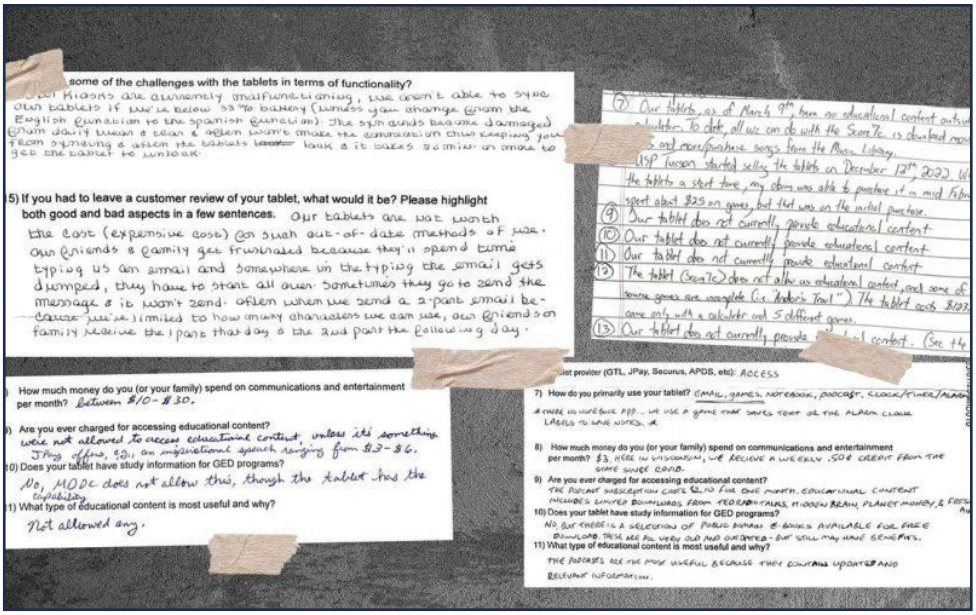
COLLEGE INSIDE

A newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.

OCTOBER 2023

We asked people in prison about how they use technology.



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BY CHARLOTTE WEST
SEPT. 28, 2023

Last spring, we sent a two-page survey to our incarcerated College Inside readers about the personal tablets that are increasingly ubiquitous in prisons and jails across the country. There's been a lot of coverage about the fact that these devices exist and how much people are paying to use them. (I've previously written about the challenges with troubleshooting glitches when the tablets don't work the way they are supposed to). What we wanted to know, however, is how people in prison actually use their tablets. Similar to a consumer product review, we asked them to rate their tablets, share the pros and the cons, and tell us if and how they used their tablets for education.

We heard back from around 80 men and women from across the country. Most responses were handwritten, but some people even used the tablets to send back their answers. (A special shout out to our former editorial assistant Maddison Hwang, who transcribed the bulk of the responses for us).

In general, people reported using their tablets for entertainment and communication. Only in a few instances did we hear that people are taking college classes on the state-distributed tablets. It was more common that incarcerated students who did use technology through their prison education programs had access to a separate laptop that was only for college. It's not unlike the free world where we generally have multiple devices — mobile phones, tablets, laptops, and desktops, all for different purposes.

The results also got us thinking about the difference between "education" and "educational content." Depending on the state, some tablets come with preloaded and preapproved content that can range from podcasts and e-books to Khan Academy Lite and GED prep material. But in others, "our tablet does not provide educational content" was a persistent theme.

We'll continue to cover the role of technology in prison education in the coming months.

A virtual lifeline or a digital babysitter? What it's actually like to use tablets in prison

Calculator. Word processor. Alarm clock. iPod. Mobile phone. Paperweight. These are just a few of the roles that tablets play in the lives of the people now using them in prison. According to the companies who make these tablets, they have around a million users in prisons and jails across the U.S.

Over the last decade, corrections departments have handed out these personal devices — which are part of a billion dollar prison communications industry — to the prison population. They've been pitched as educational and entertainment tools, connectors to family and friends, and a path toward digital literacy.

And their role is only poised to grow. More college-in-prison programs moved online during the pandemic, and an increasing number of tech companies

are interested in business opportunities created by the return of Pell Grants for people in prison in July.

While tablets have been a gamechanger for some, others who use these devices behind bars say they often amount to little more than digital babysitters. When Open Campus surveyed more than 80 people in prison about their experiences with tablets, we found that the promises of this technology often fall short.

