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# What Are The Best Practices New York Education Programs Use Within Prison Facilities?

Isabella Lupo  
*Pace University*

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What Are The Best Practices New York Education  
Programs Use Within Prison Facilities?

Isabella Lupo

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Honors Thesis

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Methodology	1
Literature Review	4
- History of College Education Programs in Prisons	4
- Recidivism	7
- Impacts of Education Programs	10
o Transformative Effects	10
o A Sense of Community Within Confining Walls	14
o Employment Opportunities	18
- Characteristics of Education Programs	21
o Computer Access	21
o Academic Courses	25
Primary Data	27
- Mercy College	27
- Marymount Manhattan College	34
- John Jay College	40
- Bard Prison Initiative	42
Conclusion	46
- Further Research	46
- Acknowledgements	48
Work Cited	49

## **Introduction**

What are the best practices New York education programs use in prison facilities? I honed my focus specifically to college education programs in New York state prison facilities. I analyzed and interviewed college degree programs offered by Mercy College, Marymount Manhattan College, John Jay College, and Bard College. These education programs most recidivism due to their incredible effects on former and current students. These effects include but are not limited to: transformative effects witnessed by the students and their authorities, the growth of a positive community within the prison facility, and the increase in employment opportunity upon release. These programs are also very successful due to their use of in-person instruction, and their focus on academia, specifically college, rather than vocational training. Overall, there are many factors that contributes to the success of each of the education programs I've studied. Each of those factors contribute to reducing recidivism rates which effectively keeps individuals out of prisons, but these factors also influence former and current students in more meaningful ways then they could have ever imagined.

## **Methodology**

I decided to study education programs within prison facilities because I've always been an advocate for education. I believe that education is a basic human right and every human being deserves the opportunity to pursue an education regardless of their background, identity, economic status, or imprisonment. However, I completely understand that the structure of school and academic courses may not be for everyone, but it's important that they still have the opportunity. I chose to combine my passion for education and my interest in our country's prison

system because I believe that the prison community can be the most vulnerable and could benefit the most from obtaining an education. It's crucial for me to also acknowledge my positionality during this type of research. I'm fortunate enough to be a college graduate this spring and have never been convicted of any offenses. I recognize how my gender, race, and class play a role in my research. I will never be able to understand what these students are going through but I support the positive effects of these education programs. I focused specifically on New York prison facilities and college degree programs because I wanted to keep my research local, within my home state. Throughout my research, I focused primarily on college degree programs rather than GED programs. I studied college programs mainly because I feel that college courses are more rigorous, spark critical thinking, and challenge students far more than high school courses.

For my primary data, I interviewed professors and representatives of numerous education programs within prison facilities and jails in New York. I spoke with Mercy College, Marymount Manhattan College, John Jay College, and the Bard Prison Initiative. I reached out to these schools and unique programs because they all work in New York facilities and teach higher education courses. I'm very grateful to have spoken to a diverse group of schools and programs since they work at different facilities and offer distinctive courses and degrees. I chose to conduct interviews for my primary data because I was most excited to speak to people about their own experiences teaching within the classroom and their individual reasoning on the benefits of education programs within prisons, specifically their own program. Since I was unable to speak with students themselves, I thought the best option was to speak to those teaching the students. A majority of professors and representatives I spoke with attend the commencement ceremony every year at the prison they're partnered with and have been able to

Speak with students and their families on their achievements. I appreciate that aspect because since I was unable to document the experiences from the students themselves, I was able to hear it through another source that can vouch and even witness the positive effects education has on these graduates.

Throughout this paper, I will be using the terms “incarcerated individuals,” “a previously incarcerated individual,” “student,” and “a person impacted by the justice system” very frequently. I will use these terms rather than referring to these individuals as “inmates,” “prisoners,” “felons,” or “criminals” because it’s vital to point out that their criminal history does not define their identity. Throughout my research and primary data of one-on-one interviews with professors in the field, I learned how important it is to observe the way in which professors speak to their students within prisons. At some point during almost every interview, my interviewee would point out the significance of using humanizing terms when referring to their students because they do not allow their current state of imprisonment to exemplify their character. In addition, one representative from John Jay College that I was unable to interview due to her position but contacted briefly over email put me in my place immediately regarding my language used when referring to incarcerated individuals. I developed both my interview questions and sample email template before diving into research, so I wrongfully included the terms “inmates” and “prisoners” quite often in both documents. It was only after the representative from John Jay College directly told me that was incorrect and sent me a document explaining why language is important and which terms are appropriate to use that I altered my word choices. Of course, I was so embarrassed and felt guilty for making that mistake in so many emails and interview questions, but I’m so grateful that it happened. I was able to learn

how meaningful and essential it is to use language that does not demean or restrict anyone from being who they want to be. I include a quote from the article she sent me in my Transformative Effect section.

Lastly, I want to reveal that by the end of my research I had to change my overall thesis question. Initially, my question was determining which education program most reduced recidivism and why. While interviewing all of the college representatives, I realized that decreasing recidivism rates was not their top priority. Each interviewee corrected me by stating how their education program is teaching these students because they hold the desire to learn, not because they want to lower a statistic. I learned that the reduction in recidivism is simply a positive result of these programs. Therefore, I adjusted my thesis question to determine what best practices these programs were using within New York state. I learned the most about the incredible effects education has on incarcerated individuals and particular elements that constitute for that success through all of my interviews. It was inspiring to hear their passion for these students and for their own programs.

## **Literature Review**

### HISTORY OF COLLEGE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN PRISONS

The primary reason prisons are able to provide educational programs for those behind bars is because of college federal grants initially named Basic Education Opportunity Grants (BEOGS). They are now referred to as Pell Grants and were legislatively created by the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 by Congress. These prison-based education funds were federal grants that were given to incarcerated individuals to pay for postsecondary, correctional-

education programming within American prisons. They granted access to education to those who were interested in the programs available but could not afford the costs of enrollment (Ubah and Robinson Jr. 122). Pell Grants became very beneficial and important since the majority of the men and women incarcerated were from low-income families who could not fund their education. Those incarcerated were first allowed to become eligible for the grant in 1972. These grants grew to be the primary source of funding for numerous prison-based college programming. Regardless of their incredible contribution and advancement for incarcerated people, the Clinton Administration passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994 which eliminated the access of Pell Grants within prisons. Diana Ali, the author of *Pell Grants for Prisoners: Considerations in the New Administration* claimed, “Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals came to an end despite it serving a substantial portion of the prison population, estimated at 9% of those in prison in 1982 and 23,000 federal and state prisons in 1993; significant evidence that the program reduced recidivism rates; and studies which pointed to a healthy return on investment.” The author expressed how education programs offered various benefits to those incarcerated and to governmental safety and investment. Due to the elimination of these grants in 1994, it was up to the individual states to fund higher education programming within their prisons. Since I am specifically examining educational programs based in New York, I was interested in what New York had done in terms of funding during this time.

Governor Cuomo continued state funding for post-secondary correctional education through a program called the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). However, as the Correctional Association of New York stated in their report, “In 1995, the first year George Pataki took office as governor, New York banned inmates from receiving TAP grants” (2). This elimination was

put into effect due to the rise of opposing views on the implementation of free educational programs within prisons. A number of senators and government officials during the time were questioning the use of rehabilitation within prisons, such as these education programs. In addition, SpearIt added, “One senator even claimed that Pell Grants for prisoners shortchanged 100,000 students with no criminal record who were denied because of lack of funds” (11). The General Accounting Office quickly denied this claim proving that the scarcity of funds was not because of incarcerated students. It’s important to note these clashing viewpoints to understand not only why Pell Grants had been initially denied, but why they were returned into prisons years later.

