



REPORT

Between Two Systems

Navigating Censorship and Self-Censorship in Higher Education in Prisons

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ITHAKA S+R

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Introduction

In 2023, Federal Pell Grant funding was reinstated for learners who are incarcerated, and new regulations were released to govern the eligibility of higher education in prison programs for such funding. This has driven increased interest in higher education in prison programming, as programs look to help their students access Pell grants and adjust their practices to account for the new regulations. At the same time, research and advocacy organizations have also redoubled efforts to better understand how higher education in prison programs are provided, what technology their students have access to, and how the student experience of education in prison differs from the student experience on college campuses. The cultural and institutional focus on security within departments of correction allows correctional institutions wide latitude to practice censorship and surveillance; however, higher education institutions have a duty to protect the privacy and academic freedom of their students. As higher education opportunities expand for individuals who are incarcerated, new configurations and collaborations will be needed to meet these needs.

With funding from Ascendium Education Group, Ithaka S+R has published two reports on relevant issues: a report detailing survey findings on technology access in higher education in prison programming and a report on media review directives and censorship policy in higher education in prison.¹ Our past work has explored the ways that media review directives and censorship policies may limit or protect student access to intellectual and education material and explored what technology students on the inside can access for educational purposes—and the quality of both the access and use that they have. Building on that work, this report, also made possible with funding from Ascendium Education Group, contributes to the conversation by exploring how educators in higher education in prison programs navigate censorship and self-censorship. Specifically, we sought to understand how the institutional context, and the relationship between educational programs and departments of corrections, may have

¹ See Ess Pokornowski, “Technology in Higher Education in Prison Programs: A Report on Survey Findings,” *Ithaka S+R*, 7 September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.319583>, and Ess Pokornowski, Kurtis Tanaka, and Darnell Epps, “Security and Censorship: A Comparative Analysis of State Department of Corrections Media Review Policies,” *Ithaka S+R*, 20 April 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318751/>.

an impact on both how students experience higher education in prison and their learning outcomes.²

Key Findings

- The need to preserve the relationship between the higher education in prison program and the department of corrections in which it operates contributes to a variety of self-censoring behaviors.
- Faculty need better training on how to best serve students, mitigate bias, and maintain the program's relationship with corrections.
- Censorship policies and practices have material impacts on what can be taught.
- Censorship, self-censorship, and surveillance practices, alongside limited technology access, make the student experience of college in prison materially different from education on college campuses outside of prison.
- The presence of correctional staff and digital surveillance impact free expression in the physical and the virtual classroom and have a chilling effect on speech.
- Students are often expected to serve as cultural arbiters, helping programmatic and correctional staff navigate interpersonal power dynamics and personalities.

² Thanks to the higher education in prison program students, instructors, and administrators that spoke with us. We have withheld mentioning anyone by name to protect anonymity, but this research wouldn't exist without their open and candid participation. The collection, coding, and analysis of data was very much a team effort, so special thanks to Kurtis Tanaka, Darnell Epps, and Tammy Ortiz for their work. Special thanks as well to Juni Ahari, Daniel Braun, and Kimberly Lutz for their editing support and to Catharine Bond Hill and Roger Schonfeld for their guidance.

Methods

The project employed qualitative methodologies to explore the intersections of censorship and self-censorship in higher education in prison programs. Our approach was informed through an initial literature review of these topics in educational settings generally to help us better identify and understand the specific issues at play in the prison context. From this review the research team drafted a series of semi-structured interview guides targeted at different categories of interviewees, namely: higher education in prison program instructors and students. (See the Appendix for more information and a copy of the interview guide). These guides were then evaluated for length and appropriateness through a series of test interviews. We used snowball sampling to recruit participants for the interviews which lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and were conducted and recorded over Zoom. To encourage candid responses, and recognizing the sensitive nature of the topic, all interviewees were granted anonymity and are not identified in the report. Formerly incarcerated students were also compensated with an honorarium of \$50 for sharing their experiences. We thank all the interviewees for their time and hope the report will be as useful to them as to the wider higher education in prison community.

