



Reflections

Why Developing Re-entry Support Matters for Prison Education Programs

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EDUCATED BY THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

Thinking back to that day in early 2001, I had no idea how much my life’s trajectory would significantly shift. While walking across a prison yard, I was stopped by an educator at Nebraska Correctional Center for Women who suggested I enroll in a college class. The instructor realized my suspicion, so she relayed that she had reviewed my intake assessments and thought I might be a good candidate for higher education. The interaction was disturbing; why would this person I had never met approach me like she knew me? I was dubious, her audacity initially provoked anger yet, eventually, curiosity. I then submitted a request to the prison’s education department asking to learn more about higher education opportunities at the prison, resulting in my enrollment in my first college credit class.

Being an enrolled member of a Native American tribe, I was eligible for funding to attend college after I completed high school. Even though I had successfully completed high school, I unfortunately did not believe I could succeed in that environment. I was afraid to even talk about going to college with anyone. I did not feel like I had support, so I resigned myself to the thought that things like a college degree were not intended for people like me. The barriers I faced pre-incarceration were the same barriers I faced in accessing prison education programs, the cyclical

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nature of a self-fulfilling prophesy: 1. I cannot accomplish real life goals like normal people; 2. Nothing good will come of my life; 3. I'm not worthy; and 4. Nobody will help me. While incarceration perpetuates dysfunction and negative psychological effects, connecting to higher education causes a significant shift. After enrolling in college, attending class, challenging my current thought processes, doing homework and successfully completing that class, I experienced a dramatic change. I realized that I was able to learn. I was

smarter than I thought. I could start and finish something.

I became entrenched in learning about the psychology of incarceration and self-limiting beliefs, taking additional classes, increasing engagement with clinical and nonclinical programming and prosocial activities, while hoping people like me could break the cycle of recidivism and realize momentous life goals "like normal people".

CUFFS TO CAREERS

When transferred to the state work release center, I requested delaying my release to continue my education on campus at Metropolitan Community College (MCC). Prison seems like a more intimidating environment than a college campus, yet coming to school as someone currently incarcerated was daunting. What if I get lost? What do I do between classes? Do people know who I am? Will they be afraid of me, if they find out?

Thankfully, another incarcerated student directed me to the MCC TRiO Program to request a free bus pass to commute from prison to campus. The Federal TRiO Programs are student service programs for first generation college students and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. For the next year, this office became my safe haven on campus. Because of my poor self-image and fear that someone may realize I was still incarcerated, I was not comfortable in the traditional campus study areas. Being able to go to the TRiO office to study and volunteer, while the staff encouraged me to persist was impactful. A member of the TRiO team even attended my parole hearing to testify on my behalf. I had never known this level of support.

When released, I inherently understood I could not return to my reservation or live with family as I may eventually return to old behaviors and recidivate. However, on the surface, staying in Omaha seemed counterproductive. I had no job, no money, no vehicle. I was new to the rooms of recovery so the only support I had were MCC employees. I was paroling to a transitional home to live with nine women in similar predicaments. Yet, again, I instinctively knew this would be the best plan.

Soon after my prison release, I was employed by MCC to work part time in the TRiO area. I continued my education, worked three part time jobs and, informally, helped people from the state work release center enroll in classes, apply for scholarships and financial aid, and navigate MCC systems. I was taking a risk associating with the incarcerated. When on parole, a typical condition of parole is that you will not associate with others who have a criminal history or are still incarcerated. Even though I was on parole and this was a technical violation, I viewed it to be my responsibility to help my peers.

MCC offers opportunity without disparity between those who have a criminal background and those who don't, as evidenced by my hiring. I had assumed two part time positions but was eventually hired as a full-time employee and was beyond grateful. I promised to never forget where I came from by continuing to help others and never leave MCC. Through the years, I worked in Student Affairs, Adult Education and Academic Affairs. When MCC applied for state funding to formalize the prison education program, I was managing an off-campus location and solely supporting 120 incarcerated and re-entry students. In 2015, I was appointed the Program Manager of the MCC 180 Re-entry Assistance Program (180 RAP), leading a team of 2 full time and 3 part time team members. In the first 17-month grant cycle, we served over 1,000 people. This prompted MCC to relocate 180 RAP to the main Fort Omaha Campus (FOC) to cohabitate a building with Adult Education. This move connected re-entry students to vital student support, such as tutoring and the math and writing centers.

