

# UNLOCKING THE DOOR

*While statistics show education reduces the odds of returning to prison, inmates scramble for opportunities to earn degrees behind bars.*

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BY PATRICE GAINES

**TODD YOUNG** WAS A PRISONER AT SING SING CORRECTIONAL FACILITY WHEN HE ENTERED COLLEGE. AT AGE 41, HE WAS A former drug addict, serving time for second-degree murder. He didn't see the value of college and thought he was "too dumb" to go, but a patient teacher at the Ossining, New York, facility helped him see his own potential, and Young eventually earned a bachelor's degree in behavioral science from Mercy College.

At his graduation, Young, who was valedictorian of his class, spoke of the ways in which higher education transformed him.

"I have increased self-esteem, confidence, discipline," Young said. "I have deeper ability to love myself, others, my wife and my family, an overarching desire to give back to society."

Studies show that education reduces recidivism. A 2013 study by the RAND Corp. and the Department of Justice found that participants in prison education programs were less likely to return to prison after their release. The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), a project of Bard College in New York that enrolls incarcerated women and men in academic programs that lead to degrees from Bard College, found that nationwide, nearly 68 out of every 100 prisoners were rearrested within three years of release, and more than half returned to prison. The recidivism rate for BPI graduates is less than 2.5 percent, and the recidivism rate for all those who have enrolled in BPI is less than 4 percent, according to Megan Callaghan, Ph.D., director of College Operations for Bard Prison Initiative.

She said Bard College had conferred nearly 350 associate in arts and bachelor's degrees to people in prison through the initiative, which operates within six New York correctional facilities, now enrolling almost 300 students. BPI also works to support other colleges in prison through the national Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison, which is active in nine states, enrolling close to 800 women and men.

Photography by: Pete Mauney



Men in the Bard Prison Initiative Program. The recidivism rate for its graduates is less than 2.5 percent.

Some critics view a college education as a privilege that inmates do not deserve. The 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act banned incarcerated people from receiving Pell Grants. The act effectively ended prison higher education programs, since most of approximately 350 programs then in existence depended on these grants to sustain them. Within a year, only about a dozen programs remained. In New York state, where Young received his education, 66 of 70 programs shut down.

Today, it's difficult to say how many prison college programs exist since teachers and activists — even inmates themselves — have had to scramble to establish new programs and financially sustain them. Most efforts are regional, often organized by colleges, and privately funded through nonprofits or foundations.

In 2014, when New York's Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced a plan to provide public funding for prison-college programs, critics in New York's legislature killed the plan and called it "a slap in the face" to law-abiding taxpayers.

New York State Sen. Greg Ball, R-Patterson, Putnam County, was among the senators who announced a petition drive to

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—Tanya Erzen, founder and executive director of the Freedom Education Project of Puget Sound

block the initiative, saying the state shouldn't be using public money for prisoners when taxpayers are struggling to pay for college educations for their children.

"In a world of finite resources, where we are struggling to find funding for education for our kids, the last thing New York state should be funding is college tuition for convicts," Ball said in a statement released by his office.

Meanwhile, black and Hispanic lawmakers, representing the communities with the highest incidence of incarceration, applauded the governor.

The governor said that helping inmates get a college education cost \$5,000 a year per person. "You pay \$60,000 for a prison cell for a year," Gov. Cuomo told critics. "You put a guy away for ten years, that's six-hundred grand."

