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## *Higher Education in Prison Thoughts on Building a Community of Scholarship and Practice*

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### **Abstract**

*Since first publishing the Call for Papers for this volume (2017), we have spent more than two years “ruminating” with the twelve authors who have contributed to this project and many others in the higher education in prison community who have generously offered feedback, posed questions (and some challenges) and most notably, we express our gratitude to the instructors who have brought these readings into their classrooms, to incarcerated and non-incarcerated students, and rigorously engaged the ideas offered. In this final essay, we touch on three themes that we believe are relevant to the present moment and purpose of this volume and that are central to field building efforts: equity in higher education, the quality and “promise” of Pell grant restoration, and how and why we should foster a community of scholarship and practice.*



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*EDUCATION is not that single formula for the solution of crime for which society is so restlessly and so fruitlessly seeking—fruitlessly because no single formula exists. When the solution for crime is found, if ever, the search will have led into every field of human knowledge, not alone into the social sciences and not alone into the terrain of any one agency, such as education.*

— Austin McCormick, 1931

In 1931, Austin McCormick, Assistant Director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, wrote the book, *The Education of Adult Prisoners: A Survey and a Program*, which was the result of visits to “all of the prisons and reformatories for men and women [sic] (state, federal, Army and Navy) in the United States, with three exceptions” (McCormick, ix).<sup>1</sup> In it, he provided a theory of adult education for incarcerated people and stated, repeatedly, that while literacy and one’s chances of incarceration were inextricably linked, education cannot be the sole cure for the social problem of crime. Therefore, McCormick reasoned, education in prison should not be conceptualized nor treated in such a way that prioritizes crime reduction.

Since 1931, there have been a number of thoughtful practitioners of prison higher education articulate something similar, seeking to expand the rationale and justification for education in prison, while resisting making unsubstantiated correlations between education and crime and/or recidivism reduction. In much of his work, Thom Gehring, former Historian for the Correctional Education Association, called for field-building around professionalization and the use of theory in “correctional education” to develop more appropriate frameworks for assessing the value of higher education in prison.<sup>2</sup> In 1986, Eggleston and Gehring together focused on the use of paradigms in “correctional education”, stating that the patterns that govern higher education in prison deserve “close and constant scrutiny” because of their ultimate influence on student learning (p. 91). Eggleston and Gehring were both concerned with the lack of theoretical framing undergirding much of higher education in prison, a point that Gehring took up in other works (1994, 2000) to, again, develop the educational-relevant rationale for higher education in prison. We see this special volume for *Critical Education* in that same spirit and believe that as a growing field of scholars and practitioners, we must keep talking about praxis and the ways that theory can and should inform the work of higher education broadly, and in prison in particular. Attending to theoretical framing is all the more important given the historical link between higher education in prison and “correctional education” or treatment models of rehabilitation that position the work of in-prison higher education as fundamentally different than higher education for non-incarcerated people. This is a perspective with which we stridently disagree, and can trace back to *at least* 1931, when McCormick made a similar statement:

If we believe in the beneficial effect of education on man [sic, throughout] in general we must believe in it for this particular group, which differs less than the layman thinks from the ordinary run of humanity. If on no other grounds than a

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<sup>1</sup> We draw attention to McCormick’s use of “men and women” here to indicate exclusion of incarcerated transgender, trans\*, gender non-conforming, non-binary, and gender queer individuals. While written in the 1930’s, there were certainly trans\* people incarcerated in U.S. prisons, much like today, who were segregated on the basis of biological sex assigned at birth.

<sup>2</sup> In the opening essay of this Special Edition, we spend time on the distinction between “correctional education” and “higher education in prison.” For more on this distinction, see: Castro, E.L., & Gould, M.R. (2018). What is Higher Education in Prison? *Critical Education*, 9(10), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v9i10>

general resolve to offer educational opportunities to undereducated persons wherever they may be found, we recognize that our penal population constitutes a proper field for educational effort. In brief, we are not ready to make its efficacy in turning from crime the only criterion in judging the value of education for prisoners.<sup>3</sup> (p. 3)

In the Introduction to this year-long project we expressly defined our intention as an effort to work,

[i]n community with students, scholars, and practitioners ... to engage and highlight scholarship on higher education in prison in much the same way we theorize higher education in society more broadly, by focusing on the purposes for why we should engage this work. (Castro & Gould, 2018)

It's now been one year of publications in *Critical Education* exploring and ruminating on the purposes of higher education in prison. This special issue wraps up during an important political moment. The increased visibility of higher education in prison in the national landscape, in part due to a focus on criminal systems reform, and specifically legislation aimed at reinstating Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated people, has placed conversations about higher education in prison squarely in the national spotlight. There is a vested public interest in the specific opportunity of accessing federal student aid to finance higher education during incarceration.

