

Prisons, Pipelines, and Pedagogy: Diary of the Birth of a Behind-Bars College Program

Part 2

BAZ DREISINGER

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One semester down.

One thing I do differently since starting P2CP (Prison to College Pipeline program): I told myself that I was going to finish things that I start. And since then, just about everything I start, whether it be a book, some homework, an essay or a class, I finish.

I just can't read any kind of book anymore.

Our humanity will always shine through when placed in intellectual environments.

I am able to be myself without having to be a convict.

College is a chance to live, this experience confirmed that.

My view of release is hopeful and vibrant.

It's been a while since I took part in getting an education and being a part of this experience further proved that I got what it takes to make it through college.

I always thought that college was not fun, that learning is not for me. But again I was wrong. College is everything and I can't wait till I'm in John Jay on the outside. My view on release is now all about education! (last word bolded and underlined)

I've learned that I have much more to offer mentally than I give myself credit for. I'm always observing and listening so much that I tend to deprive myself and others fruitful knowledge...my fellow peers take college so seriously...I am usually influenced by the positive energy around me. -Incarcerated students' written reflections after the first semester

After participation in college, prisoners and former prisoners were far more likely to offer advocacy, social supports, and services to other prisoners, their children, and families. The credential itself mattered far less than the process of learning to revise: experiences of reading, interpreting, analyzing, and writing; participating intellectual conversations; being a mentor to others; meeting new kinds of friends; learning how to question social arrangements and researching social situations; cultivating the skills to assess choices and see options individually and collectively; appreciating the ability to revise; and developing persistence in the face of obstacles. -Fine and Torre, Bar None

Like you, I was tremendously disappointed with my denial of release, but I refuse to become discouraged or lose hope. This educational opportunity has allowed me to intellectualize as well as internalize my life....please continue to have faith as I have it. I am not leaving school but plan to accomplish all that I can while I'm here so there will be less to do when I get out. -Theron's letter to me, after being denied parole. He has served 16 years.

February 10, 2012

Semester two is up and running: Anthropology 101. The professor says it's going well thus far, although we're one student down. Edward elected to transfer to another facility, where he could have a job in the DMV call center. Money before education—I grasp this.

Today's learning exchange is all about conflict. Well, conflict resolution, taught by a sociology professor. The inside students might well have taught this session; conflict resolution workshops are some of the few educational options liberally offered in prison. Theron and Rowland took courses in "pastoral care" back at Arthur Kill, so they know the conflict lingo.

The men are asked to draw conflict; most of them depict scenarios from prison—as opposed to life beforehand—and many involve fights over TV rights. William holds up his diagram for the class to see.

"This is Otisville, and this is my conflict with it. This clock is all the time passing me by. And this is all the walking I have to do. This"—he points to an airplane hovering above the scene—"I just threw that in there. Maybe 'cause it can get me out of here."

"So what issue is your conflict really about?" the professor asks. William thinks for a good minute.

"Rights?"

¹ Some names have been changed for the purposes of privacy

In the midst of this, Kenneth approaches me to say he may ask for a facility transfer. I see the hesitation on his face; he wants to talk to me, tell me why, but says he can't.

"You gotta understand certain codes here, Baz." He says he'll stay the semester but doesn't know beyond that. I tell him how much I don't want him to go, urge him to reconsider.

March 16, 2012

Today's learning exchange subject: violence. David Kennedy, known for his high-profile, revolutionary work in community policing—author of *Don't Shoot: One Man, a Street Fellowship and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*—leads this learning exchange. He mines the men for their stories. When did they first experience violence?

Kenneth: my dad had a gun and one day I stole it; I must've been 8 or 9.

Robert: my mother and grandmother tried to get me to stay in the house, so I'd be safe.

Juan: I was scared to go outside.

The outside students are mostly silent, but there's a closeness and camaraderie now, so it's not an awkward silence.