Louise Pitcher, a former inmate and college graduate who works now as an employment coach for Exodus Transitional



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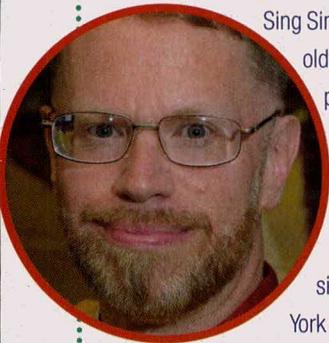
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\* 2014 Almanac of Higher Education, published Aug. 2014, by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

## OPENING NEW WORLDS

**TODD YOUNG** was released from Sing Sing Correctional Facility on Jan. 27, 2012. He was 48 and had spent 25 years in prison. His courses in prison, he said, opened up a new world for him. "They helped me with confidence, socialization, much more than just academics," said Young. While incarcerated, he also earned a master's degree in urban ministry from New York Theological Seminary. Today, he is alumni coordinator for Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, the nonprofit that runs the Sing Sing program from which he graduated. It is the oldest of the in-prison undergraduate college programs, started by inmates who asked volunteers to assist them. Its recidivism rate is less than 2 percent. The program is in five institutions, helping 445 prisoners a year, said Young. "This is a drop in the bucket, considering we have 56,000 inmates within New York state," said Young. "A lot of our participants are the first in their families to go to college, but now we are seeing their children go to college, too."



Community, an organization that helps formerly incarcerated people in New York, empathizes with people who oppose college education for people in prison, though she hopes that programs for inmates increase and that Pell Grants return for them.

"I can understand both sides of the argument," said Pitcher. "What I can say is overall, people who are incarcerated — the majority — never had any direction and never followed through with education, and education is the key to changing

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— Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York

your life ... It makes somebody feel like they have worth."

Though the governor's efforts failed, supporters of college in prison said they believe the federal government will expand these programs soon, based on recent conversations with officials in higher education and their focus on quality instruction for juveniles in detention.

"I think we have to shift thinking so that people believe everyone deserves an education," said Tanya Erzen, a founder and executive director of the Freedom Education Project of Puget Sound (FEPPS). Erzen is also an associate professor at the

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THE CHRONICLE  
2014 GREAT COLLEGES TO WORK FOR.

University of Puget Sound. FEPPS, a nonprofit organization, offers college classes inside the Washington Correction Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Washington. The program started after female inmates of the correction center reached out to the community asking for help in getting college courses. Now professors from five universities offer courses that allow women to earn credits toward an Associate of Arts and Science degree.

Jody Lewen, executive director of the Prison University Project at San Quentin State Prison in California, said taking education to prisoners is “like delivering water to the desert.”

Lewen hopes to see people in prison become leaders in changing the prison system itself.

“There are brilliant people here,” she added. “I want to know: What happens when you educate people in prison and put them in society where they can influence society on a large scale?”

## A CHANGED WOMAN

The opportunity to take college courses while incarcerated proved to **LOUISE PITCHER** that she could learn, that she had value and that she might possibly be able to “make amends” to the community she believes she deeply harmed.

Pitcher, 57, was 30 years old when she went to prison for the murder of her aunt. A drug addict at the time, she participated in a robbery of her aunt. She did not know one of her co-defendants had killed the aunt before they left the house, but Pitcher was found guilty of felony murder and sentenced to 15 to 30 years.

She was a high school dropout when she entered the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York.

“I went in with zero self-esteem and not caring about myself,” said Pitcher. “I dropped to my knees the first night and asked God to help me change my life. I immediately started

thinking of what I could do.”

Pitcher, who works for Exodus Transitional Community, an organization that helps formerly incarcerated people in New York, said that at that time, Bedford Hills had no GED program for women, only for men. She wrote letters begging to take the test and finally after four months, officials granted her wish. Then she heard about a college program. She begged to participate in that and started in January 1988. She received her bachelor’s degree in behavioral science from Mercy College in May 1991.

“My purpose for starting college was to give my mother something,” said Pitcher, an employment coach at Exodus Transitional Community in East Harlem. “I realized the enormity of the pain I caused her, but I fell in love with college ... because it was so rewarding each time I got a grade.”



Lewen also emphasizes the importance of having universities and the Justice Department agree on what the goal is for providing higher education for incarcerated individuals. “A lot of programs in prison have succumbed to political pressure to evaluate success by recidivism,” said Lewen.

