



Commentaries in Urban Education

Can Prison Education be Abolitionist? Reflections from the Circle of Solidarity

Abstract

University-sponsored prison education programs offer valuable resources to populations typically denied educational access and opportunity. They also extend the university's resources and legitimacy to the carceral system within which they necessarily operate. This essay takes up the potential contradiction between prison education and prison abolition by reflecting on my experience developing a correspondence-based inside-outside program independent from official channels: the Circle of Solidarity Study Group. Through collaborative cross-wall abolitionist study, the Circle of Solidarity seeks to connect prison education with individuals and organizations committed to the struggle for a society that does not use surveillance, policing, and human caging to address social problems and interpersonal harm.

Keywords

[prison education](#), [abolition](#), [prison industrial complex \(PIC\)](#), [Circle of Solidarity](#), [anti-abolition](#), [prison reform](#)

How to Cite

Golub, M., (2025) "Can Prison Education be Abolitionist? Reflections from the Circle of Solidarity", *VUE (Voices in Urban Education)* 53(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.35240/vue.202>

2786

 Views

0

 Downloads

**INVEST IN
OUR COMMUNITIES!**



@TIGER_STEPMON

NOT COPS+PRISONS!

Figure 1. “Invest in Our Communities” by [Tiger Step Mom](#).

My first time visiting the California Rehabilitation Center (CRC) in Norco, California felt slightly surreal. I had come to Norco as part of an outreach team with Californians United for Responsible Budgets (CURB), in support of our Close CA Prisons campaign. The August sun was brutal as we stood across the street from the prison calling out to family and loved ones who had come to the CRC for visitation day. We were offering water, snacks, and information about California’s new resentencing laws and had hoped to speak with the visitors in the CRC parking lot, but prison officials pushed us back across the street and warned us that we would be arrested if we blocked traffic or came on “their property” or got too close to the razor-wire fence. This made it harder to reach the visiting family members we wanted to connect with, as we had to compete with the cheers and shouts coming from the Little League baseball field situated directly across from the prison gates. I tried to stay hydrated as I took in the scene: on one side a sea of kids looking adorable in little league uniforms and cleats, families in folding chairs huddled in what patches of shade they could find, small children with giant sodas and bags of salty snacks; on the other, razor wire and guards and a tall prison tower watching over rows of “bungalows” where roughly 2,000 men live in human cages.

Our CURB campaign is fighting to get 10 prisons slated for closure by 2025, with releases rather than transfers for as many prisoners as possible, and to redirect the billions of dollars in cost savings back into the community for things like healthcare, affordable housing, and other life-affirming social services. Every weekend for nearly four months we came back to CRC, connecting with family and community members, building trust, sharing resources to help get their loved ones out sooner, and bringing the people most directly affected by the prison system into our campaign to close the prison down. Along with members and volunteers from Critical Resistance (my political home), Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, All of Us or None, CURB staff, and students from the Claremont Colleges (where I also teach) staffed these “parking lot outreach days.” It was inspiring to see these connections grow, and gratifying to see many of the people we connected with in the parking lot now becoming powerful advocates for prison closure.

Standing outside of CRC in the blazing sun that day, and every time I returned, I could not help but think about the invitation I had received to teach courses inside the prison as part of Pitzer College’s Prison Education Initiative—and about

some of the remarkable men from that program whom I had met on campus after their release from prison. These were men who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to earn college degrees, give commencement speeches, win Fulbright Awards, or have other experiences that seem a lifetime away from CRC's human cages. Some of my most trusted colleagues teach inside CRC, and many of my best students have taken "inside-outside" classes there. But what would it mean for me—and for the students, the program, and the campaign—to teach inside the prison while organizing outside the prison trying to close it down?

This dilemma is likely to resonate with educators who work inside prisons, many of whom hold abolitionist political views or understand the criminal legal system not only to be fundamentally biased or unjust, but also to be functioning as it was intended: as the application of organized state violence to maintain racial and class hierarchies and impose social control (Davis, 1998; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Kaba, 2021; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). It raises fundamental questions about the relationship between prison education and the prison industrial complex (PIC), which in this reflection piece I will try to work through from an explicitly abolitionist perspective. Is it possible to reconcile perceived tensions between imprisoned people's urgent needs, including the need for educational programming, and the abolitionist imperative of systems-level transformation that chips away at the prison system's reach and scope? How can we support imprisoned people with access to empowering educational resources without giving ideological legitimacy and material support to the prison itself? What would it mean to work *with* the prison when teaching inside, while working *against* the prison, as part of an abolitionist campaign demanding its closure?

In what follows, I try to think through the relationship between prison education and PIC-abolition, offering some reflections on my experience developing a correspondence-based inside-outside program independent from official channels: the Circle of Solidarity Study Group (COS). Throughout, I rely on a distinction between "prison education"—by which I mean university-sponsored prison education programs formally recognized by the prison—and "education in prison"—which I understand to include a far wider range of educational practices including formal and informal prisoner study groups, with or without recognition by the prison.

