

“E for Effort”

The Role of Brown University in a Changing World

By: Eboni McNeal

The purpose of this research paper is to understand how policy change works in the university setting and the role of the university as a policy actor in the community. The current initiative for credit-bearing courses at the Adult Correctional Institution (ACI) serves as an ideal case study to understand how these dynamics unfold in real time. As the nation comes to terms with the crisis of mass incarceration, many students on college campuses are engaged in similar conversations. In an attempt to join theory with practice, students at Brown have pursued ways to become involved at the ACI for several years, and now, they are demanding the administration develop its role in the ACI through for-credit courses, eventually aiming for a full accreditation program. Universities miss an important opportunity to take part in policy development when they refuse to show up as community partners in meaningful ways. Far from simply providing a service to incarcerated students, prison education is a reciprocal pursuit that improves the quality of our universities and our communities, allowing for a collective reimagining of the future.

I have read and understood Brown University’s Academic Code and pledge that this capstone project fully respects the principles of academic integrity defined in the code, including that the research conducted for it was carried out in accordance with the rules defined by the University’s Institutional Review Board for research involving human subjects.

I agree that my capstone project can be made available to the Brown Community for didactic purposes.

Eboni M. May 14, 2020

Introduction

When it comes to the criminal legal system, the country is at a crossroads. The proliferation of prisons and their population size has forced the United States to confront its relationship to punishment, crime, race, and fear. Few social issues have been as pivotal or as publicized as mass incarceration, with people from both ends of the political spectrum taking interest in the matter. There is a bipartisan understanding that the country must move forward from the draconian policies that devastated communities and put Black people behind bars at disproportionate numbers, but there is no agreement on how to best move forward.

Universities are far from immune to social and political shifts in society, acted out through policy, protest, and power. Through volunteer programs and engaged scholarship, these institutions showcase their commitment to surrounding communities, but these acts of solidarity are only the foundation for the ongoing work required. Brown University, which has an impact in Rhode Island and influence around the country, has grappled with the limits and capabilities that come with being a renowned institution. Few issues have engaged the question of Brown's responsibility like the current prison crisis, as few issues have captivated the country's attention and catalyzed conversations across the political spectrum. Far from futile, these tensions provide an opportunity for progress. The Adult Correctional Institutes, known as the ACI, sits less than twenty minutes from College Hill. The compound houses all seven of Rhode Island's state penitentiaries, where there are currently 2,900 people incarcerated. While Brown has a history of collaboration with the ACI, it is scattered, with singular programs and initiatives working to sustain themselves. Through activism, advocacy, and academic work, students, faculty members, and incarcerated individuals are demanding for the university's administration to develop its partnership with the prison and demonstrate its commitment to the Providence community. This push finds its footing in the call for a comprehensive Brown program that brings credit-bearing courses into the prison. While this work presents challenges, it is work that allows the Brown community to imagine a more just world and a collective future that we can build together.

Methodology

This paper uses qualitative and quantitative data to examine the effect of college education on incarcerated students, question the responsibility of universities to offer this education, and provide an outline of Brown's role in Rhode Island's state prison. To collect personal accounts from people involved in this issue, there were two months of interviews with Brown faculty, students, and activists, as well as policy actors involved in correctional education through non-profit work. A potential place for expansion in the analysis is conducting additional interviews, as not every policy actor involved with prison education at Brown was contacted. For previous members of the Brown community, the archives of the Brown Daily Herald and The Indy provided information. Most importantly, the paper includes letters from college students at the Adult Correction Institution, which were collected in collaboration with RailRoad's Brown Education Initiative. This research paper builds upon the work of Brown community members committed to expanding educational opportunities, including Aidea Downie, Sophie Kupetz, Kaila Johnson, Jourdan Smithwick, and Amy Remensnyder, and Felicia Denaud.

Part I: Current Policy Context

“The numbers of incarcerated have gone from about (600,000) in 1990 to over 2.3 million today. It would be inspiring to see Brown take a leadership position on this issue.”—

Brown University

The close of the twentieth century found both Democrats and Republicans eager to reduce crime through stricter policies and policing practices. Most notably, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 increased the stringency of the legal system and stripped incarcerated people of many rights.¹ Now, despite the deep ideological divides and political partisanship, policy actors must find a way to reverse the consequences of harmful laws and practices. There are currently 2.3 million people in prison, and the criminal legal system lags under the weight of this burden, and communities crumble as a result of an unforgiving system.² One solution to the country’s current predicament that has strong support is the advancement of educational opportunities for incarcerated people.

Prior to the 1994 Crime Bill, which rendered people in prison ineligible to receive Pell Grants, 90 percent of prisons had a higher education program.³ Consequently, within the next three years, “virtually all of the approximately 350 programs around the country shut down for lack of funds.”⁴ The country’s ideas about incarcerated people have shifted since the 1990s, and new initiatives have increased the amount of post-secondary education programs in prisons. The Department of Education’s Second Chance Pell program, an experimental initiative that provides Pell grants to select incarcerated individuals, is the most impactful of these programs. It aids over 10,048 students across 64 institutions, but, more importantly, it is a tangible success that serves as a sign of the country’s shifting ideology.⁵

The federal fervor for innovative and inclusive crime solutions has found its way into state and local governments, signaling a coming collaboration among government entities for

¹“Overview of Prison Education Policies,” Prison Studies Project, http://prisonstudiesproject.org/overview-of-prison-education-policies/#_ftn5.

