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Invited Commentary

Reimagining the Potential of Higher Education in Prison and Reentry

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Introduction

As scholars deeply entrenched in the higher education in prison (HEP) field, with an explicit focus on our work connecting campuses and communities in urban settings, we are honored as guest editors of Metropolitan Universities Journal to curate this special issue dedicated to HEP. We were honored that the scholarly voice of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) recognized the value of Marquette University in the broader arena of higher education in prison (HEP) programs. Indeed, as a Jesuit, Catholic institution, an Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) member, and our location as an urban university in the heart of Milwaukee, WI, Marquette University's mission encourages our engagement with this important matter of supporting the educational outcomes of students impacted by incarceration, both while they are in prison and when they return home. This work ultimately serves higher education's civic purpose while supporting urban communities.

Local realities compel our engagement with and exploration of individuals impacted by the justice system. "Between 1980 and 2016, Wisconsin's prison population increased more than fivefold (456 percent) to more than 22,000 people" (ACLU, 2019). Coupled with community supervision – parole and probation – Wisconsin is an outlier when comparing national data and data from neighboring states (Schiraldi et al., 2019). This contrast is starker when comparing rates of incarceration and community supervision for specific demographic subgroups, namely Black men.

According to Wisconsin's Department of Corrections, as recently as February 21, 2025, there were 23,032 people imprisoned and 63,238 on parole or probation. Over 20% of people on some form of community supervision by the Wisconsin DOC reside in Milwaukee County (Wisconsin DOC database, 2025). Moreover, 41% of those incarcerated are African American, despite Black people making up just over 6% of the state's total population (Wisconsin Prison Fact Sheet, 2025). Wisconsin also has the highest rate of incarceration for Black men in the entire country (Nellis, 2021).

Indeed, this exponential growth in carceral realities radicalized local clergy, community activists, families of incarcerated people, rights-based organizations, students, researchers, and directly impacted leaders to wage campaigns targeting biased policing and imprisonment. Marquette University's Jesuit mission charges, "Through both our academic and co-curricular programs, Marquette strives to develop students who will dedicate their lives to the service of others, actively entering into the struggle for a more just society." The current Superior General of the Jesuits, Father Arturo Sosa, calls on Jesuit colleges and universities to "contribute, as best they are able, to the transformation of the unjust structures of the societies in which they carry out their specific task as universities" (O'Brien, 2024). Answering that call, in collaboration with alums and the above local leaders, the Center for Urban Research, Teaching & Outreach (CURTO) embarked on our efforts to establish prison education at Marquette University, grounded in the values that inform Jesuit higher education and its commitment to the liberal arts tradition, as well as emerging best practices in impact-driven community engagement.

Yet, our commitment to building interdisciplinary programs, centers, and institutes is a core strength of our educational and curricular strategies at Marquette and our AJCU peer institutions. As guest editors, we represent the disciplines of History (Dr. Robert S. Smith), Philosophy (Dr. Theresa Tobin), and Sociology (Dr. Darren Wheelock), bringing our respective training and expertise to Marquette's prison education programs. Similarly, our efforts rely heavily on community expertise, expanding interdisciplinarity to include people closest to, most knowledgeable of, and most deeply invested in local challenges and their solutions. Our prison education efforts – the Education Preparedness Program (EPP) and the McNeely Prison Education Consortium (MPEC) - are deeply informed by these practices and values. Our regional consortium (MPEC) is named in honor of local scholar-activist Dr. R.L. McNeely, who championed prison education across the region and, as a Marquette Law School alum, encouraged CURTO to be home to these endeavors.

The entries in the special issue reflect the richness of interdisciplinarity and especially the value of creating prison education programs through interdisciplinary, liberal education curricular strategies. While job readiness and tradesmanship programs remain critically valuable, the longstanding success of liberal education continues to offer unique pathways, opportunities, and

benefits to students.[1] In our experiences with prison education, these benefits are recognized by directly impacted students, as well as traditional college-aged students. At Marquette, we currently offer seventeen classes across two prisons, one jail, and on Marquette's main campus. Currently, these classes adopt the Inside/Out Prison Exchange model of prison education where we bring "outside" students (or degree-seeking students on our main campus) into classes with "inside" students (non-degree seeking program students that are currently or formerly incarcerated).[2] Preliminary evaluations of the impact of our inside-outside blended course model indicates that traditional, mostly white, college-aged women students who take courses inside correctional facilities with inside students who are disproportionately African American and overwhelmingly men of color, also report being changed by taking class with "inside" students.