I pull William and James out, one by one, to talk about their impending release, some two months away. There is terror in William's eyes, and he showers me with questions that double as accusations: Can I count on you? What if I don't see you before I get out—how do I find you? I make him a personal promise. Come to my office the day you get out. *You can count on me.*

"I've been promised a lot of things out there that doesn't come through, Baz." I want to tell him I wake up nights worrying about him and James, the program's first releases, but I say nothing. I remember his journal entry about fear: "I'm fearful of my weaknesses. I'll be released in 6 months and will be attending CUNY if all is as promised...one of my fears is to stray away from this path. I pray to God not to let my past life and friends influence me. That I learn to be content. From living a life that any desire was obtainable to having to work hard...I hope that the status of my situation doesn't influence me to get off track."

James seems calmer. So does Theron; his hope and faith in the future, despite the massive parole-rejection setback, never cease to amaze me. Daniel, who'll be released in five months, asks for material about housing—he doesn't want to be in a shelter if he can avoid it. Anxiety about leaving prison can trump anxiety about prison itself. I carry some tiny fraction of the burden but it just barely lightens their load.

April 20, 2012

My guest professor cancelled on me so I run the show today. It was a blast: Jonathan Swift's satirical essay "A Modest Proposal" and class debates about moral utilitarianism.

James and William are weeks away from release, and they have my contact information in hand. Daniel practically cries to me about the guilt he feels and his fear of leaving prison. Right here, right now, the program is really being

put to the test. The idea is to build on the momentum of their identities as students and get them in college as soon as possible, but "re-entry" is a too-easy technical term for an all-consuming, full-time job.

An astonishing 94 percent of state and federal inmates interviewed prior to release consistently identified education as a personal reentry need. In fact, more of them identified this need than identified financial assistance, housing, employment, drug treatment or any other listed reentry need.—Steurer, Linton et al. "The Top Nine Reasons to Increase Correctional Education Programs"

May 8, 2012

I bolt out of class and fly to our meeting spot. Will he be there?

He is, at the top of the escalator, with his girlfriend. As of two days ago, James is a free man. In a brilliant twist of timing he's being celebrated today, his first visit to campus, at a reception honoring the students published in *John Jay's Finest*, a collection of the best writing of the year. He reads an excerpt of the research paper he wrote for me about racial classifications, to a room that includes familiar faces: professors and students he met during learning exchanges. It feels like a real homecoming, to a community he joined while still behind bars.

In my mailbox is a letter William has written me. He comes out tomorrow, and I've been worried about him since our last talk, when he said he didn't fully trust me and I saw the terror in his eyes. The letter makes me cry. He thanks me for being someone he can count on, and promises that he will do me proud as a student.

May 9, 2012

Finally, a call from William. He sounds, literally, like a different person, livelier, relaxed—like a "normal" 26-year-old. He says he's been dodging people in his hood.

"My friends wanted to take me to the club the first night I got out but I said, 'Nah, just family.' Then my parole officer showed up at 5:30 am. But he seems aight."

He tells me about the drama of his release. When he got to the door they didn't want to let him out, because there was some paperwork missing.

"I almost had a heart attack. My mother worked it out but I was flipping out. I didn't give anyone a hug—I just got in the car and said, 'Drive.'"

May 15, 2012

James returns to campus today. Michelle, one of our learning exchange students who's a peer ambassador, takes him for an official tour, then I take him for lunch at a Thai restaurant. He tells me he's barely seen his family and has hit the ground running. There's reentry programs; a meeting at our partner organization, the College Initiative; tomorrow the Department of Motor Vehicles to get a state ID card, so he won't have to show his prison ID to random people anymore. He's been running into familiar faces in the neighborhood: "They try to tell me about the block. I tell them I'm

not a teenager anymore—I don't want to hear it." He let his 17-year-old daughter know that he's home, but hasn't met up with her just yet.

"I don't want to impose," he says. "She can come to me when she's ready. I saw her walking down the street with her boyfriend but I just stayed back—didn't want to disturb her."

He hopes to go into counseling, and wants a job doing HIV/AIDS trainings, for which he was certified while inside. Fellow prisoners hassled him for getting those certifications, he recalls—was he gay or something? But he disregarded the comments and kept his eye on the prize. After all, it got him out and about, doing trainings, and it's one of the few educational options inside.

"I just want to give back," he declares.