At the same time, there is also anxiety among some practitioners and advocates, concerned that the outcomes of policy advocacy will make work “on the ground” more difficult. Some might describe it as nervously waiting for what feels like will be an avalanche of newly available federal funding for incarcerated people, placing an already vulnerable population at greater risk for exploitation and sub-standard higher education. Many are concerned about what restoring Pell grant eligibility will mean for college-in-prison, including: potential abuse of funds, guardrails for quality in programming, accountability to students and oversight, evaluation and reporting, and how potential students who are not Pell-eligible will ultimately be treated. The questions raised, and we believe, rightly so, are not new ones in the space of higher education in prison (e.g., see: Gehring, 2000; Thomas, 1994). How will Departments of Corrections, faced with multiple providers and various modes of engagement know what constitutes high quality

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<sup>3</sup> The politics and use of language are always in flux, and there remains energetic disagreement over terms used to describe individuals who are currently incarcerated and/or who have experienced incarceration. MacCormick's use of the terms “prisoner”, “prisoners” and “ex-convict” are terms that we purposely do not use (unless we are directly citing others) as we find them dehumanizing and reductive. However, while it is likely that we can attribute much of MacCormick's language use to the time period in which he was writing (1930s), it bears acknowledging that person-first language (e.g., person currently incarcerated) is part of an ongoing movement on behalf of people directly impacted by mass punishment (e.g., see: Underground Scholars' (2019) “Language Guide for Communicating about those Involved in the Carceral System”: <https://undergroundscholars.berkeley.edu/news/2019/3/6/language-guide-for-communicating-about-those-involved-in-the-carceral-system> and Eddie Ellis' (2005) “Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language”: <https://cmjcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CNUS-AppropriateLanguage.pdf>. It should be noted, too, that there remains disagreement over language use and person-first language in general. For a different take on the use of person-first language among a minoritized community, see: Anjali Forber-Pratti's (2019, June) recent op-ed “Yes, You Can Call Me Disabled”: [https://qz.com/1632728/yes-you-can-call-me-disabled/?fbclid=IwAR1cQhswumtP5cBH\\_vhNA1uIl9CsomPaaPSHaV4UYLAgYhPRgck6baBNiZA](https://qz.com/1632728/yes-you-can-call-me-disabled/?fbclid=IwAR1cQhswumtP5cBH_vhNA1uIl9CsomPaaPSHaV4UYLAgYhPRgck6baBNiZA)

postsecondary education? Will college-in-prison programming be consumed by distance and/or tablet-based coursework and/or programs? Will newly formed programs have the structural support and leadership expertise needed to implement high-quality programming? Will proprietary institutions be able to access federal funds and corner the market, so to speak, inside prisons? Who will safeguard against and hold accountable non-profit institutions acting like for-profit institutions and creating programs in an effort to maximize student enrollment and account for enrollment shortfalls on the non-carceral campus? How will quality and metrics for assessment and evaluation be defined and implemented? What data will be collected and where will it be reported for public access? We share many of these concerns, perhaps even more so than we did almost a year ago when we asked a “simple” question: *what is higher education in prison?* and then called upon our colleagues to ruminate on what it should be.

We took time in our opening essay to clearly distinguish higher education in prison from correctional education and asked readers to consider how higher education can and should be designed in the best interests of incarcerated students. We continue to define higher education in prison as having the same foundation of all higher education, as providing life-long learning opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, debate and dissent, to reflect on self and others, to engage in critical thinking, and be provided genuine opportunities for exploration and personal and professional development. On a non-carceral campus we do not ask students, upon graduation or three to five years after graduation, if they have since gone to prison, because we do not approach higher education as a preventative to incarceration. We offered this distinction between higher education and correctional education, in part, to address the distinction between education as a project of intervention and rehabilitation (“correctional”) and higher education as a specific teaching and learning experience, most commonly associated with the production of knowledge.

