



THE PETEY GREENE PROGRAM

2021-2022

COLLEGE BRIDGE PROGRAM

for Incarcerated Learners





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The Petey Greene Program

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Overview

The Petey Greene Program supports the academic goals of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people through high-quality volunteer tutoring programs, while educating volunteers on the injustice manifest in our carceral system. Since its founding in 2008, the PGP has tutored more than 16,000 students in 50 correctional facilities and reentry programs. In July 2020, the PGP approved a three-year strategic plan, which prioritizes a shift from only supplementing existing prison education programs to implementing and promoting the highest-quality education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.

In line with the goals outlined in the new strategic plan, and at the encouragement of system-impacted learners and higher education in prison programs, the PGP is piloting and developing a scaling strategy for college bridge programming that helps incarcerated people acquire the writing, critical thinking and math skills required to access post-secondary programs, while fostering the sense of educational self-efficacy and confidence vital to succeed.

The first College Bridge program was piloted in partnership with the Washington, D.C. Department of Corrections (DC DOC) during the 2020-2021 academic year. During the 2021-2022 academic year, the PGP piloted new regional college bridge programs in New Jersey and Massachusetts, while continuing to replicate and refine the DC DOC pilot. Our first pilots focused on fostering the students' reading and writing skills. Beginning in fall 2022, we have been piloting College Bridge math courses to complement the writing courses.

About the Authors

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We would like to thank the College Bridge program instructors, who have collaborated with the PGP to create the College Bridge program syllabi, assignments, and lesson plans: Tara Ronda, Jennie Snow, Amanda Harris, RL Goldberg, Ryan Smith, Erin Tatz, Peter Mallios, Elizabeth Catchmark, Jill Knapp, and Lillian Rankel.

The Need for College Readiness Programs

In recent years, support for higher education in prison has consistently grown. Several colleges and universities, including top tier institutions, have developed higher education programs for incarcerated learners. This trend has been fostered by a legislative revision process. The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Simplification Act, signed into law on December 27, 2020, reversed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, restoring incarcerated students' eligibility for Federal Pell Grants that help pay for students' tuition and other educational expenses.

Under the new legislation, starting in July 2023 up to 463,000 incarcerated people will be eligible for Federal Pell Grants (Oakford et al., 2019). The lifting of this ban removes significant economic barriers that have prevented many incarcerated people from enrolling in a higher education program, while providing funding to higher education institutions to develop effective degree programs in correctional facilities. As such, the new legislation has the potential to dramatically expand access to higher education for incarcerated people.

Yet, expanding the offer of higher education programs in prison and ensuring their affordability are only the first steps towards ensuring that all incarcerated learners have access to higher education. According to a 2018 report, formerly incarcerated people are nearly twice as likely as the general population to have no high school credential (Couloute 2018). Even those with a high school credential often lack crucial skills that are necessary to succeed in today's workplace, postsecondary education and society at large, including the ability to analyze texts, process information and effectively articulate their opinions (Steurer 2020).

Several studies have demonstrated that higher education in prison programs have significant benefits for incarcerated students, their families and communities, while saving taxpayers money:

- People who participate in higher education in prison programs are 48% less likely to return to prison after they are released (Oakford et al., 2019)
- Every dollar invested in prison education saves taxpayers four to five dollars from reduced reincarceration costs (Davis et al., 2013)
- In a 2014 survey, 40% of incarcerated respondents indicated that they would like to enroll in an Associate's or Bachelor's degree program (PIAAC 2014)

The Need for College Readiness Programs (continued)

By filling the support gap between GED or high school completion and college admission, the Petey Greene Program College Bridge program aims not only to increase access to higher education among a marginalized population but also to ensure that, once admitted, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students are able to successfully complete postsecondary degree programs. The PGP College Bridge program is unique in the landscape of prison education in that it does not use Federal Pell Grant dollars, which have a lifetime cap and will run out if used for a large number of courses at the developmental level.

In 2013, data gathered by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) showed that incarcerated individuals had very low literacy skills relative to the general population. The PIAAC scale has 5 levels and defines literacy in this context as “understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (Rampey et al., 2014: 2). 30% of incarcerated individuals had very low literacy skills (below 2 on the PIAAC literacy scale), in contrast to 19% of the general population. This gap is even more concerning for people of color – 36% of incarcerated Black people and 35% of incarcerated Hispanic people scored below level 2 in the PIAAC scale, in contrast to 11% of incarcerated white people (Rampey et al., 2014: 6). Experts have emphasized that individuals scoring in this category lack the most basic information-processing skills considered necessary to succeed in today’s world (Rampey et al., 2014; cf. also Steurer 2020). Equally alarming, 23% of incarcerated people with a high school diploma were shown to have very low literacy skills (below 2 on the PIAAC scale) and two thirds of them scored below what is considered the minimum level to succeed in today’s workplace (Steurer 2020).