May 16, 2012

William seems shell-shocked. We walk from campus to lunch and it's almost as if he forgot, while in prison, how to cross the street. Or ride the train; today he took that first ride and admitted to violating rule number one of the NYC subway: He stared at people. During lunch we discover that we grew up in the same part of the Bronx.

Back in my office he goes incognito, sitting in on my interviews with John Jay students applying to be part of next year's learning exchanges. I introduce him only as a John Jay student who participated in the P2CP. Were you scared? the interviewees ask. What was it like? I'm pleased that they pegged him wrong—they don't realize what side of the barbed-wire fence he was on. I give him Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*; he tells me he thinks he'll be English major.

May 18, 2012

The last learning exchange, and the readings are theirs. I've asked everyone to bring in some of their own writing to read aloud for the class. Some read academic papers, two of them about criminal justice issues. Rowland reads a tragic journal entry; Robert reads two beautiful poems about starting over; Patrick reads a poem he wrote in the voice of a prisoner. Tony shares his personal essay and Kenneth, his labored-over research paper. Things get intense when Daniel reads a statement about his crime and promises the class he won't cry. Dale, though, does cry, reading his contrite parole statement—a litany of life's poor choices. By the end of class, all the two sets of students can do is thank each other.

Daniel is a nervous wreck about his release date. The anxiety centers on practical issues like housing and work, but really it cuts deeper; release time means grappling with the crime all over again. Grappling with it for the first time, really. Far from opening doors to one's inner self, prison is the opportunity to tuck all feelings of guilt and regret firmly beneath necessary self-protective shells. And by virtue of its fundamental unjustness, prison transforms "offenders" into victims. When they head home, they're suddenly overcome with all that's entailed in having to be "offenders," yet again.

Daniel, meanwhile, practically throws a fit in his frustra-

tion. Where's that information about the shelter? Where's the reentry contact person? Part of me wants to holler back: *I am doing my best!* The lack of trust, the demands—I fully comprehend where it comes from. These men have been disappointed by the system their whole lives; I could easily be just another living letdown.

Out of the gates and on the road, students in tow. One year of getting them in and out hasn't been easy.

Over the academic year, the class became very close. We were closer, I venture to say, than any other class in the country because of the nature of the program and yet we were kept apart by our two very different daily realities. No text messages, no getting together for study groups, no communication whatsoever until the next learning exchange, and yet there was an understanding and a level of acceptance that I have not experienced in a classroom since.

Our assignment for the May learning exchange was to bring in a creative writing sample that we authored and present it to the class. I chose a sermon I wrote based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil." My work's underlying message was to not allow yourself to surrender to the taunts of those who judge your actions, when they too are guilty of wrongdoing. The two presentations after me were by two inside students who shocked the class by opening up about their crimes, a previously unspoken topic. One wrote a letter to his victim and gave a heartfelt apology and admitted guilt. "[My friend] had nothing to do with why I was mad, I just took it out on him... and I am so sorry." The other spoke of his actions in his presentation, and could not finish through the tears and emotional outpouring that resulted. It was heart wrenching. I had several conversations with one of the guys and he asked me if I believed in forgiveness and I replied, "I believe everyone deserves a second chance." This was a moment where I had to decide whether or not I believed those words. I had to stop and decide whether my presentation was just for show or if I could truly practice what I preach. I decided that I still felt the same, perhaps with even more force now. Who was I to decide that these guys, my classmates, should spend their lives paying for an action that they seemed genuinely remorseful for? Who was I to deny them the opportunity to start over? I looked around the classroom and no one seemed to be acting any differently. No one felt the need to pass judgment on these men either. It was a moment of trust, a moment of acceptance, a moment I'll never forget.
-Krystlelynn Caraballo, outside student

I compare meeting the outside students to being on a first date. It was awkward at first; we didn't know one another. So we asked probing questions like, "What's your name?" "What's your major?" "Why did you decide to partake in this kind of program?" The second Exchange was a little more relaxed. Everyone conversed and it felt more real, not so stuffy. By the final Exchange it was like we were at a family reunion. Everybody was happy to see each other and was sad knowing it would be the last time we would see each other until the inside students return to society. So it's

a bittersweet memory.

