

Prison University Project



photo by Phil Carter

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

October 2013, Vol. 8, No. 2

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Years ago I was at an event and met a woman who was an administrator at a local community college. She and I chatted about my work, and the next day I got a call from her office, wanting to set up an appointment. I had long been interested in getting local community colleges more involved in our work at San Quentin, and was overjoyed to hear of her interest.

But as I chatted with her assistant, I mentioned that there was no internet access inside the prison. She sounded disappointed, as if this changed everything. Confused, I explained that we had no need for on-line courses – and that in fact students benefited far more from classroom-based instruction. The assistant then mumbled something about needing to get back to me, and quickly got off the phone. I never heard from her again.

When I talked about the experience with a colleague who had worked for many years in the community college system, she explained – with regret – that many community colleges had started developing distance learning programs as a way to generate revenue to make up for their increasingly dire budgetary shortfalls. Overhead was low, and at least at the time, enrolling large numbers of incarcerated students was also a way to increase the flow of public funding that was calculated on a per capita basis. When that administrator asked her assistant to set up an appointment with me, she wasn't pursuing an opportunity to provide high quality education to people in prison; she was pursuing a prospective revenue stream.

After this experience, I began paying more attention to the distance learning programs that operate in many California prisons. Because internet access is not allowed, nearly all such programs rely on physical mail. The best of those programs – which include on-going individualized communication with an instructor – are prohibitively expensive for most students. The rest consist mostly of textbook reading assignments, occasionally video-taped lectures, and multiple choice exams.

Many of our new students who have spent time at other institutions before arriving at San Quentin have taken such classes. Their commitment to pursuing an education under such conditions is extraordinary, as is that of those faculty and staff who attempt to help them achieve their goals. Yet many of those students are surprised when they are placed by us into college preparatory classes since, regardless of the number of units they have earned, most have not yet learned how to write a college level essay.

Sadly, people across the country are in the same situation: many distance learning programs – whether internet-based or not – reflect an understanding of higher education as little more than the transfer of units of information and rote skills through memorization. Despite their marketing, they offer few if any opportunities to acquire strong critical thinking and communication skills; to become part of a larger scholarly community of fellow students and expert faculty; or to produce original, creative intellectual work.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the lowest quality programs are typically marketed to the most vulnerable students: prisoners, veterans, disabled people, low-income people, and first generation college students – precisely those with the fewest options, the least resources, and the greatest likelihood of being academically underprepared. And yet these are precisely the students who need the very best educational opportunities, not the worst.

The problem is not technology per se; the problem is the lack of any informed public consensus regarding what higher education is, or any formal mechanism for protecting vulnerable students from the substandard programs of either for-profit or non-profit institutions. Instead, so-called “innovation” in the field of higher education continues to be driven – unchecked – by the immense pressure on public institutions to enroll more students with less funding, and by the pursuit of the immense profits to be made exploiting desperate students.

Surely profit can, in certain contexts, be made doing good work. Yet as the prison system itself repeatedly demonstrates, when profit- or revenue-seeking enterprises (educational or otherwise) operate with no oversight or accountability; when those they serve have neither options, resources nor power; and when the complex social and regulatory forces that promote integrity and excellence are profoundly lacking – catastrophic problems abound.

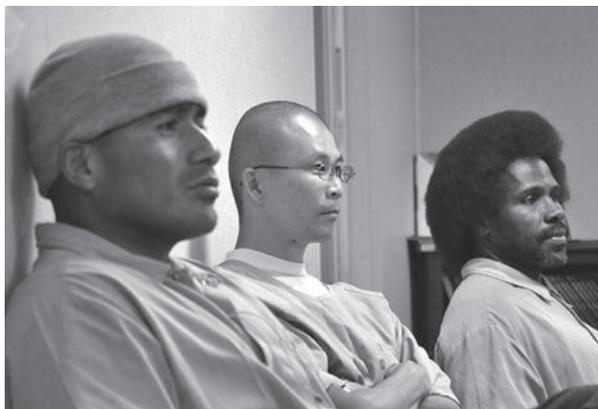
Some argue that providing high quality higher education to everyone would be an “unrealistic” or “prohibitively expensive” goal. But compared to what? The college I attended as an undergraduate now charges nearly \$50,000 a year – quite a lot, and yet not quite as much as California spends incarcerating each individual prisoner annually.

In fact, it is our failure to provide quality education to everyone that deprives us as a society of the extraordinary human and economic benefits that would flow from such an investment, and that continues to divert precious resources – and human beings – away from their creative, constructive, and life-affirming potential.

