We must build a movement for education, not incarceration. A movement for jobs, not jails. A movement that will end all forms of discrimination against people released from prison—discrimination that denies them basic human rights to work, shelter and food.

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Editor’s Note

This issue of *In Transit* takes as its subject a special learner: the person who has been incarcerated. Deep inquiry into classroom practice is informed by the identities and experiences of our students—who they are now, in this city, at this time in our history—and it is from this position that the current issue of *In Transit* engages the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). It is our hope that the work collected here contributes to increased whole-campus awareness of the consequences of mass incarceration on the daily lives of our students, the educational needs of adults after incarceration and during reentry, and the ways our classrooms may best receive and learn from those with criminal justice experience. Supported by the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), all formal research published by *In Transit* was undertaken in the 2016–2017 Carnegie Seminar. It is offered here as in-house scholarship-in-progress, intended for revision and future submission to external, refereed journals. The writers welcome the commentary and critique of their colleagues.

LaGuardia’s community is strengthened by those who have long advocated for the just treatment of individuals convicted of crimes and for their rightful inclusion in civil society upon release. Throughout the journal’s interviews, personal essays, and conversations, colleagues and students bear witness to punishment that often outlasts sentences served—lack of employment, stigma, housing plights, and broken attachments. These themes and motifs overlap, settle, and then reemerge, reframed, in multiple contexts that reveal the often hidden and unexpressed experiences of the criminal justice-involved students in our classrooms.

Finally, we bring your attention to the thicket of endnotes and resources intended for those who want to learn more about the work of the human justice movement.
Foreword

Gail O. Mellow, President

LaGuardia Community College has dedicated itself to opening the doors of higher education to all. This edition of In Transit highlights our special commitment to the men and women who have been involved with the criminal justice system. It reaffirms the College’s responsibility to afford every opportunity for them to learn with us and share their knowledge and life experiences.

Mass incarceration, with its disproportionate impact on low-income people of color, deeply touches our students, their families, and our community. It is my hope that this issue of In Transit brings greater attention to those involved in the criminal justice system, and that the words published here move us to action. To maintain access to education, LaGuardians must be engaged in creating the policies and practices that create a more just society, and provide the intellectual tools to combat injustices, such as mass incarceration, that leave our communities and our nation diminished.
LaGuardia’s Prison to College Initiative: Evolution, Findings, and Recommendations

Jane MacKillop, School of Continuing and Professional Studies, Lehman College
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When an inmate, ex-con or whatever gets out of jail, they don’t have the right information, you know? So, they just go back to the community and they have nothing, and they just fall right back into the system.

Tony

Since repurposing the Long Island City Ford Instrument factory in 1971 to serve as CUNY’s ninth community college campus, LaGuardia has upheld its mission of deep inclusion, expanding educational access and career and social mobility to the historically underrepresented:

“What if we made CUNY’s founding principle—opening the doors of higher education to all—a reality?” The burgeoning Civil Rights movement of the 1960s drove nationwide protests that spilled from college campuses to the streets, as disenfranchised groups demanded social and economic equality. CUNY instituted an open admissions policy for all graduates of New York City high schools in 1970 and saw that year’s freshman enrollment nearly double.

Dubbed Community College Number Nine in the early stages of planning, LaGuardia, the ultimate test case in higher education, began to take shape. CUNY’s 1968 Master Plan called for a new kind of community college; this institution would serve the population in one of the city’s 11 poorest areas, in New York’s fastest growing and most rapidly diversifying borough: Queens (LaGCC, n.d.).

Conventionally referred to as “nontraditional”—low-wage, full-time and part-time workers, veterans, single parents, older adults, first-in-the-family to attend college, and new-to-the-States—LaGuardia’s current population defines the “new majority” (Ross 2016) of American students, less downtrodden than up-and-coming.

Equally eager to transform their lives, yet ambivalent about disclosing past history, are men and women entering the College with criminal justice records. Some have been held in juvenile detention centers, others detained on Rikers Island,
situated between Queens and the Bronx. Still others may have been imprisoned for long stretches in facilities located throughout New York State. Upon release and often struggling with challenges related to housing, family reunification, employment, education, and trauma, these individuals are especially vulnerable: The United States Sentencing Commission’s (USSC 2016) study on recidivism among federal offenders placed on probation or released from federal prison in 2005 indicated that, within eight years, 49.3 percent had been rearrested; 24.6 percent had been sent back to prison. A Rand Corporation study suggests that these statistics could be lowered by educational opportunity (Davis 2013). One of the largest studies ever conducted on prison populations, the Rand research stresses the positive effects of education in reducing recidivism and increasing the possibility of social and civic reentry: “Inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43 percent lower odds of recidivating than those who did not. This translates to a reduction in the risk of recidivating of 13 percentage points” (xvi; italics in the original).

The Evolution of the Prison to College Initiative

**Working Group, Mission, and Process**

In the early autumn of 2015, joining with prison reform experts who view the “imprisonment binge” (Austin and Irwin 2012) as a civil rights issue of our time, LaGuardia’s President Gail Mellow embarked on a renewed commitment to mobilize educational and vocational resources on behalf of those who are, in Michelle Alexander’s words, “locked up or locked out” (2012, 7) by a process largely determined by factors of race, class, and gender. Assembling a diverse group of campus criminal justice activists and advocates, President Mellow called for a study of the ways LaGuardia Community College might better support the transition to the classroom of individuals with incarceration history.

From the President’s October 2015 meeting emerged LaGuardia’s cross-campus Prison to College Initiative. Reflecting a wide range of criminal justice experience, the Working Group engaged many upper-level administrators and support staff from the Office of the President and the Division of Institutional Advancement, and fourteen faculty and staff members representing all of the College’s six divisions, including Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Adult and Continuing Education (ACE). Many members of the Prison to College Working Group had deep roots in the prison reform and restorative justice movement, and several had grown up in the “first” civil rights movement. Faculty taught at correctional facilities, served as mitigation specialists, mentored students with incarceration history in their classes, and advocated for them in their research. Student Affairs professionals offered mentoring through the Black Male Empowerment Cooperative (BMEC) and counseling in the Wellness Center. Staff from ACE’s Fatherhood Academy and Workforce Education Center provided high school
equivalency instruction, financial literacy, vocational training, and career readiness guidance to some of LaGuardia’s most at-risk and determined students.

Most of the working group knew—or knew of—each other, but none had previously participated in a campus-wide meeting called to utilize their expertise on behalf of an aspiring cohort of students who had spent more time in a cell than in a classroom. Surprisingly, as colleagues introduced their professional roles and personal reasons for engaging with restorative education, many became aware for the first time of the variety of post-incarceration reentry conduits scattered across the College. For example, isolated pockets of support and mentorship are offered by colleagues whose direct experience of the criminal justice system identified them as “go to” resources. Grant-funded programs for those who had been or were at risk of being criminally involved also exist, along with programs at a local jail and several training programs that, by nature of their target population, serve individuals with incarceration histories. However, the range of campus resources was matched by a lack of formal coordination among these services. Indeed, over the years, a reentering student may have found support in a post-incarceration campus underground learned about by word of mouth rather than the College’s systematic dissemination of information.

At LaGuardia, the anxiety many “new majority” students experience when making the transition to higher education is eased by the First Year Seminar (FYS), implemented in 2015 to orient the uninitiated to the conventions of advisement and academic life. But a student who has been locked up may resist disclosing to an advisor, a classmate, or on an ePortfolio page the reasons for gaps in his or her social or educational development, some of which result in behaviors, insecurities, and needs complicated by the trauma of incarceration. Further, the fear of stigma or stereotyping that contributes to a reluctance to identify as having an incarceration history may be paralleled by a gap in the institution’s recognition that the consequences of incarceration—parole, upstate visits, familial estrangement—unfold in our classrooms and affect the ways our students interact with content, relate to each other, and construct knowledge. Framing the problem as a “double-gap” of personal nondisclosure and insufficient institutional awareness that threatens a clear path to reentry, retention, and degree completion, the Working Group resolved to

*explore* the reentry landscape; *evaluate* how LaGuardia Community College currently serves youth and adults who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or at risk and their families; and *recommend* how the College can improve those services and educational opportunities.

In June 2016, the Prison to College Working Group presented its findings and recommendations to the Office of the President.
Data Collection
Over the past forty years, incarceration in the United States has increased to a historically unprecedented rate of approximately 700 people per 100,000 (WPB n.d.). The total prison population in America is the highest in the world, followed by those of China, Brazil, and the Russian Federation (ICPR, n.d.). Reflecting these alarming statistics are the many men and women entering LaGuardia classrooms. To identify best practices and the vocational, educational, cocurricular, and wellness services and supports necessary for successful transition from cell to classroom, LaGuardia’s Working Group attended conferences, conducted round-table discussions with community-based leaders and activists in the criminal justice reentry field, reviewed relevant literature and government papers, and investigated funding opportunities. Research also included strategic planning meetings with numerous LaGuardia faculty and staff directly involved with past and current reentry programs. Finally, the Working Group facilitated five group conversations with thirty LaGuardia students whose personal incarceration experiences added to the College’s understanding of multiple ways to identify and improve reentry support.

Discussions with Community-Based Organizations
In New York City, the civic reintegration of individuals returning from prison is often facilitated by the multiservice linchpins of the reentry system, such as The Fortune Society and the Osborne Association, both of which provide vocational training, job placement assistance, mental and physical health services, and educational programs that include literacy instruction and High School Equivalency preparation. The Fortune Society provides some housing, and both organizations advocate for housing on behalf of their clients. Smaller organizations specialize in serving women and their children, former substance abusers, and young adults. Hour Children, for example, located in Queens, employs women released from prison in an adjoining thrift shop.

In mid-April 2016, the Working Group invited representatives from all major reentry-related community-based organizations (CBOs) to LaGuardia, along with criminal-justice advocates associated with the city’s libraries, houses of worship, and college reentry programs. Over the course of two afternoons of extensive discussions, roundtable deliberations revealed the variety of ways in which CBOs assist persons with criminal justice histories navigate college admissions, strengthen self-sufficiency, revive social and family connections, and stabilize physical, mental, and economic health. As a starting point, three central questions were posed: First, how could LaGuardia better facilitate the transition from post-incarceration to college? Second, what are the particular needs of this cohort of learners and to what extent might these be different in degree and kind from those of students who have not been locked up? Finally, and more broadly, what is the College’s role in
corrections education? In response, cohorts of guests framed additional questions, and offered insights and recommendations captured on flipcharts by LaGuardia discussion facilitators. In addition to urging outreach to local external agencies, experts sounded a persistent theme: To fulfill post-incarceration academic promise, whole-school justice-involved consciousness must be raised.

Conversations with Students
Forming a second vital source of information were conversations with criminal justice-involved LaGuardia students who had reentered the community, and students with family members, neighbors, and friends who were or had been incarcerated. To understand the challenging effects of incarceration in jail or in prison upon our students, the Working Group recruited approximately thirty individuals to share experiences. Over a span of two months, the College hosted five discussions. Three were held with men who had been locked up. Women formed two additional groups; these were the daughters, aunts, mothers, sisters, friends, and neighbors who had close ties to individuals currently or previously incarcerated. With the exception of a few ACE-enrolled High School Equivalency students, all of the male participants were enrolled in credit-bearing courses. Most lived in one of the five zip codes, communities of incarceration identified in the “Eddie Ellis Seven Neighborhood Study,” which was first publicized by The New York Times in 1992 (Clines). Two of the discussions hosted by the Working Group are excerpted in Section II of this volume.

Findings
Coordinated Pathways of Reentry Information

The first thing is, people need information... As long as the information is there, and you are planting that seed, when people need [a resource], they will go to it. The first day of class, when you are talking about the syllabus and what to look forward to, you can absolutely put it on the board: “There is a Wellness Center for whatever needs you might have.” Provide that information. Information, information, information.

Nera

When an inmate, ex-con or whatever gets out of jail they don’t have the right information, you know? So they just go back to the community and they have nothing and they just fall right back into the system. So information is just not available to them at the time when he really needs it.

Tony
Most threatening to the newly released individual’s determination to remain crime-free is a critical lack of information necessary to productively navigate the city’s many reentry services and resources. For example, New York State’s Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) aims to reduce recidivism and promote community safety by means of County Re-entry Task Forces (NYS DCJS, n.d.), yet access to these services is dauntingly complex. Similarly, examination of New York’s deeply committed and richly informed range of individual community-based reentry organizations revealed disconnection across agencies, the result perhaps of competition for limited funding.

Closer to home, the Working Group was unable to discover a coordinated conduit through which students returning from prison enroll in LaGuardia. Some have heard about the College during outreach sessions at local correctional facilities or at the Rikers Island jail; others have applied in the usual way through LaGuardia’s Admissions Office or the University Application Processing Center. Students may also have enrolled as a result of successful experiences in one of ACE’S training and precollege programs. Still others enroll through programs such as the Bard College Prison Initiative (Bard, n.d.) or John Jay College’s College Initiative (NYC Service 2017; John Jay 2015).

Further complicating their transition, once students arrive at the College, there is no clearly delineated reentry pathway. Support services exist: The Black Male Empowerment and Cooperative Program (BMEC) and CUNY Start both serve people post-incarceration, but they are not labeled as such. In addition, ACE programs such as grant-funded High School Equivalency preparation and the CUNY Fatherhood Academy, which estimates that 50 percent of its participants are involved with the criminal justice system (unpublished program data), also assist in various ways, as do the Young Adult Internship Program and the Justice Community Programs. Yet unlike the Prisoner Reentry Institute and the College Initiative programs at John Jay College, at LaGuardia, none of these programs are specifically designed for a justice-involved population.

In sum, the reentry system appears incoherent, a maze of housing, employment, and educational services through which the uninitiated may stumble without a thread of guidance upon release from jail or prison. CBOs scramble for scant funds, and city and state agencies, also underfunded, appear disconnected from each other. Similarly, CUNY is a puzzle to anyone unfamiliar with the ways of academic institutions. At LaGuardia, although addressed by institutional alignment and initiatives like the First Year Seminar, fragmented College communication with all students, especially adults, is intimidating to an individual who has spent years in a cell, or is homeless, is at risk of being homeless, or suffers any of the traumas associated with imprisonment. As pointed out by students in the conversation groups, ease of access to information and the coordination of the College’s admissions process and student support services would benefit all students, not
just those who have been locked up. Finally, findings indicated some ambivalence about disclosure of incarceration history: Students expressed the desire for faculty and staff awareness and understanding, but rejected being singled out as different. The Working Group looked to John Jay’s Prisoner Re-entry Institute as a model of transparency and respect for debts paid.

**Process of Self-Transformation**

Despite ambivalence about disclosure, students stressed the need for shared institutional awareness of their persistent reentry difficulties, ranging from a lack of pay stubs required for financial aid to housing and food insecurity. Also described were the effects of posttraumatic stress disorder, activated, for example, by waiting in line and hearing keys jangling. Yet rising above uncertainty and vulnerability was the hope to transform a past identity troubled by limited options and flawed decisions into the surprising joy of educational success. Quoted below, Justin and Zariff, speak to the demands and rewards of change:

I’m taking Math 99. I got 100. It’s exciting. I stood up for about three hours yesterday taking the practice exam over and over and over, and then to be able to walk out of the classroom and take a photo of it and show it to my mom, and she’s like, “Oh, God bless you. I’m proud of you. Good job.” That does it all for me.

Justin

I think coming to school changed me in more ways than one, not just furthering my education, but it gave me more of a purpose.

Zariff

“Over and over and over.” For most of us, learning requires patience, time, practice, and persistence, characteristics that Justin possessed and applied to his math studies. For all LaGuardia students, and especially for men and women who have been behind bars, college success also depends upon self-agency, emotional and social stability, and, in Zariff’s words, an internalized sense of purpose. To assist the formerly incarcerated in acquiring the dispositions necessary to purposeful academic life, the Prison to College Working Group proposes the recommendations detailed below.

**Recommendations**

I. Create an aware and responsive College in which LaGuardia students, faculty, and staff understand the unique needs of people with incarceration histories.

1. Provide high-quality professional development to enable faculty and staff to understand reentry issues.
• For example, key offices, including Career Services, Financial Aid and Admissions, would benefit from having professional development potentially offered by government agencies, such as Parole, and community-based organizations that would support the legal rights and new opportunities available to students with incarceration histories.

• Prompted by the Working Group’s efforts, the Center for Teaching and Learning has already initiated the Incarceration and Daily Life Carnegie Seminar for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Through this interdisciplinary professional development seminar, participants will contribute relevant scholarship to a themed issue of *In Transit*.

2. Promote learning in the classroom.
• Suggest that components of the First Year Seminar be modified to acknowledge and respond to the needs of students with incarceration histories. In addition, the current New to College Seminar for new faculty and staff should include a reentry component.

• Develop a new cluster of interdisciplinary classes to focus on the underlying economic, political, and psychological causes and consequences of mass incarceration and consider possible solutions. Such courses would also highlight careers in psychology, criminal justice, human services, counseling, and therapy, etc., working with juveniles, substance abusers, individuals returning from prison, and other high-risk populations.

• Finally, understanding of these complex, sometimes divisive, issues could be enhanced by College-wide events. For example, in 2017–2018, *In Transit* will focus on issues of criminal justice and mass incarceration. It was also recommended that the College, in partnership with Ping Chong + Company, seek funding to create a performance of the stories of people involved with the criminal justice system in order to make their voices heard and better understood (using a process similar to Beyond Sacred).

II. Support Success: Enhance coordination of existing programs and initiatives across the College.

1. Secure funding to support the position of a College-wide Navigator to assist students early in the reentry process, enhance communication and coordination among programs, and intensify partnerships with CBOs.

• The Navigator would facilitate communication and optimize resources for students early in the reentry process, manage partnerships, facilitate information-sharing across departments, and present LaGuardia’s programs to policymakers and potential funders. The
Navigator could also serve as a resource for students and faculty interested in learning about correctional education opportunities.

2. Build institutional expertise and capacity to serve students with criminal justice histories.
   - The College should enhance the expertise of select faculty and staff in critical offices and programs by identifying funding for targeted professional development. They would provide a continuum of services along the path towards graduation and be embedded in key offices such as Admissions, Career Services, Financial Aid, Black Male Empowerment and Cooperative, the Multicultural Exchange, the Wellness Center, ACE Education and Workforce Development programs, and Academic Advisement. This professional development would improve the College’s ability to address returning students’ unique concerns and needs, such as compliance with criminal justice system conditions, assistance in securing financial aid, assistance in effectively transferring college credits and career planning that recognizes their pasts.
   - The College should create a continuum of support services, from the prerelease stage (at Rikers and local correctional facilities such as Queensboro and Edgecombe) to college application and acceptance and ongoing mentoring/continuous support. The emphasis would be placed on providing services early in the student’s path towards graduation in recognition that reentry is particularly challenging soon after release from incarceration.
   - In addition, the College should consider expanding peer advising support, specifically by engaging successful students with incarceration histories to be matched up with incarcerated men and women planning to attend LaGuardia, thereby establishing a powerful connection at the prerelease stage and early upon discharge.

3. Secure funding to enhance LaGuardia’s noncredit and credit pathways to employment.
   - It is widely anticipated that funding for reentry services, from both private and government sources, will continue to grow in the coming years. Given previous work, the College’s culture and location, our vast educational offerings, and our commitment to serve this population, LaGuardia is well-positioned to increase the breadth of programs offered to students with criminal justice histories.

4. Identify and disseminate external support resources for referral by faculty and staff.
   - Using existing resources and referral networks, identify key areas of support for students (e.g., housing, substance abuse treatment,
mental health treatment, parenting skills, family mediation, food stamps, and public assistance, etc.). Referral arrangements would be widely disseminated to appropriate faculty and staff allowing them to better assist students in need of other than educational support.

III. Deepen partnerships with CBOs, educational institutions, city and state agencies, correctional facilities and religious groups.

1. Submit proposals for funding to advance the work of the Correctional Education Initiatives.
   - The College should work to secure funding to create stronger partnerships with elected officials, policy makers, businesses, and foundations, with the goal of better coordinating existing services and, where needed, offering new services.

2. Expand, where appropriate, educational offerings to meet the needs of community partners, including off-campus outreach and orientation and recruitment sessions.
   - In 2016–2017, the College should strengthen and deepen existing partnerships with facilities such as Queensboro Correctional Facility and Rikers Island to offer short-term credit and noncredit programs, building on the CUNY Next Steps program and the Second Chance Pell pilot program. Faculty and staff should participate in educational outreach sponsored by prisons in downstate New York, and, where appropriate, deliver LaGuardia materials to upstate prisons to promote educational offerings available at the College.

3. Build and strengthen ties with local educational institutions, CBOs, and New York City and State agencies.
   - The College should reach out to local educational leaders and institutions, including CUNY colleges and SUNY community colleges, to deepen relationships for referrals and sharing educational approaches and best practices.
   - The College should facilitate bimonthly meetings in order to share information and strategies with key CBOs, such as the College and Community Fellowship, STRIVE International, the Osborne Association, and The Fortune Society; and nonprofit social service agencies, such as the Community Services Society, with which LaGuardia has established ongoing partnerships and referrals.
   - In 2016–2017, College faculty and staff should meet with key representatives from New York City and State agencies, including Parole, Probation and Correction, and elected officials, in order to share the College’s current and potential work providing reentry educational services.
In 2016–2017, College faculty and staff should build on our relationship with the New York Tri-State II Chapter of The National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice, with the long-term goal of providing professional development and technical assistance to corrections officers and other professionals in justice-serving agencies.

IV. Evaluate impact and outcomes on a regular basis, using both formative and summative assessment methods, and make changes as needed. Assessment should provide both measures of success and information for program improvement.

1. Use CUNYfirst and ACE databases, in combination with national statistics, to determine the approximate number of criminal justice system-involved and formerly incarcerated people the College is currently serving in both credit and noncredit programs.

2. Measure outreach, persistence, and academic achievement of students who enter through designated special programs such as the CUNY Fatherhood Academy, Community Justice programs, and College Initiative.

• The unique challenges faced by this population make comparison with other groups problematic. Nevertheless, besides examining trend data, some idea of comparative success may be gained by looking at similar statistics for other reentry populations, including veterans and those who begin college at an older age.

3. Examine the value of utilizing pre- and post-questionnaires among faculty and staff to measure their increased understanding of and support for those with incarceration histories and their families. Such surveys would assess behavioral changes in the College’s culture.

4. It is possible to assess progress by using the transcripts of the student discussion groups as the basis for future analysis and research. They are a baseline for future comparison as new and better procedures are put in place as a result of the Correctional Education Initiatives.

Conclusion

The “criminal justice system” is comprised of nearly 6,000 different systems nationwide, diffuse and unconnected (Wagner and Rabuy 2017). Thus, when students with criminal justice history arrive at LaGuardia, they have most likely already encountered a bewildering labyrinth of agencies and services: for example, the NYC Department of Correction, for students coming from NYC jails; the NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, for those returning from NY State prisons; and the US Bureau of Prisons, for those returning from federal prisons. Justice-involved youth also interact with the New York City Department of Youth & Community Development, while the federal departments of Justice,
Veterans Administration, and Probation and Parole have direct responsibility for people who are or have been incarcerated.

In the conversations that informed the Working Group’s report, the process of college reentry was described as equally disorienting. Nevertheless, as they spoke, these men and women, formerly incarcerated, now in college and trying to navigate our offices, did not regret their choice to be educated. Like Justin, they want the new feeling of success in the math exam and the philosophy discussion—if only they can get through the ordeals of financial aid or the anxieties of explaining absences due to parole appointments. To find their way out of the maze, these students require clear information and the guidance of faculty and staff.

LaGuardia Community College’s moral call is to oppose the reproduction of marginalizing conditions experienced by those who, in Michelle Alexander’s words, have been “locked up and locked out.” In the renewal of our commitment to welcome all newcomers, let us identify and demolish the obstacles and barriers along the road to reentry, from the prison gates to graduation.

Notes
1. Dr. Jane MacKillop served as Associate Dean in LaGuardia’s Division of Adult and Continuing Education and chaired the Prison to College Initiative (2015–2016). She currently serves as Interim Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at Lehman College.

2. The Condition of Education report of the National Center for Education Statistics states that, in fall 2015, 38 percent of undergraduate students in the United States were attending community colleges (US NCES 2017c); of those, 61 percent were attending part time (US NCES 2017a). The NCES College Navigator report states that, at LaGuardia, in fall 2016, only 11 percent of students reported their race/ethnicity as white; in fall 2015, 28 percent of students were twenty-five years of age and over (US NCES 2017b).

3. Chair of the Working Group: Jane MacKillop, Senior Consultant, President’s Correctional Education Initiatives. Members: Claudia Baldonedo, Adult and Continuing Education; Claudia Chan, External Affairs; John Chaney, Academic Affairs; Nathan Dickmeyer, Institutional Research; Darren Ferguson, Student Affairs; Carrie Fox, LaGuardia Foundation; Robert Jaffe, President’s Office; Michele Piso Manoukian, Academic Affairs; Erica Nieves, External Affairs; John Parssinen, Grants Office; M’Shell Patterson, Adult and Continuing Education; Jerrell Robinson, Student Affairs; and Jennifer Wynn, Academic Affairs.

4. “The Black Male Empowerment and Cooperative Program (BMEC) is a retention program designed to engage and empower [students] to be…lifelong learner[s] and…active participant[s] in [their] education. BMEC is a community of students connected to each other and the College through academic support services and mentorship” (LaGCC Student Services, n.d.).
5. “CUNY Fatherhood Academy at LaGuardia Community College, a free 16-week program funded by New York’s Young Men’s Initiative and the Open Society Foundations to help young fathers gain academic and parenting skills. Offered are classes in GED preparation, college discovery and parenting, along with work experience through part-time jobs or internships” (CUNY 2013).

6. Guided by Sandy Watson, Claudia Baldonedo, Samuel Farrell, and the late Janet Cyril and Janice Kydd, LaGuardia’s Division of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) has secured funding for and administered such programs since the early 1990s. From 1991 to 2013, CUNY Catch (College Alliance for Transitional Career Help)—an alliance of LaGuardia, Bronx Community College (BCC), and Medgar Evers College—connected the high schools on Rikers Island to these three CUNY campuses. CUNY Catch provided outreach and career counseling to youth on Rikers and post-release services at the three colleges. Along with the integration of learning and work, family participation, and dealing with general health issues and referrals, the program emphasis was on entry to academic and vocational training, career development and preparation for entry into the labor market. Other correctional education programs previously offered by LaGuardia include the Inmate Education Program (night classes at Rikers) in the 1990s; the Green Team, also in the 1990s, which provided job preparation to youth formerly incarcerated upstate; and Project Hired!, a women’s program which operated at Rikers in the summer of 2014. Currently, the Justice Community and Justice Community Plus programs in Jamaica, Queens, serve people aged sixteen to twenty-four who have had experience with the criminal justice system, in Jamaica, Queens. Under the longtime direction of Claudia Baldonedo, the programs promote civic engagement and work experience through community service projects. LaGuardia’s Support Group for Parents with Children at Rikers continues under the leadership of its founder, Guadalupe de la Cruz. At its meetings, parents and families of incarcerated youth learn about opportunities that the College can offer their children, including degree programs, High School Equivalency preparation, internships, and summer employment.

In July 2015, LaGuardia launched a new major initiative at Rikers in partnership with Hostos Community College, STRIVE International, and The New York Public Library. Funded by the New York City Department of Correction, the CUNY Next Steps Program at the George R. Vierno Center on Rikers Island is a pilot program for detainees who are not mentally ill but are perceived to be at the highest level of potential for violence.

7. “The Fortune Society employs a holistic ‘one-stop shop’ model of service provision, offering a comprehensive array of in-house social services to nearly 7,000 people with incarceration histories each year via three primary New York City-area locations: our service center in Long Island City, and both the Fortune Academy (a.k.a. “the Castle”) and Castle Gardens in West Harlem (Fortune, n.d.).

8. The Osborne Association provides pre-trial support and advocacy; reentry planning; support services for families affected by incarceration; financial literacy workshops; prison and jail visit assistance; educational programs, vocational training, job placement; job creation (Osborne, 2017).
9. Hour Children “provides transitional and permanent supportive housing in communal and independent settings that can accommodate approximately 70 families at any given time” (Hour Children. “Supportive Housing” 2017). Additionally, “Hour Children’s Hour Working Women Reentry Program was specifically designed to support female ex-offenders by providing the hard and soft skills training and employment placement support that is needed to obtain a meaningful, livable-wage job that provides the income and stability needed to achieve self-sufficiency and provide for their families” (Hour Children. “Hour Working” 2017). Hour Children also “provides case management as well as individual, group, and family therapy” (Hour Children. “Mental Health” 2017).

10. The New York Times first publicized the “Eddie Ellis Seven Neighborhood Study” in 1992 (Clines). A follow-up description was published in 2013 by Eddie Ellis’s Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions (Ellis).

11. “CUNY Start provides intensive preparation in academic reading/writing, pre-college math, and ‘college success’ advisement for students entering CUNY with significant remedial needs based on the results of their CUNY Assessment Tests. The goal of the program is to help students prepare for college-level coursework and reduce or eliminate any remedial needs prior to starting credit-bearing courses” (CUNY Start 2017).

12. The Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP) “[p]rovides job-ready 16–24 year-old young adults who are not working and not in school, placement into a short-term internship opportunity. Funded through the Mayor’s Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), the program offers 14 weeks of paid orientation, training and work followed by 9 months of follow-up services and assistance for placement in permanent jobs, training programs and educational opportunities” (NYC DYCD 2017).

13. “The Prisoner Reentry Institute (PRI) is one of twelve institutes that collectively comprise the Research Consortium of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. PRI’s diversified portfolio reflects an overall focus on understanding what it takes for people to live successfully in their communities after contact with the criminal justice system, and on increasing the effectiveness of the professionals who work with them. We do this through our three main tracks of policy advocacy, direct service practice, and collaborative partnerships” (PRI, n.d.).
REFERENCES


No estudio por saber más, sino por ignorar menos.
I don’t study to know more, but to ignore less.

Juana Inés de la Cruz
Introduction

Jennifer Wynn, Social Science

On April 27, 2015, in broad daylight, a former resident of Project Renewal, a homeless shelter for men and women with mental illness, located at 4380 Bronx Boulevard, stalked, assaulted, and then killed the shelter’s beloved director, Ana Charle, aged thirty-six. The man who murdered Ms. Charle waited outside the shelter until she finished work. His duffle bag concealed a .40 caliber gun and plastic wrist ties. In his pocket was a scrap of paper with the license plate number of her black SUV, which was parked around the corner, on Bullard Avenue, close to East 237th Street.

The man followed Ms. Charle to her car, forced his way inside, and attempted to rape her. Ms. Charle managed to escape and fled, naked, down the street. Also naked, the man chased after her, raised his gun, and fatally shot her in the head. Standing over her crumpled body, he emptied two more bullets into her face and chest. He then walked back to the SUV, put on his clothes, and took off on foot. Several blocks away, he was arrested.

As I read the story in the New York Times, I was sickened. Earlier in my career, I had worked for the same nonprofit agency as Ana Charle. But when I read the name of the killer—West Spruill—and recognized his deformed eye, I gasped. I knew this man. In November 2001, I had met Mr. Spruill in the solitary confinement unit of a maximum-security prison in upstate New York. At the time, I was a monitor at the Correctional Association of New York, an independent agency with legislative authority to inspect conditions in state prisons; I was also the principal investigator of a study on the state’s dangerous overuse of solitary confinement.

Solitary Watch (About n.d.), an organization that researches, documents, and provides information about how solitary confinement is practiced in the United States, defines it as “the practice of isolating people in closed cells for 22–24 hours a day, virtually free of human contact, for periods of time ranging from days to decades” (Facts & Resources, n.d.) In testimony given to the state legislature (Wynn 2003) and in written reports to the corrections commissioner, I described West Spruill as among the most tragic cases of institutional abuse I had encountered. Among my hundreds of interviews with prisoners in dozens of correctional facilities, West Spruill remains a singular example of the suffering and pathology bred in solitary confinement. We had first met when he was twenty-one, years before he murdered Ana Charle. Charged with assault on another inmate and staff, he had been in the “hole”—inmate slang for solitary—for over a year. According to Mr. Spruill, an inmate blindsided him on the way back from the prison commissary and stole his food. He swung at the perpetrator but, blind
in one eye, he missed, and struck a correction officer. His punishment was sixty months—five years—in solitary.

When we spoke, Mr. Spruill’s chief complaint was having nothing to do. Busy people cannot fathom the soul-crushing pain and punishment of enforced idleness. Before being sent to solitary, he had studied for his GED. Qualified to take the exam, he requested study materials to prepare, but was turned down by prison rules. I promised to inquire about reconsideration on his behalf, warning him against high hopes. I framed Mr. Spruill’s request as an issue of mental health and public safety, especially since the prisoner would spend the rest of his term in solitary. Surely, I explained to the captain, we don’t want to release into society a man just out of five years in isolation without even a GED. Since that time, the absurdity of pleading with a corrections official to grant a partially blind prisoner sentenced to half a decade in solitary the privilege of taking a high school equivalency exam has never diminished.

Christmas came and went. During that time, Mr. Spruill sent a card thanking me for trying to help him, and wishing me happy holidays. After New Year’s, the captain returned my calls, saying he had “good news and bad about Mr. Spruill.” His request to take the GED exam was denied but that was not the bad news. The bad news was that Mr. Spruill had tried to hang himself. The good news, the captain said, was that for his attempted suicide, Mr. Spruill wasn’t issued a misconduct report. Unthinkable to most on the outside, the prisoner’s body belongs to the state, and inmates who cut or attempt to kill themselves are disciplined for destruction of state property.

Over the next two years, I interviewed Mr. Spruill three more times and continued to advocate for him. His isolation had become unbearable. He once slammed his head against the walls of his cell until the concrete turned red. He made several more suicide attempts. I last saw him in 2003; to shake my hand through the bars of his cell, he extended an arm covered in scars from self-cutting. He appeared dissociated, and said he couldn’t endure two more years in the hole.

If Mr. Spruill managed to survive those two years, I knew what would happen on his last day in custody. In handcuffs, he would be escorted through the prison corridors to the processing room, where correction officers would unshackle him, turn over his property, and lead him to a rack of donated clothes. He would be given release papers and a bus ticket to the Port Authority. And then, and after five years in solitary with no social contact, no counseling, and little education, Mr. Spruill would walk right out the prison’s front gate.

The Epidemic of the Criminal Justice System
The story of West Spruill speaks volumes about our criminal justice system—about the lives it destroys, its pointless cruelty, the long reach of its wreckage. When LaGuardia opened its doors in 1971, the United States rate of incarceration was
93 per 100,000 people. Forty-five years later, the rate of incarceration has increased to over 700 per 100,000 (WPB n.d.). A Bureau of Justice Statistics report, states that at the end of 2015, one in thirty-seven adults was under some form of correctional supervision, either confined in prison or jail, or released into the community on probation or parole (Kaeble 2015, 1). In sum, fueled by tough-on-crime laws, incarceration has become part of a vast mushrooming of a system of criminal justice that includes jail, parole, and probation.

In A Plague of Prisons: The Epidemiology of Mass Incarceration in America, Ernest Drucker equates mass imprisonment with an epidemic—“a plague upon our body politic“ (2011, 49). Using public health concepts such as prevalence and incidence, outbreaks, contagion, transmission, and potential years of life lost, Drucker shows how, much like an epidemic, mass incarceration reproduces itself, destabilizing entire communities. Unable to keep pace with the steady increase of incarceration, prisons are overcrowded, understaffed, and underresourced. Consequently, across the country most prison programs, treatment, and even medical services are currently insufficient to meet the needs of an expanding population of prisoners who, like West Spruill upon release, would fall into most of the following categories:

- 93 percent male
- 67 percent earned less than 12,000 (or half the poverty line)
- 60 percent raised in single-parent homes
- 50 percent had a family member behind bars
- 45 percent were living with children at the time of arrest
- 14 percent raised in foster homes or orphanages (Drucker, 133).

Research conducted by the National Employment Law Project (2011) found that an estimated sixty-five million American adults—one of four—had a criminal record (Rodriguez 2011, 3). These sixty-five million Americans have been marginalized not only by their criminal record but by employers’ increasing use of criminal background checks. Back in the community, their time served, formerly incarcerated individuals may carry within, or otherwise confront by necessity, the very conditions that foster criminality. Some bear the emotional if not physical scars of being violently attacked in prison, sexually or otherwise; a Department of Justice report found that one in ten state prisoners is sexually victimized (Beck 2012, 5). All bear the stigma of a criminal record. Further, federal and state laws passed in the 1990s banned those convicted of drug offenses from living in public housing, receiving food stamps, and applying for college tuition assistance. In other words, the man or woman who has been removed from society for the purpose of rehabilitation may reenter more vulnerable to crime:
The lifelong debilitating effects of exposure to the criminal justice system and incarceration produce a set of consequences that incapacitate these individuals in quite another way, making them far less able to return to productive life once their prison term ends. This is the long tail of incarceration, incapacitating individuals for their life after release from prison (Drucker, 110; italics added).

Unable to scale the barriers to productive social reentry, the formerly incarcerated often find themselves on a bus back to prison (Beitsch 2015).

To escape incarceration’s “long tail,” many formerly incarcerated individuals choose to enter college. At the same time, institutional requirements and classroom expectations present frustrations and challenges to individuals who have been regulated by rules inside the system, and who have been disciplined for infractions of the rules. In a word, the incarcerated person’s debt to society requires relinquishing autonomy, which is the very essence of life in academia and in a democracy. Recognizing the difficulties of this special cohort of students with criminal justice history, and committed to supporting their aspirations, President Mellow charged the Prison to College Working Group with studying the barriers to and the effects of the reentry process as experienced by students whose economic and educational choices have been upended by personal or parental incarceration, parole, and visits upstate to family and friends.

The Prison to College Working Group and Carnegie Seminar Research
With support from the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, the 2016–2017 Carnegie Seminar: Incarceration and Daily Life provided a space for a multifaceted look at the reentry process for students with criminal justice history, or who may be at risk. Six faculty papers presented in the current issue of In Transit provide background on the growth of mass incarceration and the racialization of crime, investigate the effects of criminal justice histories on students’ educational and career goals, and discuss the importance of education in combatting the effects of incarceration. Suggestions for classroom practice and improved College services raised in the formal research are echoed by students, faculty, and staff in more personal conversations and essays.

Opening In Transit, MacKillop and Manoukian’s report, “LaGuardia’s Prison to College Initiative: Evolution, Findings, and Recommendations,” describes the Working Group’s rationale and responsibilities, proposes next reentry steps, and sets the direction for further research, some of which was undertaken in the Center’s Carnegie Seminar and collected in this issue. The Working Group also noted the need for cultural productions that, on the scale of Ping Chong and Company’s Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity, can contribute to overcoming the stigma of incarceration.
In the first of the research articles, Rochell Isaac analyzes the roots of the culturally constructed association of race with crime, and points out that, on any given day, one in twenty-eight children has a parent behind bars. For African-American children, the number is more perilous: one in nine children has an incarcerated parent. Emphasizing that 67 percent of LaGuardia students identify as Black or Latinx (LaGuardia 2017, 5), Isaac points out that:

In LaGuardia classrooms, the students themselves, their parents, siblings, family members, loved ones, may very well be directly connected to the prison system in some form or another. Not only does mass incarceration impact the individuals behind bars; it also impacts their communities, their families, and the children left behind.

Only 13% of the national population, writes Isaac, African-Americans are “30% of the people arrested, 41% of people in jail, and 49% of those in prison. Additionally, one in every twenty Black men over the age of eighteen is in a state or federal prison, compared to one in every 180 Whites.”

The effects of the loss of family life and personal growth upon American citizens are devastating. Hill and O’Neill’s study notes that with each father “disappeared” by the prison system, children pay the price (1993). Fatherless children have a dramatically greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, suicide, poor educational performance, and teenage pregnancy (NCHS 1993). One study found that 23% of children with an incarcerated father had been expelled or suspended from school, compared to just 4% of children whose fathers have not been incarcerated (Pew 2010, 4). For boys, the intergenerational effect is profound. In studies on the precursors to violence sponsored by the Bureau of Justice, one of the strongest risk factors for criminal behavior is being raised without a father (James 2004, 1).

The consequences of “father absence” are addressed by John Parssinen and André Ford in “CUNY Fatherhood Academy: Triumphs and Struggles of Young Fathers.” Housed in LaGuardia’s Division of Adult and Continuing Education, the Academy promotes healthy parenting skills and offers High School Equivalency preparation to fathers who are low-income, high school dropouts between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. According to unpublished CUNY data, at least half of these students have had criminal justice experiences. Parssinen and Ford attribute the success of the program’s approach to an integrated design of “extensive wrap-around services, including counseling, alumni support, employment services, and parenting classes which meet the myriad needs of participants; and hosting the program on a college campus, which instills hope and the belief that participants can achieve goals that they had previously thought were unattainable.” Since its inception in 2012, the Fatherhood Academy has seen strong outcomes: Of those who sat for the HSE exam, 61% obtained a diploma.
Upon earning High School Equivalency, Fatherhood Academy students are encouraged to apply to LaGuardia’s degree programs. In doing so, they will join new and diverse cohorts of LaGuardia students who enter college optimistic that higher education will provide an affordable pathway to a four-year degree and economic stability. Breaking new ground in the literature on reentry and education, Cory Feldman’s “Unclogging the Pipe: College Entry from the Perspective of Formerly Incarcerated Applicants” examines the enrollment process step-by-step from the particular perspective of formerly incarcerated students as they attempt to enroll in college. Sharply focused on students coming out of prison, her study finds that the lack of a central institutional reentry landing point threatens their academic survival. Many teachers report that this group of students contributes intense and illuminating life experiences to class discussions. To release that potential more consistently, suggests Feldman, the College community must develop whole-campus sensitivity, problem-solving skills, and advocacy on behalf of this population.

The theme of faculty support is taken up by Neil Meyer in “What We Need in the Classroom: Excercerated Students Speak Out on Best Classroom Practices.” Meyer’s student interviewees offered that professors can contribute to retention by creating a welcoming and culturally relevant learning environment for those with criminal justice history. He finds that “when students described challenges at-large at school (such as dealing with the Bursar, or other offices), they often returned to examples of professors who helped them navigate these complications.” He recommends selecting topics and readings that invite the insights of excercerated students and encourage them to feel safe in disclosing their experiences. In their conclusions, Meyer and Feldman recommend professional development for faculty and staff who may not be aware of the needs and concerns of formerly incarcerated students and their family members.

John Chaney’s “A Review of the Literature: Attitudes of Criminal Justice Majors Regarding Reentry,” and Colleen Eren’s “Is it Personal? Exploring Criminal Justice Involvement, Victimization, and Demographics in Criminal Justice Major and Career Selections,” turn our attention away from the student released from the criminal justice system to the student who intends to work within it. Chaney reminds us that Criminal Justice majors will soon become the people who formulate policy and implement crime laws. After summarizing literature on the effectiveness of many pre- and post-release programs, he points to data that suggest students in criminal justice majors are often less sympathetic to the formerly incarcerated, and the programs that support them, than is the public at large. Stressing the importance of understanding how students’ opinions and beliefs about incarceration and reentry are formed, Chaney asks us to consider how “sound, innovative pedagogical strategies might have a positive impact upon internalizing validated and universally accepted criminal justice strategies and practices.”
Colleen Eren’s research on the career choices of LaGuardia Criminal Justice majors takes the readers into the First Year Seminar for Criminal Justice. Curious about students who wish to enter criminal justice professions as police, corrections officers, forensic scientists, detectives, or federal agents, she inquires into their personal histories of incarceration or near-incarceration. Surveys of 110 students in Criminal Justice First Year Seminar classes revealed that 15.5% had been arrested for a misdemeanor or felony offense. Another 43% had been stopped, questioned, and frisked by police. In response to her question about why minority students would choose a profession long associated with minority oppression, Eren observes that “perhaps the students see their entry into criminal justice as a heroic effort to change the system from within, to remedy the oppression that they witness as victims of both structural and interpersonal violence.” Like Meyer and Isaac, Eren emphasizes the need for faculty to find “ways to incorporate students’ lived experiences into the classroom, to cultivate self-reflection and awareness, and to make classroom discussions directly relevant to those experiences.”

Students, faculty, and staff also have stories to tell. In the Conversations and Closing Words sections of this volume, LaGuardia students who have spent years in prison or visited loved ones upstate bravely convey the sadness of lost chances and broken attachments, as well as love and possibility. In “Visits Upstate,” Anonymous, a faculty member, describes with dignity and eloquence, his own trips upstate to visit his brother. Anonymous is not alone. In the first session of the Carnegie Seminar, we learned that all ten of us had either a family member or a close friend who had been or was currently incarcerated. Two members of our group were among the formerly incarcerated. The research, student discussions, personal essays, and staff interviews that unfold in these pages reveal that many of us are deeply conscious of the effects of mass incarceration on daily life; others may wish to know more. Whether used to extend or introduce knowledge about the criminal justice system, it is our hope that the investigations and reflections offered here will be of use in classrooms as departure points for critical analysis of the conditions that create and reproduce incarceration. It is very likely that among the students contributing to the discussion on incarceration will be those who have escaped its long tail.