I do not presume to offer a solution or surefire way to avoid the contradictions named above. Rather, my intention is to uplift the crucial role of education in

prison for radical liberation movements while simultaneously sharpening our collective understanding of how prison education programming can: provide ameliorative relief without challenging the prison system itself; serve an antiabolitionist function by working to isolate prisoner study from organized outside political movements; and use the resources and legitimacy universities offer to further entrench the carceral system in which they operate. I offer my experience of developing and running the Circle of Solidarity Study Group not as a solution, but simply as one (not always successful) attempt to negotiate these contradictions and tensions.

Everyone Loves Prison Education

With widespread bipartisan support, imprisoned students are once again eligible for Pell Grants after 26 years of exclusion under the 1994 Crime Bill (Eddy, 2023; Kenner, 2023). Public reaction to the restoration of Pell Grant access for prisoners has been enthusiastic across the political spectrum, with the primary concern being that access and implementation may be moving too slowly (Dholakia, 2024; Weissman, 2023). Nearly everyone agrees that college in prison offers a potentially life-changing opportunity for students to build skills, credentials, and self-esteem (Eddy, 2023; Parker, 1990). And yet, different constituencies understand the benefits of prison education in strikingly different ways and value it according to a wide range of politically inflected metrics. Glossing Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law's (2020) observation about prison reform, it seems like everyone loves prison education, but not all for the same reasons.

Most prison educators and imprisoned students, in my experience, understand the significance of their work as making a positive difference for individuals living in oppressive conditions. And for good reason. Testimonials and op-eds written by imprisoned people speak powerfully to the transformative potential of prison education to "save lives" (Blackwell, 2022; Heider & Lehman, 2019; Kinzel, 2018; Light-Roth, 2024). Prison educators can take satisfaction in offering practical support to individuals who may otherwise be denied the opportunity to pursue high school diplomas or college degrees. Prisons are oppressive institutions, and denial of access to education is one form that oppression takes. Prisons are spaces of brutality, which is why imprisoned people are so hungry for educational opportunities that may not otherwise exist.

For prison officials and policymakers, however, the benefits of prison education have more to do with decreasing “recidivism” (reimprisonment after release), efficient prison management, and long-term cost savings for the state. A frequently quoted 2014 study by the nonprofit RAND Corporation found prison education to lower the risk of “recidivating” by 13% (Davis et al., 2014). Subsequent studies have found similar relationships, estimating that participation in prison education lowers rates of reimprisonment from 24% (Stickle & Schuster, 2023; Wilson et al., 2000) to 28% (Bozik et al., 2018). A case study of the Bard Prison Initiative saw similar declines for both associate’s and bachelor’s degree recipients, and a “near-zero new felony conviction rate” for all Bard Prison Initiative graduates (Denney & Tynes, 2021). Decreased likelihood of reimprisonment is also linked to other positive postrelease outcomes such as higher rates of employment and access to stable housing. But at the level of policy, carceral measures of public safety, cost savings, and effective prison management are the primary drivers of support for prison education.

A report from the nonpartisan California Legislative Analyst’s Office drives home this connection, celebrating reduced rates of “reoffending” as public safety, prison management, and budgetary wins that can be quantified in dollar amounts, saying, “these findings suggest that successful education programs can generate \$2 to \$3 or more in savings for every dollar invested to implement them” (Hill, 2008, p. 6). The liberal Center for American Progress similarly embraces this carceral framing in an article entitled “Education opportunities in prison are key to reducing crime,” noting that “for every dollar spent on prison education, taxpayers are [estimated to save four to five dollars](#) that would have been spent on incarceration” (Bender, 2018). In the short term, emphasizing public safety and cost savings may be a strategic move to win popular support and funding from policymakers, for whom these criteria are common sense “winning issues.” But it does so at the cost of reinscribing carceral assumptions that prisons make us safe, and by closing off consideration of underlying structural conditions that drive interpersonal harm (poverty, unemployment, despair) and responses to harm that do not involve criminalization.

Were this simply a matter of rhetoric, it would be tempting to see the claim that prison education contributes to public safety as another example of “issue convergence” (Bell, 2004), just as desegregation advanced Cold War objectives, affirmative action supported business interests in a globalizing economy, and other programs benefiting marginalized racial groups have been advanced only

when perceived by elites to be in their own interest. But it is also worth considering what this suggests about the conditions under which prisons will allow educational programs to operate and their potentially carceral implications.

Abolition vs. Antiabolition

To query the relationship between prison education and prison abolition, moreover, is not to deny the life-changing potential of prison education. Rather, it is to ask how prison education programming may or may not be part of a larger political project that challenges the legitimacy of the criminal legal system, disrupts common sense beliefs linking criminalization and punishment to public safety, or begins to imagine and build collective solutions to interpersonal harm that do not rely on prisons, policing, or other forms of state violence. These concerns raise critical questions about prison education, beyond any particular program's alignment or nonalignment with abolitionist views.