*With warm regards,
Jody Lewen*

Social Conformity and Resistance at San Quentin

In the Introduction to Social Psychology class taught at San Quentin last spring by Jennifer Eberhardt and Rebecca Hetey of Stanford University, students learned about the power of conformity. Why do people conform? What situational factors promote conformity? Are there situational factors unique to the prison environment that push people to conform? Following is an insightful journal entry by student Alexei Ruiz on this topic.



Not long ago, an old acquaintance arrived at San Quentin from a level III institution. The last time I saw him was in a level IV where the culture is totally different. He came with the large influx of inmates that came at the end of last year. As is customary, he observed the environment, getting familiar with the program. On one occasion, I saw an expression of shock on his face as he saw a young Mexican with his hair braided, and heard him comment while shaking his head, “Este vato! (this dude) has his hair done like a black dude!” On another occasion, I saw him wanting to play basketball, because that’s what he loves to do but he did not play because there were blacks playing. At the higher level institutions that doesn’t happen for the most part. Blacks play with other groups such as Asians and Northern Mexicans, but not with other Hispanics nor Whites, and the culture is such that if you were not a racist before you got there, you’ll become one once you experience it long enough. San Quentin’s environment was so unusual to him, just like most of the program. I could totally relate to him because that’s the same way I felt when I first arrived at S.Q.

When you asked last week how the power of social influence is experienced in a prison environment, my first thoughts came from an evolutionary perspective – survival. Then I thought about culture. If we consider the three forms of influence: conformity, compliance, and obedience, we can appreciate how they interconnect and how social influence varies along a “Continuum of Social Influence” (252) within prison, depending on the degree of pressure exerted on an individual. In this environment you are not totally stripped of your power of “choice.” You can still make your own decisions, and just like in the outside world they have consequences. You have the power to conform to group norms or maintain your independence, comply with requests or be

assertive, and obey or defy the commands of authority.

However, other factors can play a role in a decision-making process depending on the power of the situation. For instance, when an interracial riot breaks out you have the choice to get involved or not, but you are aware that if you don’t get involved you may regret it for the rest of your life. Most of the time, individuals “publicly conform” and get involved not just because they

fear the consequences of appearing deviant, but because they want to stay alive. Prison culture and politics are sufficiently transparent for anyone to understand, that unless you have difficulties reasoning, you behave according to what you believe is best for you.

Also, Bibb Latane’s social impact theory (1981), which proposes that social influence of any kind is a function of the others’ strength, immediacy, and number, demonstrates why prison culture has such influence on people. Prison culture is so complex, yet when you are exposed and confined to it for long periods of time in such a small environment, you absorb the culture consciously or not. Of course you can resist or yield to influence, but your options are limited. The culture’s strength is shown in the way people comply with and obey prison norms without much resistance even when they go against their beliefs. Prison politics are unambiguous and make you feel almost obligated to comply with rules, especially if you plan to be around for a while.

To conclude, going back to my recently arrived acquaintance, he was so used to the politics of his former prison that at first S.Q.’s program was unbelievable to him. He could have resisted the influence and maintained his

old beliefs, or he could have tried to defy S.Q. politics and start some trouble. But, he opted to adjust to the program. Moreover, he experienced “private conformity” and now we can see my acquaintance playing basketball with everybody, black or white. He was highly motivated and recognized that there wasn’t anything wrong with adjusting to S.Q.’s culture. His behavior shows that he found it worthwhile to change his old perceptions. — Alexei Ruiz



Cover photo, from left to right: Preston Walker (middle) congratulates Jordan Revels and Rodney Frazier, recent GED graduates, at the San Quentin graduation ceremony in June, honoring students who’ve completed their GED, AA, and other milestones.

Rebounding at San Francisco State University

An Interview with Jason Bell, Executive Director of Project Rebound

PUP: What is Project Rebound?

JB: Project Rebound is a special admissions and retention program for formerly incarcerated individuals who would like to earn a degree at San Francisco State University. The program offers special admissions for men and women who may otherwise not qualify for university acceptance because of minor academic and bureaucratic obstacles, such as rigid application deadlines. Once they are admitted, we offer multi-layered support services to all of our students in order to ensure successful completion of their degrees.

PUP: Would you share a bit about you, and your educational experiences?

