



## Introduction

# Introduction to Special Issue: Abolitionist Praxis and Education Across Prison Walls

## Abstract

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* explores the complex and often contradictory terrain of abolitionist practice within and beyond college-in-prison programs. To do so, we draw on the foundational belief that education can be a practice of freedom. Across the contributions and artwork presented in this issue, we invite readers to examine and witness how teaching and learning across prison walls has historically been and continues to be a site of political struggle, solidarity, and collective transformation. We also invite readers to consider urgent questions that arise as education institutions expand their presence within prisons, including those that ask: can education behind bars support liberatory aims, or does it risk reinforcing the prison-industrial complex? And if so, how do we make this liberatory function intentional and hold ourselves as educators accountable to the unintended negative consequences that may

arise from our well-meaning endeavors? Through reflections, case studies, and dialogues, contributors to this issue grapple with these tensions, highlighting both the possibilities and limits of working toward abolition from within carceral systems. From campus organizing against policing to building a bridge for incarcerated students onto college campuses, the issue surfaces abolition as both a political commitment and an ongoing pedagogical practice. Centering the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, educators, and organizers, this issue insists on education as a radical act of presence, imagination, and solidarity—even, and especially, in carceral spaces.

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## Keywords

college in prison programs, higher education, incarceration, abolition, critical pedagogy

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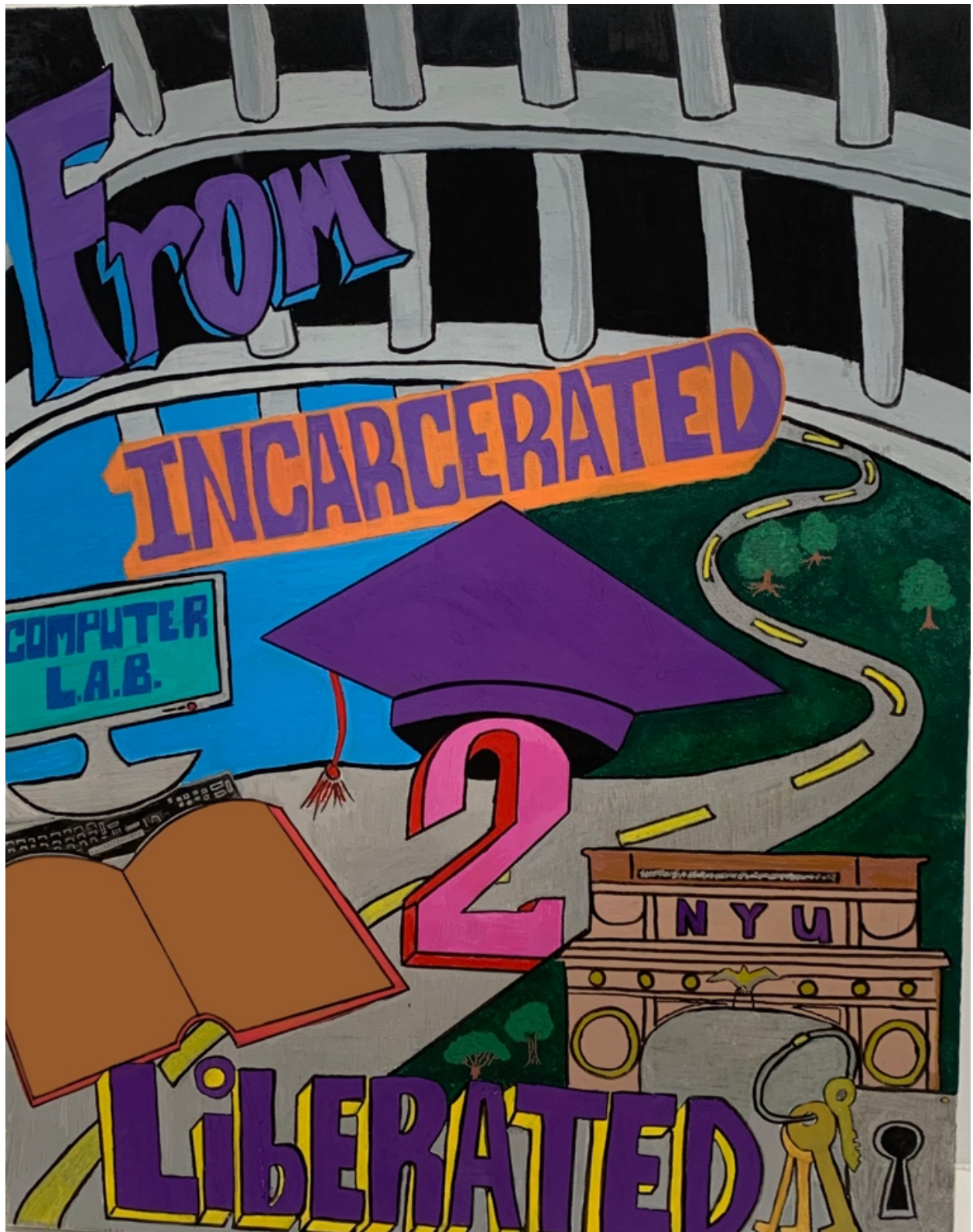


