Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.

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Prison, rehabilitation, and wasted potential

Bill Keller’s new book, “What’s Prison For?”, came out at the beginning of October. Photo courtesy of Columbia Global Reports.

Bill Keller, former executive editor of the New York Times and founding editor of the Marshall Project, talks to Open Campus national reporter Charlotte West about his new book, “What’s Prison For?”. In the book, which came out in early October, Keller delves into the tension between punishment and rehabilitation in the U.S. prison system. Looking at rehabilitative efforts such as college-in-prison initiatives and other skill-building programs, Keller reports on innovative solutions in small pockets of the prison system that offer a glimpse of what the future could look like.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Charlotte West: Why did you want to write a book answering the question, “What’s prison for?”

Bill Keller: That’s the underlying tension across two centuries of criminal justice history in America: on the one hand a professed belief in second chances and rehabilitation, even redemption; on the other hand, a punitive mindset that can be unforgiving. At the risk of being glib, I sometimes think of it as Quaker America vs. Puritan America. A sharp turn toward punishment in the 1970’s gave birth to mass incarceration. That was followed by a (more-or-less bipartisan) move toward rehabilitation, which has now shifted back toward tough-on-crime fear-mongering in the run-up to midterm elections.

In the book’s intro you write, “It is a work of journalism, not political science or political advocacy.” Where do you draw the line between journalism and advocacy? Or, maybe a better way to phrase it is: Do you see a role for journalism in advocating for criminal justice reform?

The boundaries between journalism and advocacy have shifted in the era of cable news and social media. I think of journalism as evidence-based, impartial and open to new evidence and competing views. Advocacy is more prescriptive. When we started The Marshall Project in 2014, the mission statement did not endorse specific remedies, but declared our purpose as “creating and sustaining a sense of urgency” about a system that wasn’t (and isn’t) working very well. Journalism’s role is to provide the facts and analysis that advocacy organizations need to make their case.

You chronicle some of the shifts in attitudes towards criminal justice reform, becoming more punitive and then shifting back to more rehabilitative. One of the most recent examples of the focus on rehabilitation is the reinstatement of Pell Grants for people in prison. I’ve talked to advocates who are worried that there’s a very narrow window to prove that it works. What’s your take on that? Do you see a shift back towards more punitive approaches?

In voting to restore Pell Grants for incarcerated students, Congress prescribed more rigorous vetting and tracking of the programs eligible for Pell money…You can’t rule out the possibility that these quality-control hurdles will just become an excuse to say
no. Whatever the outcome, restoration of Pell Grants is a big deal. It sends a message that education of the incarcerated is not just humane but good for public safety.

You mention the growing abolitionist movement that imagines a society with no prisons at all. To what extent does that undermine the efforts of college-in-prison advocates when other progressive reformers see prison education as part of the prison-industrial complex?

Abolitionists deserve credit for drawing attention to the failures of the criminal justice system, but sometimes the perfect is the enemy of the good. Even if you believe in no-prison, no-police world is possible and desirable—I’m skeptical—it seems cruel to tell today’s prisoners, “Sorry, no college for you until the revolution comes.”

I often hear stories about education that starts with an older person gently (or not-so-gently) cajoling a younger prisoner into GED classes. How important are lifers in creating a culture of programming in a prison?

Great question. One of the distinguishing features of American corrections is a colossal waste of human potential. I’ve run across many examples of lifers who found purpose using their experience and credibility to help create a culture of programming, and many examples of younger prisoners who credit lifer-mentors with setting them on a better path.

Can you talk a bit about what you found in your reporting about the lack of educational opportunities for women in prison and why that disparity exists?

The disparity exists in part, I think, because there aren’t enough women at the table when corrections policy is made. I don’t think it’s a random fact that two states I cite for adopting strong reform agendas—Oregon and North Dakota—had corrections departments headed by women.

How did your own experience teaching writing in prison inform your reporting for the book?