The interview recordings were transcribed by a third party and then analyzed through a grounded approach to coding utilizing nVivo software. Twenty-two interviews—six with former or current students and 16 with individuals connected to higher education in prison programs—were conducted in total. While this report cannot purport to be representative of the whole field’s experience with media review and self-censorship, we hope the findings will serve as a place to begin discussion about the nature of education and free inquiry in the carceral classroom.

Findings

What Can Be Taught: Courses, Curriculum, and Content in the Context of Media Review

Interviewees explained that the need to protect the relationship between the program and corrections leads most of them to avoid directly challenging censorship decisions.

An array of factors reshape the courses, the curricula, the content, and the assignments in the carceral context: Many participants highlighted how, while the quality of education in college in prison programming might still be quite high—one individual argued that it is higher in their program than their home campus—the actual experience of college instruction and learning differs dramatically when compared to that of the main campus. This begins at the level of policy.

It is important to note that the depth of correctional scrutiny of and interest in course materials varies widely from system to system, facility to facility, and likely discipline to discipline. In this report, we look primarily at instruction in the humanities and social sciences. In some places, there is a level of mutual trust and accountability; in others there is strict oversight, while most relationships fall somewhere between. Only one interviewee described absolute curricular freedom: “I just tell them what we’re teaching every quarter, they add it to the schedule. We just do whatever—they’ve never asked to look at a syllabus.” The rest had some level of direct content oversight.

Meanwhile, interviewees explained that the need to protect the relationship between the program and corrections leads most of them to avoid directly challenging censorship decisions. While appeals processes exist for censorship decisions, many interviewees reported not using them for fear of jeopardizing their relationship with the department of corrections.³ As one described, “You can challenge but it just sets you back. It’s not a good thing to do.” Some interviewees were unaware whether official policies were in place. Others addressed the importance of using unofficial channels and personal relationships, rather than formal

³ For more on how such processes are organized and how educational protections can help to strengthen access to information, see Ess Pokornowski, Kurtis Tanaka, and Darnell Epps, “Security and Censorship: A Comparative Analysis of State Department of Corrections Media Review Policies,” *Ithaka S+R*, 20 April 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318751/>.

appeals, and outlined a variety of strategies that they may take to ensure that course content is approved upon review.

In some cases, programs described practices that might at first glance be described as proactive self-censorship, where faculty take the initiative to remove in advance course content that they believe corrections may find objectionable. In a few cases, interviewees described simply censoring materials to comply with standard media review practices, for example, removing texts that contain “images of weapons and police brutality... before it even got to the facility’s review.”

In many of the examples that interviewees provided though, this was part of a calculated effort to remove materials that corrections might find objectionable without altering the substance of the course. In other words, it is a balancing act, where faculty sacrifice individual texts to preserve larger structural or thematic lessons or discussion. For example, several interviewees noted preemptively removing materials that they might otherwise normally teach, especially on issues centering around systemic or structural injustice. As one individual put it: “I took out [some of the] readings that seemed like they were about social justice-type issues... But I knew that the way I taught the class was still going to center those issues, it's just that you wouldn't be able to tell, like, glancing at the syllabus.”

Interviewees agreed that the educational experience of students in higher education in prison programs was substantially different from that of students on college campuses on the outside.

While the degree to which interviewees acknowledged changing their course materials differed across programs and individuals, most interviewees agreed that the educational experience of students in higher education in prison programs was substantially different from that of students on college campuses on the outside. Many interviewees spoke at length about how substantive these differences are, and they addressed curricular changes they made because of both content and its form. One interviewee explained, “professors have to change their curriculum and I’m not saying that it’s watered down, it’s just different... so, it prevents

students on the inside from having that same share of experience with the students that are actually on a live college campus.”

In addition to content restrictions that can reshape the texts and context of courses, policy is in some cases also responsible for altering pedagogy and practice in the carceral classroom. States have policies that limit how students can interact with one another, their instructors, and service providers such as academic advisors or counselors. This means that common experiences in higher education—like group projects that are done primarily outside of class time or interview assignments—are often forbidden for students who are incarcerated. Several interviewees told us about specific assignments that align more with their pedagogy but that they cannot use on the inside due to policy.