² Rebecca Ellis, “Exhibit sparks prison education discussion,” The Brown Daily Herald, September 13, 2016, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2016/09/13/exhibit-sparks-prison-education-discussion/>.

³ “Overview of Prison Education Policies,” Prison Studies Project.

⁴ “Overview of Prison Education Policies,” Prison Studies Project.

⁵ “Answering your Frequently Asked Questions about Second Chance Pell,” Home Room, April 11, 2019, <https://blog.ed.gov/2019/04/answering-frequently-asked-questions-second-chance-pell/>.

far-reaching, future-focused implementation of new policies and practices. Though, the true progress is dependent upon states. While there is forward movement regarding federal policies for prison reform, states must decide the fate of their penitentiaries. The Center for American Progress found that only 35 percent of state prisons offer college-level courses, and these programs consist of only six percent of the incarcerated population.⁶ According to state officials, funding presents a formidable obstacle to prison education programs. A survey administered by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) found that correctional education administrators identified financial concerns as the main impediment to in-class instruction, with “nearly 90 percent of the survey participants described financial limitations and related funding policies as a crucial challenge facing state correctional facilities.”⁷ The data from state budgets affirms their accounts. From 2005 through 2009, state spending on corrections grew faster than any other expenditure category, seeing a 25 percent increase.⁸ According to the National Association of State Budget Officers, states spend over 52 billion dollars on corrections and related activities annually.⁹ Thus, states need support to increase the educational instruction inside of prisons.

These problems are present in Rhode Island as well. According to the *Brown Daily Herald*, Ralph Orleck, the Special Education Director and Principal of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, emphasized “the need for correctional education in the state...” when he attended a conference at the institution. Education is a cornerstone of American civil society, though systemic inequalities restricts its ability to reach all populations. Thus, this area provides an ideal entry point for prison reform, especially for a university, whose main objective is to enrichment through education. Brown University, known for its innovation and progressive community members, fits into this framework particularly well. Its stated mission is “to serve the community, the nation, and the world,” and the ACI is an ideal place to build on this tradition.

⁶ “Prison Education: Guide to College Degrees for Inmates and Ex-Offenders,” The Best Schools, July 9, 2019, <https://thebestschools.org/magazine/prison-inmate-education-guide/>.

⁷ Laura E. Gorgol and Brian A. Sponsler, “Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons,” May 2011, http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/unlocking_potential-psce_final_report_may_2011.pdf.

⁸ Gorgol and Sponsler, “Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons.”

⁹ Gorgol and Sponsler, “Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons.”

Part II: Brown Prison Education, Past and Present

“I learned what it feels like to tear some soft part of yourself, give it to a group of people to gently mold it, hand it back to you better than they found it.” – Phil Kaye, SPACE volunteer

As the world outside of Brown has awoken to the injustices of the criminal legal system, the university’s students and faculty found themselves in a similar situation. The campus, from the classroom to extracurricular clubs, provides a place where community members can grapple with the same complex issues that grip the nation. Unsatisfied with a solely academic approach, students sought to match their academics with action. These members of the Brown community found a way to base their theory in practice through prison education. In 1992, Space in Prison for Arts and Creative Expression, known as SPACE, started in the ACI’s women facility.¹⁰ The program formed out of a desire from female students at Brown to connect with the prison’s female population, though, shortly after, a corresponding SPACE program began in the men’s facilities. Operated out of the Howard R. Swearer Center for Public Service, SPACE allowed Brown students to facilitate weekly workshops at the prison that promoted community, creativity, and critical thinking through art.

In 2008, Jonathan Coleman created a new educational program at the prison. Coleman spent 3 years working with SPACE, and his experience provided the inspiration to delve deeper into the prison system and discover ways to become more involved.¹¹ A senior at Brown, Coleman desired for the school he would soon leave to strengthen its partnership with the ACI and start the process of creating a credit-bearing college program inside the prison. Following a summer of research, Coleman selected the prison education program at Grinnell College in Iowa to serve as a blueprint for his new initiative.¹² Through a collaboration between Coleman and fellow SPACE volunteer, Ariel Werner, the Swearer Center implemented BELLS, or the Brown Education Link Lecture Series, in 2008, and the first session began in October of that year.¹³ The program was significant, as it brought Brown professors in community with incarcerated students to share and learn together. Once a week, a professor would travel to the John J. Moran

¹⁰ Prison Arts Foundation, 2014, <http://www.prisonartsfoundation.com/links/>.

¹¹ “RIDOC Announces Brown Education Link Lecture Series: Brown Professors to Lead Weekly Discussions with Medium Security Inmates,” RI.gov, October 22, 2008, <https://www.ri.gov/press/view/7366>.

¹² Andrew Sia, “Professors lecture at Adult Correctional Institutions,” The Brown Daily Herald, October 30, 2008, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2008/10/30/professors-lecture-at-adult-correctional-institutions/>.

¹³ Sia, “Professors lecture at Adult Correctional Institutions.”

Medium Security Facility to lecture on a topic related to a pre-determined theme, such as Questions of Citizenship.¹⁴ The series was open to only twenty incarcerated students, who prison officials selected based on “their past program participation, interest, and institutional record.”¹⁵ Glenn Loury, a professor of Economics at Brown and a frequent BELLS partner, emphasized that the program was a “wonderful experience.”¹⁶ Loury also held the students as “well informed and articulate.”¹⁷ Other faculty members at Brown shared this enthusiasm, and Coleman stated that after the first series concluded in December 2008, even more professors were interested in participating, despite receiving no payment for their time.¹⁸ Though BELLS was well-received at the university, when Coleman graduated from Brown, his vision for the program left soon after.