My class at Sing Sing—which ran into the pandemic lockdown after four weeks—probably had a stronger effect on me than on the students. It left a swirl of impressions. I’ll cite two. First, as I note in my book, their first writing assignments underscored the experience of early trauma that shaped, or misshaped, their lives, and helped explain—not excuse, but explain—what brought them to prison. Second, my class consisted of “alumni,” prisoners who had already earned at least one college degree behind bars. They had accomplishments and aspirations, a sense of purpose and maturity, which reinforced my lament about prison. It wastes so much human potential. I hope to teach again in the winter.

What is the relationship between higher education in prison and prison journalism? Anything else you want to add?

There have been prison newspapers for more than 200 years—heavily censored, written mostly for inmates. Recently there’s been a number of prison journalistic ventures aimed at the outside world. The Marshall Project’s Life Inside features are written by all sorts of justice-affected people, but mostly prisoners. (Marshall then turns around and publishes its greatest hits in a print product for incarcerated readers, reaching into more than 700 prisons.)

The American Prison Writing Archive, now based at Johns Hopkins, is an accessible collection of writing about prison life. The Prison Journalism Project conducts classes inside a number of prisons on the basic skills and values of journalism and helps get the best work published in a PJP newsletter and mainstream news outlets. The writer’s group PEN America, gives prizes for prison writing. A few prison journalists (John J. Lennon, for one) have become regulars in mainstream magazines and newspapers. All of this helps demystify the least transparent branch of the criminal justice system.

How does it relate to higher education in prison? My guess is that many prison journalists learned their craft, established contacts, and got encouragement thanks to teachers of college courses behind bars.

A paper form for forgiveness is here... but it doesn’t work for incarcerated borrowers.

Federal Student Aid finally published a paper form for student loan forgiveness, in English and Spanish, on November 3. The website says the form is intended for people who have limited internet access.
It’s unclear if that means incarcerated borrowers. I called the Education Department for clarification when I saw the form, but they declined to provide immediate comment. I’ll keep asking.

A few barriers stood out to me with the current form: It requires information that incarcerated borrowers don’t have, like a phone number and email address. And, it does not ask for the applicant’s physical mailing address. It provides a postal address to submit the form, but does not explain how the department will communicate with borrowers to confirm that their loans have been forgiven or if they need to provide additional information. The paper form appears to ask for the exact same information as the online application that launched in October.

As I’ve reported before, people in prison are generally unable to call the 1-800 numbers for the FSA Info Center or the Student Loan Debt Resolution Center to find out information about their loans. So right now, the Education Department has published a paper form for people who have limited access to the internet that requires...access to the internet.

Update as of Nov 3: Guidance from experts working in the higher ed in prison field is that people write onto the form a mailing address where the Education Department can send information back to them. If someone doesn’t have an email or phone, they can leave those blank. “Discussions are underway about how to modify the form to work for people who will be completing a hard copy version,” Margaret diZerega said on LinkedIn.

The final rules for Pell Grants in prison

In early November, the Education Department published the final regulations that will govern the implementation of Pell Grants for people in prison starting in July 2023. The regulations outline what colleges that want to offer prison education will need to do to use Pell Grant funds and what data they’ll have to report to the Education Department to assist in assessing programs.

The Education Department estimates that 450,000 incarcerated students will become eligible for prison education programs with next year’s expansion. This will be the first time since 1994 that incarcerated students will have widespread access to federal financial aid.

Margaret diZerega, director of the Unlocking Potential initiative at the nonprofit Vera Institute of Justice, said that one of the biggest goals of the Pell regulations is ensuring that prison education programs are of comparable quality to what is offered on their main campuses.

“One of the benefits of these programs having access to Pell is that there are expectations that come along with someone using their Pell eligibility to go to college, things like academic advising, career services and library resources,” she said. “Going through this particular funding mechanism, as opposed to it being strictly through philanthropy, obligates the college...to be thinking about how do they appropriately staff these programs, how do they bring in the right level of financial aid support, etc.”

The role of correctional agencies in determining whether or not a program was operating in the best interest of students and what metrics would be used in program evaluation were some of the biggest concerns commenters raised in the lead up to the rules. Commenters stressed that correctional agencies, in their role as “oversight entities”, might lack expertise and capacity.

