developed a space to articulate and serve their individual and collective intellectual interests and needs. The alumni chapter provides them with a community that recognizes and values its participants as they recognize and value themselves -- as scholars and intellectuals, activists and organizers. In this way, the existence of the alumni chapter expands the kind of communities that men can seek out within the prison subculture, as well as expanding the dimensions of their identities beyond the distorting and degraded institutional status of "prisoner" and "criminal." Notably, the men in the alumni chapter regard it as so formative to their own intellectual development and so crucial to their capacity to do time that they have opened up membership to include not only program alumni but also current students. They also regularly invite younger men, often with less time in prison, to attend meetings and events in order to encourage them to consider the benefits of an undergraduate education and a scholarly life. In cultivating this community, students and alumni have not only created a space in prison that serves their needs, they have improved conditions in the Villanova program and across the prison more generally. It is from the alumni chapter that the Villanova advisory board (discussed previously) was born. In addition, members of the alumni chapter created a peer mentoring organization that tutors incarcerated men who are currently enrolled in the undergraduate program, as well as others who are pursuing general education degrees.

The foregoing suggests that scholarly communities in prisons not only serve as an alternative to negative subcultures, but they can push back against the mechanisms of distrust, alienation, and competition over scarce resources that fuel them. The prison classroom, and by extension the alumni chapter, offer space to de-commodify life, a place where one can learn to value a diversity of opinions and to participate in a common struggle, in this case the search for understanding and truth. Moreover, knowledge is the classic public good; one person's holding it does not diminish another's. It can thus be freely shared, and so that source of mistrust and competition disappears or, at the very least, dissipates. Notably, students routinely form study groups comprised of individuals who are members of rival groups and the broader alumni chapter is comprised of men who by virtue of their religion, race/ethnicity, age, political ideology, or neighborhood of origin might not otherwise interact with one another. The types of knowledge obtained in these scholarly communities can be liberating, potentially leading to critical understandings by the students of their own

circumstances and of those around them. As students begin to see the larger forces that have produced their common situations and predicaments, the need for and possibility of solidarity and coordinated social action can become more evident.

Bridging the Divide and Expanding Social Capital: Lifers, Inc.

One persistent frustration expressed by students both inside the classroom and in the context of alumni meetings is the apparent inability of academics and of scientific research to influence public policy. These frustrations are felt, perhaps most acutely, by students serving life sentences. During one alumni event inside the prison, a criminologist from Temple University argued that lengthy, mandatory sentencing policies are not supported by research. She summarized various studies that conclude that most people “age out” of crime. To all the men in attendance, it was an uncontroversial and rather obvious finding. At the end of her talk, a student serving a life sentence asked her why this research appeared to have no impact on public policy saying, “If everyone knows this, why isn’t anyone doing anything?” It is a question that emerges time and time again in the alumni meetings and, in recent years, has served as a clarion call for a concerted effort to breach the walls that divide incarcerated people, academics, and public policymakers. In many respects, the problem of the wall, at least in a metaphorical sense, is a problem of social capital and collective efficacy. After discussing the apparent failure of academic research to inform public policy extensively in the classroom and in alumni meetings, several of our students decided to do something about it. Their solution emerged in the form of Lifers, Inc.

Lifer’s Inc., a non-profit organization housed within the prison and created by members of the alumni chapter, strategically mobilized resources associated with the undergraduate program to enhance social capital and strengthen collective efficacy in the interests of bridging the series of divides that separate incarcerated people from academics and policymakers. The organization originated in the late 1970s as a therapy group for men serving life sentences. A number of members were also undergraduate students in the Villanova program. As their education advanced, the group itself evolved, becoming increasingly engaged with scholarly research and public policy. Working together with the alumni association, members of Lifers, Inc. made concerted efforts to develop working relationships with academics and the academic community more generally. A subset of the Lifer’s Organization published an article in a peer-reviewed, criminology journal that explored the cultural frameworks that they argue give rise to habitual violence (Lifers Public Safety Committee, 2004). McCorkel co-authored remarks with four members for an Author-Meets-Critics session at the American Society of Criminology dedicated to prison reentry (McCorkel, Davis, Pace, Perry, & Wheeler, 2010). Perhaps most significantly, in 2009, Lifer’s Inc., working with faculty from Temple University’s graduate program in criminal justice, sponsored a daylong workshop at the prison for over 200 members of the American Society of Criminology. Advanced undergraduate students and alumni of the Villanova program were featured speakers and their talks were primarily directed at offering a more nuanced set of analyses for understanding incarceration and crime, as well as suggestions for direct involvement in policy making and political participation. The alumni association has worked to reinforce these engagements by creating a monthly “Professor Speaks” lecture series that invites local academics to present their scholarship at the prison. This program has run continuously since 2007 and has spawned multiple engagements between and among academics and incarcerated students including joint research projects, coauthored articles and editorials, reading groups, independent studies, feedback on scholarly projects, and brainstorming sessions.