The PGP College Bridge Program

Strengthening students’ writing, critical thinking and meta-cognitive skills is especially important to ensure their success in higher education programs. For this reason, the first component of the PGP College Bridge program is a writing course in which the students develop their literacy skills and learn to express their opinions in an organized and persuasive manner, adapting their writing to different contexts and audiences. To complement the writing and critical thinking course, we have also developed a math course that introduces students to basic algebra, geometry and statistics with an emphasis on real-life applications of math skills.

The PGP's College Bridge program was developed and is managed by the PGP's Director of Program Development, with support from the College Bridge Program Coordinator, a postdoctoral fellow sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS).

The PGP College Bridge Program (continued)

The math and writing courses are taught by teams of two or three volunteer instructors, recruited among faculty and advanced graduate students from the PGP's partner colleges and universities. In addition to teaching weekly classes and providing feedback on major assignments, the instructors develop the course syllabi, worksheets, and supporting materials, adapting a core curriculum that was developed by the PGP's Director of Program Development (for the writing course) and by Jill Knapp, Professor Emerita of Astrophysics at Princeton University (for the math course).

PGP volunteer tutors, recruited and managed by PGP regional staff and the College Bridge Program Coordinator, meet with the College Bridge students once a week. In most sites, they also provide feedback on weekly assignments. Tutors are members of the community (often retired educators) or undergraduate and graduate students with relevant subject matter expertise.

The tutors also participate in weekly workshops, led by PGP staff in collaboration with the instructors or with volunteer facilitators recruited from the faculty and staff at our partner colleges and universities. These weekly meetings provide additional support on math and writing pedagogy, as well as a space to workshop feedback on the students' assignments, which is ultimately reviewed by PGP staff.

The PGP piloted the College Bridge writing course in the fall of 2020 with a cohort of students from the DC DOC Central Detention Facility and Central Treatment Facility. Since then, in addition to continuing to offer the program in Washington, D.C., we have replicated and adapted this pilot at the Boston Pre-Release Center, FCI Fort Dix (NJ) and MCI Framingham (MA). We are currently piloting the College Bridge math program at FCI Fort Dix and will replicate it in at least three other regions in 2023.

Crucial to the success of the PGP's College Bridge program is its flexibility to adapt to meet the needs of our students and program partners. When piloting the program in DC in 2020, the PGP leveraged pandemic-driven investments in technology to create a fully remote program, offered in partnership with the DC DOC and American Prison Data Systems (APDS), a public benefit corporation that provides tablets and educational platforms that are secured for use in correctional facilities and are free of charge for incarcerated learners.

The PGP's growing lineup of writing courses demonstrate that the College Bridge writing program can be modified to equitably serve students in a variety of settings and public health conditions: while in Washington, D.C. course delivery and tutoring are still fully remote, at the Boston Pre-Release Center course instruction took place in-person with virtual tutoring support; at FCI Fort Dix and MCI Framingham both instruction and tutoring takes place in person.

The PGP College Bridge Program Locations and Format

Washington, D.C.: Each week, students engage with 15-20-minute asynchronous lectures designed and recorded by the two course instructors. Asynchronous lectures are complemented by synchronous classes (held 1-2 times per semester via Zoom) and tutoring sessions held weekly through a live messaging platform. As the pandemic subsides, the PGP will shift to a hybrid model, with in-person tutoring and remote instruction.

New Jersey: At FCI Fort Dix, students meet with instructors in-person for weekly two-hour classes. Instructors and tutors are available for one additional hour of in-person support every week.

