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## *The Elevating Connection of Higher Education in Prison* *An Incarcerated Student's Perspective*

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*Common Good Atlanta*

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

### **Abstract**

*I have lived in Georgia prisons for over ten years and have benefited from higher educational programs while incarcerated. This essay draws from limited Internet access behind a firewall, personal interviews with other incarcerated students, and the author's own personal experiences in an effort to convey postsecondary education's benefits for incarcerated citizens. This essay explores higher education's ability to shift the perspectives of its incarcerated students, aid in their personal development, and prepare them for their futures whether in or out of prison. The primary purpose of higher education in prison should not be to reduce recidivism, although that may be a welcomed side effect; it should be to elevate incarcerated students. Higher education in prison programming not only elevates students, it elevates society as well by creating a criminal justice paradigm that more accurately reflects our society's love of freedom.*



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## Introduction

In my over ten years of incarceration in Georgia prisons, I have witnessed and experienced higher education elevate lives and give incarcerated people hope. I have also witnessed and experienced the opposite: incarcerated people who want to grow and continue their education and make positive changes in their lives being denied opportunities to do so. This inability to grow often contributes to a hopeless outlook because they sense their life is over or “on pause.” They tend to believe that society gave up on them and disconnected them from the world. Today, people in the U.S. tend to believe that incarcerated people are the lowest class of people; incarcerated citizens often internalize this and believe themselves to be the “lowest of the low.” Conversely, higher education in prison creates an “elevating connection,” by which I mean it re-establishes our connection to the world and raises our view of ourselves to scholars and human beings engaging in the intellectual community.

Many Americans also tend to believe that the primary objectives of the prison system are discipline and punishment and that we, the incarcerated, do not have a right to higher education. If it were true that incarcerated people do not have a right to higher education, then what does that say about our society? Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1862) wrote, “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons,” (p. 210). Some argue that incarcerated citizens do have a right to higher education, but their rationale revolves around reducing recidivism. By focusing only on reducing recidivism, we do not treat incarcerated citizens as people and we overlook the deeper issues within the prison system. I agree with Rebecca Ginsburg (2014), the director of the Education Justice Project (EJP) of the University of Illinois, who says lowering recidivism is important, but even more important is the change itself:

Lower crime and incarceration rates are, of course, an important social goal. Of greater interest to me, though, are the changes that prison programs cultivate within their participants, wherever they may be, such that the potential exists not only to reduce crime on the streets but also to transform the prison. (p. 36)

Fortunately, some wardens and Department of Corrections allow dedicated volunteers and programs who recognize the significance of postsecondary education to come into their prisons to teach. I participate in two such educational programs: non-credit computer programming courses and for-credit college classes taught by university faculty from and around Atlanta, GA. I have been a student for three years in a program called Hello World, founded and directed by Paul Bolden. Hello World teaches incarcerated people computer programming and other computer-related technologies. I am also a student in the Common Good Atlanta (CGA) program and have been for over four years. Professors Bill Taft and Sarah Higinbotham direct CGA, which primarily focuses on a liberal arts curriculum. Georgia State University began conferring credit for courses offered through CGA early in 2017.

For this essay, I interviewed five incarcerated students, who have participated in higher educational programs, to get their ideas and insights about how higher education in prison has affected their lives. All of these students were eager to share with me their thoughts and granted me full permission to use their comments and names.<sup>1</sup> Shane Hinkson, Sacad Nour, and Maurice Charleston are fellow students in the CGA program. Michael

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<sup>1</sup> These students signed consent forms and were given the option to use a pseudonym, initials, or first and last name.

McCoy is a student in the college-in-prison program through New Orleans Baptists Theological Seminary (NOBTS, pronounced “no-bits”), and Brian Funderburk is a graduate of that program. Funderburk has also earned two master’s degrees since entering the prison system. In addition to the personal interviews, I incorporate my own experiences as an incarcerated student.

