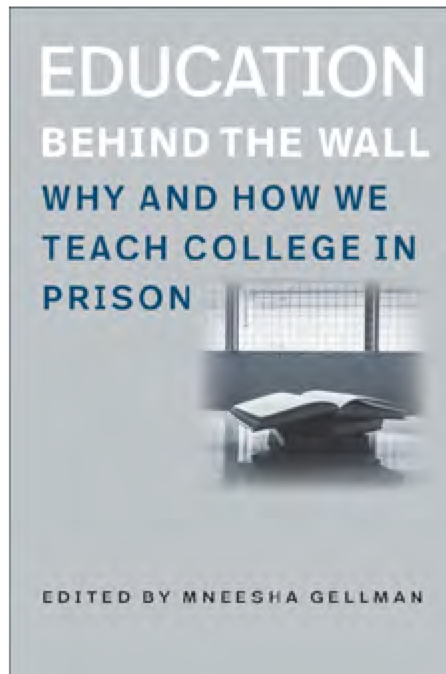
# LEARNING FROM COLLEGE-IN-PRISON PROGRAMS

DAVID STOLOFF




*Education Behind the Wall: Why and How We Teach College in Prison* by Mneesha Gellman, a Fulbright Scholar to Mexico, 2020.

As a Professor of Education at Eastern Connecticut State University, our state's designated public liberal arts college, I appreciated *Education Behind the Wall* for its introduction to college-in-prison programs, discussion of enhancing learning and teaching throughout higher education, and efforts to end the cradle-to-prison pipeline for too many people in the US. Editor Mneesha Gellman, founder and director of the Emerson Prison Initiative, has gathered contributors to this text who, as she writes in the introduction, "exhibit the ethics of care for their craft of teaching that is a hallmark of college-in-prison programs" (2).

Kimberly McLarin and Wendy W. Walters (both faculty in the Emerson College Creative Writing project) reflect on why they teach literature inside Massachusetts Correctional Institute at Concord (MCI-Concord). They differentiate between learning and teaching in the "privilege industry" – a four-year liberal arts college – and "punishment industry"– the prison classroom. MCI-Concord students, they explain, "do not conceive of their education as a product, but as a pathway" (22.) McLaren and Walters aim to make their classrooms at both Emerson and Concord "insubordinate spaces" – spaces that are "open to both emotional and critical responses to the text, as well as

challenges to the constructed authority of the text, the syllabus, and even the role of the professor" (25.) They find that "our incarcerated students come to class with energy, enthusiasm, and delight, eager to debate and discuss" (31), not what they find in some "privileged industry" classrooms.

Shelley Tenenbaum (a Clark University sociology professor) comments that "teaching in prison brings a range of rewards that include intellectual excitement, appreciation from students, a sense of accomplishments, and new perspectives" (36). She finds that the college-in-prison students have deep insights beyond her own book knowledge on dehumanization and violence, more often come prepared to class, and are close readers of the text— but there will always be challenges for regular attendance.

Elizabeth B. Langan (a retired teacher from the Boston Public Schools system and now a tutor with the Emerson Prison Initiative), examines the school-to-prison pipeline by identifying similarities in the structure of middle schools and prisons—around security issues, trauma-laden students, and the goals of vocational vs. college readiness programs. She finds that students in the college-in-prison programs have begun to work their way out of the cradle-to-prison pipeline by "working toward a future of agency, social and economic competency, and useful and engaged lives" (72).

Other contributions by librarians, Africana Studies, creative writing, and economics professors—and one by a student himself—highlight a variety of issues intrinsic to college teaching in prison. Stephen Shane (a professor with the Emerson College Writing Center) introduces the "hows" of teaching by explaining that one of his goals is "to support students as they find their voices as writers" (77) through memoirs, profiles, academic research essays, and open letters. Cara Moyer-Duncan (of the Emerson College Africana Studies program) provides guidance on one prison's logistics, program and course design, faculty selection, and syllabi that must be reviewed by the Department of Corrections, and considers censorship and media guidelines for college-in-prison classrooms. Christina E. Dent (an Emerson College librarian) developed a system of research request forms to overcome prison limitations in accessing online research tools. Sarah Moran Davidson (a Columbia University Economics professor) discusses "challenges and approaches to teaching quantitative courses in college-in-prison programs" (135) that also include overcoming limited access to the internet, collaborative projects, and tutors. Bill Littlefield (a Curry College English professor and NPR contributor) makes the important point that the prison instructor learns from his students, and Alexander X, the student, writes how his experience broadened his horizons.

Professor Gellman concludes that education is a form of recidivism intervention, structural intervention and reform of the prison system, and freedom for even those who are in prison. In college-in-prison programs, "students are treated as intellectual interlocutors, with ideas to be seriously contemplated, critiqued, and redrafted"… letting "students who are incarcerated be students first, and people who are incarcerated second" (195).

***In college-in-prison programs, students who are incarcerated are students first, and people who are incarcerated second.***

In *Education Behind the Walls*, the authors focus on introducing the reader to key issues and processes in these dynamic institutions – higher education and prisons – and suggest more humane approaches to learning and living productively in both. The actual assessment of college-in-prison programs can be found elsewhere, such as at the Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison website. Prisoners' perspectives on the cradle-in-prison pipeline are on display in *You Don't Know Me: The Incarcerated Women of York Prison Voice Their Truths*, a chronicle of best-selling author Wally Lamb's college-in-prison writing class. However, from reading *Equation Behind the Walls*, I developed a renewed appreciation of those teachers who seek to dramatically change the lives of the imprisoned through innovative teaching strategies that emphasize learning agency to develop skills in successful living, service and self-actualization.

Gellman, Mneesha, ed. *Education Behind the Wall: Why and How We Teach College in Prison*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press. 230 pages. $35.00.

## Biography

David L. Stoloff, a social foundations professor in the Education Department at Eastern Connecticut State University, was a Fulbright administrative exchange fellow at Chang Mai Rajabhat University (Thailand) during 2007-2008; he offered workshops on online teaching for English language university faculty. He was also a Peace Corps high school teacher in Zaire, taught at high schools in Israel and California, and was an educational researcher and curriculum developer in Montreal, Dallas, and Los Angeles. His research includes explorations into additive assessment, personal archives for learning, intercultural connections among universities, and undergraduate global field experiences. He can be reached at stoloffd@easternct.edu