Our program administers student surveys each semester that collect information on student demographic background, level of educational attainment, and 7 "core" course evaluation items. Adopting a pre-test (administered during the week of class meetings)/post-test (administered during the last week of class meetings) methodological research design, the survey asks about self-perceptions, confidence in study habits, academic skills, and related topics. In these surveys, we find that in bivariate analysis, "outside" students reported statistically significant higher scores between the pre-test and post-test on three measures: confidence in research and writing papers, ability to accomplish goals, and capacity to solve difficult problems if students try hard enough (Wheelock & Spies, 2022).[3] We were surprised to find any impact on outside students' confidence in study habits and overall resiliency, given the brevity of a 16-week semester. The survey also contained an open-ended question that asked students to discuss any additional feedback they wished to share. The comments we received from "outside" students also surprised us. They included the following:

- "This program has helped me so much and has ignited the fire in me to make a change."
- "I am truly beyond grateful to have been given the opportunity to be part of a course/program like this. I feel like I've learned so much more than many of the other classes I have taken. I valued the authenticity, reality, transparency, rawness, and genuineness of the course. It has been a vulnerable and comfortable environment and again I feel and will always feel very blessed to have been part of this."

[1] According to Daniel Karpowitz, former Director of Policy and Academics for the Bard Prison Initiative, "The employment rate among tracked alumni is over 85%. Post-release, Bard's BPI alumni have gone on to careers in for-profit firms, from the shop-floor to upper management, pursued professional degrees from social work to epidemiology, and are earning graduate degrees in (mathematics), sociology, theology, and public policy. Yet BPI's student body is demographically identical to that of the general incarcerated population… and nearly all of them began college in prison with only a GED." Daniel Karpowitz, "The BPI Model for College in Prison," (Mimeo), A Paper Prepared for BPI Partners in the Milwaukee Region, (December) 2015.

[2] We plan to start "inside only" classes in Fall 2025 that will only include incarcerated students as we roll out a Marquette University degree pathway inside Racine Correctional Institution (RCI).

[3] The pre and post-test difference in means for all three measures were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

- "This course has honestly been one of the highlights of my [undergraduate] career. I learned so much about both the course material and life."
- "The [class] provided me a once in a lifetime learning opportunity that I would not have experienced in a traditional classroom setting. I truly believe this course made me a better person!"

While much of the research examining higher education in prison (HEP) focuses on the programmatic impact on directly impacted students (currently or formerly incarcerated), our preliminary findings suggest that all HEP learning communities experience some level of change and perhaps even transformation.

However, it remains fair to question, quite simply, "Why higher education?" Despite decades of direct political and public critiques of the value of higher education, economic disinvestment from higher education during the same period, and the very recent onslaught of attacks on higher education institutions, degrees granted, faculty research, and our broader commitment to diversity/equity/inclusion, prison education programs provide clear and resounding answers to that question. But, owing to our discipline-specific training and expertise, we do not look to American institutions of higher education uncritically. In many ways, they have been complicit (if not co-conspirators) in generating the social conditions that fueled mass incarceration.

At times, colleges and universities have informed both the structural and ideological underpinnings of mass incarceration. For example, it remains legal to deny admission to academically qualified applicants who have a criminal record, and most schools still require applicants to disclose their conviction history. Even schools for which previous conviction was not a disqualifying factor tended to accept applicants with a criminal record at much lower rates than similarly situated students without such record. Still, even amid the ever-rising costs of college tuition, research shows that higher education, especially when degrees are obtained, can lower the likelihood that individuals of any racial background will ever experience incarceration (Western, 2006).

The remainder of this framing essay explores two related considerations. The first explores with added depth the core question from above: Why higher education? In approaching that answer, we highlight the value of higher education while in prison and the value of higher education for students who have returned home. We begin this section by revisiting the challenges presented by the stamp of incarceration in both situational contexts. We also spend time discussing the growth and scope of the carceral state during this period of mass incarceration.