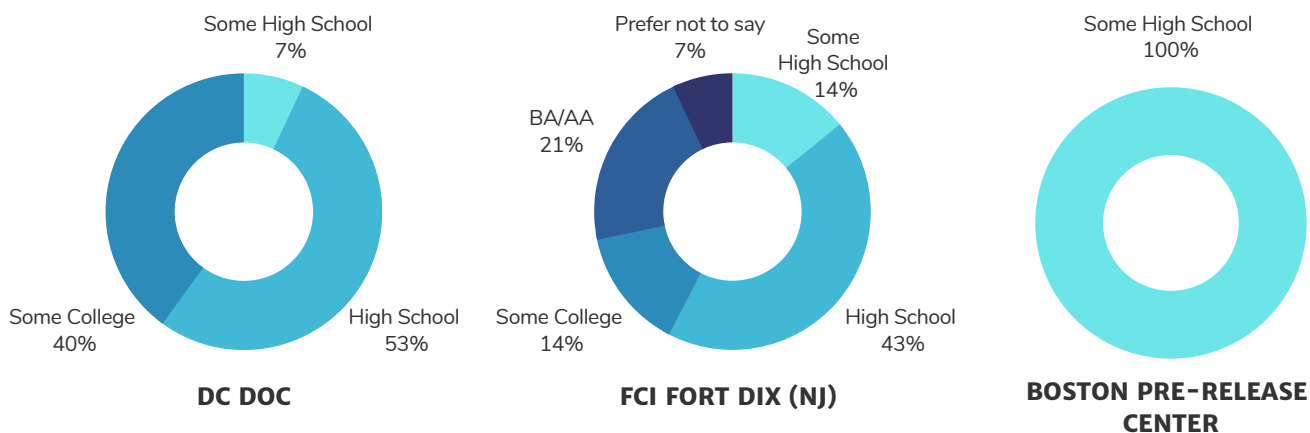
Massachusetts: At the School of Reentry at the Boston Pre-Release Center (fall 2021), in-person classes were complemented by weekly TA sessions offered virtually by tutors. At MCI Framingham, we offer weekly 2-hour classes and 1-hour tutoring sessions, both held in-person.

The College Bridge Students

The flexible structure of the College Bridge program allows us to support the goals of a wide range of students, from those who are close to obtaining their GED, to those who already have a high school credential, as well as those who have already taken some college courses but did not complete their degree. As discussed above, students in all of these categories benefit from a course that strengthens their reading, writing, and math skills, because gaps in literacy and numeracy often persist regardless of educational attainment.

The PGP relies on educational staff inside correctional facilities to recruit program participants. We also ask prospective students to complete a brief intake packet, including a survey on their academic goals and previous achievements as well as a math worksheet or the analysis of a brief text.

Highest educational level of program participants (spring 2022 data)

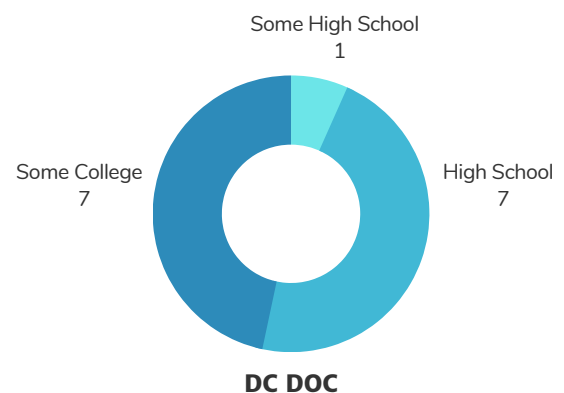


The College Bridge Students (continued)

At FCI Fort Dix, where college courses were not available during the pandemic, two students who enrolled in the College Bridge writing course had already started college before they were incarcerated, while three students already had a college degree. Still, in debriefs with the PGP staff, they expressed that the program had re-ignited their passion for reading and motivated them to engage in new writing projects. Similarly, DC DOC students who had completed some college courses and students who had only completed a high school diploma or GED had similar levels of engagement and course completion (see figure).

Most of the College Bridge students have many of the characteristics generally associated with the definition of ‘nontraditional students’, including having a GED as opposed to a traditional high school diploma and having postponed enrollment in college (cf. Ositelu, 2019). Like many learners with this background, incarcerated students often have a history of ineffective education, low self-confidence, and limited familiarity with the conventions of academic writing (Cleary, 2011). Inside and outside correctional facilities, so-called ‘nontraditional students’ actually constitute the majority of undergraduate students (cf. CLASP 2015) and developing inclusive programs and pedagogical practices that take into account their needs and experiences is especially crucial.

Spring 2022 students who completed the course and worked with tutors



The College Bridge Tutors

A crucial practice for inclusive education and a key component of our College Bridge program are regular meetings with the PGP tutors, who work with small groups of students to help address their unique needs and support the instructors by providing feedback on students’ weekly assignments. Tutoring is “among the most effective education interventions ever to be subjected to rigorous evaluation” (Kraft and Falken, 2020: 2. Cf. also Dietrichson et al., 2017; Fryer, 2017; Nickow et al., 2020). As highlighted by Kraft and Falken, “the average effect of tutoring programs on student achievement is larger than the effects found in approximately 85% of studies evaluating education interventions and equivalent to moving a student at the 35th percentile of the achievement distribution to the 50th” (2020: 2). Research shows that working consistently with a tutor is beneficial for student writing, boosting engagement, memory and retention (cf. for example Driscoll 2015, Colver and Fry 2016, Reinheimer and McKenzie 2011).

