



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

JODY LEWEN

One of the most remarkable aspects of San Quentin as a community is the way it has evolved over time as a meeting ground for people from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. To some extent this is probably typical of prisons generally; yet located as it is in the California Bay Area, San Quentin has become one of the most dramatic examples of its kind. In a demographic sense, it is precisely what colleges should be like, but rarely are.

It is strange to imagine that a prison, of all places, might model the promise of the university, but in many respects, this is exactly what is happening.

While educational, religious, and recovery programs have long been central to the intellectual and social life of the prison, in recent years, a much broader range of programs has emerged, including ones that focus on media, political advocacy, and the arts. Many have been initiated and/or are co-facilitated by incarcerated people, rather than by outside individuals or groups only.

By hosting visits, organizing events, and launching every manner of collaborative effort, those programs have become the vehicle through which the community of San Quentin engages with the outside world, and the way the outside world can engage with the

world inside the prison. This includes academics, journalists, policymakers, advocates, philanthropists, filmmakers, attorneys, researchers, judges, business people, finance professionals, elected officials, tech industry professionals, law enforcement, and others who are interested in learning from and with people inside.

In any rigorous college setting, students are always discovering new forms of knowledge, different perspectives, and new social conventions. This type of deep learning not only alters one's relationship to the world at large; it often shapes one's

very sense of identity, one's notion of community, even one's life path. And at San Quentin, those who are engaged in such transformative learning include not just students, but the entire community. Even a single visit can prompt a life-changing shift in perspective. And those profound experiences are then carried back to friends, families, and colleagues, thus expanding that transformational circle even further.

As teachers and students learn together, and get to know each other, they also establish social bonds, including a sense of mutual appreciation and trust. Those relationships serve a critical function in all teachers' capacity

to support their students' intellectual and professional development. But in the prison context, those relationships also create bridges between their often radically different worlds—they shed light, lend legitimacy, generate good will, and forge a sense of commitment and responsibility.

All of this teaching, learning, and relationship-building has created the foundation upon which world-changing work being done at and around San Quentin is built. The prison has become the epicenter of an ever-growing social network that now serves, among other things, to support people who are leaving the prison—by connecting them to a larger supportive community of friends and mentors, as well as employment opportunities, housing, and other critical resources.

But that network is not just providing vital support to individuals; it is also advancing an array of cultural, educational, and political initiatives—both large and small—many of which are transforming the criminal justice system and creating a better-informed, healthier world.

The forms this transformation takes are varied: An English instructor and a student at San Quentin team up to co-create a high school course on criminal justice reform. At a roundtable discussion with a group of visiting legislators (hosted by the *San Quentin News*), a student shares about the impact of medical co-pays in prison; one of those legislators later helps to change those rules for the entire system. Inspired by a lecture (by Bryan Stevenson) at San Quentin, a student

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found an organization through which incarcerated and non-incarcerated people use art to transform public attitudes about mass incarceration (Prison Renaissance). District attorneys attending an event at San Quentin hear about a student's proposal to create a process through which DAs and CDCR administrators can recommend people for early release, and later help put it into practice. Media projects produced by or with people at San Quentin (via the *San Quentin News*, San Quentin Radio/KALW, Firstwatch, *Ear Hustle*) are heard by tens of thousands of people every week, all over the world. This essay was written with extensive feedback from a student! The list is endless.

None of this is to say that the internal workings of such collaborations are not fraught with all manner of complex challenges—above all, the unequal

distribution of power, access to resources, and social legitimacy—all of these reflect the gross inequalities of both the prison environment and the society as a whole. But this is precisely what makes the work so extraordinary. It is strange to imagine that a prison, of all places, might model the promise of the university, but in many respects, this is exactly what is happening.

In spite of unimaginable obstacles, this community forges ahead—pooling its collective social, cultural and economic capital, its creativity, compassion, and sheer determination—to support the wellbeing of its members, serve the public good, and transform the society as a whole.



USING EDUCATION TO STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSH PAGE

Since the College Program at San Quentin was founded in 1996, hundreds of people have worked as instructors, teaching assistants, tutors, and guest lecturers. Even years later, many of them describe having been impacted by the experience in profound ways, both personally and professionally, and many find their work at San Quentin has changed the trajectory of their lives and resulted in strong community bonds and professional networks among fellow instructors. Lately we've been working to compile testimonials from former faculty, in order to better understand how their experiences engaging with the students and the program at San Quentin have created ripple effects in their lives, and document how students at San Quentin are impacting the larger world.



What did you do at San Quentin, and what are you currently doing professionally?