The second consideration is our unabashed promotion of the transformational paradigm of higher education in prison, the argument for which emerges along these two threads. 1) A transformational framework unlocks the impact of higher education in ways that the typical

rehabilitative models struggle to do. For example, a rehabilitative perspective tends to focus exclusively on the impact of higher educational opportunities on recidivism and maybe misconduct while incarcerated. A transformational framework invites a dynamic set of curricular and co-curricular processes that recognize and cultivate the skills, knowledge, wisdom, and expertise that can serve as assets for system-impacted students rather than viewing our students solely in terms of the support and resources they *need* to be successful (hooks 1994; Freire, 2018; Linker, 2014; Gannon, 2020). 2) A transformational framework can advance reentry conversations beyond the limitations of the rehabilitation model by steadily offering more creative opportunities, options, and examples of ways to reframe the experiences of those undergoing reentry. For example, a returning student who begins employment at a local non-profit will have experienced course material, classroom discussions, written assignments, group projects, and informal exchanges about a wide range of topics and ideas.

But while we lean into our argument with full confidence, the contributions to this volume encourage critical inquiry about transformational paradigms of education. Castro et al., in "Invisible Students: Challenges to Evaluation in Prison Higher Education," demonstrate that data on the efforts and outcomes of HEPs is scant. We need more reliable and robust data about the impact of our programs to know if their transformational potential for directly impacted students is actualized and to avoid unintentionally marginalizing this group even more. Additionally, "Decarceral, Reimagined, and Reparative Futures in Higher Education," by Hannon et al., directly impacted scholars analyze their experiences of punitive ideologies in both schools and prisons to pursue important questions about how educational institutions have harmed and even disabled some populations of students and to ask how higher education in prison programs can train teachers in reparative pedagogies that counteract these institutional harms. The authors of "A Habit is as Dangerous as Anything: Incarcerated Student Perspectives on the Transformational Power of a Liberal Arts Education" caution against treating education as a panacea "to a society that is unwilling to invest in mental and physical health, poverty amelioration, and other measures that would create a more equitable society." Drawing from incarcerated students' perspectives on the transformational power of liberal arts education, they argue that while HEPs should prioritize growth and fulfillment, a transformational model can be harmful if practitioners do not partner with inside students to learn from them, what they think needs to change and collaborate on how.

Several articles in this volume emphasize that the transformational potential of higher education in prison can be realized only to the extent that HEPs engage students who are incarcerated as partners and active participants in their education and in building HEP infrastructure. In "The Importance of Lived Experience in Improving Higher Education in Prison: Insights from a Community Advisory Board," Ngyuen et al. offer best practices and a model for partnering with directly impacted students for HEP program development, and Hoffner et al. in "Mapping New Directions in Higher Education in Prison Programs: An Asset-Based Approach," examine the

potential of Inside/Out class formats to facilitate knowledge production by incarcerated students. In the spirit of discernment, essays that elucidate both the transformational promise and potential pitfalls of HEPs are included in this special issue. Ultimately, the process of discernment and critical inquiry may lead us to produce programs that better serve all our students.

Why Higher Education?

While the overall US incarceration rate and population have declined in the past several years, as of year-end 2022, there were still over 1.2 million citizens confined in state and federal prisons (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). There were another 663,100 individuals confined in county jails (Zeng, 2023). As recent as 2016, there were 4.5 million adults under some form of community supervision.[4] These estimates still rank the United States as one of the most carceral countries in the world. America's social experiment with mass incarceration and its collateral damage have been well-documented by scholars across a plethora of disciplines and areas of expertise.

Scholars have found that historically unprecedented levels of imprisonment impact virtually every facet of life for those incarcerated, their families, and their communities. Incarceration can diminish health (Schinittker, Massoglia, and Uggen, 2022; Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015), disrupt familial relationships (Cuthrell, Muenter, & Poehlmann, 2023; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013), impede access to the formal labor market (Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Wheelock, 2005; Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001), suppress civic participation for those incarcerated and their communities of origin (Burch, 2013; Wheelock, 2011; Manza & Uggen, 2006), and even problematize adolescent development to adulthood for young people that receive long sentences (Knight, 2024). This is only a partial list of extant research that has examined the far-reaching impact of mass incarceration.

Valuable insights are also gained by examining people's experiences when they return home to their communities and must navigate life with the stigma of a criminal record. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, approximately 448,400 people left prison in 2022 (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). Most formerly incarcerated individuals (95 percent) will be released (Hughes & Wilson, 2004). Research has found that many individuals released from prison battle addiction, struggle with mental health (Western 2018), meet roadblocks finding employment (Pager 2007), have a difficult time reconnecting with family (Weiman, Western, Patillo 2004), and experience other key gaps in their overall reentry experiences (Liu, Visher, O'Connell, and Sun, 2021; Lattimore, Visher, and Steffey, 2011; Petersilia, 2003).