In “Technology in Higher Education in Prison Programs,” we found that the majority of higher education in prison programs lack practical, quality access to technology for educational and research purposes.⁴ Some interviewees in this project provide a complementary view, as they noted how the dearth of technological accessibility on the inside made the educational experience dramatically different. This includes the difficulty of getting students access to visual media: “As a person who teaches a lot of TV and film on the outside, I’m less able to do that inside... When I do teach moving images it nearly always has to be something I’ve gotten permission to project during the class period,” which means students cannot watch material on their own time and reflect before class. Another interviewee noted that the lack of technological access meant that much of the course delivery and coursework itself had to be rethought and remediated, explaining that courses are “identical in the sense that the learning outcomes are the same, all the materials are the same, the books are the same, all that, but the reality is that things happen differently because... students inside can’t access the full internet,” and as result “you have to actually rethink how you deliver some of your course-content, in practice.” One interviewee put it more simply: “The biggest and most obvious difference is about technology, right? Access to technology, and particularly to digital research resources is the great limitation of programs nationwide.”

⁴ For the full report, see: Ess Pokornowski, “Technology in Higher Education in Prison Programs: A Report on Survey Findings,” *Ithaka S+R*, 7 September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.319583>.

A variety of other noteworthy curricular and instructional differences were also mentioned. A few interviewees noted that the instructional experiences of students inside also differed due to faculty bias, noting “stereotypes in the way people craft” classes and “assumptions about what people inside want to learn.” One explained that part of the effort of training instructors is teaching them not to self-censor:

I've always tried to get people to become more self-aware about the ideas or the fantasies or the misconceptions that might cause them to not include certain curriculum, or materials, or ideas...in their courses. Sometimes they have a fantasy about what the institution will or won't permit. Sometimes they have ideas about what prisoners are going to be interested in or what prisoners are going to be put off by or what they're going to find appealing or not appealing. So a lot of it is, I would argue, is fantasy, really... I think people sometimes are worried about offending... about creating a conflict.

A few interviewees also mentioned concerns about voyeurism altering instruction and dialogue in courses where students who are incarcerated interact with those who are not.

Free Expression in the Carceral Classroom

“Everybody for those three hours while they’re in school is all about college; they’re not in prison anymore. You’re focused on that particular moment. When you have an officer present it kind of takes away from that particular moment.”

The people we interviewed identified a variety of factors that impact free expression in the classroom. Chief among these is the frequent presence, or spectral presence, of correctional staff in the classroom. Only one individual said that staff and guards do not enter their classroom, and even though that interviewee highlighted that while students “feel they can speak freely,” they also noted that the educational spaces were all surveilled with video and audio monitoring.

In some cases, correctional staff are present throughout instruction. Some interviewees highlighted how the presence of correctional staff alters discussion and drives self-censorship for both students and faculty. In other situations, correctional staff may not stay in the room, but instead stand just outside the door. Most interviewees were able to cite specific instances when correctional staff interrupted class for one reason or another, including those who said that they were largely left alone to teach. Some interviewees mentioned that correctional officers may

appear at any given time, interrupt class for a variety of reasons, and stay for an indeterminate amount of time. Both tendencies drive self-censorship, and one individual noted that “whenever an officer stepped in, the tension levels in the classroom would rise, because [the class anticipates] some type of reprimand or punishment.” Others described “resentment,” “visible anger,” and an environment where “everybody just gets very on-edge.” Many interviewees noted that professors also “feel intimidated and thrown off,” and “if there’s an officer in the classroom, [classes] just basically stop.”

To the interviewees, these disruptions are more than a minor inconvenience; they disrupt the entire learning environment. As one person noted: “Everybody for those three hours while they’re in school is all about college; they’re not in prison anymore. You’re focused on that particular moment. When you have an officer present it kind of takes away from that particular moment.”

