



Welcome to *College Inside*, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons. I'm Charlotte West, a national reporter for *Open Campus*.

March 10, 2022

The power of a single book

Tucked behind an interior design shop on Greenwood Avenue in north Seattle is a hidden repository of books that will eventually find their way into prisons across the country. The collection belongs to Books to Prisoners, a nonprofit organization that traces its roots back to the early 1970s and the opening of Left Bank Books, an anarchist bookstore in Pike Place Market.

The organization originally focused on support for political prisoners but over the years has become less political, broadening its mission to promoting self-empowerment and literacy, says Andy Chan, president of the organization's board. Many prisoners say that their interest in learning, and in some cases, desire for education, started by reading a single book.

Before the pandemic, Books to Prisoners received as many as 1400 letters a month. More recently, requests have gone down slightly, but the need has never been greater with access to prison libraries extremely limited due to COVID-19 safety precautions.



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People incarcerated in three Washington State prisons, for example, say they haven't been able to go to the library in almost two years. And even access to law libraries, which are legally required due to a 1977 Supreme Court decision, has been restricted.

Chan says that most prisons have some kind of library, but incarcerated people report that the texts are outdated or they have limited access to them. That's one of the reasons why Books to Prisoners has focused on sending literature to individuals rather than supplying prison libraries.

Restrictions on used books

The Seattle nonprofit, one of 30 some prison book programs in the United States, sends literature to prisons nationwide – at least in places where they are allowed in.

Some states have banned books from nonprofits or they don't allow used books, citing the potential for contraband. The Washington State Department of Corrections, for example, attempted to prohibit people in prison from receiving used books in the mail in 2019, but

quickly backtracked after public outcry.

Chan says they generally expect not to be able to send books to state prisons in Alabama, Michigan, and New Mexico because Books to Prisoners is not an "authorized" vendor, while Colorado, Connecticut, and Minnesota only accept new books.

Matching supply and demand

People send letters asking for specific books or subjects and then volunteers try to match the prisoner's request with whatever books are available and are allowed at that particular facility. Chan says the requests range from "let me have books, please" to 10-page, single-spaced lists of titles, authors, ISBN numbers, and publishers.

"The frustrating thing is obviously that there are millions of titles but we don't have every single book out there," he says.

Instead, volunteers are told to find books that are as closely aligned with the requests as possible. While that works well for prisoners who are just looking for general reading



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material, it can be challenging for people who are hoping the organization can help them with research requests or specific educational material. At times of peak demand, it can also take several months for Books to Prisoners to respond to requests, though Chan says they are relatively caught up at the moment.

Some books – like an English-Dutch dictionary – have sat on the shelves for years, while other titles like *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver and *Soledad Brothers* by George Jackson go out almost as soon as they come in.

The most frequently requested books are dictionaries and the most popular genres are Black studies, sci fi, fantasy, and horror. They also receive a lot of inquiries about literature on how to draw, learning Spanish, and vocational technology, Chan says. On the flip side, they have an overabundance of literary fiction.

Books to Prisoners works with a book recycler that donates around 10 tons of literature per year. They also accept “gently used” books from individuals. But that can lead to a mismatch. “The population who donates is not going to be reflective of the requesting population,” Chan says. “Historically we have gotten a lot more romance novels than we could ever get through. We also have a labor section and an antinuclear section that nobody ever requests from.”

Restrictions and rejections

Chan says they attempt to “self-censor” to increase the likelihood that particular books won’t be rejected from particular prisons. “We know what can get in and what can’t get into most prisons most of the time,” he says. “If we know it’s not going to get in, we’re not going to send it.”

Chan, who sorts all of the letters

that come in, has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of which states allow what type of books and what other restrictions might come into play. California, for instance, bans hardcover books and other states have limits on the number of books a prisoner can receive.

In January Books to Prisoners got national attention when they shared on social media a rejection from a private prison in Tennessee, where “Malcolm X Not Allowed” was written on the notice. Marshall Project journalist Keri Blakinger tweeted in February that Michigan bans books on how to learn Spanish because it “could be used by prisoners to learn to communicate in a language that staff at the facility does not understand.”