The College Bridge Tutors (continued)

Tutoring, mentoring programs, curriculum reviews, and academic support interventions have been shown to be especially effective in ensuring the success of nontraditional students in postsecondary institutions (cf. Tinto, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985). While these interventions have traditionally been conceived as ‘remedial’, the PGP frames tutors as learning partners and matches all College Bridge program participants with tutors. This model, known as ‘universal tutoring’ helps reduce the stigma associated with accessing academic support services, promotes educational justice and equity by giving all students access to additional resources, and enables us to address the needs of a broad range of students. In addition to reviewing the course material, our tutors can provide additional support in basic literacy and math skills to the students who need it, while introducing more advanced material to students that have a higher educational level.

All PGP tutors participate in a five-hour national pre-service training designed to provide them with an overview of mass incarceration and the carceral state in the US, to enhance their understanding of the challenges faced by incarcerated and recently released learners and to educate them on ethical volunteerism as well as tutoring pedagogy. Additionally, they take part in a regional program orientation that introduces them to the specifics of the facility or reentry program where they will be tutoring. During the semester, tutors are required to attend a webinar from those offered as part of the PGP’s Justice Education Series, a series of virtual panels featuring prominent activists and dedicated to understanding the challenges that system-impacted people face during incarceration and after they are released.

In addition, College Bridge tutors attend weekly or biweekly training and coordination meetings, moderated by the PGP staff of volunteer facilitators. Weekly meetings help tutors refine their writing and math pedagogy skills and provide them with a chance to discuss the weekly assignments and to confer on student progress and challenges.

In DC (2021–2022)...

73% of our College Bridge writing tutors had prior experiences as a tutor or educator
25% had prior experience tutoring writing
14% had prior experience tutoring inside correctional facilities

In New Jersey (2022)...

25% of our College Bridge writing tutors and 100% of our math tutors had prior experience as a tutor or educator
25% of them had experience tutoring or teaching in correctional facilities

In Massachusetts (2022)...

30% of our College Bridge writing tutors had experience teaching or tutoring in a correctional setting. All had prior experiences as a tutor or educator

The College Bridge Tutors (continued)

Tutors undergo a rigorous selection process and are assigned to the College Bridge program based on their academic strengths and experience. Writing tutors are typically college seniors or sophomores majoring in English or other writing-intensive humanities, or they are members of the community with prior experience in education. Most math tutors are graduate students or postdoctoral scholars in STEM disciplines.

There were no significant differences in retention rates and academic progress of students supported by first-time tutors vs more experienced educators—a testament to the effectiveness of our rigorous training program and ongoing support.

At the end of each session, tutors complete a feedback form indicating the students' goals for the tutoring session and whether they were met. For the spring 2022 semester, students' goals were met in 88% of the tutoring sessions and classes at FCI Fort Dix, 94% of the sessions and classes at MCI Framingham, and 70% of the tutoring sessions at with DC DOC students. The impact of tutors on student progress and confidence is also testified to by the end-of-semester surveys completed by the students. When reflecting on the course, program participants consistently mention the positive impact that tutoring has for them. One student summed up the impact of having consistent support from a tutor: "My tutor provided outstanding support! This whole course enlightened me to improve my grammar, develop my analysis of texts, and organization of arguments. Me and [my tutor] interacted weekly and most of the time, we needed more time. Also anytime I had questions or concerns I would be able to [message] her and she would respond to assist me. [...] The support I received in developing arguments, integrating evidence, organizing my arguments, and demonstrating an awareness of audience & context was OUTSTANDING!" This same student noted that the tutor played a supportive role in helping overcome challenges in the course: "It was challenging with the hard work and the unfamiliar topics. With [my tutor's] dedication, consistency, I was able to get through the process."

Leveraging Technology and Individualized Tutoring

In DC, the College Bridge Program is offered in a remote format through a partnership with APDS, a public benefit corporation that provides tablets and software that are secured for use in a correctional setting at no cost to incarcerated people. Remote learning programs expanded during the pandemic, as Departments of Corrections across the country suspended in-person programming, investing in connectivity and mobile devices. This trend, however, is not new—as early as 2014, a RAND report on the state of education in correctional facilities emphasized that technology was increasingly widespread in educational programs inside as well as outside prisons (Davis et al., 2014).