She calls that “an awfully low standard.” Lewen suggests looking at how success is measured for nonincarcerated students and including considerations like “how many students continue their education; what kinds of jobs people are inspired to pursue; civic engagement.”

In North Carolina, courses are almost wholly funded by private contributions and profits from prisoners’ phone calls and canteen purchases. Prisoners can take on-site classes as well as self-paced courses to complete by mail. The North Carolina Department of Public Safety and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill provide on-site classes at six correctional institutions.

For the self-paced classes, Raphael Ginsberg, assistant director of North Carolina Correctional Education at UNC-Chapel Hill, said, “Inmates can write us and get a workbook, and they have thirteen months to complete the class. We do not offer a degree, because the credits are accrued so slowly.”

Ginsberg estimated that 318 incarcerated people enrolled in the self-paced courses in 2014. Such classes include courses such as Fundamentals of Economics, British literature and intermediate Spanish. (The program is planning to change the course list for inmates to focus more on critical thinking, math and writing skills.)

Generally, colleges with prison-education programs hold their courses at the correctional facility and use the same curriculum taught on campus, but rules, ideologies and quality in programs vary, supporters say. Qualifications to enroll and eligibility requirements differ from state to state.

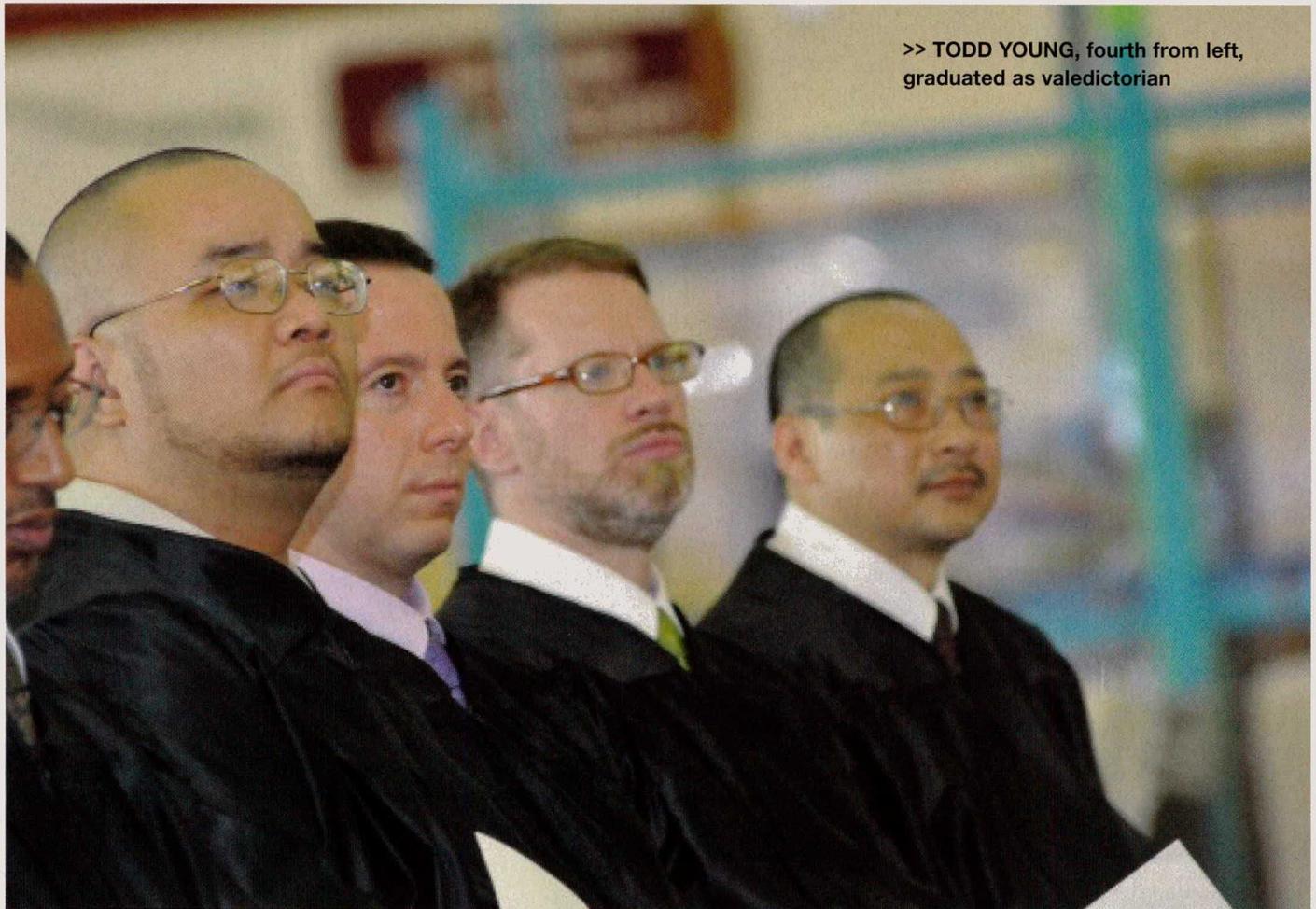
While online courses are a norm at many colleges today, most prisons don’t allow Internet use, and those that do have very strict rules. Supporters of prison education also say some online programs are just low-quality “diploma mills.” In addition, they point out, online courses don’t allow the important social interaction that inmates need.