Here are three ways the Education Department addressed public comment on the rules:

• The most prominent change the Education Department made in response to public comment was making outcomes data optional rather than mandatory, including the continuation of education post-release; job placement rates; earnings; recidivism; and program completion.

• Commenters also called for greater transparency and accountability measures for correctional agencies, such as an appeals process for prison education programs that were not approved, but the Department declined to incorporate any into the regulations, citing a lack of authority. It did note that an appeals process would be a best practice.

• The Department also declined to address concerns that some correctional agencies would exclude students with certain convictions or long sentences, even though eligibility established by Congress is “sentence blind.” Some commenters had asked that the regulations should stipulate that prison education programs could not bar people based on nature or length of their sentence.

The Department noted that it does not have the authority to regulate a college’s admissions requirements or how a correctional agency restricts enrollment in postsecondary programs.

diZerega said that broadened access to higher education in prisonushelp will hopefully alleviate some of the previous restrictions. “It was such a huge win that when Pell reinstatement passed at the end of 2020 that it was going to be applicable to all people in prison, regardless of sentence length or conviction type,” she said. “When programs are in scarce supply, corrections departments have choices to make about who gets access to the program.”

But hopefully, she said, as prison education programs become more widely available, a broader array of people will get access.

However, diZerega stressed that colleges should think about diversity, equity, and inclusion in their prison education programs just as they do on campus. She added that colleges will need to get all parts of the institution on board if they want to design effective prison education programs.

The Department confirmed that Pell Grants can be used for correspondence courses but said that colleges offering print-based courses will have to follow the same approval process as other programs. “We seek to hold all programs accountable to the standards outlined in these final regulations, regardless of the method of delivery,” it wrote.
In this first-person essay, Ryan Moser, who is incarcerated in Florida, describes what it’s been like watching his son’s college journey unfold from afar.

I never took my education seriously. I dropped out of high school and got my GED when I was 16, going to work full-time breaking the law. I wasn’t a good student and didn’t care about higher education — to the disappointment of my father, a college professor, and my well-read, working mom. Even though I was encouraged to attend college or art school, I never listened to my parent’s advice.

Later in life, I had a son of my own, D. (I’m not using his full name to protect his privacy.) When D was a little boy of maybe five or six, he used to sit on my lap and I’d read to him, or quiz him on his homework.

As D grew older, his mother and I divorced and I struggled with drug addiction, eventually landing in prison. I love my son and wanted to be a part of his life while I was incarcerated, but parenting from behind bars is like an air traffic controller trying to fly a plane from the ground — you can relay information, but you miss the hands-on experience that matters most.

When D graduated high school with honors, I urged him to go to college, knowing the advantages of having a degree. I wrote long letters pressing him to attend a university and sharing my regrets of not continuing school. I emailed him studies about college grads earning almost a million dollars more in a lifetime than high school grads. But he wasn’t very motivated to apply to schools, and didn’t really have any direction after high school.

In conversations with my parents, I pleaded with them to push D to commit to school, and he eventually did by earning a soccer scholarship to a junior college. That became one of my proudest moments and a colossal relief, knowing that my progeny now was less likely to follow in my footsteps.

There are 2.7 million children that have a parent serving time in prison or jail on any given day. Studies show that children with an incarcerated parent are less likely to graduate high school and go to college than their peers, a continuation of generational failure that hurts everyone involved. However, with my son attending school his chances of succumbing to this fate narrowed. I became a college parent in absentia.

I’ve talked to men in prison who don’t know the first thing about higher education and don’t know how to talk to their kids about it. I’ve seen a man cry when talking about a daughter he’s never met graduate med school, and then asking me what an M.D. was. In a poignant role reversal, that same man was so inspired by his daughter that he enrolled in a college-in-prison program in Miami and eventually earned an associate of the arts.

With each report from home during D’s freshmen year — my folks sending photos of his first dorm room and giving play-by-plays of his soccer games — I lived vicariously through their eyes. I sent emails to my son every week asking for details about his new life, mostly to no avail. Our relationship had been strained since he became a teenager, and our communication waxed and waned.
My son made the dean’s list his sophomore year and his team went to the Division One Soccer Championship in Kansas, far away from our hometown of Philly. During these accomplishments I was only ever on the peripheral, calling my parents and staring at the screenshots from espn.com on my tablet with pride ... my son, the soccer star.