References


Ghettoization and Racialized Criminality in Mass Incarceration

Rochell Isaac, English

Abstract
This paper explores the rhetoric of law and order used around the issue of mass incarceration, and the specific ways that calls for law and order helped to shape the modern-day crisis. I attempt to construct a framework which situates the incarceration trajectory in a particular social, cultural, and historic context to explain the shift to a punitive approach to crime specifically aimed at African Americans. I argue that a rhetoric of law and order facilitated the War on Crime, then the War on Drugs which led to mass incarceration. This paper aims to show that embedded in the anti-Black language of law and order were, and continue to be, specific tropes and representations of Black criminality and pathology that dehumanize and wage war on the poor and marginalized while justifying legislative policies aimed at maintaining social control.

Moreover, the political status of the Negro in the South is closely connected with the question of Negro crime...we must note two things: (1) that the inevitable result of Emancipation was to increase crime and criminals, and (2) that the police system of the South was primarily designed to control slaves. As to the first point, we must not forget that under a strict slave system there can scarcely be such a thing as crime ... The appearance, therefore, of the Negro criminal was a phenomenon to be awaited; and while it causes anxiety, it should not occasion surprise.

W. E. B. Du Bois

The Souls of Black Folk

Du Bois’s observations of the relationship between the political status of Blacks and the notion of Black criminality ([1903] 1994, 107) are still relevant today, as is his profound question: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (1). Here, Du Bois posits African Americans as “other” and succinctly captures the oppression experienced by those under the racialized White gaze as he pondered “the strange meaning of being black” in his seminal work, The Souls of Black Folk (v). A century later, in The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander (2012, 2) maintains that there still remains an apparent racial caste system in America—one redesigned to utilize the criminal justice system—with the same apparent goal of denying full citizenship to African Americans. I argue that a rhetoric of law and order facilitated the War on Crime, then the War on Drugs, which led to mass incarceration, and
that law-and-order rhetoric was and continues to be used to perpetuate the notion of African American criminality to mask a state-sanctioned agenda of exclusion and discrimination. This rhetoric invariably leads to the implosion of Black and Brown bodies being locked in prison and locked out of access to social capital; the full impact of such incarceration has not been fully grasped. This paper aims to show that embedded in the anti-Black language of law and order were and continue to be specific tropes and representations of Black criminality and pathology that dehumanize and wage war on the poor and marginalized while justifying legislative policies aimed at maintaining social control.

Mass incarceration is arguably the civil rights issue of our time. The issue should be of concern to all Americans as notions of freedom, liberty, and justice are paramount in our democracy. Here, mass incarceration refers “not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison” (Alexander 2012, 13). The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, with the prison population growing from 300,000 people in the 1970s to 2.3 million people today (Stevenson 2014, 15; Alexander 2012, 6). The United States now houses the largest prison system on the planet, with an incarceration rate that is five to ten times that of other comparable nations. While representing only 5% of the world’s population, America holds 25% of its prisoners (Hinton 2016, 5). It is significant too that this increase can be traced to changes in laws and policies and not to an increase in the crime rate generally or to an increase in violent crime (National Research Council 2014, 70).

Even more troubling is the racial component of the incarceration. African Americans have been the most impacted by the punitive shift in domestic policy. According to Human Rights Watch (2000), African Americans, although only 13% of the national population in 2000, represented 30% of the people arrested, 41% of the people in jail, and 49% of those in prison.1 Additionally, one in every twenty Black men over the age of eighteen is in a state or federal prison, compared to one in every 180 Whites (the ratio is even higher in some states). According to The Sentencing Project (2013, 1), “African-American males are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white males and 2.5 times more likely than Hispanic males. If current trends continue, one of every three Black American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can one of every six Latino males—compared to one of every seventeen white males.” The predominance of African Americans in jails more than supports claims of systemic discrimination. If the accelerated and alarming rates of incarceration continue, Alexander (2012, 9) warns, “One in three young African American men will serve time in prison,” and she notes that “in some cities more than half of all young adult Black men are currently under correctional control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole.”
This paper is not an exhaustive exploration of the multiple factors which led to mass incarceration, but rather a critical analysis of the literature of mass incarceration that situates the research in a particular social, cultural, and historical context focused on the racialized discourses surrounding mass incarceration. I aim to construct a theoretical framework to account for the ways in which race pervaded the War on Crime and the War on Poverty and materialized into a racialized mythology of African American criminality, which led to the current tragic state of the American penal system.

The phenomenon of mass incarceration is an ethical issue with great impact on the lives of African Americans and therefore, in the Du Boisian concept, researchers must generate knowledge that would humanize and legitimize the lived experience of people of African descent. Scholar Terry Kershaw (2003) emphasized the importance of centering the life experiences of all people of African descent that have shaped Black reality, including the factors that impact the quality of life. He maintained that Black experiences are worthy of intellectual pursuit and that the cultural, historical, and contemporary experiences of African-descended people are unique and can teach much about human relations.

Furthermore, Kershaw argued that one of the most significant tasks of an Afrocentric scholar is to work to develop tools that help generate knowledge designed to describe, analyze, and empower people of African descent to change negative social forces. It is, then, a moral imperative for African Americans to continue to take action and build coalitions to address matters of hegemonic power, inequality, and racism. This paper considers knowledge, epistemology, and critical pedagogy as activity which promotes agency, guides action, and reenvision the stigma of criminality around incarceration. This reconsideration is vital especially since robust means to address the damage wrought by mass incarceration on the Black community have been underexplored.

While we may think that the punitive turn which led to mass incarceration has run its course because of the extent of the attention focused on the issue, we now have a president who has once again signaled a turn to law-and-order politics. There is cause for concern, as history suggests that the impact of fear-based policies is to the detriment of Black and Brown bodies. In fact, in a rally in South Carolina, Trump maintained that there is a “silent majority” which wants the country to win again (Cillizza 2015). His controversial tweets also channeled President Richard Nixon: “The silent majority is taking our country back. We will MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” (Trump 2015) The theme of the opening night of the Republican National Convention was “Make Our Country Safe Again,” despite relatively low crime rates. In his acceptance speech at the convention, Trump (2016) labeled himself the “law-and-order” candidate in the race for the White House and pledged that America would be a country of “law and order,” without which, he argued, there could be no prosperity.
He painted the country as one in crisis with “attacks on our police” and “terrorism in our cities,” which “threaten our very way of life.” He vowed to bring safety at home, promising “safe neighborhoods, secure borders, and protection from terrorism.” Trump assured Americans that they needed and wanted relief from “uncontrolled immigration” and “mass lawlessness,” and that he would be the voice of the forgotten. Various writers have suggested that Trump legitimized White fear of terrorists, immigrants, and Black crime and violence, and he broadened the hate narrative to include the Mexican rapist and others (Pérez Huber 2016, 216; Kamp 2016; Giroux 2017).

President Trump’s choice of attorney general, Jefferson Beauregard Sessions—whose bid for a federal judgeship failed amid charges of racism (Apuzzo 2016)—also signaled a commitment to law and order. Sessions (2017) believes that crime in big cities and crimes committed by undocumented immigrants are on the rise. Most alarming is that Sessions intends to roll back the federal consent decrees, an attempt by the Obama administration to scale back police abuses against citizens, especially within minority communities. At least fourteen police and sheriff’s departments, including those of Ferguson, Chicago, and Baltimore, have been sued by the Justice Department because it found a “‘pattern and practice’ of discrimination that systematically violated the civil rights of black residents” (Stolberg and Lichtblau 2017). The Justice Department expected reforms to be implemented with the guidance of a federal monitor. But in response to Sessions’s actions to make law enforcement agencies shift policy to reflect President Trump’s emphasis on law and order, Kristen Clarke, who heads the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, alleges that “Attorney General Jeff Sessions is undermining and obstructing extensive efforts that have been made to promote policing reform in a small set of the most broken police departments in our country” (Stolberg and Lichtblau 2017). As John Wideman (1995, 504) subtly warned:

In the guise of outrage at crime and criminals, hard-core racism (though it never left us) is making a strong, loud come-back. ... It’s not racist to be against crime, even though the archetypal criminal in the media and the public imagination almost always wears “Willie” Horton’s face. Gradually, “urban” and “ghetto” have become code words for terrible places where only blacks reside. Prison is rapidly becoming re-lexified in the same segregated fashion.

Law and Order as Prescription

The rhetoric of “law and order” was first conceptualized in the late 1950s against the would-be gains of the civil rights movement when Southern politicians and law enforcement mobilized White opposition against desegregation and the
dismantling of Jim Crow laws (Alexander 2012, 40). By the late 1950s, “black men displaced white ethnics as the new face of urban violence” and by the late 1960s, White Americans overwhelmingly associated street crime with African Americans (Flamm 2005, 5). It is this association that would lay the foundation for law and order.

Here I use the term “law and order” to refer to the ideologies, rhetoric, policies, and actions focused on policing Black and Brown bodies in order to maintain the status quo and social control (social order). These policies rarely, if ever, directly address issues of inequality or matters of injustice, but instead emphasize cracking down on crime. The phenomenon is emblematic of racialized and politicized discourses about crime and criminals and became a dog whistle aimed at Whites. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, crime had emerged as the most pressing societal problem and “law and order” offered the solution. It became a rallying cry for those who feared the breakdown of societal order stemming from protest demonstrations and uprisings. The country faced heightened activism which included demonstrations for civil rights and against the Vietnam War and debates regarding women’s liberation. The demonstrations of the early sixties were not viewed favorably; demonstrators were branded as “racial agitators” who were disrupting the natural social order. The direct action tactics of civil rights activists were criminalized by Southern governors who argued that the gains of the civil rights movement pointed to a breakdown of societal norms and law and order.

Ironically, the increased crime rates of the 1960s alarmed even Black activists who also began to call for law and order, including more policing and harsher sentencing. The fear of crime was at the top of the list in national public opinion surveys and it is clear that the rhetoric of law and order was being used to stoke those fears (Clear and Frost 2014, 60–61). Indeed, “by 1968, 81 percent of those responding to the Gallup Poll agreed with the statement that ‘law and order has broken down in this country,’ and the majority blamed ‘Negroes who start riots’ and ‘Communists’” (Alexander 2012, 46). According to Clear and Frost (2014, 61), “linking crime to social order cleansed the backlash against disorder from the contaminating backdrop of racial injustice, and enabled the rhetoric in favor of restoring order to be more palatable to a general public increasingly troubled by fear of crime.”

Four significant factors during the 1960s shaped the punitive turn toward law and order: First was the success of the civil rights movement which changed the American racial topology, but also produced a violent White backlash and resentment at the unraveling of the social order. Conservatives critiqued President Lyndon Johnson who, in his bid for African American votes, applauded demonstrators for engaging in civil disobedience. Second was the Black migration, with more than six million African Americans relocating from southern to northern cities—a demographic shift that would transform the nation. Third was an
increase in the violent crime rate that continued for at least a decade, although the accuracy of crime statistics for this period is in dispute, and fourth was the so-called new Black militancy with street protests and civil unrest showing up in all parts of the country.

The first wave of urban strife began in 1964 in New York (Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Rochester), Chicago, Philadelphia, and Newark, but each successive summer (until 1968) brought more unrest and, most notably, the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1966. In 1965, when Watts in Los Angeles exploded, the National Guard was deployed, and the summer of 1966 saw violent eruptions in Chicago, San Francisco, and the Hough district of Cleveland, Ohio. The year 1967 brought the Detroit riots or the Great Rebellion, as it came to be called. Remarkably, by September of that year, almost 170 cities and 34 states had experienced some measure of unrest (40 communities experienced multiple instances) and more than a dozen state governors had called on the National Guard (McLaughlin, 2014, 7). This pattern of unrest became known as “the long hot summers” (viii).

These conditions created the space for the emergence of a law-and-order candidate. Following the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, Barry Goldwater ran a presidential campaign opposing the civil rights gains and placed his law-and-order agenda on the national stage. During the New Hampshire primary, Goldwater challenged President Johnson to “turn on the lights of moral leadership” and the “lights of moral order” (quoted in Miller 2015, 128). Miller (2015, 128) observes that Goldwater’s “‘light-switch’ reference identified morality with lightness, whiteness, and civic order (and, by extension, depravity with darkness and the civil rights struggle).” Goldwater would go on to attack the movement for the unrest and disorder it had supposedly produced, and he linked it to the unraveling of public safety. He identified activists of the civil disobedience model as engaging in criminal behavior and promoting street crime and riots. Goldwater also blamed the government for producing a welfare state. All of these disruptions, he argued, led to the breakdown of civic order. Goldwater railed against the government seeking to be “parent, teacher, leader, doctor, and even minister” (quoted in Flamm 2005, 33) and exploited “the increasing association of welfare, like crime, with black Americans” (Flamm 2005, 33).

In a thirty-minute campaign film, Choice (MfMA 1964), sponsored by Mothers for Moral America (MfMA)—the group targeted women interested in restoring respect for law and order so that children could be reared in a safe environment—and funded by the Goldwater campaign, Goldwater was presented as an alternative to the moderate Republicans who continued to expand New Deal programs and other government services. The black-and-white film also presented its audience with a choice between two nations. In Johnson’s version of America, wantonness rules: Interracial couples socialize and dance provocatively, half-naked
women dance on tables, fast cars careen on dirt roads and highways, and Black protesters clash with police; “in Goldwater’s America, well-scrubbed white children recite the Pledge of Allegiance” (Flamm 2005, 44). However, memos about the film were leaked and the backlash forced Goldwater not to air the advertisement on national television, although it was aired on numerous local stations. Flamm (2005, 44) contends of Choice that “between the history and the hysteria, the film’s racial insinuations were numerous and obvious: in graphic footage, white policemen confront unidentified blacks, perhaps rioters, looters, or demonstrators. No mention is made of civil rights—but no distinction is made between violent civil disorder and nonviolent civil disobedience.”

At the Republican National Convention in July 1964, Goldwater argued that “history shows us ... nothing prepares the way for tyranny more than the failure of public officials to keep the streets from bullies and marauders” and that “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And ... moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!” (Goldwater 1964) Though he did not explicitly invoke law and order here, Goldwater rationalized a path of extremism to “freedom,” but it was a path open only to Whites. The so-called extremism of Black militancy was ironically lost on him and his enthusiasts. In fact, as Alexander (2012, 40–41) points out, “for more than a decade—from the mid-1950s until the late 1960s—conservatives systematically and strategically linked opposition to civil rights legislation to calls for law and order, arguing that Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy of civil disobedience was a leading cause of crime.”

Although Goldwater lost the election, he was the first Republican presidential candidate to win electoral votes in the South after Reconstruction and he did it by stoking racial polarization. The South would no longer be reliably Democratic; this shift presented the opportunity for Republicans to appeal to Southern Whites opposed to African Americans’ demand for civil rights. George Wallace attempted to recreate Goldwater’s formula in his failed third-party candidate bid in 1968 when law and order was still the number-one sociopolitical issue of the day, even surpassing concerns over the Vietnam War. At least one factor explaining Democrat Hubert Humphrey’s loss to Richard Nixon was the perception that Humphrey was soft on crime. Furthermore, the “quagmire of race and crime” posed a major challenge for Humphrey (Flamm 2005, 169).

We should note here that accusations of being soft on crime would be replayed in later elections: President Ronald Reagan would accuse his opponent of being soft on crime, as would his successor, President George H. W. Bush, who successfully used images of and advertisements about African American convicted murderer and rapist Willie Horton to paint his opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, as being soft on crime (Dukakis was governor of the state where Horton received his furlough). Democrats continued to feel pressure to prove their toughness on the issue until Bill Clinton arrived on the scene.
Thus, while Humphrey struggled to emerge as a leader on the crime issue, Nixon linked social protests to street crime and proposed a new War against Crime. He brilliantly fused law-and-order rhetoric to a racialized message establishing his Southern strategy. Zeitz (2016) notes that, as early as 1964, conservatives began trying to exploit grassroots concerns about integration by using code words like “welfare,” “morality,” and “crime” to tap into White—and suburban—racial resentments.

In his NBC radio address on March 7, 1968, titled “A Commitment to Order,” Nixon pledged to “meet force with force if necessary—making it abundantly clear that these preparations are made, and that retaliation against the perpetrators and the planners of violence will be swift and sure” (Nixon 1968b). In his 1968 speech accepting the Republican presidential nomination, Nixon took stock of America’s plight. He noted that millions of Americans were suffering and crying out in anguish: “As we look at America, we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night. ... We see Americans hating each other; fighting each other; killing each other at home.” Nixon pledged to launch a war against organized crime with his hire of a new attorney general and promised that “the wave of crime is not going to be the wave of the future in the United States of America.” He asked the masses to listen to the “quiet voice,” the “non-shouters,” the “non-demonstrators,” and the “real voice of America” in the midst of the “tumult and the shouting.” Nixon maintained that the American Revolution was dedicated to progress, that the Founding Fathers believed order was “the first requisite of progress,” and that progress and order must coexist, as one cannot exist without the other. To confront charges of racism, Nixon addressed his critics directly: “And to those who say that law and order is the code word for racism, there and here is a reply: Our goal is justice for every American.” He also assured his supporters and proponents of law and order, who, he emphasized, were both Black and White, that they were not “racist or sick” or “guilty of the crime that plagues the land” (Nixon 1968a).

The lines between street crime and other forms of civil unrest were continuously blurred by politicians, news pundits, and the like. As such, the appeal of normalcy and calm could not be understated during this time and Nixon recognized this opportunity. In fact, he whitewashed his law-and-order message to produce a “racially sanitized rhetoric of ‘cracking down on crime’” to tap into a broad array of White anxieties around racial issues, including integration (Alexander 2012, 43). Nixon is also credited with knowing how to exploit the resentments of “The Middle Americans,” who, as Zeitz (2016) notes, were chosen as Time’s Man and Woman of the Year in 1969. Time described Middle America as a “state of mind, a morality, a construct of values and prejudices and a complex of fears” (quoted in Zeitz 2016).

Flamm (2005, 4) explains the appeal of law-and-order rhetoric to the Middle American: “At a popular level, law and order resonated both as a societal ideal
and political slogan because it combined an understandable concern over the rising number of traditional crimes—robberies and rapes, muggings and murders—with implicit and explicit unease about civil rights, civil liberties, urban riots, antiwar protests, moral values, and drug use.” Flamm’s explanation is likewise applicable to the African Americans who also called for law and order. They lived in high-crime areas and were disproportionately impacted by rising crime rates. Ultimately, what gave law and order such traction was its “amorphous quality,” i.e., “its ability to represent different concerns to different people simultaneously.” Additionally, it gave people a clear sense of who the villains were—the “protesters, rioters, and criminals”—and a ready response to their violent actions—"moral leadership, and judicial firmness” (4).

The Politics of Blackness

Clearly, we cannot talk about mass incarceration without addressing the issue of race. The framing of the crime problem was both implicitly and explicitly racialized. As Michelle Alexander (2012, 236) reminds us, we must come to understand mass incarceration as a “racial caste system, not one of crime control.” While the conflation of Blackness with criminality was deliberately injected into the American psyche well before the War on Drugs was ever conceived, its fundamental role in creating and supporting a legal system that imprisons people of color in unprecedented numbers should be explored.

In his book, The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America, Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2011, 1) points out that “violent crime rates in the nation’s biggest cities are generally understood as a reflection of the presence and behavior of the Black men, women, and children who live there” and that, for many, the grim statistics of mass incarceration have defined and continue to define Black humanity. He points out too that while Black crime statistics are ubiquitous, White statistics are practically invisible. Muhammad maintains that social scientists engineered a “statistical discourse” about Black crime during Reconstruction which did not account for their racialized experiences (4). As early as 1928, Thorsten Sellin, “one of the nation’s most respected white sociologists,” concluded that African Americans were stigmatized by their criminality (Muhammad 2011, 2). Muhammad goes on to state, “Thus for Sellin and for the many black experts marginalized within the academy (but cited in his notes), black criminality had become the most significant and durable signifier of black inferiority in white people’s minds since the dawn of Jim Crow” (3). The construction of Blackness as “other” along with the criminalization of Blackness goes back to slavery when African Americans were regarded as savages and less than human in order to justify their enslavement.

African Americans would continue to be stigmatized by the presumption of criminality, guilt, and inferiority through later decades. The influx of African
Americans into northern cities led to an exodus of White middle-class families from the cities to the suburbs, creating a decrease in tax bases. To address this issue, federal officials made ending poverty, fighting crime, and remedying racial discrimination the focus of domestic programs. Since African Americans had been excluded from social welfare programs stemming from the New Deal, including the GI Bill and Aid to Dependent Children, President John F. Kennedy’s “‘total attack’ on delinquency [was] one of the government’s first responses to the impact of the Great Migration” (Hinton 2016, 12). Kennedy also began the President’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime in 1961 and put in place a series of government interventions in cities with huge populations of Black citizens. It was Kennedy’s strategies that Johnson expanded into a “War of Poverty” with the goal of securing social mobility (12).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, two schools of thought were generated to explain poverty and the social order: “Conservatives argued that poverty was caused not by structural factors related to race and class but by culture—particularly black culture” (Alexander 2012, 45). Proponents of this idea would turn to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report on The Black Family which attributed Black poverty to a Black “subculture” and the alleged misbehaviors of the poor. Alexander (2012, 45) notes that “the ‘social pathologies’ of the poor, particularly street crime, illegal drug use, and delinquency were redefined by conservatives as having their cause in overly generous relief arrangements. Black ‘welfare cheats’ and their dangerous offspring emerged for the first time, in the political discourse and media imagery” (45). Liberals, on the other hand, placed emphasis on social reforms such as the War on Poverty and civil rights legislation that would get to the “root causes” of criminal behavior and the social conditions that predictably led to crime. The debate was contextualized with competing images of the poor as “deserving” or “undeserving” (46).

However, social unrest and violence shifted the focus from structural critiques of poverty and community action programs to a view of crime as specific and unique to Black urban youth, often referring to the cultural deficiencies of low-income Black communities and identifying what experts viewed as pathologies in racial terms. Hinton notes that as “urban civil disorder escalated, the overall focus of domestic policy shifted even further from fighting poverty to controlling its violent symptoms” (Hinton 2016, 21). The War on Poverty, therefore, can also be understood as an attempt to suppress future urban violence and to control the unruly behavior of young African Americans; it led to increased police surveillance of Black youth in their communities.

Similarly, Hinton (2016, 3) notes that, even if legislative language did not explicitly evoke race, policymakers viewed Black urban poverty as pathological and as “the product of individual and cultural deficiencies.” Furthermore, the warped ideologies surrounding the War on Poverty shaped the rationale, programs,
and legislation of the War on Crime. “The seemingly neutral statistical and socio-
logical ‘truth’ of black criminality concealed the racist thinking that guided the
strategies federal policymakers developed for the War on Crime, first in the 1960s,
then through the 1970s and beyond” (Hinton 2016, 3).

Crime and welfare, though not explicitly racial issues, have become linked
to race in the minds of many Whites who inaccurately view the typical welfare
recipient as African American (Peffley and Hurwitz 2002). President Reagan, for
instance, whose presidential campaign of 1976 was full of race-neutral/colorblind
rhetoric on crime, welfare, taxes, and states’ rights, created the narrative of the
“welfare queen,” one Linda Taylor, a supposed resident of Chicago who had
“eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve social security cards, and is collecting
veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. … She’s got Medicaid,
getting food stamps … Her tax-free income is over $150,000” (quoted in Kilgore
2015, 33). Alexander notes that the term “welfare queen” became a code word
suggesting a Black, lazy, ghetto mother and that those racialized appeals targeted
at poor working-class Whites were nearly always accompanied by promises to be
tougher on crime (Alexander 2012, 49).

Exposure to numerous media accounts in which a disproportionate number
of crime stories focused on African American suspects, who were often portrayed as
more menacing than White suspects, have been found to have a political impact.
The findings of Peffley and Hurwitz (2002) suggest that, for many Whites, support
for punitive crime measures was based on “their negative evaluations of African
Americans” (60) and contained “a strong racial component” (67). Support for
punitive crime policies appeared to be rooted in beliefs about Blacks and are not
race-neutral, “particularly reactions to black criminals” (67).

Peffley and Hurwitz (2002, 67) found several factors that aided in linking race
and crime, among them media coverage of crime and “racially ‘coded’ political
rhetoric.” Ironically, the researchers cite the Willie Horton ad as giving an “African
American face to violent crime in America” (67). This evidence illustrates Michelle
Alexander’s (2012, 18) claim that “the stigma of criminality functions in much the
same way that the stigma of race once did.” This stigma marginalizes large sec-
tors of the African American community and is exacerbated by the loss of rights
around voting, employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service.
That racially coded political rhetoric was identified as a factor linking race to crime
reveals the effectiveness of law-and-order rhetoric as dog-whistle politics.

Law and Order: The Legacy
Though the law-and-order rhetoric failed to prevent the formal dismantling of
the Jim Crow system, it was highly effective in its appeal to poor and working-
class Whites who opposed the civil rights movement, and it would also contrib-
ute to a major realignment of political parties in the United States. This history
accounts, perhaps, for the current tribalism around political party lines, yet another legacy of law-and-order rhetoric. In fact, the current legal system, which includes stop-and-frisk or a variation thereof, broken-window policing, probation, prisons, warrants, racial profiling, and the killing of unarmed Black men and boys—the Department of Justice reports on the Ferguson and Baltimore City Police Departments (US DOJ 2015; US DOJ 2016) are rather chilling on all these phenomena—seems to stem in part from what began in the 1960s but was amplified under President Reagan.

Clear and Frost (2014, 72) suggest that it might be useful to think of crime policy change as having occurred across three eras and three administrations (though they are wary of oversimplification). The first era they identify occurred in the 1970s with Nixon focused on sentencing structures for both violent and nonviolent offenders; the second period occurred in the 1980s, when the Reagan administration launched an all-out War on Drugs. The latter was an especially crucial period since it saw drastic growth in prison populations. The third era, the 1990s, during the Clinton era, saw an increase in violent crime. Clinton pushed back with an aggressive agenda targeting violent offenders.

President Johnson’s 1965 Law Enforcement Assistance Act—a direct response to the urban unrest—was the beginning of a new era of American law enforcement (Hinton 2016, 2). Republicans and Democrats would give bipartisan support to the War on Crime and later President’s Reagan’s War on Drugs. Both initiatives can be credited to the success of law-and-order rhetoric and policies which skillfully hid a racialized anti-Black and antipoor agenda of social control. The Safe Streets Act of 1968 invested $400 million in the War on Crime, and, to modernize law enforcement on the state level, the Law Enforcement Assistant Administration (LEAA) was formed, housed in the Department of Justice.

The LEAA was the fastest growing federal agency during the 1970s with a budget which grew from $10,000,000, allotted by Congress to the War on Crime in 1965, to $850,000,000 in 1973 (Hinton 2016, 2). Hinton notes that by the time the LEAA was disbanded in 1981, it had funded some 80,000 crime control projects and awarded 155,270 grants amounting to $10 billion in taxpayer dollars—the equivalent of $25 billion in today’s economy (2). This funding naturally led to a significant expansion in every aspect of the carceral state, especially since the goal assigned to the LEAA by Congress was to expand control in poor urban communities (3). The LEAA was formed a year before Nixon took office and he clearly utilized it. He also established the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) that would later become a significant actor in the War on Drugs. Despite these efforts and massive fiscal costs to taxpayers, Nixon’s efforts failed to reduce crime rates (Kilgore 2015, 30).

Following in the tradition of Nixon, Reagan, once elected, announced a War on Drugs which indicated a shift to a more punitive approach and to prison
expansion. When Reagan took office in 1980, there were approximately half a million people in prison; by the time he left office in 1988, the prison population had more than doubled (Kilgore 2015, 31). This increase could be attributed to the passage of the 1984 Federal Sentencing Guidelines which “laid the groundwork for expanded prosecutions and lengthy sentences” and mandated minimum sentences (31). Reagan successfully gained bipartisan support for his tough-on-crime/law-and-order agenda. In his last year in office, for instance, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act which allowed the use of the death penalty in drug cases and added a five-year minimum prison sentence for cocaine possession was overwhelmingly voted into law (31).

President Bill Clinton succeeded in wresting the tough-on-crime issue from the Republicans and implemented his own law-and-order agenda (Alexander 2012, 56). In August 1994, Clinton signed into law the most aggressive anti-crime legislation in the nation’s history, a $30 billion crime bill, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which included the “three strikes and you’re out” law and dozens of new federal capital crimes. The bill allocated at least $16 billion for prison construction and greatly expanded state and local police forces (Alexander 2012, 56). Clinton also signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act which “imposed a five-year lifetime limit on welfare assistance as well as a permanent, lifetime ban on eligibility for welfare and food stamps for anyone convicted of a felony drug offense—including simple possession of marijuana” (Alexander 2012, 57). Additionally, Clinton announced the “One Strike and You’re Out” initiative which allowed for federally assisted housing projects to reject anyone with a criminal history (57). In the 2016 election cycle, while African Americans delivered the Black vote to presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, many African Americans held mixed feelings about her husband’s role in expanding the population of America’s prisons (Alexander 2016). Previously, and certainly before President Obama, Bill Clinton had been heralded as “the first black president” (Morrison 1998).

Mass incarceration was bolstered by “harsher sentencing measures: mandatory minimums, truth in sentencing, three strikes, more frequent life sentences, increased use of the death penalty, sentencing youth as adults, and ‘sentences within the sentence’—the proliferation of ultrarepressive isolation units where solitary confinement is the rule” (Kilgore 2015, 39). Kilgore describes the attitude informing these sentencing practices as “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” (39). It is clear that mandatory minimums have greatly increased the prison populations since, with these minimum sentences, more people are sentenced to prison for longer periods of time. Truth in sentencing laws and mandatory minimums forced judges to impose maximum sentences, reflecting the government’s directive to increase incarceration rates and lengthen offenders’ sentences. New York’s Rockefeller Drug Laws were the most draconian of their kind, with the
sentence for selling two ounces (57 grams) or more of heroin, morphine, opium, cocaine, or cannabis, or possessing four ounces (113 grams) or more of the same substances set at a minimum of fifteen years to life (Kilgore 2015, 40).

Clear and Frost (2014, 47) argue that the shift in US policy, i.e., the growth of punishment especially as it relates to imprisonment, came about “not as a consequence of changes in the rates of crime but rather as a consequence of changes in our orientation to crime and in the policies that were used to deal with crime as a social problem.” The turn to punishment as a response to rising crime rates is not explanatory, because the rise in crime rates predated the punitive response by at least a decade, and the punitive turn continued even when there was a stabilization and decline in crime rates (59). We now know that the emergence and reemergence of law and order and its associated rhetoric is not about crime but about politics and a reflection of the political climate. Additionally, there is no evidence that more punitive measures lead to a decrease in crime rates, but there is clear evidence that there is a high rate of recidivism, i.e., individuals are more likely to reenter the criminal justice system after they are incarcerated. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Durose 2014, 1), within three years of release, about two-thirds (67.8%) of released prisoners were rearrested, and within five years of release, about three-quarters (76.6%) of released prisoners were rearrested.

So how are we to understand our apathy in the face of the draconian and punitive measures which have brought us to this state? Clear and Frost (2014, 47) suggest that it is useful to think of punishment in the late twentieth century as a “grand social experiment” that they have named “The Punishment Imperative.” Grand social experiments design “expansive social programs” to address social problems (48). Such experiments have three defining characteristics: First, each centers on a “pressing social problem” which has so galvanized the public’s attention that it calls for significant and new action. Second, there is a harnessing of political will and public support for a “new approach” or action; and, third, a new idea emerges and is widely accepted as the most logical way to address the problem (49). Ultimately, grand social experiments gain momentum in the zeitgeist when, in the public consciousness, the problem is so immense that the public believes something must be done. Often opposing constituencies—in a political context—become aligned in support of the new action indicating once again the import of the new solution. Ironically, Clear and Frost note that this “action itself is the solution to the problem.” For instance, passing laws or creating policies—whether they are effective or not—reduces the pressure for action by the populace. While grand social experiments “calm public anxieties,” they also have far-reaching and multifaceted consequences (49–50). In this case, mass incarceration can be viewed as the result of the grand social experiment in punishment.
Going Forward: Pedagogical Approaches

If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.

Toni Morrison
“How Can Values Be Taught in the University?”

In the age of mass incarceration, the statistics being what they are, it is safe to assume that students at LaGuardia, primarily people of color, are greatly affected. In LaGuardia classrooms, the students themselves, their parents, siblings, family members, loved ones, may very well be directly connected to the prison system in some form or another. Not only does mass incarceration impact the individuals behind bars; it also impacts their communities, their families, and the children left behind. Our students may not self-disclose, nor should we ask them to. Yet, as educators concerned with making knowledge relevant to students’ lives both inside and outside of the classroom and facilitating pedagogies that ensure the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students, we cannot ignore the incarceration issue. As Marc Lamont Hill (2013a, 17) notes: “If we take as a given that English education should be responsive to the lived realities and cultural orientations of our students, then we must accept the development of an English education in the age of incarceration as an indispensable part of our professional development.”

How then can we examine the current incarceration crisis and address the ensuing silence and resulting shame in the classroom? Hill (2013b, 19) suggests that we expose students to canonical and contemporary slave, political, personal, and noncarceral confinement literatures as entry points into addressing issues of social justice and as a means of analyzing literature through a new lens. Confinement literature generally refers to the writing of individuals jailed within a prison system, but can include other sites of restriction such as slave plantations and concentration camps, as well as allegorical and fictive spaces such as Jonah’s whale and Plato’s cave. Hill’s suggestion that the narratives of enslaved people, the first American literary genre, provide a rather logical place to raise the critical theme of confinement is a valid one. He also provides examples of political confinement texts: Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*; Martin Luther King’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*; the New Testament story of Jesus; the story of the Apostle John as a prisoner of Rome in the Book of Revelations (presented as literature rather than religious doctrine); and Plato’s *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*, and *Phaedo*, which detail the trial, prosecution, and execution
of Socrates for his unconventional beliefs (21). Personal confinement literature includes *De Profundis*, written by Oscar Wilde during his time in the Reading Gaol, and “conversion narratives” such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, by Nathan McCall, in which the prison becomes a site for personal change (22).

As we explore best practices for addressing mass incarceration, we are certainly not limited to the use of the above texts. Readings and discussions that teach about economic, social, political, and environmental inequality in relation to ethnicity, race, class, gender, and age can all provide opportunities for learning about mass incarceration. bell hooks’s (1994, 15) concept of progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy,” may also prove useful here as it centers on the well-being of the student. “To educate as the practice of freedom,” according to hooks, “is a way of teaching that anyone can learn” (13). It provides students with the opportunity to be active participants and not mere passive consumers of information in the classroom (15). hooks (1994, 6) was heavily influenced by master teacher Paulo Freire, who taught about the liberatory aspect of education, and emphasized that education should encourage students to question, “read the world,” develop praxis, conscientization (consciousness), and the intellectual tools needed to transform social reality (Freire and Macedo 1987). As educators, we must not only be aware of the current cultural and political climate but also develop pedagogical responses to it.

My own suggestion is that we create the space, assignments, and an environment where students can share their stories and recognize and legitimize their own lived experiences. As Henry Giroux (2004, 32) reminds us: “Cultural politics matters because it is the pedagogical site on which identities are formed, subject positions are made available, social agency enacted, and cultural forms both reflect and deploy power through their modes of ownership and mode of public pedagogy.”

**Notes**

1. The principal distinction between prison and jail is the duration of the stay. Jails are usually run by local governments or agencies; prisons are state or federal facilities (HG.org Legal Resources).

2. William R. Horton was a Black convicted murderer who, when temporarily released from a Massachusetts prison in April 1987 as part of the state’s weekend furlough program, brutally raped a White woman and assaulted her fiancé. Horton was then featured in ads by George H. W. Bush to paint his Democratic presidential opponent, Governor Michael Dukakis, as being soft on crime.
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Unclogging the Pipe: College Entry from the Perspective of Formerly Incarcerated Applicants

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Abstract
This paper addresses the extent to which formerly incarcerated applicants are equipped to pass from college programs in jail or prison to community college after release. The research follows three formerly incarcerated applicants through Direct Admit, a process through which students can gain admission and register for classes in one appointment, even after general admissions has closed. Participants’ experiences demonstrate the value of higher education while incarcerated and the importance of connecting with faculty on campus prior to release, as well as the need to ensure that all staff interacting with formerly incarcerated students receive adequate training. The difficulties these students encountered is emblematic of barriers formerly incarcerated students are likely to encounter. These include being misinformed, being unprepared, and having difficulty adjusting to free society. Recommendations for improving community college entry for returning citizens include strengthening the connection between prisoners and community college faculty by offering credit-bearing courses in correctional facilities, and correcting misinformation through targeted “in-reach.” LaGuardia Community College is both the research site and a model for creating an environment that is welcoming of returning citizens.

Formerly incarcerated college applicants face a host of barriers to enrollment but lack formal connections to institutions equipped to offer guidance and support through the final hurdles to matriculation. Thus, the gap between release from prison or jail and enrollment in an institute of higher education may represent a critical but underexplored “clog” in the education pipeline. As public universities debate how to improve the process for enrolling formerly incarcerated applicants, a growing number of students, particularly low-income students of color, have been recruited to for-profit institutions that place them at considerable risk for debt (Chung 2012; Garrity, Garrison, and Fiedler 2010; Hing 2012; Ruch 2001). Despite the fact that comparable degrees could be acquired at a community college for significantly less money, decisions of where to attend are guided by the quality of information available to prospective students. For incarcerated students, accessing accurate information about college can prove challenging, while misinformation about what it takes to enroll abounds.
Positionality
I have worked in a range of correctional and detention facilities over the past two decades, but no work has proved more important or rewarding than my current role as college advisor for young men at the Rikers Island jail. As the media and activist groups throw lobs at the facility, airing footage of savagery committed by correction officers and prisoners alike, a dedicated group of students meet at the Eric M. Taylor Center (EMTC) twice a week to prepare to enter college. When I speak to them, I smile and I provide preparation material, all of which I have created from materials that are found exclusively online, none available in print form. I urge the students to call and visit upon release, offering assistance with ordering their high school transcripts or printing out and mailing information about their intended major. Nearly every student promises to come by. I have been doing this for more than four semesters, but have yet to see any of the students successfully matriculate. Each semester, I watch these young men rap on the door of college only to have it open a crack, so that they can see what they are missing, but still not enough for them to pass through. It has been my lack of success in helping these bright scholars gain admission to college that has motivated me to study this phenomenon with the aim of opening wider the door to community college.

Literature Review
An estimated 70 million Americans now have some sort of criminal record—almost one in five of all Americans (US Department of Education 2016), a rate that can be attributed to the “tough on crime” era that reigned in the United States for over three decades beginning in the 1980s. In spite of the fact that crime steadily declined, the prison population rose by more than 350% (Schmitt, Warner, and Gupta 2010, 12). In the same milieu surrounding the “War on Crime,” funding for correctional education, which was already limited, was cut significantly, excluding prisoners from federal Pell Grant funding even though people in prison represented less than one-tenth of 1% of Pell Grant funds dispersed (Page 2004, 366). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 denied prisoners Pell Grant funding, causing a massive decline in postsecondary correctional education almost overnight (Tewksbury, Erickson, and Taylor 2000, 44). New York, like most states, piled on legislation barring people in prison from accessing the State’s low-income tuition assistance programs (Batiuk 1997). Only religion-based or grant-funded programs continued unabated, typically for noncredit courses or degrees in theology. Prior to this policy shift, people in jail and prison generally qualified for funding due to their incomes, which was logical given that many prisoners had, prior to their incarceration, paid taxes to the federal government that funded such grants.

Today, more African Americans are under the control of the criminal justice system—either in prison or in jail or on probation or parole—than were enslaved
a decade before the Civil War began (Alexander 2010, 180). The literature shows that mass incarceration of primarily people of color in the US is symptomatic of institutional racism. To begin to reverse decades of institutional racism, work must be done to increase access to areas of society that those with incarceration histories typically cannot access (Mills 2016). Community colleges can provide safe havens for students of color who have not been exposed to the range of educational options, particularly for students who are choosing between attending community college or not attending college at all (Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca 2009). An estimated 58% of all African American undergraduates and 66% of all Hispanic undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges (Katsinas and Tollefson 2009). As a result, “there are, for example, more low-income African American and Hispanic students in a CUNY Community College alone than there are in the entire Ivy League” (Bailey and Jacobs 2009, A18).

College-choice research emphasizes the importance of the summer between high school graduation and college matriculation in the transition to college. When high school students are urged to attend college, many students express interest and even apply, but then fail to complete their application or matriculate, a term referred to as “summer melt” (Castleman and Page 2014). In their study of formerly incarcerated college applicants, Rosenthal et al. (2015, iv) discovered that students returning from jail and prison are especially prone to losing the momentum they may need in order to enroll, since often they need first to secure housing and find employment, save or earn money for application fees and to request transcripts, or find money to travel to the college for multiple appointments. These tasks have been cited as contributing to summer melt by discouraging underprepared or underresourced high-schoolers. Most applicants with prior felony convictions did not complete the admission process: “We call this ‘felony application attrition’ and found that this phenomenon, more than explicit rejection on the basis of a felony conviction, closes doors to higher education for people with criminal history records” (iv). Indeed, “for every one applicant denied admission because of a felony conviction, 15 such applicants are denied admission because of application attrition” (vi). In a study of the special admissions practices at one Midwestern university, Custer (2013a, 2013b) reviewed the themes and attitudes presented in the admissions essays of the applicants. Analysis showed that the admissions process distressed and deterred some applicants, causing some to withdraw or not to complete their applications. Some applicants expressed feelings of embarrassment, fear, anger, being discriminated against, and other negative reactions (2013b, 34).

Many of the brightest students in custody are self-educated and lack experience using educational technology and taking standardized tests. These students express low confidence in themselves, or exhibit little or no sense of the connection between their poor educational experiences prior to prison and their current status
(Maher 2004). As a result, it is perhaps no surprise that, in one study, researchers showed that although 90% of students interviewed in prison reported a desire to attend college after their release, less than 40% of them felt they had the opportunity to attend (Hanneken and Dannerbeck 2007, 3).

People returning from prison may have fallen out of contact with family and lack support. In addition, there is a range of paperwork for college entry that can be a barrier for people with a recent history of incarceration. For example, community colleges have open admissions, but only residents of the state can receive in-state tuition. Proving their residency, navigating online application, and preparing for academic placement tests require freedom and access to the internet, putting returning students at a distinct disadvantage given that New York state prisons and jails forbid the internet. Faced with this multitude of pressing requirements and lacking sufficient support or know-how to meet them, formerly incarcerated applicants who pursue college may still falter in their collegiate ambitions (Castleman and Page 2014).

Evidence supports the finding that college in prison facilitates successful reentry, economic well-being, parenting skills, and civic engagement, and reduces recidivism rates and, therefore, the tax burden of mass incarceration (Fine et al. 2004). From a justice reinvestment standpoint, the benefits of giving formerly incarcerated people higher education could alleviate much of the harm prison causes, including recidivism. Yet, a national survey of 273 colleges and universities in the US conducted by the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) in 2009 revealed that most institutions of higher education use the application process as a way to screen out students with conviction histories (Weissman et al. 2010).

According to a study of reentrants from prison, 82% to 94% of people leaving prison express an interest in attending college (Stevens and Ward 1997, 106). Society would do well to encourage their endeavor, considering the benefits realized from formerly incarcerated people achieving higher education. Redirecting someone from crime to prosocial endeavors like education represents significant societal gains across communities and the nation (Crayton and Neusteter 2008; Ford and Schroeder 2011). For those returning home from prison who wish to change their lives, develop new skills, and form new, positive identities as students rather than as “ex-offenders,” college can be a space to foster such changes (Sturm, Skolnick, and Wu 2010).

In a participatory action project entitled “The Gifts They Bring,” researchers analyzed stories of college students with incarceration histories who had successfully made the transition from prison to college (Halkovic et al. 2012). The study demonstrated that college after prison can be a landscape within which multiple selves develop, networks open, knowledge is contributed and developed, giving back is enabled, and the university community is enriched.
Methodology
This research aims to understand the experience of a formerly incarcerated individual applying to college through the Direct Admit process. Grounded theory methodology allows for research into such a phenomenon and, like all phenomenological research, it starts with a research condition managed by conducting interviews and making observations (Morse 2011). Based on the underpinnings of symbolic interactionism, grounded theory can be seen as both a theory about, and an approach to inquiring about, human behavior (Kendall 1999; Annells 1996).

In this research, I use a descriptive, nonexperimental design intended to help “define the existence and delineate characteristics of a particular phenomenon” (Heppner, Wampold, and Kivlingham 2008, 224). How do people who are returning from jail and prison experience college entry via Direct Admit? And how does their experience differ from that of other applicants? People returning from incarceration and applying to college ascribe meaning to events and social interactions which shapes their subsequent behavior in relation to these interactions (Kools 1997). This methodology advocates for “generating a theory from data [whereby] most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of research” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 6). Grounded theory was born from an effort to understand “how the discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analyzed in social research—can be furthered” (1). Reality is specific to the population being studied, and capturing as much of the first-hand perspective as possible through interviews and the participant’s own writings allows for themes to emerge organically.

