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Resources @ EJP

How should we measure success in prison higher education programs?

Traditionally, the post-prison lives of incarcerated people have been viewed through a lens that sees only two outcomes: whether they return to prison or not.

This reductive thinking infected higher education prison programs. The successes of programs were largely measured by rates of recidivism, a standard that views these programs as rehabilitative rather than educational, and the participants as potential social threats rather than students.

In the spring of 2018, we at the Education Justice Project hired Nicole Robinson to help us answer the question: How should we measure the success of a college-in-prison program? To find an answer, Nicole formed the EJP Evaluation Advisory Council, made up of nine EJP students and one EJP outside member. This group met for two years to discuss the value of a program like EJP from the perspective of its most important stakeholders: the students.

Their answers were surprising, and bore no relationship to the traditional measures of success for formerly incarcerated people or college students. The things the students valued most about their experiences were the ways the program changed them as people – how it developed their senses of dignity, humanity and critical transpersonal consciousness.

In the era of COVID-19, these measurements matter just as much as they did before. The pandemic has brought new scrutiny to historic inequalities and the ways that we dehumanize certain groups, including incarcerated people. These new metrics provide better, more humane answers to questions on how we should treat people and what we value as a society.

In this document we'll explain why more traditional metrics of success diminish the students as well as the higher education programs that serve them. We'll then explore the new ways we're learning to evaluate our program with qualitative rather than purely quantitative measures.

These measurements may, right now, seem abstract. Like everything else, the pandemic postponed work on the evaluation just as we were ready to launch it. We hope to soon start creating a concrete evaluative tool using these measures by launching a pilot evaluation at Danville.

Why don't we talk about recidivism?

Within EJP our scholars are students, and it is important that we view them that way. Recidivism rates assign them value based solely on their carceral status, failing to take into account the full, lived experience of their lives. If recidivism is the sole measure of success, a student who has a loving family and works to improve their community, but who violates parole may be deemed a "failure," while a student who experiences homelessness and social estrangement but remains outside prison walls can be called a "success."

Furthermore, prison is not a rehabilitative space, and we are not a rehabilitation program. We are an instructional unit of the University of Illinois. To focus on re-incarceration warps the purposes and goals of our program. It also holds our students to a binary standard – inside or outside prison – that undergraduates are not held to.

Finally, recidivism rates in higher education programs are skewed by the demographics of our student population. EJP students are typically in their 30s and 40s, have been convicted of serious crimes, and carry decades-long sentences.

These factors make them unlikely candidates for recidivism. It would be disingenuous to claim higher education is responsible for our alumni's low recidivism rates, when we know they are unlikely to recidivate even in the absence of a college program.¹

As you'll read in the next section, not only do we reject recidivism as a metric, but we also avoid common standards such as job placement and academic achievement. This is not because they are not important, but because we want to emphasize the value our students see in the program rather than the administrators. The outcomes we'll discuss are less tangible, but more relevant to our students' feelings of success and value, and to the changes they note in themselves and one another.

How should we define success?

The first metric is emancipated humanity. This goal occurs when a student uses the EJP universe to rise above the reductive identity of "convicted felon" and begin to feel comfortable expressing themselves and investigating the ideas and thoughts of others. These benefits spread out from the student to their family and friends, incarcerated peers and IDOC staff. "When a student regains his humanity he reinforces the humanity of others," wrote the Evaluation Advisory Council.

The second outcome is resilient dignity. Within EJP, our students think, talk and walk like "free" men, despite their carceral status. They are able to resist the trauma of incarceration and its attempts to diminish their will for freedom and their courage to do what is right.

The final value is critical transpersonal consciousness (CTC). EJP works to enable our students to see structural oppression both in and outside the prison, and both toward themselves and others. Students who have gained CTC see the ways vulnerable groups are marginalized and seek to improve the world for the people they come into contact with.

¹ https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2016/recidivism_overview.pdf

What now?

We hope that this resource, outlined by our Evaluation Advisory Council, might be useful for other college-in-prison programs. For some programs, it may be a jumping-off point to start asking their students what success means to them. Others might take one or several of these outcomes as their own evaluative tools. It would gratify us to see a tool constructed by our students become a model for programs throughout the country.

We also hope to end the sway of recidivism, a reductive metric that sets a low bar for success and underestimates the capacities and potentials of incarcerated scholars. By striving instead to measure our effectiveness with respect to enhanced humanity, resilient dignity and critical transpersonal consciousness, we can better serve our students and respond to their interests in pursuing higher education in prison.

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