Chan adds that many prisons reject books on American Sign Language “because they are concerned that it means that prisoners will be able to silently communicate.”

Literature with imagery is also more likely to be banned. “In terms of the restrictions, usually most prisons are okay with the written word,” Chan says. “If you show so much as a butt crack or a nipple in pictorial form, that will get rejected from pretty much every single prison.”

The rise of mail scanning services such as Smart Communications, a Florida-based vendor that has been contracted by states such as Pennsylvania to digitize incoming mail, has added an additional layer of complication. Some states have a different mailing address for publications and packages.

Chan says reading is often a stepping stone to further learning, even with titles that might not be considered literary classics. Volunteers at Books to Prisoners are trained not to judge requests for specific kinds of literature.

“There may be a variety of different reasons why someone would want to read *Purple Panties*, as opposed to something else,” Chan says. “But

maybe it could be a way into education. They’ll read *Purple Panties* today, maybe they’ll read Shakespeare tomorrow.”

If you’re interested in donating to Books to Prisoners, Chan asks you to contact the organization at BooksToPrisoners@live.com to make sure it’s material they are able to use. Books on topics they can’t use create more work for volunteers, Chan says. People in prison who would like to receive free books can write to Books to Prisoners, % Left Bank Books, 92 Pike Street Box A, Seattle, WA 98101. Please be patient as the time to process requests can range from weeks to months.

Gender studies and prison ed in Wyoming

A recent debate in Wyoming is a case study in how the nation’s current discourse on critical race theory and gender studies could have a significant impact on prison education.

At the end of February, Republican state senators in Wyoming passed a budget amendment that would have prevented the University of Wyoming from using state money for gender studies classes, a move that could have had implications for the state’s only prison education program.

The Wyoming Pathways from Prison program is housed in the Gender and Women’s Studies program at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. The program, started in 2015, serves all four of the state’s men’s prisons and one women’s prison, offering both non-credit classes and some for-credit classes in collaboration with local community colleges. Faculty who teach in the program volunteer and the program is not currently funded with state dollars.

Although the state doesn't directly pay for Pathways from Prison, many of the most active faculty in the program teach gender studies, said Robert Colter, philosophy professor and co-director of the program. The proposed legislation could have also impacted what courses could be taught, mirroring the effect on campus, he said.

The vague wording in the budget amendment would have potentially prevented University of Wyoming from using any funding, including federal dollars from the Second Chance Pell program the prison education program has applied for, for courses focused on gender.

For the time being, however, gender studies at University of Wyoming is no longer under threat. Wyoming Public Media reported that funding was restored this week in the state's final budget.

Research & resources

Led by the inaugural cohort of its Justice Fellows Policy Program, The Education Trust analyzed state support of currently and formerly incarcerated students in eight states where the nonprofit works — California, Illinois, Louisiana, New York, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas. The analysis looks at issues such as state financial aid, sentence reductions for participating in higher education, and criminal history questions on admissions applications. You can find the report, A Toolkit for Advancing College Opportunity for Justice-Impacted Students, on the EdTrust website. Reporter Rebecca Kelliher also digs more into the report for *Diverse Education*.

PEN America is distributing 75,000 copies of *The Sentences That Create Us*, a book on writing behind bars. A free copy can be requested online at <https://t.co/ST7zHTQawK>, or by writing to:

Prison Writing Program c/o PEN America, 588 Broadway Suite 303, New York, NY 10012.

Ithaka S+R and Ennead Lab are launching a two-year research and design project to look at the challenges and opportunities of the physical spaces where higher education is delivered in prison. Please contact kurtis.tanaka@ithaka.org for more information.

News & views

The Juvenile Justice Information Exchange co-published my story on college programs for incarcerated youth, At detention facilities offering high school diplomas, college classes are seen as a next step. I look at how states like California, Utah, and New Jersey are providing higher education for a growing number of high school graduates still in the juvenile justice system.