Since first publishing the Call for Papers for this volume (2017), we have spent more than two years “ruminating” with the twelve authors who have contributed to this project and many others in the higher education in prison community who have generously offered feedback, posed questions (and some challenges) and most notably, we express our gratitude to the instructors who have brought these readings into their classrooms, to incarcerated and non-incarcerated students, and rigorously engaged the ideas offered. Authors in the series commented on issues related to quality, such as the modes of engagement and supplemental instruction used inside prisons (Evans, 2018), the critical issues of racism and white supremacy in prison higher education programs (Davis III, 2018), and more broadly, the value of the humanities and its revolutionary potential (Heppard, 2019). Others commented on the use of recidivism as a metric of program success, including one essay on how recidivism as a metric can be used responsibly (Scott, 2018) and another that situates the language of recidivism within the more broadly expressed racialized and racist lens that is often applied to higher education in prison (Castro, 2018). A number of authors ruminated on the public purposes of higher education in prison, including: return for taxpayers (Harnish, 2019) and if, indeed, it is “fair” for taxpayer funds to be used to support higher education prison programs; civic engagement both in the classroom and among students and questioning if higher education in prison could advance democratic values (Mackall, 2018); and, higher education in prison as a counterbalance to the consumer-oriented and market value approach that has come to dominate higher education more broadly (McCorkel & DeFina, 2019). Finally, a trio of authors went directly to the heart of the question “what is the purpose of higher education (in prison)” from the perspective of students, whether through the outcomes of program evaluation (Boyce, 2019) or a critical dialogue between a student and

teacher (Heider & Lehman, 2019). The essays in the year-long volume do not speak with a collective voice in the sense that they come together to provide a singular insight or statement about higher education in prison. What the authors do provide is a survey of some of the more relevant discussions helping to shape the emerging field of higher education in prison. We are hopeful that if nothing else, these ruminations have offered some insight into the complex and nuanced thought that will be needed to identify the theories and practices that will continue helping to define the community of higher education in prison.

In this final essay, we touch on three themes that we believe are relevant to the present moment and purpose of this volume and that are central to field building efforts. Furthermore, we see these three themes emerging as the infrastructure to support efforts to strengthen the quality of existing and emerging higher education in prison programs, as well as addressing persistent questions in the field, all the more important in this critical moment of potential Pell restoration. In what follows, we address equity in higher education, the quality and “promise” of Pell grant restoration, and how and why we should foster a community of scholarship and practice.

### **Higher Education in Prison & Racial Equity**

In April of this year I (Erin) was on a panel at a conference dedicated to higher education in prison in Wyoming.<sup>4</sup> A young person in the audience asked the last question posed to the panel, and it was a good one: how do we ensure that we are not taking one oppressive system (higher education) and combining it with another oppressive system (mass incarceration)? This is a question that I’ve been thinking about in a slightly different form for some time, and wrestling with what feels like a large nod to racial colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) in many formal convenings, gatherings, and publications on higher education in prison.

In my position on campus, I teach courses on the history and philosophy of higher education. In my courses, I stress the importance of learning the history of U.S. higher education to better reflect upon and understand contemporary issues related to persistent inequality of opportunity and social stratification. More to the point, I turn to scholars such as Karabel (2006), Patton (2015), Wilder (2013), Anderson and Span (2016), and Ahmed (2012) who argue that the legacy and contemporary machinery of U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in white supremacy. Their claim isn’t simply a theoretical one, although theories of racialization in higher education are necessary to reveal what is often invisible (Dowd & Bensimon, 2014). As Gusa (2010) contends, colleges and universities have long built and supported the structures of whiteness. In what Gusa refers to as *white institutional presence*, colleges and universities need not support explicit racist and hostile environments to perpetuate racism. Rather, they need only to leave unexamined racialized structures, such as valued knowledges, cultural patterns of relationships, and “organizing principles of institutional life” to perpetuate a climate of white entitlement (p. 480) and anti-blackness. Gusa’s work echoes Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) seminal research on racism without racists, arguing that racism often works in seemingly subtle ways, through normative assumptions and expectations in higher education, for example, that perpetuate patterns designed to maintain and reward standards of whiteness. Mission statements, admissions policies, grading norms, and unspoken expectations are just a few examples of