The concept of "antiabolition" is useful here as a reminder of how, throughout U.S. history, white supremacist institutions and social structures have enlisted the support of those who would condemn them, while at the same time rejecting concrete actions to bring about their abolition. In the nineteenth century, for example, the antislavery forces worked almost exclusively within a "federal consensus" (Wiecek, 2018) which recognized the U.S. Constitution as explicitly protecting the rights of slaveholders and rejecting abolitionism as recklessly endangering the survival of the Union. While by no means "proslavery," most nineteenth-century reformers were not abolitionists. Today, antiabolition names the paradoxical but enduring position of opposition to structures and conditions of racial domination, *and those actions necessary for their elimination*. The object of its critique is not those who support oppressive systems, but the attachment to oppressive systems by those who nominally oppose them.

Ideologically, antiabolition extends from nineteenth-century movements against slavery to post-emancipation, post-Civil Rights liberalism, and contemporary calls for prison reform; in each case preserving material conditions of racial domination while denouncing its prior particular forms (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 1998; 2003; Wacquant 2002). Unlike the coded racism of dog whistle politics (Haney Lopez, 2015) or the ritualized and performative racism of MAGA and right-wing populism (HoSang & Lowndes, 2019), antiabolition names the limits of

“official anti-racism” (Melamed, 2011) and our collective affective attachment to a world that abolition seeks to destroy (Moten, 2018).

Central to abolition’s call is the elimination not just of prisons but of the kind of society that requires prisons, policing, detention centers, and other carceral institutions. The object of PIC-abolition’s critique is not prisons but the PIC itself, which is also to say a world made by racial capitalism, which requires policing and prisons to manage the various disruptions and eruptions to which it inevitably gives rise (Gilmore, 2007). This is what it means when abolitionists say that prisons are not broken, but that they are functioning as intended: not to produce public safety but to manage the instabilities of racial capitalism and to contain or control elements perceived as threats to its operation (Critical Resistance, n.d.; Kaba, 2021). This is also why PIC-abolition rejects “reformist reforms” which seek to *repair* a system that must be *replaced* (Kaba, 2021; Schenwar & Law, 2020). As Naomi Murakawa (2014, p. 3) has shown, the history of liberal prison reform is a history of prison expansion in the name of “building a better carceral state.” Recognizing that prisons are not broken and so cannot be fixed, abolitionist campaigners instead organize to shift the political terrain and move the needle toward an abolitionist horizon.

Yet, abolitionists recognize that the prison system isn’t going to come down all at once, so our work involves long-term campaigns to build power in coalition and to slowly chip away at the PIC while building alternative ways to manage conflict and meet basic needs in the community. It is not always easy to tell whether a particular policy or practice is a small step toward shrinking and starving the PIC, or a “reformist reform” that provides some degree of ameliorative relief but also extends the PIC’s life and scope (Critical Resistance, 2020). Certain criteria (Critical Resistance, n.d.) do help guide the way: Does it reduce funding and resources for prisons and police? Does it challenge the notion that prisons and policing keep us safe? Does it reduce the tools and tactics available for policing, imprisonment, surveillance, and other forms of state control? Does it create resources and infrastructures that are accessible outside of prisons and state control?

Applicable to any prison reform, these questions can help guide our understanding of the relationship between prison education and prison abolition. They are also the criteria that informed my decision not to teach inside-out classes through official prison channels, but instead to develop a correspondence-based curriculum to support inside-out abolitionist study

groups.

Prison Education vs. Prison Abolition

In 2018, with the aid of a \$1.1 million Mellon Foundation grant to Pitzer College, and in collaboration with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Claremont Colleges (which includes Scripps College, where I teach) launched a Justice Education Initiative (JEI) to support inside-out prison education classes at CRC in Norco. Building on the JEI grant, Pitzer College in 2020 established the Pitzer Inside-Out Pathway-to-BA program, making imprisoned students eligible for a Pitzer College BA degree. Like all students at the Claremont Colleges, Pitzer's imprisoned students may count classes from any of the Claremont Colleges toward their degree. As a professor at Scripps College, I was both excited at the prospect of teaching degree-eligible inside-out classes at CRC, and also concerned about potential conflicts with my prisoner solidarity and abolitionist campaign work with Critical Resistance and the prison closure campaign, which had identified CRC as a top candidate for closure (CURB, n.d.).

My interest in offering an inside-outside course at CRC was inspired, in part, by students and faculty colleagues who shared their experiences, describing powerfully transformative interactions and profound personal growth for everyone involved. I had also heard directly from prisoners through my campaign organizing work—prioritizing inside-outside prisoner solidarity organizing—how much they valued access to programming both as a way to reduce their sentences and as an opportunity for meaningful work and intellectual growth. I was aware that education, historically, had been a key demand for radical prisoner movements including the Attica Rebellion of 1971 (Berger, 2014; Burton, 2024; Thompson, 2016), the Georgia Prison Strike of 2010, and the Pelican Bay Hunger Strikes of 2011 (Rodriguez, 2021). The prisoners I spoke with echoed the Georgia strike demands for “educational opportunities ... beyond the GED” and the Pelican Bay demand for the prison to “expand and provide constructive programming.” Prisons use time as punishment, with retribution measured in months and years. The prisoners I spoke with were hungry for educational programming because it offered a way to be active and engaged rather than warehoused for years of lost time. Loss of programming is frequently used or threatened by guards as punishment or retaliation. The near-total loss of access to programming due to extended lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic was

one of the most common complaints I heard from inside comrades.