Lifers, Inc. initiated a simultaneous set of engagements with policymakers and advocacy organizations. For example, members of the Lifers, Inc. encouraged a community activist and art teacher to launch Art for Justice, a nonprofit organization aimed at raising public awareness and encouraging dialogue about crime and mass incarceration. Here the medium is not academic articles; rather, it is artistic creations in the form of paintings, drawings, sketches, and sculptures created by incarcerated individuals. Many of these pieces feature aspects of the carceral experience and depict isolation, fear, remorse, longing for family, and the austere architecture of cellblocks and holding facilities. Art for Justice offers traveling exhibits of the artwork in schools, juvenile facilities, universities, galleries, art museums, churches, and community centers. Its purpose is to reach audiences who may not be inclined to attend an academic lecture and to capture the attention of individuals who do not necessarily have an overt interest in crime and the justice system.

Lifers, Inc. also works directly with elected officials, sponsoring talks at the prison dedicated to particular criminal justice policies, pledging assistance for election campaigns (in which the organization and/or individual members offer to endorse a particular candidate and write letters encouraging their families and friends to vote) and, in more than one instance, drafting sample pieces of legislation (see the section that follows). Further, Lifers, Inc. endeavors to create reinforcing links among these discrete communities of academics, activists, and public officials by bringing them all together at the prison's annual "Lifers Banquet." The prison allows banquet attendees (all of whom are men serving life or virtual life sentences) to bring two guests. Most men invite family members, but members of Lifers, Inc. agree to give up one or more of their guest passes in order to bring in academics, politicians, and community organizers. They spend a great deal of time strategizing seating arrangements to ensure that each of these groups is able to meet, exchange contact information, and converse about collaborative possibilities.

All of these endeavors serve to draw incarcerated individuals, academics, policymakers, and community organizers into dialogue with one another, which gives rise to an expanded social network—one that extends the reach and amplifies the voice of incarcerated people well beyond the wall. As one Graterford student wrote for the sociology department's 2016 newsletter, "It is amazing how the actions of others can motivate life-changing decisions in a positive way. There is a wise saying which advises, 'If you throw a pebble in a river you will create a thousand ripples.' Such a quote could apply to my affiliations with Villanova University." Beyond this ripple effect, the efforts of Lifers Inc. allow each of these discrete groups (incarcerated people, academics, activists, and policy makers) to share information in ways that can improve the quality and substance of scientific research and public policy. Further, it bolsters social capital and collective efficacy, allowing incarcerated individuals to draw on multiple sets of resources to develop and share their scholarly insights, artistic creations, and political frameworks across multiple platforms. Social capital can be thought of as the scope and value of social networks (Bourdieu, 1986), while collective efficacy is the ability of a community to work together toward its desired goals through political action, self-policing, and enforcement of positive social norms (Sampson, 2012). There is considerable evidence that the fate of the individual is tied to that of the community, something that is not lost on many of our incarcerated students and alumni (Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2015).

Higher levels of education are critical to these processes. Educational achievement increases the diversity and depth of the knowledge base. It promotes more and better connections among people by providing tools for positive interactions and an appreciation for the contributions of others, things usually modeled and pursued in the collegiate classroom. Doing so enriches the stock of social capital that community members can draw upon and,

ultimately, their power to positively alter cultural discourses and structural conditions. The resulting social power, reinforcement of democratic ideals and enhanced political capabilities directly challenge the individualization and commercialization of life pushed by neoliberalism. In the section below, we detail how this manifest in their participation in state-level political processes.