In 1998 and 1999, I was a teaching assistant for

Introduction to Sociology, Creative Writing, and English 99. Today I'm an associate professor of sociology and law at the University of Minnesota. I also have a not-so-secret life as a food writer, and I'm the co-founder and associate editor of *Meal Magazine*, a new print publication that aims to reimagine food writing and food writers.

How did the experience of teaching at SQ impact you?

It literally changed my career trajectory—and life. I went to graduate school



FALL SEMESTER

Course Offerings

- English 99A: Developmental English I
- English 99B: Developmental English II
- Math 50A: Developmental Math I
- Math 50B: Developmental Math II
- Math 99: Elementary Algebra
- Math 115: Intermediate Algebra
- English 101A: Reading and Composition
- English 101B: Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing
- English 204: Interdisciplinary Reading, Writing, and Research
- Public Health 220: Introduction to Public Health
- Sociology 230: Sociology
- English 243: Critical Thinking
- English 248: Twentieth-Century American Literature
- History 101: U.S. History I
- Philosophy 271: Introduction to Philosophy
- Anthropology 220: Cultural Anthropology
- Communication 146: Communication
- Psychology 211: Abnormal Psychology

Other Activities Happening this Fall

- A weekly discussion of philosophical and applied ethics, culminating in an Ethics Bowl competition against outside teams
- A weekly Math Circle, an alternative non-credit math enrichment program
- Regular workshops on student success

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to study racial inequality and politics (not the criminal-legal system). Early in my first semester, I received a random email requesting volunteer teaching assistants for the Prison University Project's College Program at San Quentin and signed up. After a couple sessions, I began to wonder why so few college programs exist in U.S. prisons. That question became the basis of my master's thesis, which focused on Congress's ludicrous (but politically expedient) decision in 1994 to eliminate Pell Grants for prisoners.

I've continued to research the politics of criminal punishment and related issues. For my first book, *The Toughest Beat: Politics, Punishment, and the Prison Officers Union in California*, I analyzed the rise of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association as a powerful interest group and traced its influence on penal policy, prison conditions, and carceral labor. My second book (co-authored with Phil Goodman and Michelle Phelps), *Breaking the Pendulum: The Long Struggle Over Criminal Justice*, offers a new perspective on how penal policy and practice change over time. I recently studied the bail bond industry while working as a bail agent in a large urban county. I am currently writing a book with my colleague Joe Soss that explains how and why government agencies and for-profit companies (including bail bonds) use the criminal justice system to extract billions of dollars every year from poor communities (primarily communities of color). The book, *Preying on the Poor: Criminal Justice as Revenue Racket*, should be out in 2021.

Did the experience impact how you actually approach your work? Do you see any differences between you and your colleagues who have not had similar experiences?

While participating in the program, I learned to always question one-dimensional visions of justice-involved people, including those who work in the system. Destructive public policy, bad scholarship, and ignorant comments often result

from an unwillingness to see people (especially incarcerated people) as multi-dimensional people with varied experiences, desires, and goals.

Unlike some of my colleagues, I do not think recidivism rates and similar quantitative outcomes are very effective for assessing prison-based programs. They don't consider how programs (like the Prison University Project) inspire hope, self-assurance, and commitment to helping others; improve prison climate; and help people develop the skills and confidence to become effective advocates within and beyond prison.

How do you believe that the community of San Quentin has impacted the larger world?

Over the years the College Program has facilitated strong relationships between publicly engaged scholars with a common vision of using education (teaching, research, and writing) to struggle for justice. Three of my closest colleagues also taught at San Quentin. All three are leaders in their fields and have changed how scholars, advocates, and policymakers think about critical criminal-legal issues.



The first is Amy Lerman (associate professor of public policy and political science at UC Berkeley). She has

published path-breaking research on how prisons affect the attitudes, well-being, and behaviors of prisoners and prison officers. Amy and I collaborated on research on the organizational and political determinants of prison officer attitudes in California and Minnesota. Amy's important, co-authored book, *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control*, shows how contact with the criminal justice system shapes political attitudes and civic engagement; this

research has changed the conversation about the political consequences of mass incarceration and related penal developments.



Karin Martin (assistant professor of public policy at the University of Washington), is a renowned expert on legal financial

obligations (e.g., court fines, fees, and restitution). Along with publishing first-rate articles in peer-reviewed journals, she has provided testimony on the scope and effects of criminal justice debt to the New York State Assembly and to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Joe Soss and I rely on Karin's research and consultation for *Preying on the Poor*.