Figure 1. "From Incarcerated to Liberated" by Adanjeandel Sostre.

Education, as Paulo Freire described, either functions to bring about pacification

through conformity to capitalism and state repression or “it becomes the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2000, p. 34). As Freire taught us, there is a dialectical relationship between study and struggle. Political organizations and grassroots formations have long designed and utilized teaching and learning programs to critically understand how the world works in order to change it. From the liberated zone schools that were established by the African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC) ([Vaz Borges, 2019](#)) to freedom schools created by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) in Mississippi ([Payne, 2007](#))—oppressed groups have built liberatory models of education and fought to reclaim their right to educational resources and time.

Rigorous, radical education projects have also long existed within the death-dealing institution of the prison, where imprisoned people and comrades on the outside have used education to advance a joint struggle for collective self-determination. This form of politicized relationship-building across prison walls has been a long-standing strategy in the contemporary movement to abolish policing, imprisonment, and surveillance. However, the introduction of formal university-sponsored college-in-prison programs raises a distinct set of contradictions, tensions, and questions for abolitionists. As the Education Justice Project of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign asks, “How do we argue for expansion of higher education in prisons across the state, while at the same time insisting on the need to close prisons?” ([Education Justice Project, 2025](#)). In order to answer this question university administrators and faculty for college-in-prison programs must have a rigorous analysis of the prison industrial complex (PIC). This term, first used by Mike Davis ([Davis, 1995](#)) and later popularized by the grassroots political organization, Critical Resistance, refers to the ideology and infrastructure of public and private interests that utilize systems of policing, imprisonment, and surveillance as solutions to social, political, and economic problems ([Critical Resistance, n.d.](#)). The PIC maintains social control and legitimacy by using a logic of “public safety.” As editors, one of our goals for this issue of *VUE* was to contribute to this conversation; that is, to uplift the work and perspectives of people who have navigated the hyphens in the phrase “college-in-prison.”

Nowhere is this analysis more necessary than in the US, who leads the world in both incarceration rates and higher education opportunities. Indeed, in 2008, US incarceration rates peaked with an estimated 2.3 million people imprisoned

([Kang-Brown et al., 2021](#)); fast forward to present-day and there are approximately 5.5 million people under supervision by the criminal legal system ([Wang, 2023](#)). New York State alone imprisons a higher percentage of its population than most democracies on the planet ([Prison Policy Initiative](#), n.d.). Yet, the US is also home to the most top 100 universities than any other country in the world, with more than one-third of the adult population holding a college degree ([Galan, 2025](#)).

Despite the abundance of possibilities, the organization of state capacities toward punishment has been central to the bi-partisan neoliberal austerity agenda to divest from social well-being, including from the institution and very idea of public education. As Nancy MacLean has documented, the attack against public education has its roots in the manifestos of neoliberal economists like Milton Friedman, who waged a life-long campaign beginning in 1955 to defund public education amidst the white supremacist backlash against desegregation ([MacLean, 2021](#)). As economic and racial inequality has widened in the decades since, state investment has shifted further from schooling to punishment.