Leveraging Technology and Individualized Tutoring (continued)

Indeed, while our initial decision to offer the College Bridge program remotely in the DC DOC facilities was a response to the covid-19 pandemic, online learning and instruction offer more than a short-term solution for a public-health emergency: technology-assisted learning has the potential to create more equitable and inclusive programs that can be scaled sustainably.

Although there is a growing body of research discussing the opportunities and shortcomings of technology-assisted and online-based learning, scholarship on its application in carceral settings remains extremely limited. The PGP College Bridge writing course offers a case study in the possibilities and constraints of the use of technology in a correctional setting, as well as the crucial role that tutors play in ensuring the success of virtual and hybrid programs. In line with the scholarship highlighting the benefits of technology-assisted learning, the use of tablets has proved to be a powerful instructional tool at the DC DOC facilities:

- Through the tablets' Learning Management System, PGP instructors and staff are able to access real-time student engagement and progress data and to intervene in a timely manner to support and encourage program participants.
- The hybrid format of the course gives students the freedom to progress through the material at their own pace.
 - Students are encouraged to complete one module of the course each week, and the median number of days between submissions was six (across all cohorts), showing that students remained on track to complete the course within the allotted time.

Trends in existing scholarship

The benefits of online learning:

- Remote programs could expand access to high-quality curriculum at varied levels
- They also facilitate access to academic progress data otherwise lacking in correctional facilities
- Online learning enables students to proceed at their own pace (Berge & Clark, 2005; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).

However...

- Learners in virtual programs fare worse, on average, than students enrolled in similar face-to-face programs (Hart, Friedmann & Hill, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2013);
- Differences in achievement are more pronounced for lower-performing students (Xu & Jaggars 2014).
- Online-only courses require higher levels of self-regulation and self-discipline. Qualitative studies have found that students in online courses experience higher levels of dissatisfaction, interpersonal isolation, and lack of engagement (Bambara, Harbour & Davies, 2009; Carr, 2000; Hana & Kling, 1999; Jaggars, 2014).

Leveraging Technology and Individualized Tutoring (continued)

- Throughout the course, students took advantage of the built-in flexibility and were able to take breaks from the course when dealing with particularly difficult personal situations.
 - Each semester, 1-2 students who were unable to complete the program with their cohort re-enrolled in the following iteration of the program and successfully completed it.
 - Occasionally, students completed the course faster than expected—in the fall 2022 semester, one student completed all the readings and assignments in a month to take advantage of the program before being transferred to a different facility.
- The use of mobile devices has enabled the PGP to create individualized tracks for students at different levels while maintaining a core curriculum. Students in need of additional guidance benefit from detailed worksheets and guided exercises, while the more advanced students have access to additional readings, including several issues of Lapham’s Quarterly, offered in partnership with this prestigious scholarly journal.

Virtual learning programs have the additional benefit of fostering the digital skills of incarcerated learners, bridging the digital literacy gap that puts incarcerated people at further disadvantage in the job market and educational landscape upon their release. Digital equity is increasingly recognized as a priority at the national and local level, and the PGP College Bridge program stands to benefit from growing investments in this field, especially in light of the Digital Equity Act of 2021.

However, the absence of in-person interaction was also a source of frustration for students, tutors and instructors in our DC DOC program. This is not surprising, as studies on online-only educational programs have found that students often felt isolated and had higher drop-out rates and lower performance (cf. for example Hart, Friedmann & Hill, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2013).

The Digital Equity Act provides \$2.75 billion to establish grant programs that promote digital equity and inclusion, with the goal to ensure that all people and communities have the skills, technology, and capacity needed to reap the full benefits of our digital economy. Incarcerated people are identified as a priority population for grants and programming in the Digital Equity Act.

Leveraging Technology and Individualized Tutoring (continued)

In our DC DOC program, these common shortcomings of online-learning courses are countered through built-in opportunities for synchronous interaction and individualized support:

- **Synchronous virtual tutoring.** Students and tutors communicate through a virtual messaging platform. They communicate synchronously for approximately an hour each week, but the platform also allows them to message asynchronously throughout the week. The PGP volunteers enjoy the flexibility of virtual tutoring and the ability they have to message with the student they are supporting whenever things come up. As one tutor explains: “I was able to respond to these [messages] and provide support to my student on an as needed basis and not only during our designated tutoring block of time.” Virtual tutoring also allows students and tutors the flexibility to accommodate students’ schedules.
- **Synchronous virtual classes.** Starting from the spring 2022 semester, the PGP instructors held a virtual class midway through the semester via Zoom, to strengthen their pedagogical relationship with students and discuss the course readings in a seminar format.

