



Community Conversation

“Lessons Learned: Barriers and Opportunities in On- and Off-campus Housing”

Date: April 1, 2021

Facilitator: Lauren Reed

Notetaker: Ved Price

Panelists:

James “JC” Cavitt, Project Rebound, California State University, Fullerton

Damian Rossney, New Beginnings, Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison

Michelle Daniel (Jones), Constructing Our Future

Kristina Byers, PACE, Inc.

Overview: Should the caliber of a program’s reentry services be another element of measuring quality? How can students succeed in continuing higher education when they return home if they lack access to fundamental needs, such as housing and food? This is a continuation of a series of conversations around barriers, opportunities, and lessons learned to advance quality in the field of higher education in prison. This discussion brings together experts in the community with a focus on reentry, specifically housing, both on and off campus.

Questions Asked by Facilitator:

- How did housing/services for former students/people who are formerly incarcerated become a priority for you?
 - What inspired the start of your program to get involved with housing?
- What types of partnerships do you have with other organizations, federal/state agencies, the city and neighbors?
 - Have you run into any challenges?
 - Have you found any new opportunities?
- How have students been part of the process (to secure housing and permissions) and/or how would you want students (current and/or former students) as part of the conversation.

Panel Discussion Opening

All panelists agreed that in order for an individual to participate in and complete college courses, housing must be addressed first. For students who are going through the reentry process, the most pressing and urgent issue is housing, but why don't all programs prioritize connecting students to housing opportunities? Why is the main emphasis on curriculum, and little attention given to the reentry situations of higher education in prison students? These are questions that our panelist would give insight on.

Reentry as a Metric for Program Quality

A panelist noted that since programs know the unique circumstances of current and formerly incarcerated students, they must be more involved in providing more services that match the needs of their students. A quality higher education in prison program is one that prioritizes reentry and curriculum with equal emphasis. Panelists cited that higher education in prison programs should not be allowed to enter the prison space if their programs don't have a reentry component. Moreover, panelists and audience members spoke to how it is wrong for a higher education in prison program to accept money and Pell dollars from students, while overlooking the more critical and urgent issues these students face around reentry and housing. A panelist added that if reentry support was a component of higher education in prison programs from the outset, then it is likely that more individuals would be interested in enrolling, as issues surrounding reentry can be urgent (e.g. food, housing, job security) and have the potential to derail one's educational path if they are not tended to.

Barriers to Housing

There is a need for a broader conversation about how background checks create the biggest barrier to housing for those who have experienced incarceration, and how we can address this as a community. The negative stigma that comes with being formerly incarcerated creates tension around who deserves access to safe, secure and affordable housing. Panelists mentioned the harmful effects of "not in my back yard" (nimbyism) and how this interferes with overall buy-in from the community as well. Building community relations is so important, because it allows people to get proximate with the core issues around housing instability and be more involved in resolving them.

Location

One of the more logistical issues that was brought up about housing was the location in which a person finds housing upon release, and how important this is. When considering the location of housing, a person has to think about where they are in relation to all the things they need access to (e.g. grocery stores, hair salons, pharmacies, public transportation, banks, etc.). More specifically, a person has to be in an area where employment opportunities are available, where they have access to reentry and community based services, and in a place that is conducive to their well being and success. A panelist did mention that a main priority in their program is getting a person a driver's license and a vehicle, because this helps expand a person's reach in the housing and job market and doesn't tie them down to a specific location/community.

Community Support

When a higher education in prison program has a strong relationship with community reentry services, they are better equipped to ensure continuity and a smooth transition for their students upon their release. **Instead of a program feeling like they have to single handedly take on all the tasks of housing, panelists encouraged programs to spend more time connecting and building lines of communication with reentry services who are already heavily involved in housing and other essential needs.** Other successful housing efforts have been created through programs building actual relationships with landlords, property owners, and local city and state officials. It was also noted that buy in is often achieved through storytelling and sharing the successes of other individuals with the broader community, especially now since more people are focusing on topics around disenfranchisement and equity.

Resources:

- [Constructing Our Future](#)
- [Hudson Link Reentry Partners](#)
- [Project Rebound](#)
- [Pace](#)

From the Chat:

- [Project Rebound's John Irwin House](#)
- “Research is critical. It is good to learn from national models, but seeing what is working in your own state is also very critical.”
- “Has anyone seen data or a source on how many colleges/universities conduct criminal background checks on students for on-campus housing? It seems like this practice is growing, but it's hard to say without data.”
- “As a student who volunteers with Project Rebound CSUSM I am wondering what are actions that we (as students) can do to help this population? We are currently looking at housing for our campus PR folks. We have been looking at PR Fullerton as an example.”
- “What suggestions or ideas do the panelists have to apply pressure to college/ university administrators, AND the Exec Directors of HEP programs that they employ, to understand that reentry efforts are the ultimate measure of program quality?”
- “What criteria do programs use to select residents for the. houses?”