Student interest in the prison often leads to initiatives that cannot sustain themselves, but there is a student-run education program at Brown that still operates with the help of a national non-profit organization. In 2012, Aidea Downie, then a Brown undergraduate student, brought the Petey Greene Program to Brown.¹⁹ The organization partners with universities to place students inside jails, prisons, and detention centers to provide educational support for students. At the ACI, Petey Greene operates in all of the facilities, starting at the intake center and ending at the maximum security prison. Students work as tutors or teaching assistants in courses of all levels and topics, from Adult Basic Education to African-American History. The Petey Greene Program has seven regional chapters, of which Brown is only one. Maco Faniel, the National Program Manager for Petey Greene, commented, “Rhode Island has a bunch of promise. All of its carceral facilities are in one place. It has a unique opportunity because it can educate a lot more people because it has a smaller population.”²⁰ The organization’s programmatic support and national credibility allows students access to the ACI. In its absence, Brown students would not have the opportunity to experience education inside of a prison classroom and participate in the immense learning taking place. The Brown chapter of Petey Greene is a student group, which provides autonomy in identifying objectives, building community, and planning events. Since its

¹⁴ Sia, “Professors lecture at Adult Correctional Institutions.”

¹⁵ “RIDOC Announces Brown Education Link Lecture Series: Brown Professors to Lead Weekly Discussions with Medium Security Inmates,” RI.gov.

¹⁶ Sia, “Professors lecture at Adult Correctional Institutions.”

¹⁷ Sia, “Professors lecture at Adult Correctional Institutions.”

¹⁸ Sia, “Professors lecture at Adult Correctional Institutions.”

¹⁹ Sophie Kupetz, “Brown Prison Ed,” Time Graphics, October 2019, <https://time.graphics/line/312369>.

²⁰ Maco Faniel, interview by Eboni McNeal, April 20, 2020.

inception, Petey Greene has attracted interest from a large amount of Brown students. There is an application process to join Petey Greene, and each semester, there are many more applicants than spots available. Though Petey Greene's success depends on the transferal of knowledge between each generation of student leaders, the institutional support provided by the non-profit renders student turnover less of a threat to the chapter's continuance.

Most of the initiatives to develop the university's relationship with the ACI originate from Brown students. Despite their hard work and genuine investment, students graduate and move away, leaving programs in a state of flux. If Brown provided institutional support for these initiatives, they would have the longevity needed to make a greater impact on incarcerated students. Understanding this dynamic, Professor Amy Remensnyder used the framework for BELLS to found BHEPP, the Brown History Education Prison Project. She maintains, "I know students work hard to develop community relations, but it is much harder for you all because you are not in a position of institutional authority. Students are just not there the way faculty are here, year in and year out."²¹ Professor Remensnyder began working in the prison through BELLS. "It happened through my own desire to become more engaged. I realized there was this entire world I knew nothing about, a shocking world, that existed a 15 minute drive away from my house, and that there were students in there." When Coleman graduated, Professor Remensnyder recognized that BELLS would disappear if she failed to act, so she assembled a group of history professors who were already teaching in the ACI to form BHEPP. She recalls, "Essentially, it was a group of faculty getting together and deciding that we want this to happen, and we are going to make it happen."²² BHEPP commenced in 2012, and it has continued as a stable program in the prison.²³

As the name suggests, the program lives in Brown's Department of History and allows history professors to teach seminar courses at the medium security facility on themes such as, "War and Empire" and "State, God and Citizen." The program is volunteer-based yet garners the interest and enthusiasm of Brown faculty members. Professor Remensnyder explains, "People are very interested. There are lots of people in other departments who would like to go in, who ask me about it. I get emails from people who would like to teach their own courses or people

²¹ Amy Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal, April 24, 2020.

²² Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal.

²³ Kupetz, "Brown Prison Ed."

who would like to teach in BHEPP.”²⁴ The faculty members that do participate in BHEPP find the experience worthwhile. Professor Remensnyder continues, “Almost every faculty member that has gone in and taught in BHEPP returns. It is something that people find deeply satisfying and important.”²⁵ The highlight of BHEPP is undoubtedly Professor Remensnyder’s course, “Locked Up: A History of Captivity.” Started in 2015, the course examines the long history of incarceration and how it imprints on to the current carceral state.²⁶ What makes the class unique is it involves an identical class taught at Brown, and the two sets of students are in conversation with each other throughout the semester. The class allows incarcerated students to contextualize their current situation and Brown students to challenge their own ideas and perceptions. Though the classes are the same, students at the ACI do not receive credit. Connor Jenkins, a previous “Locked Up” student, stated, “It is frustrating to me that I am going to benefit from the inside-out curriculum, and the people who need more of a material benefit from that are not going to get credit.”²⁷ Brown students question why they receive credit for the class when their counterparts do not, and the students at the ACI wonder the same. Johnathon Tretton wrote, “I simply ask that if we are doing Brown level work, then please let us have the opportunity to earn the credits awarded that work.”²⁸ The popularity of the course has highlighted this problem of accreditation, and Brown community members are holding the university accountable for the unfair policy.

