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## **ADMINISTERING A PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM: PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND PROFESSIONAL INSIGHT**

JENNIFER M. KOHLER GIANCOLA\*

### I. INTRODUCTION: MY FIRST PRISON EXPERIENCE

It was a beautiful Sunday morning drive, yet I was feeling somewhat disgruntled. Sundays were one of the few and cherished days that I had each week with my family. Instead, I was driving to a “graduation” ceremony at a maximum-security prison. To make matters worse, it was a long drive from my home. I was still trying to determine how I had ended up the administrator for a prison education program, and I resolved to scrutinize more closely future proposals before agreeing to them.

I had some mixed emotions as I had never been to a prison. I was curious and a bit nervous. I envisioned prison yard scenes that I had seen in television cop shows. My anxiousness increased as the other faculty and I went through the formal procedures necessary to enter the prison walls. We had already received a written list of guidelines regarding appropriate behavior and dress code, but I somewhat naively had not anticipated the extent of the security measures.<sup>1</sup> When we arrived, our names were matched to a list and we received a body alarm; that in and of itself piqued my concern. We went through a metal detector into a secured airlock where we once again showed our identification to guards behind a wall. The guards, in particular, made me illogically nervous, as if I might be persecuted for some transgression from my teenage years. Once the entire group was cleared, we then entered a second secure airlock before entering the guest facility. As I passed through the airlock, I took note of the electric fence running the perimeter of the facility.

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1. MO. DEP’T. OF CORR., FAMILY AND FRIENDS HANDBOOK 7–9 (2014), *available at* <http://doc.mo.gov/Documents/FFWeb.pdf>.

The process was intimidating and it was impossible for me to forget that I was in a maximum-security prison.

My adrenaline again surged as we entered the prison yard. It actually aligned with my mental picture but without the excitement. I wondered, "Is this safe? There's nothing between them and us. What if one of them or, worse yet, a group decides to rebel?" I tried not to stare, but I couldn't stop my desire to look around and take it in like a child entering a circus. Now, I realize that we must have looked ridiculous to them: all walking in a straight line, feeling clearly uncomfortable, and towing our regalia. Who was the circus?

The ceremony took place in a large common room where maroon plastic chairs and a podium had been erected. The program administrators and faculty sat at the front of the room in our gowns, hoods, and tams. (I actually did feel ridiculous when we processed into the room.) My mind wandered as the usual ceremonial niceties took place. I looked out at the prisoners in the audience, all of whom were students in the Pilot Certificate in Theological Studies and, again, I tried to size them up. I looked for nonverbal expressions that might be cues to their circumstances and how they got themselves here. After all, I do have a doctorate in psychology.

It was not until one of the students began to speak that I took notice. Although there was no valedictorian for the group, a student was asked to speak as a representative of the graduating class. At first, I was just surprised, or shocked rather, at how articulate he was. "This is one of the best student speeches that I have heard," I thought. I have sat through a lot of painful student speeches. As he talked about the program being the only source of pride that he has shared with his young son, I became emotional and I soon felt the tears building. Now, I must share that I have a strict "no crying at work" rule and have abided by that mantra for my entire career. This was not just any cry, it was an ugly cry; the type that I could not control and that I wish I could have stopped. It was equivalent to the time that I had cried in a children's animated film. Naturally, I was humiliated.

With red puffy eyes, I congratulated the students after the ceremony. I had no idea what to say or how to say it. Thankfully, the graduates were more comfortable than I was. They made small talk but mostly were grateful and humble. One student stated that he "felt human again"; another was overwhelmed by the generosity of strangers. In our conversations, there was little evidence to support my stereotypes.

The drive home was equally as emotional. I called my husband on the way, describing every detail through blubbing tears. I talked to him the entire drive home even though he was waiting there for me. I believe that I told him that it was "the most meaningful thing that I had done in my career," and I would repeat that phrase many times over the next few years. So began my role as an administrator of the Saint Louis University Prison Program.

