

# Wyoming Pathways from Prison brings postsecondary education inside prison walls

Diana Marie Waggener

## Graduation Day

*When I enter the South Facility Visitor Center, I notice a banner taped to the back wall that reads: "Congratulations Graduates!" I sense the excitement in the room. The musicians are set up and ready to play; graduates adjust their caps and gowns; some lean against the wall with the banner above their heads; others greet family members and talk to instructors. I chat with the musicians and learn that a couple of them are teaching music theory to those who are interested. Someone hands me a printed program, and I read the message on the front cover: "Education is the ticket to success." Instructors tell me how proud they are of these students—some have overcome great obstacles to be here today. I visit with a few of the graduates, and they happily talk about business plans and continuing education; one man mentions that he "should have done this ten years ago." I remind him that it never is too late.*

*I find a seat next to two women who traveled from Casper for the ceremony. As the graduates process, the musicians play Pomp and Circumstance. The woman beside me tears up, and I hear someone whisper, "That song always gets to me." Administrators and special guests take their places. We listen to opening remarks and introductions.*

*This year's keynote speaker, Professor Susan Dewey, School of Culture, Gender, and Social Justice, takes to the podium. Dewey is the coordinator of Wyoming Pathways from Prison (WPFPP), which offers college courses to Wyoming inmates at no cost. She speaks of gratitude and accomplishment and hope. She says, "It always is good to be with anyone anywhere who is working on personal growth."*

*The student speaker, Jeremy Seilaff, bounds up to the podium. He extends a substantial smile and gives a well-articulated short speech. He confidently reminds his fellow learners, "If we want to change our lives, we need to get an education."*

*I watch each man accept his certificate and then shake hands with Dewey; the correctional education programs manager; the warden; the deputy warden; and the housing manager. I see the pride in the graduates' faces as they return to their chairs. Once seated, these new High School Equivalency Certificate (HSEC) earners turn their mortar board tassels from the right to the left, and everyone applauds the class of 2019 at the Wyoming State Penitentiary.*

## The Importance of Prison Education

Many people in U.S. prisons have not completed their high school education or even received a General Education Diploma (GED). According to Wyoming Department of Corrections (WDOC) statistics, 64 percent of male inmates enter prison with a GED or high school diploma and an average reading grade level of 8.7, while 68 percent of female inmates enter prison with a GED or high school diploma and an average reading grade level of 8.9. As of January 2017, 75 percent of Wyoming inmates who enter prison without a verified diploma or HSEC, which is similar to a GED, leave prison with an HSEC.

“Wyoming prisoners are among the best educated in the whole country, and the number of prisoners who earn their high school equivalency while incarcerated is higher than in the free world,” says Dewey, whose research and teaching focus on how socio-legal systems intersect with individual lives. “In other words, the education programs in the Wyoming prison system have all the ‘problem kids’ from high school who dropped out, and yet they finish at higher rates than their free-world peers.”

## Prison Education in the United States

Prison education is not new. As far back as 1789, prison education programs existed in the United States. Reflecting the larger educational structure of the Colonial period, which was influenced by the Puritan goal of salvation through Bible literacy, “Sabbath Schools” taught inmates to read and comprehend the Bible so they could identify their “sins,” seek forgiveness from God, and achieve salvation. According to Thomas Gehring, director for the Center for the Study of Correctional Education at California State University, the Puritan version of prison education was to change hearts and move inmates toward becoming more moral and value-centered human beings.

Between 1826 and 1840, prison educators began to develop secular curricula primarily centered on reading, writing, math, and, occasionally, history, geography, and the physical sciences, but in the 1870s, the reform movement began, bringing with it a new purpose for prison learning and a mandate that a number of incarcerated persons participate in educational and vocational programs as part of their prison sentence.

Penologist Zebulon Brockway (1827-1920) advocated for a prison education program that focused on rehabilitating inmates so that upon their release from prison they could return to their communities as transformed persons; and, in 1876, his vision was realized when the Elmira State Reformatory opened in New York City. Eventually, other prisons across the country adopted the Elmira prison education model.