User experience varies widely across systems and states. Some people are able to use their devices to conduct legal research, listen to TED Talks, watch Khan Academy videos, and draft journalistic articles. A number of colleges have also started to offer for-credit classes on the communication tablets, but the uptake has been slow.

The two biggest players in the industry, Securus and Viapath, have recently attempted to rebrand themselves as education providers, pointing to educational content on their devices. Securus, for example, said it has partnered with seven state corrections departments to offer classes through a dozen colleges. Since 2015, more than 1,600 incarcerated students have earned degrees using Lantern, Securus' learning management system.

The vast majority of users, however, say that they use tablets primarily for entertainment and communication. And even for those who have access to more comprehensive content, buggy apps, tech glitches, and unresponsive customer service often get in the way.

Many of the normal features that people on the outside take for granted are missing on Atif Rafay's tablet: no cut-and-paste option, no word processor, no external keyboard, and no recourse when movies he's paid for don't stream.

Take Atif Rafay's experience. His Securus JP6 tablet, issued to him in Washington state, lacks some of the basic functions that are central to writing, learning, and working – which is why he doesn't view it as providing "real education access," despite the fact that he uses it "constantly."

Many of the normal features that people on the outside take for granted are missing on his tablet: no copy-and-paste option except in his own messages, no word processor, no external keyboard, and no recourse when movies he's paid for don't stream. The only way he can save text is as a draft in his messages folder, which often disappears if the system crashes. Still, having access to LexisNexis for legal research is "precious," he said.

Rafay spends around $130 a month on his tablet, mostly on phone calls, which cost around $1 for 20 minutes. He wouldn't actually mind paying for access to more content. "I would pay $50 a month — or half of all I earn — for real education access," he wrote in response to our survey. "It's fine to charge money, but not when you are disabling our devices and preventing us from learning, writing, and working."

> **"We wish the tablets were bigger for the visually impaired and elderly, but beggars can't be choosers."**
>
> *- Patricia Prewitt, Missouri*

Corrections departments are the gatekeepers for any content on the tablets, and they ban everything from R-rated movies to e-books on topics ranging from coding to anti-racism. The same tablet can have much different content available depending on the state and even based on security level within the same facility.

Brian Bragg's tablet doesn't have a notebook app. So to save notes, he uses a game that saves text, or even the personalizable labels on the tablet's alarm clock.

Still, people in prison have found creative workarounds. Brian Bragg, who is incarcerated in Wisconsin, said that his tablet from the Advanced Technology Group doesn't have a notebook app. So to save notes, he uses a game that saves text, or even the personalizable labels on the tablet's alarm clock.

The poor user experience often discourages people from accessing available educational content. "The operating system is so clunky that no one wants to log out/log in just to explore what else is there," wrote H. L. Tapia in Ohio, who asked to go by her first initial, about her Viapath tablet.

People on the outside are used to toggling between apps with the swipe of a finger, but Tapia said that she has to log out and back in every time she switches between an educational app, the messaging system, or the music player through a multistep process that involves entering two different numbers, doing facial recognition, and clicking through the terms of service. That would be like having to restart your phone and manually enter your username and password every time you wanted to switch between Gmail and Spotify. (Multiple Viapath users reported the same challenge. In a statement, Viapath said that users can switch between apps in some cases, depending on if they are using free or paid profiles.)

The log-in process, meanwhile, can take anywhere between 30 seconds — when the Wi-Fi signal is strong — to five minutes, Tapia said. The ability to log on also ebbs and flows with the prison's schedule. The tablets go offline periodically throughout the day and have a reset every night at midnight. Users often complain about connectivity issues, regardless of vendor, and some said they couldn't use the tablets in their cells due to weak Wi-Fi.

Tapia has to log out and back in every time she switches between an educational app, the messaging system, or the music player through a multistep process.

This clunky user experience is not at all inevitable, said Patricia Prewitt in Missouri, which uses Securus tablets. Accessibility is also a major issue. "I was a coder for the Missouri Dept of Corrections for 20 years and know

this can be much better," she wrote. "We wish the tablets were bigger for the visually impaired and elderly, but beggars can't be choosers."

