A Post-Secondary Writing Bridge Program for Incarcerated Learners

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter discusses a College Bridge Writing Program piloted by the Petey Greene Program inside the Washington D.C. Department of Corrections (DOC) Jail. The program is designed to foster racial and social justice by addressing some of the barriers that prevent incarcerated students from accessing higher education, from succeeding in college-level courses, and more generally, from finding meaningful employment. After providing an overview of the structure and the objectives of the course, the author focuses on the challenges posed by the pandemic and on two of the main features that contributed to the success of the program – the use of learning technology and the role of volunteer tutors, who provided one-on-one support to incarcerated students.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2020, the Petey Greene Program (PGP) launched a College Bridge Writing Program inside a correctional facility in the northeastern United States. The Program aims to foster racial and social justice by preparing incarcerated students to access higher education and succeed in college-level courses. The pilot phase of the Program was concluded in May 2021; since June 2021, the Program has been offered as part of a reentry initiative designed to support incarcerated students through mentorship, academic programs and extracurricular activities.

This chapter focuses on the pilot phase of the Program, analyzing data on student engagement and progress, as well as feedback from students and volunteers, with the goal of identifying the essential elements of a scalable and pedagogically effective college readiness program for incarcerated learners.

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First, we will examine the state of education in correctional facilities, arguing that college readiness programs are essential tools to foster the academic achievement and inclusion of incarcerated learners, who are systematically marginalized and face significant barriers to pursuing higher education.

Second, we will turn our attention to the Program pilot, discussing the Program's design in light of the existing research on writing pedagogy in general and on nontraditional learners in particular, and evaluating the Program's success through the analysis of data on student progress and engagement as well as feedback from students and volunteers.

Finally, the chapter will investigate two key features of the College Bridge Writing Program pilot—the use of technology and the role of volunteer tutors. The pilot was offered in a remote format, relying on tablets to communicate with students and share pre-recorded asynchronous lectures, assignments and readings. By offering the Program remotely, PGP was able to engage incarcerated students even during the covid-19 pandemic, as correctional departments across the country indefinitely suspended in-person programming to contain the spread of the covid-19 virus. Although the choice to offer the Program completely remotely was dictated by the circumstances, technology-assisted learning offers more than a short-term solution to a public-health emergency. Given the varied needs, educational levels and backgrounds of incarcerated learners, it is difficult to imagine an effective program that does not rely on technology to create individualized paths and to support self-paced learning. While online learning has significant benefits, existing research suggests that online-learning alone cannot substitute in-person interaction, especially for nontraditional students, who fare worse and have higher drop-out rates in online-only programs. To support student engagement and motivation, and to provide personalized support, PGP paired all the students enrolled in the College Bridge Writing Program pilot with trained volunteers who met with them for weekly tutoring sessions held through a live-chat platform.

In the final section of the chapter, we will discuss the College Bridge Writing Program pilot in light of scholarship on technology-assisted learning and on tutoring programs, with a focus on the benefits these tools provide for nontraditional learners. Our analysis, however, also reveals a gap in the existing research, as studies focusing on incarcerated students remain very limited: when it comes to creating educational programs for this subset of the nontraditional learner population, we still do not know what works and why. Although more systematic research will be needed to provide answers to these questions, our case study provides insights into the specific barriers and opportunities connected to working with tutors and to technology-assisted learning in a carceral setting.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

The Petey Greene Program is the largest multi-state provider of tutoring services for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated learners in the northeastern United States. The organization was founded in 2008, and for its first five years it remained a New Jersey-based program. An evaluation conducted in 2013 revealed that incarcerated students tutored by PGP advanced one to two full grade levels more than non-tutored students in both math and reading over the course of just one semester (Kowalski, 2013). Following the results of the 2013 study, PGP expanded to seven northeastern states. By 2018, PGP was recruiting 1,000 volunteers annually through partnerships with 31 universities, tutoring 2,200 incarcerated people in 47 correctional facilities.

In 2019–2020, the organization carried out a staff-driven strategic planning process to redefine its structures and priorities, leading to the approval of a new three-year strategic plan in July 2020. The plan