At the same time, I wanted to teach inside-outside classes in ways that would build power across the walls, and so had concerns that the prison would place restrictions on what and how we could teach, in order to prevent classroom spaces from becoming the places of prisoner empowerment I envisioned. Some of these concerns were very practical. I often assign primary sources in my classes, including texts from radical prisoner and contemporary abolition movements, but these seemed unlikely to make it inside given that all materials must gain approval from prison officials well in advance. I also understood that, in keeping with our Inside-Out Prison Exchange training, JEI classes required strict rules of noncontact with imprisoned students after classes ended. This requirement created a stark dilemma: if followed, it would make inside organizing extremely difficult or impossible, but if not followed, we risked bringing serious reprisals for imprisoned students in the form of disciplinary infractions, removal from the program and, I was told on multiple occasions, jeopardizing the entire program, none of which I was willing to do.

My apprehensions about teaching inside CRC were not about political alignment in the abstract or personally held moral beliefs. Rather, I worried that teaching at CRC would contribute to an educational program that actively contradicted or undermined the campaign I was working on, making it more difficult to close the prison. The closure of California Correctional Center–Susanville had been met with aggressive community pushback from prison guards and others with prison-related jobs (Coulter, 2023), just as we currently see in the “Save Chuck” campaign to reverse California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation’s (CDCR) scheduled closure of the Chuckawalla prison (Moleski, 2021), and I suspected that prison officials at CRC would similarly use the success of the college prison program to advocate against its closure. From the campaign’s inside contacts at CRC, I have since learned that this is absolutely the case and that CRC officials give tours of the “college dorm” for elected officials and policymakers in a position to influence CDCR’s budget. With the announcement of Governor Newsom’s California Model of (Norwegian-styled) “rehabilitative prisons,” educational programming at CDCR positions the prison to receive increased funding for expansion, construction, and staffing. Recalling Critical Resistance’s criteria for identifying “reformist reforms,” it seemed that prison education in CRC would actually *increase* funding and resources for the prison.

It also seemed likely that prison education at CRC, rather than chipping away at

the “tools and tactics” available to prison officials, would increase the ability of guards to control and surveil its imprisoned population. The imprisoned students I talk to are eager to take the courses, but they are also clear that control over access to classes gives correctional officers increased power and disciplinary control. This might mean ordering lockdowns during class times to prevent students from attending class, using those interruptions to foster resentment between prisoners, or other ways of converting educational programming into a disciplinary tool. The status and material benefits of being housed at the college dorm contribute to categories of “deserving” or “undeserving” prisoners, just as prison guards gain additional leverage from prisoners’ potential loss of these benefits. From a carceral perspective, this is another benefit of prison education and a selling point for the program’s continued or expanded funding. Along with decreased rates of reimprisonment, studies confirm that prison education improves “facility safety and discipline” (Dholakia, 2024), reduces “criminogenic attitudes and behaviors” (Baranger et al., 2018), and “improves prison management” (Hill, 2018). From an abolitionist perspective, it shows how prison education can be used as a tool and tactic of carceral control.

These practical concerns reinforced my ideological misgivings that university-affiliated prison education programming could function in antiabolitionist ways, by extending the resources and legitimacy of academic institutions to the carceral state. Where radical education and connection to aligned outside groups had been an urgent demand of earlier prisoner movements, the current structure of educational programming directs prisoner support into support for the prison, rendering carceral punishment as a vehicle for rehabilitation and redemption, punishment as care, and a justification for prison expansion, while redirecting prisoner advocacy to more limited demands that can be addressed within the governing logics of the carceral state.

Theorizing from a framework of counterinsurgency rather than antiabolition, Burton (2023, p. 17) reminds us that “coercion is not the only weapon in the arsenal of the carceral war machine. Authors of counterinsurgency doctrine stress the imperative of calibrating terror-inducing violence with solicitous reforms.” Through extensive archival documentation, Burton shows how New York’s post-Attica prison reformers turned to the expertise of military leaders engaged in wars of colonial occupation who had learned the value of cooptation and reform and sought to “neutralize” prisoner movements through “prompt management attention to *correctable grievances*” [emphasis added] (2023, p.

17). As implemented in U.S. prisons, this counterinsurgent tactic becomes what Burton (p. 175) calls “programmification,” which redirected radical prisoner demands, enlisted volunteers in propagandizing the public, and dislodged or criminalized “ongoing efforts by captives to forge relations of solidarity with radical and revolutionary formations that sought to tear down, rather than stabilize, the walls.”

My purpose in fielding this critique is not to cast moral judgment on those who choose to teach or take college classes inside of prisons like CRC-Norco. As individual decisions, those choices will always be to some extent tragic, with costs on either side and no “innocent” options. My intention, rather, is to understand the political work of prison education and the *structural conditions* under which it necessarily functions. As currently organized, university-sponsored prison education programs are designed to provide real and potentially life-changing opportunities for imprisoned people, while simultaneously binding that work to the prison’s own power, legitimacy, and possible expansion.