Participatory Democracy and HB 2135

In October 2016, Coalition to Abolish Death by Incarceration rallied in front of Pennsylvania's state capitol. The group was there to encourage state politicians to support Pennsylvania House Bill 2135. The bill proposes to make individuals serving life sentences eligible for a parole hearing after 15 years. Currently, people serving life sentences in Pennsylvania are not eligible for parole consideration at any point during their incarceration. A number of people serving life sentences in Pennsylvania and beyond argue this kind of sentence amounts to "death by incarceration" (Johnson & McGunigall-Smith, 2008, p. 328). The bill to grant parole consideration to those serving life sentences was introduced by a Democratic Representative from Philadelphia who is active in criminal justice reform, and sponsored by twelve other Pennsylvania Representatives including several who have attended the Lifers Banquet and various public policy events sponsored by Lifers, Inc. and the alumni association. Members of the Coalition include The Human Rights Coalition (consisting of incarcerated individuals, formerly incarcerated men and women, their family members, and friends), Decarcerate Pennsylvania (consisting of community activists and academics), Fight for Lifers (consisting of academics, family members of lifers, community organizers, and formerly incarcerated men and women), and Right to Redemption (consisting of incarcerated men serving life sentences at Graterford, including members of Lifers, Inc. and the Villanova program). Among the people in attendance was one of the founding members of Lifers, Inc. who had been released from Graterford after serving 33 years there. He told a local reporter that he remained committed to the cause on behalf of all the other men at Graterford who were still fighting for their freedom. Men who are currently incarcerated at Graterford were present at the rally as well. Many called friends and family members in attendance and listened in from cellblock payphones. Members of the Coalition held large posters that featured highlights from research reports and public policy studies: "PA Has the Highest Proportion of Prisoners Serving Life Without Parole" and "PA is 1 of 6 States That Does Not Offer Parole Options for Lifers."

Members of Lifers, Inc., and the alumni association are responsible for much of the political strategizing that went into getting the bill sponsored. They are familiar with and adept at answering questions regarding why persons convicted of murder and violent offenses should receive a "second chance." Indeed, their ability to answer this question persuasively is attributable, in no small way, to the exposure they have cultivated with multiple audiences, many of whom are not empathetic to their plight and do not share similar political sensibilities. Accessing a broader social network through the university and their organizing in Lifers, Inc. means that they are able to adopt and anticipate multiple subject positions to consider how HB 2135 might also benefit persons and communities who are not directly impacted by life without possibility of parole. The justifications they offer feature detailed analyses of public spending on schools versus prisons, savings to tax payers, crime rates, comparisons with other states, and meditations on public safety, fragile families, and community infrastructure.

Although the outcome of the bill remains, at the time of writing, undetermined, its very existence demonstrates the incredible power of knowledge acquisition and community

building even (and particularly) within the oppressive confines of a maximum-security prison. Such community building is an example of concrete political action that is essential to participatory democracy and to overcoming aspects of civil death imposed by incarceration (Gottschalk, 2015). Incarcerated men, barred by law from voting, forged a part in the political process that is in no small way a product of their extensive engagement in research, community building, community outreach, and networking.

In large part, higher education in prison serves as the crucible from which this is all possible. In addition to nurturing and sustaining an internal community of scholars and building bridges to broader, external communities of academics, community organizers, and public officials, higher education can strengthen the capacity and willingness of incarcerated individuals to engage in participatory democracy. As the example of HB 2135 makes clear, the ability of students and alumni to collectively identify and articulate political demands and enact political power is true irrespective of their actual carceral status. Working collaboratively, this group of students and alumni mobilized social capital and exercised collective efficacy in ways that allowed them to strategize and work around the conditions of confinement.

Discussion and Conclusion

Speaking before an audience of the Alumni Association in October 2014, Marcus, an undergraduate student serving a life sentence, opened with a quote he attributed to the philosopher and activist Angela Davis, “I’m no longer accepting the things I cannot change... I’m changing the things I cannot accept.” In his talk, he contrasted prisons and universities and likened himself to a builder. “Education,” he said, “provides the tools to build and create. It is the opposite of incarceration because prisons seek to destroy.” He went on to announce new course listings for the upcoming semester and encouraged the men to tutor current students who may need assistance with a particular assignment or course.