Research Methods
This research utilized two qualitative methods of inquiry. The first was a brief questionnaire that used open-ended questions to gauge participants’ preparation for their admissions appointments. The second method was recorded interviews with each participant after their application appointments. These techniques create an understanding of the obstacles and strategies that formerly incarcerated people experience during the admissions process, even though the process is dynamic in that people may change how they feel throughout their journey.

Recruitment
Recruiting participants for such a study is complicated given that the college does not ask about criminal convictions and students can be reluctant to disclose their status. One strategy was posting a flyer near the Admissions Office where students line up for their appointments. Working as a college advisor at Rikers Island also allowed me to recruit interested participants prior to their release. To guarantee a sample of three participants, a larger pool of six was recruited. All the participants had had some experience with college during their confinement and were eligible
for community college. The three participants in this study are in no way generalizable to all formerly incarcerated applicants, but they illuminate the perspective on some of the obstacles that former prisoners are likely to encounter. The three participants in this study are all male and have recently returned from a period of confinement. For purposes of anonymity, each of the three research participants has been assigned a pseudonym.

Data Collection
Data collection began with an explanation of the research, obtaining consent, and assuring participants that they had the right to refuse participation at any time during the interview. Participants completed the initial questionnaire on their own and I interviewed them after their appointment. Interviews were semi-structured in nature; as the investigation progressed, questions were added, based upon the specific information that was required for conceptualization. Initial open-ended questions addressed the following themes: (1) preparation for admissions, (2) support systems, and (3) perceptions of the Direct Admit process. All interviews were digitally recorded using a microphone on a computerized recording system. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. I then transcribed the data (deleting any identifying information regarding the participant or people mentioned) and the transcriptions were prepared for data analysis. Data analysis began as soon as the first interview was transcribed, and combined systematic coding, constant comparison of data, and theory building.

Validity
In grounded theory methodology, knowledge is acquired through a process in which the researcher is not perceived to be outside and separate from what is being researched, but “also a crucially significant interactant” (Strauss and Corbin 1994, 278; cited in Annells 1996). To increase validity, participants were asked whether the instrument seemed to capture their viewpoint and whether it needed to include any other perspectives. Participant input was considered significant in both structuring the interview and interpreting data.

Data Analysis
The questions in the interview guided the participants into an exploration of their own perspectives and behavior to shift the focus from what happened during the Direct Admit process to how they felt about what was happening during the appointment. For example, one participant commented that it was odd that they would not let him check the book to see if his friend had checked in yet. These reflections were probed in the interview with questions about what they would envision as a better system for admitting formerly incarcerated people into college. Data were first sorted into three main categories for analysis (preadmissions, the...
Direct Admit appointment, and post-Direct Admit), to develop a sense of how formerly incarcerated applicants’ motivation to enroll may change throughout the appointment. During preadmission, subcategories emerged, among them preparation, support, and information.

During the Direct Admit appointment, the perceptions of staff and campus culture were explored. Themes that emerged included doubt about the intentions of Admissions staff, misinformation, and inability to advocate for themselves during the appointment. Another theme was the inability to negotiate debt from private colleges, which can prevent an application from being accepted. Without transcripts from every institution the applicant has ever attended, an application cannot be processed. With rare exceptions, in order to obtain official transcripts from private colleges, the student needs to pay any outstanding tuition.

Taken together, the analysis points to three main findings: College in jail and prison motivate the application; applicants with incarceration histories need assistance with the application; and applicants carry insurmountable debt acquired from private colleges. To ease the admissions process, community colleges must become responsive to the needs of applicants who have been incarcerated and consider how to assist these students throughout the admissions process, not just through recruitment or after admissions.

Participants
All of the participants demonstrated college-level ability in the courses they attended in prison or jail. In this study, each of the three applicants, Sam, Kevin, and Chris, shared their impressions of the process and how they perceived their incarceration as impacting the outcome of their Direct Admit appointment.

Sam
The first participant is Sam, a twenty-eight-year-old African American male. He is a Navy veteran and father of a four-year-old son, Sam Jr. Sam is handsome, with colorful tattoos covering his arms and neck. He speaks with more education than is typical of someone with only a high school diploma, something he attributes to his parents’ intellectual discourse and his own avid reading. Sam has been incarcerated at Rikers Island for the past eight months on a fifth-degree marijuana possession charge. It was his first time being incarcerated and what Sam describes as “the only humane alternative to probation.” Sam was engaged in college preparation at Rikers through a nonprofit organization known as the College Way (n.d.). He was eager to apply to college upon release, even though he admitted that he had never believed in the value of formal education prior to his involvement in the College Way. He wanted to schedule his Direct Admit appointment even while he was still incarcerated. I marked my calendar with his release date and he called my office weekly to report his sustained enthusiasm, eagerly talking on speakerphone
to students who happened to be there and encouraging them to keep a seat open next to them in the fall. His eagerness included a completed paper application with, “Help me save my life” scrawled on the bottom of the page. When Sam missed his first Direct Admit appointment, I called him, but when he answered, his voice had changed. He sounded aggravated and anxious. He said that when he was released from jail, the things he thought his wife was holding on to were in a storage locker. His world had been upended. His wife had left him for another man. Yes, he wanted to enroll, but no, he did not think he could find his transcripts or the time to request them. The shock of reentry was more than he could bear, although he stayed determined. I thought about the letter he had shown me that he had written to his son: “Love is patient and kind. Love isn’t arrogant or rude. It’s not to be thrown in your face or resentful. Love never cuts off if it’s real. Love makes you believe in people and have faith in people. If it feels any other than what I have listed, then it is not love and stay away from it.”

Written just weeks before his release, his advice was prescient. What Sam experienced, his wife leaving him during his incarceration, is not uncommon, but his lack of awareness about her departure seemed particularly cruel. In addition to his material discomfort, lacking a home and income, he had to contend with what he described as the “ultimate betrayal.” The shock of reentry and the dissolution of his marriage caused Sam to become part of an indeterminate number of applicants who never hit the radar, invisible applicants whose names never make the registry except for a few missed Direct Admit appointments.

**Kevin**

Kevin is a twenty-year-old Latino man. He was enrolled in a private college before his incarceration, but he had studied aeronautics, a field in which his felony conviction for possession of a firearm and cocaine with intent to distribute will preclude him from ever working. Kevin made it to campus three separate times in the two weeks following his release, politely waiting on lines, filling out forms, and listening to me advocate for his transcripts, waivers, or extensions. He owed the aeronautics college $4,000 for the classes he had ended up failing. Those same classes resulted in his loss of any financial aid. As a result, his debt would be combined with the cost of current tuition fees, amounting to several more thousand dollars. Kevin’s family has stood by him during every step of the admissions process, waiting in my office while he waited to see the counselor or the financial aid advisors. But all three times that they came with him, they left with a new set of numbers that had them wringing their hands without many options. At just twenty, Kevin is not sure how to advance his life without an education. Despite his strong record of academic success after high school and before his arrest, the courses he failed proved to be more difficult to recover from than the punishment for the crime itself, a sentence he has completed. Without his prior transcript, Kevin could not enroll because he
cannot afford to pay tuition forwards to the college and backwards to the private college at the same time.

Chris
The third participant is Chris. At thirty, Chris looks like a tall, tired teenager. He is a sinewy six foot two and speaks with a Harlem drawl that sounds almost Southern. Despite his parlance, his speech is still grammatically correct and he sounds more educated than the “ninth grade dropout” he claimed to be. It was his third time trying to enroll since his release from prison seven months prior, and he had to return twice to complete his application. Chris had attempted to enroll in the previous admissions period in the winter, but on his appointment date, it snowed and on his rescheduled appointment date, he was unable to secure the $65 seat deposit. He came to his Direct Admit appointment, but he did not have a copy of his GED and had to order it from the Department of Education; receipt would take several weeks.

To assist Chris, I completed the form to order his transcripts with him. He squinted at the form and pointed to the line asking for the address of the high school or program attended. “Do I just put 30-30 Hazen?” he asked, offering up the address of Rikers Island. “I know I got my GED on the Island in 2005; so when it asks for the name of the school, is it Rikers Island?” I told him that he had the option of leaving it blank and risking that the transcripts not arrive, or putting Department of Education or the name of the East River Academy, the school that is currently offering classes at Rikers but may not have had the same name back in 1995 when Chris actually attended. I asked him how he felt about putting Rikers Island. “No, I don’t care. That’s really where I went, and I don’t care who knows.”

His attitude was a relief to me because it simplifies the process of Direct Admit when an applicant can be honest. I offered to pay the $65 and I paid the $10 money order for the GED transcripts. If Chris was accepted, he could seek employment on campus through Federal Work-Study or other opportunities; for now, he had been home without an income for some time and raising the $65 for the seat deposit seemed unlikely. An appeal to the Admissions staff for financial assistance was denied; the explanation offered was that the small amount can serve as motivation for students to make them feel “invested” in the process.

Chris was able to succeed in gaining admission, but the process proved to be stressful, and he decided that he was not emotionally prepared to attend. On the day of his second appointment, Chris arrived and picked up the $65 money order. I called the Admissions Office and emailed the director to alert them that he was registering and asked to be informed of any problems. All seemed to be going smoothly until Chris met with a peer advisor who had been assigned to assist him. After meeting with the advisor for under ten minutes, Chris called me in a rage from a train station four blocks away. I asked him to take a minute and just
trying to explain what happened. He seemed almost paranoid and said that the student worker assigned to him was trying to confront him. According to Chris, “Things got hot.”

“Hot like how?” I asked.

“Well first, this guy closes the door behind us, like, why is he doing that, and then he is looking at me all wild, and so I say, ‘What, you want to fight?’ like this dude seriously looked like he wanted to fight me.”

I instructed the peer advisor to leave the forms with Admissions and when Chris got there, they were waiting for him at the front desk. He stayed, he enrolled: a precarious entrance into college.

Findings
The outcome of this study was that several applicants were interested in enrolling but, for different reasons, none of them succeeded in matriculating. Only one, Chris, was able to keep his appointments and complete the process, but his application process was mired in difficulty and he chose not to attend college even after he enrolled. While such a small sample is not generalizable, each participant shed light on different barriers that formerly incarcerated students encounter. Sam, the invisible applicant, could not fulfill his promise to himself in the face of homelessness, family dissolution, and abject poverty, as he had been released without a home or a job. Kevin is bearing the burden of student loan debt, an albatross from a previous life, when private college made sense and before his conviction made his career unattainable. Taken together, their stories highlight the importance of learning about college while still incarcerated. The findings also highlight how instrumental application support is for this population and how detrimental private colleges can be for applicants.

College in Custody Is Key
For all three participants, the desire to apply to college upon release was the direct product of having attended college classes in jail or prison. The role of college in prison or jail was to validate their cognitive ability to do college-level coursework, to which they had had limited exposure, and to demystify the application process. All three participants also described a desire to reconnect upon release with faculty and students who had participated in their programs.

Chris explained, “I came because you told me to, and because I believe this college shit can really change me.” Chris had been a student of the Prison-to-College Pipeline program (n.d.), a program whereby John Jay College students attend class in a men’s prison alongside students who are serving out their sentences. Chris was transferred to another prison before he could receive any credit from the program, but he was accepted to college and the recognition of his talents was enough to inspire hope. He explained:
I mean, what else I got? My wife gets disability, not enough to support me, and I can’t find a job, even though my boy keeps telling me he can put me on a construction job ... I need something else, for my mind, just to be better, and maybe have a little job on the side, maybe work right here.

Chris laughed and said using college is a default: “Nothing else in my life seems to work, and this is the only thing I never tried.”

**Misinformation Is a Barrier to College**

To some degree, each of the participants suffered from misinformation about some aspect of college. Sam never knew that the curriculum could be relevant to a person of color. He had been raised to believe that all institutions created and run by White people were bad. Once Sam started interacting with professors in jail, and learning about a wider array of topics, he became excited to attend. Sam was under the impression that he would need to face an admissions board to review the nature of his offense. “I’m surprised they let anyone in, even with serious crimes. My crime was pretty mild, just drugs, but still, they don’t even want to know who they getting?”

Chris thought he would need to pay the entire tuition up front. He questioned how much time he had before he had to deliver the tuition. Misinformation seemed to stem from policies that were either true in the past or for other institutions or processes such as financial aid. Chris explains, “When I was twenty-something, I really wanted to go to college, but I didn’t know how to apply. I got my GED at Rikers. I didn’t think any school would accept me. It’s not like I could go back and ask my high school teachers for letters of recommendation: I mean, they might remember me, but not in a good way.”

He was relieved to learn that the Direct Admit process did not question high school performance, but he did need to order an official GED transcript from New York State. The process cost $10, but it needed to be in the form of a money order and took two weeks to arrive. Chris was turned away from his first appointment for having only a printout verifying that he had completed the GED requirements; he still needed to bring an official copy. “I am not too discouraged about having to come back with the official copy, but I mean, c’mon, who would make up that they got their GED at Rikers? Seems like they could have taken my word for it.”

**Private College Debt**

Kevin was not even eighteen when a college recruiter sold him on the dream of becoming a pilot. In a move not uncommon for young people who live near LaGuardia Airport, Kevin enrolled in the private college but was arrested before he finished school. He did not know when he signed up for college classes upon release from Rikers that he would need to produce the transcripts from his aeronautics
Kevin attended a private aeronautics college for a year and a half. The semester he failed due to his incarceration caused him to incur several thousand dollars in debt. Now, several years later, he is beginning to understand how the past can catch up with you when it comes to applying to college. Even after he has served his sentence, he is still paying for the choices he made prior to his arrest. Kevin returned to his private college campus after trying to call and appeal to the administration to allow him to obtain a copy of his transcripts so that he could enroll in a community college. He offered to set up a payment plan, but, according to Kevin, “They said they couldn’t do anything for me, even though, they could. I mean, why can’t they? I didn’t ask them to give me the money or make it so I don’t have to pay; just let me have my paperwork.”

This practice of withholding transcripts from students who owe money is not uncommon, regardless of whether the institution is private or public. But students at expensive private colleges accrue debt at a more rapid pace than students at public institutions and have fewer recourses for repayment. These applicants are college-ready but only when they have transcripts indicating that they have previously been successful in college and have a strong interest in enrolling. Kevin will have to turn to the option of full-time employment instead. He simply could not bridge the financial gap created at his former college in order to apply. Kevin is only twenty-one, meaning that, if he were able to enroll, he would be the same relative age as other freshmen. Although multiple avenues exist for students who have financial difficulty, there is no financial assistance available for students who owe private college debt. No data is available on how many potential applicants are unable to produce transcripts from prior institutions, but it does seem as if people who were motivated to attend college prior to incarceration could be good candidates for community college if these barriers were lifted.

All of the applicants had been released within the past year; Sam and Kevin were released the same month as they made their application. Kevin appeared well adjusted and even upbeat, but when it became clear that he would not be able to enroll in college, he did not change his affect at all. He continued to display a smile and express appreciation for the help he received. Although this behavior may not appear to be a sign of trauma, given the extent of his efforts to enroll—multiple trips to both campuses, writing requests and appeals, waiting on lines—it seemed strange that he should not express any disappointment. “I know everyone tried; I need to just work on getting a job instead,” he said.

Chris’s responses epitomized the symptoms of hyperarousal. His responses seemed to swing in a pendulum between an exaggerated response and avoidance, or just disappearing altogether. Chris saw any upset in the process as proof that he
would not be accepted. He described not having the correct transcript as “humiliating” and became aggressive with the staff that tried to assist him. The clearest indication was that when he was escorted into a private office and the staff member shut the door, Chris assumed that the worker was trying to fight him: “Why else would he have closed the door?” While he had been home for seven months, Chris had spent most of his adult life incarcerated, more than fifteen years in total, and he had developed a way of interpreting “normal” behavior as aggressive and then responding in kind. The type of responses that Chris displayed during the Direct Admit process indicates that he would likely need mental health support to adjust to school.

If Sam had been successful in enrolling, he would have found that there are services on campus that he could have benefitted from, outside of academic support: free legal services, the Fatherhood Academy program, the Wellness Center, child care, youth activities like swimming, and places where Sam could have met other veterans and students. Instead, he is navigating the shelter system and trying to get on his feet on his own, a difficult task for anyone.

Recommendations
Community colleges have the unique potential to create a climate of inclusion for students with criminal justice histories but to do this, community colleges need to figure out how to (a) identify incarcerated college-ready applicants prior to their release; (b) support their enrollment; (c) correct misinformation and create manuals and guides to college entry; and (d) create space for students returning from jail or prison to establish themselves and form community ties with staff, faculty, and other students.

Conduct “In-Reach” to Potential Applicants
Once the goal of enrolling formerly incarcerated students has been established, community colleges should create and disseminate materials within the community institutions that have a commitment to educating formerly incarcerated students. Holding credit-bearing courses in jail and prison would likely have the strongest impact, but is logistically complex, since students in jail are transient and many prisons are too far from campus.

Community colleges would benefit from in-reach to prospective students at probation and parole meetings, in local jails, and at state prisons, through informational fliers, trained student ambassadors, and newsletters (Mukamal, Silbert, and Taylor 2015, 67). Faculty and advising staff have also benefitted from connecting with programs that already exist in their communities either within correctional institutions and in the community surrounding the college (Fine at al. 2004). Being apprised of what programs exist can prevent the duplication of services or inadvertently competing with community groups. Students who have not completed high
school could still be prepared for community college admissions. Some examples from LaGuardia’s campus include the Fatherhood program (CUNY Fatherhood Academy n.d.) and the Bridge to College (n.d.) program through the Division of Adult and Continuing Education, programs that connect pre-GED/TASC [Test Assessing Secondary Completion] students to careers and degree programs.

Although the defunding of Pell grants took the bottom out of these programs, LaGuardia Community College is positioned to resurrect the credit-bearing courses that were offered through the former program “CUNY Catch” (2005). Heralded as a highly effective transitional program, initiated by LaGuardia Community College, CUNY Catch used to serve adolescents in custody and prepare them for release to their home communities. The model bridged prisoners to LaGuardia, Bronx Community College, and Medgar Evers College and was recognized nationally for its strong case management approach. CUNY Catch made assessment of participants’ educational needs prior to discharge a priority and connected students to CUNY campuses after discharge. Although the model had its merits, there were implementation issues around recruitment and enrollment. Despite its success, the program lost momentum, particularly as rehabilitation fell out of favor with the Department of Corrections, and goals became more oriented toward security. To avoid repeating the same mistakes or reinventing the wheel, community colleges could build upon existing models and learn from programs that have been evaluated.

**Offer Admissions Assistance**

To assist formerly incarcerated students with their application, a full-time staff position should be dedicated to recruiting and assisting formerly incarcerated students. At LaGuardia, the position of “College Navigator” was created to orient new students with a history of incarceration. This important innovation is instrumental for retention, but could be strengthened with the addition of a coordinator for “in-reach,” going inside of correctional facilities to recruit students.

In the “Degrees of Freedom” report (Mukamal, Silbert, and Taylor 2015, 28), the authors indicate that “incorporating peer mentorship into campus programs can help formerly incarcerated students transition into the college community with the support of others who have encountered similar challenges.” While it is important to create positions of leadership with formerly incarcerated people, it is also crucial not to tokenize their experience. Having formerly incarcerated people in visible and leadership positions is important, but administrative coordination between the college and local correctional facilities can be assumed by someone with professional experience working in prisons and jails. The ideal combination of staff would include people with direct experience working alongside a coordinator with experience working in corrections.

For colleges where assigning full-time staff members for recruitment and retention is not within budget, a University committee with members from the
Office of Undergraduate Admissions, Diversity and Community Engagement (DECO), Student Life, the Center for Academic and Student Achievement (CASA), and Career Services Center (CSC) can be tasked with ensuring that appropriate programming in each division exists for formerly incarcerated students, that program data is collected and reported to leadership, and that student success is monitored (Mukamal, Silbert, and Taylor 2015, 63). All staff tasked with working with formerly incarcerated applicants should receive training on the specific needs of this population. Such training was made available across LaGuardia in the form of CARTAP, the College Achievement in Reentry Technical Assistance Project (College & Community Fellowship 2017, 12–13). CARTAP, designed and delivered by the College & Community Fellowship, was offered to any interested faculty member and required for Admissions and Financial Aid staff with whom a formerly incarcerated student might interact. The training was geared toward helping faculty and staff ease formerly incarcerated students’ transition to a new campus community, as well as sensitizing the participants to the effects of stigmatization (Copenhaver, Edwards-Willey, and Byers 2007). “Both in- and out-of-custody college programs for criminal justice-involved students need dedicated program coordinators to oversee day-to-day implementation and build sustainability so the program survives turnover in leadership” (Mukamal, Silbert, and Taylor 2015, 63). These coordinators need not be formerly incarcerated people in order to relate to these students, but they must be well versed in the challenges and trained in the specific resources available to applicants with a history of incarceration.

Correct Misinformation

Prison education programs often connect prisoner students to private colleges that can afford to provide college classes in jail without recouping payment. They cost more, graduate fewer, and fail to provide the same range of social services that a community college can. Often, people in prison are furthering their education with whatever resources are made available. Without the ability to compare colleges on the internet, which is unavailable in correctional facilities in New York, students with incarceration histories, who do have access to federal and state aid opportunities that could make college free, may not know this. Limitations to accessing federal aid exist for some students with specific convictions, and students may be unaware of their eligibility (US Department of Education, 2016). “Programs can improve college accessibility by providing financial support through assistance in applying for financial aid, counseling to improve students’ financial management skills, and direct grants for books, meals, or other costs” (Mukamal, Silbert, and Taylor 2015, 27). Programs at community colleges could include some type of financial assistance that is in addition to the school’s traditional financial aid programming. The creation of a program for formerly incarcerated students would need to include financial support for these students. Programs should include
financial aid counseling with counselors specifically trained to work with this population of students. Resources that can be targeted toward students include on-campus employment opportunities and matching students with Federal Work-Study opportunities, scholarships, and emergency funds.

**Establish Community Spaces**

The spaces that LaGuardia has designated as student centers run the gamut from fine arts to technology to clubs celebrating the diverse cultures at LaGuardia. Spaces vary but, in general, LaGuardia offers space and support and celebrates diversity. Recently, LaGuardia launched an LGBTQIA center, another step in creating an inclusive campus. Students can walk the campus and see veterans and people with learning differences, places to receive free counseling, assistance with food and benefits, and citizenship services. Yet formerly incarcerated students remain obscure to faculty and staff who may be unsure of how to approach the issues or even what they are permitted to ask in light of rapidly changing policies. Meanwhile, students affected by incarceration, citizens returning from jail and prison, encounter misinformation, confusion and unnecessary bureaucracy surrounding their applications. Whether it is the missing documentation or their discomfort with crowded rooms and public spaces, students leaving prison may experience a sense of shame or stigma associated with their incarceration that a dedicated space could offset. Reversing stigma begins by acknowledging the experience that led to the stigma in the first place. Language used should encourage people and communicate that they are being included. For example, “reentering from,” “reintegrating after” and “returning from” jail or prison communicate the facts of what the student may be experiencing, while language like “ex-offender” or “felon” refers to the individual and can be offensive. Designating space and staff to returning citizens that reflect an understanding of the challenges of navigating the admissions process could go a long way to assuring justice-involved applicants that their experiences are valued.

Claiming space for people affected by incarceration requires a designation that is not euphemistic and does not pander to shame. A “Reintegration Center” or a “Returning Citizen Center” can be a place for people with a history of incarceration to initiate an application and see the process through to completion. Offering services for all students affected by incarceration could help create community among students who have been incarcerated and communities of students affected by prison. Populations include children of incarcerated parents, friends of people in prison, and community members impacted by mass incarceration.

Physical space on campus encourages students to build community and also offers outlets for student-run programs that explore social issues and identity. The Black Male Empowerment Cooperative (BMEC n.d.), for example, is a student-centered, school-sponsored mentoring initiative at LaGuardia Community
College. Run by faculty and students of varying backgrounds and genders, BMEC is a cooperative that shares a commitment to empowering Black males, but is not limited to men of color. The space includes room for students to complete school work at stations that offer computer access. There is a budget that allows for events and weekly meet-ups where students can drop in to play games. BMEC is able to hire mentors and staff positions with Federal Work-Study students. A similar model could be created to serve as a community space for students with incarceration histories and those affected by incarceration. Space in community colleges, while limited, is a powerful symbol of the college’s commitment to students affected by incarceration.

Conclusion
Legislative support for education within prisons and jails is currently experiencing a sea-change moment. More people will have access to community college coursework within the state’s correctional institutions by the end of 2017 than at any time in the past forty years. As increasing numbers of people reenter their communities with college coursework under their belts, community colleges should seek to broaden their ability to attract and enroll these students. Community colleges are positioned to reimagine the admissions process as a tool for social justice. LaGuardia has already initiated efforts to provide scholarships and mentoring to returning citizens, but efforts must be made to start this support prior to release and continue the momentum across the college to ensure that the necessary support structures are in place.

LaGuardia should work to ensure that a clear pipeline exists for formerly incarcerated students at every community college in the City University of New York. LaGuardia is clearly positioned to be a leader in this work of moving people from prison and jail to college. By understanding the perspective of formerly incarcerated applicants, the College can modify the process to be more welcoming, accessible, and successful for people who may otherwise fail to enroll.

References


What We Need in the Classroom: Excarcerated Students Speak Out on Best Classroom Practices

Neil Meyer, English

Abstract
This article offers faculty advice on how to design their courses with the needs of formerly incarcerated (“excarcerated”) students in mind. Multiple studies have quantified the benefits of college in reducing recidivism and improving the lives of excarcerated students. This article builds on that work and uses the responses of a focus group of excarcerated college students to provide qualitative suggestions for how faculty members can shape their classrooms to facilitate the success of this population. The classroom practices that excarcerated students highlighted as being most beneficial to them bolster the article’s overall argument: that practices most positive for excarcerated students can help all students in a diverse college classroom.

In recent years, public sentiment appears to have turned away from the “tough on crime” discourse inaugurated in the Richard Nixon era (Drakulich and Kirk 2016). States have rethought their reliance on mass incarceration, and even right-wing donors like the Koch Brothers have put modest support behind incarceration reform (Nelson and Fields 2015). The growing consensus around marijuana decriminalization also reflects a change in values around what is criminal, and therefore, who should be incarcerated (Stringer and Maggard 2016).

With the election of Donald Trump and the appointment of Jeff Sessions as Attorney General, the emerging consensus that US mass incarceration is a human rights failure and a waste of resources might be fleeting; time will tell. But those of us who teach at the college level, especially those at two-year colleges, have a job to do. Despite the precarious status of criminal justice reforms, our campuses have been at the forefront of educating students who are rebuilding their lives post-incarceration. Considered in this light, educating students after incarceration is activism.

Multiple studies have shown that obtaining a college education greatly reduces the chances for recidivism (Chappell 2004; Brown 2015; Wheeldon 2011). And community colleges, by virtue, for example, of their affordability, locations, and service to working and returning students, are often the schools of choice for “excarcerated” students (United States Department of Education 2009). If this is the reality of our institutions, then we must address this reality more directly in our classrooms. Colleges must think about the resources excarcerated students need and invest in making their campuses more responsive to those needs.
Integral to the excarcerated student’s educational experience are classroom faculty. For us, there are significant questions about how we structure our coursework, how we manage our classroom interactions, and how we create relationships with this student population at a crucial moment in their lives. My initial inquiry into the practices that best serve excarcerated students in the community college classroom led to a more nuanced question: In working with excarcerated students, what might we learn about curriculum design and pedagogy that will support learning for students from a wide range of backgrounds? This paper argues that classroom practices designed with excarcerated students in mind can positively influence the learning experience of all students.

Recent scholarship on college education for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals attests to the benefits and challenges of educating within prisons; less available are studies about how to facilitate student success after prison. To move the conversation about those students forward, I conducted a focus group with formerly incarcerated students currently enrolled in college. Their reflections provide insight into their needs as students. My conclusions are based on current scholarly discussion and student responses.

The LaGuardia mission statement reads, “LaGuardia Community College’s mission is to educate and graduate one of the most diverse student populations in the country to become critical thinkers and socially responsible citizens who help to shape a rapidly evolving society” (LaGuardia, n.d.). That mission shapes our work every day and these students obligate us to reinvestigate our mission’s meaning. As one excarcerated student said, “I think we are a special population … and we should be able to have our own organizations and support groups. … People need to see that” (Halkovic et al. 2013, 15). With this statement in mind, we need to see service to our excarcerated students as part of our service to a diverse student population. Reshaping our classroom practices to best serve excarcerated students makes a significant contribution to those students’ future college success. And, as we will see, the advice and feedback received from students in our focus group resonate beyond the specific needs of excarcerated students. Hearing from these students and adapting our classrooms to better serve them can transform the classroom for all of our students.

* * *

Research is clear that education plays a powerful role in reducing recidivism (Erisman and Contardo 2005; US Department of Education 2009). But much of this research focuses on education that happens within correctional institutions. Work by the federal Department of Education, the Correctional Association of New York, and other institutions offer models of effective educational programs within correctional institutions, and information on how to transition
students’ educations as they exit the prison system and reenter their communities. Such research calls on community colleges to partner with correctional institutions to better serve excarcerated students. Erisman and Contardo (2005, 38) write, “Prison systems that partner with community colleges can take advantage of existing testing and remediation strategies as a way to prepare prisoners for postsecondary work.”

Excarcerated students describe their educational experiences in very positive ways (Halkovic et al. 2013). They also describe structural challenges such as navigating the bureaucracy of a college (8) and finding ways to maintain parole expectations while keeping up with coursework (19). When it comes to the classroom, there are more nuanced challenges for students. Students are often not sure of how to disclose their incarceration histories and some excarcerated students describe both real and perceived stigma on campus and in the classroom (Copenhaver, Edwards-Willey, and Byers 2007).

These challenges place faculty in a crucial position. Professors are students’ most regular engagement with authority on campus and have an exceptional amount of influence over students’ long-term success (Dwyer 2017; Hoffman 2014). This dependence is true for every student in our classrooms, but especially true for excarcerated students, who bring a set of issues that most faculty are not trained to address. And since many students hesitate to disclose their incarceration histories, faculty members are most often not aware that a student might need additional support or understanding.

Even professors who are attuned to the needs of excarcerated students will have difficulty finding concrete advice and support for working with this student population. Some scholarship exists to offer faculty practical guidance. The most insightful work in this area comes from “Returning to School after Incarceration: Policy, Prisoners, and the Classroom” (Miller et al. 2014). The authors note the importance of a welcoming classroom environment as being necessary for excarcerated students: “The formerly incarcerated need to adjust to a nonhostile climate. In prison, inmates had to be alert for danger; now they have to learn new behaviors. Their old behaviors may be misunderstood” (74). Professors know that students bring challenges from their past into the classroom; Miller et al. (2014) remind us here of how much more significantly this is true for excarcerated students. The authors also point out the excarcerated student’s need for structure: “men coming from prison … need structure in their lives” (75). The authors advise “establishing a clear code of behavior,” as well as using supportive, nonjudgmental language to encourage participation in the classroom (75). I kept these insights in mind as I structured the questions for the focus groups that I will describe in detail next. My aim here was to build on the existing scholarship about excarcerated students in the classroom.
Methodology
To recruit focus group participants, I circulated promotional materials via email and posted them College-wide. Because of the privacy concerns of students, I did not ask them to reveal their incarceration histories in order to participate in the focus group. The only limit placed on participation was that participants had to be at least eighteen years old. As such, I could not guarantee that only students with incarceration histories would participate. But the topic and goals of the focus group were made clear in the promotional flyer and the email text I used to solicit participants.

The focus group produced qualitative data based on students’ responses to the questions. A trained facilitator and I led the focus group; the questions were semistructured to allow flexibility based on the participants’ responses. These questions had been workshopped with other faculty members as part of the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning’s 2016–2017 Carnegie Seminar on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, the theme of which was Incarceration and Daily Life. The focus group facilitator asked questions such as “Are there things that happen in a classroom that have held you back from being engaged in the class?” and “What challenges outside of the classroom can affect a postincarceration student’s success?” (See Appendix for a complete list of questions.)

Participants signed a consent form that explained the potential risks in taking part. The focus group was audiorecorded and transcribed. Five students took part in the focus group and all five were men currently enrolled at a CUNY school. This small number makes for a limited pool of experiences from which to generalize, an issue I will address at the end of this paper.

Focus Group Discussion
There has been little research on the classroom experience of excarcerated students. My questions were designed to concentrate on the classroom and especially the role of the professor. But I was reminded by this focus group, and wish to foreground at the beginning of this portion of the paper, that the classroom is the most foundational nexus of our students’ experiences of college. Even when our focus group questions moved on to other topics, students would return to examples or suggestions related to the classroom, and to dynamics between teachers and students. It is an important reminder that so much of what our students experience in college—outside challenges, tackling administration and bureaucracy, balancing work and life—is mediated through their time in our classrooms.

As we discussed issues with the participants, their responses about professors coalesced around two specific concentrations: an alienation from professors as a general category, and specific examples of positive experiences with their professors. I do not see these two sets of responses as contradictory; they reflect both a continuum of experiences as well as legitimate concerns students brought to the classroom. One student claimed, “I don’t think the professors can think or
even imagine that someone who has been in my situation can actually attend college.” This statement reflected a consistent sense of cautious distance from their professors. Another student felt that professors were too far removed from their experiences to be helpful: “I feel like they’re not informed enough. They can’t help us because they don’t have the education to know how to do that, how to help a person that’s been formerly incarcerated.”

This lack of both personal experience and/or expertise on the part of professors helps explain why some students suspected that professors would not be their allies and might even be hostile to them as a result of their incarceration histories. This fear made disclosure of their incarceration histories a fraught subject. One student thought, “If the professors don’t know about your history, I think that’s the best way to go. If they don’t know who you are and where you came from, they can’t judge you.” This statement presumes the likelihood of judgment from a professor. No participant described an explicit moment where this kind of bias manifested itself between student and teacher, but it was a concern discussed more than once.

Despite these concerns, students did describe positive relationships with professors, including positive experiences of sharing their incarceration histories. One student described opening up about his incarceration history to a professor after knowing her for a long time; sharing that information made him feel more supported and gave him a concrete ally to turn to on campus. These positive student-teacher interactions were about more than just sharing their stories, but also about overall support the students felt they received from professors. One student said, “If I ask them for help, they give it to me or point me in the right direction. They spend time with me. I spend time with them; we chew the fat. I feel like there’s a connection.” When students described challenges at-large at school (such as dealing with the Bursar, or other offices), they often returned to examples of professors who helped them navigate these complications.

Another student said, “I never had a bad experience from a professor from them knowing about my past at all,” but he continued with this caveat: “I don’t feel as though the teacher has to know. If you want to tell them, yeah, that’s fine, but I don’t think they should have to know.” This restraint seems to be a sensible conclusion for a student who will encounter many different professors over time: volunteering information about their incarceration experiences only when they feel it is the correct time to do so. Our focus group participants described disclosing their incarceration histories only on their own terms, and they also described concerns about bias in the classroom as a significant reason to avoid discussing the topic. These concerns mean that the conditions in the classroom and with the professor need to be right for the student. Classroom instructors need, then, to consider how to create those conditions: Our participants offered two areas for professors to think critically about: student dynamics in the classroom, and course content.
We asked students if there was anything they felt specifically held them back in the classroom. Matching their concerns about professors, students were also concerned about attitudes—real and perceived—from their fellow students. One student shared a story: He was in a class discussing criminal justice, and another student said, “I don’t care how old you are and what you been through and what your circumstances was, if you sell drugs, you deserve to go to jail.” He found that student’s attitude chilling. To our focus group participant, it signaled a lack of empathy and understanding for ex-offenders, and he took that to mean that he would face bias, if he were to discuss his own time in prison. Other participants described sometimes feeling isolated from other students and unsure of how to participate with them fully in class. This discomfort is about stigma, arising both from what excarcerated students have experienced first hand and what they hope to avoid in college.

But our participants were also aware that student bonds were essential to their success. The participant who described isolating himself from his fellow students described the consequences of that isolation: “That hurts me. It hurts me when I don’t have other classmates’ numbers so that if you miss a class, you can’t text somebody and say, ‘What assignment did I miss?’” He knew that those relationships were a way to stay connected and supported on campus.

As with their experiences with faculty, students described positive experiences of disclosing their incarceration histories to other students. One student described telling a class about his time in prison and found it brought him closer to them: “It makes people curious and they become friends and that’s a network and that network can become something in the future and somebody can invest in your company.” This example describes both the intimacy of friendship as well as the more material need to be connected to your fellow students for the good of your future success. Participants discussed how sharing their experiences could also benefit their fellow students and would, according to one participant, “create more confidence among the students.”

Despite legitimate concerns about disclosing their incarceration histories, our focus group participants overall described positive experiences with faculty and students when the conditions were right. Such conditions involved feeling that faculty and students were allies, but our participants suggested that it was also the right intellectual climate in the classroom that allowed them the space to discuss their experiences with the criminal justice system in a judgment-free way. We asked our participants about what subjects they wanted their professors to teach and discuss more. One student mentioned examples such as the Tuskegee experiments, our misunderstandings about Africa, and issues of inequality in New York City. He thought it was important that professors address such instances of “oppression” in their classrooms. Another student felt comfortable disclosing his incarceration status because he was in a class that openly discussed issues of incarceration and
immigration: “I wanted to share that and to show people that even though you are illegal or incarcerated, you can do it. There are a lot of walls and barriers that you have to cross, but if you apply yourself, you still can do it.”

This quotation is worth thinking carefully about, because it represents some of the most significant issues professors should consider. As mentioned earlier, our focus group participants felt held back in the classroom when they experienced (real or perceived) hostility from faculty and fellow students. They felt more empowered when they could speak freely with faculty and students, and they felt that course content often provided a framework for introducing their experiences into the classroom in an empowering way.

Classroom Application

The above insights from the students give us a basic framework for thinking about what insights excarcerated students bring to our thinking about the classroom. Specifically, we need to consider the course materials that might engage students on these issues, and, in addition, to consider the language we use as professors and the language students use in the classroom.

To bring the above insights concretely into our classroom practice, thinking about our course materials may be the best place to start. Our focus group participants described being most excited and engaged by socially relevant course work, course materials that applied to their lives and addressed socially relevant issues. If faculty want to create the most empowering classroom space for excarcerated students, consider the issues that might make college feel most vital and relevant to them. These issues could obviously include mass incarceration, but also housing, urban design, immigration, and other topics that touch directly or indirectly on students’ lives. One of our focus group participants mentioned earlier discussed examples such as the Tuskegee experiments and other forms of structural racism. Another student brought up gentrification and the changing demographics of New York City. It is worth noting here that questions about incarceration formed only a portion of the examples students suggested. Students were most animated by topics that found relevant to contemporary politics, and that they felt had been underaddressed or ignored in their earlier education.

Engaging with these issues requires additional, thoughtful work by professors. It might seem easy enough to assign Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) or Ava DuVernay’s documentary, *13th* (2016). But once professors recognize that excarcerated students might be in their classroom, they must prepare to address students’ real world interactions with these issues. Some students might bring in their own incarceration experiences, or those of loved ones; other students might bring experiences as victims of crime. To balance those tensions, faculty should prepare their class to speak respectfully to one another, and should address some of the language politics of these issues. One useful document is “An Open Letter
to Our Friends on the Question of Language” from The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions (Ellis, n.d.). The letter ends with four simple steps, including “Stop using the terms offender, felon, prisoner, inmate and convict” and “Substitute the word PEOPLE for these other negative terms.” The important takeaway here is to structure in advance the discourse that faculty and students will use in the classroom. This preparation will prevent the possible alienation of students (especially excarcerated students) and may provide the space for those students to feel comfortable sharing their own insights and experiences with the class.

The other significant takeaway from our focus group was how powerful a trusting relationship with a faculty member can be for excarcerated students. Students described finding allies in certain professors and how they felt they could open up to them. They also turned to faculty as resources for navigating the college. For some of us, this reliance can be an unexpected challenge. We know our classroom and department policies, but that does not mean we know where the Registrar’s office is or when a student should seek out an advisor. It is important for faculty to keep such limitations in mind when a student comes with a need or concern that seems unrelated to the professor’s class. Each professor needs to make their own limits for how much effort they can expend to help students navigate the College outside of their own classrooms, but that effort is undeniably important to students who are navigating the complexities of our institution, while navigating reentry into their communities, parole, and other challenges.

The above material stems from a single focus group and, therefore, these conclusions are still tentative. But these student voices point towards a broader conclusion: Designing our classrooms with the excarcerated student in mind brings benefits for a much larger range of students. A more careful focus on language, greater attention to how students speak to and about one another, learning to be an advocate for our students across the campus—all of these are practices from which students with a wide range of backgrounds can benefit. Therefore, in planning for some of our most precarious and sometimes invisible students, we can create a classroom environment that benefits everyone.

This conclusion is especially relevant because students’ histories with the criminal justice system will not be readily disclosed. As we saw, all the focus group participants expressed hesitation in sharing their incarceration experiences. Some told faculty members or fellow students only when the time and opportunity felt correct and described these moments as outside the norm of their usual patterns. This hesitation relates back to the issue of stigma. Focus group participants discussed both real examples of stigma and an overall fear of stigma, confirming the findings of research on the subject. Copenhaver, Edwards-Willey, and Byers (2007, 275) point out that excarcerated students might not have a “visible” stigma, but such students might be burdened by the challenge of keeping their perceived stigma private or hidden from others in their college community.
As a result, faculty should prepare for these issues before they enter the classroom. Faculty should presume the possibility of excarcerated students, rather than wait for student disclosure to rethink their practices. This level of awareness in classroom preparation extends to other identities in the classroom, for example, LGBTQ, immigration status, and ethnicity. Excarcerated students are less visible, but they share overlapping needs with other precarious student populations. Designing the classroom with them in mind is part of dealing with classroom diversity.

Conclusion and Next Steps
With only a handful of students in this focus group, we might want to hesitate in generalizing from the student feedback. Within our small group, there were a range of incarceration experiences—with jails, prisons, and immigrant detention facilities. The participants had each been out of the system for different lengths of time. But the group members shared some common insights and advice, and that common ground seems a good place to start both as the foundation of future research and as immediate application by faculty into classroom design. My aim in future research is to conduct additional focus groups and one-on-one interviews in order to hear from more voices within the excarcerated student population. But the insights provided by our group members align with some of the observations found in the research on the subject of the excarcerated in the classroom.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
1. Are there things that happen in a classroom that have held you back from being engaged in the class?
2. Do professors have biases or misconceptions about students with incarceration histories?
3. Do professors need to know their students incarceration histories?
4. How could it benefit a student or others in the class to disclose their incarceration history?
5. What challenges outside of the classroom can affect a postincarceration student’s success?
6. How could professors assist students in addressing those challenges?
7. What skills or strengths do formerly incarcerated students have that other students may not have? Are there ways faculty could better utilize those assets?
8. What people or offices have been most helpful for post-incarceration students? Could professors make using those resources easier?
9. Are there subjects/books/films/issues that you wish professor discussed or taught more about?
10. What would your ideal college class study?
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Is It Personal?  
Exploring Criminal Justice Involvement, Victimization, and Demographics in Criminal Justice Major and Career Selection

Colleen Eren, Social Science

Abstract

Criminal Justice programs have seen exponential growth across the United States as criminal justice “came into its own” as a discipline, concomitant with the rise of mass incarceration in the 1970s and 1980s. The criminal justice major is now one of the top ten most awarded degrees in the country. A nascent literature has explored the social, psychological, and demographic characteristics of criminal justice majors, primarily of White undergraduates in four-year schools, to determine motivations for entering into the major and a criminal justice career. There have been no studies to date focused on criminal justice majors in majority-minority two-year colleges. This largely exploratory study hypothesized that such students would have criminal justice involvement or victimization experiences that influenced their decision to enter into a criminal justice major and career, and that their motivations for entering the major differed from those of their counterparts in four-year schools. The current study is an exploratory study conducted through a self-administered survey of 110 undergraduates in their First Year Seminar in Criminal Justice class at LaGuardia Community College—a large urban, diverse, open-admissions community college in Queens, New York.

In 1965, hearings regarding the Law Enforcement Assistance Act (LEAA) were held by the Committee on the Judiciary of the US Senate. “Colleges and universities in every State should be encouraged to offer degree programs in police administration and criminology. The lack of a sufficient body of police educators and instructors and of modern curriculums enhances our needs in this area,” the US Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach argued at the time (Law Enforcement 1965, 9). LEAA went on to help colleges and universities fund programs for criminal justice professionals (Gabbidon, Penn, and Richards 2003). Since then, Criminal Justice (CJ) programs have seen exponential growth across the United States, as criminal justice “came into its own” as a discipline, concomitant with the rise of mass incarceration in the 1970s and 1980s. The criminal justice major is now one of the top ten most awarded degrees in the country, providing a reliable source of enrollment and revenue for colleges (Sloan and Buchwalter 2017). Job creation in criminal justice fields has been similarly robust and expanding, with
no sign of abatement in the immediate future. In 2014, there were in the United States some 500,000 correctional officers and bailiffs, 800,000 police and detectives, 35,000 private investigators, 91,000 probation officers, 1.1 million security guards, and 775,500 lawyers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015), and jobs in countless other tangentially related positions, from nonprofit social services to postsecondary education.