[4] Williams, Schiraldi, and Bradner, "The Wisconsin Community Corrections Story"

At least some of the gaps in reentry readiness stem from DOC staffing shortages that can create long waitlists for critical programming while people are incarcerated. For example, staffing issues largely preclude incarcerated individuals from meeting with a social worker and/or parole/probation officer until six months before release (Koran & Mayo, 2024). Furthermore, despite the growing awareness of reentry needs, many regions/municipalities have limited or scarce resources for those leaving prison. In Milwaukee and across the southeast Wisconsin region, there is still far more demand for reentry services and support than available resources.

As one glaring example of this resource issue, many people leaving prisons struggle to secure stable housing or, in some cases, a housing period. Commentary from parole/probation officers, formerly incarcerated students, and reentry service providers - and our own experiences working with justice-involved students - reveal that some people are forced to live in a homeless shelter or live on the streets upon release.[5] Documented resource scarcity is a national problem with dire local consequences for system-impacted people, their families, and our communities. Unfortunately, staffing shortages and limited or unavailable reentry resources and support continue to define the reentry experience for many of the individuals released from prisons every year. Relatedly, national statistics on reentry suggest that nearly half (46 percent) of incarcerated individuals released in 2012 have returned to prison within five years after release (Durose & Antenangeli, 2021).

While advancing understandings of recidivism or reentry "failure" is an important contextual exercise, our key goal is to examine the specific role education (namely, higher education) can play as a key and under-utilized resource in people's carceral-related journeys. We contend that higher education can lead to transformational outcomes for currently and formerly incarcerated students in our programs. We also contend that for institutions that serve directly impacted students, the transformational impact extends to traditional college-aged students, instructors, staff, and campus leaders involved in prison education programs on their campuses. Transformational outcomes, however, are not part and parcel of all HEP programs or classes. Some intentionality must guide programmatic decisions, course offerings, and learning outcomes, such as listing "community building" as a specific learning outcome, classrooms that decentralize authority and prioritize student agency, and pedagogies that foster self-actualization and well-being of all involved (hooks 1994; Freire, 2018).

Educational institutions, especially in urban and metropolitan settings, have continually made the case that a college education can transform students in deep and profound ways. Our own institution leans into this notion as it markets itself with the slogans, "Be The Difference" and

[5] Our program partners with the Division of Community Corrections, which supervises individuals serving some portion of their sentence in the community. There are limited transitional living facilities in the state's most populous county and available beds in these facilities could require a month or two on a waitlist.

"Arrive with a will. Leave with a way." To the extent that the transformational narrative that schools themselves propagate is more than just marketing. We expect some of the benefits of this transformational experience to also apply to incarcerated students, particularly when high-impact teaching and retention strategies are employed. To be sure, some of the traditional college experience will be lost. For example, it is unclear whether incarcerated students can build the types of social networks from inside a carceral facility that students on campuses develop regularly through informal channels and by very intentionally designed student affairs programming. In addition, many of the student support services available for on-campus students are not available to inside students, and our system-impacted, on-campus students have obviously different needs than traditional college-aged students. However, as the articles in this volume illustrate, smaller classes, lower student-teacher ratios, experienced educators in the classroom, student mentoring and contact (i.e., office hours), identity exploration, and other high-impact practices are all features of many prison education programs. These are the very same retention strategies built into small and large colleges and universities across the country.

Most notably, there is a direct and obvious connection between prison education programs and reduced levels of incarceration. A wealth of research shows that education can reduce recidivism – a long-standing measure of reentry success. A frequently cited meta-analysis suggests that college-level prison education programs can reduce recidivism by as much as 40 percent (Davis et al., 2013). Related research shows that degree-granting prison education programs can substantially reduce recidivism, even after accounting for self-selection into these kinds of programs (Pompoco, Wooldredge, Lugo, Sullivan, & Latessa, 2017; Denney & Tynes, 2021). Studies in this area explore benefits beyond recidivism and/or conduct while incarcerated of prison education programming, such as fostering healthy interpersonal relationships, increased avenues to employment (Duwe & Clark, 2014), and improved self-perceptions and self-confidence (Wheelock & Spies, 2022). Thus, increasing access to higher education for those impacted by incarceration is one powerful way in which universities can contribute to reducing the number of people we incarcerate.