Another frequent complaint among the incarcerated people we surveyed was the cost. The average daily wage in prison, remember, is just 86 cents, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, and there are states that don't pay incarcerated people for their labor at all. In some states, the tablets themselves are distributed for free, with the idea that the tech companies will recoup the costs by charging for entertainment and communication services. Sometimes, prisoners don't receive individual tablets and have to check out shared tablets for a few hours at a time. In other places, people have to purchase the tablets themselves.

A spokesperson from Securus said the majority of their partner agencies provide tablets at no charge to incarcerated people, but for those that do have to purchase tablets, the cost does not exceed $130. A Viapath representative said they do not typically charge for tablets.

Prices for services vary, too. In some states, people pay by the minute. Elsewhere, there are monthly news, music, and movie subscriptions. California, for example, provides its prison population 20 free messages per week and charges 5 cents for each additional message. People can purchase a 30-day subscription to a news and sports app for 75 cents and a radio and music app for $5.49. In North Carolina, prisoners can purchase packages of minutes, such as $15 for a package of 1,500 minutes for entertainment and messaging. (Both states use the same provider, Viapath, which said it sets rates for services "by reviewing the requirements of the competitive bid process" from corrections departments.)

Costs were a source of constant frustration among those we surveyed. "The tablet was something to be excited about, until you realized you had to pay $2.15 for one song, or $1.99 per episode of your favorite show," Courtney Quillen in Oklahoma wrote.

There were also strong opinions about the entertainment libraries. "The only movies offered are PG13 or PG," wrote a man in Rhode Island (who did not consent to using his name). "I am an adult and I don't think that … watching rated R movies with violence, swearing, and the occasional left boob is going to cause me to reoffend."

In North Carolina, incarcerated men made a game out of emoji collecting. The emoji characters aren't available on the keypad, but about a year ago, the men discovered they were able to cut and paste emoji from news articles and then save them in their dictionaries on their Viapath tablets with a label.

In general, these tablets offer a stripped-down version of free world technology, with messaging interfaces more reminiscent of AOL than Gmail. The secure messaging isn't really email; friends and family have to create an account on an external website and request to be added to someone's contact list. They, too, pay per message.

Sometimes, though, the tablets are fun. In North Carolina, incarcerated men made a game out of emoji collecting—sort of like an inside version of Pokémon GO, but with the goal of catching all the smileys. The emoji characters aren't available on the keypad, but about a year ago, the men discovered they were able to cut and paste emoji from news articles and then save them in their dictionaries on their Viapath tablets with a label.

"Say I saved a unicorn emoji and attached it to the word 'fantasy' in my personal dictionary, whenever I begin to type the word 'fantasy' that appears with the emoji in the suggested words above the keyboard," Lyle C. May, who is incarcerated in North Carolina, told Open Campus a few months ago. May said one guy collected around 225 emoji. "It cost a lot of battery life and minutes in a bundle to do it, but the emoji gave messages character," he said.

Andre Anderson in Minnesota said that the lack of tablet accessories has also given him a new side hustle. He makes tablet holders out of cardboard and tape that he sells for $5 each. "They look like a 6 inch equilateral triangle with a storage space for the rolled-up rubber keyboard, charger, and earphones," he wrote in response to our survey.

A few people noted that having access to tablets made the prison environment less chaotic because it reduced tension over phone access and helped keep people occupied. Others, however, worried that the tablets promote complacence. "It gives me an example of what my wife and son have told me about everyone just on their phones," wrote William Batton, who is incarcerated at a federal prison in Minnesota. "We call it 'tablet zombie syndrome' here."

The lack of tablet accessories has given Andre Anderson a side hustle. He makes tablet holders out of cardboard and tape that he sells for $5 each.

People surveyed also said that while tablets are a poor substitute for free world technology, having access to any kind of device provides baby steps toward teaching digital literacy; knowing how to use technology reminiscent of the early aughts is better than not having used any technology at all, especially for people who have been in prison for decades. It's particularly crucial for people reentering society, who may have never used a smartphone or filled out an online job application.

And like everything else in prison, there's no freedom of choice — you have to take what you can get. As Bragg in Wisconsin put it: "There is nothing good about this tablet other than the fact that we actually have one."

Maddison Hwang and Lily Barajas contributed to this project. It was co-published with Future Tense, a partnership of Slate, New America, and Arizona State University that examines emerging technologies, public policy, and society.