What’s more, according to the interviewees, correctional presence directly leads to a variety of self-censoring behaviors among faculty and students who are invested in protecting the program. As one described: “I wouldn’t censor myself for the benefit of that CO [correctional officer], right? But I would have to think about the program.” Another person explained the effect when correctional staff enter the classroom:

I also am looking to my students to see what their reaction is; I can pick up a lot from that. If I see people who might have been talking change the topic or change their tone or pull their hand down—usually it’s even more subtle than that—I’m going to be aware that I need to be a little more careful and that it’s a hostile environment.

This interviewee also mentioned taking extra care when addressing issues of race or race relations in front of individuals from corrections.

Technology and Surveillance

Most interviewees expressed some ambivalence about digital technology. Some acknowledged that student access to and use of digital technology is a necessity for reentry success and an equitable learning experience. At the same time, a few expressed concerns about the surveillance potential of technology, and many fear that digital technologies may lead to the

elimination of in-person instruction and the possible adoption of less rigorous, less dialogic, and less engaged online models. As one person put it, “my overarching concern is not at all actually to do with surveillance,” but that technology can allow prison systems “to replace in-person instruction.” Another expressed the nuance and ambivalence of the situation:

I’m skeptical of a lot of the technology and its capacity to be used for surveillance... I think that, if technology actually gives people the freedom to have more information, more resources, more connections, more networks, that’s a good thing; but of course, all of that comes at a cost.

Some interviewees highlighted ways that communicating via digital messaging is “not the same as having direct conversations with people.” And a few noted how instructors and students both need to be “savvy about understanding, what will and will not... pass through” security screening. They also noted how, as a result, digital communication becomes “more superficial” and is relegated to “surface-level things only directly related to class content or materials.” These interviewees suggested that some of the interpersonal interaction, mentorship, and bonding that occur as part of the education process can be diminished by technological substitutes. One went on to offer a concrete example of how they might self-censor even professional empathetic, interpersonal communication out of concern that, read out of context in digital messaging, the interaction might be misinterpreted or flagged. When the relative of one student died, the interviewee noted that if they had been in person, they would have “taken the student’s hand, looked into their eye, and said, ‘I’m very sorry for your trouble.’” But because they were teaching remotely and communicating primarily through JPay at the time, they “put that fairly formally in JPay because JPay depends entirely on the mindset of the person who’s reading it.”⁵

⁵ JPay is an information technology and finance company specializing in providing secure messaging, digital mail, and banking services in the carceral sphere. They are owned by the parent company Securus Technologies (Securus also provides other services, such as video visitation). For context, this individual is speaking about JPay’s secure electronic mail or messenger service. Some carceral institutions who contract this service outsource security screening to JPay, whose employees are then contracted to surveil and, when necessary, flag or censor messages. This individual is referencing self-censorship tendencies and uncertainties in surveillance practices and perspectives.

Other responses demonstrate just how nuanced and complex the interplay between digital technology, surveillance, and education can be. One interviewee explained how the type of technology and the related services provided deeply impact the level of surveillance that students and faculty are subject to, and how increasing classroom and educational surveillance can damage the transformative power of the educational experience:

With tablets the ability to surveil what people are writing, and reading is huge. The classroom is a safe space for them. It is really the only place where they can have privacy. I don't want to take that away from them... The thought of having the DOC being able to see what we were teaching is very uncomfortable to me, it's physically uncomfortable.

The same interviewee went on to explain that they prefer and would advocate for other types of technology, such as laptops or Chromebooks, which can be managed and monitored with less pervasive and persistent surveillance models. Some interviewees also raised the fact that policies around technology use often mandate the presence of security staff in the room during remote instruction, which effectively increases surveillance and, they fear, contributes to a chilling effect on classroom speech. One interviewee noted, however, that the opposite was true for Inside Out curriculum, which hinges on not having correctional officers in the room. In practice, though, there remains a spectral correctional presence, as correctional officers might linger in doorways, peek their head in without warning, or monitor the room on silent surveillance systems.

A few individuals, however, noted possible benefits to technological surveillance, as one explained that if technology is “monitored directly” at a centralized location in the state, it could alleviate localized “political agendas and ideologies” that correctional officers might have regarding individuals working or learning in their facility.