“Good programs build bonds between students and teachers and students and students,” said Lewen. “They need to engage in dialogue and not just sit in a room and memorize content. I want them to not just enjoy the benefits of learning history and math but also of being included into the larger community of the academy.”

The Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) may be the only school offering college courses at local jails. Most jail populations are constantly shifting as people go to trial and transfer to prisons to serve their sentences.

Tara Timberman, an assistant professor of English at CCP who is founder and director of the Reentry Support Project, said Philadelphia has some 8,500 men and women in jails for longer terms. This allows inmates in the county jails an opportunity to take college courses also.

Timberman founded the school’s reentry program to assist people once they are released by providing job counseling, academic advising and transportation assistance.



>> TODD YOUNG, fourth from left, graduated as valedictorian

“Our goal is that they can seamlessly transfer to our community college,” she said.

When students have gone to college while in prison and then come to CCP, she said, “We treat them like they took classes off campus.”

As for the future, Vivian Nixon, executive director of the College and Community Fellowship (CCF) program, an independent nonprofit organization in New York City that helps formerly incarcerated women get a college education, is optimistic that conversations with federal justice and education officials will result in more in-prison education programs.

As co-founder of the Education From the Inside Out Coalition, Nixon mobilized people to write legislators and respond to website polls posted by legislators who opposed Gov. Cuomo’s proposal. She thinks he did not anticipate the opposition and failed to engage grassroots activists from the beginning.

“He was not prepared for the negativity,” said Nixon.

Now Nixon and other supporters want Gov. Cuomo to honor his commitment to in-prison college education by including the programs in his executive budget or by supporting legislation to repeal the ban on the state’s Tuition Assistance Program.

Nixon, who in addition to her other jobs is also a minister

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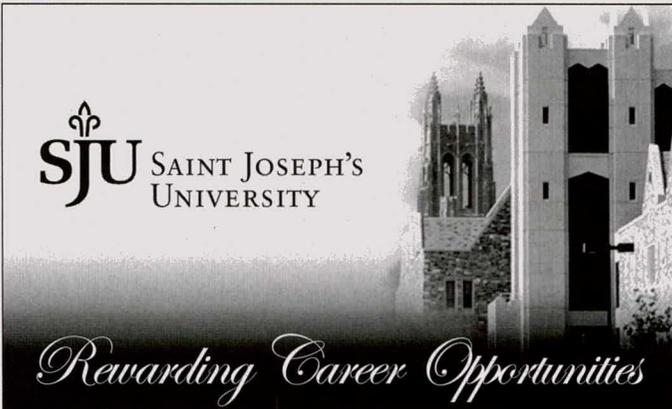
—Vivian Nixon, executive director of the College and Community Fellowship