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<sup>4</sup> The symposium, Transformative Education in Prison and Beyond, included a live stream and video capture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=XDMD5q3W2xg&feature=youtu.be>

racialized practices in higher education. Scholars who study campus climate (e.g., Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017) also include behaviors, attitudes, and standards as racialized processes. While standards and expectations may be couched in a rationale of ‘merit,’ the contemporary concept and use of merit throughout higher education is a racialized endeavor (e.g., see: Critical Race Theory), privileging those who have access to what Delpit (1996) describes as the *culture of power*. A central question for higher education in prison to ask is: to what extent are such classed, abled, and gendered practices tacitly extended into the prison and enacted in the name of program quality?

We do not have room in this short essay to pay proper homage to the history of racism in U.S. higher education or to document the efforts needed to start to chip away at the inequity that has plagued the system since its inception (Wilder, 2013). However, the importance in this present moment of equity in higher education, and the role that prison higher education potentially plays in advancing more equitable campuses is paramount, and this is what the student in the audience was calling attention to. Higher education in the U.S. exists within broader dynamics of oppression and there is not an easy solution to address persistent and complex social dynamics that continue to influence access, persistence, and completion – key metrics of student success. Students of Color remain underrepresented throughout higher education and disturbingly overrepresented in proprietary schools (McMillan Cottom, 2017). Nearly all states have severe underrepresentation of Black and Latinx graduates, and this underrepresentation is more prominent at higher levels of degree attainment (Schak & Nichols, 2017). In fact, Black graduates are less likely to be awarded bachelor’s degrees when compared to their white peers and more likely to receive associate degrees and/or certificates (Nichols & Schak, 2019).

The number of individuals whose parents did not attend or graduate from college, often referred to as first generation college students, has declined over the last two decades (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018), pointing to decreased opportunities for social mobility via higher education. Indeed, college affordability continues to decline for students from low-income backgrounds, with a recent report indicating that just 48% of community colleges were considered affordable for the average Pell grant recipient in the 2016-2017 academic year (Warick & DeBaun, 2019), a source of funding that as recently as 1980 covered almost the entire cost of a 2-year degree and more than 75% of a 4-year degree; by 2014, the amount of cost coverage afforded by Pell was 52% and 31% respectively (College Financing Group, 2014). Combined with continued structural inequity, there are states like Georgia making it more difficult for underserved and minoritized communities to access quality higher education. In Georgia, the Board of Regents require selective institutions in the state to verify residency status, requiring institutions to “verify the lawful presence in the United States of any applicant that is admitted” (University System of Georgia, 2010). This law makes it illegal for selective institutions to admit and enroll undocumented and asylee students, and students who have temporary legal status through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. This kind of discriminatory state policy is a blatant form of xenophobia that further reserves quality higher education for a privileged subset of the population, while reducing the life opportunities for many marginalized communities.

The aforementioned inequalities are nowhere near exhaustive, but we mention them here as a gentle reminder that these are the realities that should contextualize conversations regarding higher education in prison. Access to quality higher education is still out of reach for many. One

popular response to racialized systemic inequality is an ardent focus on *diversity* efforts among institutions of higher education, and higher education in prison is no different. As an example of the way we see inequity playing out in prison higher education, in our work at the Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison at the University of Utah<sup>5</sup> we are finding that the overwhelming majority of in-prison higher education programs are operating in men’s facilities. Certainly, there are more men’s prisons in the U.S. than there are women’s, but the rate at which women are being imprisoned is radically increasing (The Sentencing Project, 2019). This inequity points both to the need to keep sex and gender equity central to in-prison higher education efforts, as well as keep attention on the binary sex system in which higher education in prison programs operate.

We could go on. But, the point here is that the challenges posed above are present in the broader field of higher education, and they have yet to be adequately solved. Questioning how the structures of the academy perpetuate inequity and exclusion is part of an ongoing effort to make colleges and universities more equitable and representative of the communities they are supposed to serve. Thus, in order *not* to perpetuate bias and white institutional presence (Gusa, 2010), in-prison efforts must be proactive in resisting normalized assumptions and expectations about students, about potential, and about mission. We contend that the work many are doing to grow the field of higher education in prison is actually a reflection of the larger enterprise of higher education. In some ways, this is a good thing, but in regards to equity – and specifically racial equity, there is much more work we must do.