Part III: The Policy Actors

“Responsibility walks hand in hand with capacity and power.” – J.G. Holland

Each initiative at the ACI has brought students one step closer to their eventual goal of credit-bearing classes. Every misstep or failed attempt has taught the next generation of students what to do differently. Every success shows the transformative process of prison education, for those inside and outside the ACI. As Brown members continue their partnership with the prison, the imperative nature of their ask, a for-credit college program, has increased. Many students at

²⁴ Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal.

²⁵ Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal.

²⁶ Kupetz, “Brown Prison Ed.”

²⁷ Connor Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal, April 17, 2020.

²⁸ Johnathon Tretton, “Letter to RailRoad,” 2019.

the ACI have been present for every program that Brown has conducted inside, so they have key insights into the process. Furthermore, they are the main collaborators in the push for a Brown prison education program. What individuals on the outside often fail to recognize is the social engagement and strategy making that occurs inside of prison walls. As much as Brown students and faculty may care for incarcerated students, the future of prison education and the potential for credit-bearing courses is of highest concern to the students who experience incarceration. These students are the experts on the effects of prison education and are the most apt to advocate for its effectiveness because they experience its benefits. Thus, when urging the university to implement for-credit courses at the ACI, Brown community members must remember to center the voices inside the prison.

Kyle Campbell, a long-time learner at the ACI, recalls, “A decade ago, I was one of the initial students that was asked by Johnathan Coleman...if a Brown University education was feasible at the ACI...I responded with a resounding, ‘Absolutely.’”²⁹ Campbell holds that when creating BELLS, we passionately invested in the vision together.”³⁰ He continues, “I never imagined I would be fighting for course credit from Brown University this long...”³¹ Anthony Meo, another student at the ACI, adds, “From its inception, Mr. Coleman’s dream was to create a program that would get the Swearer Center and the University involved at the ACI, so that they could see both these inmates’ intellect and desire for higher education, in hopes that someday Brown University would offer college credit courses within the prison.”³² BELLS has come to a close, and the students at the ACI continue to prove their brilliance and dedication to their work, but the university remains unwilling to move on the issue. Meo asserts, “Our student body here at the ACI proved over and over to both Brown professors and university faculty that we could not only meet the academic standards required of a Brown student but in many instances, we would exceed them.”³³ Professor Remensnyder bolsters this assertion with her own testimonials from BHEPP. “We all have a very deep respect for our incarcerated students as intellectuals,” she

²⁹ Kyle Campbell, “Letter to RailRoad,” 2019.

³⁰ Campbell, “Letter to RailRoad.”

³¹ Campbell, “Letter to RailRoad.”

³² Anthony Meo, “Letter to RailRoad,” 2019.

³³ Meo, “Letter to RailRoad.”

avows.³⁴ She adds, “Amongst BHEPP faculty, the one thing most of us have experienced in there is the discussions that happen in there are just a high-level as the ones happening at Brown.”³⁵

Brown University’s presence in the prison has an impact on the students incarcerated there. As Peter Cole, another scholar at the ACI, wrote, “I, as well as many of my fellow classmates, appreciate Brown’s willingness to come into the ACI to make available the greatest tool to man, education.”³⁶ From personal experience, incarcerated students benefit from much more than scientific facts, mathematical equations, and historical dates. Being in the classroom, around college students and faculty, provides a view of what is possible. It lets the light in for people, who are often hopeless, to see new possibilities for their future. Professor Remensnyder detailed, “I see them building an intellectual domain for themselves and a larger perspective on the world and on themselves through the class. They are curious. They want to know things. This opens up wider horizons that they want and they are trying to open up themselves.”³⁷ According to the Prison Studies Project, one benefit of prison education is “the incarcerated person having the opportunity to feel human again by engaging in an activity as commonplace as going to classes.”³⁸ Many of the students I interacted with at the ACI felt a shame about their position in society and an insecurity about their worth, talents, and intellect. They exist in an environment that tells them they are undeserving and dangerous. As the class would progress, students began to open up and take ownership of their unique skills and opinions. Education is a way to make sense of the world and one’s self and should not be an opportunity only certain groups get to receive.

Under challenging circumstances, students at the ACI show an unwavering commitment to their education. Peter Cole testifies, “I must admit that under my current physical state of incarceration pursuing higher education that has uplifted me and will allow me to give back to my community has not been the easiest thing. Stress, lack of resources and some prejudices against me because I have an inmate number prevents me certain opportunities.”³⁹ The students

³⁴ Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal.

³⁵ Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal.

³⁶ Peter Cole, “Letter to RailRoad,” 2019.

³⁷ Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal.

³⁸ “Why Prison Education?,” Prison Studies Project, <http://prisonstudiesproject.org/why-prison-education-programs/>.

³⁹ Cole, “Letter to RailRoad.”