The value of hands-on learning in prison

Aubrey Russell, a graduate of the Trades Related Apprenticeship Coaching program, spent four years as an apprentice after she was released from prison in 2018. She recently became a journeyman ironworker. (Charlotte West/Open Campus)

BY CHARLOTTE WEST
OCT. 11, 2023

GIG HARBOR, Wash. — "You can see the dig area," says Steven Petermann, pointing to a dusty patch of dirt outside the door of the workshop building. "It actually needs to be weeded out."

"Not it!" a voice calls out.

"Not it!" another echoes, as laughter breaks out among the group of women wearing forest green t-shirts emblazoned with the white Washington State Correctional Industries logo.

It's smoothed over now, but during masonry week this patch of dirt is where the women practice digging and backfilling trenches – by hand – as part of the training they receive through the Trades Related Apprenticeship Coaching (TRAC) program, which started in 2013.

The 16-week pre-apprenticeship program at the Washington Corrections Center for Women introduces the women to trades such as carpentry, construction, and ironworking. The goal is that by exposing them to those skills now, they'll be well-equipped for paid apprenticeships on the other side.

The program is physically and mentally demanding. The union test for ironworking, for instance, involves picking up an 80 lb piece of rebar — a solid steel pole — carrying it 100 feet, putting it down, picking it up again, and carrying it back… 35 times in 30 minutes.

"The rebar carry is probably at least as fun as the hole dig, right?" interjects Petermann — he runs the program. The women laugh again.

These women, part of the program's 64th class, graduated in May. Of the more than 250 women who have completed the pre-apprenticeship, 220 are no longer incarcerated and around 40 are active apprentices or have attained journey level status. The program also operates at Washington's second women's prison, Mission Creek.

When I visited the prison in May, Brittany Wright had plans to go down to the Cement Masons & Plasterers Local Union 528 in Seattle when she got out a few days later. She's now an apprentice working on a project for Sound Transit, making $31 an hour plus benefits. "I'm a little nervous, but more excited to get out there and actually start using the trades," she told me at the time. "They seem like they're willing to work with me. And that's all that matters."

TRAC graduates aren't guaranteed automatic entry into one of the unions, but the community relationships that Petermann has developed help smooth the way. Some union representatives will come to the prison to allow the women to take the entrance exam before they are released. Petermann has also secured grant funding that will help the women cover initial costs such as purchasing their tools and union membership dues. Having an employer they know they can reach out to when they get out can be essential to a successful reentry.

Getting into the program is a heavy lift — literally. Participants have to be physically fit enough to dig ditches, haul gravel, and carry 80 lb rebar all day long. The program has some attrition — sometimes people don't realize what exactly they are getting themselves into, Petermann says, until they actually feel the burning in their forearms.

TRAC is designed to simulate the workday of union employees in various trades, adds instructor Ian O'Doyle, all the while keeping ergonomics and safety in mind.

There's also a classroom component: The women have to do math homework, learn how to tie knots, practice interview skills, write a resume, and complete financial literacy lessons. Those skills will benefit the women even if they decide a career in the trades isn't for them, Petermann hopes.

Men incarcerated at Washington Corrections Center in Shelton are able to do a similar pre-apprenticeship that was modeled on TRAC, but they also earn community college credits. But Petermann says that the women's program actually has more autonomy and flexibility because it isn't run through a college. They can bring in instructors who might lack the academic credentials required to teach at a college but who have years of industry experience.

Higher education is not going to put food on the table

Petermann looks at apprenticeships as offering another kind of education, one that can immediately lead to a living-wage career without the debt that people often incur for college. "It's not the pathway, it's

another pathway," he says. "And so it's a different pathway for a different type of person."

Some of the women are also students in a college program through Tacoma Community College and the University of Puget Sound, in partnership with the nonprofit Freedom Education Project Puget Sound. Standing beside the dirt patch, talking over the traffic noise coming from Highway 16 on the other side of a double metal fence, the women reflect on what different types of education inside means for them.

When Soy was first incarcerated, she was facing more than 20 years in prison. (As a condition of interviewing Soy, the Washington Department of Corrections did not allow us to use her last name). Because of the length of her sentence, college was initially the only program available to her — TRAC prioritizes students who have a release date between 5 and 15 months away.

When she eventually transferred to lower security custody, she wanted to gain more practical experience. "I had to think about what I was going to do," Soy says. "I had no skills, nothing besides being in college."