## II. HOW IT ALL STARTED

My introduction to prison education happened nine months prior to the ceremony. I was approached by Dr. Kenneth Parker, associate professor in Saint Louis University's (SLU) College of Arts and Sciences and founder of the Pilot Certificate in Theological Studies at the prison.<sup>2</sup> He and a faculty member in the School for Professional Studies wanted to collaborate on a foundation grant to support the expansion of the certificate to an Associate of Arts degree. The degree would be a partnership program between the College of Arts and Sciences and School of Professional Studies with the School of Professional Studies administering and conferring the degree. An argument was made for the School of Professional Studies to house the degree given that we served nontraditional students, had offsite locations, and were known for our administrative acumen.<sup>3</sup> In my role as the School of Professional Studies Dean, Dr. Parker and the School of Professional Studies faculty member were asking for my support to move forward.

My main concern was the workload of the program. I had experienced faculty with great ideas who did not have the time, interest, or skill to oversee the administrative details of initiatives. I insisted that we include a new position for a program coordinator. The position would be a staff person who would assist the director with the administration of the program. Given that I did not have strong feelings either way and was not confident that we would be awarded the money, I agreed. I did not think much about it again until I received an enthusiastic email confirming receipt of the grant.

Admittedly, we were unprepared for the Hearst Foundation to award the grant.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, I was not the only one who thought that the grant was a tenuous vision. At that point, we had to scramble to get approval for the Associate of Arts degree from the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Professional Studies curriculum committees, SLU's Academic Affairs Committee, and the Higher Learning Commission. We had to create the necessary fund structures, hire the faculty, order the textbooks, develop and implement an application and admissions process, and more. Furthermore, it became very clear from the beginning that we had to play carefully by the rules of the Missouri Department of Corrections (DOC). Thankfully, the DOC was pleased with the Pilot Certificate in Theological Studies and was equally as

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2. For more information about Professor Parker, see *Kenneth L. Parker*, ST. LOUIS UNIV., <https://sites.google.com/a/slu.edu/kenneth-l-parker/> (last visited May 22, 2014).

3. *About the School for Professional Studies*, ST. LOUIS UNIV. SCH. FOR PROF'L STUD., <http://www.slu.edu/school-for-professional-studies-home/about-professional-studies> (last visited May 22, 2014).

4. Kenneth L. Parker, *St. Louis University Prison Initiative*, ST. LOUIS UNIV., <https://sites.google.com/a/slu.edu/kenneth-l-parker/saint-louis-university-prison-initiative> (last visited May 22, 2014).

supportive of the Associate of Arts program. A number of staff and faculty from College of Arts and Sciences and School of Professional Studies stepped in to assist, and we were off and running with the program.

### III. PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

My personal transformation began with the graduation ceremony and has continued since. Until then, I knew very little about the program or prison education in general. Certainly I had heard that prisons were overcrowded and that there was corruption but, quite frankly, I had never given it much thought. It simply did not impact my daily life. To me, as Jody Lewen indicated in her article, “it did not appear as a crisis at all.”<sup>5</sup> After all, “bad people” have to go somewhere to pay their debt and be reformed. After three years of involvement with the SLU Prison Program, I still do not have the answers to problems with incarceration in our nation. Yet that does not mean that my professional and personal journey has not been profound.

I believe that my stereotypes of prisons and prisoners were fairly typical. Because I had never had direct contact with the prison system or knowingly with anyone who had been incarcerated, my schema resulted from what I saw on television and from sparse conversations on the topic. Of course, I did not realize the depth of my stereotypes until I worked with the program and interacted with individuals working and living in the prison. It was through those interactions that I began to recognize the humanity in the eyes of the men who live there.<sup>6</sup> I now view them as men who are currently incarcerated. In fact, their identity is not “prisoner” and as such, I have learned to change my language. They are “men who are currently incarcerated.”<sup>7</sup>

It was even harder for me to realize the stereotypes that I had about the prison staff. As I grappled with my stereotypes of the incarcerated men, my internal animosity toward the staff grew. Fortunately, our program has a coinciding Associate of Arts degree cohort for the men and women who work at the prison.<sup>8</sup> We initially started the staff program as a means for creating a supportive environment for the program.<sup>9</sup> If we had the support of the staff,

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5. See Jody Lewen, *Prisoner Higher Education and Social Transformation*, 33 ST. LOUIS U. PUB. L. REV. 353, 354 (2014).