In 2015, the Obama administration reinstated Pell Grants due to evidence that education drastically reduces recidivism rates. However, the Obama administration provided Pell grants to about 12,000 incarcerated individuals in an effort to offer them a second chance at becoming productive members of society when released (Eichner). Obama’s proposal of returning these grants is applauded by supporters because studies were able to measure recidivism rates and gather stories from those incarcerated and their families. Authors Ubah and Robinson Jr. would agree by stating, “...education in prison is a vital link, a bridge for inmates who are moving from incarceration to the real world” (119). However, despite the benefits of educational programs within prison systems that I will describe throughout this paper, the idea of granting inmates access to funded education will remain controversial to millions across the country. I will now explain the role of recidivism while comparing incarcerated individuals that received college education programs and those who did not.

## RECIDIVISM

Throughout my paper, I use the term “recidivism” to describe the return of incarcerated individuals back into the prison system after their release. Recidivism, in a criminal justice lens, is used to describe a person’s relapse into criminal behavior after undergoing a type of intervention or transformative programming. It is measured by criminal acts that resulted in rearrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence during only a three-year period following the prisoner’s release (National Institute of Justice). There are recognizable factors that impact recidivism rates, one being the exposure to in-prison education programs. Recidivism is a large component of my research because past studies: (Brazzell et al., Torre and Fine, Esperian, Davis, et al.) have proven that by attending college courses during their time behind bars, incarcerated people have a much lower chance and rate of returning to prison after their release. I wish to specifically understand *why* recidivism rates drop significantly for the students who obtained a college degree during their time of incarceration in comparison to those who do not. It’s crucial to discover the reality of how many people are locked behind bars across the United States.

The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates and the greatest number of people confined. Brazzell et al. wrote an article in 2017 claiming that the highest number of incarcerated people across the country had been 2.3 million (1). Torre and Fine reveal that “approximately 75% of the men and women in prison enter the system with neither high school diploma nor a GED. This percentage jumps to 90% for men and women in New York City’s jails, where 50% and 70% of the City’s adult inmate population reads below the sixth grade level in English” (578). The missing element of education could be one of the reasons these

individuals ended up in the prison system, but it could also be one of the reasons they are able to break out of the vicious cycle of violence. An unknown source in Esperian's article adds, "... considering the vast number of incarcerated individuals that do not possess the basic social and educational skills that they need to function in society, it should come as no surprise that many of those released from prison or jail will eventually return" (320). This writer's claim emphasized how incarcerated individuals cannot be expected to be productive citizens upon release if they have absolutely no rehabilitation such as education programs during their time behind bars. If those impacted by the justice system leave prison with the same level of education and literacy as when they entered prison, the chances of them returning back to incarceration are much higher. Brazzell et al. point out, "In a country where second chances and opportunity are professed values, democratic access to high-quality higher education must include access for people in prison and people who have been convicted of crimes. We cannot bar the most vulnerable people from the very thing that has the greatest potential to change their lives" (41). Education is vital in the reduction of states' recidivism rates within prison facilities due to the transformative effect it has on incarcerated individuals that have not been educated prior.

The majority of my sources state that recidivism rates are largely reduced through the advancement of education. Torre and Fine present a study conducted in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York documenting the impact of college in prison on the students both during their time behind bars and post-release. This 4-year long study gained data through individual interviews and focus groups with students both within the prison and released, correctional administrators and officers, and educators such as college faculty. The data covered around 200 incarcerated females that were enrolled in the college program at Bedford Hills

Correctional Facility. The quantitative data provided by the New York City Department of Corrections presents these findings:

Using the standard NYSDOCS measure of 36 months, 21 of 274 college participants tracked longitudinally were returned to custody. In other words, women who participated in college while in prison had a 7.7% return-to-custody rate. In contrast, 29.9% of the 2,031 female offenders released between 1985 and 1995, who did not participate in college while in prison, were returned to custody within 36 months. Women without college in prison were almost four times most likely to be returned to custody than women who participated in college while in prison. (579)

The findings of Torre and Fine demonstrate that recidivism rates are reduced when incarcerated individuals participate in college programs due to the proven 22% decrease among the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility's female population. Another statistic is one reported by the National Institute of Justice Report in Esperian's article. It states, "... prison education is far more effective at reducing recidivism than boot camps, shock incarceration or vocational training... the more educational programs successfully completed for each six months confirmed, the lower the recidivism rates. The exact figures indicating these inverse recidivism rates for degree recipients were: Associates (13.7%), Baccalaureates (5.6%), Masters (0%)" (324). Due to the National Institute of Justice Report, education at any level reduces recidivism rates but a college education specifically causes a larger drop in recidivism rates.

Davis et al. conducted a report that shows the decrease in recidivism rates due to correctional education programs within prisons across the United States. It does not disclose

what facilities were analyzed, but the data and research collected are dated between 1980 and 2011. The information gathered examines the relationship between correctional education participation and student outcomes. The authors claim, "...When applying these estimated odds to the most recently reported national rates of incarceration (43.3 percent within three years of release), correctional education would reduce reincarceration rates by 12.9 percentage points on average, although effectiveness does appear to differ by program" (39). When students participate and engage in college education programs within their prison facilities, they have a much greater chance of not returning back to prison upon their release due to the significant impacts I will explain in my next section.

## IMPACTS OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

### Transformative Effect

College in prison programs drastically reduce recidivism rates, but it's essential to step back and recognize the change found within students as well. The prison system is built and managed to impose a feeling of misery, isolation, and resentment upon those incarcerated. By living in such a controlled and restricted environment, incarcerated individuals lose their sense of purpose, dignity, and ability to grow mentally and emotionally. However, through the testimonies of released students and researchers' findings, incarcerated individuals experience internal growth through their participation in college courses.

Recidivism rates decrease due to the access to education because these released individuals have been able to change their perspective on life and break the cycle of violence that landed them behind bars initially. Lagemann shares a story about a person previously

incarcerated named Joe Williams and his transformative journey back. Williams bounced from various prisons for years, until he ended up at Eastern Correctional Facility in 2007 where the Bard Prison Initiative operated. Upon his release in 2013, Williams graduated with both an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree. Through his academic success, he was able to enroll in an accelerated program at the Columbia University School of Social Work. Williams would have never been able to obtain two degrees and become a student in Columbia University if he had not been motivated by his courses within Eastern Correctional Facility. Lagemann adds, "... Many had no expectations of being able to go to college, and many discover talents they did not know they had, in the process learning to learn at a high level, and finding that they enjoy the challenge. Joe's comments about the importance of being held to high standards express the value he found in having to push himself to the limit" (20). Through rigorous college courses, those impacted by the justice system find empowerment in the aspect of learning and regaining the ability to work towards something meaningful.

Through class time, students are able to unlock their full potential and learn how to write and debate analytically. Ubah and Robinson Jr.'s claim supports Lagemann's excerpt by explaining, "...inmates' educational successes in prison seem to have a generalizing effect because they tend to prepare ex-offenders to further their education outside of prison. Through correctional education, inmates should find the motivation to go on in their educational experience, and they may be able to improve their chance of staying out of prison after completing some courses" (119). The exposure to education programs for incarcerated individuals allows them to see a realistic future that is genuinely made possible through these programs.

Students participating in academic classes have been admitted after a lengthy, competitive application process. Therefore, the ones who made it to the classroom desperately want to be there. Patrick Quinn, an English professor at the College of Southern Nevada whose taught in prisons for 10 years is quoted in Esperian's article, "Education is a humanizing process one which clearly would have an ameliorative effect on recidivism rates when one considers that education will only sharpen rationality and critical thinking" (329). I can compare his claim to Lagemann's argument about Williams by showing how released individuals will advance their knowledge and future career opportunities by participating in college courses with the intention of success. I'll provide another example of positive outcomes from the Bedford Hills College Program. "Many people interviewed for this report described an increase in their sense of "self-efficacy", the knowledge that they have the ability to shape and steer their lives in a meaningful way. As a professor at the Bedford Hills College Program, Aileen Baumgartner observes the change in women over the course of a semester as they become more aware of their own capabilities. "Earning college credits connects hard work and determination to measurable success" (The Correctional Association of New York, 7). The result of an education during the time of incarceration provides skills such as critical thinking, determination, and a strong work ethic that drives them to a life of success rather than crime post-release.