Tutoring and teaching through virtual platforms comes with its own challenges. In particular, any time a student has technical difficulties with a tablet or access to the facility’s intranet, tutoring is disrupted. As a result, tutors met with students on average 60% of the weeks, when it was possible for both students and tutors to use the messaging platform (spring 2022). Virtual tutoring sessions held in DC were slightly less effective than the in-person tutoring sessions held in other regions. In addition, participation in the Zoom classes was restricted to a specific DC Jail unit, so only a limited number of students (four each semester) were able to join.

Despite these challenges, synchronous meetings with tutors and instructors had a remarkable impact on student engagement, compensating—at least in part—for the lack of in-person interaction. We were able to fully appreciate the impact of the tutors during the first pilot of the program: due to technology issues, tutors received access to the direct messaging platform midway through the course, and their arrival boosted assignment completion rates from 64% to 76% over the course of a month.

Similarly, students who participated in the synchronous Zoom classes engaged more frequently with the readings and submitted assignments more regularly than their peers who did not attend. They also indicated in a survey that participating in this class strengthened their motivation and helped them complete the course. The students’ responses provide insights into the reasons for the success of the class. Some students indicated that they felt accountable to the instructors after connecting with them, others appreciated hearing new perspectives on the readings, both from the instructors and from their peers. One student shared: “People raised certain points pertaining to the texts that I hadn’t gotten to yet. So it made me read and interpret them in a different way. Even with [the texts I had already read],... I heard different interpretations and perspectives that I didn’t think about when I read”.

The College Bridge Writing Course

A Case Study in Pedagogy and Student Progress

The College Bridge writing course is the first and the most established component of the PGP College Bridge program. We first piloted this course in partnership with the DC DOC in 2020 and in the last two years we have offered it to 11 cohorts of students in four facilities across three states. It has been taught by six different teams of instructors in different formats, including fully in-person, hybrid, and fully remote. Through each iteration, we have refined our pedagogical model and evaluation system. The College Bridge writing course serves as a case study in effective pedagogical practices in carceral settings and their impact on the student's writing skills, their attitudes towards reading and writing, as well as their confidence.

Program Structure and Pedagogy

Each iteration of the College Bridge writing course is different. The PGP staff works with instructors and correctional partners to create a syllabus that reflects the needs and opportunities of each facility and student cohort. However, the core structure of the program remains consistent and it is informed by research on writing pedagogy and nontraditional learners:

- The course is organized into sections focused on core skills and clear learning goals: analyzing and summarizing texts, identifying key arguments, themes and hypotheses; identifying implicit and explicit information; comparing and contrasting texts; developing and supporting an argument.
- Each week, students work on brief interim assignments and at the end of each section they complete a 3-5-page milestone paper. Progressing from structured exercises to more open prompts, with each assignment building on the previous one, helps students grow their self-confidence and reduces feelings of frustration when faced with complex tasks (cf. Benko 2013, Benson 1997, Applebee, and Langer, 1987). This structure, known as scaffolding, is recognized as a best practice for teaching to all students, but especially to nontraditional students, who often have lower self-confidence in writing skills and higher anxiety related to writing (Krause, 2006, Cleary, 2011).
- Building on existing research on the link between reading, writing and critical thinking (cf. for example Tierney et al., 1989, Çavdar, & Doe, 2012), new concepts and skills are introduced through the close reading and analysis of texts. Students are exposed to and learn to recognize a broad range of genres, including novels and short stories, autobiographical texts, op-eds, and scholarly articles.

The College Bridge Writing Course

A Case Study in Pedagogy and Student Progress (continued)

- Symmetrically, rather than learning a single writing style, our students learn to analyze different rhetorical situations and adapt writing strategies accordingly. Identifying and responding to audience expectations is a key advanced writing skill. Research shows that nontraditional students are more likely to need support in recognizing and moving between genres and discourse communities. In a final de-briefing session with PGP staff, several tutors remarked that students had developed greater audience awareness and a better understanding of the conventions of academic writing during the program.

Michelle Cleary has suggested that college students need “not only encouragement but also coaching on how to recognize and move between their different discourse communities” (2011: 37). This is especially true for nontraditional and adult students, who often “are confused and anxious about academic writing because of prior experiences in and out of school” (Cleary, 2011: 37). Developing these skills is especially important in transitioning from high-school-level to college-level writing, as instructor expectations and assignments vary much more significantly in higher education programs. Discussing the requirements of college-level writing, Lee Ann Carroll argued that writing courses should not prepare students to master one specific style of academic writing – rather, students need “to develop flexibility as writers, especially the ability to analyze different rhetorical situations and adapt writing strategies accordingly” (Carroll 2002: 131, quoted in Cleary, 2011: 38). Several other scholars have emphasized the importance of helping students, especially nontraditional students, develop of these skills – commonly known as meta-cognitive skills (cf. Wardle, 2007, Beaufort, 2010).