His junior year, I was able to help him pay part of his tuition with my stimulus check. I’m aware of how privileged I am, even in absentia, to have the ability to help pay for college for my son, and to have family who are able to guide him through the process. Even though I faced challenges supporting D through school, at least I was able to participate in some way.

I tried to make up for my past absence with present attention and love, inquiring weekly about his classes, girlfriends, jobs, and hobbies. When he transferred his junior year to the university in the same town where I lived for a couple years in my youth, we bonded over local hang-outs, dingy bars, and pizza shops on campus. But it constantly pained me not to be there; his college career unfolding without me ever experiencing it with him. Now he’s 22 and we’re reconnecting slowly but honestly.

As he finishes his senior year with my parents playing the role of advisor, financial benefactor, and liaison to a father inside prison, I glow with pride whenever I talk about his achievements: a marketing major with aspirations for a career in sales; a college athlete who went all the way; a boy who overcame adversity because of a father with an addiction.

And as I sit and look at pictures on my tablet, I can’t help but feel like a little piece of me is there. In fact, because I get out in December, I will be there in person to see him graduate next spring.

_Ryan M. Moser is an award-winning writer and recovering addict from Philadelphia serving 8 years in the Florida DOC for property crimes._

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**Student loan cancellation lawsuits, applications**

There have been two different federal court orders blocking the Biden administration’s student loan cancellation program in the last week. As of Nov. 10, the Education Department stopped accepting cancellation applications as a result. The department will hold the 26 million applications from borrowers that have already been accepted. The administration said it processed 16 million applications and will be ready to cancel those debts if and when the orders are lifted. And, the administration is trying to overturn the orders through appeal.

On November 18, the Biden administration asked the Supreme Court to reinstate the student loan forgiveness program. The administration is also considering extending the pause on student loan payments past the current deadline of Dec. 31.

The court orders do not affect the “fresh start” initiative to help bring defaulted student loans into good standing. Borrowers in default should still contact their loan servicers to enter into an income-driven repayment plan.

Earlier this month, the Education Department also published a PDF form for student loan debt relief that requests an email address and phone number and does not include a spot for a physical mailing address. **Guidance from experts working in the prison higher education is that people can write their mailing address on the form. If someone doesn’t have an email or phone, they can leave those blank.**

“Discussions are underway about how to modify the form to work for people who will be completing a hard copy version,” Margaret diZerega, director of the Unlocking Potential initiative at the nonprofit Vera Institute of Justice, said on LinkedIn.

Federal Student Aid confirmed they will retain paper applications they receive in the mail but cannot process them, according to Bradley Custer, policy analyst at the Center for American Progress, who attended a closed briefing where Education Department officials described the process.

_With the October issue of College Inside, we sent out a guide for incarcerated borrowers with instructions on how to seek cancellation with the print edition of College Inside. Please note that the guide does not reflect the current court orders and notes that the Education Department is still accepting applications, which was accurate when it was published on Nov 7. (https://bit.ly/3GtIXCb)_

_As of Nov. 18, the Education Department is not accepting online applications and said it will hold but not process paper forms it receives. The instructions to complete the cancellation application will be the same if the court orders are lifted. If you would like to receive a copy of the guide for incarcerated borrowers, please write to Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062. The PDF of the paper application is available online. (https://bit.ly/3OqH77m)_

**Transfers, lockdowns, and other disruptions**

For Injustice Watch, Adriana Martinez-Smiley, a senior journalism major at Northwestern University, investigated the impact of prison transfers and other disruptions on incarcerated students in Illinois.

As the closest prison to Chicago, Stateville has by far the most college programming of all Illinois prisons, with four colleges serving about 300 students a year. From May 2021 to October 2022, prison officials transferred nearly 400 people out of Stateville’s general population. The recent transfers, along with staffing shortages and frequent lockdowns, have been especially disruptive to postsecondary programming.