While proponents of neoliberalism advocate rhetorically for a shrinking of state and government power, their policies in fact renovate and expand a bigger, meaner state. Austerity cuts to public goods like education occur in the same city, state and federal budget agendas that rapidly increase spending on police, prisons, and border patrol. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore outlined in their classic piece “Restating the Obvious”, this capitalist “anti-state state” and its increasing carceral power produce the very social problems that the expansion of jails, prisons and police purport to address. The rampant expansion of the PIC is not primarily the result of a simple profit-motive or forced labor, though of course, these things occur in the prison-industrial complex. Rather, the carceral state is a reconfiguration of public institutional power and resources toward ever more cruel and coercive infrastructure, in order to continue managing the social and economic crisis inherent to racial capitalism ([Gilmore and Gilmore, 2022](#)). That is, prisons serve a social function that reproduces inequality through racialized exploitation.

The logic of the PIC also permeates into our collective imagination about what schooling is and should be. As our society continues to prioritize punishment over learning and care, schools themselves are also reconfigured into carceral spaces. Policing in schools has spread throughout K-12 and higher education systems in the US. In K-12 schooling, Black students in particular are

disproportionately suspended, expelled, and targeted for criminalization (Whittenberg & Fernandez, n.d.), with Black girls seeing the highest relative rates of suspension, expulsion, and arrest at school starting as early as kindergarten ([Epstein et al., 2020](#)). Beyond pushout, educators and students are now forced to navigate and confront more than 300 bills introduced in over 30 U.S. states since 2021 restricting the teaching of Queer, Trans, Black and Indigenous histories in classrooms (*PEN America Index of Educational Gag Orders*, 2021). At the university level, teachers and student organizers have voiced concerns about punitive disciplinary processes and partnerships with local police departments to curb dissent.

In this issue of VUE, we highlight narratives that uplift struggles for liberation, and which see education and access to spaces of learning as a transformative and necessary part of freedom dreaming. Throughout, we include artwork created by activists, artists, and students in NYU's Prison Education Program that we hope serves to inspire and challenge our deeply held assumptions about learning and liberation.

## Articles in this issue

First, scholar and activist Maya Wind reflects with the editors on the role of universities in settler colonialism and militarism. Reflecting on her new book *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom* (Wind, 2024), Wind contextualizes the genocide in Gaza and Israeli and U.S. universities' roles in Israeli settler colonialism and military occupation in Palestine. Amidst the swell of campus encampments and organizing against the on-going US-backed Israeli genocide, Wind details how policing, surveillance and incarceration are deployed to target students and educators in the movement for Palestinian liberation. She emphasizes the crucial importance of solidarity organizing across universities and colleges in support of Palestinian and collective liberation in this critical moment.

Universities themselves represent a space of paradox and contradiction. As this article describes, we cannot deny the role that universities have played in the repression of ideas and actions centered on Palestinian liberation. These repressions have ripple effects across myriad university stakeholders, and the "solutions" that unfold can tell us something about a larger tension centered

around what the *social function* of universities are (or are imagined to be) — who are they for? What ideas and values do they ultimately reify or resist? Whose ideas (and identities) are protected (Rhea, 2024)? One contemporary illustration of this uncertainty evolved over the course of publishing this issue — as editors, we could not guarantee academic freedom protections for the artists who contributed works to this issue and retroactively contacted each artist to provide a choice for anonymity.

Relatedly, policing and protest on U.S. campuses is also taken up in this issue's roundtable conversation amongst University of Pennsylvania organizers, who reflect on the challenges, opportunities, and abolitionist gains from their campaign to end policing at their university. Their conversation provides critical insights for other student, faculty and staff organizers in this era of increasing repression.

Yet, the ongoing shift towards carcerality within colleges and universities is happening amidst a resurgence of university-sponsored college-in-prison programs in the last decade. This is part of the contradiction of university spaces that needs to be wrestled with. The increase of these programs is the result of several forces: organized pressure from incarcerated people and allies demanding expanded access to education; efforts from university staff and faculty to redistribute resources (across a spectrum of radical solidarity to liberal charity); and a reaction from many correctional departments to mitigate their own legitimacy crises and attempt to pacify organizing inside. How can PIC abolitionists engage the critical contradictions of this confluence toward our goals? Campaigns to end policing on campus, for example, should find likely allies amongst college-in-prison programs whose formerly incarcerated students are exceptionally vulnerable to police presence in universities. College-in-prison programs, at their best, can also provide an important avenue for combatting increasing censorship in prisons and the over-reliance on surveilled and expensive tablet technology (<https://www.prisonpolicy.org>, 2024). Yet, college-in-prison initiatives can also fit hand in glove with punitive prison policies and problematic rehabilitation narratives, as well as provide public relations cover for higher education institutions' investments in police, military, and gentrifying infrastructure.