But education is valuable for reasons beyond keeping people out of prison. Prison education programs steeped in the liberal education tradition can harness the transformational power to challenge and alter socio-cultural assumptions that allow participants to re-humanize those who have been impacted by incarceration. There are several ways the transformational power of education can upset the carceral logics that laid the conditions for mass incarceration and are in turn, reinforced by it. The first is that education can serve as a "gateway" to social mobility. If involvement in the criminal legal system is a "gateway" into a larger system of permanent social marginalization, universities offer a counter "gateway" into a larger array of social and economic opportunities that outmaneuver structural exclusion and marginalization. Universities are not just places to get credentialed; they are also communities that expose students to high-impact learning opportunities such as campus programming, community-engaged activities, domestic

and study-abroad programs, internships, research labs, Inside/Out Prison Exchange classes, and campus career centers. While students inside correctional facilities have far less access to these opportunities, HEPs are increasingly adding these resources as part of a longer re-entry process.

Meanwhile, on-campus students have access to these options, and staff across various offices have the expertise to pivot resources to benefit students with an array of life-specific particulars. Alongside degrees, these co-curricular opportunities have proven to benefit students as they enter the labor market and advance in their careers. Universities are often enmeshed in or serve as bridges to broader social and economic networks such as regional employers, local community organizations and non-profits, the cultural life of the surrounding area, and national alum networks.

In many ways, colleges and universities provide credentials, skills, and access to the social capital capable of countering many of the deleterious consequences of imprisonment. However, genuine access to higher education and ensuing academic success becomes a realistic possibility only when students' basic needs are met, when they have reliable and safe housing, food, and clothing security, when they have access to and can finesse a rapidly shifting technology landscape, and when they have family stability. With full transparency, we acknowledge that universities often provide traditional college students housing (residence halls), food/meal programs, access to employment opportunities compatible with student schedules, campus health clinics, and recreational/wellness facilities. However, this infrastructure is not typically designed with directly impacted students. People directly impacted by incarceration face extraordinary barriers to having basic needs met, making college readiness and success more challenging. But, when done well, prison education can extend these kinds of support systems and high-impact retention strategies to directly impact students with their unique needs in mind.

Members of our team have visited established programs across the country and learned about innovative and creative ways to support directly impacted students. The Rising Scholars Program at Cypress Community College in Cypress, CA, utilizes a full-time counselor for mental health support and substance abuse. Project Rebound – Cal State Fullerton purchased a beautiful home (named after Dr. John Irwin) for formerly incarcerated students who are enrolled there. That program also utilizes peer navigators (or willing program veterans) to support and coach new students. In fact, we found that having an integrated peer support staff member is a must to serve released students navigating the setbacks and successes of reentry while attending college. The NJ-STEP program at Rutgers University – Newark also has robust peer support throughout their program. It continues working with program alums on various community-based projects and initiatives, such as a community greenhouse. They also developed a college readiness class for incoming students, which was taught by the NJ-STEP associate director, who was formerly incarcerated herself. The importance of hiring directly impacted staff cannot be overstated. Programmatically, credible messengers help with recruiting, tutoring, and mentoring. Hiring

directly impacted individuals at all levels (including leadership positions) also aligns with the point that harnessing the transformational power of higher education also requires valuing their skills, knowledge, and expertise.

At Marquette's Center for Urban Research, Teaching, and Outreach (CURTO), we have started two closely related HEP initiatives. The Educational Preparedness Program (EPP) is Marquette's HEP program. EPP courses are taught by Marquette faculty; EPP staff organizes all HEP classes; EPP staff partners with academic departments and the registrar to enroll students; and the EPP staff coordinates specific programming for students. The McNeely Prison Education Consortium (MPEC),[6] also housed at CURTO, operates as the coordinating body for nine schools in Southeast Wisconsin that seek to offer programming and/or classes for directly impacted students. MPEC provides the structure for schools that seek to offer programming, classes, and degree pathways and for students who decide to pursue a degree pathway. We have incorporated many of the innovative features of the HEP programs we have visited and added some of our own. We engage the expertise of local, directly impacted consultants and leaders in the development and administration of our program. We serve as an educational resource for formerly incarcerated students seeking higher education. We have collaborated with veteran's diversionary courts to extend educational pathways to those aspiring students. And we have launched a fellowship program (the MPEC Fellowship) for formerly incarcerated individuals to serve as researchers and program advisors.

