



From left to right:
KrystleLynn Caraballo,
Professor Baz Dreisinger
and Bianca van Heydoorn

Opening Up a Pipeline

Education Program Helps Pave the Way for Prisoner Reentry

by Peter Dodenhoff

College education programs for prison inmates may have an uneven history, but they are nothing new. What is new – and, apparently, completely unique – is the approach taken by John Jay College. The Prison-to-College Pipeline, now in just its second year of operation, not only provides prisoners with college-level learning, it also facilitates their reentry into society.

“I was doing work on the intersection of the arts and criminal justice, and I started getting invitations to give talks in the prisons,” recalled English Professor Baz Dreisinger. “At one of these talks I met a superintendent who said, ‘Why doesn’t John Jay have a program in a prison?’ I had no good answer to that question.” From that casual question, the wheels began to turn, and Dreisinger ended up posing the question to President Jeremy Travis, whose well known scholarly forte is prisoner reentry. “I said we ought to do this,” she recalled. “After all, we’re CUNY, we’re John Jay. He was incredibly supportive, and the program developed from there.”

The Prison-to-College Pipeline program, also informally called P2CP, is today more than the education program it was originally envisioned to be. Held at the medium-security Otisville Correctional Facility in Orange County, NY, it has become a critical reentry and resocialization tool, one that mingles inmates with students from the John Jay campus proper in a semester-long series of “learning exchanges.”

“We call them inside and outside students, because they’re all considered John Jay students,” said Dreisinger, who serves as Academic Director of the program.

Despite enjoying enthusiastic support from the start, P2CP hit a serious speed bump early in the two-year run-up to its launch in 2011, when the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) decided to close the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility on Staten Island, the intended site of the program. “We had already interviewed all the guys and picked our class,” Dreisinger said. “We were all good to go, and we could never have done a whole other interview process in time.” With some extraordinary efforts on the part of DOCCS officials, she said, “We managed to have our guys transferred to Otisville.”

The David Rockefeller Fund provided a crucial \$100,000 in grants to launch and operate the program – “the first big leap of

faith, for which we’re supremely grateful,” said Dreisinger. She added that Assemblyman Jeff Aubry of Queens, chairman of the Assembly Committee on Correction, helped with his “totally gung-ho” support and sponsorship of an appropriation measure. In both cases, Dreisinger sees it as money well spent. “There is an unequivocal relationship between reduced recidivism rates and higher education,” she observed. “There are numerous studies that have shown this to be the case. And it’s far cheaper to educate than it is to incarcerate.”

Education, P2CP-style, is carefully constructed for maximum benefit. “We wanted to do something different,” said Dreisinger, pointing out that there are two cohorts of students: 10 from the John Jay campus and 16 Otisville prisoners. Competition for available slots in each group is intense, with some 50 applicants for the 10 outside student spots. In order for inmates to qualify for the program, they must be within five years of release, and have no excessive disciplinary record in prison. They must also pass the CUNY assessment tests in reading and writing, write an essay and undergo an interview. “There are a lot more interested prisoners than there are available slots, so we try to recruit people who

are coming back to the five boroughs,” said Bianca van Heydoorn, Director of Education Initiatives for the College’s Prisoner Reentry Institute (PRI), which oversees the program. “According to DOCCS, 48 percent of those incarcerated in the state system are New York City residents.”

Inside and outside students are intermingled in the prison classroom, and both groups are told in advance that this will be the case. Program directors see this as an essential facet of the program. “It’s intended to promote interaction,” said van Heydoorn. “The Otisville students appreciate being interspersed with John Jay students. The whole point is what the two groups can learn from each other, as well as what the ‘outside’ students

can learn from actually being inside a prison.” Along the way, participants read and write intensively, and engage in freewheeling exchanges of ideas.