Using self-reflection and interviews with others, this essay demonstrates that Hello World, CGA, NOBTS, and programs like them help imprisoned citizens broaden their perspectives, raise their self-worth, give them hope, motivate them to live up to their potential, instill in them critical thinking skills, and enable them to participate in the academic community. Additionally, according to our experiences, these programs are able to counteract the dehumanizing effects of living in prison. The educational opportunities provided help incarcerated students transform their lives and prepare for a better future. Furthermore, this essay demonstrates that higher education in prison could elevate society by creating a prison experience that better mirrors its love of freedom and by easing the burden on states.

### **Leaving Plato’s Cave: Revising Our Perspectives on Life**

I will never forget donning a pair of latex gloves and holding a human brain in a neuroscience class. My fellow incarcerated students and I passed the brain around. The formaldehyde made the brain firmer than I anticipated. Aside from wondering who the brain once belonged, I wondered what his or her perspectives had been. The brain-holding experience reminded me of life’s wonder and fragility. It also reminded me of the poor job I had done taking care of my own brain. While caught up in my addictions, I had failed to give much thought to my brain’s well-being. Moreover, this experience reminded me of how much my own perspectives had changed over the previous few years.

As I remember holding this human brain, it occurs to me that higher education challenges and sometimes spurs us to revise our perspectives. Nour (personal communication, April 22, 2017), also known as “Skinny,” observes, “CGA helped me change my perspective by giving me an option to seek education beyond GED. In most prisons, the only option for education is a GED. CGA allows me to expand my learning.” When we expand our learning, we see the world in a much broader context because higher education exposes us to different and often thoughtful perspectives and ideas about it. Charleston, aka “Moe,” put it this way:

Common Good Atlanta has helped me change my perspective in a number of significant ways. But I would say the most significant has been my perspective on literature, particularly poetry, which I have found to be both therapeutic and educational. I also think I have a more mature perspective when it comes to the struggle of humanity as a whole regardless of race and ethnicity. (personal communication, April 23, 2017)

In another vivid experience from my educational path, I recall a professor bringing alive for us Plato’s Allegory of the Cave with a projector and shadows. In that allegory, men have been imprisoned in a cave since their childhood and their heads are fastened so they can only look straight ahead. A fire burns behind the men so they only see shadows on the cave wall in front of them. Plato asks, “Would they not assume that the shadows they saw were the real things,” (Lee, 1955)? When one of the men is freed, he ventures out of the cave into the blinding sunlight to discover the truth out of the shadows. Many of us spent our lives watching shadows, to some degree, thinking what we saw was real. We are trapped not only

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by fences with razor wire but also by a cave of false beliefs and limited understandings. Higher education helps us emerge from that cave by prompting us to reexamine our beliefs and raising our understanding of the world through our studying, research and writing, and class discussions.

I am a white guy who grew up in the middle of Georgia among some racist people. I never thought much about the struggle of African Americans. I used to think something like, “Well, I’m white and my life isn’t exactly a bed of roses. We are all struggling.” Nick Chiles, an American Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and prolific author of books who primarily writes about African-American life and culture, visited our English 1101 class in March of 2017. During our time together in class, he said one of the main things African Americans want from white people is empathy. By then—in large part due to classes and discussions about slavery and the Civil Rights Movement—I developed a much deeper appreciation for what African Americans had endured for centuries in this country. I can never truly know what it is like to be an African American, but I can now at least see their continuing struggles through the lens of a much wider historical context. This is one example of how higher education has challenged me to reexamine and broaden my perspectives.

In my first few years of incarceration, I felt like inventory on a dusty shelf in a warehouse. Looking at my life from that shelf, I was merely “on hold” until I got out. This induced a lot of self-pity. However, once I immersed myself in education programs for creative writing, liberal arts, and computer programming, I no longer saw it that way. I still have a life, even in prison, and I am learning and growing, not just occupying space. CGA and Hello World pulled me out of both a cave of false beliefs and a warehouse of stagnation by providing me opportunities to stimulate my intellect and immerse myself in constructive projects—like writing essays and computer programs—that increase my knowledge and understanding as well as productively occupy my time. My expanded empathy for others and consciousness about the world has also helped me exit that cave and warehouse because my world is no longer just about my problems. The more wrapped up I am in my own issues, the more apathetic I become, which leads to a lack of concern about how my words and actions will impact others. When I focus on other people and their struggles, I am far more likely to consider how what I do or say will affect them.