In addition to setting these released students up for success in the real world, whether it may be with relationships or academic or career goals, education gives incarcerated individuals a greater sense of self-worth, confidence, and purpose. A particular element within these education programs that is vital to include in this discussion is the relationship between the professor and the students. Trained professors that teach incarcerated individuals do not view them as prisoners

or criminals, but solely students willing to learn. Students' pasts, individual sentences, and reasons for being behind bars are never spoken about nor considered during the semester. While most of the time these people are referred to as serial numbers by administrative officers, they are seen as human beings within the classroom. By using humanizing terms as I described earlier, the professors are already empowering their students to regain their dignity and sense of purpose. "Dehumanizing labels stereotype and marginalize people rather than support the while they rebuild their lives. Individuals with justice system involvement are not defined by their conviction history. The words we use to reference people should reflect their full identities, and acknowledge their capacity to change and grow" (The Fortune Society). The importance of word choice within education programs can only strengthen the impact of education on these students by allowing them to see a future for themselves that is not defined by their past conviction.

In addition to the significance of uplifting language, it's also important to note that education offers much more than a hard-copy diploma and reduced recidivism rates. Programs such as the Bard Prison Initiative and the Bedford Hills College Program are incredibly successful because their mission as education programs is not to decrease recidivism rates within the state of New York. Their purpose is to educate and empower these students because every human being has the right to an education. Brian Fischer, commissioner of New York State Department of Correctional Services is quoted in Brazzell et al's article claiming, "Education in the prison setting provides far more than a degree and lower recidivism rates... Through its transformational powers, it provides for a socialization and self-actualization process that no other treatment program can offer. It allows offenders to better understand their own self-worth and potential, and most often has offenders reaching out to their own children to encourage them

to continue their education” (17). Through Fischer and Fortune Society’s report on the benefit of empowering language and centralized focus on educating versus getting people out of prison, incarcerated individuals gain a change of perspective on their future and their self-purpose. It is a remarkable factor that education programs within prisons largely reduce recidivism rates, but the transformational changes that are observed from the students themselves, administrative officers, and professors are far more rewarding.

#### A Sense of Community Within Confining Walls

In addition to reducing recidivism rates and providing students with a vision of hope for their future, academic programs within prisons build a sense of community in a place that’s often full of misery. Through student engagement, there is a noticeable decrease in violence and misconduct, and the development of a community among the college students. When incarcerated individuals get accepted into these competitive programs, they understand the value of this education and would do anything to prevent losing it. Students do not involve themselves in petty fights, arguments, or violence due to the threat of losing their spot inside the classroom. Authors Torre and Fine claim, “According to the women and the correction officers, women in college are far less likely to violate facility rules than they were before college. Prisoners in the college program tend to opt away from trouble, *especially* if participation in college courses could be jeopardized” (587). The students’ devotion to their classwork and their passion for gaining knowledge shifts their focus from engaging in prison rec time to working hard for their future goals. Not only do students wish to concentrate on their academics, but their actual

behavior changes due to the positive environment formed within the classroom setting. The Correctional Association of New York argues, "...characterized inmates attending classes as the best-behaved population in a correctional facility, crediting college programs with creating an incentive to avoid conduct that will be written up as a disciplinary infraction. Changes in behavior can be attributed to improved cognitive capacity as well as to the incarcerated person having the opportunity to feel human again by engaging in an activity as commonplace as going to classes" (8). Incarcerated individuals have witnessed effects in their personality due to their participation in a college education program by gaining valuable soft skills and the ability to engage in intellectual conversations.

By surrounding themselves with other motivated students, students within the program are encouraged to work hard and continue their research or class discussions outside the classroom as well. Rather than initiating an argument, students initiated political and analytical conversations around the facility even after class ends. Current students and graduates are both found helping students with classwork or writing assignments within the prison as well. Torre and Fine add, "Immersion in a trusting community of women students also encouraged the women to take on responsibility for others. Mentoring and 'giving back' were woven into the fabric of the college program. In a college culture of peer support, tutoring and mentoring, the women came to understand themselves as connected to a larger social context, one that was affected by their actions and one to which they were accountable" (583). This quote shows how the community formed encourages students to support others, positively interact with each other, and learn from each other by tutoring. Due to the visible changes in students' personalities overall and the development of a community among these students and other incarcerated

individuals, it's clear that college education programs form a productive, peaceful environment. The Correctional Association of New York agrees with Torre and Fine by stating, "The prison officials have often recommended reinstating college programs because of their multiple benign effects: providing an incentive for good behavior; producing mature, well-spoken leadership who have a calming influence on other inmates and on correction officers; and, communicating the message that society has sufficient respect for the human potential of incarcerated people" (9). This type of programming can produce so many benefits for not only the incarcerated individuals within the prison facility but the officers as well. The effects of education from prison officials allow them to feel much safer within the facility and have an easier time ensuring the safety of the rest of the individuals within the facility.

Due to the attitude change among these students, there is noticeably less violence or ticketing occurring within a facility. Authors Torre and Fine add from their study at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, "While no direct evidence on disciplinary incidents could be collected due to the strictly confidential nature of such reports, interviews with administrators, corrections officers, inmates and faculty consistently confirm that college creates a more "peaceful" and manageable prison environment" (586). Despite the lack of physical reports, the testimonies of incarcerated individuals themselves, along with faculty and guards prove that the environment within their facilities has become peaceful in result of a college education program. In comparison, Lahm conducted a study from 1,054 incarcerated men residing in prisons in Kentucky, Ohio, or Tennessee. Those chosen to participate within Kentucky and Tennessee have been in the same facility for at least six months, ensuring they had time to partake in the education programs offered. The exact time of imprisonment was not mentioned for Ohio, so I

cannot say how long incarcerated individuals were imprisoned before participating in Lahm's research. He discovered, "Most importantly, inmates who participated in college programs received fewer tickets for misconduct than inmates who participated in other types of educational programs" (47). Lahm's research brings into question the study of other programs offered at prisons in comparison to college education programs.

Another aspect that allows a college education program to flourish within prison facilities is the disciplined, academic learning that a majority of students have never fully experienced. A college education requires willpower, dedication, and desire to learn. Topics and discussions revolve around social issues that are happening in the world around us, rather than learning algebra or geometry. The type of education a college degree program offers students within prison facilities is more intriguing since they do possess a desire to know what they are missing from the outside world. The author James Vacca attests that prison education programs should be tailored to the prison culture. He claims, "They recognize different learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and multiple literacies... Instruction should involve engaging topics that motivate and sustain the inmate's interest. It should also use literature that is written by prisoners because it provides relevant subject matter as well as writing models. Most of all the programs must enable inmates to see themselves and be seen in roles other than that of prisoners" (302). Vacca's quote shows how the literature and articles that are read for these college classes spark hope and a sense of connection. Through the use of engaging topics, students are motivated to participate and bring their own voice to the table. Through this intellectual engagement, students form a community that allows them to continue their education outside of the classroom and steer away from violence. Lahm adds, "... college programs have shown to decrease misconduct in this

study and decrease recidivism in number studies. Thus, increasing the number of college programs and increasing access to them could save taxpayers millions of dollars that are often spent on the new ways to make prisons harsher, more secure environments. More immediately, less inmate misconduct means safer prisons for inmates and prison officials” (48). By allowing students to participate in college academic programs, prison facilities have significantly become a less violent place. The attention has shifted from boredom that causes frequent disorder to persistence that results in an encouraging environment.