At the beginning of March, the Wyoming state senate appropriations committee gutted a proposed \$50 million endowment that would have funded Wyoming's Tomorrow Scholarship, a state financial aid program to support nontraditional students who are 24 year or older. Unlike other state scholarship programs in Wyoming, students with criminal convictions would have been eligible as long as they weren't incarcerated when they applied for financial aid.

In March, Colorado launched *Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio*, the first statewide radio station in the United States to be recorded and produced by people in prison. Anyone with an internet connection can listen to the station 24-hour-a-day. The program is supported by the University of Denver's Prison Arts Initiative and will reach more than 14,000 incarcerated listeners, the Denver Post reports.

A proposal by New York Governor Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, to

restore the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for incarcerated New Yorkers is making headway in the state legislature. Seven members of the New York House have backed the program, *Spectrum News* reports. A poll, sponsored by a coalition advocating for TAP reinstatement, released Wednesday found that 58 percent of New York State voters favor restoring financial aid for incarcerated people compared to 28 percent who are opposed. If the legislation passes, New York would become the second state to repeal a state-wide ban following New Jersey, which put a similar law into effect in 2020.

The Appeal and Dissent Magazine collaborated to publish *How Corporations Turned Prison Tablets Into a Predatory Scheme*. "If prison telecom companies have it their way, tablets will not function as tools for education and rehabilitation—as both companies and correction systems have disingenuously promised—but as another extractive scheme," the authors write.

Let's connect

Please connect if you have story ideas or just want to share your experience with prison education programs as a student or educator. Right now, I'm especially interested in speaking with anyone experiencing challenges accessing Second Chance Pell Grants because of student loan default and juvenile lifers who have been shut out of education programs because of the length of their sentence.

You can always reach me at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org on JPay/Securus/Connect Network/Corrlinks or on Twitter at @szarlotka.

To reach me via snail mail, you can write to: Charlotte West, Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062.

— Charlotte



Welcome to *College Inside*, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons. I'm Charlotte West, a national reporter for *Open Campus*.

March 24, 2022

This week, we're featuring a guest essay by Nicholas Brooks, a writer who is incarcerated at Sullivan Correctional Facility in New York State. Nick profiles his friend, Daniel Sanchez.

First Person: 'I wonder about comeback stories. Danny's might be one.'

When I talk to my friend Daniel Sanchez about books and life and his college classes, I lean in, elbows on his cell bars. Sometimes it gets deep. "I would sell crack to my friend's mom — that was regular shit," he told me. "But in my ethics class I learn things like ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism, which made me question the choices I made."

Daniel Sanchez, or Danny, has always had a high aptitude and lots of ambition. In 2004, when Danny was 16 years old, he drove to Vermont from New York to sell crack cocaine and heroin. Scouting a gas station, he found his first



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customer and used the man's trailer to set up shop. Twelve days later, he drove back to Yonkers with \$60,000 in a Ziplock bag. It is unclear whether or not he realized how much natural ability he had. What is for certain is that the people who sent him there did.

I met Danny in 2019 when he landed here with me in Sullivan Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison in the Catskill Mountains of New York, with four natural life sentences. We have both been lucky to be in a state where privately-funded college-in-prison programs are widely available, but our journeys have been disparate. My experience with college in prison has been relatively smooth. When I landed in Sullivan in 2015, they were beginning a college program. I enrolled, got decent grades, and when my family came to the graduation ceremony in the facility gym, they were proud of me. I was proud of me.

Danny's journey was not like mine. It took almost nine years and nine different prisons — violence, solitary, violence, solitary — before he would enroll in a college

program. He wished that he hadn't been so violent, he wished he could have gotten in a college program earlier in his bid. With Danny's story, it appeared a hard life on the outside spilled over to a hard life on the inside. When I think of Danny, and all his potential, and his hunger to learn and his life without parole sentence, I wonder where he gets his drive. It also makes me think more about redemption.

I wonder about comeback stories. Danny's might be one.

Danny is Black and I am white, and we had very different early educations. I went to Horace Mann, a private school in New York, and I was expected to succeed. Danny, on the other hand, dropped out of school at 14 and later earned his GED in prison.