Higher education in prison not only stimulates students, it motivates us to live up to our potential. Growing up, I did not have much confidence in my ability to learn. In truth, I was lazy and insecure. The education I have received in prison, however, has boosted my confidence and shown me that I am a lot more capable of learning than I once believed. Hinkson (personal communication, April 24, 2017), a fellow student and Army combat Veteran, told me that CGA has allowed him to “see how much creativity and intellect is within all of us, waiting to be released. Race, religion, and economic background are irrelevant to the potential within.” This potential within is difficult to see from a warehouse shelf because we do not expect warehouse items to change. In addition, our ability to see our potential is shaped by race, ethnicity, and class backgrounds. Funderburk (personal communication, November 27, 2017) had this to say about his potential: “I now understand the potential I have—regardless of my incarceration—and am striving to continue realizing it every day.” Higher education in prison programs such as CGA and NOBTS help incarcerated students like us see that we are capable of future success and productivity; but, in reality, we are the exceptions. Prisons are awash with wasted potential. Many men and women in prison never develop their potential in large part due to the lack of opportunities available to them.

Higher education in prison also brings with it hope in a place that often seems hopeless. While shelved in a warehouse, I did not feel particularly hopeful about my life. The

palpable apathy and hopelessness in me and around me never made me suicidal, as it does many people in prison, but it did torment me. Participating in higher education programs changed that. One reason they give a person in here hope is because, with higher education, a person can then see more options available to them. According to Daniel Karpowitz (2017), author of *College in Prison: Reading in an Age of Mass Incarceration*, “College inside prison creates new choices, new and alternative ways of being, that lie between the extremes of compliance and disobedience, between resistance and surrender,” (IX). When we have options, we have hope. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) asserts, “...it is not the limit-situations in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness,” (p. 99). He said education if done right could lead us to a critical perception of our “limit-situation,” which for those of us in prison is our lack of freedom, our limited access to the world, and our lack of resources. When we act on this critical perception, hope and confidence can develop within us. Samuel Johnson (1750) wrote in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, “Hope is necessary in every condition. The miseries of poverty, sickness and captivity would, without this comfort, be insupportable,” (p. 67). Without hope, prison becomes an unbearable place to live. Higher education in prison brings us vital hope by giving us options and instilling in us a critical perception of our “limit-situation.”

The higher educational programs I participate in also give me something positive to focus on. I could spend my sentence using drugs, wasting my days in front of the dorm’s TV, or focusing on the dramas of prison life; instead, I focus on writing better code, writing analytic essays for college classes, or as I did for a neuroscience class, preparing for a presentation on how fear conditioning takes shape in the brain. These programs take my mind out of a negative place and occupy it with Shakespeare, Dickens and Melville, Freire and Foucault, nonviolence theory, neuroscience, and the code for ASP.NET web applications. Focusing on positive, constructive projects may also aide in my personal development.

### **Personal Development and Humanization**

Higher education in prison should facilitate higher learning and personal development in the lives of men and women in prison for their sake, not to reduce recidivism, which will inevitably materialize as a welcomed consequence. According to the report “Locked Up and Locked Out: An Educational Perspective on the U.S. Prison Population,” the evidence indicates that personal development and lower recidivism rates are not mutually exclusive: “Numerous studies have shown a clear and fairly consistent correlation between collegiate studies and recidivism, and between college and variables measuring personal growth,” (Coley & Barton, 2006, p. 19). A lower recidivism rate will likely result from higher education in prison, but lowering recidivism should not be the primary reason for advocating it. In their essay, “Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration: Possibility Under Constraint,” Castro, Brawn, Graves, Mayorga, Page, and Slater (2015) argue, “When the purposes of higher education in prison contexts are anchored in a rationale of recidivism, a vision for the educative possibilities within carceral spaces can become constrained,” (p. 16). I agree because the message I receive when I hear or read the anti-recidivist logic is that I am merely a body that needs to be controlled and that higher education in prison may be yet another tool to make me a “docile body,” as Michel Foucault (1975) phrased it. This message does not acknowledge my humanity, nor does it suggest that higher education in prison should seek to “raise critical consciousness and cultivate humanization,” (p. 29), which Castro et al. argues it should aim to do. Although I concede that the reducing recidivism argument is better than no argument, I still maintain that this rationale does not go far enough. A significant part of the problem with the prison system today is that it dehumanizes us and reduces us to garbage tossed out by society. We become criminal subjects who need to