6. The Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Bonne Terre, Missouri, where the SLU Prison Program is administered, is a maximum-security facility for men. See *Prison Program: Education, Research, Service*, ST. LOUIS UNIV. C. ARTS & SCI., <http://www.slu.edu/x49684.xml> (last visited May 22, 2014); *Institutional Facilities*, MO. DEP'T OF CORR., [http://doc.mo.gov/DAI/Institutional\\_Facilities.php](http://doc.mo.gov/DAI/Institutional_Facilities.php) (last visited May 22, 2014).

7. Moving forward I will use the term “incarcerated men” for stylistic writing purposes only.

8. *Prison Program: Education, Research, Service*, *supra* note 6.

9. See WENDY ERISMAN & JEANNE BAYER CONTARDO, INST. FOR HIGHER EDUC. POL'Y, LEARNING TO REDUCE RECIDIVISM: A 50-STATE ANALYSIS OF POSTSECONDARY CORRECTIONAL

then we thought we would be better able to change the prison culture. But for me, it seemed more about the incarcerated men than the staff. Over time, I realized the need for such a program in the relatively poor rural community that surrounds the prison. I saw firsthand the positive impact that it had on individual staff members, many of whom have worked hard to send their children to college and gave them an opportunity they were not afforded. The Associate of Arts degree for staff is truly one of the unique gems of our program.

#### IV. DEALING WITH PROGRAM RESISTANCE

One of the most helpful ways for me to sort out my beliefs and feelings about prison higher education has been the need to craft a standard response to those who are against the program. There are vehement resisters and strong opinions on both sides. While I have avoided becoming actively involved in public debates, I have dealt with resistance from family, friends, faculty, and staff. From colleagues, in particular, there has been a great deal of negative nonverbal behavior like eye rolling and disapproving expressions. The source of and reasons for resistance vary widely from personal wrongdoing, to criminal justice training, to liberal versus conservative values. I have respected the negative opinions of others and limited my efforts to “prove them wrong.” I simply have a different perspective, or at least one that has changed significantly since my involvement with SLU’s Prison Program.

I now use two divergent arguments in conjunction when making the case for the program. The first is a human rights argument: “Every person deserves access to quality education. Higher education not only benefits the individual but also advances society and our collective existence.”<sup>10</sup> I thought that this was a difficult premise to refute, but I was mistaken. The most common rebuttal is to state that it is not fair for the incarcerated to receive a free education. After all, “they had to pay for their own education or can’t even afford to send their kids to college.” I certainly understand this argument. In fact, I paid for my own college education at Saint Louis University. I respond, “I wish that everyone had access to a free, quality education. I can only make one change at a time, and I have chosen to focus on prison education for now.”

The second argument is a non-emotional one regarding the impact of prison education on society. The reality is that most incarcerated men and women will be released from prison and return to our neighborhoods. Research shows that more than 65 percent of those who are released will re-offend and

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EDUCATION POLICY 38–39 (2005), available at <http://www.ihep.org/%5Cassets%5Cfiles%5Cpublications/G-L/LearningReduceRecidivism.pdf>.

10. See International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), U.N. Doc. A/RES/2200A, at 4–5 (Dec. 16, 1966).

return to prison.<sup>11</sup> However, the recidivism rate is slightly below 6 percent for those who earn a bachelor's degree.<sup>12</sup> With 2.3 million Americans in prison (one in every one-hundred adults in the United States),<sup>13</sup> this decrease in recidivism can have a strong impact on the safety and economy of our nation.