Universities are also places where diverse populations of students can engage and interact, creating opportunities for connection rather than polarization. Integrating directly impacted students on our campuses can create opportunities for human connection among diverse populations that expose the falsehoods of dehumanizing stereotypes that ensnare the formerly incarcerated. Inside/Out prison programs can also have this effect as traditional college students meet intellectual peers with whom they share other interests and experiences who happen to be incarcerated. Moreover, "inside students" quickly come to identify themselves as students (rather than as criminal, inmate, felon, etc.) and come to be identified by others as students, reshaping dominant cultural images of who counts as a knower, and who is capable of intellectual growth and achievement. Classrooms and campuses can foster social relationships among student populations typically segregated in broader society, indeed overwhelmingly intentionally. Through education, diverse student populations that rarely inhabit the same social and physical space have the opportunity to interact as co-learners and co-contributors to knowledge.

[6] MPEC is named in the honor of R.L. McNeely, who was a Milwaukee-based attorney and activist who was a central community partner in developing the consortium. He passed away in 2020 before seeing the launch of the consortium in 2023.

In these ways, institutions of higher education play key roles in countering ideological ignorance and denial. As institutions that create and share knowledge, universities are best suited to expose false dehumanizing assumptions that have enabled mass incarceration and are able to counter with a more complex understanding of people and their circumstances. In the Jesuit education tradition, we call this *cura personalis* – care for the whole person. University curricula, particularly courses in the art, humanities, and social sciences, challenge students to think critically about history, politics, social constructs like race and gender, and systems of power and inequality. Here, too, liberal arts education that seeks human development and not only job skills or training is key: courses that foster a sense of self-worth, voice, and confidence, and training in generous listening and dialogue offer opportunities to practice empathy, to develop a sense of community and responsibility, and cultivate or enliven a sense of purpose and meaning (Gannon, 2020; Grain 2022).

Prisons and jails are explicitly intended to "reform" or "correct" the behavior of individuals convicted of violating the law. For example, Wisconsin DOC states in its orientation manual for non-DOC personnel and visitors, "The agency supervises the custody and discipline of PIOC [people in our care] in order to protect the public and seeks to rehabilitate offenders and reintegrate them into society." (p. 2; Wisconsin DOC 2024), People who support higher education in prisons often value it as one among many "rehabilitative" programs that can reduce recidivism. But the very notion of "rehabilitation" borrows from carceral logics that support a reductionist and dehumanizing understanding of those that have experienced incarceration. A rehabilitation paradigm assumes that intra-personal change can only take place when individuals have severed ties to their former selves who operated in different social and personal contexts. Rehabilitation suggests reaching an "idealized" version of oneself that has moved beyond past trauma or adversity and is now capable of generating entirely new social and personal contexts. The new self is conducive to educational success, while the former self is not. Nothing about a rehabilitative framework invites questions about the ideal version of self that we are asking people to reintegrate into, nor the social context for which we ask them to rehabilitate. This paradigm is analogous to hooks' notion of "performative integration," or integration without community. It cannot examine failings in existing social structures that inhibit people and communities from thriving and supporting each other in the first place (hooks 1994).

Narratives of rehabilitation as programmatic success, while enticing, are also flawed and inconsistent with our experiences with HEP at Marquette. Many of our students have educated us on the pitfalls of the rehabilitative model of intra-personal change. They cannot simply abandon their former selves. They remind us that their past selves and their past challenges have set the stage for the students they are now. Their lessons led us to seek out an alternative model of their transformation that could account for these layers of human complexity and nuance. We champion a transformational model of higher education because it does not require a severing of someone's past self. Rather, it can include how formerly incarcerated students carry many of the

same social and personal circumstances that led them to prison or jail in the first place. Even when they may seem to be "rehabilitated," many still struggle with the trauma of their confinement, mental health issues, anxiety, fear, interpersonal issues, etc., because that is the human experience, especially in today's so-called modern world. A transformational model also creates conceptual space for institutional transformation. Can HEP programs transform carceral institutions? Can they transform institutions of higher education? As previously discussed, institutions of higher education engage in their own practices of punishment and exclusion. Welcoming directly impacted students to college campuses and classrooms has the potential to transform both carceral and educational spaces and the institutions in which those learning spaces operate.