Given the continued significance and centrality of criminal justice and the realities of mass incarceration in the United States, it is surprising that relatively little analysis of those entering the criminal justice major exists. After all, these individuals will be entering into professions that are characterized by discretion, which can entail making decisions that mean life or death, freedom or incarceration, and impact directly the lives of the millions involved in the criminal justice system and their families. Furthermore, for those educators designing and teaching criminal justice curricula, ignorance of their students means that pedagogical potential is lost. More knowledge about the background experiences, motivations, and beliefs of their students should sensitize instructors to their and their students’ use of language and tenor of conversation when discussing incarcerated persons or victims (e.g., avoiding the dehumanizing terms “perps” or “cons”). It also means that the educators will have the chance to think of ways to incorporate students’ lived experiences into the classroom, to cultivate self-reflection and awareness, and to make classroom discussions directly relevant to those experiences.

In their article “Commercializing Success: The Impact of Popular Media on the Career Decisions and Perceptual Accuracy of Criminal Justice Students,” Barthe, Leone, and Lateano (2013, 15) noted, “Only a few research efforts have specifically examined the motivations and aspirations of criminal justice students.” The very nascent literature that has emerged in the past twenty years has been limited in scope. Although scholars have looked at some of the social, psychological, and demographic characteristics that undergird the students’ career aspirations and motivations, they have largely ignored students of color, with almost no attention paid to Latinos/Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans or the recently immigrated as distinct groups. Perhaps because they have focused on Whites in traditional suburban four-year college settings, the studies have not considered at all the role that victimization or criminal justice involvement (both of which disproportionately affect racial minorities in urban areas) play in the decision to enter into the major and pursue a career in criminal justice.

In 2014, 1 in 9 African American children and 1 in 28 Hispanic children, but only 1 in 57 White children in the US had an incarcerated parent (Rutgers 2014). Racial minorities are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and face harsh sentencing than their White counterparts (Sentencing Project 2013). At the same time, minorities (with the exception of Asians) and, particularly, Blacks are also more likely to be the victims of violent crime. Those living in urban areas, regardless of
race, face a higher probability of violent crime victimization (Harrell 2007). As a faculty member in a large, urban, majority-minority and majority-immigrant community college with a thriving Criminal Justice program comprised overwhelmingly of Latino and Black students, I had a strong personal interest in and curiosity about whether and how personal experiences such as criminal justice involvement or victimization affect my students’ decisions to enter Criminal Justice. Did they affect their motives? their career aspirations? their view of the fundamental fairness of the system or of their ability to change it? Additionally, I wanted to learn how gender, race/ethnicity, and immigration status were intervening variables. As these questions are each complex and extensive, this first round of research was intended to be exploratory in nature. In other words, I wanted to find out through the descriptive data yielded by this study which areas I should prioritize and focus on in future studies, and also how best to modify my survey instrument to yield the type of specific information needed.

**Literature Review**

A sizable force in academic settings now, Criminal Justice students are under academic scrutiny primarily in two ways. First, their psychological traits and ability to be influenced by media in career selection are being compared to those of students who elect other majors. Courtright, Mackey, and Packard (2005), for instance, used a well-tested instrument to look at CJ majors’ empathy vis-à-vis that of non-CJ majors, concluding that there is evidence that the former are lower in empathy and more punitive towards those who commit crimes than their counterparts. In “The Specter of Authoritarianism among Criminal Justice Majors,” Owen and Wagner (2008) used Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale and concluded that criminal justice majors (particularly males) indeed exhibited higher levels of authoritarianism, although education can minimize this tendency. They urge, “Given the potential dangers of authoritarianism, the nature of criminal justice work, and the propensity for criminal justice agencies to inculcate new recruits into a sometimes-authoritarian organizational culture, criminal justice programs should develop curricula to ensure that students develop and apply skills that may mitigate the deleterious effects of authoritarianism” (48). Bjerregard and Lord (2003) evaluated criminal justice majors’ ethical orientations, concluding that these students expressed more consideration for the welfare of others, were less likely to report unethical behavior, and also considered corruption by police to be more serious than non-CJ students.

The psychological influence of media on criminal justice students was confirmed by Barthe, Leone, and Lateano (2013). They found that television had a sizeable impact on major selection, with 65% of their sample indicating that criminal justice shows had a significant impact on their choice (19). They also showed how the media negatively impacted these students’ factual accuracy when
asked questions about the roles of criminal justice practitioners (20). In “Choosing Criminal Justice: Factors Contributing to the Selection of Criminal Justice as a Major,” Sarver, Sarver, and Dobbs (2010, 62) had likewise concluded that media had an influence on a large percentage of their criminal justice student subjects, with almost 20% citing media as the most important factor.

A second branch of research on criminal justice students which is extended through this paper focuses more on the sociological characteristics of those who choose the major. Krimmel and Tartaro’s (1999) widely cited exploratory study of “Career Choices and Characteristics of Criminal Justice Undergraduates” has become the basis of attempts at replication and extension. They looked at “personal, social and demographic attributes of [four hundred] criminal justice undergraduate students [in twelve four-year colleges]” and their career aspirations (277), determining that the majority of Criminal Justice majors preferred careers in law enforcement. Although the authors had expected, on the basis of previous research, that family and friends would influence the decision to enter into law enforcement, their hypothesis was not supported: “Our respondents reported no influence from family, friends, or high school relationships in their decision to study criminal justice in college,” they noted (284). Criminal justice students as a group perceived the major as “interesting and relevant” (287).

Like the researchers who would follow, Krimmel and Tartaro found racial differences and gender differences in their subjects’ motivations and attitudes. More Whites than non-Whites were interested in entering law enforcement (284). Whites were more likely than non-Whites to value wearing a uniform, to want to “arrest bad guys” and to protect the Constitution. Whites were also more likely to say that they were influenced by family members when choosing their major (287). Women expressed more interest in obtaining a criminal justice job to “help solve problems” and were less likely to be motivated by “arresting bad guys” or wearing a uniform (285). Important to note about this study was the lack of diversity: 73% of the respondents were White, 15% were Black, and 12% were combined into an “other” category (282).

Courtright and Mackey (2004) sought to extend the work of Krimmel and Tartaro. They noted, “Research on occupational attractiveness and career planning among undergraduate criminal justice (CJ) students has not been systematically examined to the extent warranted, especially in light of the size and popularity of the major” (311). Sampling from five public and private four-year schools in the northeast, Courtright and Mackey looked at which law enforcement occupations were perceived as “attractive” among CJ majors at various stages of their college careers, and at correlations by the demographic variables of gender and class ranking. They also looked at the relationship between punitive attitudes and law enforcement desirability (314). Women were found to consider corrections-related jobs more desirable than their male counterparts, who rated law enforcement
jobs more desirable, consistent with Courtright and Mackey’s previous research “reporting greater levels of empathy by females [and] higher levels of punitiveness … by males” (318). “Those students who believe law enforcement is a highly desirable job hold rather punitive views,” they concluded (321–22). As with Krimmel and Tartaro, this study had so few minorities, with 92% of respondents being White, that they had to make race a dichotomous variable. They did not even attempt to parse out differences between minorities and Whites.

Schanz (2012) pointed out the importance of looking at differences by ethnicity and race in attitudes among CJ majors, given the projected increase in enrollment of minority students, which is expected to far outpace that of White students over the next few years (160). To that end, he investigated career goals of CJ majors in different ethnic and racial groups at a four-year midwestern university. The study revealed significant differences in career decisions based on race: Racial and ethnic minority students were less inclined to pursue a law enforcement career and they expected barriers to equal opportunity in job prospects (167). Surprisingly, however, for an article purporting to examine ethnic/racial differences, Schanz’s sample of non-Whites included only 62 respondents. Like Courtright and Mackey (2004), he made race a dichotomous variable due to lack of ethnic diversity.

Gabbidon, Penn, and Richards (2003) built on this work at predominately White colleges to study students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), using the survey instrument of Krimmel and Tartaro (1999). Correctly asserting that “studies related to individual motivations for entering the criminal justice profession have centered more on white Americans than African-Americans” (235), they pointed out a seeming contradiction: Blacks, as historical targets of unfair treatment, are more skeptical of, and hold negative views of, the criminal justice system and yet, African Americans represent a growing percentage of those entering into criminal justice majors and careers. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017, 16) has reported that, in 2010, Blacks made up 17.8% of protective service occupations (Hispanics made up 13.3% and Asians, 2.4%). A full 22% of bailiffs, correctional officers, and jailers were Black, and 13.3% Hispanic. Blacks also made up 38.8% of private detectives and investigators (15.9% Hispanics) and 12.1% of police and sheriff’s patrol officers, approximately representative of numbers in the general population. As with other studies, Gabbidon, Penn and Richards’s work showed gender disparities: Black males were more interested in wearing uniforms than women, for instance. Women were more enthusiastic about subject matter and more likely to think that the subject matter was “relevant to the real world” (239). Gabbidon, Penn, and Richards concluded that “when it came to why students at HBCUs selected criminal justice as their career, there were stark differences [from students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)]. These differences were all seemingly tied to social justice issues … In a similar vein, the history of racism in America produced responses that showed
more concern among students at HBCUs [than at PWIs] regarding their altruistic selection of criminal justice as a career” (242).

Like Gabbidon, Penn, and Richards (2003), Yim’s (2009) “Girls, Why Do You Want to Become Police Officers? Career Goals/Choices among Criminal Justice Undergraduates” sought to extend the work of Krimmel and Tartaro (1999), this time teasing out more fully the impact of gender. Her work corroborated evidence that women were less likely to be interested in law enforcement careers, and added that this lack of interest is perhaps related to women’s lower perceptions of their own competence in such a career compared to the self-perceptions of their male counterparts. Women were, on the other hand, more likely to express interest in law school and graduate school, perceiving themselves to be more competent in this arena (131). Yim did not attempt to show racial or ethnic differences, as she, too, was constrained by the homogeneity of her sample from an urban midwestern college.

Methods
According to the LaGuardia Community College 2016 Institutional Profile, LaGuardia had approximately 20,000 undergraduates enrolled in 2015. Of those students, 21% were Asian, 19% were Black, 43% were Hispanic, and 13% were White, with 4% unknown (LaGuardia 2016, viii). A full 60% are foreign born, with 98 languages spoken (ix). The median age was 21, with only 53% falling into traditional college age of 17 to 22 (3). Of those students living away from their parents, 77% had family incomes of less than $25,000, while 57.5% of those living with their parents had family incomes of less than $25,000 (6). In the Criminal Justice program alone, there are approximately 1,300 students (9).

For this study, an IRB-approved survey consisting of fifty-four questions was administered to undergraduate students in seven First Year Seminar classes in Criminal Justice at LaGuardia Community College. For replication purposes, the survey included twenty-two of the previously validated questions asked by Krimmel and Tartaro (1999), but extended the scope of the inquiry as described to include questions pertaining to victimization and criminal justice involvement. The First Year Seminar is the first criminal justice class required of students entering into the Criminal Justice major, and so is typically their first formal introduction to the discipline. This class was chosen to tap into student attitudes, ideas, and motivations about criminal justice and criminal justice professions before the “intervention” of college-level study and formal exposure to career options. Students were given the surveys and read a consent script in class. Any identifying information was removed from the individual surveys to ensure anonymity. In total, 110 surveys were returned. Data was input into SPSS by the principal investigator and descriptive statistics were obtained.
Results and Analysis

Ethnicity, Immigration Status, Sexual Orientation, and Politics: Areas of Interest

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all categorical and some ordinal variables related to the demographic and experiential backgrounds of students. I have presented the data both as raw numbers (left column, N) and as also as percentages (right column, %). From an exploratory perspective, there are several notable outcomes, each of which could stimulate further, narrower lines of inquiry and independent study. For example, in regards to race and ethnicity, the percentage of criminal justice majors who reported being Hispanic or Latino was 57.9%, whereas the undergraduate population of LaGuardia is 43% Hispanic; so this group is overrepresented in this sample of CJ majors, whereas Asians, at only 10.3% of the sample, are underrepresented in comparison to their percentage in LaGuardia’s undergraduate population of 21%. What is leading Hispanic students to gravitate towards this major? What is discouraging Asians from enrolling in this major?

There are also no studies to date of LGBTQ+ students and their decisions to enter into Criminal Justice. The percentage of CJ students identifying as LGBTQ+, approximately 10%, is slightly higher compared with national samples of millennials (Gates 2017). With a third of all students identifying as first-generation immigrants, and three-quarters reporting at least one immigrant parent, probing more deeply into how the immigrant experience affects views of the criminal justice system is another fertile area for a focused, independent study.

A surprising finding was that, contrary to an intuitive expectation that those interested in law enforcement and other careers in criminal justice fields would skew politically conservative, this preliminary study revealed that only 12% of respondents indicated that they identified as “conservative” or “strongly conservative.” Of those reporting a political affiliation, most identified as “liberal” (29%) or “very liberal” (14.6%). Perplexing was the large number of students (33%) who said they either did not know or were undecided about their political affiliation. Given the heated tenor of US politics in the current moment and increased polarization, it was a reasonable expectation that many would know and strongly identify with a political orientation.

Criminal Justice Involvement/Victimization

I have operationally defined criminal justice involvement to mean the involvement of self, family, or close friends in the criminal justice system, either by working within the criminal justice system and/or by being subject to arrest for a misdemeanor or greater violation. The questions which dealt with criminal justice involvement revealed interesting results about LaGuardia Criminal Justice students in the First Year Seminar. Twenty-five percent have a family member in a criminal justice career, and 33.6% have a close friend in a criminal justice career.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian or European</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation immigrant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one parent born outside of US</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>89.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay or Lesbian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Liberal</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrist</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Conservative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/Undecided</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member works in a CJ career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>73.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A close friend works in a CJ Career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been arrested for misdemeanor or greater violation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What kinds of conversations about this work are being communicated to our students, and what kind of information disseminated through these social networks? At the same time, 15.5% of our students have themselves been arrested for a misdemeanor or greater violation, and 42.7% have had a family member arrested for a misdemeanor or greater violation. A full 43.6% have been stopped, questioned, and frisked by police. While most (83.6%) indicated that their interactions with police were either neutral or positive, approximately 30% hold the view that the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family member arrested for misdemeanor or greater violation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close friend arrested for misdemeanor or greater violation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been stopped, questioned, frisked</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been charged with quality of life violation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of law enforcement interactions</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal justice views</td>
<td>Fair and justice always served</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair and justice usually served</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral/no opinion</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfair/justice infrequently served</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always unfair/justice never served</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime victim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member has been crime victim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
criminal justice system is usually or always unfair. This is a fascinating paradox that I have noted anecdotally in my four years of teaching at LaGuardia. On the one hand, the students have experienced discrimination against family and friends by the police, but on the other, they wish to join the police. How are our students constructing these contradictions for themselves? Do they see contradictions?

Other key findings include students’ reports of their own and family members’ victimization (regardless of whether the crimes experienced were reported to the police). A substantial 33.6% report being victims themselves of a crime, and 44.5% report that a family member has been a victim of a crime. A possible failing of my current survey was that it did not inquire into types of victimization (e.g., violent versus nonviolent and perceived severity of the victimization). My follow-up study will certainly incorporate such questions. However, regardless, these outcomes point to a much more complex relationship between communities of color and a criminal justice system which disproportionately impacts communities of color than is typically presented in media narratives which emphasize a solely adversarial association. The reality that the New York City Police Department is now majority-minority (Pressman 2010), and that most NYC corrections officers are people of color—including a majority in positions of leadership (NYC 2016)—shows that more research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon. Importantly, as educators of these students who are likely to have either firsthand or close secondhand knowledge of victimization and incarceration, it points to our need to analyze our pedagogy, the language we use, the materials we present. How do we fully and thoughtfully explore interpersonal harm and structural harm?

Reasons for Selecting College Major and Career Choice
Table 2 gives the descriptive statistics for Likert-style survey questions that were largely taken from Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) whose studies have been replicated in several four-year, majority-White colleges. The right-hand column shows the mean (average) response on a scale of 1–5, with 5 indicating strongest agreement. What is notable about these findings is that the strongest agreement for reasons to choose the college major included interest and relevance to the real world (4.51 and 4.38, respectively), and that these results correspond closely to the results of Krimmel and Tartaro (4.49 and 4.30, respectively). However, LaGuardia students are more motivated by the prospect of making a “decent salary” and enjoying job security than the students surveyed by Krimmel and Tartaro (4.54/4.68 versus 3.88/4.17). They are also significantly more motivated to enter into criminal justice careers to protect people from oppression than those in Krimmel and Tartaro’s sample (4.43 versus 3.80). This finding points to a possible answer to the paradox discussed earlier: Perhaps students see their entry into criminal justice as a heroic effort to change the system from within, to remedy the oppression that they witness
as victims of both structural and interpersonal violence. Only further qualitative study can fully answer this question.

I added a question about being influenced by media such as television programs due to my own experience in the classroom, where students seem frequently to offer a favorite show such as CSI or Law and Order as a reason for entering into criminal justice. There was a large standard deviation, with some students expressing strong influence, and others, none at all. Future study should analyze how students who indicate strong influence by media differ in their motivations from their counterparts.

Table 2: Reasons for Selecting College Major and Career Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likert-style Responses to Dependent Variables formulated by Krimmel and Tartaro (1999)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for selecting college major</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was influenced by a family member to do so.</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was influenced by a television program or programs.</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the subject matter was very interesting.</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the subject matter was relevant to the real world.</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the course content would include less math.</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the course content would include less science.</td>
<td>2.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the course content was easier than other majors.</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was told this major was appropriate for pre-law.</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the subject matter was relevant to my current job.</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought a college degree would increase my job status.</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for career choice</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to make a decent salary.</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to have status in the community.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a secure position.</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a position with union benefits.</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a position where I can help people solve problems.</td>
<td>4.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a position where I can protect the Constitution.</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a position where I can protect people from oppression.</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to arrest bad guys.</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a position where members are treated equally.</td>
<td>4.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a position where I can excel (get promoted).</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek an exciting position.</td>
<td>4.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seek a position where I can wear a uniform.</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will be easy to find a job in this field.</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. This question was not used by Krimmel and Tartaro.

Note: Respondents answered the above in Likert scale format, as follows: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree
One further finding that is significant (and accords with Krimmel and Tartaro’s study) is that criminal justice students are highly motivated to enter CJ careers because they think they will be “exciting.” In fact, this is the strongest motivating factor—even above salary and job security—for our students. This finding can be the basis for longitudinal studies, as I hypothesize that the more exposure to the quotidian realities of criminal justice careers students gain through their education, the less they may see these careers as adrenaline-fueled, and the more they may be motivated by other concerns.

**Criminal Justice Career Interest**

Unsurprisingly, based on my work with students in the First Year Seminar over the past two years, and reading through their “About Me” profiles in their ePortfolios, their strongest interest (see Table 3) lies in law enforcement jobs, particularly positions in the FBI. The perception that the FBI is an “exciting” job corresponds with the data about why students are pursuing a career in criminal justice in the first place. Students also indicate a strong desire to pursue policing and other law enforcement (such as the US Marshalls and Customs and Border Protection). However, what is unclear based on this very preliminary work is how much—if anything—students know about other career possibilities in criminal justice, or if they know about the realities and requirements of the careers in which they are interested. Exposing students to a wider range of opportunities available to them and educating them about criminal justice professions—supplementing what they have heard or seen in the media—is of paramount importance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Careers</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interested in pursuing policing</td>
<td>3.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interested in FBI</td>
<td>3.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interested in Other Law Enforcement</td>
<td>3.38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interested in Defense Attorney</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in Prosecutor</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in Juvenile Justice</td>
<td>2.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interested in Corrections Officer</td>
<td>2.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interested in Corrections Counselor</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in Forensic Psychologist</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in Forensic Science</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in Fraud Investigation</td>
<td>2.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interested in Research or Teaching</td>
<td>2.04</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: 5=Very interested, 4=Somewhat interested, 3=Neutral, 2=Somewhat uninterested, 1=Not interested at all
Conclusion and Future Direction

This study cast a wide net in its probing of demographic, experiential, and motivational factors that may be linked to LaGuardia’s Criminal Justice students’ entry into the major and their career aspirations. It is limited to providing descriptive, exploratory statistics to give a better sense of what hypotheses to test and which areas to focus on in future studies that can tap into correlation and causality. Based on the data obtained through this study, I believe that the most valuable information will come from knowing more about how students from urban community college settings—students of color who are from communities both likely to be adversely impacted by the disciplinary apparatus of the carceral state and simultaneously to be victims of violent crime—draw on this experience (or not) in their choice of major. One working theoretical idea that I would like to test is the “double superhero” hypothesis, i.e., do these students see themselves as both able to “save” their communities from the crime they witness firsthand, and also as able to effect massive change within law enforcement agencies to end racial discrimination? I would also hypothesize that those who have been personally victimized or had family members victimized are more likely to want to go into law enforcement jobs than those who have not been victimized. Those who have themselves been arrested or had a family member arrested, I predict, are more likely to want to go into “helping” professions such as juvenile justice, public defense, or probation officer. Of course, in many families, both of these realities are present, and so the way in which they interact with each other will be a fascinating and important study.

Tapping into these questions will involve refocusing and expanding the study to include qualitative data (interviews). The preliminary data so far has stimulated great interest, however, and I will be partnering with a Borough of Manhattan Community College professor to extend the study to this additional CUNY two-year college campus in Fall of 2017.

Leaving the future evolution of this study temporarily aside, there are a few immediate pedagogical takeaways from the current study results for those of us who teach at two-year colleges in urban environments. We must not only be aware of our discussion, framing, and investigation of criminal justice/mass incarceration issues from the point of view of those people who have been labelled as offenders in some manner: It is absolutely important for us to think through our speech and avoid the dehumanizing labels of “con,” “perps,” “criminals” and so forth. It is crucial to think about how we perpetuate racialized narratives of crime or may not be meeting the needs of our formerly incarcerated students. But we must simultaneously be aware of just how many of our students have experienced trauma not only from structural/institutional violence, but also from interpersonal violence (these two going hand-in-hand). This awareness should not lead to an insertion of conservative narratives, but to a recognition very much in line with restorative justice theories and practice about harm. It may help us understand our students’
felt motives for entering into a criminal justice (or indeed, any) career that on the surface may seem contradictory or even blind, and enable us to meet their human and educational needs at their deepest level.

REFERENCES


A Review of the Literature: Attitudes of Criminal Justice Majors Regarding Reentry

John Chaney, Social Science

Abstract
This article explores the gap currently existing in research that explores the pre-existing viewpoints of students who study reentry as part of their criminal justice curriculum and the effects of these viewpoints upon deeper learning. It discusses factors that may influence student acceptance or rejection of validated criminal justice precepts, including policies that promote the successful social reintegration of formerly incarcerated men and women as effective approaches to reducing recidivism. Finally, this paper calls for developing a new research agenda that encourages quantitative and qualitative analyses of student attitudes toward reentry and the possible impact their attitudes may have upon their acceptance of “best practices” within the criminal justice arena. The findings of such studies should lead to the creation of more innovative and multidimensional pedagogical strategies.

According to Shelley, Waid, and Dobbs (2011, 526), “it can be argued that students majoring in criminology and criminal justice are exposed to more detailed and accurate knowledge about crime and criminal justice than their peers majoring in a different subject matter.” If this were true, however, one would expect to see more criminal justice students expressing viewpoints more in line with the findings of Congress that enacted the Second Chance Act of 2007, the very first piece of federal legislation allocating taxpayer dollars for reentry projects (US BJA 2015). In New York City, for example, the prosecuting attorney’s offices in four of the city’s five counties are part of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Service’s twenty-county Reentry Task Force, a project specifically formed to provide comprehensive reentry resources for high-risk men and women returning from prison (DCJS, n.d.). A plethora of studies have confirmed reentry as a powerful tool in reducing recidivism. Interestingly, however, research typically reveals that criminal justice students lean more toward punitive measures than their peers studying other disciplines (Shelley, Waid, and Dobbs 2011, 526). Alarmingly, this finding is also at odds with the views of the general public; a recent study shows that American voters are overwhelmingly in favor of rehabilitative services for prisoners and persons released from prison, as opposed to a system concentrating on punishment (Krisberg and Marchionna 2006).

During the first half of 2017, the new administration in Washington, DC advocated a policy rollback to impose the harshest penalties possible for criminal convictions, including those for drug crimes (Ingraham 2017); renewing contracts...
supporting the controversial private prison industry (Zapotosky 2017); and spearheading draconian proposals targeting our nation’s immigrant population, all under the supposed aim of increasing public safety. On the other side of the spectrum, award-winning documentary films such as 13th (DuVernay 2016), publications such as The New Jim Crow (Alexander 2010), and the campaign calling for the closure of Rikers Island (Corasaniti 2017) have challenged the public conscience to acknowledge the glaring flaws and disparities that exist within the current criminal justice system. They have stimulated an even broader discussion (Heffernan 2016) that charges our nation’s colleges and universities with the challenge to responsibly prepare students majoring in criminal justice. This charge includes the need to become more proactive in discerning how students’ preconceived views might shape their ability to learn, and whether sound, innovative pedagogical strategies might have a positive impact upon internalizing validated and universally accepted criminal justice strategies and practices. After all, these are the men and women who will be at the forefront in shaping future local and national policies addressing crime in American communities.

This paper, therefore, explores the extent to which research has been undertaken to determine the views that students bring into the classroom regarding their support or rejection of transitional services for citizens returning from incarceration, also known as reentry. It argues that very little, if any, research has been conducted to date that confirms the logical assumption that student attitudes on punishment likely correspond with those regarding reentry, or measures the extent to which preconceived viewpoints brought into the classroom impact critical thinking with respect to these issues. Finally, this article highlights the responsibility of academia to develop responsible and innovative pedagogical approaches that will assist in developing students’ critical thinking ability regarding these important issues to its maximum potential.

The Success of Pre- and Post-Release Programs
The public at large has been shown to be largely in favor of prerelease prison programs, especially those offering opportunities in education and workforce development, initiatives that have been shown to play a key role in enhancing the quality of life for all community stakeholders (Krisberg and Marchionna 2006, 1). This has been especially true for projects with proven track records like the Prison to College Pipeline that affords prisoners the opportunity to begin classes leading to college degrees while still incarcerated (Halkovic 2014). Validated studies consistently show that those who either receive degrees while still in custody or after release have significantly lower recidivism rates and higher levels of employment (Nally et al. 2012). The fact that many future criminal justice practitioners harbor a dimmer view of this trend should raise discerning eyebrows among faculty who employ a “one size fits all” pedagogical style while giving lessons on these topics.
As noted above, the Second Chance Act of 2007 became the first piece of federal legislation in American history to allocate millions of taxpayer dollars for the designated purpose of providing a wide array of transitional services for newly released men and women who return from incarceration to the community—36,000 of whom are in New York State (DOCCS 2017, 5). One of the most compelling reports that greatly influenced the passage of this legislation was Harvard University’s two-year longitudinal study for the Brooklyn District Attorney’s ComALERT reentry program (Western 2008). Heralded in a New York Times editorial (“Right Way” 2017), the study reported findings showing that when recently released individuals receive immediate wraparound services, the recidivism rate is cut by more than half during the first year after release when compared with a control group without these services. The Second Chance Act and its impact on reducing recidivism are now required reading in virtually all college textbooks covering corrections (e.g., Clear et al. 2017; Latessa and Holsinger 2016), and are taught to students nationwide as part of the new “smart on crime” stratagem (US DOJ 2013) that promotes reentry in furtherance of long-term public safety. The huge question, of course, is whether the preconceived ideas that students bring into the classroom impact the internalization or the outright rejection of these proven precepts.

Even the Criminal Justice Section of the American Bar Association (ABA) continues to aggressively spearhead a national campaign that not only addresses the crucial need to supply housing and other transitional services for the reentry population, but also warns of the need to eliminate many of the “collateral sanctions” faced by returning citizens because of their convictions (Archer and Williams 2005–2006). These sanctions all too often impose barriers to gainful employment, housing, and even educational opportunities, barriers that do nothing to curb rates of recidivism (Archer and Williams 528). The ABA sees the successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated as such an important component of criminal justice that it created a separate reentry committee for its members and a separate national website with an interactive map that highlights the various legal barriers in housing, employment, and education imposed by each of the fifty states, depending upon the crime of conviction. The website for the American Bar Association also regularly highlights reentry news items (Howell 2016) and the Re-entry & Collateral Consequences Committee of the ABA Criminal Justice Section often sponsors workshops and symposiums for which their members receive CLE (Continuing Legal Education) credits.

Comparing Community and Student Attitudes on Reentry Initiatives
Interestingly, scholarly articles can be readily found that competently address viewpoints of the general public on prison management policies and prison reform services. One of these included surveys to uncover “individual-level predictors,”
among them sex, political affiliations, and parenthood, that might shape community viewpoints on crime and rehabilitation (Leverentz 2011). With respect to the workings of the nation’s penal systems, the opinions of the American public on prerelease initiatives and prison reform have also become fertile areas for scholarly study: One research study went so far as to develop a scale, coined the “1Zitem” scale, for measuring the attitudes of the general public with respect to prison reform, essentially finding out whether people felt the system should be tougher or softer on inmates (Silvia 2006). This study readily acknowledged that the esoteric world of corrections and prison management is in need of “social scientific attention” where a number of relevant psychological issues come to the fore when these attitudes are explored (Silvia 2006, 2554).

To date, no studies have explored whether common demographic or experiential patterns might exist among those criminal justice majors whose views are contrary to empirical data confirming the validity of reentry projects as effective tools in maintaining long-term public safety. Remarkably, until the Calaway study discussed below (Calaway, Callais, and Lightner 2016), no research had ever been undertaken that even explored the views of criminal justice majors with respect to prison reform.

Evaluations of attitudes on a variety of other salient criminal justice topics, have, however, emerged in recent years. In an interesting study to determine the levels of homophobia among criminal justice majors, 453 undergraduates were surveyed. A number of demographic and experiential variables including race, religion, having gay acquaintances, and other factors were used to arrive at “significant predictors” of anti-gay attitudes (Miller and Kim 2012). Interestingly, the existence of these homophobic attitudes were found to be more prevalent among criminal justice majors than nonmajors, and also more common when compared to those aspiring to careers in law enforcement to those seeking other career choices in criminal justice (148).

Scholars have even explored whether the thinking patterns of students majoring in criminal justice are impacted by campus environmental factors. A timely and increasingly relevant study, given the country’s current political climate, involved whether campus environs had any influence upon student propensity toward right-wing authoritarianism, or RWA (Hurley and Hurley 2015). In conducting this research, the hypothesis challenged the general notion that the academic environment where classes were being held had no bearing upon this process. Not surprisingly, the findings supported the conclusion that student attitudes supporting RWA were highest for criminal justice majors attending a military college as opposed to those attending a historically black college or a “teaching” college (372).

Other studies exploring building blocks that make up attitudes of criminal justice majors have included analyses of their views on hot-button topics. One such study analyzed the different facets of wrongful convictions, the need for law
enforcement personnel to receive greater training to avoid their occurrence, and whether occurrence might cause students to lose faith in the system (Ricciardelli, Bell and Clow 2009). Another quantitative online survey queried over 3100 students to compare differences in views between criminal justice majors and other college majors on carrying concealed hand guns on campus (Bouffard, Nobles, and Wells 2012). Personality components, values, attitudes, and career choices of these students were seen as important factors in shaping their thoughts and opinions (285).

In what has been arguably the closest attempt to address the views of criminal justice majors on prison reentry to date and how these views can be influenced through innovative pedagogical approaches, researchers analyzed the impact a prison tour would have upon the attitudes of a class of criminal justice majors, using a pre- and posttour Likert scale questionnaire (Calaway, Callais, and Lightner 2016). The pretour survey results confirmed the widely accepted premise that criminal justice majors generally begin and end their academic careers with attitudes that lean more towards punitiveness than those of other college students, generally regarding prisoner rehabilitation as a low priority. Interestingly, the survey findings also revealed that the tour actually did work to soften the students’ original views about prisoners and prison and to promote greater support of prison reform initiatives and interest in community corrections (442). This effect was especially noted for those students who, before the tour, had had no exposure to an incarcerated person or to a prison environment.

Recommendations Regarding Pedagogy
A recent article (Heffernan 2016) dared to challenge one-dimensional pedagogical practices that fail to effectively incorporate and explore the concept of “justice” in many criminal justice classes. Heffernan correctly noted that no responsible discussion of criminal justice can be had without incorporating social justice issues, including an analysis of why the criminal justice system includes chiefly individuals from the poorest and most vulnerable segments of American society (115).

College faculty and administration will want to collaborate in offering a well-balanced curriculum and cocurricular activities where possible for these students (MacKillop 2017). Well-balanced lectures and group discussions of issues should address systemic disparities, the effectiveness of prevention strategies like reentry, and alternatives to incarceration.

Bordt and Lawler (2005), in their offering of a curriculum that better stimulates students’ “intellectual imagination” (190), also referenced the reality that too many students see criminology-related courses solely as technical training for a career in law enforcement and criminal justice. It is remarkable that current research reveals precious few quantitative or qualitative studies that distinguish the nature or the source of the building blocks that shape the attitudes of future
criminal justice professionals. To date, none can be found that focus squarely on the attitudes of criminal justice majors with respect to supporting reentry projects that promote social reintegration while decreasing recidivism. The current prevailing view is that criminal justice majors generally begin and end their academic careers with harsher attitudes toward punishment than other college majors (Courtright, Mackey, and Packard 2005). This being the case, student views on transitional services for returning citizens and how these views are shaped have become, in the light of recent political events, more important than ever for the academic community to discern.

The Need for Further Research
Considering the importance of furthering criminal justice policies that embrace the vital importance of supporting reentry initiatives not merely as an altruistic option but as a valid and accepted tool of law enforcement, a research agenda that explores the views of criminal justice majors, how these views are formed, and whether these views have a significant impact upon their ability to learn is more than warranted and long overdue. Studies that measure the effects that these attitudes have upon the learning process, particularly upon critical thinking, would be a good place to begin. A new research format that employs pre- and postsurveys involving student site visits at community reentry resource programs, including job readiness and job training projects, GED education, and other projects, could definitely assist in this regard. At the very least, experiential activities like these will serve to neutralize the stigmatization of a population that many would otherwise know only from texts and media, as well as providing added depth to the limited one-dimensional learning offered in textbooks and lectures. Ideally, this new research will also serve to validate the assumption that attitudes on punishment closely parallel viewpoints held on reentry, while exploring their impact upon the internalization of core competencies, leading students to embrace validated best practices.

Even in acknowledging the obvious merits of the Calaway, Callais, and Lightner study (2016), it should be pointed out that its findings, as in the case of the other studies profiled in this article, involved students enrolled in four-year institutions. Comparing the profiles of students in four-year colleges to those in two-year colleges yields significant differences including variables of work status, age, parenthood, and marital status, and cry for the need for research projects to explore these differences in a separate study (Eren and Keeton 2015).

LaGuardia Community College, whose criminal justice program comprises the third largest cohort of its graduates each year (LaGuardia 2017, 29) and is a key partner in John Jay College’s Criminal Justice Academy, has an even greater responsibility to the public at large in readying these students. Community colleges, in particular, attract large numbers of men and women since, for many
careers in law enforcement including becoming a member of the New York Police Department, a two-year degree is often the minimum requirement for hiring.

Any consistent patterns that may emerge from this long overdue quantitative and qualitative research may be especially helpful in designing new and innovative pedagogical approaches, such as exposing students to prisoner autoethnographies (Chaney 2017; Newbold et al. 2014) and to “counterstories” (Baston and Miller 2017; Chaney 2017). These innovative classroom strategies can help to neutralize demographic or experiential factors that prevent students from embracing commonly accepted criminal justice “best practices,” including those involving successful social reintegration of citizens released from periods of incarceration. Additionally, if new research findings uncover variables that impede the development of critical thinking among students, innovative faculty will then be able to shape better pedagogical approaches that will result in deeper, cleaner learning experiences among future practitioners. Long term, the investment will result in a fairer, value-based, and less biased system of justice.

Academia is challenged more than ever to acknowledge an ever-growing responsibility to employ pedagogical practices that serve to identify, engage, and make an impact on experiential factors and attitudes that students, especially criminal justice majors, bring into the classroom. Instructors are charged with preparing students to eventually assume roles of leadership within the community, knowing that their views will have a tremendous impact upon the long-term quality of life and overall safety of all. More enlightened, progressive research must be undertaken that seeks to explore whether and how preconceived attitudes brought into the criminal justice classroom impact critical thinking. These should include pre- and post-qualitative studies that evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies that address or attempt to influence attitudes on salient topics such as punishment and reentry. The findings will better equip faculty with the knowledge necessary to assist criminal justice majors in effectuating positive change in communities, including reversing the mass incarceration of marginalized citizens of color, arguably the greatest civil rights issue of our time.

Notes
1. As the Deputy Executive Director for the ComALERT evaluation project during this period, it was the author’s privilege to oversee the administrative operations for this important study, including retaining Dr. Bruce Western, Dr. Erin Jacobs, and research staff through a special grant provided by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.
2. Between 2009 and 2013, the author had the amazing experience of participating as a planning committee member for these reentry colloquia, developing programming, and sometimes serving as a panelist or moderator at annual ABA conferences. Audiences continue to consist of a robust assortment of prosecuting and defense attorneys, law enforcement personnel, social service professionals, and community organization administrators—the very same career choices to which many current criminal justice students aspire.

REFERENCES


CUNY Fatherhood Academy: Triumphs and Struggles of Young Fathers

John Parssinen, Grants Development Office
André Ford, CUNY Fatherhood Academy

Abstract
From March to June 2017, LaGuardia Community College researchers participating in the Carnegie Seminar on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning conducted a qualitative evaluation of the CUNY Fatherhood Academy (CFA). Operating within the College’s Division of Adult and Continuing Education, the CFA offers educational, career, and family services for young fathers between the ages of eighteen and thirty from low-income households. CFA participants often lack a high-school diploma or are unemployed or underemployed and face many challenges in their personal lives. Young fathers enroll in the CFA to obtain job-readiness skills and/or a High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma needed to pursue an advanced degree or succeed in the workforce. The study analyzed how the CFA helps participants complete the program and reach their academic/career goals. The study identified the following key strengths of the CFA that contribute to participant success: a flexible and inclusive program culture; the staff’s notable commitment to student success; robust social services for current and former participants; and having the program located on a college campus.

For the past several decades, father involvement in family life has increased dramatically. In 2013, the Pew Research Center reported that since 1965, the amount of time that fathers spend with their children has nearly tripled (Parker and Wang 2013). This trend is linked to the idea that modern fathers are no longer solely “bread winners” but “equal co-parents” (Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson 1998). In contrast to this data, however, the percentage of single-parent, female-headed households in the United States has grown from 9% in 1960 to 26% in 2014 (Pew Research Center 2015). In 1997, 85% of families with welfare cases in the US were single mothers and their children (Anderson, Kohler, and Letiecq 2002, 148). Today, 36.5% of single-mother families live in poverty (as defined by the US Census Bureau), a rate nearly five times higher than the 7.5% rate for two-parent households (Tucker and Lowell 2016, 3).

In an effort to reduce poverty rates and welfare reliance and to encourage marriage and parental cohabitation, policy-makers launched support programs for low-income fathers (Anderson, Kohler, and Letiecq 2002). In 2012, the City of New York, in partnership with the City University of New York, launched the CUNY Fatherhood Academy (CFA) at LaGuardia Community College.
The primary goal of the CFA is to help young fathers secure a High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma. The program also provides job training and placement, college preparation services, counseling services, and parenting supplies such as diapers, and helps fathers build healthy relationships with their family members (McDaniel et al. 2014). We conducted a qualitative study of the CFA to ascertain whether and how the CFA is accomplishing its goals.

Literature Review

Studies have found that children who grow up with a father actively involved in their lives, regardless of whether the father lives with the child, are more likely to avoid pitfalls and succeed as adults (Fogarty and Evans 2009; Harper and McLanahan 2004; Pew Research Center 2015). Children are also more likely to excel in school when they are raised in homes where fathers prioritize children’s homework and monitor their behavior in school (Astone and McLanahan 1991). One study found that boys raised without their fathers are two to three times more likely to be incarcerated before the age of thirty (Harper and McLanahan 2004). Another found that girls whose fathers left before they had turned six were almost five times more likely to become pregnant as teenagers compared to peers raised in a home with a father (Ellis et al. 2003).

As noted above, the number of single-parent families in the United States has grown from 9% of all families in 1960 to 26% in 2014 (Pew Research Center 2015). In 2016, the US Census Bureau recorded approximately 12 million single-parent families, of which single mothers headed 83% (US Census Bureau 2016). While most agree that father involvement is essential for a child’s well-being, fathers of today face challenges that previous generations did not have (Stahlschmidt et al., 2013). Maintaining a consistent relationship with a child is more difficult for fathers whose children live in female-headed single-parent households. And as mothers work more and more outside of the home, the role of fathering has shifted from that of breadwinner to that of nurturer and active parent (Cornille, Barlow, and Cleveland 2005). This new role can be difficult for fathers to adjust to, especially if a father did not have his own father present in his life when he was growing up (Stahlschmidt et al. 2013). Finally, in 2015, four in ten American children under the age of eighteen lived in low-income households, or households that earned less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Threshold (Jiang, Granja, and Koball 2017). In addition to the aforementioned parenting challenges, raising a child in poverty greatly increases stress for many fathers.

African American fathers living in urban areas “experience these parenting challenges more frequently than other groups of fathers. Sixty-seven percent of African American children are ... raised primarily by their mothers ... nearly double the rate of all children” (Stahlschmidt et al. 2013, 2). According to statistics published in 2011 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 38% of African American
children were living in poverty, compared to 35% of Hispanic children and 11% of White children (Stahlschmidt et al. 2013, 2). Citing Threlfall, Seay, and Kohl (2013), Stahlschmidt et al. (2013, 2) point out that, in addition to “the stress of struggling to make ends meet, poverty can also limit the amount of time and resources a father can spend on his child … which may add to parenting stress for urban fathers.”

Fatherhood programs first emerged in the United States during the 1970s as a way to strengthen child rearing and child support for low-income families. In an effort to reduce poverty rates and welfare reliance and to encourage marriage and parental cohabitation, policy-makers in both federal and state governments made concerted efforts to fund fatherhood programs in the 1990s and continue to support programs for low-income fathers (Anderson, Kohler, and Letiecq 2002). These objectives were reflected in the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which specifically encouraged marriage and the creation/maintenance of two-parent households while discouraging adults from having children out of wedlock (Anderson, Kohler, and Letiecq 2002, 148).

Because the fatherhood field has emerged only recently, very few fatherhood programs have been rigorously evaluated, and as such, researchers have a limited understanding of what makes a fatherhood program effective (Osborne et al. 2016). While the foundation of all fatherhood programs is to ensure that low-income fathers are positively involved in their children’s lives, each program varies greatly from the next. Fatherhood programs can vary based on the age of participants, their cultural background, the type of fathers served (custodial or noncustodial), the location of the program, and the specific goals of the programs: helping fathers secure employment, improving parenting skills, preventing violence, taking advantage of educational opportunities, or a combination of these goals (Osborne et al. 2016).

One fatherhood model that gained popularity during the 1990s was the Responsible Fatherhood (RF) model, which works to promote “men’s financial and emotional involvement in their children’s lives” (Anderson, Kohler, and Letiecq, 2002, 148). Anderson, Kohler, and Letiecq (2002) conducted a qualitative analysis of an RF program located in a large city in the US whose primary aim was “to help [low-income] fathers become: (a) more capable of financially supporting their children, (b) more compliant with Child Support Enforcement, and (c) more involved in their children’s lives as positive role models and nurturers” (149). Participants in this program ranged in age from 17 to 48, 60% of participants held jobs, and 65% of participants had either a high school diploma or GED. In contrast, most participants in the CUNY Fatherhood Academy are under the age of 25, very few hold jobs upon entering the program, and none of the participants enter the program with a GED. In fact, one of the main goals of
In Transit

the CUNY program is to prepare participants to obtain their GED (McDaniel et al. 2014).

Even with the advent of various fatherhood models that utilize strengths-based approaches with low-income fathers, past research has been criticized for portraying low-income fathers as “absent, problematic, and uninvolved in their children’s lives” (Ray 2000, 4). This “deficit framework,” many argue, has contributed to the creation of policies that negatively affect low-income fathers (Zvetina 2000). Ray argues that several areas within the realm of low-income fatherhood remain unexplored, including how fathering is defined, how fathering changes between cultural/ethnic groups, and what fathers want for themselves and their children (Ray 2000).