These arguments used in combination have served me well over the last few years. It also helps that neither the prison staff nor the incarcerated men pay tuition.<sup>14</sup> But the most powerful way to overcome resistance is through direct contact with the students. Nonetheless, I still have empathy for the individuals, family, and friends who have suffered because of our students. These feelings juxtaposed against my reformed beliefs about the value of prison higher education cause me cognitive dissonance. I can imagine how those who have suffered must feel. For some, it may be a slap in the face to see the perpetrator of a crime receiving a college education for free. At the same time, I have seen the impact of our program and the gratitude and potential in the eyes of the incarcerated men. Reconciling this personal struggle is still a part of my journey.

#### V. LESSONS LEARNED

As a university administrator, I have learned a number of lessons regarding leading a prison education program. First and foremost, the program speaks for itself, so let it. Once a person interfaces with the program and students, he or she is typically moved by the encounter. Hence, providing opportunities for others to experience the program is one of the best things that a program can do for itself. There are many alternatives like newsletters, videos, testimonials, and samples of student's work, but nothing is as powerful as directly interacting with the students who are incarcerated.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, the SLU program has an arts and education program that provides the perfect opportunity for external visitors. SLU staff, faculty, students, board members, and others can sit side-by-side with the prison staff and incarcerated men for

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11. MATTHEW R. DUROSE ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., RECIDIVISM OF PRISONERS RELEASED IN 30 STATES IN 2005: PATTERNS FROM 2005 TO 2010, at 1 (2014), available at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf>.

12. KENNETH MENTOR, *College Courses in Prison*, in ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PRISONS & CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES 142, 143 (Mary Boswell ed., 2005).

13. PEW CTR. ON THE STATES, ONE IN 100: BEHIND BARS IN AMERICA 2008, at 5 (2008), available at [http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS\\_Assets/2008/one%20in%20100.pdf](http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2008/one%20in%20100.pdf).

14. Kenneth Parker, *St. Louis University Prison Program: An Ancient Mission, A New Beginning*, 33 ST. LOUIS U. PUB. L. REV. 377, 398 (2014).

15. Thomas F. Pettigrew & Linda R. Tropp, *A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory*, 90 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 751, 766 (2006).

lectures and literary readings, staged theatrical and musical performances, and small group workshops.<sup>16</sup>

At times, I harken back to the idea that we are treating our students like a circus act (i.e., “come look at the incarcerated”). Yet, the way to reach many people is through this very curiosity.<sup>17</sup> Finding ways that allow for face-to-face human interaction, not just observation, is most desirable; interacting with individuals is the best way to confront stereotypes.<sup>18</sup> For example, in one of our visits to the prison, we (incarcerated men, prison staff, faculty, students, and staff from the university) participated in a role-play simulated town hall debate that was unrelated to prison life. The roles were given out randomly and put each of us on different sides of a political and religious debate. It was powerful to be arguing with and against the incarcerated students, prison staff, and my university colleagues. The debate momentarily put us on equal footing where everyone’s opinion and voice were part of creating the event. Each voice counted. In that moment, we did not perceive differences in our circumstances. After numerous visits, we have learned that it is important to process our experiences in prison, either through conversation or through silent reflection. I have found that some of the most meaningful conversations engaged with my colleagues have occurred during the sixty-mile return trip to the university. There seems to be a need to discuss and grapple with the experience and the disillusionment of our stereotypes.

Keeping the program visible to the university leadership is important for the long-term viability of the program. While it may be difficult to get school officials to visit the prison, this is the perfect place to share student testimonials and samples of their work. The SLU Prison Arts and Education Program has produced two publications containing the sketches and writings of members of the prison community, staff, and incarcerated.<sup>19</sup> Although this is another strength of Saint Louis University’s program, such a formal publication is not requisite. What is important is for the intended audience to hear the “voices” of the students. Readers are frequently shocked by the content, quality, and richness of the student’s voice.

Given that SLU is a Catholic, Jesuit institution, it is crucial and fairly easy to connect the mission of the prison program to the university’s spiritual and social mission. While sharing the story of the program and students with

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16. See *Prison Program: Arts & Education Program*, ST. LOUIS UNIV. C. ARTS & SCI., <http://www.slu.edu/prison-program/arts-and-education-program> (last visited May 22, 2014).