today, was helped by CCF, the program she now runs. She served three years at the Albion Correctional Facility for business document falsification and forgery. She was released in 2001. She heard about CCF while incarcerated and called the organization immediately upon her release, because Nixon said she learned in prison that “education was the key to changing my life in ways that would be permanent, so that I never ended up back in prison.”

In 2006, she got a degree in human services administration from Empire State College, which is part of the CUNY system.

She was encouraged in December when the Justice Department and Education Department released a letter asking states to provide a quality education for youth in correctional facilities.

The letter, signed by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, said in part, “High-



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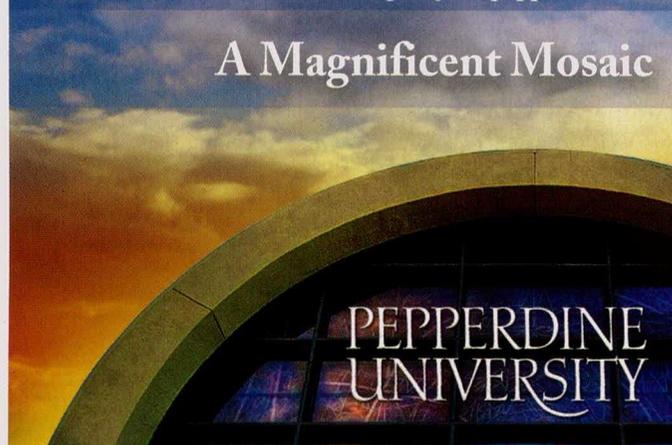
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## READY TO GRADUATE

**HERNAN CARVENTE** was a teenager incarcerated in the Brookwood Secure Center in the Hudson Valley region of New York state when he began academic classes there through the Brookwood College Program, a satellite program of the Columbia Green Community College.



He was 16, a high school dropout, when he went to prison for attempted murder and 20 when he got out. While incarcerated, he attended classes. On the day of the interview for this story, Carvente, who now lives in Queens, was excited that the mail carrier had delivered his class ring. In May 2015, he will receive a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

"I will be the first male in my family to graduate from college," he said, counting off his siblings and cousins. "My parents are both undocumented and don't have the same opportunities I do."

"I am trying to set a higher bar for my daughter," said Carvente, the father of a 6-year-old daughter.

He is a research assistant at the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit that works to make justice systems fairer and more effective. He also serves on some New York advisory groups and works on policy changes, particularly those relevant to youth offenders.

He decided to pursue his general educational development diploma after "a staff member told me I was too stupid to get a GED. I got it because I wanted to prove him and other staff members wrong." At the time, Brookwood had no college programs. When one started, Carvente said he signed up because one of the staff members, James LeCain, made him feel welcome, "like he cared and he wanted to teach me." Still, Carvente quit the program three times and was nearly kicked out before he realized he really wanted an education.

"There was an adjustment period," he said. "When I walked into the facility, I was a loner kid who wasn't listening to authority. By the time I walked out, I was a leader and had 54 college credits, close to an associate degree."

quality correctional education is one crucial means of supporting their future success and thereby strengthening the communities they return to."

"The end goal is they (the departments) should have the same respect for adults," said Nixon. "The next round of conversations I will have is that they made this announcement and the world didn't come to an end, and people didn't say these kids don't deserve it. So why are we afraid to put education back in all facilities?" ■

*Patrice Gaines is a journalist, motivational speaker and author of Laughing in the Dark: From Colored Girl to Woman of Color, A Journey from Prison to Power (Anchor, 1995).*

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