be controlled. The anti-recidivism logic does not counteract that. I think a better argument for higher education access in prison is one that recognizes incarcerated citizens as people who deserve opportunities that aide them in their intellectual growth, teach them critical thinking skills, and facilitate their personal enrichment.

Drawing on fifteen years of experience as a teacher within the Bard Prison Initiative, Karpowitz (2017) asks, “Does college in prison change people?” He says he is “quite sure” it does, “...just as working in prison or being incarcerated in one, or attending any liberal arts college does. Any rich set of disciplines, personal transitions, and newly acquired networks will be transformative, altering people and the future trajectory of their lives,” (p. 11). The array of subjects we have studied in the CGA program—classic literature, nonviolence theory, critical theory, poetry, creative writing, philosophy, neuroscience—have stimulated many epiphanies for my classmates and me. The academic experience and the network of fellow students, instructors, and volunteers have placed my life on a path far different from the one that led me to prison.

I realize, though, that many people in our society believe incarcerated citizens have forfeited their right to be treated as people. I understand this point of view. I, too, have felt rage after someone I love and I were victims of crimes. Retribution is a strong moral code. According to Kaia Stern (2014), the director of the Prison Studies Project and Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Harvard University, “Our culture is mesmerized by the myth that violence will redeem us,” (p. 444). She claims this myth is rooted in a religious ideology that asserts we can “...right wrongs and heal wounds through isolation and retribution,” (p. 444). We, therefore, punish people as a means to “institute justice,” (p. 445). Stern also points out that our will to punish “...clouds public judgment and threatens the very solutions to the prison crisis that taxpayers claim to seek,” (p. 451). In other words, many Americans ignore potential solutions to the prison crisis we face today because of a deeply ingrained and unproven myth that says we must punish in order to receive justice. According to Jody Lewen (2014), Executive Director of the Prison University Project, the majority of Americans take this a step further: they believe incarcerated people “deserve” to suffer, (p. 355). She says this in part allows them to “rationalize and dismiss” the dehumanizing treatment of people in prison, (p. 355). For many, “...justice is when bad people suffer,” (p. 357). They believe without that suffering evil gets a free pass. She also argues that non-incarcerated people do not see harming incarcerated people the same way they see harming anyone else. In a poetry class, my classmates and I created a book out of poems we had written. I came up with the book’s title, *The Language of Monsters*. I chose that title because I like the irony. Many Americans, says Lewen, perceive incarcerated men and women as stereotypes. They view us as more of an abstraction than as a human. We are more like a “...subspecies of monsters or cartoons...” than actual people, (p. 357). We are “utterly dehumanized” in their imagination, she claims, (p. 357). They also believe that destructive behavior is simply an “expression of evil character,” (p. 356). Lewen is struck by how “not-curious” many people seem to be about the origins of our destructive behavior, (p. 356). She says it is “taboo” to bring it up because many see it as “making excuses” for incarcerated individuals, (p. 356). However, if you read our poems, you will see that we are complex individuals who made poor decisions, lost our way, and engaged in destructive behavior for a myriad of reasons. Many were also products of social systems that did not offer alternative opportunities or even created the expectation that “destructive” behavior was the norm. This by no means excuses the behavior, but it does challenge the common belief that all people who have engaged in destructive behavior are simply evil. Our book of poems reveals that when you look past the abstraction of “inmates,” you often see people who were caught up in the treadmill of race and poverty. And who were also products (or at least influenced by) the systems and society

by which they were surrounded. In my case, my destructive behavior inflicted injury upon another person, my family, and my community. My conscience is not clear, but today I ache to retrieve my humanity, end my destructive behavior, and fully be the man I am on the inside. Monsters cannot do that, and humans cannot do that alone. Higher education enables this personal transformation. If people in society, out of their anger, fear, hysteria, and entrenched belief that we deserve to suffer, deny us opportunities to help us find our way, they are sending us a message that we are not even human beings.