At least 60 of the transfers were enrolled in college courses through the Prison and Neighborhood Arts/Education Project, or PNAP, which offers a degree program through Northeastern Illinois University. That’s about a third of PNAP’s total enrollment, Martinez-Smiley writes. Two other universities did not respond to inquiries about how many students they’ve lost.
Martinez-Smiley previously interned with PNAP, where she had the chance to see some of the challenges that education institutions face when navigating correctional agencies. She shared more about her work via email.

“These difficulties aren’t specific to PNAP’s program,” she wrote. “More importantly, the largest stakeholders in all of this — the students — are being displaced...I wanted to focus on the experience of someone that was actually transferred from the facility at a time they didn’t expect, and how that affected them.”

She wanted to write about the difficulties faced by programs and students in Illinois because so much coverage of prison education focuses on success stories. “I didn’t find anything besides stories uplifting these programs — which is important — but also not showing the full picture,” she said.

Martinez-Smiley points to Devon Terrell, who finished his bachelor’s in 2019 but continued to take noncredit classes through PNAP. Not only did he lose access to higher education when he was transferred, he lost his community.

“While prison education is shown to reduce recidivism and increase employment opportunities for released individuals, I hope that people understand just how meaningful this access is to people inside,” she wrote. (https://bit.ly/3tFBFno)

News & views

- For JSTOR Daily, Phillip Vance Smith, II writes about how becoming a prison journalist prepared him to enroll in the only bachelor’s program in the North Carolina prison system. As a reporter and editor of Nash News, he learned critical thinking and how to communicate complex information. “For me, education does not serve a long-term purpose of supporting my survival after prison, because I will likely never leave,” he writes. (https://bit.ly/3VbaQ6s)

- For the Texas Observer, Michelle Pitcher delves into the uneven access to prison education across Texas, noting the Pell restoration might bring increased opportunities. Currently, 12 community colleges and two universities run higher education programs in 33 Texas state prisons. The other 69 state lockups have no programs at all. As the number of programs expands next year, “one area of particular interest to advocates is accessibility for all incarcerated students. Certain programs and classes are only offered in certain units, so women and prisoners with disabilities or medical conditions can get left out of the system altogether,” Pitcher writes. (https://bit.ly/3AsPWYh)

NewsMatch

As a nonprofit newsroom, we rely on grants and donations to keep bringing you news about prison education and sending this newsletter to more than 700 incarcerated readers. This is one of my favorite compliments from our inside readers: “We made multiple copies of your newsletter and they are circulating around the facility even quicker than COVID did.”

Until Dec. 31, NewsMatch will double your new monthly donation 12x or match your one-time gift, up to $1,000. If you would like to help support my work, send a check to Open Campus Media at 1 Thomas Circle NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005. You can also donate online. (https://bit.ly/3OnwZwa)

About this newsletter

Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about prison education produced by Open Campus, a national nonprofit newsroom. Topics we cover include college-in-prison programs, Pell Grants for incarcerated students, career and technical education, and education in juvenile justice facilities, among other higher education issues.

We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a monthly print edition. You can subscribe to the email newsletter at https://bit.ly/3ToP2Uz or by writing to Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062. You can also sign up for the print edition. (https://bit.ly/3oMCmss)

You can reach us at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org, via JPay, Corrlinks, Securus, Connect Network, GTL, or at the postal address above.

Please note that Open Campus is a news organization that covers higher education. Open Campus does not investigate criminal cases or report on crime-related issues, nor do we provide educational courses or assist individuals in enrolling in education programs or obtaining transcripts. When we receive a letter, we will add you to our mailing list to receive College Inside. Given the volume of letters that we receive, we cannot always respond personally, but we appreciate your interest in our work.

We work with incarcerated writers, but do not usually publish unsolicited manuscripts, essays that have been published elsewhere, poetry, or stories on topics other than education. We are looking for story pitches that offer new and surprising insights about higher education in prisons with a clear angle and broader takeaway.

A pitch should be a paragraph with the main argument, like a thesis statement, and an explanation of the unique perspective that you offer on the subject. We prefer to work with writers in shaping their story ideas, so reach out if you have an idea. Please be patient. It may take several weeks before we are able to respond to specific ideas and may not have the bandwidth to reply to unsolicited manuscripts.

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