Many incarcerated students in higher education programs will spend significant portions of their adult lives in prison. In the case of the Villanova program, it will be many years (if at all) before most of our students have an opportunity to put their higher educational achievements to use in the labor market. This does not mean, however, that their education is without value or that it is less than fully operative in the present. Indeed, our students and alumni are, as Marcus observes, builders. In each of the examples offered above, we have endeavored to highlight how the men in our program utilized higher education to build community, strengthen social solidarity, expand social networks, and engage the political process. As mentioned, these collective and democratic outcomes directly contravene the individualistic and commercial tendencies and values promoted by neoliberalism. Moreover, they provide space for new and more capacious meanings for education and its benefits.

Wacquant (2012) argues that isolated and involuntarily segregated spatial areas are, or at least have been, “Janus faced.” That is, their residents look both outward toward the society from which they have been marginalized and excluded, and inward toward the community in which they live. Reflecting on Drake and Cayton’s (1945) classic study of Chicago, he reminds us that, despite severe oppression, the inward facing community can be vibrant, supportive and almost self-sustaining. The Chicago ghetto in the early twentieth century, for example, had jobs, stores, churches and social organizations that met, to the

degree possible, the needs of residents by offering financial, social, emotional and political capital. Thus, within a larger context of domination, resilient and resourceful communities arose that allowed a semblance of humanity and possibility.

At the same time, the functioning of the internal community is clearly connected to the developments of the external community. Certainly, broader economic conditions help determine the resources and structures of opportunity and constraint available within socially denigrated areas. As deindustrialization and cutbacks in federal funding devastated cities, for instance, and as population flight reduced social and cultural capital, once healthy urban communities began to disintegrate. A new set of social conditions arose in the vacuum, as did new methods of external social control. Mass incarceration, of course, was a primary technique, creating what Wacquant (2010b) terms a “deadly symbiosis”. To wit, mass incarceration alters the life of incarcerated neighborhoods for the worse, while the new social arrangements of incarcerated neighborhoods infiltrate the daily routines of incarcerated life.

The appeal and the promise of higher education must not be that it creates opportunities for incarcerated individuals to be absorbed back into the depleted labor market and buffered from the temptations of crime. Not only does this fail to offer formerly incarcerated people a complete model of social integration, one that facilitates the emergence of post-prison identities that are made up of more than work and consumption, it fails to redress underlying race, class, and gender inequalities that generate various forms of crime, state surveillance, and state coercion. Indeed, a thin, neoliberal model of education such as this does nothing to dismantle the structures that produce and reinforce poverty, marginalization, violence, racism, gender inequality, and mass incarceration. Instead, it keeps all of these structures in play. The subject position of incarcerated individuals and the communities from which they originate does not change. They merely shift from positions within a penal architecture that encompasses both the prison and the disadvantaged communities from which the incarcerated are drawn (Wacquant 2010b). Thus, neoliberal post-incarceration employment, which proponents exalt as the goal of prison education, in reality lacks the decent wages, security and reasonable job ladders that allow a meaningful exit from the precarity and social disorganization that underwrite recidivism. The neoliberal vision all but guarantees the reproduction of carceral, political, and economic inequality.

The appeal and promise of higher education in prison must be to help create actors and conditions that can, at least to some degree, effectively challenge and hopefully alter oppressive conditions for the better. This includes conditions both inside and outside the prison walls. Higher education can promote this by enhancing and encouraging individual and collective self-determination and throwing open the door to the knowledge, skills, networks, and resources necessary to build just communities and democratic societies. To be clear, the harsh realities of prison and the social conditions that underpin crime and violence are complex, multi-faceted and held in place by significant material interests. Higher education in prison certainly cannot, on its own, overcome them. But it can contribute to meaningful improvements both at the individual and social levels that go beyond a simple reduction in recidivism. Ultimately, higher education in prison is a part of a larger political project that seeks to wrest back social life and human dignity from the narrow constraints of market logic and discipline. As such, a more expansive understanding of its purposes and possibilities is required to both guide and comprehend its use.

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