The humanizing effects of a classroom with dedicated, caring, positive instructors have made me feel a lot less like Frankenstein. Susan Hopkins (2015), who teaches in a higher education in prison program in Australia, says this about her approach to teaching: “A holistic and humane approach to [postsecondary] teaching recognizes that students are emotional beings who need encouragement and support, not just technological access and basic skills,” (p. 52). This is the antithesis of what Freire (1970) called “banking education.” He said in the banking concept of education, “...knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing,” (p. 72). Fortunately, my instructors use a “holistic and humane approach,” not a banking method to education. For a long time after my conviction, I felt less than human, something no one could love or understand. The prison environment and many of the prison guards and staff reinforce this feeling by their degrading treatment and language. The Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC) reduces incarcerated people to things, “property of the state,” as guards have told us. When people do not view themselves as valuable, autonomous human beings, they are easier to control, which seems to be the main objective of prison officials. They can easily justify degrading and dehumanizing treatment because most Americans, as Lewen (2014) points out, believe we deserve to suffer. But Georgia’s high recidivism rate refutes the long-term efficacy of the degrade-and-control philosophy. According to the Georgia General Assembly (2017), one out of every three people released from prison return within three years. Transforming injustice, Stern argues, “...requires attending to and fostering practices that connect people with their own and other’s humanity,” (p. 447). She also points out that finding ways to “feel human again” and counteract prison’s dehumanizing effects “...is often one of the most powerful experiences of those whose lives were positively transformed in the prison context,” (p. 453). Higher education often nullifies the dehumanizing treatment of prison staff by humanizing incarcerated students.

Higher education in prison not only humanizes incarcerated students, it fosters a belief in us that our lives have value and meaning and that we are worthy of living among other productive, social people. Without this belief, it is akin to the cycle of addiction. When we are in the gutter, we reach for the object of our addiction to lift us out. That object eventually drags us back down into the gutter and around and around we go. Higher education helps to offset this, particularly when the teachers do not implement a banking approach. When I am in class, I’m treated as though my opinions and thoughts matter, that *I* matter. These intelligent, educated people think I am worthy of an education. The directors of CGA have told us, “The class is not a gift to you. You are a gift to our intellectual community.” Freire (1970) called teachers like this “humanist, revolutionary” (p. 75) educators. He said their efforts must “...coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization,” (p. 75). He also said, “...their efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power.” This method of teaching describes CGA’s approach, which in part explains why the program successfully humanizes us. Nour (personal communication, April 22, 2017) told me CGA helped him with his personal development by “...giving [him] an environment of higher education within the prison environment.” He added, “Personally, I look forward to classes

and the time I spend there, the feeling of being incarcerated is paused until class ends.” I’m often struck by the juxtaposition when I leave class and a guard yells at me and calls me “inmate” with disdain in their voice. In class, I’m a human being; outside of class, I’m Frankenstein.

Postsecondary education also aides incarcerated citizens in finding a purpose for their lives. I asked McCoy what NOBTS means to him. “NOBTS for me is the fulfillment of a dream,” he said (personal communication, March 14, 2017). McCoy divulged to me that before his incarceration his life had “...no real direction or purpose.” After his conviction, he realized “...how drastically [his] life would need to change in order for [him] to become successful.” He also saw the “bad examples” he had set for his children. “I needed a new direction,” he said, “I needed positive change in my life.” Many of us in prison, like McCoy, need a new direction and positive change. McCoy added, “I will use that degree to honor God and set a path for my children that I would not be ashamed for them to follow.” I asked Hinkson (personal communication, April 24, 2017) what CGA has meant to him. “It has helped me with my personal development,” he said, “by allowing me to use my untapped potential to strengthen myself academically, and use that strength to help and unite others around me.” Funderburk told me that through his endeavor of going through seminary college, he realized that he was an “insecure man without a sense of purpose,” (personal communication, November 27, 2017). Today Funderburk has a “solid, realistic sense” of his purpose in life. Through ministries, he works with other men in our community to help them realize their purpose, too. “Outside of the glory belonging to God for my salvation,” he says, “I credit the education I received in prison for the dramatic, irrefutably positive change in my life.” McCoy, Hinkson, Funderburk, and I did not have a real purpose in our lives before coming to prison. Perhaps this is partly why we are here. We are grateful for the opportunities we have to change that. Higher educational programs have helped us find a purpose for our lives, even while serving time.