While the educational aspects of Brockman’s reformatory were commendable, general treatment of prisoners was not, and after a state investigation of the reformatory’s excessive physical punishment of prisoners and Brockman’s poor administrative abilities, he resigned in 1900. Brockman spent the remainder of his life, however, chronicling his prison reform efforts and publishing an autobiography that describes his years in the American penal system and promotes his concept of transformative education.

Concurrent with the industrial revolution, market-driven prison education during the early 1900s focused on vocational training to help meet the high demand for skilled laborers. Educational programs could be found in most prisons across the country by the 1930s, but college-level education programs did not appear until rehabilitation became the primary objective of prison education in the 1960s. Illinois was the first state to offer live college instruction to inmates in 1962, and the program in Texas was the first to demonstrate that its college prison program reduced recidivism (the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend).

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Part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society domestic agenda, the Higher Education Act of 1965 aimed "to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in postsecondary and higher education." Incarcerated persons benefitted from this act, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Pell Grants were issued to prisoners interested in postsecondary education, which was offered in most states.

During the 1990s, however, prison safety became the overarching issue, resulting in shifting budgets that allocated less federal and state funds to education; and an amendment to the Higher Education Act, in 1992, denied Pell Grant eligibility to prisoners serving life sentences or those who were on death row. Two years later, passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act disallowed all incarcerated persons Pell Grant eligibility. The combination of budget cuts and no access to Pell Grants greatly reduced access to higher education in prisons across the United States.

### Current Prison Education Trends

In 2015, President Barack Obama created the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative to determine if financial aid influences the participation of incarcerated persons in educational programs. Within the first year, incarcerated student enrollment in courses increased by more than 200 percent. In February 2019, the initiative was renewed for another year. Currently, lawmakers are reconsidering the ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated persons, and the REAL Act was introduced with bipartisan support in both the House and Senate to repeal the Pell Grant ban.

President Donald Trump has included "supporting returning citizens" among the guiding principles for reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, as part of broader criminal justice system reforms.

Nonetheless, the ebb and flow of prison education funding generally follows public education trends. As creative and performing arts and humanities in public schools find themselves standing in front of the metaphorical guillotine, prison education tends to land in the same line. Proponents of a liberal arts education have long argued that the humanities, arts, and social sciences empower individuals and give them the necessary tools to successfully respond to complexity, diversity, and change. Opponents posit that education should serve as a direct pipeline to employment and that the arts and humanities are for the privileged few. Modern prison education programs usually lean toward so-called practical education.

As a general rule, state prisons offer adult education programs that emphasize literacy, vocational training, and high school equivalency, and, while these offerings are important, they tend to exclude creativity and intellectual development. Current "evidence-based-practices" programs measure success using narrow criteria such as test scores, pass rates, and recidivism. In addition, programs like these do not focus on the whole person.

A growing movement in corrections, nonetheless, places more emphasis on preparing former inmates to return to their communities with new skill sets that help them to function as better parents, partners, citizens, and neighbors. Clearly, basic education alone does not facilitate the kind of personal

growth and self-reflection necessary to change an individual's world view and responses to difficult situations—whether economic or interpersonal. As a result, an understanding of the importance of college education inside prisons once again is beginning to take hold across the nation.

### Wyoming Pathways from Prison (WPfP)

Despite financial constraints, universities and colleges are developing innovative ways to partner with prisons to convert the punitive approach toward convicts into one that encourages opportunity and access to higher education, including arts-based learning, which increases motivation, improves social skills, and results in psychological and attitude shifts (Cheliotis &



Wyoming State Penitentiary (WSP) Class of 2019. (WSP Photo)

Jordanoska 2016). WPfP, a trans-disciplinary and trans-professional statewide collaborative, is such a program. Keeping in mind that quality education develops emotional intelligence, as well as educational intelligence, WPfP aims to support inmates, as well as formerly incarcerated persons, as they move forward in life.

Partnering with the WDOC, WPfP has the primary goal of offering college credit to incarcerated persons at no cost, while also providing a valuable service to the state of Wyoming (thereby, serving UW's land-grant mission) and mentoring UW students in teaching and leadership. WPfP also has a memorandum of understanding with Eastern Wyoming College and Central Wyoming Community College that help to make this work possible. A regular volunteer rotation of UW faculty, staff, and supervised students teach at multiple correctional facilities in person or through remote instruction, playing an important role in helping inmates get ready to reenter free society.