17. See Pettigrew & Tropp, *supra* note 15, at 766–67.

18. See *id.*

19. See Sean Worley, *College in Prison Program Students Publish Literary Journal*, ST. LOUIS UNIV. STUDENT GOV’T ASS’N (Aug. 28, 2012), <http://sga.slu.edu/diversity/vp-of-diversity-social-justice-announcements/collegeinprisonprogramstudentspublishliteraryjournal>; ST. LOUIS UNIV. PRISON ARTS & EDUC. PROGRAM, *1 INSIDE OUT* 9 (2011).

leadership, I have frequently demonstrated this connection. The program is not a moneymaking venture, but it is in support of social justice and aligned with Catholic teaching.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, both the prison staff and incarcerated students have engaged in service learning projects, which is an important tenet of Jesuit education.<sup>21</sup> As part of a class project, the staff students held a trivia night with proceeds supporting a food pantry for underserved children in their community: a perfect example of the fulfillment of our mission. The incarcerated students developed a pre-GED tutoring program, a literary journal for the prison, and service-oriented student organization that is now a registered organization with the SLU Student Government Association.<sup>22</sup> Finally, it is always essential to provide the university leadership with regular updates on funding progress and public relations success.

While there are many other best practices that I could share, I will give a final piece of practical advice: do not underestimate the administrative workload of the program. Developing, implementing, and running a prison program is time consuming! Much of the program falls outside of the traditional processes and systems that are in place at the university. For instance, the incarcerated men do not have access to the internet, so all electronic student processes must be done manually by a staff or faculty member. Besides the typical administration necessary for an academic program, there are additional items like raising funds, establishing a board, publishing a newsletter, and collecting research and assessment data. Minimally, I believe that a program needs a fulltime staff administrator, a development officer, a research assistant, and at least one faculty member with designated program administration time depending on the size of the program.

#### VI. CONCLUSION: MAKING AN ARGUMENT FOR PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION

Since the graduation ceremony, I have sobbed on more than one occasion when discussing the program. I still grapple with my views on the prison system, but I firmly believe in the need for and value of prison higher education. It is an imperative in my mind. Education is a human right that advances our shared experience. It cannot and should not be reserved for the affluent and privileged in our society. Nor do I believe that we should limit our efforts to just the educational needs of the incarcerated. There are populations in each of our cities who deserve and are thirsty for knowledge, the opportunity to engage in rigorous discourse, and the creation of shared

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20. See Parker, *supra* note 14, at 377–79.

21. See Sandra Cuban & Jeffrey B. Anderson, *Where's the Justice in Service Learning? Institutionalizing Service-Learning from a Social Justice Perspective at a Jesuit University*, 40 EQUITY & EXCELLENCE EDUC. 144, 148–49 (2007).

22. See *Degree Program: Prison Program*, ST. LOUIS UNIV. C. ARTS & SCI., <http://www.slu.edu/prison-program/degree-program> (last visited May 22, 2014); Worley, *supra* note 19.

understanding. The explosion of open source education and massively open online courses (MOOCs) are a testament to this need and provide another modality for expanding the availability and delivery of education.<sup>23</sup>

As the previous dean of SLU's School for Professional Studies, I experienced prejudice firsthand from colleagues on campus who believe that adult education is of lower quality. In actuality, I believe that their beliefs are rooted in prejudice against students who do not "look" like the middle to upper-class Caucasian students who make up the majority of SLU's campus. In contrast, the SPS student body includes higher percentages of first-generation, minority, low-income, refugee, and older students, not to mention the incarcerated students. Universities cannot continue to ignore growing class and income inequality. We have a responsibility to be a part of the solution and to make education accessible.

This article is in fact a continuation of my journey. It has forced me to think more deeply about my experience and my beliefs. It has forced me to take time to reflect, and for that I am grateful.

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23. See Jeffrey R. Young, *Episode 88: Why Universities Should Experiment with 'Massive Open Courses,'* CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Oct. 6, 2011), <http://chronicle.com/blogs/techtherapy/2011/10/06/episode-88-why-universities-should-experiment-with-massive-open-courses>.