Finally, in addition to helping us find a purpose, higher education helps us shift the narratives of our lives. In a PBS documentary called *Crime, Punishment, and Rehabilitation: Higher Education in Prison*, featured incarcerated citizen Jermaine Archer talked about earning a Bachelor of Science degree from Mercy College at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York:

I have to redefine Jermaine Archer, I cannot be known for the worst decision that was ever made or the worst day of my life. I can’t because that’s not who my mother raised me to be, that’s not who I should have been, that’s not what God put me on this earth to be. And I realize now that’s not the end. ... This is maybe the end of the beginning like Winston Churchill said. (2016)

After the graduation ceremony in the prison’s auditorium, Archer hugged and kissed his mom. “It felt so good to know that, Mama, you did not fail,” he told the interviewer, “This is the person you made me be, this person getting a college degree.” Later he greeted his young nephews that had come into the prison with his mom for the ceremony. “It was so important for my nephews to be there,” he said, “because I realize they want to be like the me they heard about. I have to break that cycle because my grandfather was in prison, my father was in prison, my uncles were in prison, my brothers were in prison, I’m in prison.” He paused and then said, “I got to stop the cycle.” Archer changed the narrative of his life from “murderer in prison” to “college graduate stopping the cycle of incarceration in his family.” I want to do the same thing. I do not want my narrative only to say that I committed a horrible crime and now I am serving a twenty-year prison sentence. I can’t change that fact, but I can



shift the narrative of my life to say that I am an incarcerated citizen who is working towards obtaining a college degree, who is an aspiring writer and computer programmer, who is growing intellectually, and who is making lasting positive changes in his life. The poor decisions we have made may always be a part of our lives, but they do not need to define our lives. They are not the whole story. And they do not need to determine our futures. What will determine our futures is how well we prepare for them.

### **Preparing for the Future**

One thing that will help shape our futures is the critical thinking skills we have gained from higher education. These skills will help us think through the issues we will face instead of merely reacting to them. For example, after studying and writing essays about *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by Michel Foucault (1975), I could more clearly see the underpinnings of the oppressive structures, if you will, that loom over me. I did not paint myself as a victim, but as I stated in one of the essays I wrote for class, oppression is oppression whether it's justified or not. Incarcerated people, at least the ones I know, can easily relate to people who live under despotic regimes. We do not vote for our warden. Prison officials determine what we do and when we do it. If we protest, they could meet us with brutal force and send us to "the hole" (segregation). Furthermore, we could unwittingly internalize the image our oppressor has of us. Freire said it this way:

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (p. 63)

By critically thinking about my oppressive situation, I do not allow the opinions of other incarcerated citizens, guards, prison staff, or people in society define for me who I am. This will help me going forward because when I get out (hopefully within two years), some people may implicitly or explicitly inform me that I am not worthy to live among them and that I am less than human; thus, ironically, I may find myself in another oppressive situation after I obtain my freedom. I could let this anger me, or I could internalize it and believe it myself. But I prefer to take Freire's advice: "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity," (p. 47). I failed to get the help I needed and committed a crime; because of this, some people will be afraid of me. I understand that. Nevertheless, I have paid severely for my crime, and with the help of higher education, I have since made positive changes in my life, despite the GDC. And I will seek the help I need in the future. My past actions are not who I am, but they are what I've done. I can't forget that, but I can forgive myself and move forward and continue taking transformative action in my pursuit of a fuller humanity.