Our point here is that the aforementioned topics are often missing from conversations on higher education in prison, and instead we think they should be foregrounded to ensure that structural bias remains central to understanding how higher education (in prison) currently operates. Contextualizing the work of higher education in prison within the broader dynamics of inequity will also protect against well-intended but wholly inadequate responses to underrepresentation, such as tokenism and othering. Entrenched racial inequity cannot be solved through tokenism, and in a field where the racial demographics of program leadership seldomly mirror the racial demographics of students, we are all at great risk for tokenization. How will programs recognize and ultimately navigate this challenge? Without understanding the racist history of U.S. higher education and continued stratification, higher education in prison programs are not positioned to address inequity. As we sit on the precipice of possible reinstatement of Pell grant access for people incarcerated along with an increase in program formation, it is essential to engage meaningful conversations about the barriers to full access to quality higher education for many people and the systemic structures of inequality that continue to prevent access to the college classroom (in prison and outside campuses), as well as the ways that institutional racism makes the classroom more easily navigated by some students (and instructors) than others.

### **Quality and the “Promise” of Pell Grant Restoration**

There is a narrative among advocates of Pell grant restoration (for incarcerated people) that tells a tale of two eras — pre-1994 and post-1994 — and the “devastation” that ensued when, in 1994 President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act

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<sup>5</sup> Erin Castro is the director of the Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison at the University of Utah.

(1994), codifying into law the prohibition of incarcerated people in a federal or state penal institution from accessing Pell grants. The effects of the legislation were swift and punitive (as they were intended to be) and in some cases programs closed overnight (SpearIt, 2016) and former students still tell stories of books being boxed up and returned to outside campuses and entire cohorts of students left without any insight into when or if their programs of study would start again. While we have many first-hand accounts of the aftermath of the loss of Pell grant access, we know very little about the programs that existed at the time. Most of what we know about the pre-1994 era is narrated through a number of meta-analyses, most conducted through the lens of an outcomes-oriented approach focused on crime and recidivism reduction and estimates about how many programs existed (the most popular number is 350). What we know very little about is the scope and nature of the program: How many programs offered degrees? What types of degrees were offered? How many students were enrolled? How many students graduated with a degree or certificate? It is likely that we do not know the answers to these questions for the same reasons that we do not know them today—that higher education in prison programs have always existed with some level of secrecy, whether because of public opinion or stigma on campus, or other very real and emergent reasons. Without much of this descriptive information, we can actually say very little of the quality of programs in the pre-1994 era and must rely simply on the objective statements that they, in fact, existed.

What formed in the wake of the loss of Pell grant funding in the post-Pell era was a small, but sustained effort to rebuild higher education in prison programs while continuing to advocate for the reinstatement of Pell. A small number of programs were able to move forward without an interruption in programming because they existed in resource-rich environments and had strong philanthropic ties in communities. In many cases, as is the case today, what was created was a funding model that relied upon partnerships between and among college/universities, Departments of Corrections, private philanthropy, and individual donors. Because of these funding models, most of the college in prison programs were small, supported by private institutions, and enrolled small cohorts or groups of students. These programs were also administered through infrastructure rich colleges and universities, and this discussion of program administration and overhead, and the costs associated (often considered “in kind” support), are often overlooked when advocating for Pell reinstatement. In some ways, with notable exceptions, particularly in California and New York, this funding model still prevails, where an in-prison program could not exist without the extensive support of the college/university and/or philanthropic community.

The problem of scale has always been a challenge for this field, but this not a unique problem within higher education. Postsecondary programs designed to serve underrepresented and underresourced student populations, for example, face similar obstacles. The challenges of higher education in prison, in many ways, are the challenges of higher education more broadly: How do you grow quality and sustainable programs without a stable funding mechanism that recognizes inequity in access? While this very real challenge remains, there are models from which we can learn.