Preserving the Relationship Between the Higher Education in Prison Program and Departments of Corrections

Most interviewees talked explicitly about the relationship between their program and the department of corrections in which it operates. And, indeed, for many of the educators we spoke to, the preservation of this relationship was crucial to the continuing existence of the program.

Participants identified the long-term growth and development of these relationships as key to achieving and maintaining relative autonomy and academic freedom as well. As one participant described, “They got to know me. They got to know us. They got used to the program. They were like—they’re probably not going to smuggle in anything crazy. You know, they just got busy and they were just like, ‘OK, the program’s doing some good.’” The same individual went on to explain that the maintenance of a strong working relationship between the higher education in prison program and correctional partners is mutually beneficial: “Part of it is they trust you not to do something that’s going to get them fired, but the other thing is that they’re taking a kind of pride in it. They get credit. They get recognition.”

Interviewees referenced a wide variety of environments and relationships with corrections. Some highlighted how supportive correctional leadership was, while others emphasized how obstructionist correctional staff could be. These differences were variously attributed to ideology, culture, and internal politics. At worst, one individual noted that correctional staff “would treat the professors just like the [incarcerated individuals], maybe worse,” and they would look for ways to penalize or restrict professors who teach inside by doing things like refusing to allow faculty to use the bathroom and actively searching for arbitrary rule violations so they could refuse entry. On the other hand, one interviewee noted that the differences between being “just tolerated or welcomed” came down to the warden, and that the warden they are currently working with was kind and supportive of the program.

Relationship management serves as the prime directive for many of the educators we interviewed, structuring how they approach all aspects of their work. Interviewees spoke about this at both the program level and the individual level. Some highlighted how, even when their relationship with high-level leadership in a department of corrections might be strong and positive, they still have to contend with individual correctional officers who might be skeptical, restrictive, or outright hostile to programming and faculty. An additional complicating factor of these relationship dynamics is that they are subject to change at a moment’s notice given the high turnover of administrators and personnel in prisons. Interviewees described frequent change at all levels of the department of corrections.⁶

⁶ Indeed, the staffing crisis in corrections has been a persistent problem, though the depth and scope are only becoming apparent. For more information, see: Shannon Heffernan and Weihua Li, “New Data Shows How Dire the Prison Staffing Shortage Really

One described how “every time that there's a new assistant warden, which [is] every 18 months or so, there's a lot of relationship-building, meeting with the assistant wardens, explaining the program.” Another interviewee highlighted their experience with mid-level personnel changes: “I’m on my fifth deputy of programs. Those relationships vary. People tend not to stay in that job... very long.” Other interviewees noted high turnover among correctional staff: “The turnover for corrections staff has been astounding. They are just running through corrections staff like water... So you’re not building up that rapport that correction officers and the residents were used to,” and the effectiveness of the program itself is “entirely reliant on who is working there.”

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The impacts of a strong relationship between the higher education in prison program and the department of corrections cannot be overstated. That said, the screening of course materials by correctional staff varied widely across interviews: some emphasized how the department of corrections goes through all their materials with a “fine toothed comb,” while another noted: “So this blow[s] everybody’s head. We can do anything we want. We can teach anything we want.” Interviewees also emphasized how the screening of materials often depends on the level of trust between the department of corrections and the program, where those with more established relationships and trust are given more latitude. And the pressure that instructors and administrators in higher education in prison programs feel is real, as one person explained: “If you make bad decisions, not only may you get, like, kicked out and not be able to go and finish teaching your class, but you're going to affect all of us.”

Interviewees highlighted a series of ways that they alter their behavior and appearance to support the relationship between their program and corrections. In order to make the work of correctional staff easier and to seem like better partners, some mentioned actively embracing and

is,” *The Marshall Project*, 10 January 2024, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/01/10/prison-correctional-officer-shortage-overtime-data>.

proactively submitting to materials screening in ways that may be categorized as “performative transparency,” for example, by bringing materials into the facility in a clear plastic bin or backpack and leaving envelopes open and unsealed so that materials might be more readily and easily examined.