persist through obstacles because of their love of learning and hope for the future. When Brown denies incarcerated students credit, it serves to invalidate that hard work. Johnathon Tretton adds, “If we can produce work on a high level despite the handicaps we face in here, then we should be given the credit that work deserves, much like the students in other prisons receiving credit from prestigious universities.”⁴⁰ As many individuals stated in their interview, Brown’s concern with “peer institutions” is a crucial challenge for community members working towards credit-bearing courses. Jourdan Smithwick, a Brown senior, said, “Brown will not do this unless somebody else does it first.”⁴¹ Upon review, many elite institutions have stronger prison education programs than Brown. Harvard University, in addition to instituting a tutoring program in six facilities, has a scholarship fund for people incarcerated or previously incarcerated to bolster their educational outreach.⁴² Columbia University’s Prison Education Program (PEP) has awarded 120 students college credit and plans to offer two credited courses per facility each semester.⁴³ Since 2018, Yale University has offered a variety of credit-bearing courses in Connecticut prisons.⁴⁴ Maco Faniel, who believes Rhode Island is behind other states in providing prison education, asserted, “It is amazing to me that Brown does not [have a prison education program] because Brown is participating in the exclusion of people getting degrees and getting access to higher education.”⁴⁵ Many Brown community members share this sentiment, and their concern has become how to convey this reality to the university and compel them into action. Sophie Kupetz, class of 2018.5, insists, “The roadblock is not logistical. The roadblock is not that Brown does not have a way to do this. The roadblock is not that there are not professors or students who care about this. The roadblock is not that there is not a need for it. I think the roadblock is really the will and the university administration’s desire to do such work.”⁴⁶ Understanding this impediment, Brown faculty and students began a campaign to bring credit-bearing Brown classes into the ACI.

⁴⁰ Tretton, “Letter to RailRoad.”

⁴¹ Jourdan Smithwick, interview by Eboni McNeal, April 14, 2020.

⁴² “Harvard Organization for Prison Education and Advocacy (HOPE),” Phillips Brooks House Association, <http://pbha.org/programs/hope/>.

⁴³ “Prison Education Program,” Justice-In-Education Initiative, <http://justiceineducation.columbia.edu/programs/prison-education/>.

⁴⁴ “Yale Courses in Prison,” The Yale Prison Education Initiative at Dwight Hall at Yale, <https://www.yaleprisoneducationinitiative.org/>.

⁴⁵ Faniel, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁴⁶ Sophie Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal, April 24, 2020.

In 2017, Professor Remensnyder, in collaboration with Susan Smulyan, Director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, and Marisa Brown, Assistant Director of Programs at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, published the “Brown Incarceration Initiative Proposal,” which called on President Paxson to consider implementing a comprehensive education program in the ACI.⁴⁷ The proposal was accompanied by a petition with 250 signatures and an appendix written by students Kaila Johnson and Sophie Kupetz.⁴⁸ Ashbel T. Wall, who was then Director of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, also submitted a letter of support for the proposal.⁴⁹

In 2018, Paxson formed the Brown Prison Education Committee to inquire into Brown’s role at the prison and its potential for future expansion.⁵⁰ The committee met over the 2018-2019 academic school year and released its recommendations in May.⁵¹ When asked about the committee, Kupetz, the only undergraduate student involved, replied, “The makeup was horrible.”⁵² She elaborated, “There were no formerly incarcerated people. There was no one who had experience building a prison education program. There were no students of color.”⁵³ Glenn Loury, a conservative economist at Brown, provided the only representation for people of color. Kupetz, who feels that committees often serve as a way for the university to stall, stated, “The committee did not feel like it was created to make a good program. It felt like it created to check off the box that the committee happened.”⁵⁴ The committee, in addition to being divided in ideology, had to work with constraints. Though Kupetz felt Janet Blume, Deputy Dean of Faculty, and chair of the committee, wanted to go further, she knew the president “would not commit to anything bigger than a very small in scope program.”⁵⁵ Therefore, the committee members sought compromise, and the stronger advocates for an accredited courses strategized to lay a foundational structure that they could scale up in the future.

⁴⁷ Kupetz, “Brown Prison Ed.”

⁴⁸ Kupetz, “Brown Prison Ed.”

⁴⁹ Remensnyder, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁵⁰ Kupetz, “Brown Prison Ed.”

⁵¹ Kupetz, “Brown Prison Ed.”

⁵² Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁵³ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁵⁴ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁵⁵ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

The committee's final proposal, which is not open to the public, reflected these tensions. Their recommendations included three parts: to commit to one to two for-credit Brown classes a semester, to increase Brown's partnership with the Community College of Rhode Island, and to institute a Carceral Studies program at Brown.⁵⁶ The monetary request accompanying these plan was 15,000 dollars, which was meant to assist the committee in applying for grants that fund prison education programs.⁵⁷ While these endorsements represented a strategic reconfiguration of the proposal's initial aspirations, it still did not achieve the results committee members hoped. In the fall of 2019, Paxson responded to the committee's recommendations in an email, which is also not public.⁵⁸ She declined offering Brown credit at the ACI, said there would be talks with CCRI, and told members who they could speak with about a Carceral Studies certificate.⁵⁹ Reflecting on the experience, Kupetz remarked, "Brown, because it smaller, is centralized and top-heavy, so everything has to go through Paxson and the top administrators to get done, and nothing was going to happen if Paxson needed to okay every step of things because she just was not interested."⁶⁰ The president's response was a setback for community members invested in the issue of prison education, but it did not deter students from trying alternative avenues. Kupetz states, "We did all the things that President Paxson and other administrators asked of us and then in the end Paxson came back and basically said no to the for-credit college courses..."⁶¹ While going through the bureaucracy of Brown can prove futile, there are other ways to spur policy change. After the university failed to meet their demands, students turned to activism.