The Urban Institute, a New York City-based think tank, conducted an independent qualitative evaluation of the CUNY Fatherhood Academy (CFA) at LaGuardia Community College in 2014 (McDaniel et al. 2014). The study interviewed 55 individuals, including CFA administrators, staff, and participants at LaGuardia, as well as administrators from CUNY Central, the New York City Young Men’s Initiative and the Open Society Foundation’s campaign for Black Male Achievement (McDaniel et al. 2014). The study found that the CFA is successful in preparing participants to obtain a High School Equivalency Diploma, in motivating young fathers to become more involved with their families, and in helping fathers prepare for the future. A primary recommendation made by the Urban Institute was that the program provide more services for fathers who had completed the program, including employment, education, family, or other supports. We hope that this study will contribute meaningful updates regarding postprogram support for CFA participants.

The CUNY Fatherhood Academy at LaGuardia Community College

In New York City, young men from low-income communities are largely shut out from economic opportunities. In 2011, the unemployment rate for young African American and Latino men was 60% higher than that of their White peers; and the poverty rate of African American and Latino young men was 50% higher than that of White young men (NYC Young Men’s Initiative 2013, 5). In 2009–2010, only 28% of Black males in New York City earned a high school diploma four years after starting their ninth-grade year, compared to 57% of White males (Holzman 2012, 6). Among young men in New York City aged 18 to 24, 109,269 have only a high school diploma and another 75,561 have dropped out without obtaining a High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma (McDaniel et al. 2014, 1).

Work-life earnings of Black and Latino men who earned a high school diploma are 39% and 16% higher, respectively, compared to men who had only some high school experience but no diploma (Julian and Kominski 2011). HSE Diploma recipients are also able to command higher hourly pay and better
fringe benefits, have greater job satisfaction, and are able to move into more diverse occupations compared to high school dropouts (Song 2011). Work-life earnings for this population are substantially higher after securing an associate’s or bachelor’s degree (Julian and Kominski 2011). For young men who have not completed high school, the HSE Diploma represents a second chance (McDaniel et al. 2014, 2).

In order to address the needs of the City’s young men of color, in August of 2011, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg launched the Young Men’s Initiative (YMI), which implements several strategies to support this population in partnership with businesses, schools, government programs, and community-based organizations. Within the YMI, the CUNY Fatherhood Academy (CFA) is the only program solely dedicated to addressing the needs of young fathers between the ages of 18 and 30. The CFA was launched as a pilot program in 2012 to assist young, low-income fathers in New York City in achieving tangible outcomes in order to become more supportive parents of their children (McDaniel et al. 2014).

As noted above, the primary goal of the CFA is to help unemployed/underemployed fathers ages eighteen to thirty to secure a High School Equivalency Diploma while addressing participants’ immediate educational, career, and family needs (McDaniel et al. 2014). The program provides job training and placement services, college preparation services, counseling services, and parenting supplies such as diapers, and helps fathers build healthy relationships with their family members. Additionally, the program offers internships, supportive services for immediate and extended family members, a stipend for participation, and a MetroCard to offset travel costs (McDaniel et al. 2014).

CFA participants enroll in and complete the program in a cohort with other young fathers and the program traditionally graduates four cohorts of participants each year. Each cohort enrolls approximately forty fathers (McDaniel et al. 2014). Within each cohort, fathers are placed into one of two tracks: College Preparation or High School Equivalency (HSE). HSE participants prepare for and take the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) high school equivalency exam, while the CFA’s College Preparation program emphasizes the importance of education by introducing students to topics that help them transition successfully to college or pursue a vocational trade. HSE and College Preparation participants enroll in the program for 16 weeks and 10 weeks, respectively, and alumni of the program receive ongoing employment and training services, as needed. The program also introduces students to the world of work by providing internships and short courses such as OSHA [Occupational and Safety and Health Administration] certification, which help students be more competitive in the job market (McDaniel et al. 2014).
Purpose of Inquiry
The purpose of this inquiry was to determine how the CFA helps participants to complete the CFA program and meet their academic, family, and/or career goals. In their 2014 study, McDaniel et al. found that participants enrolled in CFA are securing HSE Diplomas at a higher rate than the state average (26); however, due to the relatively brief existence of the program at the time of the study, more time is needed to determine whether the program is making a lasting impact in the lives of its participants. We hope that this analysis of the CFA program sheds new light on how the CFA is meeting the needs—both immediate and long-term—of its participants.

Method
Focus Group Participants
From March to June 2017, we held five focus groups at LaGuardia Community College with a total of twenty individuals. We met with administrators and staff, as well as current and former participants and family members of participants. See table 1 for additional details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Focus Group Discussion</th>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>03/28/2017</td>
<td>CFA staff</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/02/2017</td>
<td>CFA current participants</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/11/2017</td>
<td>CFA former participants</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/30/2017</td>
<td>Family members of CFA participants</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/16/2017</td>
<td>CFA administrators</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were recruited by CFA staff to participate in focus groups. The fathers who participated in the study ranged in age from 20 to 29. Seven of the ten fathers were African American (70%) and seven were not married (70%). The staff members who participated in the study ranged in age from 27 to 50. Three of the six staff members were African American and two had advanced degrees. The family members who participated in their focus group were both African American and female and possessed high school diplomas.

Procedure
Focus groups were held in conference rooms at LaGuardia Community College. Four cofacilitators (one White woman, one White man, one Black man and one Black woman) led the groups. They greeted the participants and obtained informed consent signatures from them. The fathers were then asked a series of questions
concerning their reasons for initially enrolling, their impressions of the program, and the outside challenges that they might be experiencing. For those who had successfully completed the HSE track, additional questions concerning employment, family, and education-related issues were addressed. Staff members were questioned on program effectiveness, the availability of resources to meet program objectives and goals, best practices that are needed to support young fathers, as well as their understanding of the program mission. Focus groups lasted approximately 1½ hours and were audiotaped for transcription. Program participants were compensated with a one-way MetroCard for transportation and a $25.00 Amazon gift card.

Focus groups were used for a number of reasons. The research on young fathers of color who come from low-income families is very limited. In addition, the most recent qualitative evaluation of the program took place in 2014 (McDaniel et al. 2014) when the CFA was operating as a pilot program, leading us to believe that renewed analysis of the CFA through focus group conversations with participants would be beneficial for the program.

Data Analysis of Focus Groups
Focus group data analysis occurred in four phases. The first phase included the careful review of each transcript for each focus group in order to identify themes. Two members of the research team, one African American male and one White male, read the transcripts and noted themes as they emerged. The team members met to review the results and conceptualize all of the themes that emerged from the focus groups. Team members identified themes individually and discussed how to categorize the various findings. An additional phase included highlighting direct quotes that support each theme. Finally, quantitative data was collected from a variety of sources in order to document outcomes of the program’s latest implementation. The latter are presented first below, followed by analysis of focus group results.

CUNY Fatherhood Academy Programmatic Outcomes

Education
The Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) exam is the national test that qualifies individuals who lack a traditional high school degree for a High School Equivalency Diploma. Assisting participants in passing the TASC test and obtaining a HSE Diploma is a cornerstone of the CFA program (McDaniel et al. 2014). All participants who complete the sixteen-week program sit for the TASC exam at the conclusion of the program. Staff then secure participant test scores to quantify student testing success. From 2012 to 2014, the program served five cohorts. During this period, 178 students enrolled in the program and 136 students completed the program. Of 105 participants who sat for the HSE exam, 64 students (61%) passed
the exam and secured an HSE Diploma (unpublished program data). The CFA was temporarily dissolved in the fall of 2014 due to lack of funding (Hamill 2014) but was able to renew operations in 2016. From February 2016 to May 2017, the CFA served four cohorts of students. During this period, 92 students enrolled in the program and 62 students have completed the program. During this time, of the 64 participants who sat for the HSE exam, 39 students (61%) passed the exam and secured an HSE Diploma (unpublished program data).

To date, 61% of CFA participants who have taken the HSE exam have passed the exam and obtained a diploma (unpublished program data). This figure surpasses the passing average for both New York State test takers (53%), and New York City test takers (46%) (Hilliard 2017). Looking at New York State test scores by race/ethnicity, only 40.7% of Black test takers and 48.8% of Latino test takers passed the TASC test in 2012 (McDaniel et al. 2014, 26). CFA participants, predominantly Black and/or Latino, noticeably outperform fellow test takers.

HSE program participants are also transitioning into the College Prep component of the program and matriculating into college. Twenty-six students have been served in the College and Career Prep program since February 2016 (unpublished program data). During the 2012–2014 period, twenty-one students successfully enrolled into a CUNY community college, four students obtained an associate’s degree and one student obtained a bachelor’s degree (unpublished program data).

**Employment**

CFA provides an employment counselor who works with participants to find, prepare for, and secure employment while in the program and after participants have completed the program. Since program inception, 115 of 270 CFA enrollees (42.6%) have been placed in jobs. Of those who were placed in jobs, 39% were employed full-time, 26% were employed part-time and 13% worked seasonally. Since February 2016, 37 participants (31%) were placed into an industry-recognized training program. Furthermore, 6% of the students transitioned from part-time to full-time employment. The latest survey of College and Career Prep students reveals that all students are interested in either gaining or improving their current employment status (unpublished program data).

**Focus Group Results**

Focus group discussions revealed a nuanced and complex program. When asked to define the most rewarding aspects of the Fatherhood Academy, fathers attributed the value of the program to two core factors: the staff and the participants themselves. Staff and participants described a positive, family-oriented programmatic culture based on trust, respect, and regard for the well-being of each individual. The following excerpts were taken from focus group discussions with six CFA staff members, two CFA administrators, six current participants in the program, four
former participants, and two family members of participants. Excerpts are grouped by themes that emerged throughout the focus groups.

**Programmatic Strengths**

**Nonjudgmental Attitudes**

Several focus group members indicated that they had experienced repeated failure in securing employment or completing other HSE programs prior to joining the Fatherhood Academy. One former member commented, “People judged me, like, when I tried to get into other schools. They used to look at my background and be, like, ‘No you can’t come to this school.’ Here they don’t.”

When asked to describe the biggest strengths of the program, current and former participants unanimously agreed that the attitudes and supportive nature of the staff were key strengths of the program. One former participant noted, “From the first interview I had with Dave and Raheem, I just felt the energy. You are not in judgment. [Staff say,] ‘We are going to be here for you.’ Once I felt that energy, I felt at ease. I didn’t feel like this was something I had to do, I had to be here, or it was a strict regimen. They worked with me.”

Another father echoed this sentiment, stating, “You don’t have to hide who you are when you come to this program. We come from different backgrounds and nobody here is going to judge you.” One former participant commented, “This is a very understanding place and a very accepting place.”

**Staff Outreach and Support**

Both current and former participants described challenges they face in their lives, including balancing work schedules, participating in the program, and being an active and supportive parent/family member. One current participant indicated that phone calls from his counselors keep him motivated and engaged, stating that “Ryan calls me every morning. I wouldn’t come to school—without Ryan, I wouldn’t be here.”

A former participant also credited frequent communication from staff as a benefit: “Here it’s kind of hard to miss a day…You will get a call from Miss Monica or Jaime or Ryan or somebody…they will text or call you and see where you’re at: ‘Why aren’t you in class right now?’ Not like a harassing kind though… They don’t just call to see why you’re not in class. They want to see what’s going on.” One current participant noted, “They genuinely want to see you succeed.”

Former participants also described several moments when staff members supported them through issues outside the classroom, including attending family court hearings with participants; accompanying participants to doctors’ appointments and to the hospital; and helping them move into and out of homeless shelters. In one instance, a staff member accompanied a former participant to a police precinct to
turn himself in for a crime he had committed. The individual has since been released from incarceration, has returned home, and is engaged with the CFA again.

The following anecdote told by a former participant more fully describes staff support for participants: “I was homeless at one point and Miss Monica found me—I went to almost every shelter and nobody had room. Miss Monica found me a room in a shelter and Dave helped me get my stuff to and from that shelter. When I left the shelter...he drove me with my stuff from Brooklyn to Queens to the shelter. When I left the shelter, he came and picked my stuff up, picked me up, and took me to my destination. So it’s that type of love that everybody show here.”

One current student summarized the staff’s commitment to their success succinctly, stating, “These people are going to bat for me in ways that blood relatives haven’t.” This supportive environment, noted one former participant, carried over to the classroom. “I feel like the way that they approached us with teaching was like nothing I have ever experienced anywhere else, to be honest. If you didn’t understand, they didn’t move past it. They stayed on that specific topic until everybody in the class got it down.” Another participant said, “They made it like a family environment. I didn’t always have to raise my hand and ask the teacher. I could lean over to him and he may have the equation that we were working on mastered, and I am struggling on it. He will break it down for me in a way that I will understand. That’s kind of what made it work so well. It was the teachers giving us the information and peers helping each other at the same time.”

Mentoring

The CFA maintains a mentoring component in the program through which students who have completed the program are hired to mentor current students. Both staff and students believe that the mentors play an important role in student retention, completion, and success.

One former student who is now a mentor in the program described his role supporting current students: “I had a conversation with a kid today and he was about to leave the program and I was telling him that there’s a lady who sends me job leads every day. He’s in the program, so he can definitely take advantage of that, and he didn’t even know the lady. Just with that conversation, I got that linked up and now they’re discussing business possibilities for him and what they can do for him without the GED.”

The program first partnered with the Criminal Justice program at LaGuardia Community College, which provided student interns to serve as mentors. After the internship program dissolved, CFA staff tapped their own students to continue the program. “We were able to look at our students and realize that a lot of the students were already doing mentoring without even realizing it. So we started to formulate that component,” noted one CFA administrator. The mentoring component is also a stable source of income for former participants.
Employment Preparation

As noted in the programmatic data review, securing employment and enrolling in college are two primary goals for participants to pursue during and after the program. When asked what they liked most about the employment preparation component, current and former students said that the employment advisor does a good job of providing them with several employment options, resume preparation, mock interviewing, and individualized services. One current participant noted that “if you look at [the employment specialist] and tell her you want to do construction, but you don’t have your OSHA [certification], that will be her first move. She’ll be like, ‘All right. We gotta get you some classes first.’”

Another current student noted that “a lot of the options she gave came from us talking prior about what we would be willing to do. That means she was actually listening to what we were talking about.” Staff observed that former participants in particular will reach out for employment support at certain times:

Immediately after they either pass the [HSE] exam or not, I don’t really hear from them as much. And then maybe around three months or so, they may start to reach out to me. I guess it’s a process. I guess they struggle with “I achieved this goal, so maybe I can achieve the next goal, which is finding employment.” But then really my heaviest traffic is the alumni, students who graduated from the program several years ago. I find that I get more calls from them. I see that they reach out to me more needing assistance than the recent graduates.

College Preparation

The CFA partners with LaGuardia Community College to offer college advisement/enrollment services for participants through the Division of Adult and Continuing Education. These services are provided by a College-employed advisor not affiliated with the program. While college placement services are offered, staff and fathers note that participants, not the program, determine the services they wish to receive based on their current needs and goals. “In this last cohort, a lot of the guys already came in with employment, so a lot of them, their focus wasn’t really college,” noted the alumni coordinator.

One program administrator further described the program’s approach to college placement: “If someone wants to enroll [in college], we help them take the necessary steps. We also pay for their college application. It’s not easy to come to college. It’s not easy to take those steps. It’s a big commitment. We try our best to prepare students for that. We understand some students may not be ready, but generally when someone says they’re interested, we proceed with the process.”

Since the program’s launch, four CFA participants have gone on to enroll at LaGuardia Community College. Two focus group participants who are currently
mentors and CFA graduates have both enrolled as Criminal Justice majors at LaGuardia for the current academic year. When asked how the program has prepared fathers to become college students, one CFA graduate noted the program’s location on a college campus: “I think having the program on the college campus itself kind of motivates you in a way to actually go to college because you are in the environment and you see what it is like. You see different people with like EMT outfits and you know they’re taking EMT classes. You see people with these uniforms on and you see they are going to class in the very same building that you are actually taking your GED classes in. It might want to actually push you to go to college.”

At the time of the focus group, current program participants had not started the formal college preparation component of the program; however, when asked about goals after the program, five of the six current participants stated their intentions to enroll in college. The sixth participant was intent on starting a new construction job for which the program was helping him receive OSHA certification.

The Bond of Young Fathers
Program staff and fathers described the unique bond that participants share as young fathers. Fatherhood is the driving force linking participants together and represents the foundation of the program. Other similarities that participants identified include a lack of parental presence at home growing up, a desire to give their children better lives than their own, and experiencing similar life challenges, including navigating dire financial and social issues. One administrator described how fatherhood functions as the program’s core philosophy:

[Fatherhood] really links the students together and, through that, we believe when a student feels comfortable and begins to have confidence in themselves and when the staff around them also believes in them, and they see that there are people who really, truly care about them and their well-being and the well-being of their families and their children, then they feel respected and they feel that they can come to us with things that may be detrimental to them if they bring that up to us, but they are wanting to work on solving it. …We have a philosophy of treating every student fairly and respecting them for being fathers and really honing in on the fatherhood aspect and this isn’t a youth program where we’re pointing fingers at people and telling them what to do, but we’re allowing them to make their own decisions and go through some of the pitfalls and different things to try and figure out where they want to be. In doing that, I think it’s respected more because then they can see if something didn’t come out the way that they wanted it to, we can go over the reasons why the steps that they took and, you know, we keep trying to build people up.
Several fathers noted the positive environment of the program and the motivation they gained from each other as fathers. One former participant said, “We learn from each other as fathers. In my cohort, there was fathers from seventeen to twenty-five or twenty-eight. There’s like young fathers and there’s older fathers and we all teach each other different things. We all learn from each other. We all fathers. We all come from the same neighborhoods. It’s not like some of us got a lot of money and we can deal with it a certain way. We all dealing with the same things. We will be remiss not to learn from each other.”

Another former participant said, “We all in the same boat right now. We all need to help each other get to where we need to go because if we don’t do that, the boat is not going to move.” A current participant described the camaraderie of the program, saying, “Within the first week of the program, most of us in the class pretty much clicked. Everybody instantly got along. We all here for the same reasons. We have great conversations. We have fun together; we make it fun.”

**Parenting and Family**

Both participants and staff described the importance of parenting workshops as a source of knowledge that provided participants with real-time information that they could use to address immediate issues with their children and partners. Participants said that they rely on each other for guidance and answers during parenting workshops. “I like the parenting workshop. When people talking, I like to listen to their stories. I get insight.”

Another participant commented on his improved relationship with his wife saying,

I’m not gonna lie: We talk more, we communicate more. The relationship is better. I learn that from this fool over here, you know what I mean? I get insight from all my classmates. It’s cool... The parenting group has taught me a lot about patience... Before I would get to a point where I would just swallow everything and not deal with it. Now I have gotten to the point where I explain things to her. I break it down in the moment; the second you say something, I explain it right then and there, how it makes me feel, how it affects me. It has helped me to find new communication techniques, not as a parent, but as a partner.

One program alumnus echoed the importance of parenting workshops and learning from his peers’ experiences: “You get the opportunity to hear from people, young fathers just like you. It is pretty good to hear somebody else’s side of the story... Communication was really a big topic in the workshops because without knowing what’s going on or knowing why you upset to begin with, you can’t really fix it. To me, that was the best thing.”
Another participant described using his words to communicate with his child instead of force: “If my kid’s not listening and I’m talking over and over and he’s not listening, so instead of hitting him on the hand or something like that, I try to step away from that. Instead of resorting to hitting them if they’re not listening or whatever, I guess now I’ll try to talk to them a little bit. Usually it works out.”

**Positive Male Role Models (responses from family members)**

Both family members described the lack of positive male role models for their participants enrolled in the program. They emphasized the importance of having had female role models in their own lives, which had better prepared them to be mothers. One family member, who is the mother of a former participant, articulated the importance of developing values, which had been transmitted to her by having her mother serve as a role model and mentor: “There is one thing that both of us [the other family member and she] have in common. Why do you think that we have what you just asked? We had our mothers. Our mothers were our mentors. We learned to be strong and do what we had to do. These males didn’t have that.”

She further described the importance of having a male role model, specifically for young men who will eventually become fathers: “Remember, a man doesn’t know how to be a man; they have to see it. They have to learn it.” The other family member, who is the wife of current program participant, further articulated this point of view: “A woman cannot teach a man to be a man. My mom explained to me, ‘You can’t teach a man to be a man; only a father can do that.’” Both family members agreed that, because they had experienced being parented by their mothers, they were better prepared to be parents. Furthermore, both came from households in which both the mother and father were present. Both described the program participants as having fathers who were either minimally present or completely absent from their lives. Their absence led the participants to seek to fill that void by turning to a life on the streets. The lack of a father, in the view of one family member, causes program participants to feel as if they are a failure: “I think boys feel failed if their father wasn’t part of their life. You desire that.”

Both family members articulated the necessity of having mentors for the program participants, as well as programming that specifically encourages the development of the young men as fathers: “I said to him [her son] earlier, one of the things I saw—it got him his HSE Diploma, but did you guys inspire him to be a father? It’s a fatherhood program; did you do that? Did you show them—were there classes about what it means to be a father? Remember, these are kids who do not know anything about fatherhood.”

**Growth as Young Adults and as Fathers (responses from family members)**

Family members noted that the program participants exhibited some areas of growth with regard to their personal development. There appears to be growth
based upon the student’s participation in the program, as well as the student acquiring his HSE Diploma. One family member, whose son obtained his HSE Diploma, said that he appeared to have higher self-esteem after he got his diploma: “I think it showed him that he can do it and it inspired him to do much more. I saw his self-esteem really shine; that was amazing. He’s always been very quiet, and now he’s able to express himself. He was a bit more confident.” The other member mentioned that she felt that her husband has more hope since his enrollment in the program, despite the fact that he continues to dwell on things that are beyond his control: “At the end of the day, he’ll dwell on things that he can’t do or things that’s out of his control in the moment. I would say he has more hope. I have seen him—he gets up earlier nowadays, not as early as I would like him to get up, to know, wake up, make breakfast and all that, but he does get up earlier now.” She further articulated that her husband wants to be a better father, especially since his father was absent: “He expressed to me that he wants things to be better for his son. He wants a better life for him. He want his son to see him and see that he finished high school and that he went to college and had a career. He wants to be somebody for his son to look up to, because he didn’t have anyone to look up to.”

**Challenges**

Participants outlined three challenges that they face in their day-to-day lives that serve as stressors: unstable housing, tenuous relationships with their partners, and lack of financing to support their families. Additionally, several fathers said that the current program schedule created logistical challenges in their lives.

**Precarious Housing**

Five out of ten fathers—both current and former participants—disclosed that they did not have stable housing while in the program or before entering the program. Three of six participants currently enrolled in the program disclosed that they were currently in the shelter system or temporarily staying with friends and family. When asked to describe the biggest challenge faced, one current participant said, “The challenge for me is my living situation...I’m back and forth from...Queens to Brooklyn and sometimes the Bronx.”

Another participant said, “Right now, I’m at my uncle’s sleeping on the couch,” to which another replied, “Wow! You got a couch? I only got a chair.” When asked how living precariously impacted their well-being, a current participant described the toll it takes on one’s mental health and the ripple effect it has in other aspects of one’s life: “I been in almost every kind of shelter system you can think of. It’s not just hard on the body; it’s hard on the mental, it’s hard on your soul...It’s hard when you don’t know if tonight you gonna have a legitimate place to lay your head. You can’t get a job because you can’t find the right help to look appropriate. People in higher positions will judge you based off of your
looks. It is hard to find self-motivation and have self-worth when you are in a situation like that.”

Lack of Financial Resources
Several participants described the need to earn money to support their children and partners and that being in the program was detrimental to their livelihood, because time spent in the program was time that they could have spent earning income. One current participant described a conversation he had with another participant about staying in the program and not dropping out:

There have been a good amount of times when I had to sit my friend down and convince him that coming here was still the best option. He said something that is real and something that applied to me as well, “Every day that I’m not in here is a day that my son is eating. Every day that I’m in here not getting money that I could be getting is a day that my wife don’t have something that she is used to having. If you want me to stop taking care of my family, then you gotta give me something more than work.” I personally am cool with [being in the program]. I know the benefits of having long-term patience. That’s a circumstantial feeling. Not everybody has that.

One former participant described a more contextualized experience stating, “How many times has your baby mom sent you out because your daughter or son needs Pampers or wipes or this and that and the third, and then you look in your pockets and you be dead broke and you’re like, ‘Where am I getting this from?’” Another participant alluded to the reality that young fathers from low-income neighborhoods must resort to earning income illegally. “I don’t have the luxury of working right now—you know what I’m saying? When I gotta go out and get some bread, that’s what my priority is. You givin’ me way too much room to not be here. So that way when you call me, ‘What happened [name]? It’s Tuesday,’ I’m like, ‘You know what can happen in four days?!’”

This conversation also revealed a greater scheduling issue within the CFA, as the program offers services only three days per week. Other participants and staff members agreed that the current schedule of the program is inconsistent and expressed a desire for the program to meet more frequently.

Strained Relationships with Partners
Participants described patterns of poor communication between partners as sources of frustration with their partners. Participants also described the pressure they face to provide financially for their partners and children.
“Communication is a real big roadblock in my household. My wife is not good at expressing herself. She’s extremely bad at it… She says one thing and you do it and then it’s like, ‘Well, this is what I meant,’ and I’m like, ‘But that’s not what you said.’” Upon hearing this, another focus group member added, “My baby mama does the same thing.”

Another current participant described the mental toll that his relationship has caused, saying, “One of my biggest challenges outside of the program is being married. We been struggling since the beginning of our relationship. There was a two-week period when I wasn’t in class at all because I was just [expletive] depressed. I didn’t want to get up in the morning; I was pretty much sleeping all day. I was depressed as hell.”

One current participant described how his partner would, on occasion, act violently towards him prior to his joining the CFA, because of his inability to provide for his family: “There’s times when I was dead broke and I couldn’t afford Pampers. Right when I would step through the door, there’d be the curse words, stuff thrown at me, you know, in front of the baby. It was a bad environment.”

Several other participants agreed that the need to provide for their children and their partners was the primary reason for joining the program. Participants also noted that their relationships with their partners improved after enrolling in the CFA. Specifically, participants stated that the CFA’s provision of essential items such as diapers brought improved relations with their partners.

Discussion and Recommendations
The primary purpose of the CFA is to help young fathers to prepare for and pass the TASC test in order to secure a High School Equivalency Diploma. CFA participants and staff identified programmatic strengths that supported participant growth academically, socially, and in their careers, as well as challenges that existed within and outside the program that negatively impacted participants and their ability to complete the program. These observations are based on testimonials recorded during focus groups and are intended to contribute to ongoing dialogue regarding ways the CFA can better support participants and their career and family needs.

Participants described daunting challenges they face outside of the program, including a lack of financial resources, strained relationships with their partners, and lack of stable housing. We believe that the most critical issue facing participants is lack of adequate finances to support their families. Participants are often forced to choose between staying in the program and obtaining an HSE Diploma or leaving the program to earn immediate income to provide for their families. Even though data shows that individuals with an HSE earn substantially more income over their lives compared to individuals lacking a high school diploma, the day-to-day financial burdens often appear too great for participants to remain
in the program. Participants alluded to the reality that they must often participate in illegal activities to earn income, such as selling illegal drugs or shoplifting, for example, or participating in other underground economies traditionally found on “the streets.” Based on program intake and enrollment data collected, of 146 fathers, 44.5% self-reported that they had been arrested and 5.5% reported that they had been convicted of a crime (McDaniel et al. 2014). This information, however, only scratches the surface of a much larger and critical aspect of the lives of CFA participants. Participant engagement in illegal activities to earn income and participant involvement in the criminal justice system is not fully known. A deeper examination of how CFA participants engage with and are impacted by the criminal justice system is needed.

Lack of money also results in participants’ inability to secure stable housing, resulting in couch-hopping or living in the shelter system, both of which make for an unstable home environment. The CFA currently provides a modest stipend of $500 to participants upon completing the program as a way to both incentivize participation and provide financial support. Stipends do not serve as a living wage, but rather, as an incentive to remain in the program. The CFA also offers participants essential materials such as diapers, assistance which participants believe is very helpful. Based on this information, expanding the stipend program and the resources available to participants could serve as a deterrent to leaving the program.

The only programmatic challenge that participants had a problem with is the program’s schedule, currently three days per week, which some participants and staff members say is too inconsistent. Expanding the number of program days from three to four could provide greater stability and consistency in program attendance, retention, and completion.

The CFA clearly demonstrated several strengths that make the program a unique model that can serve as an example for other fatherhood programs to replicate. Aside from the commitment to HSE training and diploma achievement, the program creates a supportive environment conducive to success for a population that has, in the past, faced substantial academic failure, with most participants having spent several years out of school prior to entering the CFA. Other highlights include: the program staff’s commitment to supporting each participant regardless of his background and personal challenges, even helping participants navigate challenges outside the program; the development of peer-to-peer mentoring that enables current participants to receive support from former participants—support that serves as encouragement and motivation to persist through the program; extensive wrap-around services, including counseling, alumni support, employment services, and parenting classes which meet the myriad needs of participants; and hosting the program on a college campus, which instills hope and the belief that participants can achieve goals that they had previously thought were unattainable.
Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the program is the common bond that participants share as fathers. This bond is made stronger by a caring and supportive staff that goes above and beyond what is expected to help participants succeed. Researchers observed what appeared to be a positively infectious family atmosphere that stressed an ethos similar to that found on sports teams where participants felt that they were “only as strong as the weakest link.” The desire to counsel, educate, and learn from each other is perhaps the defining characteristic of the program. Together, these strengths coalesce to create a program that is more than just a GED program. As one participant noted, “People hear ‘fatherhood’ and they think it’s a GED program that you go to and leave from. No. It’s a family that you come to...you come to enjoy the family and you get the benefits of having a structured environment.”

Limitations of the Study and Further Research Needed
Although this study provides insight into the experiences of low-income fathers who are predominately young men of color between the ages of eighteen to thirty, it had limitations that leave essential questions yet to be answered. Limited demographic information was collected from the fathers who participated in the study, specifically how their individual family units are structured as well as the custody status of their child or children. Additional information about the construction of their family units when they were children would also have been helpful, providing insights into how they had learned to model parenting behaviors. Additional research on how the participants developed effective methods of parenting, based on their own experiences as well as knowledge acquired from the parenting workshops, would be a good next step.

Great variation existed in the ages of the participants in this study as well as in their degree of participation in the program, specifically attendance and achievement of certain outcomes, for example obtaining the HSE or enrollment into college or a training program. The small size of the samples of students currently enrolled, program graduates, and family members presented additional limitations to data analysis. We were not able to fully explore questions about whether the program actually led to more parental involvement and more positive relationships with the mothers of their children as well as other essential family members. We were also not able to explore whether the program prepared its participants to be the custodial parents of their children or to share custody of their children.

A longitudinal study tracking the long-term employability and/or educational attainment of both students who left the program and those who completed the program would be useful in evaluating the economic, social, and educational impact the CFA has on participants. Further exploration of the program’s impact on family members and whether the CFA helps participants become more engaged as fathers would be of great benefit. Finally, the pipeline from HSE services into
College Prep and the probability of successfully matriculating into college and completing a college degree warrant further investigation. Such analysis could have major implications for program development as well as service delivery. This research is particularly important now that the CFA has expanded to two additional CUNY campuses—Hostos Community College and Kingsborough Community College—with the program at LaGuardia serving as a template for how new programs should operate.

REFERENCES


In our classrooms are individuals whose ordeals and endeavors rival those of any ancient Greek or Netflix drama. Among these are men and women making the transition from prison to college. In the spring of 2016, with the purpose of improving post-incarceration educational support, the Prison to College Working Group leafleted the campus in search of criminal justice-involved students willing to share their experiences.

From the dozens of respondents, the working group organized five conversations, each with four to seven participants selected according to availability. Below are lightly condensed and edited excerpts from two conversations, the first of which is with men who had been locked up. The second conversation is with female family members and friends of the incarcerated. In the first exchange, men describe their backgrounds, current challenges, and career aspirations. As they speak, common reentry themes emerge and recur: the need for employment, the pleasures and confusion of campus life, the fear of stigma, and the possibility of a dedicated support space for men like themselves.

Similar themes flow through the women’s conversation, deepening at times into darker notes. Recounted is the loss of brothers and fathers, the strength and insecurities of uncles and nephews, the stress of family expectation, and the call for acceptance. Men and women expressed emotion and offered practical advice equally, openly, and differently, the men tending towards blocks of uninterrupted speech, the women braiding their words closely together in Greek-chorus bursts of insight and sympathy. Despite gaps in age or upbringing, the women finished each other’s sentences and sensed what hadn’t yet been said.
Conversations

To heal a nation, we must first heal the individuals, the families, and the communities.

Art Solomon, Anishinaabe Elder
Reentering the Community

The following conversation, facilitated by M'Shell Patterson of ACE’s Workforce Education Center, was recorded on April 6, 2016.

M'Shell: Thank you for coming to be part of a conversation that is going to change LaGuardia for people who are reentering. Miguel, you’re going from part-time to full-time. What do you have to offer? Justin, in your job in ASAP [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs] you have an opportunity to influence and affect more people. What do you want to see? Tony, you’re hanging out in BMEC!—what change do you want to see? David, I know you’re now with CUNY Start, and soon you are going to take some college classes. Luther, we want you to be part of the LaGuardia voice, too. What do you want to see?

All of you have made a significant decision to further your education by entering college, in most cases for the first time. Would you describe your motivation for taking the step from release to college?

David: So for me, basically, I got stabbed twelve times a few years back by somebody I knew for twenty-five years. After that happened, over these last few years I went through a bit of a tough time—drinking, drugs, smoking a lot of cigarettes. I basically destroyed myself. These last couple of years I’ve been getting myself back together, but I gained 150 pounds after it happened. I was being harassed by the cops and district attorney to testify. I told them I wasn’t going to testify, because if somebody were to come after my mother or family, they would have to put me in jail, and I’ve already been in jail. I was in jail from when I was ten to when I was eighteen. I decided I’m not going to die. I’m not going to kill myself. I did some research, found out what was wrong with the substance abuse industry. I saw what was going on with people getting hurt, and I just decided to make a change. I decided I wanted to go into psychology, decided that I want to open up halfway houses. So that’s where I’m at.

Tony: I knew there had to be a better way. I came home from doing twenty years in prison, and in prison, I learned the trade of electricity, so I went to Local #3, and I figured I’d try to get inside the union, try to get a good job. There’s a three- to four-year waiting list. I said, “Well, that don’t look like it’s going to do anything for me. I’ve got to get a job now.” When I came home, I was in the halfway house, and I had to work. I got me a job, but I said, “This ain’t going to be my career. This ain’t going to be my life.” Then a couple of friends said, “You need to go to school. Go to College Initiative run by the Fortune Society.” That was spring of 2014. I started classes and I did good. I had a 3.0. I was smarter than I thought I was, but the next semester it wasn’t that good. It just kind of dropped. I guess the classes got harder. I was saying that I could do it. My only
problem is work, and I also do financial Federal Work-Study. You go to school, nobody’s going to pay your bills. I’m doing everything I can to stay out. I don’t do nothing against the law. I don’t even jaywalk. I look both ways walking across the street. I don’t do nothing wrong, but the simple fact is you’ve still got to pay your bills, and there’s no money that’s coming to you, so I’ve got to work. That kind of hinders your grades; you don’t have as much time as you need to study. My major is Human Services. I want to deal with the youth, to try to keep them from going in the same direction I went, let them know that there’s a better way. After doing twenty years in prison, and then coming here and trying to start your life all over—it’s hard as heck.

**Justin:** I started thinking about going to college when I was in prison. I was in Mid-State Correctional Facility, and that’s a Level 1S facility, meaning they have mental health—they have psychiatric places there, and I actually ended up getting a job dealing with some of the mental health guys. I would make sure that their beds were made, make sure the cubes were clean, make sure they ate breakfast, and anything that I would notice, I would report to one of the staff. If I noticed one of the guys wasn’t eating, I’d say, “Hey, he didn’t eat breakfast or lunch.” I guess the inmates felt a little more comfortable talking to me, and then I would talk to the mental health staff. They would speak to them about their diagnoses, like paranoid schizophrenic, schizophrenic affective. I grew interested in those things; I would bring a notebook, and I would start taking notes, and the staff noticed that. They actually advised me, “Okay, why don’t you take some classes?” I thought that the felony would impair me getting any jobs in that career, but it didn’t stop me from going to school. I said, “Okay, I might not be able to do that, but I’m sure going to college will open up doors and give me more options.” And that’s what inspired me going to college. I went to College Initiative, a program that goes to the prisons, and they helped me get into college. I chose LaGuardia, because it was closer to the job at the time, and now I’m here.

**Miguel:** I have approximately a little over ten years’ experience with incarceration, probation, and parole, so it’s been a long journey. On February 18, 2010, when I came back to Astoria, I had school in mind. Three weeks after that, I started working. What clicked was the economy. I was working for Universal Survey as a marketing rep. I got two promotions in less than ten months, assurance supervisor and production manager. During Christmas, I got laid off right before all the bonuses were given out, and I was surely to receive a bonus, because with two promotions, I saw it coming. I didn’t see the termination coming. Someone with a bachelor’s degree got my position, and I didn’t even have my associate’s then. So I know it was lack of education that prevented me from moving up and going up the ladder in this company. When that happened, I said I have to do something differently. In January I applied, I got accepted, I did my financial aid, and after all
the process—in which College Initiative assisted me—it would have been nice if I could have come just to LaGuardia to an office and say, “Yeah, I want to be part of the Reentry Program. My situation is such and such.” That would have been ideal, an office just to go to, but that hasn’t been developed yet.

M’SHELL: “Yet” is the key word.

MIQUEL: Yet—hasn’t been developed yet, and Miguel wants to be part of that office. On March 7, 2011, I not only started working at LaGuardia Community College, it was also the first day of school for the Spring semester, and that’s where it started. I got my associate’s the following year. I went for the gusto. In the spring of 2012, I took twenty-six credits between Sessions I and II and that was tough. I lived here from six-thirty in the morning to eleven o’clock at night. Security sometimes came by the Campus Life office, “Miguel, you know what time it is? The school is officially closed,” and they would kick me out. So long story short, I got my associate’s in 2012 from LaGuardia Community College, and now I’m at Hunter pursuing psychology, my major. But if there was somewhere where I could have come in 2010, I believe it would have been a lot easier for me, but I still was able to get it done.

LUTHER: Basically, I got here before somebody believed in me; I didn’t believe in me. I did over sixteen years in and out of the state penitentiary, and I really didn’t have any big aspirations for myself, but last time I was incarcerated, they sentenced me to nine years. After a while, it registered that this is basically all life is going to be if I keep doing the things I was doing. Gradually, I started changing some things. One of the teachers in the facility got me a job working in the transitional service office, and I started facilitating programs and reading the material, and it started to hit home. I started to take it seriously, so now I was not only just facilitating, I was trying to incorporate it in my life. All that information that was in transitional services, I started taking for myself, and I used it to advocate for College Initiative. The director of the education department put together a program with someone from the outside called Inside-Out Program, and they brought St. Lawrence University into the prison that I was in, and I signed up for it. Because I was encouraged, I took a few college classes. I was able to actually get a decent grade. College students came in and sat down with us, and we had classes together and that really gave me a little encouragement. So when I got out, I went to Fortune Society to follow up on the College Initiative program, and someone there helped me with the registration and financial aid process. Someone else put me in touch with someone in the Student Life office who also helped make the transition easier. I think that would be key for people coming in; I had a lot of fears and insecurities about whether I could compete or not.
M'Shell: Like what? What were some of those fears?

Luther: The world I came from wasn’t very well-spoken, and people didn’t have a lot of manners or degrees. So to be coming into an environment where people speak proper English and carry themselves respectfully is a little intimidating. Coming from the prison system to that environment—people of authority or who seem to be authority—are intimidating when you first come out of prison. Having someone like Miguel, who really embraced me when I first came in, someone I could understand, was key in making me believe it’s okay to be here. Otherwise, I might not have been able to stick around. I’d have felt like I didn’t belong.

M’SHELL: I’m getting goose pimples; what you’re saying resonates. I hear some key words—an interaction while incarcerated that clicked, an interaction while working with the mental health population, or involvement with College Initiative. I also hear that there was a transitional point. Fortune Society pointed some in the direction of LaGuardia. The key thing is that there was an initiative or person relatable enough to help you figure out that the transition was not impossible.

Tony: When I got here, I joined ASAP. Once I realized that I could do this, I feel like kicking myself in the butt for not doing it straight out of high school, because I’m like, yo, opportunity—I don’t have time to really do all the activities, but if I would have done this when I was out of high school, when I didn’t have to worry about bills, I could have participated in other things and gone to school, and enjoyed myself. It seemed like a loving—not a loving atmosphere, but a fun atmosphere. You do your work, but there’s other activities to partake in—the drama club, plays, and the basketball games. This would have been way fun for me back in the day, but now I don’t have time for participating in nothing. But I’ve seen some good people, some good professors who talk to you, who don’t look at you biased. They work with you, and I respect that. Some professors had to take time and work with me. I think what really makes you want to come back is the hospitality of the people that you deal with day to day. I worked in Federal Work-Study and Campus Life, and the people I work with are more of a family. We all mess with each other and we have fun; it’s about everybody trying to help each other. If I need help, somebody I work with is going to take time out to help me a little bit. They want to help me to pass, and I like that.

M’SHELL: I think being at the age that you’re at now, in the position that you’re at now, you’ve come to a different level of consciousness, that now you’re able to harness earlier energy and put it to positive experience, and that’s exciting for me to hear. What excites you about being here?

Miguel: I’m going to be fifty in September. I was born in the Bronx and raised in Harlem. Growing up in the inner city may not have been the same for everybody.
In the inner city, there’s buildings, very few parks, and so I got to play in the street. Growing up in the streets, on the blocks, there were no baseball teams. There were no sports. There were gangs. There were drugs. There was violence. There was territory. That was my experience. That’s what I was seeing. That’s what I was looking up to. The guys driving around in a Mercedes and a BMW, this is what I was looking up to at eleven, twelve, and thirteen years old. This is what I started to idolize—I had a fantasy when I was in junior high school. My fantasy was to go to prison. This is the world that I was living in. It was Harlem. It was in the ‘80s, and this was my role model—the drug dealers, the flashy cars, and the guys on the block coming home from prison. They would come home very muscular, very big, and very well-respected among the community. So this is what I saw at ten, eleven, twelve. I heard the stories about a broomstick being used improperly on another human being, and I heard all the stories, too, how you go in, and the guys work out, so I was curious as a child. Children are curious. They want to know. They want to learn. I was fascinated with these guys coming from prison.

This is what I was taught, and this is what I had available to me as far as nurturing. So my fantasy was to go to prison. I wanted to see how it was. I had a fear, but it had a thrilling excitement. What makes me happy is that I’m able to live my college life now. I wasn’t able to do it when I was supposed to do it. It does make sense to go to school early, not just to party. The way we do it as a society is that your children have the privilege—they go away to school where you can actually learn and concentrate on your studies. Again, inner city kids are not that fortunate. Living in that environment, my teenage years were adult years. I was doing adult things, adult activities. I wasn’t able to enjoy my youth. I never had a youth. So I play softball now. I play racquetball. I do clubs. I do workshops. I have the Leadership Club here with 200 students. I’m living my college life now at a later age. I love being in the classroom.

David: I didn’t get to experience this when I was younger. Like I said, I was locked up from ten to eighteen. I started in Washington Square Park. I went there to play chess when I was getting beat up in school and it turned into other things. It turned into smoking weed. It turned to drinking. That turned into selling weed, and from there next thing I know, it was everything else. I got arrested probably six months after I started hanging out in the park, for selling weed to an undercover cop. They put me in group homes for my first bid. I was in and out of group homes for about—it was supposed to be for eighteen months. It turned into two and a half years, in and out, because I ran from every group home I was in. I was getting beat up because I was the only White boy up in the Bronx. And I’m talking about in the middle of Soundview in the ’90s on Dyer Avenue. You know what I mean? Forget it. When they put me in Woodlawn with the fucking Irish kids, it was even worse, because I had been in a group home with the Black kids. All the Irish kids
looked at me like, “You little motherfucker,” and I got my ass whipped. I’m sorry. Excuse my language. So that didn’t work out too well for me, either. It didn’t work out well for me in any of those situations, but it did teach me a lot of things, and it made me the person I am now. It gave me a lot of strength, and it also made me want to learn now as an adult. Yeah, everything that I missed as a child, everything that I was supposed to do as a kid, I’m doing now. The funny thing is when I was ten years old, I was in the seventh grade, so I was almost two years ahead, and that was one of the reasons why I was getting beat up at school. I decided to go my own route, and that was just too smart for my own good.