But P2CP doesn’t end at the prison gates, which is part of what makes the program unique – and so far successful. It has a reentry component that PRI designed in conjunction with the Osborne Association and the College Initiative. It includes support in areas of life that are usually a challenge for those returning from prison, such as housing, employment, reunification with family and health care. And, for the men in P2CP, there is the focus on continuing their higher education. “With a minimum C average and passing the math assessment test, you are guaranteed a spot at John Jay,” van Heydoorn said, noting with undisguised pride that five inside students to date have been released from prison, and two of those are currently enrolled in CUNY, one of them at John Jay. These CUNY students pay the same tuition as any other New York City resident, and have the same access to tuition assistance and other support.

“As a public institution, we wanted to make a statement as far as our commitment to the idea of a pipeline, so that these men start their college journey while inside and then upon release are funneled right into the CUNY system,” said Dreisinger. “In this way, the campus becomes a kind of reentry tool, and a place for them to find a new community – to experience not just college inside but college outside, and benefit from all the things you find on a traditional campus.”

Dreisinger admits that she could never have foreseen being on the frontlines of the reentry issue, but that’s one of the very few surprises she’s encountered. “I had been doing educational programs in prison before this, so I knew they’d be motivated, fantastic, smart and committed,” she said. “It’s way easier to teach inside; the commitment level is just tremendous.”

She envisions P2CP becoming a national model for similar programs in other states, and has a ready answer for those who question the idea of spending public money on prisoner education. “There’s the popular, mainstream answer, and then there’s the one that I think is most just,” she said. “The popular answer is that it reduces recidivism, so it becomes a public safety issue and a cost issue. But to those of us who are really invested in this issue, it’s much deeper than that. It’s really about civil rights and the idea that everyone has a right to an education, whatever scenario you’re in, whatever mistakes you’ve made in your life. It’s a human rights issue.” **JJ**

The Prison-to-College Pipeline was the subject of a recent edition of the John Jay-produced show “Criminal Justice Matters,” aired on CUNY-TV. The show, hosted by Steve Handelman, Director of the Center on Media, Crime and Justice, can be viewed on YouTube at <http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/p2cp>.

P2CP from the Outside In

KrystleLynn Caraballo practically beams when she recalls her experience as one of the “outside students” in the Prison-to-College Pipeline program at Otisville Correctional Facility, meaning she was one of the John Jay students who went behind the walls to study with inmates in the College’s P2CP program.

The P2CP experience stoked Caraballo’s simmering interest in prisoner reentry, which was already being fueled by her work on the issue as an intern in President Jeremy Travis’s office. After graduating this past May, she quickly obtained a position as an administrative assistant in John Jay’s Prisoner Reentry Institute, which allows her to stay involved in the pipeline program.

“Otisville was an exceptional experience because it added a realistic approach to looking at reentry,” she recalled. “In the President’s office, I learned a lot about the prison system, but actually going into the prison gave it a sense of depth that a 100-page report never could.”

P2CP is not a course, per se, but a learning exchange. “We go there once a month and it’s a chance for the Otisville inmates to interact with John Jay students, and vice versa,” Caraballo remembers. “We would leave the College at 10 AM by van and return around 6 PM, leaving only about three hours to spend in the classroom at Otisville.”

“The point of the program is to penetrate the borders that divide us, and thus we are all John Jay students,” Caraballo said. “I remember one guy who defiantly but respectfully said, ‘I am a John Jay student.’ We all cheered. These guys have been labeled too many times, and this was the one area where they did not have a number, so we wanted to keep it that way.”

Purposely, in order to avoid bias, John Jay students are not made aware of the inmate students’ charges, unless the inmates themselves volunteer the information. In Caraballo’s case, “the subject didn’t come up until the last learning exchange in May. There was this one guy who was pretty much my favorite, and I didn’t find out until the end what he was in for. It took me by surprise, but it didn’t really bother me.”

Now that Caraballo is on the operating end of P2CP, she is getting a firsthand look at how complicated the undertaking really is. “It’s a lot of work, but 100-percent fulfilling,” she smiled. **JJ**