The organization currently leading these efforts is RailRoad, an abolitionist student group formed in 2018. When discussing the group's founding, Kupetz detailed, "There were a lot of people at Brown doing different types of anti-carceral work through their studies, through their projects, or in conjunction with organizations in Providence, and there was no coordinated body or student group at the time..."⁶² From this need, the organization was born and became a "non-hierarchical collective of students who are working to imagine a world beyond prison and to lay

⁵⁶ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁵⁷ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁵⁸ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁵⁹ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶⁰ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶¹ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶² Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

the foundations for that world to be realized.”⁶³ The group began working on a prison education initiative in 2019. Connor Jenkins, a member of RailRoad, stated, “We found that there is no centralized university support for the program.”⁶⁴ The group then tried to follow-up with the parts of the Brown Prison Education Committee’s requests that Paxson supported. When the students spoke with the faculty members who would oversee the process of creating the carceral certificate program, they stated that there was not enough student support for the program and it would not happen.⁶⁵

When working to change university policy, the best way forward is persistence. Still, the process is not simple. Jenkins stated, “We felt very much at a standstill. What are we supposed to do when the university is just sending us in circles and being very unclear?”⁶⁶ RailRoad decided to show there was student support for Brown for-credit classes through a one-week letter writing campaign held at the end of the 2019 semester. It was meant to be a play on final’s week—while Brown students would receive credit for their work that semester, incarcerated students in Brown classes would not. Jenkins attested, “When I talked to people, I never had anyone refuse to sign the petition, and I think that is because the ask is so small. It is not radical...and Brown is still refusing.”⁶⁷ After accumulating over 500 student letters, RailRoad members printed them all and delivered them to President Paxson on December 13th, her final office hours of the semester.⁶⁸ Jenkins recalled, “We gave them to her and talked to her. She seemed very flustered and did not know that there was more than one classroom at the ACI.”⁶⁹ He said Paxson also asserted there was not enough capacity for RIDOC to carry out a Brown education program, and Brown should focus on supporting CCRI’s partnership and other existing programs.⁷⁰ The ACI, which includes a multiple classrooms across its facilities, has been supportive of increased education efforts from Brown. Will Jackson, RIDOC’s college program coordinator, regards Brown increasing its involvement at the prison as “a winning situation.”⁷¹ From that encounter, RailRoad members

⁶³ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶⁴ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶⁵ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶⁶ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶⁷ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶⁸ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁶⁹ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁷⁰ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁷¹ Suvy Qin, “Conference examines Brown’s role in prison education system,” *The Brown Daily Herald*, September 19, 2016, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2016/09/19/conference-examines-browns-role-prison-education-system/>.

secured a meeting with Rashid Zia, the Dean of the College, this March. “It was very similar in terms of the run-around and the very empty, vague responses,” Jenkins commented.⁷² As others have stated, he finds the process of creating policy change at Brown frustrating. Jenkins said there is an “amorphous way Brown responds to calls for change”⁷³ and the university is “vague and unclear about what the avenues are for enacting change.”⁷⁴ This constitutes a major problem, considering the importance of student concerns and the unique perspective they bring to policy queries, which is lost when the university limits their efficacy.

As Brown’s history with prison education displays, the biggest threat to student progress and policy change is time. Students only stay at Brown for four to five years, and much of their energy goes toward schoolwork and the other demands of college life. Brown is aware of this dynamic, and many students feel they use it to their advantage when setting the policy agenda. Kupetz contends, “I think a big issue is the fact that the university relies on that turnaround. It is a way for them to say, if we stall on this enough, these kids who are spearheading it will leave, and we will not have to deal with it anymore.”⁷⁵ In anticipation of this tactic, RailRoad is now working to train its younger members and pass down the institutional knowledge necessary to continue its activism. While the student push for a Brown prison education program is on hiatus due to COVID-19, there are hopeful plans for the future. Jenkins disclosed, “Where we are going next is targeting high-stake, high-donor alumni who would be supportive of this.”⁷⁶ He revealed there were alumni who reached out to RailRoad’s Facebook page asking to circulate the letter writing campaign amongst alumni.⁷⁷ Students involved with the fight for credit-bearing courses have felt disempowered while petitioning the university to implement new policies but believe if powerful alumni get involved, Brown might listen this time.

⁷² Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁷³ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁷⁴ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁷⁵ Kupetz, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁷⁶ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

⁷⁷ Jenkins, interview by Eboni McNeal.

Part IV: Potential Structural Impacts

“I was attempting to resign myself to the bleak and hopeless future I believed lay ahead. But, try as I might, I could not kill completely that engine which seemingly drives us all: curiosity, the desire to know and understand. So I began to read — and the world opened up to me.” — Jeremy Pontbriant, BHEPP student

One cannot discuss prison or the benefits of education inside without understanding the factors that place people under correctional control. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Rhode Island has the second highest probation rate in the country.⁷⁸ With 24,000 individuals on probation each year, its rate is 91 percent higher than the national average.⁷⁹ Rhode Island is one of three states that only requires a “reasonable satisfaction” standard to violate probation.⁸⁰ Thus, there can be reasonable doubt or a scarcity of evidence, as long as the possibility of a probation violation appears likely. Rhode Island spends more than 70,000 dollars a year incarcerating a single individual, and 90 percent of the people that go to jail in Rhode Island violated their probation.⁸¹ Thus, we are witnessing a cycle of criminalization and incarceration in our own community, and it is working well.

There is a stark contrast between the treatment of Black and White residents of Rhode Island. The legacy of slavery and racial injustice still colors the state’s criminal legal system. As the *Providence Journal* reports, “13 out of every 100 black adults in Rhode Island are in prison or on probation, while only 2 out of every 100 white adults are.”⁸² This disparity is not the product of inherent moral failings; it is a symptom of a prejudiced system. John A’Vant, who served as the highest ranking Black member of the Rhode Island police department before his retirement, said throughout his twenty-five years of police work, he witnessed his colleagues intentionally go to Black and Latino neighborhoods when seeking to make arrests.⁸³ He also

⁷⁸ Shayna Toh, “Rhode Island increases efforts to tackle high probation rate,” *The Brown Daily Herald*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2017/03/06/rhode-island-increases-efforts-tackle-high-probation-rate/>.