Seeing his extraordinary talent firsthand makes me feel guilty. My intelligence was groomed and nurtured, his was innate. When I look at Danny, I become frustrated because I see so much ability and greatness in him. I don't know if he can overcome the choices he made that put him here, and seeing all of



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his wasted talent forces me to look inward and ask myself: “Is it too late for both of us?”

Danny grew up in Park Slope, Brooklyn, in the Gowanus housing project, with his mom. He has three siblings. He started experimenting selling drugs at 10 years old, and by 14 he moved to heroin. He had been kicked out of his house and was living on the streets and in abandoned crack spots.

At 16, Danny was running his own crew, and they strong-armed a crew of older guys, forcing them to abandon their territory. He did so by paying a drug addict to ring the doorbell, in order to gain access. He snatched one of the dealers and dragged him outside of the building he wanted and beat the guy in front of residents and customers. “It was prime real estate,” he told me.

Danny moved to the Bronx, then Yonkers with his mom. Old time gangsters saw he was quick, in every way, including pulling a trigger. They manipulated him to do their bidding. He went to prison. In 2010, when he got out, he started doing his own thing. The older guys who’d put him on in the drug game felt violated and sent some shooters at Danny. They missed.

Weeks later, Danny ran up in their drug stash spot and shot up the place. Two people died, one was paralyzed, another three were shot but lived. Danny made a statement to the police, identifying his two accomplices. He violated the street code, and that’s part of what has made his life harder in prison. But it’s not like him making a statement helped him any. He was sentenced to life without parole.

In 2012, Danny was in Attica and wrote to his counselor to apply for college classes. They never even responded to his letter. So, Danny did what he knew best, started selling drugs in prison and ended up cutting someone who gave him a fake Western Union receipt.

Four years later, Danny was in the box once again. He had slashed someone over porn magazines. He had gotten a “kite,” or prison note, from his friend explaining that a guy on their tier had robbed him. “They stole the hos, bro!” he wrote Danny, and Danny took care of it.

In solitary, Danny became what is known as a box monster. He became primal. When a fellow prisoner on the housing unit was denied food one evening, Danny rallied the guys on the company to “stick it up” — meaning they refused to give back the plastic trays that their dinner was served on. This act of solidarity forced the officers to act. Danny was sprayed with pepper spray, extracted from his cell, and beaten by the officers while handcuffed. Then he was placed on what is known as deprivation — his water was turned off, except for five minutes a day during meals, and all of his property was taken, even his clothes.

When he returned to his regular solitary cell, the windows had been jammed open. In nothing but his boxers, and mattress on a slab, he was left to freeze. He used his teeth to rip open the bare mattress and cocooned himself inside to stay warm. When the officers came the next morning, they couldn’t believe what they were seeing.

“Bro, you pulled a Revenant,” I told him, referring to the movie in which Leonardo DiCaprio slept inside a carcass to prevent himself from freezing to death.

Danny told me that he had gotten the idea from the book by the same name in which a frontiersman survived the winter elements by sleeping inside a dead horse.

In 2017, Danny landed in Five Points Correctional Facility, a supermax in New York State. It was one of the prisons built with the “truth in sentencing” funds from the 1994 Clinton crime bill, which quashed Pell Grants for prisoners. When his bunkie started bringing back books from the college courses

he was taking, Danny read them all. He loved three in particular. Slaughterhouse Five by Kurt Vonnegut, A Nanking Winter by Marjorie Chan, and poems by Robert Frost. It inspired him to fill out an application, hoping to enroll in the next available semester. The response he received was less than encouraging. He was told that he had too much time left on his sentence and was ineligible.

When Danny landed in yet another facility in 2018, he had beef with the Bloods, because the co-defendant he mentioned in that statement was a member. One day, he was walking down the stairwell and he felt a razor slide down the back of his head. It’s a scene I’m reminded of every time I walk behind him and see the scar from the top of his Bic-bald head straight down to his neck.