Impact on Student Writing Skills

We evaluate student progress through a rubric based on four categories—“argument,” “evidence,” “organization,” and “context”—each measured on a scale of 1 to 3. A score of 1 indicates that the student “needs support” in order to meet the course expectations for that category; a score of 2 indicates that the student is meeting course expectations, while a score of 3 records that the student “exceeds expectations.”

We used this rubric to compare the results of a diagnostic assessment completed prior to the beginning of each writing course to the students’ final argumentative paper. This analysis consistently revealed significant student progress. For the 2021-2022 academic year, average student scores increased between 1.1 points (Summer 2021) and 0.5 points (spring 2022). The most significant improvement was registered in the categories of “argument,” “organization” and “context.”

It is important to note that this numeric scale was used only for program evaluation purposes—student assignments received an overall score out of 100 points in addition to discursive feedback that highlighted their strengths and areas for improvement.

The College Bridge Writing Course

Impact on Student Writing Skills (continued)

The PGP Evaluation Rubric

Category	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Needs Support
Argument	Presents and develops a convincing argument in your own voice with detailed and organized support.	Presents and develops an argument with some support.	Does not identify an argument, instead may make an observation, a general statement, or a claim that cannot be disputed.
Use of Evidence	Draws on substantial evidence, including appropriate paraphrases and quotations, to support the argument. Analyzes the evidence.	Draws on evidence, including some paraphrases and quotations, to support the argument.	Does not draw on evidence or draws on evidence that is in conflict with the argument. Does not analyze the evidence.
Organization	Effective organization among introduction, argument, body paragraphs, evidence, and conclusion. Transitions to move among the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. Evidence is grouped together in logical ways.	Some clear organization among introduction, argument, body paragraphs, and conclusion. Evidence is grouped together; some use of transitions.	Lacks clear organization, no relationships between argument, paragraphs, and evidence. Does not use transitions.
Awareness of Audience and Context	Demonstrates effective use of voice in expressing awareness of writing to and for an audience and context in word choice, organization, detail, and tone.	Demonstrates some awareness of audience and context in word choice, organization, and tone.	Does not demonstrate awareness of audience or context.

Impact on Student Confidence and Attitudes Towards Reading and Writing

Baseline and endline surveys and debrief sessions revealed an increase in student confidence and a shift in their attitudes towards reading and writing, from a focus on grammar to a more nuanced understanding of how genre, audience, and context shape the production and reception of texts. In baseline surveys and literacy narratives, students indicated that they were strong readers, identifying comprehension as their main strength. They focused on vocabulary as a crucial part of reading and comprehension, indicating that they spent time looking up new words, repeating them to themselves, and understanding their spelling and pronunciation.

The College Bridge Writing Course

Impact on Student Confidence and Attitudes Towards Reading and Writing (continued)

Students were less confident in their writing skills, but the majority of them still indicated that they believed they were good writers. Their answers also give interesting insights into their understanding of what counts as a good writer: about half of those who elaborated on their self-assessment focused on mechanical skills, such as grammar, spelling, and even penmanship, while the other half focused on higher level skills—many associated good writing with clarity, concision, and the ability to express opinions, whereas others mentioned imagination and the ability to express emotions and feelings.

At the end of the course, students were asked again about their attitudes towards reading and writing through open writing prompts, surveys, and debriefing sessions led by the PGP staff. In DC, several key themes emerged in group debriefing. One of these themes was visibility: writing, several students commented, was a way to be seen and heard, to take control of their own narratives. Another theme that emerged was writing as a form of healing: writing provided several students with a means of processing personal experiences and connecting with loved ones. As a result, students noted that the process of writing relieved stress and could feel “meditative.” Finally, several students reflected on the connection between writing and freedom: in contrast to the experience of being incarcerated, writing was an experience where students did not feel bound by rules. As a result, their experiences of writing this semester reinforced for them the importance of the right to freedom of expression.

Similarly, FCI Fort Dix students shared that by the end of the course they saw writing as a way to express themselves and shed light on issues that mattered to them. Importantly, several students reported feeling more confident in the writing skills that they already possessed and shared that one of the key takeaways from the course was adapting their writing to different contexts and audiences, while building on their own voice and strengths as writers. One student, for example, started the course feeling confident in his skills as a poet, but intimidated by other writing genres. For his final project, he reflected on how he could maintain a poetic voice while writing a journalistic piece on an ongoing issue: school shootings.