Luther: On a daily basis, myths are killed. The myth that I’m too old to do this, that I’m not smart, all that misinformation I fed myself or others fed me, is put to rest. I’m encouraged here. You know what I mean? The environment is a learning environment. I go to the Student Life office and I talk with people, and I’m encouraged, and that means something to me. A lot of times, I may be feeling that I really can’t do this, because I’m not used to doing it. I work full time, midnight to eight o’clock in the morning at Project Renewal, and that inspires me to go to school, because it’s like I’m just a step away from being in those positions. I try to keep that up front and remind myself of that, and so when I come in, I’m inspired to do something. Getting an education is the only way I can perhaps come back from the past that I have. I can say, “This is who I am today. This is what I’m doing.”

Justin: There’s a lot of things that excite me about school, like meeting new people and getting discounts for students. What excites me the most is options; I have options. It seemed like growing up my options were so limited, and now it seems endless. I could be a law student or I could be a business student. I could take my classes in the morning. I could take my classes in the evenings. I could be an ASAP student. I could be a College Discovery student. I have options; I think that’s what excites me the most. I can explore these options and see where it takes me.

M’Shell: Let’s think about the rudimentary things about going back to school. Sometimes they get drowned in the process. What was that process like for you?

Miguel: I know the process front and back. My experience with the processes is that you can’t do it alone, because we don’t know how, we are ignorant of this process, and so are a lot of students who have not had the experience of parole, courts, and incarceration. Being in Admissions, I see this as well with—what would we call them so it doesn’t sound too crazy? Regular people without a history, without records, they are having problems as well. They need somebody, too. In reentry, we need somewhere we can go, an office that’s familiar with admissions. I wouldn’t have been able to do it alone, because it’s very tedious—all the questions on the financial aid application, which is PELL and TAP, and then you’ve got the school
application, which confuses people because it’s two separate applications, one for school and one for financial aid. I understand it now, but as a student and a young person today, whether you’ve been incarcerated or not, you can fall between the cracks very easily, because of the tediousness of it, because of all the work that you have to do. Then you have documents: Are you coming in as a freshman? Or are you coming in as a transfer? There are a lot of things, and every situation is different, and there’s a procedure for every situation almost—all the work just to become a college student, “I’m going to go to work. I’m not going to do it.” I had somebody help me do it, and we need to provide that here. I’m not saying that LaGuardia doesn’t have it here, because we have an Admissions department. We have a Financial Aid department, but the kids don’t know that. The kids don’t know you can go to an actual office. It’ll be a lot easier if we can go to—not to exactly Admissions where they’re always busy. They’re not going to take ten minutes or fifteen, twenty minutes to sit down and talk to you and talk about your major. We have an advising office, but they’re not going to see you either, because you haven’t been accepted yet. You have to be a student first, so that’s absurd.

Tony: My experience was a little bit different because I did try to go to school before I went to prison. Being that I did some of the paperwork already, they had to get everything, but they had to transfer it over, because I had never attended. I saw the inside of the bar system before I—you know—so they had to go through a lot of headaches. They kept calling me, “Yo, they said that you had transferred over there.” I said, “I never went. I got locked up.” I had to show them dates and all, and they did all that paperwork, and they did a lot of arguing with the other school I was going to go to. At LaGuardia, I was confused. The person didn’t really want to help me. I’m like, “Can you help me? You know, I never went to college before.” Where I went before, they had everything in one thing, and they’re supposed to come and help you. Here they have Admissions here, chaplain there, PELL over here, you know?

I took a day off from work. I just did everything as much as I could that day, and then they sent me a letter, saying I was accepted and since then I’ve just been going. But it’s a pain in the butt. You’ve got to be really determined to go to school. Like you said, the process is very tedious, and it’s time consuming, and if you don’t really understand it—no offense to nobody here. I’m pretty sure they’re overwhelmed with work, because, you know, the school don’t want to spend more money and get more helpers so they’re just, “Alright, you guys watch over these 500 people, and you guys watch over these 500 people,” and they ain’t got time to help every individual. That’s the problem. When you have more people than you have hands to help, it’s going to be a problem. In my opinion, if they would leave TAP right where it is, they should do it all in one spot. Once you get right there, do everything there, so you don’t have to do a whole bunch of papers here,
and then go over there and do a whole bunch of other papers, and then bring your birth certificate. One hand don’t know what the other hand is doing.

**Luther:** A lot of things are a little intimidating, not having done them before. Coming from an environment where you speak when spoken to, you get a little leery about doing certain things. It gave me a little reluctance to go about it, but by going through College Initiative, I had someone who understood. When I went to Admissions, I had a flip phone and a fold-up calendar that I would write my dates in, and the woman there didn’t make me feel any kind of way about that. She said, “Oh, that’s cute.” That’s what I knew when I left: I had a flip phone. I didn’t know about a smartphone, yet. Now we’re going into doing all these things, like emails on my phone. I needed someone to guide me through that process and have patience. You gotta have a lot of patience. It wasn’t that bad because I had someone who took their time.

I was working last semester in the Student Life office as well as with Federal Work-Study. We had a gentleman just coming from prison, and he wanted to go to school. He needed someone to show him those different offices, and I knew the fear and the reluctance that he had because I had just gone through it. It’s easy to just say, “I’m not going through this. I’ll just go find me a job. I’m not going to do that,” especially if I’ve never done it before. What makes you think, “I can do it”? Like I said, it was important that someone had the patience to understand where I was at. Everybody doesn’t understand where people are coming from, where they’re at emotionally or mentally. I had Miguel, and I also had Darren Ferguson, and these people were very, very instrumental in my process. If there’s any type of office set up, that would be the thing, someone who understands that person’s emotional state. We relate better to one another because you understand me. I can feel confident to tell you what’s going on, because I know you know, as opposed to, “I have to hide this because of what they gonna think about me.”

**David:** Like Miguel said, it was definitely tedious, but once I figured it all out, I was able to do it. I was able to do the application on my phone, and so it worked out well.

**Justin:** My experience was kind of smooth, too. College Initiative linked me with Miguel and he helped me. He said, “Okay, take care of this. When you’re done with that, come back, and then go see this person, go see that person. They’re waiting for you right now.” So my experience was kind of fast. I got a lot of things done in one day, because I had some help.

**M’Shell:** That’s good to hear. Let’s think about some of the support services that you received: What was the most helpful or least helpful of services that you’ve had? Which office have you been to that you can think about and say that when
you left there, it was an awesome experience? You’ve all been here more than one
semester now. Good or bad: Where have you been, and what happened?

David: I still really haven’t experienced much, because I’m a CUNY Start student.
I’m dying to get into my major course of study. Right now, I’m just doing remedial
math. I’m dying right now, I’m dying, because I really want to get into psychology,
and I’m just doing math.

Luther: I’ve had very good experiences. In the Student Life office, I had a lot of sup-
port, sincerely. They helped me to deal with other areas as well, directed me to go
see this person over here or this guy or this other thing. As far as bad experiences?
And walking away saying that I didn’t enjoy that experience? I didn’t really have
any bad experiences as of yet. Things that were potentially not right, I went to the
Student Life office and asked for some help. I learned to do that.

Justin: I haven’t had any bad experiences. I’m not going to say “yet.” ASAP, I’m so
passionate about ASAP; the people are amazing. ASAP has helped me not just with
academics. My apartment was broken into last year, and a lot of stuff was taken
away, and they helped me get through that process. I kind of didn’t want to come
to school. I was veering off track a bit, to the point where I just wanted to give up.
I was closing in and depressed. But the staff at ASAP helped me out of that quickly.
They’ve also helped me with employment. They’ve hired me to help recruit more
students into the program. ASAP is amazing. I told the director, “When I become
successful, I’m donating a lot of money to the program.”

Tony: I’m going to give you a couple of things that was good for me. ASAP was
good for me because they helped me pay for my books. They gave me a MetroCard
for the semester, so that helped me financially. They didn’t get me working; I still
don’t have no money. I’m broke. Again, BMEC: I went down to BMEC, and they
helped me when I first got in. Brian Miller, I’m calling him up and saying, “I need
help with this essay I’m writing,” and he’ll work with me, and he’ll stay up all
night working with me. You know, I mess with him all the time, but that’s my
man, Brian. That guy right there with the red shirt—Miguel? He was my advisor
for College Initiative, so when I came to him, he introduced me to everybody in
Campus Life. When I got my Federal Work-Study, that’s where I worked.

M’SHELL: Let’s talk about you. Think about your own experience: Would you say
that you’re making progress? Attending classes regularly? Completing course work?

Tony: I’m making progress. I don’t miss class. Well, I missed one class, and I was
sick, out of the whole time I’ve been here. My first GPA was 3.0, and then my next
GPA, I was on academic probation, but I’m back up to 2.6; my grades continue
going up, and I’m finding a way to study and get my stuff done.
Justin: I don’t have a GPA yet, but I attend all my classes. I took a math exam today. I’m taking Math 99. I got 100. It’s exciting. [Cheers] I stood up for about three hours yesterday taking the practice exam over and over and over, and then to be able to walk out of the classroom and take a photo of it and show it to my mom, and she’s like, “Oh, God bless you. I’m proud of you. Good job.” That does it all for me.

Miguel: I graduated from LaGuardia in 2012 with a 3.5. You know, when you transfer out, you start from zero. So I believe by the end of the semester, by next month, it should be up to 2.9 at Hunter. It’s not easy. I always say this, it may not be easy, but it’s simple.

Luther: Stagnant at the moment. Right after I started class I got hit by a car. I had some surgery, so that kind of threw me off, trying to make doctors’ appointments. Completely [out] the first semester, and then I was out for six to eight weeks recuperating from the surgery. It’s been a little struggle, and I’m back to work now. I’m doing midnights and school, so, it’s taking me a minute to get acclimated. I have classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I work Thursday morning from midnight to eight o’clock in the morning, then I come take an hour nap in my car, and then I start classes at ten-thirty in the morning.

M’Shell: Many of you talked about participating in extracurricular activities. Tony mentioned that that becomes a struggle; you’ve got to work. But it seems as though you’ve got involved in Campus Life. Are there any cocurricular activities that you’re involved in?

Tony: BMEC.

Luther: Just BMEC and some of the functions that they put together, but, other than that, I’ve been trying to focus in the schoolroom.

Miguel: In Campus Life, where I’m an ambassador, I do all the tours, which I love, and I assist students starting clubs and with workshops. I go on the field trips. We take the students every year to Washington, DC. We go every year to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, so I participate in Heads Up America.9

Justin: ASAP is the only thing I’m part of. I help them with anything. I helped them set up Spirit Day.10 I pretty much utilize the library as much as I can. That’s about it.

M’Shell: So we’re kind of closing this circle. We’ve talked about your experience being formerly incarcerated and making the transition to college. As you think back about the time spent being locked up, what things in the past, if any, currently affect your academic progress or aspirations, the dreams that you have had for
Now that you’re a student, the world has opened up and you are thinking about careers and the future.

Luther: Well, my past experiences, I allowed them to motivate me. I know that I have to be realistic about my criminal history hindering me from going into certain fields. That’s just a fact. What field is going to actually benefit me? So that’s where it motivates me to do well, because that way perhaps I can give back, by working in a field with people—younger people who are going through similar situations, or struggling—to prevent them perhaps from going down the same roads that I have. The dream job would be something in the field of helping just because of my experiences. A lot of times it was me that prevented me from doing better—so letting people know that you don’t want to stand in your own way and getting that across to people is important for me to do.

David: I was locked up with some interesting kids, a whole wide range of them. I don’t know if you guys remember the story. There was a kid and his girlfriend, a White couple, and in Central Park, this girlfriend talked her boyfriend into hitting a guy over the head with a rock, cutting him open, and filling him up with rocks and putting him in a lake in Central Park, just trying to get rid of the body. Remember that? I was in Spofford with him. I remember these things, and I remember a lot of different mental health issues. I, myself, am manic depressive. I’m bipolar, and now on top of the manic depression, I also suffer from PTSD after I got stabbed in 2007 and locked myself in the house for a year and a half. Basically, all of those experiences motivate me into wanting to work in the mental health industry. I know firsthand that there’s a need and a lack of good work being done.

Miguel: It’s been tough, somewhat demoralizing, and it needs to get better. After putting all the work, after doing what I’m supposed to do, it seems like my past history continues to follow me. It continues to linger over me. I don’t understand how millions of dollars are being thrown into the reentry program, and there’s still a stigma. We’re still being discriminated against; they’re not giving us an opportunity.

Justin: Of course, the felony has affected a few job opportunities that I’ve tried to pursue, but one thing I’ve learned in the interviews is that once I mention the felony, to curve it immediately. I have stuff to curve it with, like school. I could see the body language change from when I say, “Yes, I’ve been convicted of a felony, but now I’m a LaGuardia student. I’ve done this, this, and this.” I could see their calm like, “O.K., wait a minute. There might be something here.”

I wanted to be a traveling nurse, and I don’t think that can happen with the felony. I’m going to pursue photojournalism, and I’m going to try to get that done. That’s what I would like to do.
Tony: Jail gave me motivation. I’ve seen a lot of people in jail that was geniuses, very inventive. They create things, really smart, and I know I was smart. I just took it the wrong route. So jail gave me motivation because I didn’t want to go back. Therefore, I had to find something that I could do that I liked doing. Dealing with other people, youth, and trying to keep them from the same errors I’ve made, that’s one of the areas I want to deal with.

I went to job interviews, and got the job. Once I was supposed to start that Monday; they knew I was going to school. They said, “All right, cool.” They did the background check, but I already let them know I have a felony. I went to the school and met the people. I met everybody, met some of the students, shook their hands and took pictures. I got a call: “We’re not allowed; the background check didn’t clear.”

You’ve got to really research what jobs you can get and what jobs you can’t get. Just because you have a felony does not automatically mean you can’t get a job. That was my issue. I didn’t want to argue with it. I’m tired, frustrated. I just went back to school and got another job. I really think the felony is a hindrance, but it’s not going to stop me.

M’Shell: In one word, can you please offer your most positive feeling about being in the college?

Tony: Compassion and understanding.

Justin: Hope.

Miguel: I have a few words. If you think education is hard, try living in poverty.

Luther: Experience and hope.

David: Just getting advice, feedback from people.

M’Shell: What sort of things do you think this campus should think about or know about students like yourselves who’ve had experience with incarceration? Your voices are now part of what is going to happen going forward. If you can influence the LaGuardia community, what are some changes that you would make? What is important for people in decision-making capacity to know?

Miguel: I feel that we need to create a position, a counselor, preferably in Campus Life—students go there anyway. Students need a place to go where it’s not rush-rush, where there’s somebody you can talk to, because you’re dealing with people’s feelings, people’s emotions. You’re dealing with mental health. My statistics may be off, but probably 90 percent of incarcerated individuals who go through the experience have some slight mental health issue. So you need a well-rounded
individual in this position, someone who has empathy for individuals who have been incarcerated. We need a place to go. We need a full-time counselor.

David: That’s most important. People want help. People are crying for help, looking for friends. There are people who don’t have anybody to go to, anybody to consult with. They desperately need that.

Tony: I was going to piggyback on what Miguel said earlier today, that we need to have an incarceration coming-home program, to help them get into college. In LaGuardia, we help you financially so you won’t be burdened with work. We’ll help you with transportation, a MetroCard, and we’ll help you with books so you won’t be so messed up. If you fit the criteria for the group coming home from incarceration, we could help you get back on your feet and help you get into school.

Justin: I don’t think I’ve been here long enough to see. My experience at LaGuardia has been just so welcoming. It’s been enlightening, inspiring; I’m happy. I’m so happy. I get joy when I walk in these buildings and I’m studying. I’m doing my homework. I really don’t know what needs to be done or changed, just because I feel it’s so perfect for me.

Luther: I think that there needs to be an office for people coming home from incarceration. They have a unique set of problems, so help them get acclimated, get into the school, walk them through the process, have mentors who understand where they’ve been, who can help them along the way. Because you get discouraged. You know, we’ve learned a way of dealing with things in a negative manner for a long time, so when you hit adversity, sometimes those manners are quick to come back. If you have someone who’s been on that road and stayed the course to talk to as opposed to the intimidating authority factors—you know what I mean? I think it’s important that you have this place for them.

These life experiences that we have never dealt with positively in the past start to show themselves. More experienced people have also gone the path that you have—that’s what we relate to better. You wouldn’t know if you’ve never done it, so how are you going to tell me what it’s like? You know what I mean? We get that attitude a lot. So I think it’s important to have people who understand what you’re going through. It’s important: You don’t want to leave people by the wayside.
NOTES

1. “The Black Male Empowerment and Cooperative Program (BMEC) is a retention program designed to engage and empower [students] to be...lifelong learner[s] and...active participant[s] in [their] education. BMEC is a community of students connected to each other and the College through academic support services and mentorship.” (LaGuardia Community College. Student Services. n.d. “Black Male Empowerment Cooperative Program (BMEC).” Long Island City, NY: LaGCC. Accessed November 27, 2017. https://www.laguardia.edu/Student-Services/Black-Male-Empowerment-Cooperative-(BMEC)/.)


3. After the conversation was recorded, Tony sent the following description of his family and early life:

I was born in 1971 in Harlem Hospital to Nathaniel Walker and Shannon Walker. At this time, my family was poor and on drugs. I had two older brothers, Nathaniel Walker, Jr., and Tyrone Walker. We lived in Brooklyn, in the Red Hook projects. A lot of times we lived in condemned buildings, and we went days without food. As I was growing up, I learned how to hustle—packing bags, helping people with their groceries to the car, shoveling snow, doing anything and everything to make money to get by. A lot of times my mother took the money that we was hustling for in order to get drugs. The value of life was never shown to us. I have two brothers older than me, and I have four other siblings younger than me. My mother got herself together and wanted to move out of the city to try to give us a better life, to try to take us away from the drugs, the hustling, and the murders. My mother really wanted the best for us, but it was hard for us to get that when she was addicted to drugs. My mother taught us right from wrong, even though we didn’t listen. I decided to continue hustling even when I didn’t have to. I had an opportunity to go to school and be better than I was, but I decided to hustle, and I got addicted to the lifestyle and the money.


6. “Inside-Out is a national program based in Philadelphia, which aims to bring college students and incarcerated men and women together in an educational setting in which they learn from one another’s experiences” (Crawford, Charlotte. 2015. “St. Lawrence’s Prison Teaching: Transformation through Education.” Community Connections 6 (1). http://www.stlawu.edu/govtnews/nov15/prison.html).


8. “College Discovery Programs (CD) were created in 1965 at the City University of New York to assist students who have the potential to succeed in college but lack the educational foundation and economic resources necessary to pursue a degree” (LaGuardia Community College. n.d. “College Discovery.” Long Island City, NY: LaGCC. Accessed November 27, 2017. https://www.laguardia.edu/Academics/College-Discovery/).


10. Spirit Day is a full day of themed activities organized by ASAP for ASAP students.


To You, He’s an Ex-con; to Me, He’s a Father

The following conversation, facilitated by Michele Piso Manoukian of the Center for Teaching and Learning, was recorded on June 1, 2016. The names of two students have been changed.

Michele: Let me welcome you and thank you for coming! I’d like us to begin with a little description of our community and family life. I’m from the south side of Pittsburgh; my five brothers and sisters and I grew up in St. Clair Village, a housing project above the Monongahela River. Our community was pretty tight back then, mostly women and children, and everyone knew each other, maybe a little too well. In many ways, I am proud of my neighborhood; there was struggle and lots of love and care. Now it’s your turn. Would you share a bit about your backgrounds?

Victoria: Yeah, in the community I lived in, they watch you. In the Caribbean, they are very strict on education. If you mingle with other kids, the neighbors watch you and they report to your parents, and then it’s just a whole bunch of other stuff that’s going to happen.

Nera: I came from a very disassembled community. My dad was in the penitentiary for a third of his life. It wasn’t a household where you have the mother and the father; it wasn’t like that. My mother made some bad choices because of the situation that happened with my dad, and that left me to fend for myself. I felt a sense of abandonment, and I wanted acceptance in different ways and school wasn’t it for me. So I decided to do other things. My grandmother stepped in, my angel on earth. But she’s a lot older and she grew up in a different time. As far as having somebody push me with academics or just instilling core values about education and school, that was lacking, it wasn’t there. My father was in and out. There was one particular time when he did a stretch and I think that hurt everyone. It was for a long period of time and it was tough.

Michele: If I understand, you are describing—

Nera: Like, what is a stretch? That means like a bit—

Velma: She knows what a stretch means.

Michele: Right, I meant the tough part. Victoria, you were nodding?

Victoria: Yeah, I’m nodding because of what she said about her grandmother. That’s true. I think everybody here—grandmothers are like that. My grandmother is like that. But my grandfather grew up differently, which was weird. My grandmother is from the country, and he’s higher than the countryside. I don’t know how
to say it, but he’s not fully Black. He grew up in a background where education is really important. My grandmother doesn’t care about that. She didn’t go to high school. My dad, neither.

**Velma:** My parents, too. One finished in sixth grade and one finished in ninth grade. But they made sure that we went to school. “You’re gonna go, because we don’t have that education.”

**Leslie:** That’s how mine was.

Velma: “You are gonna get what we don’t have.” So they couldn’t help you with certain things. But then my grandma—the family is from down South. My father is from the North, but my mom is from the South. My grandma always worked as a maid or whatever; she cleaned houses. My father always promised my grandmother that my mother would never have to work. And she never did. He provided everything for the family. I just lost my father in September—I don’t want to talk about that. [Crying] But the thing is, they always made sure we go to school every day, every day, rain or shine, we did better than the mailman, every day. They didn’t play around about school. But they got to the point where they said, “Okay, finish high school, and either get a job, a good job, or continue in school.” It didn’t matter which, as long as you can take care of yourself.

Leslie: Speaking of grandmothers, my grandmother was also not well educated, but she loved education. She said, “I would sneak a candle in the middle of the night to be able to read.” She was married off very young in Colombia. She left my grandfather and came to this country. She brought three of her children and left the other three, couldn’t get the other three over. It was always all about education in the house. She only knew up to, like, fifth or sixth grade level, right? She pushed me up to high school and then it’s like, what’s beyond high school? You get a job. It was a contradiction: “You’re out of high school now, you have to start supporting the family.”

**Velma:** Right, you gotta work.

**Leslie:** “You gotta give me $60 dollars a week.”

**Velma:** Yup, I always worked. I always worked. I always had the envelope, yeah.

**Leslie:** So there was always that sense of responsibility towards the family, like money. Money always—

**Velma:** —take care of everybody.
Leslie: Money always came into light and I feel like money is the root of all evil in terms of a lot of our family members got into the troubles that they got into because—

Velma: —they want that money, fast money.

Leslie: Because they’re chasing that money, you get what I’m saying? That comes from families where it’s like, “Okay, you got to support…” If you get a girl pregnant you support your kid. It’s always chasing that money.

Lizzie: I grew up in a really feminist household, highly feminist. I grew up with my mom and my dad basically just left us. I still talk to him now; he never wants to speak to me. My mom is a sculptor. She has always been an artist. My brother is a tattoo artist. I do film. We always lived in a household of five people and one bedroom. Then my mom married an Argentinian and now we’re like upper middle class. I’ve lived from being poor to being rich now and it’s kind of—I don’t know where I belong. I don’t know where I fit in. My mom has a bachelor’s degree. My dad has a bachelor’s degree. It’s expected that all of us—it’s either we have to do something with art or we have to be a professional.

Velma: My nephew did time. He did six. But we had an uncle that did thirty-three. This is what I learned about when you don’t have enough evidence: My uncle studied everything—every criminal law for thirty-three years. He already is a lawyer in a sense because he helped out a lot of people with their cases behind bars. I had a sister, an older sister; she did four years in Bedford. She assaulted someone. She beat up somebody really nicely. Her and her husband was killed in 1999 by a home intruder. It’s like a lot of them, climbing in and out. My uncle is waiting to be off parole so that he can sue the city. He was locked up, and they had no evidence whatsoever that it was him. They took the word of a crack head over him. We the same age; he was nineteen when he went in. I was married at eighteen. I was a wife and I became a mother at nineteen. It affected the family because you go on these long visits, these long drives to go to these places.

Raven: That’s right.

Leslie: I remember.

Velma: Long drives up.

Velma: And you’re taking the kids over the years, and the men aren’t staying in one place. They’re bouncing from prison to prison to prison. They go all the way up, and when it’s time to come home, they get sent closer and closer.
Nera: I don’t remember how old I was the first time he went in, because the first time my dad was incarcerated, I wasn’t told the truth. I used to think he was away working because that’s what I was told. I was old enough to know that he wasn’t around and I was old enough to ask questions like, “Where’s my dad? I can speak to him over the phone, but why can’t I see him?”

Leslie: When did you find out that he was incarcerated?

Nera: It kind of slipped out. No one ever really told me. I probably overheard something and—

Velma: Probably just came to the conclusion.

Nera: I put two and two together. “Wait a minute, he’s not always working. When a person works, they get off of work and they come home. He didn’t come home. Where is he?” Actually, I think my dad told me one time over the phone because I said to him, “You’re never here. You’re always at work. Where are you?” And he told me. My grandmother and my mother tried to keep that away from me and paint this pretty picture. When he told me, I remember his voice. There was hurt in his voice. There was shame in his voice. But there was honesty, too.

Leslie: And do you think that’s better? I’ve always thought about that. I never got involved with any hustlers, nothing like that because growing up, I had to do those long visits, those miles and hours, and it felt like the whole two days just going and coming. I had friends that had their baby daddy locked up and I’ve always wondered, is it better to tell the child?

Velma: You tell them so that you can keep them out of jail.

Leslie: So you think your mom was right to keep it from you?

Nera: I think my dad is so great because he is so transparent. His truth is beautiful—or it was, he passed. His truth was a beautiful dynamic. I probably resented my mother and my grandmother for lying to me about it. I can’t speak for every child. Maybe with some children you have to give them a fairy tale; that’s what works for them. Being honest was the best thing that he could ever do for me. I never, ever lied to him about anything.

Leslie: My older brother was constantly in trouble. He’s an artist, too. He was a graffiti artist. He grew up in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. We lived right here, by Sunnyside and Woodside. 5 Pointz? That just got knocked down? The whole thing for him was about chasing the money. I would tell him, “Why don’t you go to school for art? You’re an amazing artist.” He used to collect Marvel Comics.
He said they were all political; he said they were all about racism. Like the superheroes, he would say, “Make believe the superheroes are Black people. Make believe the superheroes are Spanish people. They’re fighting The Man. The villains are the White people.” He was so much into politics and art. He didn’t go into art; he said he couldn’t make a living. People go to school for art when their family is rich. That definitely affects our people. Our people don’t go into their passion, because they’re, like, “That’s not going to make any money.” When he came out, he didn’t come out with a clean slate. He came out with that title, “You’re an ex-con.” He didn’t pursue his passion of art; he did some C++ thing for cabling because there’s money in that. But even then, he couldn’t get a job.

**Velma:** *My uncle still can’t get a job; he fighting to get a job.*

**Michele:** I hear you about the money/art conflict. I wonder if a professor or college life could help students like your brother clarify those choices?

**Leslie:** One thing is career planning: I feel like schools should focus on career planning and get in touch with companies willing to hire ex-cons. That’s why people don’t go into their careers of passion: They need to go into something that is going to make them money.

**Velma:** *They trying to go anywhere that’s gonna give a job.*

**Victoria:** *I was going to speak pertaining to what you were saying about your brother—in the community I feel like—you said your family is supportive of education?*

**Leslie:** *Of education? Yes, but that’s only in my household.*

**Victoria:** *What about the community around?*

**Leslie:** *No. My brother got shot in a drive by. I feel like I grew up in the ‘hood. You look at it and it looks good, but I’ve had friends be killed by other friends over a stupid beef. Cops would roll up to my house to get a line-up.*

**Velma:** *Where do you live at?*

**Leslie:** *Woodside.*

**Velma:** *So you in Queens. Really, in New York, the community is not for supporting. I can tell you that right now. They might give a little bit,*
but they not being advocates for your futures. My future—I’m into a third future now.

Victoria: My cousin was in—we call it recidivism in criminal justice, where you’re constantly in and out of prison—so I’m learning it and I’ve been seeing it, but it’s not only him. I went to junior high in Brownsville,3 and you know that’s the homicide capital. I’ve seen it. You see so many things that you just get this.

Velma: It’s a community that really don’t care.

Victoria: If it wasn’t for my family, it would have been downhill.

Velma: They have no hope. It’s the truth. The majority of the young people are either in jail or in gangs.

Michele: It’s so different now. In my day, we had a teacher in St. Clair, Miss Lausanne, the music teacher, in her hat at our bus stop, keeping us in line. She was loved. On Sundays, the Brother Dan and Sister Anne Revivalist bus would come around, but I don’t know who got on. I heard later that they got called up on racketeering charges! Anyway, we were all supposed to do our homework, graduate, move it up, you know? What about you? Did your family and community set a high standard?

Victoria: Right. I know a kid that got shot—you see it all the time. You know, once the community shunned these people. But now, it’s kind of like you come out of jail and you get a little bit more respect on the street. It’s something that’s regular. You hear about any of this and it’s like, okay. It’s just regular.

Velma: I call it the project mentality, that there’s nothing better, that they ain’t gonna do any better. They be there for thirty or forty years, living in those buildings.

Victoria: That’s why so many of them take drugs.

Nera: I don’t think there’s one specific pressing issue about family or community. I think that it’s everything clumped together. For me, the main person was my dad. I’m a part of him. I think emotionally you can lack certain things because in a household there’s certain things that your mother teaches you. There’s certain things that your father teaches you. My father tried to do his best to be a parent, even though he was incarcerated. Some people get locked up, and they have children, and they totally abandon their responsibility. My dad tried to be active while he was in jail. On those long visits he would say, “Bring your homework,” and we would do homework on visits.
There were times when he would call, and I would be like, “Dad, this is going on at school right now, can you help me?” I would get cursed out from my grandmother because those phone calls cost, and me and my dad would be on the phone for two and three hours, and he’s trying to work with me to do homework. It probably broke his heart that he had to do it over the phone. But for me, it was him being somewhat active in the household. I started having a lot of trust issues because I was wondering why would somebody take him away. To you, he’s a criminal, he’s an ex-con. To me, he’s my father. Emotionally it messes you up. You don’t have balance. When you’re put in settings such as school and work, sometimes you become a bit defensive. You build this certain—I hate to generalize, so I will speak for me—you build a wall because you’re not taught those things from that parent. The most emotional part for me was actually going to the visits and seeing the police officers talk to my dad anyway that they wanted, or him having to be on line and they didn’t treat him like he was human. If you’re twelve or thirteen or eleven or however old I was, and you see that, you have this defense mechanism. And it does make you not want to listen to authority because you feel like they abuse their authority, because someone who you look at as an authority figure, which is your parent, is being talked down to.

**Velma:** Belittled, yeah.

**Nera:** Someone that you view in high regard is being treated like they’re less than human. So now I don’t give a fuck about none of these authority figures. They can all kiss my ass. This is what I feel like. You said to be real, you said, “Nera?” This is Nera.

**Velma:** Keeping it real.

**Nera:** I don’t know if I was keeping it real. It was an emotional thing. It was a defense mechanism. There were problems in the home, clearly. If there are ten months in a school year and you fight ten times, there’s a problem. There’s something wrong.

**Velma:** Seriously.

**Nera:** You can’t deal; you don’t know how to deal with your anger. You’re angry. I don’t know if my professors are getting the effects of my pain. Before I would fight. Now I’m more closed in. If you hadn’t said, “Nera, Nera, Nera,” I would have listened to everybody else’s story. I’m always writing; I would have taken my little notes. I wouldn’t have said anything. It’s like you don’t want to be judged.

**Michele:** I’m hearing that a young person needs to be taken care of. If not, there’s doubt, maybe anger or loneliness, emotions to be expressed in some way, maybe not in words. You know what I’m trying to say? How do we let out that inner
feeling or identity in a healthy way? I mean, should we be more open, tell others straight up about what’s going on? Do you tell people?

Nera: No.

Victoria: Definitely not.

Velma: But you haven’t popped off in here at anybody either.

Nera: I’m a different person now. I’m not in sixth grade anymore.

Michele: But she said something else. Nera said, “I don’t act out in that way. I cut off.”

Velma: Probably at a younger age you don’t know how to express yourself so much.

Nera: Right. It’s still my defense mechanism; it’s just in a different way.

Velma: Nobody really talks about family members in prison. You don’t want to tell everybody your business. This is one thing in a Black family, family business stay in the house. You don’t talk about your business outside in the street. That’s what’s wrong with a lot of young people—a lot of them need to speak to people and we don’t believe in shrinks and putting our kids in front of people to talk about issues. You just talk to a family member—and that’s wrong. They should have some kind of therapy for them.

Lizzie: Schools have counselors.

Leslie: I think they should advocate about them more. I know we have a counselor in the law school. That’s something that’s really important.

Velma: But will they go? Will they go?

Victoria: Advocate about it, get people to go—

Michele: As a teacher, what should I know about a student who may not be doing his or her work, might be late all the time? It’s possible to misidentify the problem.

Velma: Don’t identify nothing. Just give them a card and say, “Here, go see this person.” If they want to go, they’ll go.
Victoria: It’s probably how you do it, too. Some people are going to look at it and be like, “What are you giving me this for?” You have to ask them, like, “What’s happening?”

Velma: They’re not going to speak, a lot of them, they’re going to keep holding it in. You gotta say, “I think this person is somebody you can relate to. Maybe open up to.”

Michele: Is it the stigma? Is it the Black family or the Latin family or the Syrian family? Because we did not go to shrinks either. [Laughter] And you kept it all in the house and you never told anybody anything, except everybody knew about it all the time anyway.

Velma: They still talking.

Michele: Not long ago, a person who’d been inside, a professor here, someone who is out with his life, described what it’s like when you are out to dinner and everyone’s talking about what they did last year or, you know, “Where were you that summer when the lights went out?” He said, “What do you say when it’s your turn and you were in prison that year?”

Leslie: When my brother came out, at family dinners and barbeques, he would always talk about his experiences in jail and my mom would get so angry. She would be embarrassed almost. I would be like, “Let it go. Relax.” That’s why I just say it. It wasn’t just my brother, it was my cousin, it was my aunt. Growing up, there was always someone in jail that I had to visit or call on Christmas Eve. There was always somebody in jail, and the closest to me was my brother; he’s seven years older. I didn’t grow up with a father, so he was the father figure. He wanted to talk about it; I was always there to listen. But my mom would always be, “I don’t know why Alexis is always talking about his time in jail.”

Victoria: I definitely agree. You gotta let it out. A lot of people keep it in and you see the anger. My cousin doesn’t talk about it, and the family doesn’t talk about it. Something like that, you can’t not acknowledge it. It’s like somebody getting abused when they were younger. It has an effect on them and not talking about it, they keeping it in? Then it’s gonna display in their behavior.

Nera: I went through a little identity crisis at one point, because you identify yourself with your parents. When one is not there, or you see one being treated in a certain way that you don’t feel they deserve, like, “You can have a phone call
for a certain amount of time.” Those kinds of things cause a crisis. When he came home—like, when Leslie was discussing her brother talking about his time in the penitentiary—Leslie was his advocate when everybody else was, like, “Don’t bring that jail mentality here.”

You have to understand that a lot of these males—and females—when they go to jail, they’re really young. They were lacking something growing up. So now their authority figures have guns and they tell them when to wake up, when to eat, when to sleep. They pick up these jail mannerisms, and not even do you have to be in there a long time because you gonna learn quick. You know what I mean? Because if you don’t, you’re gonna get punched in your mouth.

They pick up these things and then they come home and then they try to get reinserted back into society and it’s very hard for them because they don’t know how to adapt to that environment. I say he’s the world’s greatest dad, but when he first came home, he didn’t know how to speak. He would speak at me and yell at the top of his lungs. It could be, “Pass me that water bottle,” but that’s what it was like in jail. That’s what he knew for so many years, and this is what he brought.

Velma: Some people learn to separate certain things—you not gonna bring your home problems to work. Some people, it’s so bad in their house—they’re getting abused and you never know what’s going on, because they got a façade on, like, “Hey, girl, everything’s cool.” But you gettin’ killed in your house. So they separate. “This is nobody’s business; I am not telling nobody.”

Michele: Does that experience affect education? I just feel that all of that just pushes a person so far to the edge, that we don’t talk for fear of not being accepted, and then maybe we just give up, drop out.

Victoria: It does affect your education. Like Rikers Island, for example, 90 percent of them are undereducated and haven’t received high school diplomas.4

Velma: They in there trying to get a GED.

Victoria: The majority of them are in there due to lack of education. The majority of them went to high schools in places like Brownsville. I been there. I know that the teachers are not good. Because of my family’s feelings about education, I would have to go home and learn a lot on my own. The thing is, either you want to fit in or you want to be better. That’s the choices you are left with in the community, and the majority of the time people want to fit in. I’m not going to say I’m a loner, but most of the time I’m by myself or in the library. Or I’m with my friends and my friends are not rowdy—but my cousins, they’re different. They’re boys and it’s way different for them. It’s like they have to show this manliness, and manliness is this aggressive behavior. That’s what goes on in jail. You don’t want to get picked on as a boy, so you join these gangs—that’s what’s happening.
Michele: How about people on campus who have been incarcerated? Do they talk about it?

Nera: I’m pretty sure that people have somebody in their family that has been incarcerated, it could even be them, but they’re not going to discuss that. It’s not a conversation that you want to have. It comes with a lot of judgment and a lot of emotion. There are so many different things that come into play. Why would you want to put yourself on Front Street to possibly be looked at in a negative manner?

Velma: That’s why my nephew was worried about these discussion groups—and I told him, “I think you should go there and you speak your mind and you tell them that if you can come out of jail and get into school and graduate, then there’s a lot of other people that might be able to do that, too.” A lot of other people might be feeling that same way.

Nera: Definitely. I’m the type of person that when I’m listening to everyone, I’m still internalizing. I’m thinking other things; I may not say it right now but I’m—

Velma: But don’t you feel a relief?

Nera: Yeah, it’s better, it’s therapy.

Velma: Like whew, I got it off my chest.

Leslie: Is there a mental health day in this school? Is there something like that?

Michele: That’s interesting! What would you do on a mental health day?

Lizzie: There’s people you can bring in.

Velma: You’d be surprised how many are on Zoloft.

Leslie: Remember when we did those breathing exercises?

Michele: I do remember.

Leslie: To think about, oh, imagine yourself where you’re happiest.

Michele: I’m thinking about the families—we’ve had people in our First Year Seminar who talk about that, husbands have been inside or are still inside. Some students expressed a sense of loss and grief.
Leslie: Oh yeah, holidays. It’s, like, it’s very hard.

Velma: Visiting day. Family day.

Victoria: I have the chills, just saying that.

Michele: Right? I’m wondering about those feelings kept private for fear of judgment. From your words, I’ve understood that some of our students are carrying loss and grief, a sense of stigma, sometimes anger at authorities. How can the college support that weight? How can we help others who might have similar experiences?

Nera: I don’t think you should hand students a card. You’re singling them out. It says to them, “Something is wrong with me.” They might feel like that already and by you handing them that card, you are reaffirming an insecurity that they already have.

Michele: How does that insecurity affect them in a classroom?

Velma: They late.

Victoria: Performance.

Nera: You can tell if someone has some type of trauma going on. I have a female in my class, and I can tell that there’s a lot of trauma going on in her household just by the way she interacts. She yells at the professor when she speaks to him, and it’s not intentional. It’s just how she speaks.

There is the Wellness Center, that’s how I found out about this discussion. I would say that information is power. So you put it in their court, and you say, “Hey, LaGuardia has this and that. Feel free to go and check it out.” And you just leave it there, plant the seed. You don’t push it. When I did go to the Wellness Center, I was overwhelmed with emotion; I just walked in one day. I heard about it, but I didn’t actually go until something made me feel very emotional and very overwhelmed, and I thought, “Let me just check it out.” Had I not had the information, I wouldn’t have known to go there.

Actually, I took on befriending that girl in my class because everybody else was like, “She’s crazy. She’s psycho.” I understand that everybody has issues and nobody is perfect. You can’t judge her because you don’t know where she’s been or what she’s going through. So I mean, she not gonna get crazy with me because we gonna lay that law down from jump. I’m just saying I’m here for her. She talks to me more than she talks to anybody. I go to the computer lab with her. I reached out to her because there’s something she’s trying to get out and I understand that.
Michele: You never asked your friend? Like, “I noticed in class you get a little frustrated—.”
Nera: I would never. I would never.
Velma: No.
Nera: I would never.
Velma: No, you don’t do that.

Leslie: You could kind of finesse it, though. You know how you said you’ve been to the Wellness Center? You know how when you’re trying to tell someone to do something? Sometimes you just want to scream, “You know there’s this place, there’s actually this place here where you can go and scream if you want to.” It’s called the Women’s Center, and you can go there if you just want to go and cry or you just want to go and scream.

Michele: Women do that in the bathrooms.
[Laughter]

Michele: Some people have suggested an office for the formerly incarcerated and for their family members. Listening to you, I’m thinking our whole community has to be a caring community because trauma is something that many individuals experience from many sources.

Velma: Yes, that’s right. Like kids given up to foster care.

Michele: Is there a way that Student Life can take on the idea of caring for somebody else, so when you see somebody, or when you see something—

Everyone: —say something! [Laughter]

Leslie: We live in this world and we’re like this and we don’t interact with people in our community. Nobody even says “hi” anymore.

Velma: Wait. Wait. Wait. Hello! That’s wrong. That’s not true. I am a full time minister, so I’m always out preaching. I’m always out talking to people about their children.

Victoria: But the majority of people in New York don’t.

Velma: You should see people’s faces when I say, “Good morning.”

Victoria: Yeah, it makes people smile.
Michele: That’s true. In my old neighborhood, too. You didn’t just walk out on the street and not say anything to anybody. So, what would your suggestions be for the College? Many people are coming home, coming back into the communities—

Velma: You gotta do something, but you gotta do the right thing. Maybe at the welcome—

Victoria: Like orientation?

Velma: Yeah, when they do the orientation.

Michele: What would you say? Would you just be out with it?

Velma: Branch it out.

Leslie: Bring up all these wonderful resources—

Velma: You can say, “We have things for families that have—” like you was saying about health and wellness.

Victoria: Mental health. There’s a lot of mental health issues.

Velma: When I was in school, they were teaching us how to meditate. Showing us how to meditate your pain away, how to meditate your problems away. There are other ways to go around this without touching a bone. You don’t want to touch a nerve because they will blast you out in a minute. But if you can figure out a way to just say, “We’re here. We’re here.”

Michele: You don’t want to put up a big sign saying, “Welcome, Formerly Incarcerated!”? [Laughter]

Leslie: I think in career planning there should be a sign saying, “Hey, we will connect you to businesses that are willing to work with formerly incarcerated individuals.” That is so hard. People come out and they gotta go back to selling whatever they were selling because they can’t get a job that will pay for anything. Life in New York is so expensive as it is.

Velma: It’s very unfair. They will tell you that they will rehabilitate you all those years you in there, but then you get out and you don’t get a fresh start.

Nera: No, you don’t.

Velma: They still treat you like you’re in there. They still don’t give you anything. My uncle took so many exams, city exams, to get a job.

Victoria: Yes! And they’re like, “Nope. Nope.”
Velma: I’ve seen the applications this guy has put in, so many.

Victoria: People think, “Oh, he don’t got a job because he’s lazy.” No. It ain’t about that.

Leslie: It’s not because they’re lazy. It’s not because they’re not educated.

Velma: As soon as they find out he’s been locked up, that’s what happens.

Michele: Do you think that people coming back need special assistance on the campus?

Leslie: Yes.

Velma: Yes.

Lizzie: I think so.

Michele: So to help with application processes, for example—?

Velma: Yes. There’s the thing. You know how they have the Ban the Box campaign to no longer have that little box—\(^6\)

Victoria: People have issues about putting male or female, like, so they may have an issue about putting that too. It’s just so tricky.

Velma: But there are reentry programs already in place. When you come out there are places where they can go and get business suits. They do have programs already in line. Maybe you need to get with those activists and find out how you can put it together.

Michele: Still, how am I supposed to know if there’s a student in my classroom who needs certain basic things because they have been inside too long and they don’t want to tell me? I know I’m not going to say, “Hello. How are you? Have you ever been incarcerated?”

Velma: No! [Laughter] When you have your first class you can just—just like you asked us these questions. See how they respond to some of these questions. “Do you know anybody who’s been incarcerated? Have you ever been incarcerated?”
Leslie: Maybe all professors should give students the opportunity to respond with a comment. Usually professors comment on people’s papers, but then they should give us the opportunity to write a comment back. Do you know what I mean? Sometimes just from reading somebody’s paper, you don’t understand what’s in their head. And sometimes you can’t get what’s in your head onto the paper.

Michele: Right, if that person has that stigma or fear of judgment, they may not want to say, “I didn’t learn that because I was inside for a long time,” or “I’ve been in and out of foster care.”

Victoria: Maybe it’s the stigma. If they were in a community that was more accepting of convicts—we treat convicts horribly. We treat them like aliens.

Velma: And now the housing is trying to throw them out.

Victoria: If you’re a convict you cannot get public housing. You have limited opportunities in the job fields. Every job does a back scan.