Re-entry campus traffic was tracked beginning April 2017 and averaged 5.3 students each day. By the end of 2018, traffic averaged 12.4 students each day causing adult education to be moved to another site to provide greater access and support for 180 RAP. During that year it is believed that MCC was hosting the largest on campus Re-entry Center in the United States. In 2021, the Re-entry Center was moved to an even larger building that doubled space availability to house a re-entry specific education center, job center, pantry, computer center, digital training lab and expanded commons and study areas. Foot traffic in the new Re-entry Center averaged 23.8 students per day in 2022 and continues to build each month. The job center served 1,128 in 2019 with an 80% employment rate, compared to 2,328 served in 2022 with a 97% employment rate. While MCC's focus was to provide higher education in Nebraska prisons, realizing the needs and removing barriers for incarcerated and re-entry students became a fundamental part of 180 RAP. How could we expect our students to focus on educational goals when they did not know where to go when released, were hungry, or couldn't find a job?

An essential component of our work is based on the science of re-entry and focuses on identifying each individual's most salient criminogenic needs that might be barriers to their re-entry journey. By "criminogenic needs," we refer to factors that are directly related to criminal behavior but are changeable and can be addressed by programming (Taxman & Caudy, 2015). The eight central categories of criminogenic needs – history of antisocial behavior; antisocial cognition; antisocial associates; antisocial personality; family/marital instability; employment/education; substance abuse; leisure and recreation – are integral to consideration of how to best support someone pre- and post-release. While some criminogenic needs are easy to address and navigate, identifying and understanding needs are central to assisting. For example, if someone is struggling to find employment yet creates and submits a suitable resumé and masters interviewing skills to obtain a job, their risk changes quickly as they enter the workforce gainfully employed. Other risks may be more complicated. For example, if someone is struggling with filling in their spare time with appropriate leisure and recreational activities and returning to old behaviors and poor choices, yet not motivated to address the behavior associated with the need, they may be slow to change risk levels, if at all.

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With awareness of criminogenic needs, experiential participation in prison education programming and primary knowledge of the transitional experience from prison to the community, it is an uncomplicated process to identify key methods of support pre- and post-release: basic needs acquisition, viable access to education and employment services, and ongoing peer support and mentoring.

In addition to a focus on criminogenic needs, peer-based support systems utilized by MCC 180 RAP since 2015 have proven to be a dependable model. Staffing 180 RAP with team members directly impacted by the justice system is important. As the peer ushers a student from intake to achieve their education and employment goals, they can communicate and address concerns more effectively than someone without lived experience in the justice system.

Transition support offered vary on individualized needs screened by peer support mentors at intake and are revisited regularly throughout their journey. Basic needs – food, hygiene, diapers, laundry detergent, transition backpacks, bus passes, cell phones – are provided when released from jail or prison. For example, Christina faced many barriers when released and shared, “After 16 years in prison, everything scares you. 180 RAP did everything from helping me find housing...they gave me rides to school, showed me how to use a cell phone and computer, taught me how to interact with people and realize that everything is okay.” Christina, known as “The Glue” of the team, is a full-time peer mentor who daily provides encouragement and support for people leaving Nebraska jails and prisons.

Access to immediate needs reduces the likelihood of return to a base criminal activity to acquire those necessities. If seeking employment, the job center helps create resumés, provides work-readiness skill building, offers employment referrals to 360 employer partners in every industry and pay scale, and assists with workforce needs – uniforms, footwear, tools, etc. Those choosing to continue formal education or short-term training are scheduled for one-on-one appointments with the education center team to register for classes or referred to the Re-entry job center to find employment. Connecting students to basic needs, education, employment, and other resources helps lower barriers when facing release without support.

