Chapter 6
Meeting Them Where They Are: Student Learning Behind Bars

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ABSTRACT
Correctional educational programs strive to enhance the type of prisoner returning to the community and reduce the chances they will return to their criminal activity and (as a result) return to prison. While some correctional facilities have school districts, some collaborate with community colleges to obtain educational services. In 2007, the United States Congress passed the Second Chance Act, which allotted funding to enhance the nation’s educational system within its correctional facilities. The purpose of this chapter is to address a specific way community colleges serve students where they are. The authors address research pertaining to the role of education in an incarcerated student population’s ability to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. Additionally, the authors share first-hand curricular and support challenges and innovative practices in preparing students behind bars for the workforce of the (in most cases) not so near future.

INTRODUCTION
Teaching community college students in transition (from where they are to where they are going to be) can be challenging without the confines of high cement walls, solid steel bars, and constant supervision. Some of the general factors that have the potential to serve as hurdles along the pathway to academic and life-career success for community colleges students include having first-generation student status, family obligations, work obligations, part-time enrollment status, being of non-traditional age, and academically underprepared. The transition for community college students behind bars is coupled with a sense of hope for regained freedom to live and thrive once again as a member of society. The transition period for community college students behind bars can last a lifetime, and the opportunity to gain knowledge through formal education offers a pathway into the future.

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When one thinks of prison they most likely automatically envision a cold, eerie (almost ghostly) building with barbed wire around the perimeter, slamming gates, and commanding watch towers that restrict the movement of its inhabitants in an effort to provide the security of the prisoners, staff members (sworn and civilian), and the community at large. The security necessary to protect those within the prison walls is omnipresent. From the handcuffs and chains, the exposed bathroom facilities, and lingering security cameras, there is a constant reminder that one is inside of a secure environment. The imposing reminders add a thick layer of awareness for the instructor who teaches students behind bars. Yet in an effort to build and maintain a classroom environment that is conducive to effective student learning, the instructor behind bars must keep in mind (regardless of the physical environment) that the objectives at the heart of it all are the appreciation for knowledge, progressive learning, and ultimate students success.

BACKGROUND

As previously mentioned, the student population that attends community colleges in America is unique because, compared to students who attend baccalaureate degree-granting institutions, more non-traditionally aged students tend to enroll in coursework at community colleges. The average age of students at the community college is 28. Also, a large percentage (42%) of students at community colleges are first-generation college students which means they come from families where neither parents nor guardians earned a baccalaureate degree. Students at community colleges are likely to have family (16% are single parents) and work obligations, and as a result nearly 60% are enrolled in part-time coursework (NCES, 2009).

Because of an open-access mission, community colleges tend to admit a large number of academically underprepared students (McCabe, 2000). More specifically, over 50% of the students admitted to community colleges are considered academically underprepared as a result of placement test scores in core academic disciplines such as reading, writing, and mathematics and are required to enroll in remedial or developmental education courses and programs when they enter the community college (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Just over 30% of the students who enroll in remedial or developmental education courses and programs obtain a degree or certificate within six years at community colleges (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepherd, 2010).

Students behind bars are not immune to these characteristics. In fact, students behind bars could potentially bring with them any combination of the many success-impeding characteristics. However (for better or worse as illustrated later in this chapter), students behind bars have one other very important variable to add to the equation—time. In a qualitative study on prison reentry, an ex-prisoner stated, “The influence on my way of thinking was being alone in those 4 x 8 cells, you know, and I had a chance to really do a lot of soul searching and, you know, it was what I call my wilderness experience. But then, I think about it, I was locked down for 30 days, 24 hours, you know? For the average person that might make you an animal being caged in like that but it didn’t. Like I said, I did a lot of crying, you know what I’m saying, because I was mad at myself for letting myself down and letting my family down for being back in there (prison). That was my major influence, you know? I wanted to change, you know?” (Smith, 2013).

Another research participant shared that after serving his first year of a four-year sentence he realized that he needed to do something different with his life and make the most out of his prison sentence. He