She remembers a conversation she had with a representative of the laborers union who came to visit the TRAC students. She told him that she wasn't sure if she wanted a career in the trades, but was hoping to use the program to get her foot in the door. He told her that there were other opportunities to work within the industry, such as being a business manager. She said she hadn't really thought about how she could combine the practical experience with her degree before that interaction.

Tiana Wood-Sims, who works as a teacher's assistant for the program, says her academic classes have taught her critical thinking but won't immediately translate into employment. "Higher education has been a beautiful experience for me," she says. "I learned a lot about myself, but it's not going to help me to put food on the table."

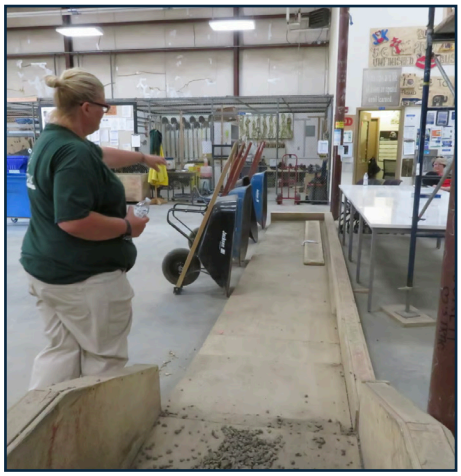
Wood-Sims, who will earn her bachelors from the University of Puget Sound in spring 2024, also did a pre-apprenticeship program in advanced manufacturing where she learned how to make parts using a CNC machine, which uses software to automate the tools used for manufacturing, or by manual operation on a lathe or mill. Like Soy, she's hoping to get a job and then move into a management position.

Veronica Marry, Tiana Wood-Sims, Brittany Wright, and Lani Kraabell are part of the 64th class to graduate from the TRAC program, which started in 2013. Instructor Ian O'Boyle stands in the middle.

Hands-on training provided by apprenticeships might do a better job than academic programs at preparing people to return to society. "This definitely prepares you for reentry," Wood-Sims says. "The network that comes with this is irreplaceable."

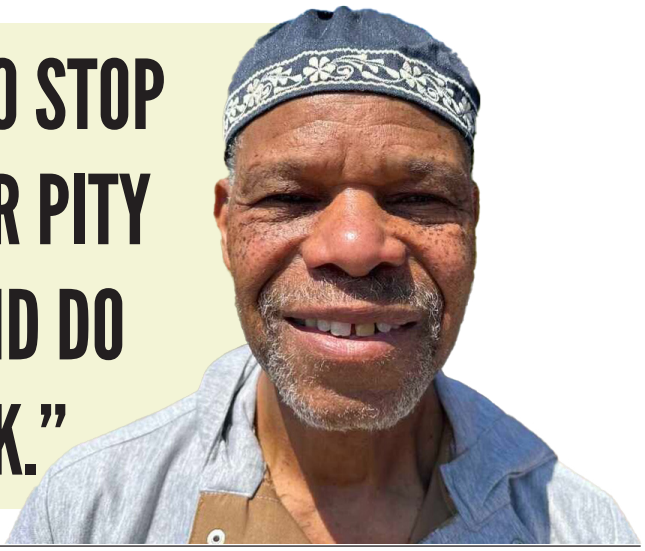
She adds that TRAC teaches other things you can't learn in a classroom. Earlier in the spring, she watched as the women pushed themselves to finish the rebar carry. "Veronica didn't want to do it, but she still did it. Brittany was about to puke, pushing her limits physically," she says. "It's a physical thing, but it's also so mental to have to overcome something. That type of skill, you get it through pushing through things. And that's going to be valuable when you get out because you know that you can do it, you know?"

This story was produced as part of the Higher Education Media Fellowship at the Institute for Citizens & Scholars. The Fellowship supports new reporting into issues related to postsecondary career and technical education.



Top: *Wood-Sims and Kraabell. Wood-Sims will also finish a bachelor's degree from University of Puget Sound in spring 2024.* ***Below:*** *Kraabell gives a tour of the TRAC workshop at the Washington Corrections Center for Women. (Charlotte West/Open Campus)*

"YOU NEED TO STOP HAVING YOUR PITY PARTIES AND DO THE WORK."



BY LONNIE MORRIS, as told to CHARLOTTE WEST
OCT. 25, 2023

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

When I went to prison in '78, they only had high school diplomas or the GED, depending on which prison you were in. I think maybe you could take some correspondence courses and they had a teacher that would help facilitate that process. That was about it.

