

Tyrone Werts: Reflections on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

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Abstract

The Inside Out Prison Exchange Program housed at Temple University is an International educational program that brings together outside college and university students and inside incarcerated students in prisons and jails for a semester long college course. Started in 1997 in the county jail system in Philadelphia, PA, Inside Out is presently in 38 states and Canada, offering hundreds of courses that spans throughout the humanities and social sciences. The class is taught in a circle and emphasizes dialogue, exchange and collaboration. It impacts participating students in ways far beyond education by providing a profound learning experience that is transformational. It invites participants to take leadership in addressing issues of crime, justice and social concerns.

Keywords

prison, education, recidivism

In 1975, I was convicted as an accomplice to a second-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole. I served my time at the Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution at Graterford, a maximum-security prison

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housing approximately 3,500 men. After accepting my fate, I spent the next 36 years of my life committed to improving myself and helping those around me to discover their potential. Although I was expecting to die in prison, my life sentence was commuted by former Governor Ed Rendell on December 30, 2010.

When I first entered Graterford, I was angry, bitter, and resentful toward the legal system. I was angry at a system that had sentenced me to die in prison for something of which, at the time, I thought I was innocent. When I went in, I lacked any formal education. After a battery of tests during the intake process at Graterford, I learned that my reading, math, and comprehension skills were at second- and third-grade levels. I wasn't surprised and, frankly, I didn't care. I had dropped out of school early, and even when I did go, it wasn't for the purpose of learning. You see, education had no value for me; moreover, I did not have the necessary confidence or self-esteem to compete academically. However, at the urging of a staff person at Graterford, I was able to go to school, get my GED, and earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from Villanova University.

During my 36 years, I met and worked with a number of incredibly committed and dedicated people working to bring hope and inspiration to those of us housed at Graterford. One of those incredible people was Lori Pompa. I met Lori in my capacity as President of the 800-member lifers' organization. In the early 1990s, we served on the board of directors of Reconstruction, Inc., a holistic reentry program designed to assist men returning to the community to be successful. Along the way, we continued to work on many projects that would change the impacts that incarceration has on people.

Over the years, as a professor of criminal justice at Temple University, Lori would regularly bring her students into Graterford to tour the facility and meet with some of the men there to give the students a real-world perspective of the criminal justice system. Most times, I would serve on the panels to answer students' questions about incarceration, the prison system, and possible reforms.

In 2002, when she brought a group of students in for a tour, she told me about the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program that she was running in the county jails. Initially, I saw it as just another prison college program for men who were operating at a successful level, who already had their lives together. For me—someone deeply involved in finding ways to empower men whom others discarded as unreachable—I wasn't immediately impressed. That is, until I learned that the requirements to participate were vastly different from other prison college and university programs.

There are, in some states around the country, a number of colleges and universities that have initiated programs that allow people in prison to take college courses and work toward degrees. Research clearly indicates that those in prison who graduate from college have a lower recidivism rate than non-college graduates. This is noteworthy because there are many incarcerated people who are quite capable of doing college level work. And when given the opportunity, they usually do well and even excel.

However, research also indicates that incarcerated people who go to college, graduate, and do not recidivate are more often those who would have succeeded even without a college degree. That is, the majority of men and women who have received college degrees while incarcerated were already on the path to correct their lives and more than likely would have succeeded without going to college. These are the people who are considered the “cream of the crop.” Therefore, while these programs are giving incarcerated people great opportunities, those who cannot meet the requirements or have the confidence to obtain a college education are left behind. They are what I think of as the “throw-away people”—men and women who recidivate because no one showed them any kindness or compassion or demonstrated a belief that they could survive the rigors of a higher education.

What piqued my interest in the Inside-Out program was finding out that, to take this college course, you didn't necessarily need a high school diploma or GED; you also didn't need college experience or recognize that you had the intellectual abilities to compete in an academic setting. Why this resonated with me so powerfully was because I knew intimately that there were literally thousands of men and women incarcerated, not just in Graterford, but also across the country, who were essentially like me when I first came to prison: people who were smart, but didn't know it; who suffered from low self-esteem; who lacked confidence in their abilities; who saw no value in education; who needed a chance and opportunity to find out about their capabilities. I realized that this program would provide them with that opportunity.

All participants needed was the willingness to do the work and fully participate in the sessions. Most of these men and women are the very people who would probably fall short of regular college requirements because they don't possess the necessary confidence to believe they can perform at a high level academically. Yet, those who take Inside-Out classes build confidence in their abilities. Once they go through this engaging experience, participants develop a new perspective of themselves and their ability to learn, as well as a desire to seek other educational opportunities. In many ways, Inside-Out serves as a gateway to higher education, which translates into lower recidivism, lower crime rates, and reduced prison populations.

I know, for me, as someone who already had a college degree, who understood the value of education, I balked at the very idea of taking this course because my life was already on an upward trajectory. Little did I know what I was headed for once I was convinced to take this course. On a personal level, I expanded as a human being; I found a larger vision for myself and how I was connected to my community and the rest of the world. Even as aware as I thought I was, this class experience further ripped away prejudices and biases I had of which I was totally unaware. But more than that, what I witnessed among my fellow “inside” classmates was astounding. Some I knew and others I didn’t. The energy generated in the class carried over into the prison, where men were studying together, competing for the best grade against each other, and having positive impacts on their peers. Before this opportunity, some men hadn’t shown any interest in activities that were beneficial to their growth and development. Yet, here they were, changed men, eager to find ways to further grow and build healthy lives.

So, Inside-Out for me is what has been missing in our prisons, jails, communities, colleges, and universities. While its focus is education, its outcome is thousands of changed lives that will, in the end, change our world.

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Author Biography

Tyrone Werts presently is employed as a Public Relations Consultant to the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program housed at Temple University, and is a founding member of its affiliated Think Tank group. He also consults with the Philadelphia Public Defenders Association in the Homicide Division.