⁷⁹ Stephanie Reyes, “Rhode Island General Assembly passes parole, probation reform bills,” *The Brown Daily Herald*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2017/09/25/rhode-island-general-assembly-pass-parole-probation-reform-bills/>.

⁸⁰ John Hill, “People of color sent to prison, put on probation far more than whites,” *Providence Journal*, <https://www.providencejournal.com/article/99999999/NEWS/151209537>.

⁸¹ Reyes, “Rhode Island General Assembly passes parole, probation reform bills/”

⁸² Hill, “People of color sent to prison, put on probation far more than whites.”

⁸³ Hill, “People of color sent to prison, put on probation far more than whites.”

observed officers treat suspects of color more forcefully than Whites.⁸⁴ The ACLU of Rhode Island enhances this testimony through their study on racial disparity. “The Rhode Island police departments that were analyzed arrested black individuals at rates up to 9.1 times higher than the rate for non-blacks,” the ACLU confirms.⁸⁵ Thus, there is a prejudice in policing that leads to adverse outcomes for Black and Brown people in Providence. Keith Oliviera, Chairman of the Providence School Committee, recalled, “The first time I was stopped and detained by the police I was 15 years old. I was walking home to Fox Point from the Brown Bookstore on Thayer St. As I was walking, three or four police cruisers pulled up all around me with lights flashing...I was told there a break-in on the next street over and I fit the description of the suspect...”⁸⁶ Thus, these issues exist right on Brown’s campus, and it would be immoral to sit by idly as systems of injustice continue.

Brown is a university, and while powerful, it does not have the capacity to resolve all systems of injustice. What the institution must do is interrogate its role in the community and how to take this responsibility seriously. That begins with the BHEPP students housed in the ACI. As Kyle Campbell wrote in his letter, “Apart from the fact that it is the right thing to do, it is also a culmination of legal, moral, and academic justice.”⁸⁷ Bryan Stevenson, a civil rights lawyer, emphasized at a conference on Rhode Island mass incarceration, “the opposite of poverty is not wealth, but justice.”⁸⁸ Rhode Island has the highest poverty rate in New England, and it is one of 11 states to experience no improvement in its concentrated poverty rate over the last ten years.⁸⁹ Thus, there is a need for swift and just action in the state. Brown is a prominent part of Rhode Island, and it has a responsibility to give back in this role, just as it benefits from this role. As an institution of higher education, Brown should begin with what it does best, enriching through education. There is a population of students waiting for Brown to take this step, a step they believe will remedy some of the systemic issues that restrict them. Campbell posits, “I am

⁸⁴ Hill, “People of color sent to prison, put on probation far more than whites.”

⁸⁵ “Racial Disparities Report by RI ACLU Called ‘Extraordinary’ by Community Leaders,” Go Local Prov, February 20, 2015, <https://www.golocalprov.com/news/racial-disparities-report-by-ri-aclu-called-extraordinary-by-community-lead>.

⁸⁶ “Racial Disparities Report by RI ACLU Called ‘Extraordinary’ by Community Leaders,” Go Local Prov,

⁸⁷ Campbell, “Letter to RailRoad.”

⁸⁸ Emily Wooldridge, “Speakers dissect R.I. mass incarceration,” The Brown Daily Herald, April 1, 2015, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2015/04/01/speakers-dissect-r-i-mass-incarceration/>.

⁸⁹ Linda Borg, “Report: R.I. poverty rate is highest in N.E.,” Providence Journal, November 20, 2017, <https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20171120/report-ri-poverty-rate-is-highest-in-ne>.

aware of Brown’s commitment to criminal justice reforms, reforms that could not be espoused without confronting some of the institutional barriers that infringe on equitable education.”⁹⁰ Denis Potenza, another student at the ACI, elaborates, “I would add that allowing inmates the honor of earning Brown University credits would demonstrate Brown’s commitment to confronting socio-economic injustices in our institutions of higher learning.”⁹¹ As the students explained, education presents a pathway forward for incarcerated individuals. It is an effective way to remove structural barriers that follow people when they leave prison. Furthermore, investing in prison education helps remedy the symptoms of structural injustices that place people behind bars. As reported by the Center for American Progress, only 18 percent of incarcerated people have a high school diploma, compared with 41 percent of the entire U.S population.⁹² This is especially troubling in Providence, where the public schools are not able to prepare their students for success. John Hopkin’s report on the Providence Public School system states, “PPSD has an exceptionally low level of academic instruction, including a lack of quality curriculum and alignment both within schools and across the district.”⁹³ Additionally, the racial disparities in disciplining deter school completion for black students. A study from the ACLU stated that one out of every six black students in the public school system received an out-of-school suspension versus one in 16 white students.⁹⁴ The Prison Studies Project summarizes, “Incarcerated persons are disproportionately likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; to be members of a racial/ethnic minority group; to have held a low-skill, low-paying job (if employed at all) at the time of arrest; and to be less educated than their counterparts in the general population.”⁹⁵ Prison serves as a receptacle for society’s policy problems, and prisons are where one finds the most vulnerable members of society. Thus, if Brown wants to make a positive impact in Providence, it is an ideal place to start.