These paradoxes around what universities are and how they function might make us more willing to exclude them in our imagination and action planning toward abolition and liberation. But like all social spaces in capitalism, the University's

contradictions make this site a terrain of struggle that we must contend with directly rather than avoid (Massey, 2018; Baskin, 2022). What's more, contradictions can be generative (Rappaport, 1981) and we invite readers of this issue to reflect on and grapple actively with these contradictions.

Indeed, it matters that educators take on the fraught challenges of teaching about the carceral state and provide forums for rigorous principled discussion and debate about different strategies and tactics toward abolition within universities. Zoe Hammer, an early member of Critical Resistance and long-time educator, shares in *We used to think, but now we know: Abolition pedagogy* in this issue some reflections on over twenty-years of teaching abolition to college students, and the importance of continuing to develop our abolitionist analyses in the context of changing conditions. Hammer poses a series of reflective questions for abolitionists working toward non-reformist reforms particularly in a landscape of increasing liberal reforms that expand the PIC in the guise of what James Kilgore calls "carceral humanism" (Kilgore, 2014).

Several authors in this issue take up the issue of how to enact practical, as in materially effective, uncompromising abolitionist reforms in the terrain of college-in-prison specifically. Mar Golub, in *From Prison Education to Prison Closure*, considers their experience as a college professor and campaign organizer with Californians United for a Responsible Budget's campaign to close 10 prisons by 2025. Golub details both the tensions and overlaps of this work, and reflects on the ways collaborative learning processes have taken place between university-cited scholars and imprisoned organizers both within, and outside of, formal university-sponsored prison education programs.

In their piece, *Building the Prison-to-University Pipeline*, Azadeh Zohrabi describes the development of the Underground Scholars program as a resource and organizing effort across University of California (UC) campuses. Founded by formerly incarcerated UC Berkeley students and allies, Underground Scholars now operates across all nine undergraduate-serving public universities in California in order to address the specific needs of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. Zohrabi elucidates the challenges and tensions of expanding this public program, as well as its strategic importance within the state's carceral landscape to impact law, policy, and narratives of education through the leadership of those most impacted by the criminal legal system.

While there are sharp tensions in building learning communities inside of

correctional institutions, at the heart of this endeavor are real students, leveraging their expertise in navigating the daily challenges of prison, to advocate for their right to access education while incarcerated. In a conversation between NYU Prison Education Program (NYU-PEP) professor Allyson Paty and her former students Ramone Fairweather and Karejah Cornelius, they share their experience in Professor Paty's creative writing class at Wallkill Correctional Facility. Similarly, NYU-PEP alumnus Mychal Pagan and current student Chauncy Ramos reflect on how their relationship to schooling, and education more broadly, has shifted over time.

Together, the contributions to this issue pose essential and urgent questions for educators and abolitionists. Ultimately underscoring that education can, and should be, an abolitionist practice of radical transformation through which we change ourselves as we struggle together to build the world we need. It includes both the shifting of political consciousness and of material conditions toward freedom for all. In the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the struggle for "abolition is not *absence*, it is *presence*. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. Abolition is building the future from the present in all the ways we can." (Gilmore, 2018). The term abolition has been popularized following the 2020 uprisings against police violence, reflecting a broadening of the common sense that punishment and incarceration cause more social problems than they purport to solve. Yet it remains imperative for us to get evermore clear-through principled study, discussion, and action—on what exactly the presence of abolition means.

For educators and students working within or confined within the prison, we are interested in how to facilitate learning and nurture liberatory communities under severe state repression and institutional unfreedom. Some abolitionists argue that such liberation cannot occur in any form within a prison setting, while others argue that working across prison walls is essential to any principled abolitionist organizing. We must consider the risks to abolitionist movements and incarcerated people when universities, with their own carceral investments and security logics, often steeped in racist and classist practices, run educational programs inside of prison. As well as take seriously the risk of maintaining the illusion of purity by avoiding the complex, fraught realities of enacting abolitionist strategies and tactics in every setting, on every front.

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