Lack of access to university-affiliated and prison-approved educational opportunities, I am suggesting, constitutes an antiabolitionist “correctable grievance” that, when remedied, also bolsters the power and legitimacy of the prison, binds prisoner demands to carceral power, and undermines cross-wall prisoner solidarity movements. This, of course, does not mean that prisoner grievances should go unaddressed. Rather, it might spur further reflection on what education in prison could be—beyond the false choice between university-affiliated prison education in its current form or “nothing at all” (beyond warehousing and isolation), which presumes the neoliberal university to be the only source of rigorous or legitimate education. The history of radical social movements provides many examples of how rigorous, disciplined, and liberatory learning communities have been created outside of university settings. Similarly, I wanted to know if other models for prisoner education could better serve the transformative goals of radical prisoner movements and PIC-abolition without abandoning the urgent need of imprisoned people for critical education, solidarity, and support across prison walls, and the tools needed for survival within the prison’s oppressive conditions. This desire for an abolitionist prison education program led me to seek input from imprisoned comrades, student organizers, faculty colleagues, and fellow members of Critical Resistance to develop the Circle of Solidarity Study Group.

Abolition Study and the Circle of Solidarity

Now in its third year, the Circle of Solidarity Study Group (COS) is a product of many hands. It developed initially from a collaboration with Jonathan “JoJo” Ejonga, a talented inside organizer at Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Washington. I met JoJo through Critical Resistance’s Prisoner Solidarity Phone Line, and together we had the idea of making course materials from my Scripps class called “Race, Violence, and the Law” that is available to imprisoned students at Stafford Creek. JoJo brought together a group of inside students and I put together packets with readings and discussion questions that could be exchanged as “peer review” assignments between inside and outside students. This informal inside-outside classroom was a success, but also felt overly academic for the political needs of students, inside and out. From this experiment came the Circle of Solidarity Study Group, which (with a small group of Claremont students and Critical Resistance volunteers) we built both as a community-engagement course at Scripps College and as a decentralized inside-out political education resource.

At its core, the group is an experiment in collective study and an attempt to build solidarity across prison walls. It seeks to connect imprisoned people with students and community members, to share stories, resources, and analysis, and to build together toward the world we want and deserve. Unlike other inside-outside prison education programs that rely on academic institutions functioning in collaboration with prisons, COS works from a deinstitutionalized racial justice curriculum, with inside and outside students communicating directly or through a facilitator, via tablets and U.S. mail. Consistent with the tradition of critical pedagogy, this model of deinstitutionalized learning does not require formal recognition by the prison or the university and sidesteps the constraints imposed by prison administrators. Instead, it relies on curriculum and materials that are free-standing, portable, and potentially available for use by anyone interested in taking up this work.

Those joining the Circle of Solidarity commit to a 10-week correspondence course and receive a Course Reader and Workbook which contains reading questions and activities corresponding with each week’s readings. Reading responses are completed weekly and shared with a peer review partner participating in the study group from the other side of the wall. Reading questions are meant to be open-ended, offering space to think and reflect about

what each participant found valuable, interesting, or challenging in the material. Participants are encouraged to use these questions in whatever ways help them get the most out of the study group. In alternating weeks, students also exchange “peer review responses,” which are written communications to peer review partners, engaging with their reading responses from the previous week and building the conversation over the course of the study group. Peer review responses offer space for peer review partners (or “pods” if in groups of three) to get to know each other better and understand each other’s thinking about the issues under discussion. They are also spaces to ask questions of each other, to build on each other’s ideas, and to engage in principled struggle over possible points of disagreement. Ideally, peer review responses come to feel like an ongoing conversation, building organically over the 10-week course. The course is advertised as a political study group more than an academic class and is intended to build mutually transformative political relationships across prison walls rather than demonstrating “mastery” of academic subjects.

The Circle of Solidarity is also explicitly abolitionist in ways that would not be possible were formal recognition and approval required from the prison. Much of the curriculum uses movement materials adapted from Critical Resistance’s “Intro to PIC” and “Intro to PIC-Abolition” workshops and Abolition Toolkit, and was put together collaboratively with input from inside organizers. As clearly announced on the syllabus, the course is designed to offer participants a better understanding of the rise of the American prison system as part of a larger political formation, grounded in the requirements of racial capitalism and social control. It is meant to connect imprisoned people with individuals and organizations committed to the struggle for a society in which everyone’s basic human needs are met without relying on surveillance, policing, and human caging to address social problems or instances of harm. We want to know more about how the PIC works so that we can more effectively dismantle it.

Outcomes

Thus far, COS has been administered through courses I offer at Scripps College, in which each registered (outside) student is responsible for coordinating a three-person reading pod, consisting of themselves, one imprisoned (inside) student, and one community member or abolitionist organizer. Registered students also break into working groups to complete service-based learning projects

supporting the organizations whose members have participated (Critical Resistance, CURB, Claremont 5C Prison Abolition Collective) or are engaged in support work for imprisoned students (No New WA Prisons; WA Cultural Awareness Groups). This spring, COS officially partnered with Critical Resistance-LA, whose members and volunteers filled over half of the community/organizational spots.