One of my dearest friends, Keramet Reiter (associate professor of criminology, law, and society at UC Irvine), is the

author of *23/7: Pelican Bay and the Rise of Long-Term Solitary Confinement*, an incredible study of the rise, transformation, and consequences of the Security Housing Unit (SHU). I assign *23/7* in my course, *The Sociology of Punishment*; the book successfully challenges students to reconsider their understandings of solitary confinement and popular images of prisoners. (Keramet has participated in the class remotely, and the students love her.) In my opinion, *23/7* is one of the best books written about prisons because Keramet shows that the book's subjects (SHU prisoners, state officials, advocates, et al.) are multi-dimensional people with complex backgrounds, a fact that gets lost behind denigrating, simplifying terms like "the worst of the worst."

FOOTNOTE TO WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE AN OLDER INMATE DOING TIME IN PRISON

BY PETER BERGNE

Being incarcerated is physically and mentally stressful enough, even for a young, able-bodied person, but for someone older, the challenges are even more intense. When I invited Peter Bergne to write for this newsletter about the experience of being incarcerated while an elderly person, I imagined he would write about the vulnerability to abuse or exploitation, the sense of social isolation, challenges of accessing medical care, lack of appropriate toiletries, poor nutrition, sleeping on a bad mattress with older bones, or the fear of be-

ing involuntarily moved to another prison with far fewer programs due to one's physical limitations. Instead he wrote a very personal account of what it is like to be repeatedly denied parole. My immediate reaction was to think he'd veered off topic, so I asked him to write some more in response to the original prompt. It was only when I saw his second response that I realized that he was in fact answering the question. I am grateful to Peter both for writing this piece, and for his patience with me.

—Jody Lewen



My life as an older inmate is different in that it is more oppressive psychologically, and it is the egregious unconstitutional prison overcrowding that has made incarceration much more difficult today. This is only one issue. Secondly, the isolation and very restricted contact with people on the outside is a problem for older inmates who need better interaction with community volunteers and reentry facilities. Also, time is very valuable to older inmates who are trying in good faith to salvage what time they have left in a free society under parole supervision.

What is not understood very well by others outside in society are the overt abuses in the state's existing parole system. Life in prison would be made a lot better and more fair if elderly prisoners would be released unconditionally without the "suitability" hurdle by the parole board commissioners if they have served more than thirty (30) years and who 1) are over the age of 70, 2) have not taken the life of a police officer, child, or governmental official, 3) have not been

sentenced to death or life without the possibility of parole, 4) have not committed multiple murders, and 5) have not been convicted of first-degree murder except for those who have been granted relief by the courts pursuant to Senate Bill 1437.

Currently, and most unfortunately, California's parole commissioners with their excessively broad authority and discretion over the fate of life-term prisoners create an atmosphere of fear and even terror in the hearts and minds of many elderly prisoners hoping to be released on parole. Like other deserving and reformed lifers, my 15-years-to-life term is being unjustly and unconstitutionally "prolonged" and unreasonably hampered by findings of "unsuitability" by unduly biased and prejudicial parole commissioners who have the unfettered liberty of using any one of a dozen or more "highly suggestive reasons" as a basis for denying parole.¹ This abusive practice needs to be overhauled and changed.

Finally, in a higher dimension of

human and spiritual thought and awareness, I will add that the principalities and rulers of this Earth shall never dictate to me who I am, where I may be, or where I am going, for I am a reborn child of God and a new creature founded in Christ. I will never know what it is to be an "old man" because I am still young in spirit, mind, and body. Only my Father in heaven knows when, and if, I will ever become an old man.

1. "Highly subjective reasons" include, for example, "lack of insight," "lack of remorse," "lack of appreciation for the impact of a crime on the community," etc. Also, there is unfair discrimination due to parole applicants' autonomy, personal beliefs, or sexual orientations or tastes in clear violation of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling and precedent set forth under *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 135 S. Ct. 2584, 192 L. Ed. 2d 609, 621-631 (2015).

THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE A LIVING EXAMPLE: ON BECOMING A TEACHING ASSISTANT

BY WILLIAM BLACKWELL



In 2017 I graduated from Patten University with a GPA of 3.22. Thereafter, I found myself involved with the teaching assistant program because I desired to give back to a community that has given me and others

like me so much. My pursuit of higher education has given me insight into the illiteracy and learning disabilities that once arrested my mental and educational development, which resulted in me succumbing to the psyche of the streets, crime, and gang subcultures of society.

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During my 25 years of incarceration, I've witnessed thousands of juvenile men of color who entered the prison system, as I did at 16, and came from a subculture that gave them the same thing it gave me: the generational inheritance of being psychologically enslaved to the mindset of the sociopath and psychopath.