My classmates also pursue a fuller humanity with the help of the critical thinking skills they have acquired. Charleston told me that CGA enhanced his personal development "...through critical thinking on various topics among a classroom of scholars." He also said CGA provides him with an educational context that "challenges" his intellectual growth. "The class represents for me," he said, "an accountable community where we hold one another accountable for the success of the program as a whole," (personal communication, April 23, 2017). Hinkson (personal communication, April 24, 2017) told me, "[CGA] is

giving me knowledge, understanding, and a sense of tolerance I may otherwise have missed out on.” Funderburk revealed to me that during his seminary journey he “delved deeper” into his character issues with the hope of “positive change.” He said learning how to read and think critically provided him with “invaluable insight” and soon contributed significantly to his life. After many hours of introspection, he discovered many of his insecurities, which he believes contributed to his incarceration. “This discovery,” he says, “has assisted me in addressing those issues with a level of confidence previously unknown to me—a confidence of which I could never have dreamed” (personal communication, November 27, 2017). These five attributes—accountability, knowledge, understanding, tolerance, and confidence—arm us with the tools we need to become more “fully human,” as Freire put it.

Higher education also arms us with communication skills that will allow us to express ourselves in a manner that educated people will understand and not dismiss. As Lewen (2014) argues, men and women incarcerated have numerous barriers in projecting our voices to the outside world, but it is important for us to break through those barriers. “Education that enables people in prison to develop strong written and oral communication skills,” according to Lewen, “empowers them to represent themselves in the public sphere in a way that makes it possible for others to actually hear them,” (p. 359). She points out that our social status often “undermines the power and credibility” of our voices, (p. 359). But if we can communicate in a way that people with different backgrounds can understand, this would be a “...vital part of the advocacy and social transformation that will be critical to our undoing of the landscape [she had] just described,” Lewen asserts, (p. 359). Paul Pendergrass, a communications expert and former Communications Director for Coca-Cola, visited our CGA class and told us, “words matter.” Words do matter. The words I choose for this essay matter, for example, because I want to impress upon the readers the importance of higher education in prison. Without the writing skills I have gained from CGA, I do not believe I could articulate my thoughts and experiences and overcome those obstacles effectively.

Partly because of my improved communication skills and college experience, my job prospects when I return to society are not as bleak as they were before participating in educational programs. I teach incarcerated individuals a career center class where I demonstrate job search, resume writing, and interview skills, and I do my best to show them an optimistic attitude towards finding a job. In truth, though, my pessimistic inner voice taunts me. No one will hire me, it says, I am a convicted criminal. Education does not squash that pessimism, but it does silence it most of the time. The skills I have acquired, such as computer programming and writing, will considerably improve my odds. I also believe I could work with other people better than I could in the past. This was difficult for me because I have Social Anxiety Disorder. I call the class presentations I have given and class discussions “exposure therapy.” I even acted out a scene from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in front of the class and the warden once. I bellowed the line, “And though shalt have the air at freedom!” These experiences, which I would not have without higher education, increase my confidence in my ability to function successfully on the outside, which I will need to do in a couple of years. I know finding a decent job when I’m on the other side of the fence will challenge my patience and resolve, but I’m more optimistic today than I was before I obtained an education because today I am better prepared.

Education also motivates me not to succumb to my laziness, which will help me in my life in and out of prison. Some essays I have written for class are good examples of this. I did not feel like writing them. I wanted to sleep in and later zone-out in front of the TV in the dorm. All my lazy tendencies were whispering to me like a stoner friend, saying I should quit writing and do what I feel like doing. I refused to listen because I knew if I didn’t write a coherent, complete essay I would not only get a poor grade, I would also disappoint my

instructor. Perhaps more importantly, I would disappoint myself and my family, and I would let my fellow students down. In addition, I would not continue to learn and grow. I have wasted enough time, and I have squandered too many opportunities already by listening to those whispers. Furthermore, CGA and Hello World motivate me, as Nour put it, "...to focus on what my future is going to be like" (personal communication, April 22, 2017). Nour also told me that education plays a big part in our futures and that the CGA class is the only place he finds it. When I focus on my future, I am compelled to limit my stay in front of the dorm's TV, to get out of bed early on the weekends, and to sip coffee while studying and writing code or essays for class.