For example, federal programs like the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) and the eight programs under the umbrella of TRIO, are broadly designed to increase access to higher education for individuals from under-resourced and underserved communities. Both of these programs are designed differently than the Pell grant as they are not awarded to individual students. Rather, both CAMP and TRIO are competitive federal grants that colleges and



universities apply for and in the case of TRIO, training for program directors and staff is included in the award and detailed reporting is required.<sup>6</sup> One of the concerns with the use of the Pell grant in the specific context of higher education in prison is that Pell funding is dependent upon student enrollment, potentially incentivizing colleges and universities to enroll more students with little to no attention quality.

The Pell grant is one of the most important mechanisms for access to higher education in the country, originally made available through the 1965 Higher Education Act as the Educational Opportunity Grant (Pub. L. 89-329, § 401, 79 Stat. 1232 (1965)). The federal investment in and recognition of the importance of higher education for all people, regardless of their ability to pay, was and continues to be to a significant mechanism for social mobility in an increasingly stratified society. Twenty-five years into the “post-1994 era” we potentially find ourselves on the eve of the reinstatement of Pell grants for incarcerated people. In May, 2019, the U.S. Department of Education formally extended the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, inviting institutions in collaboration with states departments of corrections to apply to be included in the experiment. At the same time, a groundforce of energy has emerged to support full reinstatement for people incarcerated in state and federal prisons (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Yet, many questions remain about who will be considered eligible (i.e., Will people be excluded from participation because of crimes committed, length of sentence and/or eligibility for parole)?; What types of experiences will be offered to students (i.e., distance learning and tablet-based programs “pushing out” face-to-face programming because of the promise of ensuring more “safety and security” within the facility)?; and what credential and/or pathways will be available (i.e., prioritizing career and technical programs because of deep-seated beliefs about the career opportunities available to returning citizens)? Amidst the conversations about how, when and why Pell should be reinstated are secondary conversations, some would say, being pushed too far to the edges, about the need for “quality guardrails” or ways to ensure that the programs that will most likely emerge once a free flow of federal funding support is released are of high quality and designed in the best interest of incarcerated students and not the best interest of college/university enrollment statistics. In particular, we are concerned about college/universities that will seize upon opportunities to enroll incarcerated students to account for falling enrollment rates on the non-carceral campus. We also have significant concern about programming types that have already emerged during the first round of the Second Chance Pell ESI that does not provide on-site and in-classroom instruction to students with ample opportunities to meaningfully interact among peers and faculty, opportunities to participate in academic challenge, receive consistent feedback on assignments, among other experiences that are the cornerstone of quality higher education (see: Kim & Sax, 2014; NSSE, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). The current Second Chance Pell ESI call does not mention any of the aforementioned experiences as necessary for programs to consider in submitting applications and creating and/or expanding their programs. This is a problem, and flies in the face of the wealth of empirical research available indicating what students need access to during college to achieve student success. Additionally, because incarcerated people lack the same level of choice afforded to education seekers on the outside, they are at greater risk for substandard, predatory practices by questionable providers, without the ability to choose from a wide selection

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that there aren’t challenges with these Federal programs. Grant-based programs will always face the specific challenges associated with uncertain funding streams and grant cycles. Our point here is to simply acknowledge that there are other ways to think about Federal support for higher education in prison.

of programming. While significant uncertainty remains about when/if Pell will be reinstated, what guidelines and/or barriers to participation will be included and how quality will be safeguarded, there is time to take actions that will ensure the best possible outcomes for currently incarcerated students.

### **Building a Community of Scholarship and of Practice**

Nine years ago, when the first National Conference on Higher Education in Prison<sup>7</sup> was hosted by the Education Justice Project at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, seventy-six participants huddled in a single room on the university campus, many of whom had never met each other before. Programs and practices were discussed as if long-held secrets were finally being shared. In fact, many of the programs that were represented that weekend in October 2010, existed “under the radar”, and in some cases, it would be years before they would actively engage in public discussion. Fear of public backlash, the loss of what little funding support was being offered by the college/university, that private philanthropy’s resources were finite, and other fears that have yet to come to fruition, drove programs away from one potential source of significant support — each other. As we build the field of higher education in prison we will need to continue to address the secrecy and scarcity of resources model that has historically plagued this work, and has often stood in the way of programs’ ability and willingness to collaborate. At the same time, this does not mean that we should not continue to sustain a commitment to holding each other accountable for engaging programming that is high quality and first and foremost prioritizes the academic best interest of students. And, because we are yet to see a quality assurance model proposed by any entity (i.e., Department of Education, accrediting body or external evaluation, research or policy center) that offers more potential than the community of practice that has continued to grow over the past decade, it is imperative that we strive to achieve this goal: to be a community of practice that helps support all members achieve high-quality programming. We can only realize the promise of our commitment to quality if we can engage in transparent, public dialogue that includes the most possible stakeholders (e.g., practitioners, teachers, current and former students, researchers, funders, policy makes and DOC and university administrators) to engage in sustained conversations about high quality practice for in-prison higher education programs.