Conclusion

Lessons Learned, Next Steps and Policy Recommendations

As college in prison programs continue to expand, supported by the newly reinstated Federal Pell Grants, the implementation of college readiness programs at scale has become all the more urgent. The evaluation of the PGP College Bridge program offers insights into the essential elements of effective college readiness programming in carceral settings:

- While the writing and math courses were effective in improving the students' academic skills and confidence, to reach its full potential the College Bridge program should be connected with higher education programs, to create clear pathways towards college enrollment for College Bridge program alumni. Such pathways can be established through agreements with higher education institutions to ensure that incarcerated learners can receive college credit for participating in the College Bridge program and/or that College Bridge alumni are automatically admitted to college programs. Formal agreements with higher education institutions are also essential to evaluate the effectiveness of the College Bridge program on long-term student outcomes.
- Another important way to recognize students' efforts is to ensure that they earn credits towards a reduction of their sentence for participating in the College Bridge program. The First Step Act (FSA) includes provisions for those incarcerated in federal facilities to earn Time Credits through participation in a variety of educational programs, detailed in the Federal Register. The list currently includes both GED programming and college courses, but it does not include college readiness programming. Given its need and effectiveness, the College Bridge program should qualify for FSA Time Credits.
- Remote asynchronous instruction is a powerful tool to build a scalable program, as it offers more flexibility for students, instructors, and tutors, while enabling the PGP to collect academic progress and engagement data at an unprecedented level. However, online asynchronous courses are not enough: synchronous tutoring and instruction are essential to support student learning and engagement.
- The College Bridge program is most effective when it supports a broad range of goals. Writing, reading, critical thinking, and math skills are essential not only to enroll and succeed in college programs, but for employment, self-advocacy, and day-to-day life. Emphasizing the benefits of the program beyond college enrollment and accounting for the diverse goals of the students helps boost enrollment and motivation.

Conclusion

Lessons Learned, Next Steps and Policy Recommendations (continued)

These conclusions will inform the PGP strategy to scale the College Bridge program across its regions:

Spring 2023

We will pilot College Bridge math courses at MCI Framingham and the DC DOC facilities, to complement the College Bridge writing courses already offered at these facilities.

We will create a series of portable asynchronous mini-lectures that can be used in combination with synchronous tutoring and instruction, as well as self-paced educational software when available, to more flexibly replicate the College Bridge program in reentry settings and inside correctional facilities where students have access to technology.

Fall 2023

We will pilot the College Bridge program (with both math and writing courses) in at least four additional facilities, prioritizing expansion to Pennsylvania and New York, to ensure that the PGP's College Bridge program is offered in all our regions.

We will adapt the core syllabi of our existing College Bridge programs to create a hybrid program to be offered in partnership with halfway houses and facilities with shorter average stays. Students will be able to begin their College Bridge program while they are in custody and complete it after they are released.

By the close of 2023, the PGP will have implemented College Bridge programming in at least seven facilities and two reentry programs across all of its regions. Beyond 2023, our goal is to continue to replicate the College Bridge program across our regions, while starting to expand it beyond our current footprint.

Conclusion

Lessons Learned, Next Steps and Policy Recommendations (continued)

To support the expansion of our College Bridge Program, we will strengthen our partnerships with higher education institutions. By the fall 2023 semester, we will secure accreditation for the College Bridge program and/or automatic admission to accredited college courses for program alumni in at least one program site. These partnerships will also enable us to evaluate the long-term outcomes of the College Bridge program, collecting data on the number of College Bridge alumni who enroll in college and their results in their first writing- and math-intensive courses.

In addition to bridging the gap in academic preparation for incarcerated learners, the College Bridge program provides valuable civic engagement opportunities, training, and tutoring/teaching experience for students and faculty in our partner colleges and universities. As higher education institutions across the country increasingly prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion, the College Bridge program has garnered a growing interest and support from college administrators. The Department of English at the University of Maryland, for example, has established and funded a new advanced undergraduate course centered on the College Bridge program. The course will train UMD students to serve as PGP tutors, allowing them to earn academic credit for their participation in the College Bridge program. Other colleges and universities support the program by covering the transportation expenses for volunteer tutors and instructors.

By strengthening and expanding our partnerships with higher education institutions, we will be able to grow the College Bridge program sustainably, securing fee-for-service contracts and in-kind support to cover volunteer management and travel expenses. PGP will seek philanthropic and government funding to cover the remaining program expansion costs, including partnering with external consultants for program evaluation and increasing the capacity of our staff at the regional level to recruit and train a growing number of volunteers.

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