Velma: It’s terrible.

Victoria: If you’re a convict you cannot vote. I don’t know if everybody—

Velma: Not every state.

Michele: Some states you can.

Victoria: Not every state,—even them coming out, they are really like the world is gonna repel me. We have to be more accepting of them right off the bat.7

Michele: How do we communicate that acceptance at the community college?

Nera: I wrote down a couple of things and this is what I came up with: The first thing is people need information. You don’t want to single them out. If I was in your class and you asked questions specifically, I would not answer them at all. You would never know my story. There are a lot of people like me. As long as the information is there and you are planting that seed, when people need it, they will go to it. The first day of class, when you’re talking about the syllabus and what to look forward to, you can absolutely put on the blackboard, “There is a Wellness Center for whatever needs you might have. If you want to share those things with
me, feel free, if not, that’s fine too.” But provide that information. Information. Information. Information.

The next thing is support. When I went to the Wellness Center, it was okay. But I’m going to be very honest. You want people who understand what support really means and are qualified to give it. It might be somebody who has gone through it, went through the visits—but you need people who connect. You’re not going to connect with someone you don’t feel is supporting you. I might not feel comfortable telling my professor my story, but if I go to the Wellness Center and it’s somebody like Leslie here, I might feel a little more comfortable expressing that to her, if she doesn’t push.

The last thing is: It’s a process. When my dad came out of jail, it took him years before he stopped yelling. He couldn’t even speak to you in a calm tone. He wasn’t upset, but that’s how those males in the penitentiary spoke to each other, and that’s all he knew. How can you get mad at somebody when this is what they know? This is what they were taught. He went to a job interview and we were walking to the train together, and he stopped to ask somebody, “Can you help me tie my tie?” He was a grown-ass man and I was walking to junior high school, you know? He didn’t know how to tie a tie. There are certain things that these people need. They need the support and you have to understand that it’s a process. You need to learn how to tie a tie. You need to learn how to interact with other people

    Velma: Training for interviews? That kind of thing?
    Nera: Even conversation, you know? How to read in cursive, you know what I’m saying?
    Velma: I’m thinking of a hotline. Remember the suicide hotline?
    Michele: Somewhere to go to have a conversation, to learn how to interact in a different way.
    Velma: How to speak to others.
    Lizzie: I grew up with the fear that I would get deported, like my uncle, because I wasn’t born here. Acceptance is the most important thing.

Michele: So, I hear a call for acceptance and affirmation, so that folks feel enough trust so that he or she can just say, “Excuse me. I don’t know this. I need to know this. Can you help me out?”

    Lizzie: LaGuardia is really accepting of that.
    Victoria: Yeah, LaGuardia is very accepting.
Leslie: At some colleges people are very separated. LaGuardia feels like a very close-knit community.

Lizzie: Listening to all of you, I thought back to community. A lot of our community is school. When you’re growing up, you spend eight hours a day in school. Your accent comes from school and how kids grow up. I’m a heavy advocate for art, arts education is so, so, so important. Art, for an artist, is separation of self. Art for someone who is not an artist, art for you, and you, and you, it’s finding yourself. It’s literally finding yourself. I feel like LaGuardia has art everywhere, just for that exact reason. Art can be considered therapy.

Michele: Does anybody have a final burning thought?

Victoria: Yeah. Acceptance. You have people coming home from prison, and they don’t want to feel alienated. They just want you to treat them as human, because they haven’t had that treatment in a while. They just want to be accepted. They don’t want to be different, treated like, “He’s a convict, let’s treat him nicer.” Or, “He’s a convict, let’s treat him meaner.” He just wants to be a regular person. It’s the same thing for everybody. And that’s how they can feel, “Okay, I can just be myself.” If I was a person in that situation, that’s how it would be. Like. I don’t want to be treated any differently.” That’s what we should do. Just be regular. If you under-treat or over-treat—

Velma: That’s true for all minorities.

Victoria: Yeah, I’m not going to treat you this way because you’re this or that.

Michele: Just be real, just—

Velma: Just a person.

Leslie: I went to an event this spring about incarceration. Seven zip codes in New York contain 70 percent of all the people incarcerated in New York State penitentiaries. They all come from those zip codes.

Victoria: Seven different neighborhoods, right? It’s called the “Eddie Ellis Seven Neighborhood Study.”

Leslie: Yeah, it’s crazy. Seventy percent are Black and Latino and 85 percent come from those seven neighborhoods.
Velma: Yup. You can’t just talk about incarceration and not talk about racism and not talk about—

Leslie: —there’s so much that is connected to it.

Victoria: Racism is definitely there.

Nera: A panel discussion will be excellent as long as the information is put out there. I think it will be great. But you gotta get the information out there.

Victoria: Especially if it’s like this discussion where people don’t feel alone.

Leslie: We’re here because we want a fulfilling career. If you come to school and get your degree, and then you can’t go out and get a job, then there’s a problem.

Velma: Definitely. There’s definitely a problem.

Notes

2. See New Yorker online article for an extensive description of an inmate who studied law while imprisoned, wrote his own motions, and defended himself. As a result of his efforts, he was finally released, and subsequently went on to help prisoners in similar situations (Gonnerman, Jennifer. 2016. “Home Free: How a New York State Prisoner Became a Jailhouse Lawyer, and Changed the System. New Yorker, June 20, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/06/20/derrick-hamilton-jailhouse-lawyer).


5. “Last year, 25,000 people were discharged from the New York State prison system, according to data from the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. An additional 68,000 were released from city correctional facilities, according to the New York City Mayor’s Management Report” (Shrier, Adam, Erica Jackson, Mary Wilson, and Nomin Ujiyediin. 2017. “Many Inmates Move from Prison to Shelters, Despite Efforts to Get Them Homes.” Citylimits.org, January 17, 2017. https://citylimits.org/2017/01/17/many-inmates-move-from-prison-to-shelters-despite-efforts-to-get-them-homes/).

6. The Ban the Box campaign was started by All of Us or None, a national civil rights movement of formerly-incarcerated people and our families. We started the campaign in 2004, after a series of Peace and Justice Community Summits identified job and housing discrimination as huge barriers to our successfully returning to our communities after jail or prison. The campaign challenges the stereotypes of people with conviction histories by asking employers to choose their best candidates based on job skills and qualifications, not past convictions. Since 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. has a conviction history, the impact of this discrimination is widespread and affects other aspects of life in addition to employment opportunity” (All of Us or None. n.d. “About: The Ban the Box Campaign.” All of Us or None. Accessed November 28, 2017. http://bantheboxcampaign.org/about/).

7. State approaches to voting rights for people who have committed felonies differ considerably. For example, in Maine and Vermont, people who have committed felonies maintain their right to vote, even while incarcerated; however, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people who have committed felonies lose the right to vote forever in Virginia and Florida, unless they get a governor’s pardon. In New York, rights are automatically reinstated after they complete their sentence. Source: NCSL (National Conference of State Legislatures) Elections Team. “Felon Voting Rights.” NCSL. September 29, 2016. http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx.


The whole enterprise of correctional education—the teachers, the volunteers, the classrooms, the books, the computers—helps humanize correctional facilities and plays a key role in relieving inmate stress and frustration by focusing incarcerated individuals on positive and constructive activities and relationships. Students benefit directly from these programs by improving their skills and knowledge, and staff—particularly correctional officers—benefit from working with individuals who are more cooperative and better adjusted to their circumstances. More than that, educational programs help elevate the mission and professionalism of corrections from one of warehousing individuals to one of preparing individuals for their futures.

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Exploring the Value of Philosophy at Queensboro Correctional Facility

Shannon B. Proctor, Humanities

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell ([1912] 2010, 87) characterizes philosophy in terms of its transformative power, noting that “though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, it is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom.” For Russell, that philosophy cannot provide us with certainty is not, in fact, a flaw. The “liberating doubt” that arises out of inquiries into truth, goodness, and the nature of reality is essential for human freedom and self-growth. Transformation requires that we reflect upon and (often enough) disrupt the social customs and personal habits that circumscribe our possibilities. These themes of uncertainty and freedom are at the heart of my interest in a new project at Queensboro Correctional Facility (QCF), located just across from the Van Dam Diner.

Since joining LaGuardia’s Humanities Department as a professor of philosophy, I have wanted to extend my interest in public philosophy into the criminal justice system. Thus, when a call went out for volunteers to teach in Fall 2017 at QCF, I jumped at the chance and created “Practical Philosophy: What is Freedom?” I wanted to see if the men who took my course would find value in philosophical inquiry; together we would explore whether and how philosophy could be practically valuable for men about to be released from prison.¹ Along the way, I discovered that many of my own assumptions about what these men were looking for from a philosophy course needed to be disrupted. In order to do this, I had to transform not only my lesson plans, but also my sense of what it meant to do public philosophy. As I discuss below, my desire to make philosophy more accessible and useful had led me to underestimate how valuable these men would find deep conversations about existentialism, determinism, spirituality, freedom, and justice.

After deciding on the themes of freedom and practical (or applied) philosophy, I designed a four-week course organized around two central learning objectives. The first objective was to refine my students’ understanding of and facility with the philosophical concepts of freedom and justice. The second was to deepen their ability to apply these concepts to a variety of real world problems, especially those associated with their reentry into society. More broadly, I wanted to create a space within which these men could think about how the conditions for freedom, transformation, and social justice are shaped by our judicial system.

Queensboro is a minimum security institution designated for men who are within three months of being released; as such, it provides a unique environment
for thinking about freedom and transformation. With their sentences nearly completed, the men begin to prepare for the economic, social, educational, and emotional challenges that accompany reentry. Among the transitional services provided are educational classes, counselling, and workshops with diverse community members. The frequency of these interactions means that inmates at QCF are routinely—even if not necessarily systematically or explicitly—thinking about the concrete and material conditions of freedom. Much more so than the average person, these men must reflect upon “what they’ve done” and consider how they might do things differently when they are free. These circumstances provide a fertile ground for discussions about freedom, justice, and change, as well as consideration of the relations between their actions and consequences or the value of rational thinking in the face of anger and aggression.

Our class met on Mondays, between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m., and our group averaged about seven individuals, usually not more than nine. I am a White woman; the men in my class were of diverse ages, races, and levels of education and exposure to philosophy. We all shared a deep interest in the concept of freedom, as well as a sense of humor about how we were learning to work together. Our first class began with a reading from Russell’s “The Value of Philosophy,” which provided us the opportunity to reflect on the nature of philosophical inquiry, and how “doing philosophy” differs from scientific analysis. That evening we asked: What does it mean for something to be of value? Interestingly, students both confirmed and disrupted Russell’s description of philosophy. Although they agreed that there was immense value in asking questions that we don’t quite expect to find an answer to, my class challenged the notion that philosophy is nonproductive. For many of the inmates, philosophical questioning was valuable for its production of nonmaterial goods: a better sense of ourselves, the world, and how we ought to live together. This was interesting to me because I am consistently asked by students and those outside the academy why I would spend my life studying philosophy, a field that produces no goods, provides little to no certainty, and is incapable of answering the questions it led me to ask.

That first night’s discussion transformed my expectations; these men showed me that I was thinking too narrowly about why they would be interested in philosophy and what it means for something to be of practical value. While our discussions always brought us back to their experiences with incarceration and anxieties about life outside of prison, their core focus was on making sense of the ideas we were discussing. In other words, these students were far more interested in learning about philosophical concepts and theories than in figuring out how to apply these ideas to the practical issues associated with reentry. I had expected them to challenge Russell on the concrete ways philosophy could be useful, i.e., that they would argue that not only could philosophy help us to grow and change, it could also be used to navigate the judicial system postrelease. But while these were important
“products” for the students, their main focus was about how philosophical engagement could be a worthy end in itself. Fortunately, our discussion dislodged some of my preconceptions and made me more present to the conversations as they unfolded (rather than forcing my own interest in public philosophy onto the class).

It was in our second class that our conversation truly took off. I started class with a brief writing prompt: What is freedom? Are you free? I began with a writing activity so that they had space to think about these ideas on their own before anyone began sharing. Oftentimes, if I start class with a discussion, the most vocal students or those with more prior knowledge of the topic will dominate the conversation and crowd out other voices. Similar to discussions about freedom in my LaGuardia classes, preliminary definitions were thin: One student proclaimed, for example, that freedom is being able to do whatever you want whenever you want. For two other students, the problem with such a definition was discovered almost immediately. They noted that not only would unlimited freedom mean that nobody in our class was free, it would actually mean that no one in the world was free! Then, another student began exploring the differences between mental and physical freedom, which led us all to question whether someone serving a life sentence could be meaningfully free and if emotions inhibited our ability to act freely.

The concept of justice framed our third session, wherein students wrote about what a just society might look like. Easily bridging the theory/practice divide, students connected theories about punishment and the social contract to contemporary issues associated with Black Lives Matter, the criminal justice system, and separatism. For example, one of my students who had as yet been more reserved in class questioned whether Black-owned businesses should work exclusively with members of the Black community. Another student posed challenging questions about the possibility of justice in our society (asking, “Can we actually be free in America?”) while also arguing that freedom required us to accept the consequences for our actions (even in an unjust society).

Before my first class, I worried that no one would show up or—perhaps worse!—that if they did show up, no one would speak. I needn’t have worried: Every student has participated in every class, and again confounding my preconceptions, they are perfectly comfortable asking when they don’t know a concept or don’t understand what I’m trying to explain. I’ve also been astonished by the openness of many students to changing their views on certain topics (e.g., their views on freedom and the need for punishment). They’ve requested additional readings on a variety of philosophical topics; have shared their writing with me; and have been extremely generous in helping me to understand the day-to-day life at QCF, as well as how life here differs from doing time at other correctional facilities.

I’ll continue to teach at Queensboro, and as I do, I want to keep in mind Russell’s view that philosophical reflection broadens our understanding of the world; even more importantly, philosophy opens up spaces for self-reflection and
growth. With my students inside Queensboro, I’ve experienced that to grow as a teacher, and, of course, as an individual, I must be willing to question my own assumptions about life in a correctional facility, about the philosophical concepts and questions that my students will find useful, and, more generally, about public philosophy. In taking up this challenge, I hope that I will become better able to help my students develop their ability to self-reflect, their understanding of philosophy, and—most importantly—their willingness to struggle to be free.

For those interested in teaching at Queensboro, please contact program coordinator, John Chaney (Criminal Justice, jchaney@lagcc.cuny.edu).

Notes
1. A note on language: throughout the piece I employ different words to characterize the QCF participants in my class including men, inmates, participants, and students. The point here is to avoid glossing over the fact that these men are incarcerated, as well as to refrain from presenting a totalizing view of their identities. My hope is that as I continue on in this program, a more organic solution will present itself.

References
Twenty-three Years at Rikers Island: A Conversation

John Chiarkas, CUNY Catch

The purpose of CUNY Catch was to provide outreach and career counseling to young men between the ages of sixteen and nineteen incarcerated on Riker’s Island. The Department of Corrections and the New York State Department of Education supported the program, which offered reentry services such as pre-GED, GED, and college preparation courses, vocational training, and career counseling, and workplace preparation. CUNY Catch was recognized as a model for transitional services, cited in nationwide studies by the National Youth Employment Coalition and the Youth Development and Research Fund as one of the top twelve youth employment and development programs serving juvenile offenders. In 2013, after twenty years of service, the program lost its funding.

Long before arriving at Rikers Island in 1993, I was a teacher of reading, traveling the country as a kind of reading specialist. I grew up in a housing project in Chinatown and until finishing college, I had never been out of the city, had never once gone outside New York, had never been on a plane in my life! When writing research papers as an undergraduate at Pace University, I’d look at the bibliographies, and see those place-names, like Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and think, “What’s that like, North Carolina, Chapel Hill? What a lovely name!” I saw a publishing house in Winooski, Vermont, and I thought, “I would love to go there, but how do you get there?”

It was raining late one afternoon in Manhattan, so I went to a bar in midtown. This was in the late ‘60s; I had just graduated from Pace University and I was job hunting. I ordered a martini, my father’s drink, and began browsing the want ads in the New York Times and the Village Voice, and—surprise—I see an ad for a position to “travel and teach reading.” I immediately made the call from the phone booth in the bar, and was invited to an interview in a hotel a few blocks away with Kenneth Baldridge of The Baldridge Reading Institute. He hired me, and the next day I went to work in Greenwich, Connecticut. After twelve weeks of training in speedreading, study skills, and some reading theory, I was sent to my very first job at a college for women in Montgomery, Alabama. It was 1967, and the women still wore white gloves to class. My second job was at Danbury State Prison in Connecticut.

Each position lasted for six weeks, and for five years, I traveled by plane and company car to different states throughout the country. I even taught at St. Michael’s College for Men in Winooski, Vermont. Eventually I was a pretty good reading teacher—if there was a reading problem in a school, Kenneth Baldridge would send me in to fix the problem. The key was to adapt, to enjoy, to read a
little bit about the school, the city and state, and to be curious and upbeat about
the assignment, even if it was Danbury State Prison. I thought I was going to teach
reading forever. I loved the traveling, and I became knowledgeable in developmental
reading and cognitive learning, in urban education, and the theory and philosophy
of reading.

In the early ‘70s, while teaching at Antioch College in Vermont, I decided
to enter their master’s program in reading. I finished in 1975, said good-bye to
Vermont, and moved to Manhattan’s Upper West Side. For eight years, I taught
reading at New York University’s Reading Institute, and for another nine years,
I served as the director of Washington Square Reading. Meanwhile, my older
brother was studying law at Temple University, living in New Jersey, and teaching at
Trenton State College [The College of New Jersey]. Part of Nick’s teaching contract
at Trenton State included teaching at night at Trenton State Prison’s death house.
I visited his classes both at the college and at the prison, and was so impressed. Nick
taught in a kind of counseling mode, a whole-person approach, and he asked ques-
tions of everyone. He liked his students and they loved him. Eventually, I decided
to return to academic life, and was accepted at Columbia, where I studied criminal
justice and sociology. I took classes in anthropological principles with Margaret
Mead, and middle-range theory with Robert Merton, who became my advisor. In
addition to the eleven of us who were formally enrolled, Mead’s class always had
about two hundred students auditing, who sat in just to listen to her.

Before choosing to work with people who are sometimes called “the casual-
ties of the system,” I worked at the White House with the correspondence corps;
I worked with executives at Mobil Oil, and for a year I worked with physicians
at Mount Sinai Hospital. They’d bring their text material and we would read it
together. The question is: Why leave this work for Rikers? Why would I move from
going professionals through that timid, turgid, dry information that they had to
read every day, to working with Rikers’ inmates who could barely understand a
sentence, could barely read? Why would I leave people who read Jimmy Carter’s
mail to be with the “casualties of our system”? Simply because that’s where my
interest fell. I was never afraid at Rikers—careful, cautious, and protective of staff,
yes—but never afraid.

Over the course of twenty-three years, I worked with more than 8,000 kids
aged sixteen to nineteen, an age group that is much harder to work with than
adults. A lot of people are afraid of young men—afraid of their recklessness. Ask a
kid how long he’s been in a gang, and his answer is, “All my life; my father was in
a gang, too.” Gang culture on Rikers is overwhelming. Even when a unit is a mix
of members from different gangs—and to my knowledge this is true of all Rikers’
units—a temporary gang gets established. Here’s what happens: The new inmate
gets sent into a unit that has two officers and thirty-eight adolescents from different
gangs, and they are going to make the new kid’s life miserable. They’ll make him
their “boot.” He can’t keep his Snickers; they’ll take his Snickers from him. On commisary day, he can’t hold onto anything—his tuna fish, Cheetos, soap, whatever. One after another, inmates reach in and take everything. If he’s standing on line to make a phone call, they’ll pull him out of line, or get in front of him, or make him use his card to make a call for another inmate. Then, the kid can’t call his lawyer, or get a call back from his lawyer, and he can’t call home. He is enraged, but he’s more scared than enraged. Most inmates are slashed waiting on line—any line, but phone lines in particular—or traveling along corridors in single file. Because nothing is computerized at Rikers, there’s no documented history of slashings, or pretty much anything else.

Idleness, slashings, and beatings happen every day on Rikers. The degree of authority the adolescents in the unit have over the new kids, or the power they wield in general, depends on the interest, standards, and integrity of the two unit officers. Adolescents are warehoused in units, and most are returned to the streets in eight weeks, frustrated and with the same skills they had when they were arrested. Correction officers are hired without proper background checks, no documented histories, and some have got clear gang affiliations, family members on the inside, gang tattoos, and these identify their gang affiliations and connections to gang members at the jail.

As a teacher and as the director of CUNY Catch, I was able to understand a population that most people think they can’t get to, especially if you feel blocked by age, race, or gender differences. In my experience, if you are genuine, of course you can relate. I loved working with those young men, and they knew it. I remember myself at that age, not knowing who I was, and looking for role models, people to emulate. Over the years, as I got older, I became a kind of father figure, and I hope to have made a difference in their lives; that’s what we all want. Jen Wynn, for example; that’s why she does what she does. I know that many of the young men I worked with were or could be equal to anyone, including the executives I had worked with at Con Edison and Mobil. When they left Rikers, many of those men came to LaGuardia, Bronx Community College, Medgar Evers, and John Jay.

These kids want to progress, and I believe there’s hope for them. If they show up at LaGuardia, it’s because they want to grow, to do something positive with their lives; they want to contribute, too. But to get through the admission process, they’ll need assistance. If they fail or look bad, they’re going to be laughed at. Their parents will laugh at them; their friends will be laughing. Instead, they need professors who look them right in the eye and say, “Hey, you’re a man, a community member, and you gotta get that degree.”

John Chiarkas and Michele Piso Manoukian spoke on November 7, 2017, in West Palm Beach, Florida. Their conversation has been condensed and edited.
Visits Upstate

Anonymous

I have been a faculty member at LaGuardia for many decades and I have a younger brother in prison, incarcerated many times when he was a teenager, and now doing the longest stretch, going into his twenty-first year. Very few of my colleagues and friends know about my brother’s incarceration, both because I am a rather private person and also because my brother prefers that we not talk about his involvement with the criminal justice system. As a family, we no longer engage in recrimination or blame.

My decision to keep my identity a secret in this essay is not to tempt speculation: I don’t want you to try to guess who I am. I want you to understand that my experience is not unique. I could be any one of your colleagues; in many ways, I am like any one of your students. Like my brother, they themselves may have been arrested; or perhaps their parent or sister is locked up. Whether or not faculty know about or acknowledge this truth, the reality is that, like myself, many of our students come to class carrying this extra burden. My purpose here is not to unburden myself but rather to offer in some detail the true meaning “going upstate” has for my LaGuardia peers and me. In the end, I hope those who’ve never made the trip will have a picture of a system that is opaque and full of contradiction and frustration to those who wish to maintain ties to a prisoner.

Those familiar with the criminal justice system understand that when people like me say we’re going “upstate,” we are not talking about apple picking in Poughkeepsie; we mean that we are visiting one of the several prison systems located in New York State’s small towns and villages. For a long time, my brother was incarcerated five hours away, in the medium security Washington Correctional Facility; recently, he was transferred to the Wyoming Correctional Facility, also medium security, but further upstate and adjacent to Attica, a maximum security prison. My brother has never been incarcerated close to New York City. If that were the case, our visits would be more frequent. For the last few years, I’ve seen my brother every month, bringing “provisions” (institutional language for “food”), reading material, clothing, and family warmth.

* * *

Prison food, according to my brother, is either barely edible in taste and texture, or repulsive to look at. Hardly anything is cooked in the facility; instead, large bags of “chow” are brought in from outside, sometimes from other facilities, reheated, and served on site. Family food tastes better, and, as he can prepare it himself, he
stays out of the mess hall where conflicts can arise. After each visit, my brother confirms the list of items; in the past, he'd seen guards eating inmates’ provisions.

Shopping for my brother’s provisions is something of a personal, bond-strengthening ritual. I go alone to one of the four supermarkets in my neighborhood, or to our local Trader Joe’s. Over time, I have developed a nose for the deal—$5.00 for three bricks of coffee, $3.00 for two cans of sardines, and so on. I usually buy vegetables, fruits, and meats one or two days before my trip. For two weeks every month, I go around to the supermarkets to buy the right size and amount of food, which I bag and weigh two days before the drive. In the car are fifteen pounds of canned goods, ten pounds of meats, and ten pounds of fruits and vegetables. Adding to my reasons for doing the shopping myself is to insure that I’ve not exceeded the thirty-five pound limit and to keep an eye on my brother’s balanced diet. He’s rather vain about his six-pack. I’ve learned to bring tuna, sardines, salmon, calamari, octopus, beans, condensed milk, Kalamata olives, and soups. I also bring chips, crackers, coffee, cooked meats, candy, vegetables, and fruits.

There are no clear and consistent guidelines provided by the state as to which provisions are allowed. In some facilities, potatoes and raw carrots are not permitted; in other places, cilantro and cranberries are forbidden as well. For example, in some facilities plantain chips were rejected if the guard mistook these for dried fruit; on the other hand, potatoes, carrots, cilantro, and cranberries whizzed through the security check. Items permitted one month are denied the next, and then accepted a month later. One or two pounds extra are generally fine, but going over the limit is not good because the staff there gets to decide what to send back. In addition to food, I bring socks, white underwear, gloves, toiletries and other permissible necessities, like back issues of *The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Harper’s,* and *Esquire,* and books, detective stories, thrillers, and nonfiction. Before incarceration, my brother was not much a reader, but now he reads to learn and to escape the grim realities of his cell. The night before, in preparation for a dawn departure, everything gets loaded into the car; I go to bed early, and, to avoid stopping along the way, I don’t overeat or drink too much water, and I give up the morning coffee.

The drive upstate and back usually takes me about ten hours, but If you don’t have a car, like so many of our students, the trip is much harder. To see your parents, children, friends, or beloved in prison, you take the bus sometimes as early as ten o’clock the night before to arrive about nine hours later, at around seven o’clock or earlier the next morning. Operated by a private company, the buses are crowded with others who are going upstate, too. To get a seat, this is what you learn to do: You call a number, leave your information, wait for a confirmation call and location instructions. If the bus company has a website, you fill out a reservation form and wait for a reply. Depending on the bus line and the distance, the fare can vary from between $30.00 per person to $60.00, and up to $200.00. Children do not ride for free; ten hours on a lap is too long for comfort. At the
Wyoming Correctional Facility, where my brother is now incarcerated, the Visitor’s Room does not open till eight o’clock in the morning, so bus riders wait outside winter or summer, rain or snow. Some visitors line up foldable beach chairs to wait in relative comfort.

Once inside we check into the waiting room, usually full of activity, usually beginning with an hour-long grooming. Women of all ages curl hair, apply makeup, and change clothes and shoes, a flurry of transformation that for a moment negates the reality of incarceration. I sit there and contemplate in wonder and in a haze of lotion and perfume. After the long drive, our visits last less than a few hours because we must wait while visitors are processed; we wait while guards do a head count, which usually takes about forty-five minutes; we wait if staff is short, we wait if female visitors wearing “inappropriate” clothes are asked to change. On the other hand, time sometimes speeds up. In one facility, for reasons unknown to me, the clock was set fifteen minutes ahead. As a result, our visits, cut short by so much waiting, ended sooner.

Once we have been processed, once we’ve gone through the metal detector, some of us pulled aside for a drug test, we are assigned a table where we wait for the unit guard to notify the inmate of a visitor. For any number of reasons, notification can be delayed: a guard’s bad mood, short staff, or additional punishment for an infraction. As we wait, some of us go to the vending machines for food to be shared with our people. We buy frozen chicken wings or nuggets, burgers, maybe meatballs. There’s a microwave for the guests, its use prohibited to the inmates. When my brother arrives, we eat and he tells me what he’s read, what’s happened in the unit, what he remembers of our childhood. He and our mother speak regularly, conversations that keep him up-to-date on family life. My brother has a vivid recollection of events; a good storyteller, he exaggerates for effect and is drawn to human folly and gentle teasing. It is clear to me that my brother appreciates and enjoys our visits. There’s a light in his eyes, and he seems to relax a bit when we are together.

My brother tells me that there is an undercurrent of coercion and violence to all these preparations. He overhears inmates on the phone threatening girlfriends, demanding visits and provisions. Once inside, the women take Polaroid photos that inmates later boast about in their cubicles. And then there are the women referred to in prison lingo as the “fatties” —women who, while visiting a relative or friend, develop crushes on a particular prisoners. Once the relationship takes hold, she visits regularly, bringing provisions and sharing food from the vending machines. My brother tells me that inmates talk about knowing a “fatty” who is looking for a relationship, a desire that inmates exploit. To strengthen the claim on the woman’s affection, inmates stage a kind of theater, arranging beforehand to argue in front of her, one man demanding that the other stop looking at his woman, eventually conceding that the fault was hers, that her beauty was to blame.
for the rival’s attention. She proceeds to calm her suitor with promises of clothes, or shoes, or a new sweater. Although to my eyes the performance is demeaning and born out of despair and loneliness of all the players, I know that not all inmates get visitors or provisions. In their play-acting, I also see glimmers of happiness.

Finally, there is the unexpected encounter. I once ran into one of my students in the waiting room; she had come to see her brother but she also had an incomplete in one of my courses. She had the book with her and had attempted to read, without success, on the bus. We sat and talked about the work she needed to do: how to begin her research, what parts of the text to focus on, and how to organize her essay. Inside the visitor area her table was close to mine and when I ended my visit she asked to borrow my playing cards, which she returned along with her completed assignment a few weeks later. She complained repeatedly about having to take the bus so late at night and then having to wait for the bus to come and pick her up, more than an hour after the end of the visit. Her provisions fit into a small paper bag. She did not see herself making this trip regularly. Another time, a different student was visiting her boyfriend. I did not see her but my brother told me that the student’s boyfriend had mentioned that I was her professor. Other inmates started teasing him about what I was “teaching” her and he never mentioned it again. I soon realized that distance makes sense if you want to avoid gossip and innuendo.

Love and affection are acts of volition that require sacrifice, patience, and perseverance. Although my life of teaching has not led to wealth, I am able, unlike many of our students, to afford the provisions, gas, and tolls that amount to about $250.00 to $300.00 every month. Now that he has been moved farther away, my visits may not continue as regularly. The last time I visited, I drove for almost fourteen hours. For all of us who travel upstate, these visits take a toll. I stress over the shopping and the planning, and I return home physically and emotionally spent. Getting my bounce back takes a couple of days. Are the visits worth the effort? Yes, absolutely. Our visits of shared food and stories lift my brother’s spirits and sustain his hopes for a new life. We’ve always been close, even when we did not get along. In our few hours together each month, there is love and affection as we plan for the day of his release. My brother looks toward a new beginning, the chance to live a life of consequence. He is up for parole next year. In his last letter, he asked that I share these words with you:

Every day we have lights out at ten-thirty and then there is count. By eleven o’clock the day has come to an end at Wyoming Correctional Facility, but tomorrow is the day my brother and mother come to see me and I can’t help but to stay awake and worry about the distance they have to travel to see me, especially now that I have been moved further west, the treacherous highway, the weather. I think about this again at the end of the visit,
filled with anguish and fear that they would have an accident. I am here, in prison, unable to do anything, feeling like I am in a cemetery surrounded by men in suspended animation, half dead, half alive. As I lay awake, I also think about the happiness I feel when I see them, the food and stories we will share. I appreciate the sacrifices they make, the food they bring me, the books and magazines I get to read. My every move is controlled here and I know that when they come to see me, they go through humiliating scrutiny similar to mine. Their freedom is curbed here and they willingly accept that just to see me.
Envision a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment—demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance.

Angela Davis

*Are Prisons Obsolete?*
Faculty and staff offer reflections on our country’s racialized history of mass incarceration and a system of criminal justice that emphasizes punishment over rehabilitation. In five-minute recorded conversations, twelve colleagues responded to two questions: “What do you know about mass incarceration?” and “How can the College support the integration of individuals with criminal justice histories into campus life?” Their observations constitute a deeply felt commitment to the healthy, goal-oriented development of students who, aspiring to complete degrees, continue to struggle with stigmas related to housing, employment, enrollment, and identity.
Toni Foy, LaGuardia Performing Arts Center

Mass incarceration is a continuation of our history from the history of slavery until now. It’s just one long process to keep Black folks, particularly Black males, enslaved and in an underclass. No matter how hard we try to disrupt that continuance, it seems to resurface. We take a community that’s already been pushed back, or never moved forward in the way that other communities have moved forward, and we use the system of incarceration to continue a process of inequality and underclass. It’s horrible. I’ve had mentors like Eddie Ellis who kind of schooled me on this, and we have the wonderful writings of Michelle Alexander. I’m reading something about the history of whiteness, called Deep Denial; the author is David Billings. It’s fantastic. Mass incarceration is a symptom of systemic racism and until that is pulled apart and more openly talked about, we will continue to have mass incarceration or something by another name.

One of the great things we know about incarceration is that education is a link, a way out, at least a beginning of a way out. Once you get out, how do you deal with that? I think that would be a great role: How do we as an institution not only educate but advocate, and, as someone said, “agitator,” so that those who have been incarcerated can enter back into the society as productive, without continued penalty? That’s one of the effects of mass incarceration that is so damaging, not only to the people who are coming out, but to the society. You want folks to come back as tax-paying, bringing their value into society. If we could help that to move forward—help folks integrate more seamlessly into society without continually being punished, that would be great.

Terry Parker, LaGuardia Library

For a long time, I wasn’t aware of this effort to actually put so many people in jail. America has more people in jail than any country in the world. I didn’t know how bad it was until the last ten years or so when we started reading about the Rockefeller laws and the Clinton administration’s tenet that the way to handle law and order was to put people in jail. Fortunately, it’s out there now, and people are fighting against it. Still, law enforcement is very crucial in politicians’ programs. Whenever they talk about what they are going to do in their communities, in their states, and in their districts—law and order is a prominent thing used as a fear tactic.

Young men of color are demonized, and that creates a very easy population for you to round up and put in jail. Black Lives Matter isn’t just about police killings, it’s also about mass incarceration; it’s about the criminalization of young men of color because that’s who the police target. At a minimum, they round them up and put them in jail, and at the worst, they shoot them. You can’t separate any of those things. There’s a lot more behind the two words “mass incarceration” than just people going to jail. Everyone doesn’t go to jail to the same degree; everyone
doesn’t go to jail for the same reasons. That’s the history of a lot of youth of color, Latinos in the urban areas, where they’re not treated equally.

The College’s job is to educate and inform; that’s just about all colleges will be able to do, to provide a space where these things can be discussed and talked about and solutions pondered. That alone is a lot because that’s where the research comes from and that’s where students may have an opportunity to voice and empower themselves, to get out and make changes, and take it to the next level.

Tracey Jackson, Black Male Empowerment Cooperative Program (BMEC)/Student Affairs

In our African American communities, when the individual serves their time, they’re still condemned. The African American male and Latino male—they have issues when getting started again. An individual who did time and comes home shouldn’t be penalized again, twice, three times, and four times, when it comes to housing, when it comes to employment, when it comes to school. They have issues in school. I have a student who was in a particular program, and got put out of it because she has a case pending, and she wasn’t even charged yet. That’s heartbreaking. So she’s currently sitting out right now. She had a 3.6 GPA. You tell them to get into a program, and they get into a program, they get on the right path, and then the program is taken away from them.

LaGuardia should have a plan for when these students come out. We should have a better partnership with the New York State Department of Corrections and LaGuardia should be the pipeline. We challenge the students, daring them to do more. We, as faculty and staff, we need to do more. We should have a meet and greet, a dinner with Corrections and LaGuardia staff because there’s a lot of sensitive issues that we …. I don’t want to talk about it. But just because we don’t discuss it, doesn’t mean it’s going away.

In my office, the students are very vocal. They’re not very happy about certain things that are going on around campus. We’re in the process of creating a Black Student Club. To make the faculty and staff aware of what’s going on in our communities, because that’s where we can be us without being judged. We can speak our truth without being judged.

I’m very vocal. I’m very passionate about this because on my own personal ground—I was with someone who was in prison for quite a few years. He’s successful now but that’s because he’s smart. He utilized all the resources that came his way. We all make mistakes. Giving that person that second chance is good. We’re not perfect.
Hugo Fernandez, Humanities Department

Because of the New York State Rockefeller drug laws, we’ve got a lot of people in prisons with nonviolent offenses whose whole lives have been destroyed. It’s just about punishment and not about what it should be about: helping people change the way they live their lives. Then add in the for-profit piece; it’s a system of free labor. Upstate New York sees prison as a revenue stream. We know who goes to jail and who gets arrested—it’s people of color. They’re more likely to get arrested; they’re more likely to be jailed; they’re more likely to be charged; more likely to be convicted. They’re more likely to do time and long-term time. The fact that 10 percent of our population is locked up doesn’t say much about us as a people.

Part of the role we play in educating the people who end up working in the system—as police officers or in the law, or working in prison systems—is to help them develop some understanding and compassion. The other thing we could do is offer the opportunity to educate folks in the system who want to find a way out. Some of these people who spend all their time incarcerated, and have nothing else to do but read—unless they want to lift weights or engage in some other kinds of behaviors—they perform like graduate students. Another thing we could do is offer an opportunity for people to accrue college credit while they’re inside, so that when they get out, they have options.

Almost every man in my family has either been arrested or done time. My father was a political prisoner in Cuba; all my sisters’ husbands—at one time or another—were in there. I was once picked up for sneaking into a building, and they charged me with burglary as a way to try to dissuade others from doing the same thing. I had a taste of what it’s like to be locked up for twenty-four hours and then had the fear about what could happen in the United States justice system. It’s a fear. For any man of color, it’s a great fear that you live with. You know, you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people and suddenly you’re in trouble. Your chances of being charged and convicted with maximum penalties, kept inside without real parole options, is high.

Bill Rosenthal, Mathematics, Engineering, and Computer Science Department

I think that the people who are in that situation are disproportionately people of color and people living in poverty. I think another issue, which I think is maybe trickier, is to understand the effects of mass incarceration on our student body. We don’t know, but it’s got to affect a large percentage, either personally, or friends and family. I have no idea what to do.

The issue is too complex for me to figure out anything on my own, and whatever I might contribute to understanding and addressing how mass incarceration
affects our students will have to come in conversation with others in the College community.

Steve Ovadia, LaGuardia Library

I recently went to this famous penitentiary-turned museum in Philadelphia; which, when it was built, was described as the world’s first real penitentiary because it was originally designed by religious people to “inspire true penitence and regret.” Everybody was in a solitary cell and every cell had an opening in its ceiling through which the penitent could see the sky, and then supposedly connect to God and nature. At the same time, you didn’t see anyone else. You were completely isolated. I don’t think that’s a good model. But I do like the idea of making it a deliberate experience, and hopefully a transformative one that improves the person, so that the person is in a different position when they are out: to work, to be educated, to make different choices. I don’t think that’s what’s happening now. That would be in a perfect world. I would love it if people left prison with some kind of purpose and some ability, if they weren’t stigmatized and prevented from holding jobs, if they were ready to be citizens again, and prepared to be citizens in some way. That’s my thought. I think prison was intended to be punitive. I feel like it’s just a place to stick people, and to punish them, but not to address the underlying issues. I don’t know what we do at LaGuardia right now. But we definitely need to accept and support those students. I don’t know if there are support systems, some sort of community where they can meet and talk to each other. I have no idea how much that’s a part of the process. Reentry is difficult and there are a lot of things that only people who have been through that experience can understand. We can understand it intellectually, but I think there’s the whole PTSD aspect of it, too. So, give them a lot of support, more support than they get from the penal system.

Nichole Shippen, Social Science Department

I teach at Rikers Island and have found that the students are very similar to our students. They’re intellectually curious. The story of Kalief Browder7 really struck me: his being locked up in Rikers for three years and, not wanting to say he was guilty, he stayed in there—and then getting out and being a student at Bronx Community College. He ended up committing suicide, and then his mother died of a heart attack or a stroke. His story is indicative; he’s like the Socratic figure whose lived experience is there to tell us about what happens inside these places. Ruth Gilmore’s book, Golden Gulag, really struck me: Any amount of time spent in prison, cuts short your life. You die prematurely. If we look at the documentary 13th or at Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow; we know incarcerations mostly impact young Black and Brown males. The way the legal system is set up, they don’t stand a chance; they’re trapped in the system without
a lot of activities. It’s only when outside people come in that they can have some sort of intellectual engagement. That’s what struck me the first time I ever visited a prison in New Jersey. Our criminal justice system is mostly about punishment; it’s not about rehabilitation. It’s a particular and limited understanding of justice that doesn’t allow for imagining what else justice could be. Once someone is labeled a criminal, we just lock them up, throw away the key, do whatever you want with them, use them, exploit their labor. We don’t see them as human beings anymore. I stress the connections between why all these people are locked up and the fact that there aren’t actual jobs for them. We lock people up, and then make some jobs, like prison guards. Gilmore’s book is really awesome; she talks about communities in California. Government authorities charged with building new prisons came and said, “We want to build a prison in your community.” And the community said, “No.” They fought it because they were, like, “Why? To lock up our own sons? And then get a few jobs out of it which are not even good jobs?”

I think LaGuardia should set it up so that these people can get college credit. Right now, there is a volunteer program with Queensboro Correctional Facility. But they’re not earning college credit. They might be experiencing a college classroom, sort of. But let’s give them something concrete that they can hold on to. I don’t know if they are eligible for college credit or not, but that would be one thing we could do.

Stefanie Sertich, Humanities Department

I think the most difficult part that I’ve seen at LaGuardia has been the reentry process. A previously incarcerated student comes out of the system and has to support basic needs like a job and housing, two things that are really difficult to find, especially housing because of the stigma of renting to someone with a record. That’s the most difficult thing. And then someone becomes homeless and may turn back to the crime that got them in jail in the first place. So the cycle just keeps on recurring.

We have to fight for more Section 8 housing from de Blasio. We have to get more housing opportunities for people who are in low-income brackets and who are reentering. We have to be advocates for them. What happens when the individual goes on an interview with potential roommates, they just get cut off, cut off, cut off. Everywhere, because people don’t want to live with someone with that kind of record. Maybe we can hold up a magnifying glass to New York City and say that this is a problem. Come on, Mayor de Blasio. Let’s make it really on his agenda. As an institution, I think we should get behind better public housing.
To be better informed about LaGuardia students who have been incarcerated, I recently attended an NYU training about mass incarceration and reentry. What got me most were the statistics: One out of three people who went to prison ended up going back. The speaker also said the majority of people locked up on Rikers haven’t been convicted of anything yet. This was very alarming—maybe 85 percent had no convictions at all. They were just there because they can’t afford bail. Another concerning fact is the majority of the individuals who are incarcerated have mental health issues.

Very often, students who come back aren’t able to complete their education because of things that tie into experiences and trauma they had inside. These individuals need services they don’t necessarily get upon release. A lot of things that impact their success here at LaGuardia, and even in the program I work for, are beyond our control, like wellness issues, and the neighborhoods and influences that led to being incarcerated in the first place. Sometimes, when they return home, they also return to these behaviors.

Recently, one of our advisors attended a Queensboro Correctional Facility resource fair to connect formerly incarcerated individuals to services. A couple of Criminal Justice professors were there to provide information on how to connect to resources at LaGuardia upon release. A lot of LaGuardia professors teach at Rikers and at other facilities. Surprisingly, they said that these students are among the most engaged individuals they’ve ever had in their classes.

With regard to the College’s role, I think many supports could contribute to successful reentry—if we could just be aware, cross-trained, and understand signs of mental health issues. There’s trauma, there’s a fight-or-flight situation that these individuals are going through. Just knowing social cues, knowing how to talk with them, and, when appropriate, how to connect them to other services on or off campus, having a dedicated individual who knows the story: All of this creates support. Just like any student at the College, having somebody to go to whenever they have a question—that’s a good thing. A person who has been through the experience is always a helpful resource both academically and personally.

Let me talk about what I think LaGuardia can do more of. First of all, we need to seek specific funding to address the needs of those who are being released and/or we need to move into the prisons and the jails. We have to do more at Rikers; we have to do more at surrounding areas to get people prepared so that when they come out, recidivism drops significantly. We need to interrupt their prison lives, to give them something tangible to hold on to, something that helps them move
forward in life. That’s what I think LaGuardia needs to work on. We’re making some inroads in terms of students who are being released, but we also need to do more for people who are in the jails and in the prisons. I’m talking about Rikers; there are thousands of people in there. And even if we have to coordinate with John Jay or other schools, then that’s what we need to do.

Mass incarceration saddens me. It’s happening all over the country; it’s happening here in New York, and in our surrounding areas. What do we do to reach out to people to lessen mass incarceration? That’s going to take a special emphasis and a special group of folks from LaGuardia. There are people here who work with people who are incarcerated or who might become incarcerated, and we need to work with families of those who are or who have been inside. We need to get together to figure out what we can do to lessen the impact upon all these individuals, including those who have been released for a long time but who have no guidance and don’t know where to turn. LaGuardia ought to be a sanctuary, in essence, for that population.