The brainchild of Dewey and Alec Muthig (M.A. philosophy 1997), a professional educator, technologist, and project manager, WPfP began in 2016 with a three-week summer intensive learning experience, "Telling My Story: Voices from the Wyoming Women's Center (WWC)." (To read the book, go to: <http://sites.cortland.edu/wagadu/v-17-2017-special-issue-telling-my-story-voices-from-the-wyoming-womens-prison/>).

"This project was the dynamic result of three weeks of rigorous feminist collaborative work in prison between UW students and incarcerated women, who worked one-on-one to produce 22 self-reflective pieces by currently and formerly incarcerated women, as well as those who work closely with them," explains Dewey.

"The strength and sheer force of the writing featured in this book demonstrates how higher education in correctional settings has the power to transform lives, both within and outside prison walls."

Continuing with the self-reflective education paradigm, WPfP hosted Stoic Camp in summer 2017. Studying philosophy in general, and Stoicism in particular, affords a path to self-reflection and critical thinking, while also providing strong elements of personal purpose, virtue, and community. Based on the UW Department of Philosophy's annual intensive for philosophy majors, this week-long camp gave in-

mates at the Wyoming Honor Conservation Camp (WHCC) and the Wyoming Youthful Offender Program (WYOP) an opportunity to read classic texts, perform daily exercises in Stoic mindfulness, and write final essays.

"These concepts are important for anyone to explore," says Muthig, "and their study tends to build bridges between people of diverse backgrounds such as those residing at a university and those residing in a correctional facility. Stoicism also explores ways to face the human experience, which often is painful and difficult to navigate. This resonates immediately with many of our incarcerated students, who have had less-than-ideal lives, and it seems to have provided a positive way forward for some. We have heard that the concepts are discussed for months after the classes conclude. Philosophy has moved from academia to lived experience in the Wyoming correctional system. By the end of summer 2019, we provided the Stoicism class in every correctional facility in Wyoming to approximately 120 students!"

Also, in summer 2019, Assistant Professor Barbara Logan, Department of History and American Studies, offered a classics course to 15 inmates at WWC. Logan, who studies and teaches the history of texts from Antiquity to the Early Modern era with a focus on women and other "outsider" groups, taught a Greek course that included several texts, including Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and Euripides' *Medea*. Logan taught this three-week course via Zoom the first and last week, and offered the course live at the WWC the second week.

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Sandra and Tiffany, inmates at the WWC, do homework. (Wendy Perkins, B.A. Journalism 2011; M.A. Communications 2018, Photo)

WPfP steadily has increased its course offerings in a variety of subjects, including financial literacy instruction, training for incarcerated women to tutor their cohorts who are working toward their HSEC, mindfulness, and psychology. One course, “Incarcerated Parents as Readers: Fostering Improved Parent-Child Relationships through Storytelling as Performance,” helps inmates to connect with their children.

“Built upon the success of the ‘Fathers as Readers’ program, this course shared cutting-edge research about the impact incarceration has on families,” notes Dewey. “Prisoners practiced storytelling skills and then read a story on camera to a child in their lives while performing it with a hand puppet. The DVD, storybook, and hand puppet were mailed to the children with the goal of maintaining a connection to their incarcerated parents and relatives.”

WDOC Education Programs Manager Hayley Speiser began her career as an Adult Basic Education teacher at the Wyoming State Penitentiary (WSP) and developed the “Fathers as Readers” program.

“The WDOC’s partnership with UW’s Wyoming Pathways from Prison has been an absolute blessing to our agency and to the offenders we serve,” says Speiser. “The UW faculty are so gracious to volunteer their time in providing quality courses at each of our institutions. Stoicism and mindfulness classes have been some of the most beneficial courses for our population of offenders; they become more self-aware. The ultimate goal of the WDOC is to provide offenders with opportunities to obtain the skills they will need to be successful upon release.”

### Effects of Prison Education

Personal outcomes of prison education, such as gaining literacy or developing a specific skill, play an important role in helping incarcerated persons to rebuild a sense of self-worth, while earning some sort of certification or a GED communicates to potential employers that a person is capable of completing work and meeting goals. Research has shown that higher education far exceeds

vocational training and so-called boot camps in reducing recidivism, improving prison conduct, and helping inmates to maintain relationships with their children and family members. Programs like WPfP help incarcerated persons to develop a healthier sense of self.