—Robert Taitt, inside student

May 29, 2012

James and William blew the board of trustees away. They're part of a panel about the P2CP at the annual board dinner, which the Otisville superintendent and the Commissioner of Corrections for New York State attended. Both guys giggle nervously as they shake hands with those who formerly incarcerated them.

They wow everyone and I'm pleased, even with my requisite reservations about the whole dog-and-pony-show routine. Comment made by a trustee: I had no idea you guys just got out—I thought you were “regular students.” Question posed by a trustee: What's tomorrow about for you guys?

“It's about all the guys inside. I do this for them,” says William.

“Tomorrow,” says James, slowly, “is about being one step closer to where I want to be.”

July 9, 2012

The VP of Enrollment lets me know that James failed the math exam required to attend John Jay; he'll have to start at a two-year college instead. William, though, passed, so he is good to go—officially the first one in our pipeline.

I meet William in my office. He's been worrying me for days now. Says he may not want to go to school.

“I don't really feel like I was in prison—like it never really happened.” This is good and bad, I say. I don't want him to have to be marked—even self-marked—with that scarlet letter, but at the same time, he needs to recognize that odds are working against him. Should I insist that he be defined by his incarceration? He admits that he's been partying. He wants to move out of his mom's place and rent a two-bedroom apartment with his boy. I understand his need and right to be a regular 26-year-old, but the reality is that he isn't one. A single slipup and he's back inside. The stakes are high, I tell him.

“Don't worry,” he assures me. “My parole officer is cool with me.”

“Don't fall into that trap,” I insist. He still thinks I have some ulterior motive for wanting him in school. He tells me I'm too trusting; I tell him he needs to tone down the cynicism and distrust—not everyone is out to get you. Is it wrong of me to want him to be a model citizen of reentry America? William hasn't been remotely institutionalized. He's bitter about the system and won't stop questioning it. That's beautiful and awful.

July 24, 2012

Interviews for the new class of P2CP students. It's grueling trying to gauge someone's intellectual capacity in ten minutes. And even more grueling making sense of nonsensical sentences: What the hell is “15 to life”? Either your crime is worthy of 15 years, or it's worthy of life—what sort of range is that?

I am looking for men who will be released within three

years, an admissions requirement for our program. No one here seems to be coming home. That's because, as one inmate explains, in the past year Otisville has become packed to the gills with lifers and long-termers. “They call it the lifers' graveyard,” he explains. Apparently I am, in mourning, interviewing the living dead.

The day I went to my counselor's office for the telephone interview, I was excited and nervous. I thought to myself, “this is it. This is your shot.” My counselor said something that captured the feeling I had at that moment: “Mr. Wilson, this phone call can change your life as we know it.” At that time in my life and up until this day I believed it could and it did. That phone call was an opportunity to meet a goal I set for myself during my incarceration, to get educated and be the successful person I was meant to be.

—Matthew Wilson, inside student

July 25, 2012

Today I see James on campus, looking dapper in crisp white shirt and tie. The girlfriend didn't work out so he's moved back in with his mom. He'll attend Bronx Community College and has scored a full-time job as a counselor with a reentry organization. He promises me he'll check in on William, who's MIA. I've been trying to get him to show up and register at John Jay for days now, to no avail; when he finally showed up and I marched him through the chilling bureaucracy that is CUNY registration, there was a hold on his account and we couldn't get through the red tape.

Tony and Daniel are home and I've spoken to both of them. They sound happy and hopeful. But so it seems to go. The honeymoon period immediately following release eventually gets soured by the reality of life in the new Jim Crow.

August 30, 2012

“Can I call you back? I'm in school.” I could cry at the sound of those words, delivered by William. That evening, he sends me his schedule for the Fall semester. I say Hosannas.

Tony meets me on campus wearing a Kansas City blue cap and matching jersey. It's freshman orientation day, which is convenient. We walk from booth to booth and at every turn he's handed flyers for this club or that major. Tony is confused but I'm not. “He'll be starting in February,” I tell them. At lunch, we talk for some two hours about his complex life outside. His main concern is his son, 17—in prison.