At the end of each COS cycle, student feedback informs subsequent revisions of course structure and materials. Additionally, each inside student receives a Certificate of Completion and a signed Letter of Completion for their files. Some inside students have asked for personal support letters for classification or parole hearings, and I am happy to oblige. Because COS does not prohibit communication with inside students after the course is completed, it can be used to build politicized support networks that are essential for long-term movement building. To date, there have been three iterations of the course, as well as a student-led inside-outside summer book club. Each course has included 15 to 25 inside students, each paired with one outside college student and one community member. Approximately 50 imprisoned students have participated in the study group, with over 150 total participants.

Challenges

To be sure, the COS model is not without difficulties and drawbacks, some of which might be addressed as the program grows and expands while others are simply part of the COS structure. To work well, the reading group requires some system of accountability to build a political community around collective study, keep people engaged, and avoid “flaking” or drifting into depoliticized pen-pal relationships. When run as a college course, regular classroom meetings provide that structure for outside students, but setting up a similar system inside can be harder to do. Having strong inside organizers take the lead has been crucial, such as when students who have completed the course return in subsequent semesters to mentor new members of the group. Inside organizers who are also connected to abolitionist campaign work will be best positioned to make those connections.

Two fundamental limitations of the COS model are direct consequences of our deinstitutionalized structure: without formal recognition by the prison, inside

students participating in COS do not receive Rehabilitation Achievement Credits (RAC), which figure in calculations of reduced sentences and security classification, and they do not earn credits toward a degree. For some inside students, this can be hard to understand, since reduced time and degree credentials are the primary draw to prison education. At the same time, this deinstitutionalization is a core value of the program and one of the reasons why COS can avoid many of the reformist concerns articulated previously. Clarifying this point is one reason COS is pitched as a study group rather than a college course for inside students. It also illustrates how successful programmification has been at diverting prisoners from the radical autonomous study groups they had been demanding. JoJo Ejonga describes it as “a strategy of appeasement – they give you just enough for you to be cool, but then they use it as a threat: ‘if you do this, we can take it away.’” Because RAC credits and Pell Grants only go toward approved classes, prisoners are strongly disincentivized from taking classes with outside prisoner solidarity groups, thus shifting authority to prison officials rather than prisoner-led autonomous groups.

Despite these limitations, there is plenty of interest on both sides of the wall, and there is always a waiting list for inside students who seem eager to learn more about PIC-abolition, connect with outside students and organizers, or hold space with other prisoners to study together and become more involved in abolition work. For some inside students, participation in COS may be the first time they are exposed to abolitionist thinking, or the first time they’ve had access to language capable of properly naming oppressive structures they’ve experienced first-hand. At Stafford Creek, JoJo Ejonga reports that participation in COS has “really opened their eyes up and made it possible to engage in the work. A lot of people get very engaged and energized about the work and putting that knowledge into what is important.” In the Washington prisons where COS has been active (Stafford Creek Corrections Center and Washington Corrections Center), that has meant working to protect Cultural Awareness Groups from oppressive Washington Department of Corrections restrictions, as well as campaign work with organizations like No New WA Prisons and Columbia Legal Services.

Adaptations

It is also possible that the move from study group to campaign work can

sometimes go in the other direction. Two examples from California COS pods illustrate this point. David Perryman, another long-time caller to the Critical Resistance Prisoner Support Phone Line, has for years been developing a prisoner-to-prisoner advocacy and support group—first at California State Prison, Sacramento, and now at Mule Creek State Prison, where he was transferred. David calls the group Prisoners Against Violence United (PAVU) and has big dreams of “prisoners rehabilitating prisoners” rather than turning to prison officials and programming to stop the violence. After participating in the study group himself, Mr. Perryman brought in two of PAVU’s co-founders, Darren Hulbert and John Roettgen, each of whom recruited several more PAVU members for the most recent iteration of COS. The PAVU vision is one of independence and self-sufficiency, born of a healthy skepticism that prisons are intended to rehabilitate. PAVU is thus abolition-aligned, but not affiliated with external organizations or campaigns. Still in its developmental stage, PAVU used the study group to recruit new members and spark internal development.

Another example comes from Wasco State Prison in California, where Duane Palm was transferred after helping to close down the California Correctional Center (CCC) in Susanville. Duane has been active in the Close CA Prisons Campaign since 2021 when he connected with CURB after helping to gather more than 100 signatures from prisoners at CCC calling for the prison’s closure (Peoples et al., 2024). A gifted inside organizer, Mr. Palm joined COS already familiar with campaign work, but wanting to learn more about abolitionist ideas and concepts, and how abolitionist study could sharpen his organizing. Because much of the COS curriculum is adapted from Critical Resistance workshops which imprisoned people cannot attend—or abolitionist training materials that imprisoned people will have difficulty accessing—the study group offered Mr. Palm something akin to the political education support that outside organizers make central to their political practice, as well as creating a space for editorial support of his campaign writing. Mr. Palm expressed feeling empowered by this honing of skills, describing the difference in his writing as “like putting a pulse in a dead body.” Such can be the transformative power of education in prison, when directed toward critical consciousness, developed in the solidarity of shared struggle, and put to use in abolitionist praxis.