### Employment Opportunities

Within this section, I will explore the correlation between released incarcerated students and an increase in employment opportunities. Companies and corporations are looking for prior experience, relevant work, and a college degree. The job market is a terrifying world, imagine how shocking it is for those incarcerated who have just been released. Incarcerated individuals who gain the opportunity to earn a college degree during their time behind bars have a significant advantage when finding employment upon release in comparison to those who do enroll in the program. The authors Davis et al. state, “On average, the odds of obtaining employment post release among inmates receiving correctional education are 13 percent higher than the odds of obtaining employment post release among inmates not receiving correctional education” (47). I do not know what correctional facilities were studied by these authors, but it’s mentioned that approximately 1,700 males participated between 2004 and 2007 across 12 states. When analyzing college degree programs across the United States, 13% is quite impressive. These students who participated in education programs used their time within prison to their utmost

advantage. As a Bedford Hills graduate stated within The Correctional Association of New York's report, "A degree signals to potential employers that a person is responsible and hard-working" (6). Education benefits a released person from incarceration by securing their financial income and helping them not return to the prison industrial complex.

When applying for particular jobs, incarcerated individuals may be required to include their criminal record within their application. This is desperately embarrassing and discriminatory. However, though these individuals possess a criminal history for a particular number of years, they also hold a college degree for the rest of their lives. Despite their past, incarcerated students hold accountability for their actions by engaging in a college degree program that equips them with the tools needed to succeed upon release. "When back in their communities, formerly incarcerated people are at a dual disadvantage: they are chronically undereducated, which limits employment options, and are stigmatized as ex-offenders when filling out applications. Exposure to post-secondary education helps break the cycle of unemployment and incarceration" (The Correctional Association of New York 6). Students that leave prison with a college degree are much more likely to secure a job and therefore break the cycle of violence and not return to prison. Authors Ubah and Robinson Jr. claim, "...acquiring college-education credentials in prison will provide inmates with legitimate human capital that can open up better job opportunities, which, in turn, can build social bonds that protect against criminal behavior" (119). A college degree gives a student leverage when applying to various job positions, but the discipline and dedication they obtain from their education program allows them to not only land a job but succeed and stick with it as well.

Pursuing a job upon release may seem essential for incarcerated individuals due to the urgent need of a steady income, but it's also crucial so these individuals do not fall back into old habits. When a released student has a college degree, their chances of employment rise while their chances of returning to prison decrease. By sustaining a full-time job, those released from incarceration are focused on avoiding the path of crime, doing what's best for themselves and their families, and securing their own income. They are not thrown back into the same community, hanging around the same group of people that landed them in prison in the first place. An anonymous corrections officer at High Desert State Prison was quoted within Esperian's article stating, "The turnaround rate (recidivists) is high, and the reason, primarily, is their not being able to find jobs. In this sense, education is a good idea because not working in a suitable job often results in hanging out with old friends and falling into the same bad habits" (328).

I agree that through the benefit of having a college degree opens doors for various employment opportunities for incarcerated individuals despite their criminal record and keeps them productive and pushing forward rather than falling back into crime. "Not having an advanced degree greatly diminishes people's capacity to earn a living wage, often forcing them to take two or three meaningless jobs to support themselves and their families. In many cases, particularly in economically depressed areas, people may turn to criminal activity simply as a means to survive" (The Correctional Association of New York, 5). Students with a college degree that land a job after release not only have a lower chance of reverting back to crime but have an easier time transitioning back into society. By earning their college degree from their

education program, students can get a job opportunity after release which reduces their likelihood of returning to prison.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

### Computer Access

Throughout my research, I came across articles promoting the inclusion of online classes within prison facilities. This is strange since computer access for incarcerated individuals is already limited. A few articles encourage the use of online classes or added computer time, whereas other articles support the technology-free environment. The increase in computer access will benefit incarcerated students for it will allow them to further their research on certain assignments and have more articles and pieces of literature at their fingertips. The use of online classes will *not* be as engaging and meaningful to these students as in-person academic courses offered by college education programs.

The authors Davis et al. describe four studies within their article conducted within adult correctional facilities that compare computer-assisted instructional services to traditional, face-to-face classroom instruction. It's stated that the computer-assisted instruction replaced the same amount of time as students would be inside the classroom with a professor. This study in particular observed the students' performance in mathematics and reading. As a result, the authors learn that there is no direct effect of computer-assisted instruction in comparison to professor-led instruction. Davis et al. state, "Our meta-analysis of six reading effect estimates and three mathematics effect estimates from four studies suggest that the effect of computer-assisted instruction on incarcerated adults' reading and mathematics performance is not

statistically different from that of traditional, face-to-face classroom instruction” (56). The authors still promote the implementation of online classes since it could save the government and the institution valuable money. “Because computer-assisted instruction can be self-paced and can be supervised by a person other than a licensed classroom teacher, it is potentially less costly to administer and could even allow correctional facilities to expand their instructional course offerings (Davis et al, 54). The benefit of saving institution and government money is understandable, but by providing the best quality education the hope to save money is overruled. The authors research proves that there is no effect based on the type of instruction, yet they still encourage online classes so trained faculty members do not have to get paid. However, the college education programs within prison facilities go above and beyond to provide their students with a meaningful experience that involves active participation, discussion, and encouragement.

The implementation of online classes lacks the physical aspect of class which forms the sense of community. Torre and Fine add:

The college-in-prison program was designed by the universities, the inmate committee and the administrator to go beyond the taking of courses. The college program was designed so that the women could participate in an intellectual and ethical community of reading, writing, thinking, revising, studying, mentoring, and tutoring. The physical space of the Learning Center – equipped with nonnetworked computers (no Internet), contributed books, magazines, newspapers, flags from college and universities in the consortium – holds a sense of community. (573)

The use of college education programs within prisons is to have students productively participate in discussions with other students and their professor who they can regularly learn from.

Knowledge can be gained through the use of the Internet or technology, especially for research purposes, but it should not take the place of actual class time. Davis et al. believe students can be “self-paced and supervised by a person other than a licensed classroom teacher” through online classes while Torre and Fine argue, “The college program was designed so that the women could participate in an intellectual and ethical community of reading, writing, thinking, revising, studying, mentoring, and tutoring.” The implementation of online courses in place of in-person courses will not form a peaceful community within the prison facility nor allow students to develop the cognitive skills acquired through classroom learning.

Many college degree programs I analyzed and interviewed for my research require a research class or assign projects that often need additional sources or articles. Imagine how challenging it would be to complete a project or paper with limited internet access and a set number of books available at the library. It’s quite difficult for students to advance their research or opinion on a topic when there is a restricted number of sources they can read. Brazzell et al. attest, “Computers and the Internet are also an increasingly essential part of the education process itself, and both teachers and students rely heavily on these tools for seeking information, locating articles and references, and composing documents” (33). The use of computers and access to the Internet for incarcerated students is beneficial so they have the ability to progress their research by browsing online databases and even engaging in interactive lessons. Brazzell et al. also raise the point that “Multimedia content and interactive learning opportunities can now be delivered via the Internet, closed/restricted computer networks, satellite, closed-circuit

television, or CDs or DVDs. Coursework using these technologies ranges from highly structured, prepackaged instruction to self-guided, individualized, and interactive lessons” (32). The use of DVDS and restricted computer networks will be beneficial for it will still ensure appropriate content and allow the students to learn more on a topic they are unaware of through online searches. Regarding the concern of appropriate content, Delaney et al. add, “In practice, most typical security concerns can be addressed by using firewalls and secure servers that limit the range of Internet sites to which students have access” (22). Due to the measures that can be taken to ensure Internet use will not be violated, prison administrators should consider installing a computer lab for incarcerated students or expanding their allotted time with these computers if they’re available.