The Transformational Paradigm

If one were to say, "A philosopher, a sociologist, and a historian decided to write an article together...," it may sound more interesting as the opening line to a dad joke. What brings us together to prioritize prison education is our belief in its transformational potential. We apply a set of ideas and values, like those discussed below, to our teaching, research, and service toward the end of meaningful, impact-driven, community-engaged scholarship. Below, we explore a vignette that allows readers to engage in our respective academic training and connect that training to ideas that inform transformational pedagogies and practices.

As a vignette, author, poet, and educator bell hooks has written extensively about the power of education. In the introduction to her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks tells a story about growing up in segregated all-Black schools in the apartheid American South. She shares that in segregated schools, she learned that education was a practice of human freedom. She describes her teachers as "messianically" devoted to developing the full human potential of Black children—mind, body, and spirit—in a society that defined Black people as less than fully human and as incapable and unworthy. Black schools were places that welcomed curiosity and questioning. Students were exposed to a wide range of perspectives, the life of the mind, and the joy of being changed by ideas. In school, she could suspend who others defined or expected her to be, and through an encounter with ideas, she could reinvent herself. Education provided tools for reinvention, growth, curiosity, and wonder, encouraged openness, and affirmed her worthiness as a person deserving of opportunities for self-actualization. Indeed, it was in all-Black schools that hooks and many other Black southerners cultivated an inner authority and a reflective life.

While Jim Crow is overly marked by the practice of segregation, what made it especially nefarious was that segregation was legal. Supreme Court opinions of the 1880s and 1890s that narrowly, indeed literally, interpreted the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments made a mockery of definitions of citizenship, democratic participation, and the promises of equal protection and due

process. Similarly, the federal courts turned a blind, if not hostile, eye to racial violence despite congressional legislation targeting lynchings, mob violence, and politically motivated acts of racial terror.[7]

That segregated schools were spaces of liberation should come as no surprise. Buildings that housed schools in small, rural communities were oftentimes churches. As a central institution in Black communities, churches often doubled as schools, political institutions, and places of worship. Schools in urban spaces were equally committed to liberatory ideas even if the racial violence of the Jim Crow era was not as immediately present. The overarching system of segregation was always meant to be "separate and unequal" and predicated on fictive claims of White superiority and Black inferiority. Indeed, since the abolition of slavery, education has been a primary goal for nearly 4 million people who had been denied this fundamental human right for centuries due to slavery's legal apparatus. For to remain uneducated was to remain a slave. Black Southerners knew all too well the realities of their circumstances and steadily engineered a series of oppositional stances, both seen and unseen, and movements that were deeply private and publicly demonstrative.

When schools were legally desegregated, hooks was bussed to an all-White high school where Black students were seen as interlopers and not really belonging. She describes the experience as devastating, as do many African Americans who experienced the first waves of school desegregation. She experienced a massive shift from a school that was molded to be a beloved community that fought back the indignities of Jim Crow to a school where she was not welcome and met with overt hostility that largely went unpunished. In all-White schools, education was no longer transformational or liberatory. Quite conversely, all-White schools required obedience and conformity to an external authority, recreating the performance of Jim Crow's racial hierarchies and racial etiquette. Questioning and curiosity were squashed. She writes, "*Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us* (hooks 1994, 3)*."*

hooks's journey, recounted by countless Black people of her generation, provides the main ingredients for the application of the transformational paradigm, one that reaches its maximal learning potential when explored with interdisciplinarity. First, this historically powerful vignette can be amplified using primary documents including, but not limited to, the Reconstruction Era Amendments, Supreme Court opinions, excerpts from Jim Crow era laws, and oral histories. The philosophical underpinnings of hooks's story makes room for transformational paradigm to engage discourse about how liberatory outcomes emerge under a repressive regime. Alongside hooks, the radical feminist, writings from comparable intellects might include W.E.B. DuBois,

[7] DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction*; Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record*.

Pauli Murray, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Ruby Sales. Periodizing school desegregation, from the *Brown* decision in 1954 through its full retreat in the 1990s, offers a foundation to explore compelling realities in policing and prisons of the same era. As the country shifted from outright legal segregation on the heels of civil rights era victories, the politics of "tough on crime" and "the war on drugs" shaped national, state, and local priorities that fueled the racial disparities associated with the broader criminalization apparatus. Mass incarceration sprouted roots during Nixon's war on drugs and was further bolstered by Clinton's infamous Omnibus Crime Control Act of 1994, which included a provision that cut off Pell grants for incarcerated students. Indeed, a historian, a philosopher, and a sociologist can find oneself in hooks's vignette. But what of the student who we hope will experience transformational outcomes?