Some interviewees also highlighted how they consciously change their posture, tone, and behavior to improve how correctional staff view them, with a few emphasizing how, once they begin interacting with prison staff, they are a “different person.” One noted, “I’m a completely different person. I try to make myself smaller; I’m 5’1, 5’2. My voice goes higher. I have found that the more feminine you present, the more comfortable—especially men, who are in corrections—feel.” Another said, “I’m a completely different person when I’m at prison. I change the tone of my voice. I change my demeanor completely. I’m very agreeable—this especially with corrections, not with the students.”

Interviewees also shared that identity and interpersonal belonging directly impact relationships with on-the-ground staff. One interviewee explained how as “a white man with a PhD who shows proper deference to authority” he’s conscious that he is working with people who assume that because he looks like them, they have shared cultural connections. He speculated that “women in general, women of color in particular, would run into a number of challenges working with that hierarchy, just because of [gendered assumptions].” Another interviewee suggested that they had student assistants or colleagues that correctional officers perceived as “like them” serve as liaisons for the program.

The performativity of the relationship is not one sided, however, as interviewees also spoke at length about intradepartmental politics and performativity among department of corrections staff. A few interviewees emphasized correctional cultures where a tough on crime mindset and investment in appearing tough and masculine led to “anti-program” sentiments. Others spoke about the difference between meeting one-on-one and in front of or with multiple stakeholders from the prison or correctional setting:

That’s where you see the division, because one-on-one, like you’re saying, I get pulled into [a correctional administrator’s] office and [they’re] confiding in me about all this stuff that I probably shouldn’t even know—sees me as a friend, like a colleague, right? Then the next minute they’ll come up and start yelling at our students like, “You’re

too close. Pick that up. What are you doing?” Just being rude. But then behind closed doors they are telling me how much they love the program, how much they like this student, how much they like that student... The performance is absolutely there and it’s really uncomfortable and also makes it super challenging as a staff person because you feel like people are living two different lives.

Ultimately, stakeholders in both higher education in prison programs and departments of corrections understand that, as one individual put it, “as long as I keep that relationship going with [the warden], and smile in [their] photo ops, we can continue to do what we do.”

The primacy of maintaining this relationship is so structural that it follows higher education in prison faculty and administrators in their daily lives outside the prison. For example, though the program directors and faculty we spoke to broadly support prison reform and/or abolition, only one said they do so publicly. Most interviewees expressed concern that public advocacy would negatively impact their program and therefore engage in self-censoring behavior outside the prison and online in order to preserve the program.

Caught Between: The Complex Pressures Faced by Students

The emphasis on preserving a good working relationship between the higher education in prison program and the correctional staff and administration is not lost on students and can impact their educational experience in a variety of ways.

Some interviewees noted a subjective, personal toll on students simply from seeing how program faculty and staff work to ingratiate themselves to correctional personnel. As one interviewee put it, “they don’t like the politics that we have to play. The being...very transparent, and open, and being overly kind to officers. There are students who I know are bothered by it.” A few interviewees also suggested that students play a key role as cultural arbiters, informing individuals working in the higher education in prison program about individual correctional officers’ personalities and perspectives on the program.

The largest pressures, however, appear to come in terms of push back against decisions. According to the people we interviewed, the prioritization and protection of the program's relationship with corrections in some cases puts inequitable pressure on students to advocate for themselves and challenge correctional decisions. This is particularly important regarding censorship and content challenges, which are a persistent barrier for learners and readers on the inside. While many college programs have arrangements for educational exceptions, independent student research or reading is seldom covered.⁷ Some interviewees stressed the importance of having individual students make censorship appeals, with one explaining that "there's a pretty clear review process for them and they can often get things back if they file it like it's a grievance or something else. They can push-back individually a little more easily but, of course, I think it depends on their current relationships with officers and things like that." Another interviewee noted that first amendment protections allowed individual students a more robust argument against censorship decisions than programs might make.