“For many of our incarcerated students, the feat of completing *any* college course boosts confidence and helps them realize that they can be successful in college, work, and life,” says Muthig. “This is a major step toward positive personal change. In addition, WPfP offers topics that cultivate a more profound understanding of self and society. Particular classes of note include: ‘Memoir Writing in Prison,’ ‘Alternative Autobiographies,’ and ‘Introduction to Psychology: Using Psychology to Recover and Thrive.’”

Individuals who learn how to communicate effectively, analyze situations, use ethical judgment, empathize, and understand social responsibility tend to have a sense of dignity and self-control. Developing these abilities before in-

mates reenter their communities is especially important in a small state like Wyoming because former inmates often return to the communities in which they already are seen as undesirable neighbors. With these new skills under their belts, they have a better chance of rebuilding their lives.

### *Reduced Recidivism*

As mentioned earlier, prison education success often is measured through recidivism statistics. Research from the Vera Institute for Justice, a national organization that advocates for criminal justice reform, indicates that people are 43 percent more likely to stay out of prison if they receive some form of postsecondary education. In addition, inmates who participate in prison education programs are more likely to find a job after release into the free world, leading to social and economic stability.

### *Positive Influences on Children of Incarcerated Parents*

Prison education influences outcomes for children with incarcerated parents. A study of the Bedford Hills College Program found that children of the women enrolled in the prison education program expressed pride in their mothers' academic achievements and were inspired to take their own educations more seriously. This motivation can lead to breaking the cycle of intergenerational incarceration.

### *Improved Overall Prison Environment*

Directors of prison education programs often report noticeable improvement in general prison conduct and discipline. This may be due, in part, to prisoners self-policing because they don't want to permanently lose their prison education program. One report concludes that "changes in behavior can be attributed to improved cognitive capacity, as well as to the incarcerated person having the opportunity to feel human again by engaging in an activity as commonplace as going to classes" (Correction Association of New York, "Education for the Inside Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison," 2009).

## **The Women**

WPfP chose to begin its higher education initiatives at the WWC precisely because of the special challenges facing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. Dewey notes that research on women in prison expanded following the dramatic rise in drug-related convictions among women during the 1980s. Many scholars contend that women and girls involved with the criminal justice system face different issues, resulting from their criminal convictions, than do men.

"Most women incarcerated at the WWC, which houses under 300 women, have relatively short sentences, ranging from



Kalayah, Lacy and Lorri, inmates at the WWC, work together.  
(Wendy Perkins Photo)

four to seven years," notes Dewey. "Just under 78 percent received felony convictions for nonviolent offenses, and, as is also true nationally, just over 42 percent of incarcerated women received drug convictions."

Incarcerated women frequently violate gendered cultural norms, such as passive, unselfish, and obedient behaviors, and many people do not understand or have any experience with the forms of violence—sexual, physical, and emotional—that pave women's way into and through the criminal justice system. In addition, these women often have suffered grief-generating events and struggle with mental health consequences of such events long before they enter prison. In one study, an incarcerated woman noted, "Prison is the safest place I've ever been."

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Once released from prison, women face myriad challenges in securing employment, housing, and access to resources like mental health treatment and the opportunity to reenter college to finish the education they started in prison or to start anew. In large part, this is because of the significant stigma that surrounds felony criminal convictions. Also, the majority of formerly incarcerated women are mothers of young children and are likely to be victims of intimate partner violence, and, even if they do find a job, the chance that they will earn a living wage is very low.

“This is especially true in Wyoming where the economy primarily is driven by the extraction industry, resulting in boom-bust cycles, a transient population, and reliance on tourism to boost state coffers,” says Dewey.

### The Men

WPfP offered its first course in the maximum security Wyoming State Penitentiary in summer 2018. Instructors were allowed to continue teaching through lock-down procedures, which usually involves confining inmates to their cells.

“We have offered courses in all of the men’s facilities, as well as to the Youthful Offender Program,” notes Muthig, “with

topics ranging across literature, writing, philosophy, psychology, and financial literacy. Summer 2018 at the State Penitentiary was an impactful week of classes for students and instructors alike, as students successfully worked through challenging material, and instructors realized that they had some of their best students in the state pen.”