Several core features inform the transformational paradigm we champion. First, transformational does not mean to recreate any person anew, but it does require creativity. Teaching and learning have to be a reciprocal process for both students and instructors, shaping a learning community that promotes growth and dignity for all participants (Freire, 2018). Therefore, transformation does not require a severing from one's former self but instead welcomes the ideas and experiences people already possess as valuable contributions to the shared learning community. Several entries in this volume affirm this core idea and offer best practices for implementing it. Indeed, this opens an environment for all participants to acknowledge personal skills, knowledge, trauma, and challenges for fuller self-actualization.

Next, a transformational paradigm requires authentic classroom experiences, especially authenticity from the instructor. Prison education programs have the potential to foster spaces where students can radically re-imagine themselves and adorn identities beyond inmate or criminal. In blended classes, the traditional college students can come away seeing themselves as more than a young suburbanite in college, but someone who stepped into one of the key human rights issues of the last two generations. In that respect, our teaching, curricula, and classroom communities must always strive to move beyond the performative. For classes inside prisons, location matters, and acknowledging the location is an early welcoming of authenticity and, indeed, honesty. Teaching inside requires an adept and dynamic set of strategies, from syllabus creation to sources used to fielding impromptu questions from students. For classes on campus that welcome formerly incarcerated students, privacy is always required. But life experiences, if shared, require their own treatment and recognition, which differs from student to student. This is no easier set of skills to hone, but when done well, it can take an uncomfortable scenario and make it one that inspires tremendous growth for all students and the instructor.

Though there are many more valuable features, the final one we advance argues that a transformational paradigm must boldly seek liberatory outcomes, particularly as students chart new intellectual journeys. As multiple "inside" students have shared while in class, the reality of

being in prison drifts to the background. For a brief few hours, they escape the feelings fueled by being incarcerated. Classroom discussions and debates, educational art and media, thought-provoking textbooks and literature, and rigorous assignments and assessments all play distinctive roles in challenging ideas, perceptions, and definitions of knowledge. In practice, prison education courses provide liberatory moments.

Conclusion

Mass incarceration is neither an accident nor unintentional in our cities and urban settings. It is the result of decades of deliberate and strategic policy shifts to ostensibly address crime, substance abuse, violence, and social disorder. Scholars have poked many holes in the utilitarian arguments for mass incarceration, and most have settled on it serving as political expedience at best and race and class macro-aggression at its worst. Regardless of why it happened, nearly 50 years later, we continue to grapple with the individual and collective harm of confining more people than our prisons were ever meant to hold. As with most ill-conceived social policies, the most vulnerable members of society tend to bear the brunt of their weight, and our urban communities suffer. It is also no coincidence that the poorest and most economically marginalized communities house the greatest concentrations of individuals who have experienced incarceration. Despite declining rates of incarceration for the past several years, the United States still wears the distinction of having the largest incarcerated population in the world and the second-highest incarceration rate in the world. Given all of the well-documented harms of penal confinement, it is in the best interest of everyone that we begin developing solutions to decarcerate. Doing so is not easy, but there is significant reason for hope.

Scholars have also found that racial disparities in incarceration have started to decline. Political leaders started publicly rethinking their "tough on crime" approach. George W. Bush signed his Second Chance Act of 2007, which focused on improving reentry services and drug treatment. In 2023, Pell grants became available again for incarcerated students. While it is not certain whether the U.S. will ever return to its pre-mass incarceration punishment practices, it does appear that we have entered something of a new era. That said, focusing too intently on rising or falling incarceration rates overlooks key elements of the role education can have in contributing to the decarceration process. Mass incarceration can diminish the human capacities of those directly affected but also potentially erodes the humanity of all of us who live and are formed in a society that so effectively discards vast numbers of people. Racial theorists have written widely about the way legalized racial segregation, and the laws supporting it dehumanized white people, too, making them vulnerable to what Lisa Tessman (2005) calls the vices of domination, including callous indifference, a sense of superiority over others, and arrogance. A broader societal approach from multiple stakeholders must enter carceral spaces to assist the tens of millions of citizens (Shannon, Uggen, Schnittker, Thompson, Wakefield, and Massoglia, 2017) who have experienced the harm of incarceration and the burden of readjusting to life on the

outside after their release. In our view, HEP programs designed to foster transformational learning are ideally situated to assist in that broader social project while serving the civic mission of higher education.

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