He was transferred to Sullivan in 2019. Our first encounter was when I was trying to put together my flag football team. We had never really spoken much, but I knew he was flash fast and could do 100 pushups straight. I had my running back. As the season progressed Danny and I became friends. He told me that he’d just enrolled in college and it had changed him. It taught him emotional intelligence, helped him identify his feelings and made him question the street code.

Danny and I lived together in the same housing unit and spent much of our time together. We ate at the same table, played sports on the same teams, and sought out one another for meaningful conversation, which is in short supply inside. One evening, when I saw him after a class, he was animated, applying theories from ethics class to hypothetical dilemmas. “If you promised your daughter that you would be on time to her play,” he said, “but you saw a woman being mugged — would you break your promise to your daughter to help this woman?”

I recently asked Danny, now 36, how he felt about selling crack to his

friend's mom all those years ago. He told me he felt like shit, but that it was all he knew at the time. When I asked him how college had changed him, he replied that it completely reinvented his way of thinking, his ethics. "I'm choosing a different fork in the road," he said, "one I haven't traveled before."

Nicholas Brooks was born in London and grew up in Los Angeles and New York City. He is currently incarcerated at Sullivan Correctional Facility in New York State and will see his first parole board in 2035. This is his first published piece.

The reentry experiences of juvenile lifers

Almost all of 112 Philadelphians who have been released from lifetime prison sentences, imposed when they were juveniles, said they participated in some form of prison programming, but 53 percent reported having been restricted from vocational programs such as barbering (Pennsylvania prioritizes people who have less than five years left on their sentences for vocational training). Sixteen percent of those former juvenile lifers mentioned college credit courses when asked what programs they were shut out from.

Those were among the findings in a recently published policy brief on the reentry experiences of juvenile lifers in Philadelphia, which has the highest number of juvenile lifers in the country, according to researchers at Montclair State University in New Jersey, who authored the brief. Researchers also concluded that 82 percent of those surveyed participated in GED classes and 40 percent had some college programming.

"A lot of these guys who did end up taking advantage of the college programming were able to enroll through their perseverance as

opposed to these programs being allocated for them," said study co-author Tarika Daftary-Kapur, professor of justice studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey, which conducted the survey.

Roughly 80 percent of those surveyed Philadelphians who, as juveniles, were sentenced to life in prison had been suspended from school at least once and about half had been expelled before they were incarcerated. Sixty-four percent reported earning poor grades in school, researchers found.

Additionally, researchers wrote, 63 percent were raised in a household headed by one parent; 69 percent were physically disciplined at home; and 63 percent had experienced poverty.

Together, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Louisiana account for two-thirds of all juvenile lifers in the United States, researchers wrote in an earlier analysis. Pennsylvania has been ahead of the other two states in its resentencing efforts. That research team's previous analysis concluded that less than 1 percent of those who were released on parole early committed a crime that landed them back behind bars.

As more and more juvenile lifers, who were sentenced when they were under 18 years old, are being released through sentencing reforms following the U.S. Supreme Court's 2012 *Miller v. Alabama* ruling and its 2016 *Montgomery v. Louisiana* decision, the researchers sought to document their experiences before, during and after incarceration.

The survey respondents were between the ages of 38 and 67 at the time of the survey and had been incarcerated between 21 and 49 years. The majority of the juvenile lifers were male (94 percent) and Black (82 percent).

Although programming in general did not have a significant impact on juvenile lifers' reentry experiences, participating in college classes may

have had an effect on the type of jobs they had post-release, researchers concluded.

Seventy-one percent had jobs in areas such as construction, maintenance, janitorial services or retail. Around 22 percent were working in advocacy or the legal or nonprofit sectors or held administrative positions.

Daftary-Kapur said that while the numbers are too small to show a statistical significance between college classes and type of employment, follow-up interviews indicate that those who had college classes might be more likely to find white-collar jobs. "Those who sought out college credits seem to be the ones who landed those types of positions, based on early analysis," Daftary-Kapur said.

Twenty-nine percent of the surveyed juvenile lifers reported that finding employment was their biggest challenge for reentry. Along that continuum, 65 percent said having a criminal record was the biggest barrier to employment; 46 percent said lack of job experience was the biggest factor and 28 percent noted that a lack of job skills was the biggest obstacle.