I believe the authors Brazzell et al. agree with Delaney et al. on their argument for internet access within prison facilities because it is limiting incarcerated students on certain privileges that students on college campuses have every day. “Students in prison may have difficulty finding a quiet place to study and often have limited access to tools and resources such as computers, libraries, and tutoring services that are commonly available on college campuses” (Delaney et al, 24). It’s quite unfair to expect the same quality of work from incarcerated students when they have limited amount of resources within their reach. These college degree programs treat students within prisons and on college campuses with an equal amount of discipline, but the restricted number of resources must be taken into consideration when evaluating the quality of work produced. Overall, the implementation of online courses in place of an instructor-led course is not as beneficial to the students but the advancement of technology

for these students outside of class time will help students further their knowledge through applicable research.

### Academic Courses

Despite students' success in obtaining job opportunities due to their vocational skills upon release, college degree programs hold more value to incarcerated individuals both within prison and after their release. Vocational training, or technical training, within prisons are more tailored to teaching incarcerated individuals on specific skills needed for specific jobs. Some examples include engineering, construction, and information technology. Although these jobs and skills can be useful for students finding jobs upon release, there are not learning basic reading and writing skills, nor complex theories taught in college courses. In addition, since prison facilities do not hold a desire to update the technology available for incarcerated individuals, the equipment the students use is probably outdated. Brazzell et al. points out, "Vocational training in some facilities is geared towards outdated career paths and uses equipment and techniques that are no longer relevant" (37). If prison facilities cannot even update computer labs for their students, how can we ensure the skills they're learning within vocational training can be used in real work practice? Brazzell et al.'s concern about the relevancy of prison's vocational training due to the fact that these facilities never update the technology provided to incarcerated individuals is crucial. However, there are claims that employment rates are higher due to students' vocational training.

Author Vacca claims that employment rates rise due to these specific skills learned. He states, "...inmates reported that they were more inclined to participate in programs when they

saw clear opportunities to improve their capabilities for success after being released. In addition, ex-prisoners who participated in employment and vocational education programs in prison had a better chance of maintaining employment and earning slightly more money..." (300). Students who have earned a college degree or a vocational certificate immediately have a greater chance at landing a job in comparison to released individuals who have neither. If an incarcerated individual earned some type of academic or professional recognition, they hold an advantage over those who did nothing with their time behind bars.

Interestingly, Vacca raises an aspect of vocational training that The Correctional Association of New York does within their report as well. Both authors argue that vocational training allows students to study, learn and practice techniques that they genuinely enjoy. "Technical training has a proven impact in reducing recidivism and should be placed on an equal level as academic education. Allowing individual prisoners to choose a path best suited to him or her increases the chance of success during incarceration and post-release" (The Correctional Association of New York, 4). I understand the point both authors are conveying because certain students, whether in prison or on college campuses, prefer to learn a physical craft rather than general academics.

Another element of both academic and vocational training is its effect on recidivism rates. Vocational training programs do not sustain a higher recidivism rate in comparison to a college degree program. Esperian claimed, "According to the National Correctional Association, in a 2009 report, inmates who earn an AA/AS are 70% less likely to recidivate than those who do not complete a program, a GED, 25% less likely to recidivate, and those who earn a vocational certificate, 14.6% less likely to recidivate" (324). I acknowledge that this is a 2009 report rather

than a more recent report, but the evidence shows that a college degree produces the lowest recidivism rates. Authors Davis et al. do not provide statistics like Esperian, but agrees with Vacca by stating, “Vocational training program participation did not yield a consistent relationship with recidivism but was associated with increased odds of employment” (7).

Vocational training programs do not reduce recidivism rates as much as academic programs, but employment rates do rise.

Lastly, author Karen Lahm explained how vocational training influences student misconduct within the prison as well. Lahm described a study conducted by a researcher at Lee College that observed 147 incarcerated individuals from Texas. He determined, “During the follow up period, he found that the 147 inmates who had participated in vocational programs were involved in only 13 rule infractions requiring disciplinary action compared to 115 rule infractions in the ninety days preceding program participation” (Lahm, 41). Successfully, students enrolled in vocational training have both a high rate of landing a job upon release and contributing to the positive prison environment.

## **Primary Data**

### MERCY COLLEGE

Mercy College is a private, liberal arts college in New York that has partnered with Hudson Link to sponsor a college program at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison was formed in 1998 to provide college education, re-entry support for incarcerated individuals, and life skills that can be used outside of the classroom. Hudson Link has an impressively low recidivism rate of less than 2% over their years of educating

students in prisons. They are partnered with 9 schools across New York state, but I will only be focusing on Mercy College. This program offers its students in Sing Sing the opportunity to pursue an Associate and bachelor's degree in Behavioral Science. Students take classes in psychology and sociology, which Hudson Link believes to prepare them for future careers in education, health services management and even counseling. For my primary data, I interviewed Karol Dean who is the Dean at the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Mercy College. She does not teach at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, but she works with the program and attends every commencement ceremony. By attending every graduation, Dean is able to hear firsthand about the education experience through former students and their families. During our interview, she expanded on the program offered at Sing Sing and elaborated on certain aspects that she believes allows this specific program to be successful.

This program within Sing Sing Correctional Facility is highly selective in its admissions process. Dean informed me that Hudson Link runs a college prep program before the actual degree program, ensuring every student gains the basic concepts before being placed in a rigorous college course. Not every student in the classroom holds the same education background and that is vital to keep in mind while teaching these courses and selecting students within the program. A student with a high school diploma will have an equal opportunity of gaining a spot within the program as a student with no high school diploma. As Dean informed me, their admission requirements include recommendations, high school diploma or highest level of education, interviews, and essay questions. Their waitlist is very long each term. The strict application process only furthers their student's success rates and recidivism rates since the students that have been admitted truly want to be there and will do anything to continue their

education. Dean added to the discussion about the competitive entry process by claiming, “Students must meet the requirements, have good conduct, and show exemplary behavior. Education serves as a reward for these students, it cannot be a self-selection process. They have to *really* want it.” Through having a competitive application process and acceptance rate, Mercy College and Hudson Link ensure that the students who enroll in their degree program are determined to work hard for their grade and pursue more higher education after release or an attainable job in the field of their degree.

Another aspect that allows the program from Mercy College to be so successful is its dedicated staff members and professors. As I can personally attest to as a college student myself, if the professor is not passionate or excited about the course material, there is a low chance I will enjoy the class and get the most out of it. Dean claimed, “Our dedicated faculty have been teaching at Sing Sing, so they understand the prison system.” Her statement emphasized that well-trained staff and experienced professors work best with this group of students. Experienced professors are necessary when working in a college program within a prison facility because flexibility is key. Professors working within prison facilities understand that they cannot control everything and they adjust their class schedule with that in mind. For instance, professors will not always be aware of sudden lockdowns, student absences, random searches, or mandatory head counts issued by officials. Experienced staff will be aware of these sudden mishaps and will know how to best alter the class schedule based on the students’ needs and available time. To further prove this point, when Dean was asked what a college education program should have in order to successfully reduce recidivism, she reported “skilled faculty” as one of her responses. The inclusion of dedicated and knowledgeable staff and professors within college education

programs further the benefits of education upon the students and decreases the likelihood of released students returning back to prison.