By far the most challenging and gratifying part of COS has been figuring out how to support inside study groups and how to use the materials to most effectively bring inside students into more participatory roles in abolitionist organizing. The

collaboration with Critical Resistance-LA suggests some possibilities for the future. For example, because of COS's deinstitutionalized structure, there is no reason the study group necessarily should retain its connection to Scripps College in particular, or *any* college or university for that matter. Academic affiliation likely has made it easier to avoid censorship and get abolitionist materials inside (whenever possible, correspondence and course materials are sent on college letterhead and envelopes), but this could be supplied by any faculty member or student group at any academic institution that is interested in participating, and could be just as effective if sent on Circle of Solidarity letterhead. With necessary attention to structures of accountability and appropriate communication with imprisoned people, it is possible to imagine COS becoming available more widely, perhaps circulating through aligned faculty networks or prison abolition student groups.

Another possible direction for COS might be to embed more thoroughly in abolitionist organizations as an inside-outside organizing tool. The COS model, if not its particular materials, could be valuable for organizations looking to keep political education and volunteer engagement connected to those most directly impacted by the prison system. Or it could be useful for organizations looking to deepen their inside-outside organizing by onboarding inside advocates into campaigns or other organizational work.

Conclusion

Understanding the relationship between prison education and prison abolition is important not only for self-identified PIC-abolitionists, but for anyone who sees the prison system as systemically unjust and inhumane, and for anyone drawn to education for its redemptive potential to transform lives and bring some degree of opportunity, dignity, or self-esteem to individuals condemned to live under the prison's oppressive conditions.

In various forms, education has played a crucial role in all phases of the movement for freedom and liberation. However, not all educational practices are the same and may have different goals or agendas, serve different purposes, or be taken up in different ways by the learning communities they engage. In this reflection piece, I've tried to account both for the transformative power of education in prison and for the potential antiabolitionist implications of prison

education programming that collaborates with prison officials, lends the university's resources and legitimacy to the carceral system within which it necessarily must operate, or undermines connections to outside abolitionist study groups. As imprisoned scholar and organizer Stevie Wilson (Berger, 2020) reminds us: "a learned prisoner is an affront to the PIC. Those of us working within the [Black radical] tradition continually find ourselves confronted with and challenging policies and procedures designed to frustrate our connections to the free world." Sometimes those barriers involve censorship, intimidation, and repression. At other times they take the form of appeasement, cooptation, and reform.

The Circle of Solidarity Study Group grew out of shared desires to build abolitionist connections across prison walls, both to sharpen our analysis of the PIC and to facilitate our struggle against it. If abolitionist build-work is the gradual unfolding of "1 million experiments" (Interrupting Criminalization), we should not expect any definitive resolution to the dilemmas and contradictions of prison education to which COS is addressed. I do not offer this reflection as a solution, blueprint, or definitive plan. COS is one way to think about the power of education in prison, and one way to protect that power from the prison's inevitable attempts to contain and absorb it—or enlist it in humanized practices of carceral control.

References

Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.

Baranger, J., Rousseau, D., & Matesanz, J. (2018). Doing time wisely: The social and personal benefits of higher education in prison. *The Prison Journal*, 98(4), 490–513.

Bell, D. (2004). *Silent covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform*. Oxford University Press.

Bender, K. (2018, March 2). *Education opportunities in prison are key to reducing crime*. Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/education-opportunities-prison-key-reducing-crime>

Berger, D. (2014). *Captive nation: Black prison organizing in the Civil Rights Era*. University of North Carolina Press.

Berger, D. (2020, August 28) "Imagining a new world without cages": An interview with Stephen Wilson. Black Perspectives. <https://www.aaihs.org/imagining-a-new-world-without-cages-an-interview-with-stephen-wilson>

Blackwell, C. (2022, August 17). Reading while incarcerated saved me. So why are prisons banning books? *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/opinion/banned-books-prison.html>

Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L., & Turner, S. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve postrelease outcomes? A meta-analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14, 389–428. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-9334-6>

Burton, O. (2023). *Tip of the spear: Black radicalism, prison repression, and the long Attica revolt*. University of California Press.

Californians United For Responsible Budgets (CURB) (n.d.). *The People's Plan for Prison Closure*. <https://curbprisonspending.org/uploads/docs/resource-library/Peoples-Plan-for-Prison-Closure.pdf>

Coulter, T. (2023, March 24). Planned closure of Blythe prison draws protest from leaders in Coachella Valley. *Palm Springs Desert Sun*.
<https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/local/2023/03/24/coachella-valley-leaders-oppose-closure-of-blythes-chuckawalla-prison/70045740007>

Critical Resistance (n.d.). Mission and Vision.
<https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision>

Critical Resistance (2020). Seven Easy Steps. In *A World Without Walls: The CR Abolition Organizing Toolkit* (pp. 55–57). <https://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CR-Abolitionist-Toolkit-online.pdf>

Critical Resistance (2021). *Reformist reforms vs. abolitionist steps to end imprisonment* [Chart]. https://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CR_abolitioniststeps_antiexpansion_2021_eng.pdf

Davis, A. Y. (1998). From the prison of slavery to the slavery of prison: Frederick Douglass and the convict lease system. In J. James (Ed.), *The Angela Davis*

Reader. Blackwell Publishing.