Peer support groups are valuable to the incarcerated and re-entry populations. An inclusive environment to ask questions and share concerns and wins is an enormous benefit to the personal growth and long-term stability of the individual. 180 RAP tracked 106 high risk individuals involved in a peer support group for 18 months, and 96% of those involved did not reoffend or return to prison.

I AM NOT DOING IT ALONE = OTHER FORMERLY INCARCERATED/JUSTICE-INVOLVED PEOPLE AT RAP

A group of like-minded persons, all with their own histories of justice-involvement, are essential collaborators on my journey. For example: Greg, currently housed at the state work release center, had some of the same concerns and questions I did when he began attending class on campus as an incarcerated student after 25 years in prison. Greg, who began his education in MCC’s prison education

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program in 2018, said, “I wasn’t going to tell anyone I was incarcerated but I know now there’s no discomfort or shame in it. Education has helped me learn how to pivot. I’m infused with re-entry; it holds me up. It’s a part of my spine. Someone went in front me, did the work, to provide me with the help that I wished that person had when they were coming out. To be grateful for that, I wear it as a badge of honor. The peer support from the Re-entry advisors and coaches have helped a lot...I just had to get some advice this morning.” Greg was recently hired as a peer mentor with 180 RAP and moved to a full time Re-entry position in June.

Sharri, Re-entry Program Manager at MCC 180 RAP, values how she has been able to utilize her lived experience to assist the justice impacted population in Nebraska. Sharri enters the prisons to connect students to Second Chance Pell education funding and manages the Full Turn team that provides transition support. Sharri said, “The fulfillment of helping others – there’s nothing better. It’s easy to trace back to my life where people, who had like-minded experiences, stepped up and helped me. It helped me move forward and understand that my life would be okay, and I could change. Now I’m blessed with the opportunity to provide that same support to others.”

Empowering and motivating a marginalized population, while ensuring they are focused on both a personal and team mission, is impactful. Providing a mission to support the program helps them while they are accomplishing new goals, also helps others to see they do not have to be what they always were. This philosophy helped build the re-entry and prison education program at Metropolitan Community College. It’s been 8 years since 180 RAP began and the life changing results from involvement in education, transition and peer support are evident. Since February 2015, 180 RAP has helped 8,930 people in prison or returning to the community.

PRISON EDUCATION LESSONS LEARNED IN PRISON TRANSLATE TO THE STREET

Fast forward 20 years and, as Director of the Re-entry Program at the same college I took my first college credit class at while incarcerated, the lessons have been exponential:

- Education during incarceration is the key to a deeper freedom than any prison release can offer. While it is an important fact that higher education in prison lowers recidivism rates, changing the long-term self-concept is integral to helping the incarcerated population succeed and grow as motivations, attitudes and behaviors mutate.
- Ongoing peer support is a critical need for those impacted by the criminal justice system. No one can address another person more succinctly than someone with a mutual lived experience. Defenses and justifications diminish, and trust is earned quickly.
- Transition assistance is mandatory for all releasing from an institution. We adopt a strength-based approach for motivating and empowering individuals, known as motivational interviewing (MI) (Schlager, 2018). MI allows for individualized support, open communication, and acceptance of team-based approaches that drives the individual to connect to a personal and team mission, while receiving assistance with basic needs, education, employment and other transition services with dignity.

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• True change can transpire if we live outside our comfort zone, seek support and help others. The program philosophy is “a hand up, not a handout”. When individuals accept, they are part of a team and helping, while receiving help, changes the dichotomy of engagement. There is no humiliation receiving assistance when assisting.

MOVING FORWARD

My two favorite words are moving forward. I use these words daily – to remind myself and others I have the honor to serve that anything is possible. Motivating others is imperative. In retrospect, I am confident the educator that took the chance to stop a stoic, detached woman on the yard and talk about the possibilities with higher education understood the power of her words. While it cost her nothing, it was worth everything to me. Today I follow her lead. Whether I am talking to one of our students on campus or inside a Nebraska prison, I remind each person that engaging in higher education raises the likelihood of their success when released from prison. If they don’t buy that, I tell them my story...and they listen.

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