They brought in a pilot program for a bachelor's [degree] from Antioch University to San Quentin in 1984 or 1985. That's when I first kind of got aware of it. Before that, they had some little classes here and there. There was no consistency until like the mid 90s, when Patten College came in with the Prison University Project [now Mount Tamalpais College].

I had dropped out of high school. I got back in school when I went to prison, where I got a GED. And that was just something to do. I also wanted to get into the trade program, and they wanted you to have a high school diploma.

What happened was, they brought the program in, and they were recruiting people to participate. And one of my friends told me about it, and said, 'Hey, man, this is a really cool program. They got some women up there, and you might want to go check it out.'

So I really went to go see the women, to be honest. I didn't really go to get into college. That was like a byproduct of it. That's the truth.

They used experiential knowledge coupled with your high school diploma. So once I qualified, I started thinking, 'Well, you know what, let me just see what this thing does.' And so I just kind of stuck with it. And, the next thing you know, one year, another year, and so on. And then three or four years go by, and I was graduating.

I've always been the person that loves to learn, but I wasn't the best student.

It was kind of like a slow-going process, where I started getting exposed to people in the academic world. I've always been a person that loves to learn, but I wasn't the best student. Even though I was haphazardly going in and out of school over my teen years, just getting back into a learning environment where it was new experiences, new information, new knowledge, it kind of stimulated my interest. Then, I understood, 'Oh, this is something I could try to do.' But I was still kind of in and out of really completing my assignments.

I didn't like the formal part of it. I didn't like sitting in those classrooms, listening to somebody tell you about something. That wasn't really my cup of tea. But you know, I stuck with it.

I graduated in 1988. But prison is a place where nothing ever happens the way it's supposed to happen. And so we didn't actually have our graduation ceremony till 1989. So myself and two other guys were the first three people to ever graduate from San Quentin State Prison with a bachelor's degree.

Prison has what we call a grapevine, where the word of mouth spreads fast

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, and career and technical education. We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a monthly print edition.

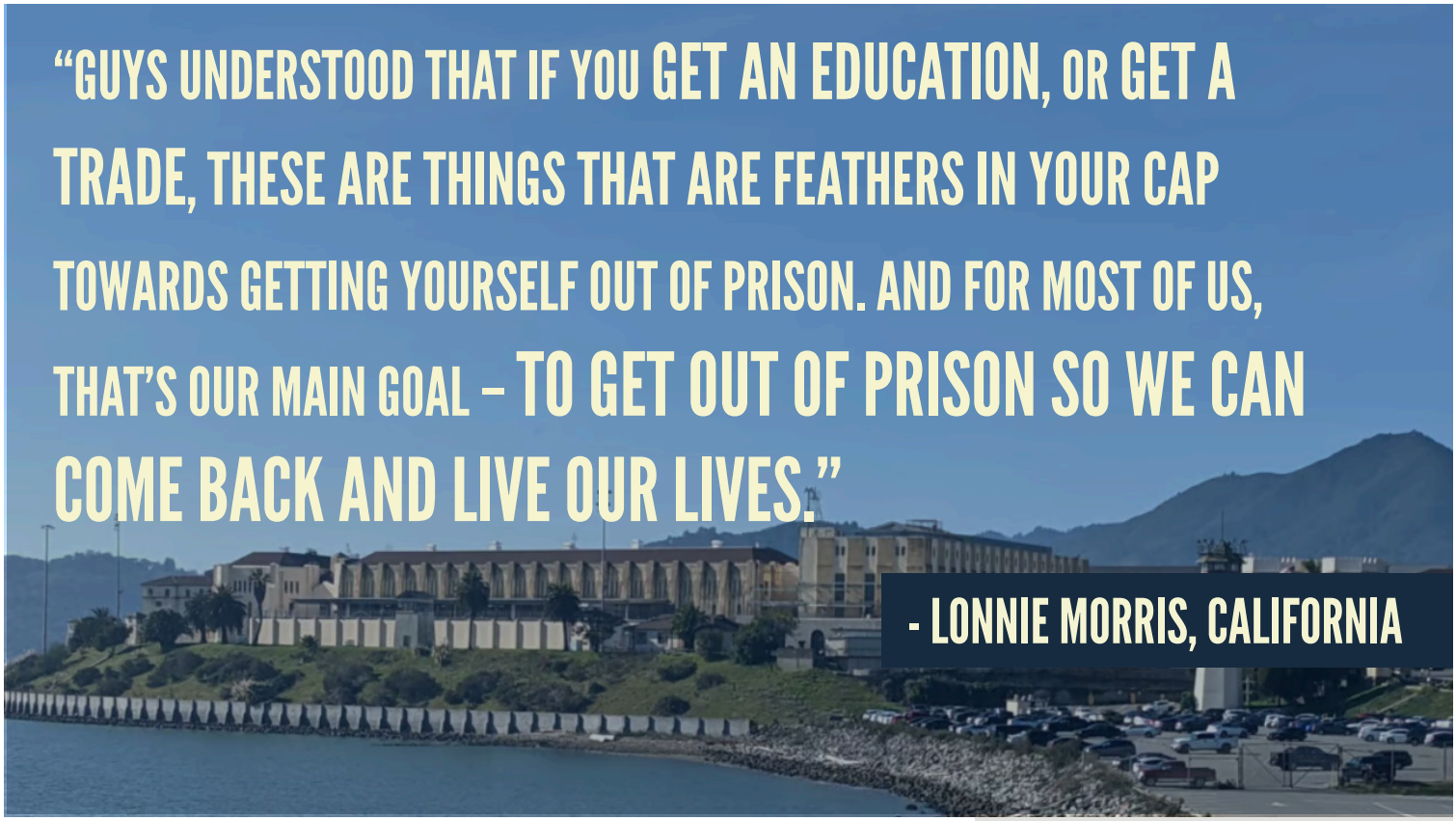
You can subscribe to the email newsletter at https://bit.ly/3ToP2Uz. You can also sign up for the print edition at https://bit.ly/3oMCmss) or by writing to **Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062**. (Please note that we are unable to distribute the newsletter electronically through the prison messaging systems).