This antisocial behavior that clouds over the subcultures of our society ignites within me a passion to strive for positive change—not just for myself, but for all

who are affected by a system that dishonors and devalues human life and its right to thrive healthy and happy.

Becoming a teaching assistant and tutor has allowed me the opportunity not only to assist new students in their education, but also to have a platform to create positive dialogue to challenge the mindset of men who hold on to antisocial behavior dearly. It is through higher education endeavors and my passion for positive change that I seek to obtain my B.A. and Masters in juvenile justice and counseling.

My experience and observations as a student and teaching assistant have given me the ability to recognize new students' strong and weak points in their learning skills, and the opportunity to be a living example for new students to see what higher education can achieve. It is important that incarcerated students witness men—like them, incarcerated—who have achieved their college degrees, and are now displaying their educational transformation in the role of a civil servant, with a genuine heart to give back to the community.

THE PATH TO INDEPENDENCE: A PROGRESS REPORT ON SEEKING INDEPENDENT ACCREDITATION

The Prison University Project continues to make progress toward independent accreditation. In February, our eligibility application was accepted by the Accrediting Commission of Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). While this does not create a formal relationship with the commission, it is a major initial success. As of the end of Summer 2019, we have just completed our self-evaluation process, which included collecting and reviewing feedback about our instructional programs, student support services, and foundational values from faculty, current and former students, and our broader community of supporters.

On July 29th, we held a Town Hall inside San Quentin to further inform students about the history and rationale behind our effort to become an independent college, and to address questions and comments. Around 50 students attended, along with Prison University Project staff and four College Program alumni. In August, we submitted our detailed

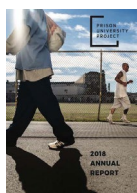
self-evaluation report in support of initial accreditation to ACCJC, and in October, we will host a site visit with nine peer reviewers from colleges across the state. The visitors will meet with instructors, staff, students, and board members to learn about and evaluate our work. We anticipate a formal decision from ACCJC about our accreditation in January 2020.

OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT OUR GROWTH

The Prison University Project is currently seeking funding partners to join us at leadership levels in founding the first-ever college based inside of an American prison. There is much work to do to make this dream a reality—accreditation is only the first step. Building and maintaining an independent college will impact every aspect of

our organization, such as expanding our student support services (including library and technology resources and alumni supports), building an institutional research department with new data tracking and management systems, expanding our operational and financial capacity to sustainably manage our growth, and building out our Technical Assistance program, which supports the high quality development of other prison-based college programs throughout California and the U.S.

There are many opportunities to invest in the work ahead, and we are eager to share the details with interested members of our community. Please reach out to Lauren Hall at lhall@prisonuniversityproject.org if you'd like to learn more about our efforts in to become an independent institution.



If you would like a printed copy of our 2018 Annual Report, please send a message to development@prisonuniversityproject.org. For an electronic copy, visit prisonuniversityproject.org/media-library.



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“It is important that incarcerated students witness men—like them, incarcerated—who have achieved their college degrees, and are now displaying their educational transformation in the role of a civil servant, with a genuine heart to give back to the community.”

— WILLIAM BLACKWELL, STUDENT

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The mission of the College Program at San Quentin is to provide an intellectually rigorous, inclusive Associate of Arts degree program and college preparatory program, free of charge, to people at San Quentin State Prison; to expand access to quality higher education for incarcerated people; and to foster the values of equity, civic engagement, independence of thought, and freedom of expression. We provide approximately 20 courses leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses, to approximately 350 students each semester. All instructors work as volunteers; most are faculty or graduate students from local colleges and universities. We rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.

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YOU CAN HELP

We’ve accomplished so much through the generosity of our donors. Your contribution helps us increase our capacity at San Quentin, build a national model for prison higher education, train and support the next generation of prison higher education providers, and amplify the voices of incarcerated people across the nation.

To contribute, please go to prisonuniversityproject.org/donate.



PHOTOS

Cover: Students on the yard at San Quentin
(Photo: R.J. Lozada)

“Footnote to What it is Like to be an Older Inmate Doing Time in Prison:” Peter Bergne (Nigel Poor)

“Using Education to Struggle For Justice:” In order, left to right—Josh Page, Amy Lerman, Karin Martin, and Keramet Reiter (Unknown)

Fall Semester photo: Pencil and class notes
(R.J. Lozada)

Above: Hieu “Rocky” Nguyen, Eric Villanueva, and Jack Benford in study hall (R.J. Lozada)