Program faculty and administrators suggested that they still protect and advocate for their students, albeit through indirect approaches. Nonetheless, the focus higher education in prison programs put on maintaining their partnership with corrections may at times put their students in a difficult position.

Bridging Institutional Gaps: Training and Orientation

A few of the people we interviewed noted that their training functions largely to limit bias in instructors and to help them to navigate relationships in the prison space.

Given that higher education and correctional institutions have different structures of power and values, and that the greatest concern for higher education in prison programs is navigating the relationship between the college program and corrections, training and orientation practices may have an outsized impact on faculty, students, and staff. Despite that, descriptions of what kind of programmatic training or orientation were available to faculty varied widely among the people we spoke with. For some it was cursory, "really geared towards, 'Don't get manipulated.'" Others described attending multi-day training sessions or receiving robust

⁷ For more, see again: "Security and Censorship: A Comparative Analysis of State Department of Corrections Media Review Policies," <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318751>.

program handbooks.

Several interviewees noted that faculty often came into the program with assumptions and preconceived notions about what students might want to learn and about what corrections might object to. A few noted that their training functions largely to limit bias in instructors and to help them navigate relationships in the prison space. One explained that their program's training "deals with the rules, regulations, and culture of the department. You know, understanding not only what the rules are but how they think... and what their concerns are." Another explained that it is really about "creating a kind of cultural competency in relation to corrections." They drew upon a variety of strategies and sources to develop and support program orientations, from interviewing former instructors to establishing a student advisory board.

Interviewees noted that departments of corrections have orientations for faculty, but that these focus primarily on institutional rules, structure, and security. Few referenced any training aimed at helping students or correctional personnel acclimate to, understand, and work within the college program. This is likely an area for growth, especially considering the expanding adoption of digital technology in college in prison programs. One student put the issue poignantly when they told us:

I didn't know how to access Canvas. I didn't know what a login page, what's a user? I still don't know what a user's name is, you know what I mean? And why do I got to set a new password every time I open something up? What's happening here? It's really confusing and trying for me.

Conclusion

The interviews that we conducted reveal how the relationship between the college in prison program and the correctional institution in which it operates has an impact on nearly every level of the program from curriculum design to pedagogical approach to communication among students and faculty. And, indeed, there was a pervasive concern throughout interviews that without cultivating a relationship of goodwill and trust with correctional institutions, the college programs operating

within them cannot succeed. That pressure also exerts itself on students, who frequently must liaise with program and correctional staff, helping each system's emissaries navigate the personalities and codes of the other.

The prioritization of maintaining this relationship also has a direct impact on instruction, as faculty avoid teaching texts they think corrections might find objectionable, or use indirect strategies to adjust course content and themes—for example, leaving out key readings on race and racism out of concern that corrections might object to them, but then using an innocuous but conceptually related reading to have a discussion about race and racism anyway. While this approach successfully navigates the college-correctional relationship, it also highlights a key difference between what and how students might learn inside prison versus on a college's main campus. Nearly every interviewee highlighted how different the educational experience is in these programs as compared to college on the outside.

Nearly every person we spoke with highlighted how different the educational experience is in these programs as compared to college the outside.

Moreover, the role of digital technology complicates several of these issues. On one hand, while some faculty maintain that the small class size and intimate discussion make their courses on the inside more rigorous and valuable than some of the courses they and their colleagues might teach on the main college campus, they also raise questions about the educational and experiential inequity of these differential learning experiences. The lack of student access to library databases, fully functional learning management systems and software programs, and the internet itself suggests that many students in college in prison programs are not getting comparable experience with key tools and technologies that are ubiquitous and essential to work, learning, and communication outside of prison. This then raises concerns about how well students are prepared to navigate and thrive in their reentry.

Interviewees suggested that simply increasing the scope and volume of student access to digital tools and technologies alone will not be enough, as this may inspire correctional institutions to eliminate in-person

instruction and/or to partner with colleges that might be able to successfully scale remote education to the detriment of in-person instruction, interactivity, and rigor. Moreover, concerns about surveillance, and especially about increasing opportunities for unobserved and pervasive digital surveillance, are persistently driving self-censorship among faculty and students and making faculty hesitant to advocate for digital technologies.