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

Please note that Open Campus is a news organization that covers higher education. Open Campus doesn't investigate criminal cases or report on crime-related issues, nor do we provide educational courses or assist individuals. 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.

There is no cost to subscribe to College Inside. But as a nonprofit newsroom, we rely on grants and donations. If you would like to support our work, please send a check made out to **Open Campus Media** to **1 Thomas Circle NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005**.



about education. People started gravitating towards San Quentin. But more importantly, for a lot of us, it was about getting out of prison. And so, guys understood that if you get an education, or get a trade, these are things that are feathers in your cap towards getting yourself out of prison. And for most of us, that's our main goal — to get out of prison so we can come back and live our lives.

One of the fundamental things that education did for me, I'd say, is the fact of being able to actually accomplish something in my life. At one point I was gonna give up on the college program. I just wasn't doing the work. I had a lot of personal trauma going on. All that stuff impacts your ability to focus and function in a college environment.

I was slacking and my faculty supervisor — her name was Carol Foster — just kind of pulled me aside and said to me, 'Listen, man, there are people who would die to get the opportunity you have, where you're getting a full-ride paid for by the Pell Grant. You need to stop having your pity parties and feeling sorry for yourself and get about the business of doing the work. We can get somebody else to take your place.'

Carol asked me a fundamental question: 'Have you ever completed anything in your life?' And I had to look at that and say, 'Honestly, no.' Up to that point, I never completed anything. I dropped out of high school and dropped out of everything that I've been involved in.

She really helped me a lot. And she was kind of like the catalyst that helped me recognize that I could do more in my life and be a little more than I gave myself credit for.

Lonnie Morris served more than 40 years in California before he was released in 2021. He is the co-founder of No More Tears, a violence- and crime-prevention program at San Quentin.

We want to hear from you!

You can write to us here:

Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062

Or send us a message here:

charlotte@opencampusmedia.org

College Inside is going digital!

In the coming weeks, we will be partnering with Edovo, an educational app available on GTL and Securus tablets in some locations, and APDS, to publish both the archives and new issues of College Inside on the tablets. These partnerships will allow us to bring news about higher education in prison to more incarcerated people in more places.

We are also hoping that making College Inside available on tablets will alleviate some of the issues we've had with delivering the print newsletter in jurisdictions where mail is scanned.

Incarcerated people will not be charged to access College Inside on the tablets. *Our content is and will continue to remain free of charge for our incarcerated readers thanks to support from Ascendium.*