Davis, A. Y. (2003). *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.

Davis, L. M., Steele, J. L., Bozick, R., Williams, M. V., Turner, S., Miles, J. N. V., Saunders, J., & Steinberg, P. S. (2014). *How effective is correctional education, and where do we go from here? The results of a comprehensive evaluation*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR564.html

Denney, M. G. T., & Tynes, R. (2021). The effects of college in prison and policy implications. *Justice Quarterly*, 38(7), 1542–1566.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2021.2005122>

Dholakia, N. (2024, March 5). *After 30 years, the first program to offer Pell Grants to incarcerated students has launched*. Vera Institute.
<https://www.vera.org/news/after-30-years-the-first-program-to-offer-pell-grants-to-incarcerated-students-has-launched>

Eddy, H. (2023). *Vera Institute of Justice celebrates historic reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for people in prison*. Vera Institute.
<https://www.vera.org/newsroom/vera-celebrates-historic-pell-reinstatement>

Gilmore, R. W. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California* (Vol. 21). Univ of California Press.

Haney López, I. (2015). *Dog whistle politics: how coded racial appeals have reinvented racism and wrecked the middle class*. Oxford University Press.

Hill, E. G. (2008). *From cellblocks to classrooms: Reforming inmate education to improve public safety*. Legislative Analyst's Office (CA).
https://lao.ca.gov/2008/crim/inmate_education/inmate_education_021208.pdf

HoSang, D. M., & Lowndes, J. E. (2019). *Producers, parasites, patriots. Race and the new right-wing politics of precarity*. University of Minnesota Press.

Kaba, M. (2021). *We do this til' we free us: Abolitionist organizing and transformative justice*. Haymarket Books.

Kaba, M., & Ritchie, A. J. (2022). *No more police: A case for abolition*. The New Press.

Kenner, M. (2023, November 17). Something wonderful is happening in prisons.

Really. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/17/opinion/college-prisons.html>

Kinzel, A. T. (2018, May 11). *Prison education saved my life and stopped an environmental cycle of incarceration*. Vera Institute.
<https://www.vera.org/news/prison-education-saved-my-life-and-stopped-an-environmental-cycle-of-incarceration>

Light-Roth, K. (2024, March 27). Prison education saves lives – but it's way too hard to get. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/opinion/education/4557795-prison-education-saves-lives-but-its-way-too-hard-to-get/>

Melamed, J.(2011). *Represent and destroy: Rationalizing violence in the new racial capitalism*. Minnesota University Press.

Moleski, V. (2021, June 13). Northern California city to sue Gavin Newsom administration over plan to close prison. *The Sacramento Bee*.
<https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/the-state-worker/article252078113.html>

Moten, F.(2018). *Stolen life*. Duke University Press.

Murakawa, N. (2014). *The First Civil Right: How liberals built prison America*. Oxford University Press.

Parker, E. A. (1990). The social-psychological impact of a college education on the prison inmate. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 41(3), 140–146.

Peoples, T., Noel, P., Kaneda, B., & Golub, M. (2024). Closing cages for a just transition: Organizers talk ecological justice across prison walls. *The Abolitionist*, 41.

Rodriguez, D. (2021). *White reconstruction: Domestic warfare and the logics of genocide*. Fordham University Press.

Schenwar, M., & Law, V. (2021). Introduction: Everybody loves prison reform. *Prison by any other name: The harmful consequences of popular reforms*. The New Press.

Stickle, B., & Schuster, S. S. (2023). Are schools in prisons worth it? The effects and economic returns of prison education. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 48, 1263–1294.

Thompson, H. A. (2016). *Blood in the water: The Attica Prison uprising of 1971 and its legacy*. Pantheon.

Wacquant, L. (2002). The curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration. *Ethnography*, 3(4), 371-397.

Weissman, S. (2023, November 17). Reinstating Pell Grants in prisons moves slowly after 26-year ban. *Inside Higher Ed*.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/state-oversight/2023/11/17/after-26-year-ban-reinstating-pell-prisons-moves-slowly>

Wiecek, W. M. (2018). *The sources of anti-slavery Constitutionalism in America, 1760-1848*. Cornell University Press.

Wilson, D. B., Gallagher, C. A., & MacKenzie, D. L. (2000). A meta-analysis of corrections-based education, vocation, and work programs for adult offenders. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 37(4), 347–368.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427800037004001>

Share



Authors

Mar Golub (Scripps College)

Issue

Volume 53 • Issue 1 • 2025 • Education Across Prison Walls

Dates

Accepted	2024-07-30
Published	2025-09-03

Licence

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International [↗](#)

Identifiers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35240/vue.202>

File Checksums (MD5)

| ISSN: 1553-541X | Published by [Metropolitan Center for Research on Educational Equity and the Transformation of Schools](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) |

English (en) 