Throughout this interview, the positive effects the Mercy College education program had on its former students at Sing Sing were explained with much excitement. During every commencement ceremony, Dean witnesses tears of joy among the graduating students and their families, listens to speeches given by particular students regarding their experience, and speaks to the graduates and their families about their accomplishments. Dean claimed, "Prison can be a very dark place and it's hard to stay positive...if they had continued on the path they were on, they would have not gone anywhere. Mercy College program helped them change their life." By going to class, engaging in intellectual discussions, completing assigned homework, and staying on top of a strict, demanding curriculum, students have been able to realize that they can make the best out of their time behind bars. When speaking with family members, Dean states, "They speak about the value of education in their emotional life. It has become something bigger than themselves...I love to see the kids come because they can see hope in their parent(s)." The impacts education has on a student's emotional life alludes to an incredible transformative effect witnessed by the students themselves, their families, their professors, the staff members, and even the prison guards. Teachers have stated that their students "are open to change, study very hard, and appreciate education so much, even more than traditional students...it's a very transformative experience" (Dean). The students within the program at Sing Sing Correctional Facility realize the opportunities that can arise from obtaining a college degree so they work hard and avoid expulsion at all costs. Dean mentioned how students will do anything to avoid getting ticketed or in trouble since it will affect their enrollment in the college education program. She

also added how behavior does change when the person sees a new path. Through this devotion to academic courses, students enrolled in the program create a peaceful, less violent environment within the prison.

Since students within the college program at Sing Sing Correctional Facility would not risk anything to lose their spot in the program, they become some of the most motivated, dedicated students their professors and staff members have ever seen. “Students at Sing Sing are cream of the crop, they are motivated, interested, hard workers, and have the attitude for success. They are a part of a community of other students who are also motivated and alumni who are still in prison willingly tutor the others” (Dean). It’s inspiring to hear how the inclusion of the college education program from Mercy College and Hudson Link has transformed the environment at Sing Sing to be a more calm place. Dean also mentions how graduates or former students are often found tutoring other students since Sing Sing is a maximum-security prison where many students have very long sentences or even life sentences. If students end up transferring to a different facility, they are able to transfer their credits earned at Sing Sing to their corresponding facility or educational program. This allows the student to proudly continue their education despite the transition to a new facility and carry those credits with them upon release as well. Dean’s responses to the question regarding what a college program should have to successfully decrease recidivism rates, she responded, “Motivated students.” Devoted students that are passionate about their courses and have a desire to be inside the classroom allow this program to be so successful and reduce the chances of them returning to prison.

Mercy College and Hudson Link provide a very unique degree program for their students at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. The two degrees offered are an associate degree of liberal arts

which includes general education courses, and a bachelor's degree in behavioral science which includes psychology and sociology. Usually, students earn their associate degree first and then are encouraged to pursue their bachelor's if they are not applying already. Students that gain their degree now have the ability to pursue jobs in that field, specifically in social service agencies. Dean commented on the career paths available for these students, "The degree option is flexible but also useful. They are the type of jobs that will always need humans. It's also a broad enough field that allows greater employment options." Another element of Mercy College's education program in this facility that allows it to be so successful is their liberal arts education for it opens up more general employment options upon release and provides students with a well-rounded education. During commencement, Dean described that the graduates had "profound effects such as understanding philosophy, sociology, and even statistics at a deep level." In my personal experience of obtaining a liberal arts education, I've gained knowledge in various subject areas and found passion and interest in certain classes that ended up helping me choose my career path. I argue that through the use of the option of offering both an associate's and bachelor's degree in liberal arts and sciences, students at Sing Sing gain a greater understanding of the humanities that allow them to change their perspective on life.

This program sponsored by Mercy College and Hudson Link runs on an eight-week term where the students are taught twice a week. All of the programs I've studied for my research vary in the amount of times students are taught within classrooms and how long the courses run. Therefore, I cannot confidently assume that the duration of these education programs weighs in on their overall success rate and deduction of recidivism rates. Some disadvantages were mentioned during my interview with Dean at Mercy College. She claimed that a few

inconveniences were, “Depending on the facility, students cannot have access to internet. Resources are not as accessible so it makes it much more difficult. However, the benefits still outweigh the potential disadvantages.” She included this in our discussion because even though this education is fantastic for incarcerated individuals, it’s important to remember that it is still a prison facility at the end of the day.

The guards and officers hold the most power and can easily deny certain articles or books for academic courses. “Successful programs require a good relationship with administrators at the local level as well as the state level” (Dean). The sole reason Mercy College and Hudson Link were able to partner with Sing Sing Correctional Facility is due to the support of the administrators at the facility. The partnership is set in place because the value of education is upheld by both the program itself and the prison’s administrators. However, the same support is not always found among the prison guards on duty. Dean and I began speaking about the attitude and presence of the guards within the prison facility. Some guards encourage the education programs for it cultivates a safer environment and reduces recidivism rates, whereas other guards disprove of the programs because they view prison as a place of punishment rather than rehabilitation. In addition, guards can often hold an intimidating presence so the education program in Sing Sing places the guards outside of the classroom. Dean informed me, “Guards are usually outside of the classroom. However, there is transparent glass so they can see in and hear everything within the classroom.” I definitely believe the guards presence within the room makes a huge difference in the classroom dynamic and their view on the program itself aims to belittle the students. However, how can we lock away hundreds of individuals in one facility with no rehabilitation practices and expect them to *not* return to prison if they are released? The

only way these incarcerated people will have the ability to break away from the cycle of violence is through restoration, which includes a college education program.

#### MARYMOUNT MANHATTAN COLLEGE

Marymount Manhattan College is a private, independent college located in New York City. It partners with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program where my interviewee, Michelle Ronda, taught her first class in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester County, New York. During her time at Marymount Manhattan, she taught classes within prisons regularly. Now, Ronda is a part of the research committee for the Inside-Out Program with the Borough of Manhattan Community College. In this position, she interviews students and faculty within Bedford Hills on the education classes. Despite her transition from Marymount Manhattan to the Borough of Manhattan Community College, Ronda remained a part of the Inside-Out Program for she believes in their mission. “Inside-Out’s mission is to create opportunities for people inside and outside of prison to have transformative learning experiences that emphasize collaboration and dialogue and that invite them to take leadership in addressing crime, justice, and other issues of social concern” (The Inside-Out Center). This program, due to its incredible success, has spread to 34 states and 6 countries. This program does not display a drop in recidivism rates on their website because that is not the top priority. The purpose of college education programs within prison facilities is to *educate* students and support them through a transformative journey that sparks intellectual discussions and a new perspective on the world around us.

Ronda mentioned, “Recidivism is bottom-line important and is the most attractive...” but it’s not the sole reason these life-changing programs exist. Recidivism is only one benefactor out of my entire research. As I mentioned in my section regarding Mercy College, a majority of administrators for these prison facilities understand the value of a college education. It’s an incredible opportunity for these students while also balancing the population within prisons. Guards who tend to view prison as a place of punishment rather than rehabilitation are usually swayed on the idea that these college education programs keep released individuals out rather than returning back within a few months or years. Ronda’s statement above that recidivism is the “most attractive” is due to the reasoning that prison officials want these incarcerated individuals out being productive citizens rather than idling around in their same cell for years. Recidivism is a huge contributor to the successes of the college education programs I’m analyzing in my research but it’s not their mission nor underlying goal.

My interviewee, Michelle Ronda, shared her experiences with me during her time working in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility with Marymount Manhattan College and interviewing students and faculty in the same facility with the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Since Bedford Hills is partnered with the Inside-Out Program, there are admission requirements that are expected from the applying students. All students who do not have a high school diploma must start at the GED program. In addition, all students who are applying to the associate degree program must take an exam before entry. Students who finish their associate degree are then able to apply for their bachelor’s degree next. Similar to Mercy College’s program, this program also allows students to transfer their credits to another facility if they are moved or to a school upon release. The Inside-Out Program at Marymount Manhattan

offers students at Bedford Hills an associate degree in social sciences and a bachelor's degree in politics and human rights. During Ronda's time teaching within the facility, the bachelor's degree was in sociology, so the change to politics and human rights has been quite recent.

The courses at Bedford Hills run on a semester of 15 weeks where the professors teach class once a week. An element that I admire about the program at Bedford Hills is that they treat students within the facility exactly the same as students on-campus at Marymount Manhattan or the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Students admitted to this program are determined to work hard and get the most out of their classroom experience. Ronda added, "It requires a lot of discipline...but they're so earnest and some of the best students I've ever encountered." Because of their competitive application process, the Inside-Out Program provides the students with the utmost drive the tools to succeed not only during their time in prison but upon their release as well.