In 2019, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, in partnership with the Prison University Project published the report “Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison” (Erzen, Gould, & Lewen, 2109)<sup>8</sup>. To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive report written by and for practitioners to share quality recommendations for higher education in prison programs. The report draws upon the lessons learned from existing programs offering post-secondary education in prisons and a detailed overview of both the opportunities and challenges that in-prison education programs face in seven key areas: Program Design, Partnerships and Collaborations, Faculty Recruitment, Training and Supervision, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Instructional Resources, and Students Advising and Support Services. The *Equity and Excellence in Practice* report is one effort to engage in rigorous discussion about

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<sup>7</sup> To learn more about the annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison, visit: (<http://www.higheredinprison.org/national-conference.html>)

<sup>8</sup> Mary Gould is the director of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and co-author the report “Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison”.

the opportunities that every program has to continually improve and how we can all support the expansion of quality programming for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. Further, the report is timely in the context of the discussion of full reinstatement of Pell because it forefronts the need to make equity and quality central to policy initiatives intending to address access to higher education (in prison).

As we move forward, as a community of practice, we will have many more opportunities to address equity, access and quality as higher education in prison begins to occupy more space in criminal systems reform efforts; in particular, the experiences and expertise of practitioners and currently and formerly incarcerated students will be needed. We will have the opportunity to define assessment metrics and outcomes that are holistic and that focus on the whole person. We will have the opportunity to share these data and information and resources in an effort to raise the quality of all programs. We will have the opportunity to define and strengthen our external partners, particularly our partnerships with Department of Corrections across the country (and the Bureau of Prisons) who might become one of our greatest partners (as the gatekeepers of institutions across the country) to ensure that only the highest quality programs enter their facilities. We will have the opportunity to be a collective voice in rejecting utilitarian and outcomes-oriented rationales based in an antiquated philosophy of education as “corrections”, or a corrective to “criminal thinking”, a perspective that MacCormick rejected more than eight decades ago, writing:

To what extent lack of education is a cause of crime and to what extent merely an accompanying circumstance we do not know. How much effect education has on character we do not know: whether or not it has the power to create a moral desire or merely to stimulate a desire already existent and to give it something to feed on. We do know, however, that men and women in prison are as a rule undereducated and, however high or modest our hopes for the result, we should remove that deficiency as we should remove adenoids ... In brief, we are not ready to make its efficacy in turning men from crime the only criterion in judging the value of education for prisoners. (p. 3)

As we work to define and grow the field of higher education in prison and to ensure high quality and equitable educational opportunity for currently and formerly people, we hope that we continue to find spaces, like this one, to ruminate on the significant themes of equity, quality, and community building. Additionally, we believe that it will be useful, too, to create our own journal for the field that can elevate context-specific research and writing to improve practice and the experiences of students inside prisons. We believe that both the outpouring of interest in this year-long project, the quality of essays submitted, and the collective understanding that if the field is going to have a voice in larger, public discussions, including policy debates, that we need to produce and publish high-quality scholarship from the many stakeholders in the higher education in prison community (e.g., practitioners, teachers, current and former students, activists, policymakers, and researchers). An academic journal for the field of higher education in prison is a project currently under development and one that the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison is eager to contribute to our community.

In closing, we would like to thank all of the contributors to this special volume and everyone who has and will continue to be part of these conversations. It has been a great joy working together on this project and we have learned much from all of the collaborators and

those who have reached out to continue conversations started in this special series of articles in *Critical Education*. While making quality college experiences available to incarcerated people is an important part of comprehensive criminal systems reform, it is perhaps, more importantly, a necessary part of the democratic mission of U.S. higher education. Understanding the challenges that we face in addressing equity, quality, and community building is part of the process of realizing this mission.

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