The first step is for-credit classes. Many of the students in the ACI did not have access to a quality education or attentive instruction before going to prison. When asked about for-credit

⁹⁰ Campbell, “Letter to RailRoad.”

⁹¹ Dennis Potenza, “Letter to RailRoad,” 2019.

⁹² “Prison Education: Guide to College Degrees for Inmates and Ex-Offenders,” The Best Schools, July 9, 2019, <https://thebestschools.org/magazine/prison-inmate-education-guide/>.

⁹³ “Providence Public School District: A Review,” Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, June 2019, <https://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PPSD-REVISED-FINAL.pdf>.

⁹⁴ “The School-to-Prison Pipeline in Black and White,” American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island, February 2015, http://riaclu.org/images/uploads/School_to_Prison_Pipeline_in_Black_and_White_2015.pdf.

⁹⁵ “Why Prison Education?,” Prison Studies Project.

Brown classes, Christopher Sanders, a student at the ACI, said, “This will afford an opportunity to those who may otherwise fall to the wayside for their lack of education.”⁹⁶ While incarcerated students benefit from Brown courses, they do not disrupt structural barriers without the addition of credit. Sanders reflects, “I think that up until this point, we in BELLS program have proven our willingness to transcend through education. I cannot say enough about the positive impact the BELLS Program has had on me. And if I would have been accumulating credits for each of the courses I had completed, my chances of success upon my release would increase greatly...”⁹⁷ A credit validates the work of people who were often cut off from educational opportunities and provides a path towards college completion. According to a 2009 report from the Correctional Association of New York, a college education has become one of the most valuable assets in the United States; a bachelor’s degree is worth more than \$1 million in lifetime earnings.⁹⁸ Thus, it is an important resource for anyone seeking economic security but is especially beneficial for people with a prison record. One year after release, 60 percent of formerly incarcerated people are still unemployed, as they face application rejection rates that are 12 to 13 percent above those without convictions.⁹⁹ Education can assist with advancement through institutional barriers to employment by imparting the skills, training, and confidence necessary for success. The boost that a degree gives previously-incarcerated people can help break the intergenerational cycle of inequality. The Prison Studies Project states, “In the first decade of the twenty-first century, more than half of all people behind bars had minor children at the time of their incarceration.”¹⁰⁰ One study reports that without mass incarceration, our overall poverty rate would be 20 percent lower between 1980 and 2004.¹⁰¹ We all face the consequence of constricting the rights and resources of people with convictions, and it our responsibility to remedy this injustice. As the “Slavery and Justice Report” shows, Brown is an institution benefits from the injustices of the past, which spill into the present, and it would be unfortunate for the university to act as a bystander to its own power and privilege.

⁹⁶ Christopher Sanders, “Letter to RailRoad,” 2019.

⁹⁷ Sanders, “Letter to RailRoad.”

⁹⁸ “Why Prison Education?,” Prison Studies Project.

⁹⁹ Elisa Nadworny, “Congress Considers Making College More Accessible To People In Prison,” NPR, April 20, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/20/713874091/congress-considers-making-college-more-accessible-to-people-in-prison>.

¹⁰⁰ “Why Prison Education?,” Prison Studies Project.

¹⁰¹ Lois M. Davis, “How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here?” RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR564.html.

Most importantly, people in prison are still a part of our community, and most of them are will return home. There are over 2 million people incarcerated in the U.S., and 700,000 of them return home each year.¹⁰² While this paper makes the conscious choice not to engage the topic of recidivism, which stems from the faulty logic that legitimizes the carceral state, it is important to prepare incarcerated people for success upon leaving prison. In total, 95% of the people in prison will return home, so it is in society's best interest for them to be ready for reintegration.¹⁰³ Statistic, studies, and personal stories confirm that post-secondary education programs remain the most effective mode of preparation.

While prison education is a worthwhile endeavor, the university has not committed itself fully to helping the prison population a few miles from campus. Brown University sits in the midst of these structural injustices, surrounded by indications of socioeconomic ills that stretch back centuries. Often, universities will only move into action if a policy benefits them, but if the administration only seeks situations where they gain, it will not accomplish true social good. It is no longer enough to acknowledge the university's problematic history or its predatory behavior in the state; it is time for the university to take proactive steps towards a new paradigm.

Part V: Movement Forward

“Persist in this work regardless of results, because if you persist, eventually there will be results.” – Amy Remensnyder

As the current COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates, situations can change in an instant. The pandemic has both brought people into solidarity with one another and shown the socioeconomic disparities that can mean life or death. Our society has the chance to grow from this crisis if we make a concerted effort to construct a world beyond our current circumstances. COVID-19 has also exposed the ways we have been complicit. We are all implicated in the ills of our society. As universities across the country contend with how to conduct distance learning ethically, there is opportunity to operate virtual or remote programs inside of prisons. Technological innovation provides the possibility for partnership between Brown and the ACI, which could endure this

¹⁰² Davis, “How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here?”

¹⁰³ Davis, “How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here?”

outbreak and unforeseen events in the future. There is a reimagining of our world occurring inside the campus and throughout the country, and the university must decide which direction it will take. There is a call for universities to become proactive in social policy, instead of reactive to the whims of an ever-shifting society. In Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University must determine if it will assume a passive role or provide its resources, capital, and knowledge in partnership with our global community.

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