Still no word from Daniel.

September 3, 2012

The highs and the lows of this work are jolting. I step onto campus and there's William, beaming, in his hoodie and backpack—a regular college student. Like James, he tells me his classes are easy.

“And I'm the only one who talks in my sociology class,” he says.

But then Daniel brings me back to earth. He's receiving every form of public assistance imaginable, housed in a

shelter and attending programs day in, day out. He's practically living in governmental offices; I tell him he'll have a Ph.D. in bureaucracy by the time this is all over. He's miraculously managing to stay positive, but—"I'm not saying I want to go back to prison, Baz, but sometimes *I want to go back to prison.*" He asks me if he can get me permission to go back to Otisville, just for a visit, to see the guys.

Robert, meanwhile, updates me by phone. He's at a halfway house for men with alcohol addiction. He's never had a problem with alcohol but this was the house he happened to be placed in, so he has to attend their workshops twice a week. The other day he almost landed a job at a bakery in downtown Brooklyn, but he'd be required to be there on the two mornings he has programs at the halfway house. No can do—he couldn't take the job. Because if he misses the programs—which he doesn't actually need—he'll get kicked out of the house. Double sigh.

Later, texts from William: "It feels so good to be in school, Baz."

A second later: "Sharing my knowledge."

September 6, 2012

William is applying for a CUNY internship aimed at fighting for social and economic justice. The big question: Does he tell them about being formerly incarcerated? Ah, the dilemma du jour. The first generation of the new Jim Crow have it the hardest, because it's incumbent on them, whether they like it or not, to change people's minds about what "formerly incarcerated" looks like. Like undocumented immigrants, we don't really know how many of them there are; like the undocumented, too, they live in fear and grapple with the implications of "coming out." All conversations about rights for the formerly incarcerated should be about civil rights and equal citizenship, not safety and recidivism. If the state deems someone safe, and we allegedly believe in that state and its government, then how can that same someone be deemed unsafe for a campus or a jobsite? This is the hypocritical universe into which my students—free yet still very much unfree—have been thrust.

September 5, 2012

Full circle: the first school day of the second full year of the Prison-to-College Pipeline. I accompany this semester's faculty members up to prison for their volunteer orientation. After getting fingerprinted—again; there was apparently a problem with my ones on file—we're made to watch an orientation video that the staff is excited about, as it's newly produced. *Games Inmates Play* details, in portentous tones, exactly what the hyper-manipulative species known as "in-mate" will do to unwitting volunteers and COs, if given the chance. Words are splashed ominously across the screen—*manipulate, consequences*—and the whole thing ends with Feds swooping down on errant officers and volunteers, then shipping them behind bars, where they belong. My new professor looks at me nervously when it's done. When it comes to this population, I wonder, isn't there a way to humanize without hagiographing?

We walk into the classroom. So many students! Looking out at the nervous faces of the newbies, I feel excited but anxious: the program is now full-fledged. Rowland, newly rejected for parole, gives me a stunning thank-you card. "Thank you for having faith and trust in me from the beginning," he writes. "I will never misplace them."

Somehow, some way, these men trod on against the tide, books in hand.

This journey was not solely about me fulfilling a personal quest. It was a group of men coming together...we would stand by each other during our journey of higher learning, pushing each other toward excellence. Ultimately, this experience has become one of life's lessons that will guide me throughout life. Here I stand, a student enrolled in John Jay's Prison-to-College Pipeline, with a 3.75 GPA. Yes, I have earned the right to be here. —Rowland Davis, inside student

At one time college was further from my mind than Pluto is from the Earth. But now it feels closer to me than some of my own thoughts. —Marcus Chandler, inside student

Four findings in her testimony on the benefits of college in prison: reincarceration rates are reduced; there are considerable government savings due to fewer commitments and the reduction in the associated costs of incarcerating people; prisons are more peaceful and disciplined; and, the children of prisoners participating in in-prison college programs are encouraged to pursue education more seriously. —Fine et al.

Correctional education is almost twice as cost effective as incarceration. —Bazos & Hausman

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