Only 20 percent of respondents said that accessing educational opportunities was "the most challenging aspect of reentry." Daftary-Kapur said that their follow up interviews show that most juvenile lifers were not looking for educational opportunities after release. "It seems like education isn't the top priority when they're coming out," she said. "It's really getting a job, finding housing, and reconnecting with family."

One of the recommendations made by the researchers was to provide more programming and training for juvenile lifers, especially as a growing number of states are passing "second chance" laws. "As such, it might be prudent to revise policies that restrict lifers and virtual lifers from educational and

vocational programming,” they wrote.

Research & resources

PEN America is distributing 75,000 copies of *The Sentences That Create Us*, a book on writing behind bars. A free copy can be requested online at <https://t.co/ST7zHTQawK>, or by writing to: Prison Writing Program c/o PEN America, 588 Broadway Suite 303, New York, NY 10012.

Ithaka S+R and Ennead Lab are launching a two-year research and design project to look at the challenges and opportunities of the physical spaces where higher education is delivered in prison. Contact kurtis.tanaka@ithaka.org for more information.

The *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* published its first volume earlier this year. It's the only open access, peer-reviewed journal that publishes exclusively on topics and issues affecting the field of higher education in prison. For more information on receiving a copy of the journal or how to send a submission, email jhep@higheredinprison.org or write to Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, Attn: Journal of Higher Education in Prison, 1801 N. Broadway, Suite 417, Denver, CO 80202.

News & views

Cal State Los Angeles has received a \$1 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to establish the first in-person bachelor's degree program for incarcerated women in California. The university is partnering with Chaffey College to offer the new program for women, which builds on the bachelor's program for incarcerated men at California State Prison, Los Angeles County in Lancaster. Students at the

California Institute for Women in Riverside County will be able to earn a BA in liberal studies, with an option in interdisciplinary studies in culture and society. Classes are expected to begin in fall 2022.

Oregon did not offer any college classes for incarcerated women until Portland State University's Higher Education in Prison program launched at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, the state's only women's prison, in 2019. The program started as a one-year, 15-credit, interdisciplinary course designed to meet PSU's first year general education requirements. Since then, the program has raised over \$300,000 and now enrolls around 75 students, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported. This year Oregon lawmakers also passed a bill allowing online college courses at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility as well as the Snake River Correctional Institution, a men's prison.

A recent report by the Los Angeles Probation Oversight Commission, a civilian body that advises the probation department, highlighted the observations made during a series of site visits to classrooms in LA county's Juvenile Court School. The commission recommended that “all reform efforts for juvenile court schools in Los Angeles County recognize that improving student engagement must be the immediate priority.” The observers found that “classrooms generally lacked a culture of learning” and noted that students were not given space to express whether or not their needs were being met.

For Book Club Chicago, Pascal Sabino reported on a scholarship program in cannabis studies at Olive-Harvey College in Pullman, Illinois. The program teaches people who were once arrested on marijuana possession how to work in the cannabis industry, which was legalized in Illinois in 2019. Participants in the nine-month scholarship program receive free tuition, a \$1,000 monthly stipend,

and academic and other basic needs support. The scholarship is funded by tax revenues from recreational pot sales. Students earn a certificate in cannabis studies upon completion and the program is on track to have an accredited associate's degree in cannabis studies by spring 2023. Two cohorts with a total of 47 students have received the scholarship. The program aims to increase racial equity in the pot industry.

Let's connect

Please connect if you have story ideas or just want to share your experience with prison education programs as a student or educator. Right now, I'm especially interested in speaking with juvenile lifers who have been shut out of education programs because of the length of their sentence, or who have been resentenced and were then able to participate in education, as well as anyone incarcerated at a facility without academic or vocational education beyond high school. I'm also looking for information on how prison education programs are accommodating students with disabilities.

You can always reach me at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org on JPay/Securus/Connect Network/Corrlinks or on Twitter at [@szarlotka](https://twitter.com/szarlotka).

To reach me via snail mail, you can write to: Charlotte West, Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062.

— Charlotte