### **Higher Education Inside Elevates the Outside: Benefiting the "Free World" Society**

Implementing postsecondary education programs for incarcerated citizens can not only elevate the incarcerated, it can elevate society as well. Karpowitz (2017) explains, "...college in prison is one way to make the meaning and experience of criminal accountability a more honest expression of our avowed love of freedom." Dehumanizing incarcerated people in an effort to exert control and denying them opportunities to elevate their consciousness does not reflect a society where freedom is its most beloved fundamental belief. Karpowitz also argues that college in prison "...should be conceived less about how people in prison might change and more about how we, as a society increasingly defined by the scope and quality of our prisons, might change ourselves" (p. 161-163). I could only speculate on how widespread higher education in prison might change people in the "free world," but my classmate offers a possibility:

It is no secret that society often sees incarcerated people as outcasts and undesirables. As wrong as this is, it still shows that even the "lowest" caste of society can do amazing things. If a "criminal" can achieve this greatness in self-realization and humanity, why can't those who judge him? (Hinkson, personal communication, April 24, 2017)

Higher education in prison could not only more honestly reflect our society's love of freedom, it could inspire people in the "free world" to live up to their potential.

Higher education in prison could also inspire the children of incarcerated citizens to pursue their own education. According to Stern (2014), more than half of people in prison between 2000 and 2010 had minor children at the time of their incarceration. "When children are inspired by their parents to take education more seriously," she says, "they too begin to see viable alternatives to dropping out of school and entering a life of crime, thus breaking a harrowing cycle of intergenerational incarceration," (p. 454). This makes me think of McCoy's children and all of the children of incarcerated people. The elevating effects of postsecondary education in prison may ripple from incarcerated citizens to their children; it also may plot courses for their children that break the cycle of incarceration.

From a utilitarian point of view, a more education-focused approach to criminal justice might improve upon the current approach. A report from the Georgia Center for Opportunity challenges the outcomes of the status quo approach: "For decades America has taken a 'tough-on-crime' approach to criminal justice. This philosophy has generated little in the way of positive results and has resulted in burgeoning state budgets, overcrowded prisons, and low success rates," (Schulte, 2016, p. 1). Part of the reason for these low success rates is that people are returning home from prison ill-prepared to face the challenges of the "free world." Higher education prepares people to face these challenges. Nour told me, "Most

people who are incarcerated don't have a higher education. And the ones who do are more likely to never return to prison when they are released" (personal communication, April 22, 2017). When people do not return to prison, they get jobs and pay taxes, thus easing the burden on the states. In her report, Hopkins (2015) argues:

...there are significant benefits to society as a whole in breaking the cycle of incarceration and disadvantage. Even from an economic 'burden to the state' perspective, the cost of continued incarceration far outweighs the costs of higher education provision. (p. 48)

Hopkins also asserts that "aggressive law and order campaigns" have benefited politicians, but have failed to deter crime, (p. 48). Higher education in prison would not only help prepare the incarcerated individuals for their release, it would also ease the burden on the states, and consequently the state's residents.

## Conclusion

If Dostoyevsky was right that we can judge a society by its prisons, then connecting incarcerated people with a higher education makes sense not just for those behind bars, but for society as well. According to Hopkins, "...society must be accountable too if offenders emerge from prison even more isolated and marginalized than when they went in" (p. 48). Ultimately, incarcerated citizens bear the responsibility to shift the trajectories of their lives, but society bears the responsibility to ensure they have the support and resources to do so. Higher education in prison is worth the investment because it lifts incarcerated citizens out of a cave of lowly self-image and narrow views about their lives and the world. It spurs their intellectual growth and facilitates their personal development by challenging their minds and humanizing them. It also prepares them for their futures whether inside prison walls or outside. We're all elevated when incarcerated people like Shane Hinkson, Brian Funderburk, Sacad Nour, Maurice Charleston, Michael McCoy, Jermaine Archer, and I emerge from a cave of shadows and rewrite our life's narrative. We are all elevated when incarcerated citizens transition to free citizens as empathetic, hopeful, educated people instead of bitter, dependent "subhumans" who believe they have no value. And we are all elevated when we prepare our imprisoned population to live constructive and momentous lives.

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