JB: Growing up, I truly felt that I was not “college material,” was not smart enough to go to college, and would never fit in a traditional college setting. All of those false ideas helped to lead me to a prison cell. As a person who once was doing everything in his power to stay away from college, Project Rebound became the answer to help me overcome all of my fears. The beauty of it is that by learning about Rebound, I learned that there were people in the world who could understand what I was trying to accomplish. Since I started at Rebound I have not only completed my undergraduate degree with honors, but I have completed a Master’s degree in counseling as well. My college experience has been one of the best and most positive things I have accomplished in my life so far.

PUP: How many students have you met at SFSU who’ve come through San Quentin’s College Program, and what are your impressions of them?

JB: In the last three years, over 25 students have transferred from the PUP program to SF State University, and I can honestly say that they are the most prepared for a four-year college setting. They tend to gradu-

ate with honors more often than other Rebound students, and they are more likely to graduate within the expected time period. I truly wish all formerly incarcerated transfer students would have access to the level of academic preparation that PUP offers to their students.

PUP: What are your goals for Project Rebound in the future?

JB: We would like to expand Rebound’s mission to all 23 California State University campuses. Our intention is to someday be able to fill all the major gaps that have historically prevented people being released from prison in California to successfully reintegrate, socially and professionally.



Our dream is to eventually run our own Rebound Institute that provides wrap around services like safe, clean and sober, and stable family housing; a counseling center to address mental health as well as academic and career needs; an in-house clothing recycle center for new attendees who don’t have clothing; a computer lab and tutoring center; a full time day care facility to support students who are parents; and a tattoo parlor to utilize skills developed in prison legally, as well as tattoo removal.

PUP: How can people support your work?



JB: Our students need basic things, such as housing, school supplies and books, clothing, food vouchers, and public transportation vouchers, just to name a few. They also need jobs that allow them to use the skills they have obtained in their respective fields. It would be ideal if we could connect with professional mentors to help us get the ball rolling and to provide additional job training and networking for our students. We also need professional and legal assistance for successful Rebound students to obtain official Certificates of Rehabilitation, so they can apply for professional licensure and experience less discrimination based on their past criminal records.

In photos, clockwise from left to right: Alexei Ruiz, Keung Vanh, Van Wilson, Chris Scull, James Earl Evans, Kevin Tindall, Allen Webb, and Ali Tamboura in Social Psychology, spring 2013.

Photos by Sam Hearnese



PO Box 492 • San Quentin, CA 94964

Dear Friends,

I am so proud to say that I'm doing well working two jobs as a driver part time for Jackson Limo. No limos, just sedans and I work part time as a forklift driver graveyard at a warehouse in Compton. Pass the word about the forklift license. Real simple. Look up forklift.com for the nearest school. Three hour class, \$50, take test, pass and get your license and card then. A lot of openings for licensed drivers.



I am currently blessed to be living with my 89 year old grandmother. I have also recently adopted a dog named Dutchess. I have plenty of pictures to send and I can be kept up with through Facebook. I'm under Sean Simms. You should see a picture of a dog on a leash.

I can't thank all of you enough for the confidence PUP gave to me. Because of PUP I was prepared. I had seen it all, from English 99A to an A in English 204. Being able to socialize kept my communication skills up. I was comfortable in interviews.

I tell everyone about PUP. They're amazed. I can't thank you enough, oh... I almost forgot, I'm also going to Fiber Optics class two nights a week for 17 weeks. On week 4 now. Tonight was season Monday Night Football, had friends all going to meet up for the game. Nope, went to my Fiber Optics class and then to work. Same as in there. Don't stop Won't stop!

Please let me know if there is ever anything I can do from the greater Los Angeles District. Send my best to everyone and new staff. Let all my fellow pupils know that I think about them every Monday and Wednesday night when I go to school. Keep pushing, stay positive and believe in yourself.

Got to go, just excited to finally say Thank You!!!

Talk soon, call anytime.
Sean Simms

FALL SEMESTER 2013 COURSE OFFERINGS

English 99A (two sections)

English 99B (two sections)

English 101A, Reading and Composition

English 101B, Critical Reading, Writing and Thinking

English 204, Reading, Writing and Research (two sections)

Ethics

American Government

Comparative Religion

Physics with Lab

Math 50A

Math 50B

Elementary Algebra

Intermediate Algebra

Pre-Calculus

Spanish 102

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

Our mission is to provide excellent higher education to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, to create a replicable model for such programs, and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice.

We provide approximately 20 courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses in math and English, to over 300 students. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland. All instructors work as volunteers. We receive no state or federal funding and rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.