Through supporting the students as best they can, the Inside-Out Program at Marymount Manhattan believe in the importance of quality faculty members. It's impressive how their professors and staff members are one of the reasons these programs continue to exist within prison facilities around the United States and the globe. When asked what a college education program should have to successfully reduce recidivism rates, Ronda responded, "Dedicated staff members for sure...The inside staff members MATTER!" The dedicated faculty members within Bedford Hills Correctional Facility encourage growth in their students and contribute to their transformative effect. When authority figures, both from the educational program and those within the prison facility, support and promote the college academics being offered it boosts the positive culture among these students.

Adding on to the development of a positive culture among students in Bedford Hills, Ronda shared more on the impacts this education has on her students. She explained how the college education program transforms the students, improves the facility by decreasing violence, and promotes a community of motivated students. Within Bedford Hills, one whole floor is dedicated to the partnered education program referred to as the “learning center” (Ronda). Through their time inside the classroom and outside working on essays and projects, students have been able to unleash their creativity and unlock their full potential. “Their individual journey is transformative...It changes how you think about yourself, and even how you feel and think...You can sustain yourself now” (Ronda). Students who gain the opportunity to participate in these degree programs feel a sense of accomplishment and witness a change of attitude due to this. A “safe learning space and supportive environment” is formed when students place all of their attention and focus on their course work and future goals (Ronda). Similar to the program at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, alumni assist current students with their assignments and continue to engage in discussions around class readings or current events. This aspect of tutoring current students and continuing their engagement with the program after graduation is a clear sign that these graduates have a desire to advance their knowledge regardless of their program completion.

In addition to the community-building aspect formed by this college program, students steer their focus onto their classwork rather than engaging in drama within their cell unit. Ronda mentioned, “People with nothing to do in an environment of constraint can get easily violent...Now that people are productive, the facility is improved.” There are fewer fights, less petty acts, and fewer ticketing as a result of the college education program in Bedford Hills.

“Education creates a positive culture in a place that can be quite negative” (Ronda). No student enrolled in the program would risk getting kicked out because they are aware of their privilege of even obtaining an education. Ronda added, “Education is a privilege in that environment so these students want to protect and preserve it at all costs...If you get a ticket you can’t go to class, if you fight, you can get thrown out of the program...A culture is formed around protecting that education.” The opportunity to simply have a seat within the classroom nonetheless earn a degree is so meaningful to these students. Ronda explained, “Your education is something the state can’t take away from you...It’s a source of pride, hope, and inspiration.” A person’s education is not something anyone can take away from them. Prison can be a very dark, miserable, depressing place where an incarcerated person can feel as if there is nothing to gain. However, the Inside-Out Program grants students the power to regain their integrity, self-confidence, and most importantly their sense of hope.

Before diving into the courses and degrees offered at Bedford Hills from the Inside-Out Program at Marymount Manhattan, I wish to briefly point out some challenges Ronda informed me of during our interview. Ronda mentioned the obstacles faced by working within a prison facility. Bedford Hills Correctional Facility only provided incarcerated individuals enrolled in education programs access to internet in 2011. There are heavy restraints on the academics due to the prison security. “They can deny certain films and readings...Every DVD must be watched by the officials before being approved for the class...At the end of the day, the prison still has constraints” (Ronda). The prison administration still controls the material brought into the classroom which limits the students on certain opportunities. Regarding these restrictions, Ronda claims, “It’s very difficult for the students to do library research...We need enough resources,

materials, access to the library, and even computer time.” How can students be expected to complete research projects and papers without access to the internet? The limited access to resources online makes it almost impossible for students to complete these assignments. These institutions should consider blocking any inappropriate websites and permitting a certain number of hours for these students to work on computers with supervision. Greater internet access whether outside or inside the classroom, more course material and resources, and allocated library time will benefit these students by allowing them to further their education and ultimately reduce recidivism rates.

It is important to acknowledge the liberal arts education the Inside-Out Program from Marymount Manhattan offers students at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. The students begin with a GED program if they have no high school diploma, then apply to the associate degree program in social science. After their completion, the students are able to apply for their bachelor’s degree in politics and human rights. Ronda had taught research methods in social sciences, a senior seminar, and a combined class for theories of justice. The focus on politics, social sciences, and human rights opens the eyes of these students to better understand the inequalities happening in the world. Since these students are in prison, they suffer social inequalities from firsthand experience. However, through the act of reading, writing, and discussing diverse human inequalities, these incarcerated individuals gain a better understanding of the reality we live in.

## JOHN JAY COLLEGE

John Jay College is a liberal arts college in Manhattan, New York that focuses on criminal justice and forensic science. I spoke with a representative from John Jay who currently teaches college readiness courses at a prison that he wishes to keep anonymous. This representative also wanted to stay anonymous so I will refer to them as “he”, “my interviewee”, and “representative of John Jay College”. I interviewed the representative I did because he just started teaching a college readiness course this month, though he was teaching courses at Queens Borough Correctional Facility for the past year and a half. His college readiness class is scheduled on a four to five week cycle, and he teaches the students three days a week. In comparison to Mercy College and Marymount Manhattan College, John Jay did not mention the level of difficulty or competitiveness. However, all students must take the placement exam unless they have a high school diploma or SAT scores. Classes hold about 20 students and run on a very short schedule. The representative did mention that despite the course being five weeks, it has an intensive writing component. An element about John Jay’s program that correlated to the other programs I studied was the importance of passionate staff members. I appreciate the focus John Jay places on the quality of professors teaching these students. These professors view their students as *students*, rather than criminals or prisoners locked behind bars. My interviewee added, “We fundamentally do care about them...We respect their humanity and see them as people.” This argument proves that students engage better when they are treated as students rather than incarcerated individuals.

My interviewee holds a strong belief that education is a fundamental human right. He stated, “Once you start seeing them as ‘not human’, their human rights start to be disrespected.”

However, my interviewee also mentioned how crucial it is to “acknowledge your privilege within the classroom because, at the end of the day, you get to go home, they don’t.” I believe the aspect of recognizing one’s own privilege falls on the same level as using humanizing terms to refer to incarcerated individuals. Through professors and staff members that believe in the humanity of all human beings and the value of education for all, incarcerated students will feel eager to learn and gain hope in their work.

Similar to the other programs I’ve interviewed, John Jay College values their students’ education and the incredible impacts it has on them rather than recidivism rates. My interviewee realized the spark within his students by stating how education, “gives them the text and language to articulate their views...gives them the space to be heard when they are usually left voiceless...gives them a way to express themselves.” Through this personal yet meaningful development among students, education gives them the tools to critically engage in a way they may never have done before. They are able to think critically, problem solve, and disagree in an intellectual way rather than violently. In addition, the representative of John Jay mentioned how education gives these students a head-start when they are released, allowing them to be more marketable due to their degree. In this generation, almost every individual searching for a job position needs a college degree. Therefore, by obtaining a degree, it allows formerly incarcerated individuals to find employment easier.

After my interview with the representative, I realized how special and unique the program at John Jay College truly is. I mentioned that he teaches college readiness courses, but it’s much more than that. When he first told me he taught college readiness, I assumed he taught intensive grammar, English, literature, mathematics, and reading courses. To my surprise, my

interviewee teaches college-level texts, criminal justice and social justice issues and topics, housing injustices, and relevant New York Times articles. His students are expected to respond to these readings in a “college-level format” and discuss their reflections during class. I applaud his use of social justice topics and readings that will not only keep his students participating but connecting. Students are able to connect with each other by sharing aloud their personal opinions, but also connecting with the literature since they’ve experienced injustice firsthand. In addition to the other programs I’ve interviewed, John Jay’s liberal arts education allows students to engage more, unleash their full potential, land a job upon release, and therefore not return to the prison system. John Jay College’s program is successful due to its liberal arts education and devoted staff members and professors.