The landscape of technology in higher education in prison programs is changing rapidly and has already changed significantly since we conducted these interviews. As an increasing number of programs and prisons begin to adopt digital technologies, and technological mediation reshapes the relationship between corrections and colleges, orientation and training programs will likely serve an increasingly pivotal role for faculty, students, and correctional staff.

Recommendations

- Higher education in prison programs should collaborate closely and proactively with correctional institutions and facilities. Proactively increasing cultural literacy among both constituencies and aligning on shared goals and values will help to strengthen the college-corrections partnership and take pressure off students to help both sides navigate it.
- College in prison programs and corrections should coordinate and align on educational exceptions to censorship policies, demonstrating the necessity for students to learn about and discuss sensitive issues for educational equity and professional success.
- To alleviate the tension between surveillance and self-censorship, programs and their correctional partners should actively coordinate to clarify censorship requirements and surveillance practices.
- Colleges and departments of corrections should actively coordinate and collaborate to deliberately implement digital technology and to ensure that students have quality access and use of it, as a complement to in-person instruction.

Appendix

Understanding Self-Censorship in Higher Education in Prisons and Its Impacts

Project Background and Overview

Given the increased use of digital technology in prison and the need for better quality educational resources, Ithaka S+R began exploring the ways in which technology is impacting higher education in prison; one key question was whether the increased surveillance capacity of these technologies may be causing instructors or students to self-censor. However, **a segment of this study is also focusing on censorship self-censorship more broadly, and whether existing media review guidelines and processes are inequitable. We also understand that there is added pressure on HEPs to comply with these guidelines given their asymmetrical relationship with DOCS.**

In addition to convening a community of practice and conducting a 50-state policy-scan of DOCs media review policies, Ithaka S+R is trying to get a deeper sense of the interrelationship of digital technology and self-censorship. Specifically, Ithaka S+R is looking to untangle how the advanced monitoring and surveillance features of these technologies may be reorienting the instructor-student relationship. Prison officials are becoming increasingly tolerant of these technologies given their capacity to better monitor and surveil communications. Examining how this digitally heightened security atmosphere is impacting student learning is a primary goal of this study.

Interview Guide

1. Can you tell us about the particular program you taught for and/or supervised?
 - a. What security level was the prison you taught at?
 - b. Is there any orientation you must receive prior to volunteering as an instructor in prison? What does that orientation entail?
 - c. What courses did you teach?

- d. Were those courses the same that you taught on campus?
 - e. What digital technologies, if any, did your students have access to?
 2. How would you characterize your program's relationship with DOC?
 - a. Is your program's or your personal relationship with facility staff different than its relationship with high ranking DOC's officials? Why or why not?
 3. Describe how you design and/or propose the courses you teach in prison. And how, if at all, does that differ from how you structure your curricula for on-campus students?
 - a. Is the way you frame or title your courses different?
 - b. Are there specific modules or topics you feel the need to remove or change?
 - c. Have you ever had any conflicts about your choice of course materials?
 - d. Are you aware of the media review guidelines at your facility?
 - e. Have you ever needed to appeal a media review decision and, whether or not you have, how comfortable would you feel doing so?
 4. Describe the context in which you teach.
 - a. Do guards or other staff members sit in on classes?
 - b. Do you have a sense of whether your students feel like they can speak openly and freely, even when a guard or staff member is not present?
 - c. Do guards or other staff members ever review student writing assignments?
 - d. Has there ever been an instance when you needed to steer students away from talking about a particular topic? Why?
 5. Although digital devices like tablets began appearing in prisons before the pandemic, the current inability to teach in-person has caused HEPs to become reliant on those devices for remote learning. How has this shift altered the way you teach, and how you engage with your students? If you have not taught with such technologies, what concerns do you have, if any?

6. Does your relationship with DOC affect how you engage with social media or talk publicly?
 - a. Specifically, do you ever limit what you say publicly for fear that DOCs may respond negatively or become hostile to your program?