### Particular Challenges of Prison Education in Wyoming

Wyoming is divided into three geographical land areas—the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Intermontane (land between the mountains) Basins, and it covers 97,818 square miles, 97,105 of which are land areas. Although it is the tenth largest state in the United States, Wyoming is the least populous by area and is the second most sparsely populated state. Small towns are spread across this expansive land, with the two largest cities, Cheyenne (population 65,864) and Casper (population 56,387), more than a two hour drive apart.

Winters are brutal and long, often beginning in early October and ending in May, and, because Wyoming is windier in comparison to the rest of the country with greater temperature extremes, roads often become impassible due to blowing



These men take advantage of the library at the Wyoming Honor Farm minimum security facility in Riverton. (Wendy Perkins Photo)

## Wyoming Department of Corrections

The Wyoming Department of Corrections operates five adult prisons:

- Wyoming Honor Conservation Camp and Wyoming Boot Camp, a joint effort between the WDOC and the Wyoming State Forestry Division, is housed in Newcastle and contains three dorms for approximately 238 minimum-security inmates, as well as a 180-day boot camp program for youthful offenders who may work on forestry or fire fighting projects.
- Wyoming Honor Farm is a minimum-custody facility located one mile north of Riverton in which the Wild Horse Program plays an important role with inmate rehabilitation.
- Wyoming Medium Correctional Institution, located in Torrington, is specifically designed to serve as the main intake and assessment center for male inmates not sentenced to death who require high levels of protective custody and medical, mental health, dental, substance abuse, life skills, cognitive/behavioral, and/or sex offender treatment services.
- Wyoming State Penitentiary, located in Rawlins, is a high-custody facility for both general population and administrative segregation housing.
- The Wyoming Women's Center is the only women's prison in the state and is housed in Lusk.

For more information about Wyoming Pathways from Prison, go to: <http://www.uwyo.edu/gwst/wpfp/>

snow, drifting, and snow-capturing topography. As a result of its geography and climate, Wyoming is a tough state in which to travel from one place to another.

All of these factors combine to create a challenge to offering higher education to Wyoming prisoners. "In other states, instructors can commute to teach classes, but the greater distances in Wyoming, compounded by inclement weather, require us to either incur greater travel costs, which usually includes meals and lodging, or become creative with available technology," explains Muthig. "This has really driven our exploration of how we can use various remote technologies within secure facilities, and the Department of Corrections has been exceptional in its willingness to explore these options."

### Looking Forward

In the immediate future, Dewey and Muthig are working to expand WPfP's programming and capabilities. "We would like to offer more high-quality classes to more incarcerated persons, continuing our model of no cost to the students," says Muthig. "We have begun discussions with state community colleges to explore the potential of offering certificate programs in prison, which could act as a stepping-stone to an associate's degree. Many of our goals depend on successfully building our personnel and financial resources."

Currently, WPfP is an all-volunteer program, meaning those who are participating are doing so in addition to their full-time jobs. Having the means to fund a dedicated full-time

WPfP position would allow more time to build the structure needed for the next steps. In addition to staffing, WPfP plans to implement technologies that will provide asynchronous learning to prisoners and expand remote instruction, which would open many doors to education and personal growth in the correctional system.

"A prison sentence is a form of social death because it forcibly removes those convicted of a serious crime from their families and communities while stripping them of the most basic rights guaranteed by civil society, including the right to vote, to make choices, and to exercise control over one's own person," says Dewey. "All too often those who are sentenced to prison are also the most marginalized—the poor, the addicted, and the mentally ill—to the extent that prisons are now the largest addiction and mental health facilities in the United States.

Dewey believes that teaching in prison is a radical act because it provides those who are most marginalized with the most profound form of liberation—transformation through education. "Working with so many gifted colleagues throughout Wyoming to help lead a college in prison program is simultaneously inspiring and challenging," she adds, "and on truly difficult days when I want to give up because there is never enough money or enough hours in the day to do the work that we need to do, I take a moment to be inspired by a letter written by a prisoner who benefited from our college classes. 'Thank you,' it reads, 'from the bottom of my freed heart.'"