#### BARD PRISON INITIATIVE

The Bard Prison Initiative is a program from Bard College that provides college opportunities to incarcerated individuals. The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) works in six prisons across New York state where it offers students an associate and bachelor’s degree from Bard in liberal arts. BPI is an extremely well-known prison education program that is recognized for its reduced recidivism rates and aspiring graduates. My Honors advisor connected me to two BPI representatives, Wendy Urban-Mead and Derek Furr, to interview. Urban-Mead teaches at BPI every semester and offers a variety of classes for students to participate in. Some of her classes are a writing intensive class on the great war of world history, revolutions of global history, and introduction to Africa. All of Urban-Mead’s courses have no prerequisites and are adapted from Bard College. She teaches students twice a week for two hours. Derek Furr is a literature

professor and directs Bard's MAT Program. Through both of their extensive work with the Bard Prison Initiative, I learned a lot about their successful program and what elements influence their students the most.

Bard upholds a heavily competitive program within six prisons across New York state. Urban-Mead informed me that they only accept 1 out of 9-10 applicants. BPI places the same expectations on students within prisons as they do on students with the Bard College campus. Urban-Mead stated, "to get in is already a huge boost...If they stick with it and let themselves be changed, it's very rigorous...If they could do this, they could do better than prison." The competitiveness BPI brings into prison facilities because it proves the value this education holds and accepts the most devoted students. Regarding their entry process, Urban-Mead mentions, "it makes them thankful that they're in, they know they have to be on top of their game." BPI's competitive acceptance rates allow students to realize that they need to desperately want it because they understand how much can change after they get their degree. My interviewees, Urban-Mead and Furr, described the numerous changes witnessed from their students which is shared by my other interviewees as well.

Urban-Mead and Furr have witnessed students' transformations within their own classroom and speaking to graduates on graduation day. "Education helps these students gain a sense of worth; it helps them find what they're good at; they become more reflective, articulate students" (Urban-Mead). The access to education trains these students discipline and allow them to regain their sense of purpose in life. Students gain this is through the social skills and technical skills they've acquired such as writing, reading and researching. Regarding the question of student change, Furr added, "this is what liberal arts is intended to do – ask us to think critically

and realize our humanity. I suspect that incarcerated students need that as much as, if not more than, any student I've ever taught, because prison puts one's humanity under so much pressure that it begins to vanish." Furr highlights the importance of a liberal arts education and how that specific degree fuels students to not only realize their own potential but the contributions other students are bringing to the classroom as well.

The inclusion of history and social justice permits students to be more engaged within class for they feel connected to the readings and the discussions held within class. Urban-Mead mentions, "I'm a huge fan of liberal arts for everyone, but for this community it's very powerful. The deep reading of their own heritage and culture is incredible. Students can now name their own experience because they're able to understand who they are." The course material and topics discussed for these classes push the boundaries of success. Furr adds on to the discussion, "In my experience, they're willing to try any text or idea. Nothing seems "irrelevant" or "unrelated," at least not before they've fully taken it on. They'll challenge the text and the teacher, but they'll do so in an effort to arrive at an understanding. They're engaged, passionate students." I believe that through BPI's competitive acceptance rate and their intensive liberal arts courses, students enrolled in the program are able to witness positive effects in their lives, feel supported after their release, and have the capability of breaking the cycle of violence which reduces recidivism rates.

Lastly, the devoted staff members and professors at BPI also contribute to their students' success. Similar to my previous interviewees, Urban-Mead and Furr emphasized the importance of humanizing language and the purpose of BPI in and of itself. "In the classroom, it's not about being an inmate, even though prison is omnipresent and it necessarily informs the conversation.

They're college students debating issues, wrestling with texts and problems, figuring out how to put complex ideas into language" (Furr). By viewing these incarcerated individuals as solely students within the classroom eager to learn, the environment changes. Through this, encouragement, positivity, and motivation are sparked. Students begin to view themselves as human again rather than serial numbers or past criminal history. This gives them hope that their future can change the identity they're possessing behind those bars. Urban-Mead adds, "We don't have college in prison to decrease recidivism, but because they're people and they have minds and we want to educate them. It's all about them as a person. They are no longer an incarcerated individual but a person who wants to talk about a book they read for homework." Of course, these students see themselves as students when they're physically sitting inside the classroom, but if the professor does not treat them equally or disregard their criminal background, students are not motivated to continue the program or even take education seriously.

I believe that through BPI's passionate staff members and professors, opportunity to pursue an associate's and bachelor's degree in liberal arts, and their competitive entry pushes this program to rank so highly throughout the nation. BPI holds a 97.5% in the number of graduates who leave prison and never return. Recidivism rates are significantly lowered, employment opportunities for released students are increased, and students are given an experience that will be with them forever. Interestingly, neither representative from the Bard Prison Initiative mentioned the use of online classes or the improvement of technology for the students. They both cherish the "one-on-one work" professors at this program have with students weekly to improve their academics (Urban-Wendy). Urban-Mead even mentioned that one of her favorite aspects of working within these environments is that there are no screens within the

classroom. Through the lack of technology within the classroom, students are allowed to be more present and participatory. Overall, the Bard Prison Initiative is an exceptional program that allows its students to flourish and grow not only after their time in prison but during as well.

## **Conclusion**

### Further Research

Despite my extensive research on the topic and deep study of the education programs partnered with Mercy College, Marymount Manhattan College, John Jay College, and Bard College, I do believe there is always space to learn and improve. I wish to acknowledge that since I only analyzed college degree programs in New York, there may be successful education programs offered within prison facilities across the United States that I have not researched. Despite my lack of knowledge on those programs, I applaud the work they are doing for incarcerated students across the country. These programs thrive on the success of their students and the students are able to leave prison with an accomplishment they would have never imagined obtaining while entering. I also wish to include some areas of research that came up during my interviews. Karol Dean from Mercy College informed me of a fascinating idea of offering degree programs for prison guards. This program will be separate from the incarcerated students but will hold the same structure and curriculum. I believe that a potential degree program for prison guards will eliminate jealousy of the students' education and allow the guards to experience the transformative experience as well.

In addition, Michelle Ronda from Marymount Manhattan College, brought up the idea of offering degree programs for the children of incarcerated individuals within the facility they work at. Through attending numerous graduation ceremonies, Ronda is able to see the pride and joy covering the faces of the graduates' children. It's an incredible moment because the children are inspired to achieve that same higher education and make their families proud as well. Lastly, Ronda also mentioned the idea of offering alumni opportunities or PhD degrees to former graduates. Through this extended program, students will have the chance to further their education whether in prison or on campus once they're released. I believe that all of the ideas brought up by both Ronda and Dean could be significantly beneficial to the current and former students, their families, prison guards, and the institution itself.

I gathered more sources on the promotion of college degree programs outside of recidivism rates and employment rates, which I will admit is an area to improve on. GED programs and vocational training programs within prison facilities are very successful as well. I solely interviewed professors or representatives from college degree programs where there was no mention of vocational training in any of them. I acknowledge that additional programs offered to incarcerated individuals should be analyzed on the same level as college degree programs.

I'm proud to say that I discovered that the college degree programs partnered with Mercy College, Marymount Manhattan College, John Jay College, and Bard College all demonstrate best practices of education within prison facilities. The factors that contributed to their individual success are the implementation of a college liberal arts education, the quality of professors teaching within these facilities, the competitive application process, the clear value on academics rather than vocational, and the use of an instructor-led class rather than online courses. Through

the journey of obtaining a college degree, students experience transformative effects, develop a sense of community among other students within prison, have a reduced chance of returning to prison upon release, and have increased employment opportunities upon release.

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