Darren Ferguson, Advocacy Bridge to College/Student Affairs

As a formerly incarcerated person, my thoughts are that we are at a tipping point in the country and we have to address mass incarceration from multiple angles. The most pressing is to deal with the present system which is unbalanced, and unfair, in terms of the way we incarcerate people, who we incarcerate, and how long we incarcerate. We have more people incarcerated in this country than in any other country in the world. We also have to do something about that. But also we have to do something about the pipeline that leads people into mass incarceration. A lot of people think the pipeline is inner cities; we think the pipeline is crime-infested neighborhoods; we think the pipeline is people who are just criminally-minded. But the number-one pathway to mass incarceration is poverty; poverty amongst people of color who have far less opportunities to get out of this vicious cycle than other races and ethnicities. We have to address this.

We have to address our attitudes. Until we have real, deep, hard, angry, self-reflective conversations about race, about White privilege, and Black apathy, and Brown apathy in a very real way with ourselves, as individuals, and then in community, we will find changes in pockets. We need to make changes in mass.

In my role as the Advocacy Bridge to College program coordinator, my view is that we should actively recruit and retain formerly incarcerated students. I think all of our staff should be trained in effectively dealing with formerly incarcerated people. I think we should have very strong conversations, especially in the college setting, about language and the use of language—about the difference between calling someone a “returned citizen” and “ex-convict.” Even now, twenty years removed from my prison experience, if someone calls me an “ex-convict,” I shut
down. But saying “returned citizen” or “formerly incarcerated person” opens up a lot of communication. There’s still a lot of folks, a lot of formerly incarcerated folks, for whom incarceration is still a scarlet letter. I’ve had the privilege in these nineteen years to always work in settings where people knew my history before I got there, which kind of relieves me of having to explain my past. But not everyone has my experience. My prayer going in is, “They know my past. I pray they look past it and see me.” Some people are saying, “I hope they don’t look past me and see my past.” I think we need to find a balance.

Renée Freeman-Butler, Transfer Center/Student Affairs

Given that so many are incarcerated, given that so many are Black males and minorities, and given that we are a diverse institution in CUNY, it’s important that we look at the collateral damage of incarceration. Think that so many people are in prison: What about the families they leave behind? Males with young children who grow up seeing their fathers in prison? That so many males are in prison and haven’t been convicted of anything yet, but can’t afford bail? And so many coming from disadvantaged communities: The cycle of poverty that it’s creating is phenomenal.

We are an educational institution, but we also advocate. When you talk about rehabilitation, you talk about education, and bringing it to prisoners that might be inside or on the verge of coming outside. The prison we have right here [Queensboro Correctional Facility], is a space where people are transitioning back to the city, and into society. If we aren’t helping them structure what they want to do when they come out, and giving them the skills, and helping them make the connections when they do get out, what is going to happen to them?

What I see as collateral damage are the restrictions on their ability to move forward, sometimes rendering them almost unemployable. Because of background checks, employers aren’t apt to bring them on board. They may not be able to get licenses for particular careers. Even something as simple as cutting hair as a barber, there may be restrictions for that; a driver’s license may be restricted. There are many impacts that occur after they’ve served time.

I call it collateral damage because they’ve served their time, but they continue to serve the penalty. How do we help them reintegrate back into society so that they can be contributors? I think the College can step up the game to expand the conversation beyond how we educate and provide skills to how we can advocate with the business communities that we may have relationships with to create opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals. How can we help from that perspective?
Notes


A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

_The Scarlet Letter_
Transformation, metamorphosis, and evolution of ideas and ways of being: These key concepts set the value of teaching and learning at LaGuardia, and recur as themes throughout the Prison to College research collected in these pages. In conversations recorded just before Thanksgiving, Naina Ahmed and Philip Proszowski remind all who aspire to be educators of the human capacity for hope and change.
Naina Ahmed, LaGuardia Criminal Justice Major

**Naina:** Recently, I’ve been researching Syria and Syrian refugees. And I’ve kind of been pushed towards humanitarian work, particularly with the Syrian population. But what really got me into pursuing any kind of criminal justice on an international level is that it took me years to find out what happened to my father and how things went down. I recently found out that he was shot by somebody he was affiliated with here. It was very hard growing up. I have a younger sister as well, we have the same dad. My mom was a single mom, always working. My dad passed away when I was ten, and going through that experience at a young age changed who I was and the way I looked at things. At the time I was a little too young to understand. From the age of five until I was seven, I was seeing him incarcerated in various locations, in North Carolina, in Massachusetts, and upstate. I never spoke about it for a really, really long time, which caused a lot of mental and emotional draining.

**Michele:** When did you decide to share with others?

**Naina:** Probably last year. It’s been really hard. If you had met me last year, I would have never agreed to talk about it; I used to get really bad panic attacks. Right now, I’m getting a little…it’s difficult to speak.

**Michele:** Your courage and resolve will help others, Naina.

**Naina:** I know, and that’s what really changed my view about things. If only other people knew there are people like me and other people out there who have gone through what I’m going through. They don’t need to be alone with this. Other people should feel okay to talk about it. If people know that their parent or their brother or their boyfriend or their sister, whoever it is…that it’s normal, it happens, it’s human behavior. Don’t judge me because my father was incarcerated. I spent a lot of time trying to find out on my own because nobody would tell me, nobody would talk about it. I didn’t want to talk about it with anybody else, so I became very independent in trying to research and trying to find out what happened. It’s been very difficult and I commend myself for talking about it now. I’ve never been this way about it.

**Michele:** What helped you to come out?

**Naina:** My classes, and learning that there are so many people in the system, and so many children are affected, and so many people go through this. What helped me was watching Syrian refugees talk about their experiences; they were able to be interviewed and discuss something so traumatic. I could never even imagine going through that. It educated me about how they feel and what they’re going through and what can change if you share your experience with others.
Michele: Yes. There’s a beautiful point in Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, when Hester, the mother who’d been made to wear the red letter that identified her as a sinner to the community, speaks to Pearl, her daughter born of adultery. She tells her to come away from the edge of the community, and to take her place in the world, amid human joy and sorrow.

Naina: Yes, that’s the thing. From an early age, I used to distance myself from everyone. I’ve been told that I have a bubbly personality, but that’s because I learned that I couldn’t cry every single day over something I couldn’t control. There was a better way for the pain I suffered, to really put it out there for everyone else, to try to transform it into something that gives me joy, and helping others gives me joy.

Michele: Is that your hope—the transformation of trauma into knowledge that benefits others?

Naina: Yes, that’s it. You know, going through what I’ve been through, and seeing where I am now, I know it’s possible for everyone going through that, for other children who have parents or other family members going through that—I know it’s possible to come back. It’s possible to take everything they’ve gone through and use it to make them stronger. What I went through is unfortunate. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone else, but it’s made me who I am. It’s made me independent, and it’s made me courageous. It’s made me very ambitious. It’s made me a person that I hope to be for everyone else.

Michele: As I listen to you, you’ve helped me understand that coming home is not only a return to a familiar place. We want individuals who’ve been inside to come home to their strength of spirit. Come home to the human community with all its flaws and flourishing. How can we contribute to creating that sense of possibility at LaGuardia? Do you have a top suggestion for the college? You’re kind of a ladder or a support for many people, but you’re only one individual.

Naina: I would say a really resourceful thing would be teaching people about the effects of incarceration on children, and just talking to people. On a larger scale, something like weekly seminars or panels, so we can just talk about this issue. I’ve never spoken about this the way I just did with you. Just seeing how you react to me, just talking about this as just normal changes people. It changes the way others think about stigma. Doing this on a campus like ours would be very instructive. I think the biggest problem is that people don’t know and people don’t understand. And not understanding can be very frustrating—it can make you think a certain way, in stereotypes. If we have panels, people might take what they’ve learned to their friends. It’ll spread and that’s how change happens, with these little steps. That’s my hope—to implement things in smaller settings and watch them grow!
Philip Proszowski, LaGuardia Liberal Arts Major

My whole childhood, I’ve been always on the go, always bouncing from babysitter to babysitter, to group homes, to mental hospitals, to juvie. From fifteen to almost eighteen, I was incarcerated at Brookwood, a juvenile prison in the Hudson Valley. I was doing my GED, taking courses, and that’s where I first met Alexandra [Cox] because she was doing her research there. The second time, I was at Rikers for thirteen months. I was fighting the case; then I took the plea, which was easier than watching my back all the time. You know, you have to stand up if somebody comes at you, and somebody is going to come at you. Somebody always wants something; that’s how to survive in a room of wolves. You just get hard to that, to dealing all the time with all that violence and possible violence, the slashings, coming at you twenty-four hours a day, fighting over phones, TV, fighting for no reason, just because they want to fight. They don’t care about what’s going to happen because it’s already happened. To survive, you need to find a group of people like you, because the most important thing is going home. You need to get to that. So, I pled and went upstate to Riverview, up near Canada. From inside, I could see the bridge from New York to Canada.

When I came home the first time, after being in Brookwood from July 2007 to November 2009, I started getting this energy about how fucked up the system was, from seeing how everything was inside and now seeing how everything is outside, and then going through parole. That following May, I turned eighteen. I was so focused on not going back, on doing the right thing. As time went by, I slowly started forgetting about what I had just gone through. I was slowly going back to doing certain things that I shouldn’t do, back into a negative lifestyle—not to say I wasn’t doing good things; I was doing a lot of good things. But I thought I could balance the negative and good things, like, yes, I’m breaking the law, but I’m still working legally, selling Christmas trees in Soho, and I was going to school in Berkeley. Within three years, September 2012, I was arrested again—for the gun.

So I am proof of the recidivism rate: Almost 70 percent return within three years. But before I got locked up, during the three years I was home, I reconnected with Alexandra. I went to DC with her for juvenile justice reform, and I met all these prison reform activists within those protests, like K. J. [Kyung-Ji Kate Rhee] and Chino [Hardin] from the Center for NuLeadership. I was doing some of that while going back into my old ways, and next thing you know, I get locked up. So, now I come home on April 7th of 2016 and within the first month, Alexandra reaches out to me again, and is like, “There’s this program I think you’d be interested in.” And that program was H.O.L.L.A!

She linked me to Cory Greene who tells me about the program. At that time, I’m just thinking, “All right, I’ll check it out.” I go in for a session right that day; I didn’t know the executive director was K. J., from the reform protests in DC.
Seeing her at H.O.L.L.A! was like a fate thing, like it was destined to happen, you know? Between my first and second bids, I was already working with juvenile justice reform, and now here I am, out again, and I get connected to this organization that was created in prison. It’s my first month home, and now I’m going to session after session. I realized that H.O.L.L.A! was probably the biggest hope I had to making sure that this time home, I stay home.

Michele: In what way was H.O.L.L.A! the hope?

Philip: I never had brothers or sisters, so the streets were always like my brothers and sisters. I felt that this group was a family I could relate to. You have formerly incarcerated people, or just people who have been through a lot of stuff that I had been through, or their family has been through. I felt that we’re all in this fight together. I felt like I had somebody, you know? We’re meeting three times a week, and let’s say we meet on Mondays. We’re starting the week off strong, working on stuff that’s going on. Then we meet Tuesday, okay, that’s good. But then on Wednesdays and Thursdays, you have a little bit of room to start slacking because—you know, you might—whatever—. But at Friday meetings, we’re right back on it. The meetings built a type of consistency, knowing that even if I might fall off, or lose hope, three days out of the week that hope is going to be restored. Whenever I was with this group, whenever I was with the people I call my family, the hope is alive. Everybody is like, “You’re not alone; we’re going to do this together.” The consistency created the hope for me.

Michele: What was it like being in those sessions? How many of you were together? Were the sessions structured? Was there an agenda?

Philip: It was usually a group of ten of us, mostly men, but some women. To me, it was very unstructured, but there was still an agenda, if that makes sense. Unstructured, but there was still an agenda that most of the time didn’t get completed because there was always room; it was so flexible. There was always freedom, and it was so real. If you’re talking about some real stuff, I’m not going to stop you just because the agenda says we need to stop, especially once you get into it. You’re talking for a reason. You feel a certain way about something, and you’re in that moment. You’re going to be able to express that feeling better than you will another time when you’re not really feeling that.

Michele: How would you start the session? Would you begin with a song, a prayer, words …?

Philip: Cory runs the group most of the time. To begin, we do check-ins. What’s going on in your personal life? The focus used to be only your personal life; now it’s your personal life and your Youth Organizing Collective [YOC] life, and
anything that’s in between. So, we’d say, “What’s going on? How you feeling?” And you could say, “I don’t feel like being in session today.” Or, “I don’t feel like talking. I just want to be left alone.” Whatever you feel like. This is your moment to speak up.

Michele: Talking with you, and Arocks back when I first met him, it seemed that so much of the work you all do, the workshops for example at Princeton and up at Columbia, all of the organizing and your life energy is about creating relationships, about being with others. Could you talk about the Youth Organizing Committee [YOC] a bit? I know it’s an offshoot of H.O.L.L.A!

Philip: YOC has three main commitment points: The first focus is for H.O.L.L.A! members to build relationships with each other, so we can support each other and gain strength. Another aim is to help youth in the community to understand how important it is to build relationships with each other. The third concern is political education, to understand what’s going on right now, like, what is the climate we are in?

Michele: But why do relationships matter? Why not just go off, be alone, do your own thing without anyone else’s interference?

Philip: Relationships are important because if I’m fighting for something or organizing in the streets, there are times that I might need you, and I have to know I can depend on you to have my back. It’s a good feeling when you know you can depend on somebody. If I feel that I can come to you to talk about real stuff, then I’m not going to hide something from you, or not be real. You know what I’m saying?

Michele: Often, we just bump into each other, but building—that requires consistency, too. What you said about being inside, about everybody wanting something from somebody, obscure motives, so much hidden because you can’t be vulnerable and survive—I think that’s just the opposite of what we want in the classroom. The classroom is about relationships, too. It’s a profound achievement that Cory and Arocks conceived H.O.L.L.A! while incarcerated. Can you talk a little about the origins of H.O.L.L.A!?

Philip: Cory Greene saw K. J. speak on an NYU [New York University] panel and was inspired by her words. She invited him to visit the Center for NuLeadership offices; the Center for NuLeadership and H.O.L.L.A! have mutual interests in working together.

Michele: Right, I hear so much about Mr. Ellis. He is revered in the human justice movement.
Philip: Eddie Ellis created the Center for NuLeadership; he was part of the Attica uprisings in the ‘80s, and he started doing a lot of organizing in prison. He was also part of the Green Haven think tank, with 85% of the [prison] population is Black or Hispanic, and 75% of it come from seven neighborhoods within New York City: Bed-Stuy, Brownsville, South Jamaica, Lower East Side, Harlem, I think Gun Hill in the Bronx, and one more that I’m not clicking on. He saw the correlation, the pattern, and he saw that these neighborhoods are targeted the most, and that the people at the tables where the policies are being made aren’t people suited to have those discussions. The people involved in the system should be at the table, should have a voice. That was his thing.

Michele: When you go to your workshops, like at Princeton and Columbia, and you introduce H.O.L.L.A!, what do you tell people? In a nutshell, can you sum up its founding principles?

Philip: I think the biggest thing is that we’re trying to create a healing justice movement and that healing is a two-way street. It’s internal and external. A lot of systems of oppression are allowed in our communities, and that’s what we’re fighting against. First, we need to heal internally, heal within our communities, before we can fight all these systems of oppression.

Michele: Earlier you talked about learning to survive inside, about feelings going cold. How do we know when we’re healed?

Philip: That’s a good question. I don’t know the answer to that one. I feel like as long as you’re aware that you need to heal, you’ll take the necessary steps to get there.

Michele: I’m thinking about your meetings, and your activist life, and the lessons these have for those of us who want to know about—or experience—healing in community. Here’s a question for you: Do you think we should have a center for men and women who have been inside, and for the families and loved ones of those who are inside, a place where we can be out about that part of our identity if we choose?

Philip: I think we should have a center like that. You know, when you first come out, if you are in class, you are just trying to adapt, trying to figure out what everyone’s motives are, what they want; maybe you’ve still got that hardness in you. You aren’t in a room of wolves anymore, but you aren’t sure where you are. Most important is having group sessions on a consistent basis. If you’re doing something consistently, you’re going to create that habit. If I’m just coming home and I’m going to this group, at first I’m like, “Well, I’m going to go today, and I’ll check it out,” and if you feel like you have people around who you can relate to, who are
here to help you and who went through what you are going through, and are able to recover from it—if you see that on a consistent basis, if you have this twice, or three times a week, I think that would establish some hope.

Let's have some hope in feeling that if they’re in school, but they can’t take it in class any more, feeling like they don’t belong, they still have that other space to go to, that safe space for them. Because for a while, the whole campus may not be a safe space. But that one place, if that’s safe, and they know they have that, they won’t have to look for other spaces outside the school. They won’t have to leave school to go to their neighborhood, or go somewhere else where they do something they would regret later on. I think that’s the most important thing. Building that safe, consistent space where people feel they can go when they feel like they can’t go anywhere else.

Michele: It seems that you are adjusting to campus life, balancing your advocacy and classroom commitments and relationships. What do you want from your education? What do you want education to do for you?

Philip: Education is a critical part of regaining my freedom. I’m still not free; I feel the more I educate myself, the more I free myself.

Michele: Why would education free you?

Philip: Because it opens my mind and opens more doors and opens more perspectives. Instead of being in this mental cage, I feel like I got this, I got this, I got this. When you are pursuing an education, you meet so many people who restore hope in your life. And I want to have a voice for people who don’t have a voice right now, for people who are still in cages, who would love to have a voice, but have never had the opportunity. So education is more than just me. It’s doing something for a whole group of people. That’s the goal of gaining freedom.

Michele: Have you ever had a class that opened you up, or changed the way you think? Or when was the last time you changed the way someone else thought? I know you’ve added to my life—what about in your classes?

Philip: For my First Year Seminar, we had to go to this “Global Citizen” fair and there were three panelists. I shared one of my favorite quotations with them: “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters and create many ripples.” I asked, “How can we students be those ripples? I understand about being a global citizen, but how can students be those ripples? Global is fine, but what can we do local? What can we do as a community? As a student community? As a Brooklyn community, as a New York City community? And how can we create those ripples within ourselves?” In order to be an effective global citizen, you need to be an effective local citizen. I asked them for their strategy for
dealing with the dehumanization that we all deal with at school, work, whatever. And they all just looked at each other for a few seconds, and then they said, “Well, that’s a good question.” One said we can’t fight hate with hate, but with love, and that in each situation, respect should be up front.

Michele: Did they answer your question? For me, your question was the answer.

Philip: One said, “Based on your question, I think you know the answer.” That was the last question—and that was the last answer. I felt like that was an effective way to end it. We left the fair with a lot of energy.

Michele: Philip, as we finish, I want to thank you for bringing so much knowledge. So much comes from your personal life, and from your experiences with H.O.L.L.A!, with Arocks and Cory, and all your relationships, and of course, with Alexandra, who has been such a beautiful force in your life. I wonder: What does LaGuardia give to you? You’ve given hope to so many. What hope does LaGuardia offer you?

Philip: You think I’m your hope, but for me, it’s the other way around. I came here, from some kind of darkness, and now there are all these people, all this support. That’s my light.

Notes

1. Brookwood Secure Center, located in the Hudson Valley, is a juvenile detention center for “male juvenile offenders who, while under the age of 16, committed certain violent felonies and were convicted and sentenced in adult criminal court. Depending upon the sentence, youth may remain in OCFS [New York State Office of Children and Family Services] custody up to 21 years of age.

“In addition, juvenile delinquents under the jurisdiction of the family court may also be placed at Brookwood if they have been transferred or ‘fennered’ from a Limited Secure facility for violent behavior. Juvenile delinquents may remain in OCFS custody up to the age of 18 depending on their placement order.” (New York State Office of Children and Family Services. n.d. “Brookwood Secure Center.” OCFS. Accessed December 6, 2017. http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/rehab/regionalListingDetail.asp?ID=5.)

2. Alexandra Cox is currently a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. Prior to this appointment, she was an Assistant Professor of Sociology at SUNY New Paltz. She earned her doctorate in Criminology from Cambridge University. She continues to work as a sentencing mitigation specialist for defense attorneys in New York and, as a board member of many organizations, she advocates for criminal justice reform. Her book, Trapped in a Vice: The Consequences of Confinement for Young People, will be published in January 2018. (“Academic Staff: Dr. Alexandra Cox.” 2017. University of Essex, Colchester, UK. https://www1.essex.ac.uk/sociology/staff/profile.aspx?ID=5663.)
3. Riverview Correctional Facility, a state prison in Ogdensburg, NY, “is classed as a medium security facility. It has a strengthened perimeter fence and electronic detection systems to ensure inmates stay within the confined areas within the facility. To help inmates prepare themselves to rejoin the wider community, [it] offers a wide range of work and treatment programs. The medium classification means that the inmates are supervised 24/7 with controlled movements. Medium security prisons house more serious offenders, but inmates can also be sent to serve time in lower security facilities for things like good behavior at the end of a sentence” (InmateAid. 2017. “NY DOC Riverview Correctional Facility.” InmateAid. https://www.inmateaid.com/prisons/ny-doc-riverview-correctional-facility).

4. Berkeley College is a for-profit institution with five New Jersey campuses, three New York campuses, and an online program. It “offers career-focused programs, supportive professors with real-world industry knowledge, hands-on learning through our internship program, and a variety of supplemental programs and activities” (Berkeley College. n.d. “Internship Program.” Berkeley College. Accessed December 9, 2017. http://berkeleycollege.edu/files_bc/Berkeley_College_Internship_Program.pdf).

5. “Overall, 67.8% of the 404,638 state prisoners released in 2005 in 30 states were arrested within 3 years of release, and 76.6% were arrested within 5 years of release” (Durose, Matthew R., Alexia D. Cooper, and Howard N. Snyder. 2014. Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report NCJ 244205. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. https://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf).

6. “The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions (CNUS) is an independent research, training and advocacy think tank that employs a Human Justice framework to achieve community well-being, empowerment and safety. … CNUS engages in youth and community organizing and system stakeholder advocacy to: a) develop blueprints for policies and programs for sustainable community investment and human development, b) equip decision makers with tools for meaningful results and accountability and c) build capacity and (Nu) leadership for implementing Human Justice now” (Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. 2017. “About.” CNUS. https://www.nuleadership.org/overview/).

   Kyung-Ji Kate Rhee, Deputy Director of CNUS, is “nationally recognized for her expertise in campaign strategy development, youth justice advocacy and dynamic training design for system and community stakeholders on culture change, racial disparity and leadership growth” (Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. 2017. “Kyung-Ji Kate Rhee, Deputy Director.” CNUS. https://www.nuleadership.org/staff-board-list/kyung-ji-kate-rhee). Chino Hardin, Community Organizing Director for CNUS, “has over 15 years of experience in the field of youth organizing and leadership development, conflict resolution, violence prevention and gang intervention” (Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. 2017. “Chino Hardin, Community Organizing Director.” CNUS. https://www.nuleadership.org/staff-board-list/chino-hardin).


Resources


The LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning
2017–2018 Professional Development Seminars

The Center offers multiple opportunities for LaGuardia faculty to improve their knowledge and skills while strengthening the College’s key teaching and learning initiatives: the Core Competencies and Communication Abilities; guided practice in developmental advising; investigating a range of digital learning spaces, including new developments in ePortfolio technology, design, and pedagogy; and classroom inquiry through the scholarship of teaching and learning. In 2017–2018, the Center is pleased to introduce new seminars resulting from the Center’s first Request For Proposal process, including: a seminar exploring possibilities of the “flipped classroom;” support for faculty who have transitioned to higher education from clinical or industry settings; and an examination of the cultural and linguistic differences LaGuardia faculty and students experience in the classroom.

Bringing Global Learning and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Your Classes
Participants will explore ways to utilize culturally relevant pedagogy to build upon the global knowledge that students and faculty at “the world’s community college” already possess. These explorations will enrich our understanding of what global learning means in different disciplines.

Seminar Facilitators: Florence Kabba, Education and Language Acquisition, Roslyn Orgel, Center for Teaching and Learning, and Christopher Schmidt, English

Carnegie Seminar on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
Faculty from across the disciplines are invited to participate in a community of dialogue and inquiry committed to evidence-based pedagogy. The three-semester seminar reflects LaGuardia’s commitment to a scholarly approach to teaching and learning, supporting systematic investigation into disciplinary-specific teaching practices.

Seminar Facilitators: Michele Piso Manoukian, Center for Teaching and Learning, and Patricia Sokolski, Humanities

Faculty Scholars Publication Workshop
In this year-long faculty development seminar, designed to assist LaGuardia faculty with their scholarly writing, faculty scholars seek to complete current academic writing projects and place them in external, peer-reviewed journals.

Seminar Facilitators: Nancy Berke, English, and Michele Piso Manoukian, Center for Teaching and Learning
Flipped Learning by Design
By introducing students to course content outside of the classroom, and using class time to practice working with the concepts they are learning, flipped learning facilitates engagement and active learning pedagogies. Faculty will design discipline-specific learning activities that help students to learn at their own pace, and learn to use digital feedback tools to address students’ challenges responsively and effectively.

Seminar Facilitators: Maria Entezari, *Natural Sciences*, Jaime Riccio, *Humanities*, and Priscilla Stadler, *Center for Teaching and Learning*

From Practitioner to Academician
This seminar will assist “practice educators” gain an understanding of the pedagogical strategies of teaching and learning in the disciplines. Considered are factors that both support and hinder professionals as they transition to the professoriate. Topics include collegiality, campus contributions, pedagogical strategies for at risk students, scholarship, and guides to publishing.


Humanities Allliance
Supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Graduate Center and LaGuardia staff and faculty are offering the Humanities Alliance Seminar to CUNY doctoral students committed to public higher education and interested in developing pedagogies particularly effective for teaching humanities courses to the “new majority” of diverse students.


Inventing the Next Generation ePortfolio
LaGuardia faculty, students, and staff have begun working together to re-invent ePortfolio practice. Rather than ask students to build a new ePortfolio in class after class, we are inviting students to build a primary, or core, ePortfolio that they can use throughout their LaGuardia journey. Through this shift, we hope to utilize the power of the ePortfolio more effectively to connect different parts of the student learning experience, as well as to collect rich artifacts of students’ growth as learners over time.

**Language Across the Curriculum Mini-Seminar**

Faculty who teach at LaGuardia will inevitably have students in their classes who do not speak English as their dominant language. Seminar participants will explore different characteristics of academic language in various fields and will be introduced to strategies designed to help students develop academic language proficiency.

Seminar Facilitators: Leigh Garrison-Fletcher, *Education and Language Acquisition*, and Ellen Quish, *Center for Teaching and Learning*

**Learning Matters Mini-Grants: Strengthening Assignment Development and Programmatic Benchmark Readings**

The Center is offering Mini-Grants of up to $7,500 to support program-led efforts to strengthen the integration of Core Competencies and Communication Abilities into courses and curricula. Program faculty, or teams of faculty teaching courses designated for depositing, will propose a year-long plan to design, test, and disseminate assignments that encourage the development of students’ Core Competencies and Abilities.

Seminar Facilitators: Cristina Di Meo, *Academic Affairs*, Regina Lehman, *Health Sciences*, and Justin Rogers-Cooper, *English*

**Learning Matters: The Pedagogy of the Digital Communication Ability**

Grounded in the Digital Communications Ability Core Competency, faculty will investigate assignment design and classroom activities that help students to communicate with purpose using multi-media, and/or to collaborate and interact with different audiences.

Seminar Facilitators: Jade Davis, *Center for Teaching and Learning*, and Justin Rogers-Cooper, *English*

**Liberal Arts and STEM Clusters and Pairs**

Learning Communities (clusters and pairs) are a key component of the Liberal Arts curriculum. Participants teaching in clusters and pairs will collaborate to develop themes, assignments, and activities to enhance integrative learning. As co-curriculars are an important component in the First Year Experience, this seminar will also support field trips.

Meanings of War: Its Technologies and Aftermaths—An NEH-Funded seminar
Participants will consider questions surrounding perceptions of war and the relationship between technology and war, examine how war has been understood, explore the philosophical questions that war evokes, and discuss how evolving technologies of war shift these perceptions.

Seminar Facilitators: Karen Miller, Social Science, and Naomi Stubbs, English

New Faculty Colloquium
This year-long orientation to teaching and learning at LaGuardia provides opportunities for faculty to learn from each other and from senior colleagues about our students and the pedagogies found to be effective at LaGuardia, and consider options for future growth and development.

Seminar Facilitators: Department Chairs, Eric Hofmann and Priscilla Stadler, Center for Teaching and Learning

New to College Mini-Seminars
To support ongoing learning and exchange among First Year Seminar faculty, the Center for Teaching and Learning is offering two mini-seminars: (1) New to College Refresher (offered Fall I 2017) and (2) ePortfolio and Identity Development in the FYS and Beyond (offered Spring 1, 2018). Each mini-seminar will consist of three sessions. To be eligible, faculty must have successfully completed a New to College seminar.

Seminar Facilitators: Tonya Hendrix, Natural Sciences, Givanni Ildefonso-Sanchez, Education and Language Acquisition, and Ellen Quish, Center for Teaching and Learning

Teaching the City: Urban Studies at LaGuardia
Dedicated to experiential and global learning, Urban Studies is an interdisciplinary program that reaches every student at LaGuardia. Seminar participants will learn about the program and its mission while designing and refining syllabi and assignments that embody the goals of experiential learning that makes the city the classroom, and engage with global learning that draws on an understanding of comparisons, networks, and systems.

Seminar Facilitators: Arianna Martinez, Social Science, Priscilla Stadler, Center for Teaching and Learning, and Laura Tanenbaum, English

Transfer Advising Mini-Seminar and Workshop
In conjunction with a day-long workshop introducing faculty to articulation, curriculum, and registration through the lens of transfer, faculty in this 3-session mini-seminar will develop teaching and mentoring strategies to support students as they prepare to graduate from LaGuardia. With the goal of helping our students transfer...
successfully, participants will also use their knowledge to help design a program-specific tip sheet for colleagues and support staff involved with the transfer process.

Seminar Facilitators: Marzena Bugaj, Center for Teaching and Learning, Jayashree Kamble and Natalie Havlin, English, and Kai Chun Chuang, Humanities

Writing in the Disciplines (WID)
Full- and part-time faculty will develop and test writing-intensive assignments that can help students learn course content and develop Inquiry and Problem Solving, Integrative Learning and Global Learning competencies, and revise syllabi to create a Writing Intensive course.

Seminar Facilitators: Evelyn Burg and Michelle Pacht, English, and Karen Miller, Social Science

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Papers will draw upon class assignments previously initiated by cross-disciplinary faculty in the Provost’s Learning Circle or CTL seminars, and further developed in the three-semester Carnegie Seminar (Fall 2017, Spring 2018, and Fall 2018). Designed for traditional classrooms, online courses, and learning environments that exist beyond the classroom (i.e., labs, parks, streets, galleries, music spaces, clinics, etc.), such assignments will serve as objects of scholarly investigation, provide structured opportunities for faculty to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and further LaGuardia’s understanding of the multiple ways learning is experienced and evaluated in the arts and sciences at a two-year urban college.

In Transit welcomes proposals for short reviews of fiction, non-fiction, film, and music, as well as personal essays relevant to classroom instruction and the complex challenges facing educators and students at this pivotal time in history.
Contributors

**Naina Ahmed**, a New York native, is the first in her family to attend college. Having parents from both India and Pakistan has made her passionate about different cultures and languages. She is trilingual, and wants to learn Arabic and Spanish. She is pursuing a career in international criminal justice.

**Claudia Baldonedo** is an Executive Director in the LaGuardia Division of Adult and Continuing Education and an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Business and Technology department. Her lifelong passion has been to improve the lives of students, particularly women and youth, who have been formerly incarcerated or otherwise involved in the criminal justice system.

**David Boyd** survived the justice system. That experience led him to discover a passion for working with young children who might find themselves where he was at their age—on the streets and headed for trouble. He is currently a second year student at LaGuardia; after graduating, he plans to complete an undergraduate degree in criminal justice at John Jay College and, later, pursue graduate work in forensic psychology. He has a life-long interest in forming a non-profit transitional housing organization.

**John R. Chaney** is the Codirector of LaGuardia’s Criminal Justice program. He was formerly the New York State-appointed coordinator for the Kings County Re-Entry Task Force. He is the coeditor of and a contributing author in *Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizens: Counterstories and Counterspaces* (Lexington Books, 2017).

**John Chiarkas** earned a PhD in Criminology and Sociology from Columbia University. He served as the Director of CUNY Catch (College Alliance for Transitional Career Help) from 1993 until 2013, and subsequently led the CUNY Next Steps program. Recently relocated to Florida, he will be teaching in the criminal justice program at Florida State University.

**Matthew Eckhoff** is a licensed social worker with over nine years of higher education experience. In his current role as ASAP Associate Director at LaGuardia Community College, he manages the day-to-day responsibilities of the ASAP advisement team, advisement programming, and other special student activities.

**Colleen Eren**, PhD, is a sociologist. Her publications include *Bernie Madoff and the Crisis: The Public Trial of Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2017) and articles in *New Politics, Community College Journal of Research & Practice, Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, and *Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizens* (Lexington Books, 2017). She is an Associate Professor in and Codirector of the Criminal Justice program at LaGuardia.
José Fabara is a Lecturer in the Education and Language Acquisition department. He has served as departmental curriculum chair, and as a facilitator in the 2016–2017 Carnegie Seminar, Incarceration and Daily Life. His MA degrees from Queens are in philosophy and comparative literature, and he is currently engaged in doctoral studies that focus on Latin American literature, and questions of literacy and epistemology.

Cory Feldman is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at LaGuardia Community College. She volunteers with students at Rikers Island and is a senator on the Committee for Higher Education in the Prisons of the CUNY University Faculty Senate. She earned her PhD in Criminal Justice from the CUNY Graduate Center.

Darren Ferguson is a 2017 graduate of the New York Theological Seminary’s Doctor of Ministry Program, where he also earned his Master of Divinity in 2009. He currently serves as the Manager of the Advocacy Bridge to College Program at LaGuardia Community College and on the Advisory Board at Queensboro Correctional Facility.

Hugo Fernandez, Associate Professor in the Photography and Fine Art areas of the Humanities department, has an MFA from the Yale School of Art. He has taught at LaGuardia since 1994, including courses in black-and-white, color, and studio photography and photojournalism. His work focuses on large-scale panoramas and candids.

Louise Fluk is Collection Development Librarian at LaGuardia. She holds a BA from the University of Toronto, an MLS from Columbia University’s late, lamented School of Library Service, and an MA in Political Science from New York University. She has an abiding interest in the nitty-gritty of editing and citation styles.

André Ford received his BA in Theatre Arts and History from Saint Edward’s University in Austin, Texas and his MSW from the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. He currently works in the CUNY Fatherhood Academy at LaGuardia Community College as the High School Equivalency Program Specialist.

Toni Foy is a training specialist who uses theater as a tool for conducting workshops on topics such as conflict resolution, crisis intervention, cultural competence, and workplace violence. Her love of art and commitment to social justice inspire her work. She holds a BA in Dance Education from Queens College and an AA in Illustration from the Parsons School of Design.
Renée Freeman-Butler is a leader in student development and student affairs who earned her EdD in Executive Leadership from St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY. A long-time student advocate and mentor, she earned the 2016 NASPA [National Association of Student Personnel Administrators] Community College Professional Award. At LaGuardia, she has served as Assistant Dean, Special Assistant for Strategic Initiatives, and Executive Director, and is currently providing leadership for the Office of Transfer Services.

Rochell Isaac is an Assistant Professor of English who received her PhD in African American Studies from Temple University. Her research interests are interdisciplinary: literature and theory of the African diaspora, post-colonial literature, Black feminist theory, and cultural studies.

Tracey Jackson is the Manager of the Black Male Initiative and the Multicultural Exchange at LaGuardia Community College. For 20 years, she has mentored students whose challenges include criminal justice involvement, housing instability, and involvement with the foster care system. Ms. Jackson holds BA and MA degrees from the University at Albany, SUNY, and has advanced certification in anger management.

Luther Jordan, the youngest of five children and the only male, spent a total of sixteen years in prison before being exposed to higher education. In Fall 2015, he entered LaGuardia with a major in Human Services. Luther credits LaGuardia for the foundation upon which he is building a productive career helping others who are attempting to change their lives. As a Transit Outreach Specialist, he enters the subway daily to assist the homeless. Upon completion of his studies, he will transfer to York College.

Victoria Lindsay graduated from LaGuardia and transferred to John Jay as a Criminal Justice major. At LaGuardia, she experienced liberating discussions and new environments, and accomplished many of her educational goals. Among her achievements is leaving LaGuardia with a higher GPA than when she entered!

Jane MacKillop has a BA (Hons) and a PhD from the University of Sheffield and a Postgraduate Diploma in English as a Second Language from the University of Leeds. Her interests include adult education and workforce development. Most recently, she has launched a Virtual Reality training program. She served as Associate Dean in LaGuardia’s Division of Adult and Continuing Education from 2005 until 2015, and as senior consultant to the President’s Correctional Education Initiative in 2015–2016. She is currently Interim Dean at Lehman College’s School of Continuing and Professional Studies.
Michele Piso Manoukian, Editor of *In Transit*, facilitates diverse CTL seminars, among which are the Carnegie Seminar and the Mellon-funded Humanities Alliance Seminar, coordinated in partnership with the CUNY Graduate Center. She teaches Critical Thinking from the perspective of social problems such as food sovereignty, public education, and public housing. As a graduate student in Cinema Studies at the University of Oregon, she served as a poetry editor for *The Northwest Review* and taught film in the Oregon State Penitentiary. Raised in Pittsburgh, she has also taught in Italy and Istanbul, Turkey.

Gail O. Mellow has served as President of LaGuardia Community College since 2000. She earned a PhD in Social Psychology from George Washington University. An expert on community colleges, Dr. Mellow coauthored *Minding the Dream: The Process and Practice of the American Community College* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) and has written extensively about higher education.

Neil Meyer is Associate Professor of English at LaGuardia, where he has taught developmental writing and literature courses since 2012. He is now the Director of Basic Writing. His PhD in English is from the CUNY Graduate Center; his work has been published in *Early American Studies* and the *New England Quarterly*.

Roslyn Orgel is a director at the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning where she cofacilitates a variety of professional development seminars, including seminars with Math and Natural Sciences faculty. An Associate Editor of *In Transit*, she earned her MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from Hunter College.

Steven Ovadia is Professor/Deputy Chief Librarian in the LaGuardia Library, which he joined in 2004. He has an MLIS from the Palmer School of Library and Information Science and an MA in Applied Social Research from Queens College. He is the author of *Learn Linux in a Month of Lunches* (Manning, 2016) and *The Librarian’s Guide to Academic Research in the Cloud* (Chandos, 2013).

John Parssinen received his MSW from the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. He has taught social welfare courses at Westchester Community College and has worked in the social services field since 2008. He now works in the Grants Development Office at LaGuardia Community College.

Terry Parker is the Media Services Coordinator of the LaGuardia Library Media Resources Center. A proud graduate of LaGuardia Community College, he received his BA and MLS from Queens College. He has provided assistance and guidance for countless programs and projects, most notably as Codirector of the Thomson Avenue Film Festival, which is in its fourteenth year.
M'Shell Patterson, Director for the Young Adult Internship Program, is passionate about helping young adults meet their full potential. An avid runner, she has completed ten marathons and sixty half-marathons to date.

Miguel Pineda, a Human Services major, graduated with Honors in 2013, and is currently pursuing a BA at Hunter College. He has held several positions at LaGuardia, beginning as a Federal Work-Study student in the Enrollment Services Center during his first semester, followed by part-time positions in Campus Life and Student Development. He now works full time with the Black Male Empowerment and Cooperative (BMEC) and Crear Futuros.

Shannon B. Proctor, Associate Professor, Humanities, has been at LaGuardia since 2014. She received her PhD in Philosophy from Michigan State University in 2013. Her research employs the phenomenological method to explore the embodied nature of habits, addictions, and freedom. Currently, she is teaching a course on freedom at Queensboro Correctional Facility.

Philip Proszowski, the son of a Polish single mother, grew up in the streets of Brooklyn and learned to survive at an early age. After he had bounced from numerous households to a group home, and served two prison bids as a youth and as an adult, the oppression and mental damage of these institutions became clear. As a H.O.L.L.A! Youth Organizer, he helps youth deal with issues in the community and contributes to ending mass incarceration and creating a healing justice movement.

Bill Rosenthal joined LaGuardia’s Mathematics, Engineering, and Computer Science Department in 2010. He has taught mathematics, computer science, education, and women’s studies to students aged eight to eighty. Bill’s scholarship includes work in pure mathematics, calculus curriculum and teaching, school-university collaboration, culturally relevant teaching, and environmental education.

Stefanie Sertich, Associate Professor and Director of LaGuardia’s Theatre Program, also serves as the Humanities Alliance Scholars Coordinator, Cochair of the Kennedy Center’s American College Theatre Festival, Region I, and KCACTF’s National Coordinator for Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity. She has a BA in Acting from Western Michigan University, and an MFA in Directing from the University of Portland.

Nichole Marie Shippen earned her PhD in Political Science from Rutgers University. She wrote Decolonizing Time: Work, Leisure, and Freedom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), which reconsiders discretionary time as a measure of freedom through the concept of temporal autonomy as developed through the Aristotelian-Marxist and critical theory traditions. She is a volunteer teacher at the Rikers Island and Queensboro Correctional Facilities.
Patricia Sokolski is an Associate Professor in the Communication Studies program. She earned her PhD in Comparative Literature and Medieval Studies from the CUNY Graduate Center. She cofacilitated the 2015–2016 Carnegie Seminar and serves as an Associate Editor for *In Transit*. Her research interests include medieval literature and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Leslie Torres, a New Yorker from Queens, graduated from LaGuardia in 2016, while working at CUNY Law. Passionate about understanding people, different views, and reasons for behaviors and interactions, she is pursuing a BA in Sociology. With a newly-discovered love for higher education, she studies for pleasure and because she is fascinated by people and not by money. As a sociologist supported by her life experiences, she hopes to one day reach and educate others.

Tony Walker completed his associate’s degree at LaGuardia Community College in 2017. He currently resides in Bayshore, Long Island and has recently accepted a new position working with developmentally disabled individuals. After resolving housing complications, Tony plans to enroll at York College to pursue a bachelor’s degree in psychology.

Jennifer R. Wynn is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice with a PhD from John Jay College. In addition to teaching, she works as a mitigation specialist on capital cases and has testified as an expert witness on prison adjustment and future dangerousness. She is the author of *Inside Rikers: Stories from the World’s Largest Penal Colony* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2002), and the forthcoming *Solitary Madness: America’s Dangerous Overuse of Extreme Isolation in Prison*. 
Acknowledgments

Many teachers, students, mitigators, community-based organizers, and social activists, at LaGuardia and across New York City, have deepened our understanding of the human justice and reentry movements. First and foremost, we owe special thanks to Gail O. Mellow, President of LaGuardia Community College, for the clarity of purpose that launched and sustained the Prison to College Working Group’s inquiries, and we thank the members of the Working Group, and especially our colleagues in the Division of Adult and Continuing Education, for dedicated collaboration on behalf of LaGuardia students with criminal justice history. The Working Group’s persistent recognition of the “locked up and locked out” is the sine qua non of this issue of In Transit.

We thank former Associate Dean Jane MacKillop for the grace and intellect that guided the Working Group through the investigations that inspired the work collected in these pages, and we thank former Associate Dean Howard Wach for committing the initial resources necessary to conduct the Carnegie Seminar’s research on incarceration and daily life. We are especially indebted to Eric Hofmann, Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, for his informed commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning, for his equitable practice of professional development, and for laughter at the right moment. Our gratitude goes as well to Cory Feldman, for being present to the formerly invisible, and to the LaGuardia Foundation’s Elyse Newman for second chances. We are grateful to Robert Jaffe for quietly offered insight that expands others. We thank the Carnegie Seminar cohort for racing against time’s wingéd chariot—and winning.

We express respect and love for the students whose moving testimonies remind us of the pedagogical value of openness and honesty. We thank H.O.L.L.A! activists Victor Alvarez, Andrew Cory Greene, Thomas ‘Arocks’ Porter, and Philip Prosowski for reaching out and pulling us into community; and we thank Abdul Lloyd-Bey for his unforgettable stark depiction of stigma’s division of those who feel broken from those who seem whole.

We thank our Center family for steadfast support and patience throughout our work, and we are grateful to our families and friends at home for caring and waiting, all these months—especially Emilio Franchini, who sent sandwiches and pasta sauce. Finally, we are grateful to all 2016–2017 In Transit contributors for laying down the moral imperative of restorative education and raising up awareness of teaching and learning as acts of intellect, art, and justice.
Two things fill my mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.

Immanuel Kant
The function of freedom is to free somebody else.

Toni Morrison
Any person who claims to have deep feeling for other human beings should think a long, long time before he votes to have other men kept behind bars – caged.

I am not saying there shouldn’t be prisons,

but there shouldn’t be bars.

Behind bars, a man never reforms. He will never forget.

He never will get completely over the memory of the bars.