



Event Transcript

Education Justice: Why Prison Classrooms Matter

October 29, 2020
Harvard Radcliffe Institute

Description

“What college does, it helps us learn about the nation,” said Rodney Spivey-Jones, a 2017 Bard College graduate currently incarcerated at Fishkill Correctional Facility in New York, in the docuseries *College behind Bars*. “It helps us become civic beings. It helps us understand that we have an interest in our community, that our community is a part of us and we are a part of it.”

The Bard Prison Initiative and programs at other institutions of higher learning across the country have brought together teachers and learners in incarcerated spaces for years. This panel will gather faculty members, administrators, and students who have participated in such programs to discuss the critical importance of prison education and the pivotal role colleges and universities play in expanding the power of education beyond their campus.

View the four-part documentary film series *College behind Bars* on PBS through December 31, 2020, or view the extended trailer for the series.

On November 10, 2020, the Radcliffe Institute will hold an associated virtual program that focuses on students’ voices.

SPEAKERS

Max Kenner, founder and executive director, Bard Prison Initiative

Dyjuan Tatro, government affairs associate, Bard Prison Initiative

Zelda Roland, founding director, Yale Prison Education Initiative at Dwight Hall at Yale

Craig Steven Wilder, Barton L. Weller Professor of History, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

MODERATOR

Lynette Nicole Tannis, adjunct lecturer on education, Harvard Graduate School of Education; author, *Educating Incarcerated Youth: Exploring the Impact of Relationships, Expectations, Resources and Accountability* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Transcript

KAIA STERN:

- Welcome. Thank you for joining us. My name is Kaia Stern. I am the Co-Founder and Director of the Prison Studies Project, a faculty member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Executive Director of Concord Prison Outreach, and the first practitioner-in-residence at the Radcliffe Institute.

Thanks to Dean Brown-Nagin's leadership, one of Radcliffe's strategic focus areas is law, education, and justice. Part of our work explores the ways in which Radcliffe can be meaningfully engaged in prison education. This topic is urgent and timely.

Some local context may be valuable. As early as 1833, Harvard University graduate students were traveling to local prisons to help teach. In the 1950s, the Phillips Brooks House Association, the longest standing student-run organization at Harvard College, started tutoring programs in prisons.

In 2008, Bruce Western and I began teaching a college course inside Norfolk Prison in partnership with Boston University's longstanding Prison Education Program. It was the first time in the history of our Commonwealth that incarcerated students and Harvard students learned together inside a prison classroom and each student received academic credit. These classes continued for five years at Norfolk and Framingham Prisons until funding ran out.

In 2018, Harvard hosted a three-day conference of scholars, activists, and educators to discuss the university's future of prison education. Now, as we turn our attention to education justice, why prison classrooms matter, we have much to offer and much to learn.

Before I introduce our inspiring panelists whose life work embodies education justice, I would like to remind our audience that there are so many people who have come before us whose lives are testament to the transformative power of prison education. And there are people across our nation who are coming together right now because they realize how vital it is that colleges and universities engage in education beyond their gates.

I would like to credit the College Behind Bars series for generating this specific conversation, and to thank our partners, Lynn Novick, Priscilla Burns Thompson, Salimah El-Amin, Bella Feinstein, and Sarah Botstein, as well as Abbie Cohen for making this event possible. People can view the four-part documentary film series on PBS through December 31, 2020, and view the extended trailer for the series, which is bringing people to tears of joy in only six minutes, on the Radcliffe web page.

I would also like to acknowledge all the members of the Radcliffe Institute Leadership Society and all our annual donors who are watching this afternoon. Your generosity keeps Radcliffe programming free and open to the public, and we thank you.

We will soon hear from our esteemed panelists, Lynette Nicole Tannis with the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Lynette will also be our moderator. Dyjuan Tatro with the Bard Prison Initiative, Zelda Roland with the Prison Education Initiative at Yale, Max Kenner with the Bard Prison Initiative, and Craig Steven Wilder with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They will briefly introduce themselves.

Dr. Tannis will then moderate a conversation among the panelists, and then she will open it up to share questions from the audience with our speakers. We encourage those watching to use the Q&A feature on Zoom to submit your questions at any time during the program, and the speakers will address as many as they can. Since we anticipate a lot of questions, we ask that you keep them short. This will increase the number of questions we can answer.

Finally, please note that we are holding a second program, Education Justice: Centering Student Voices, on November 10, 2020. Registration is open, and we encourage you to join us. It is now my honor to pass the virtual floor to Lynette Tannis.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. Thank you so much, Kaia. And thank you panelists, and for all those of you who are logging in, ready for today. So I began my education career 25 years ago. My family had migrated from Trinidad and Tobago, and you know, they were excited for coming to the land of opportunity.

However, they realized very quickly that the opportunities really vary, depending on what a person looked like or where a person lived. And so they actually sent my siblings and me to private school where wealthy white families sent their children with the belief that we would at least be exposed to a higher quality education than my neighborhood peers.

So growing up and having conversations with my neighborhood friends who on the outside, you know, this race thing that we do here, based on our skin color who looked very much like me, I realized that I was being exposed to education at least a full grade level above. And for me, that was an injustice, which is why I sought out to be an educator and ensure that every child received a high-quality education, no matter what they look like or where they live.

When I in 2009 was accepted to Harvard to work on my doctorate, for one of our classes we were asked to research any topic, as long as it deals with education. And I recalled actually Delaney Hall in North New Jersey and Union County Jail in Elizabeth, New Jersey. I was involved with prison women's ministries with two churches. And I just remember going and praying with the women, singing with them you know, encouraging them to make better choices.

And in that moment I asked the question, like, wait a minute. What are we doing for youth who are incarcerated? What does their education look like? And I couldn't believe I had been on this private school platform because I was a product of private school. I'd been on this traditional public school platform because I was a teacher and leader in those spaces, and a charter school platform because of a charter school administrative position I had, and never thought about the children we don't see.

As you all will see in the docuseries, there are some of those featured who entered adult facilities at the age of 16. They were children. As Dyjuan I think phrased it best in his question of, where

would I be if I were able to go to Harvard? I think that children have a right to be loved, to be respected, to be exposed to high expectations and high-quality education programming, to really actually be supported to self-actualize. And I think when we rob our communities and our children of that right, that that is also an injustice.

I also believe that incarcerated children and incarcerated adults, there has to be a plan, a purpose, a design for true transformation. Otherwise, why incarcerate? That again is an injustice. Frederick Douglass I think said it best in his "Blessings of Liberty and Education" address in Manassas, Virginia, in 1894. He said, "A man without education is as a poor prisoner without hope. Education means emancipation."

And I think back to one of the participants who actually indicated that when that individual is learning that the bars actually dissipate, and they become free. And that is really the hope I would imagine for all of us in our society. Today, I'm very excited to pass the virtual floor onto Dyjuan as we hear from him and the other panelists and engage with you all. Thank you.

DYJUAN TATRO:

- Thank you so much, Lynette, for the introduction. And good afternoon, everyone. My name is Dyjuan Tatro. I am the Government Affairs Officer at the Bard Prison Initiative and also an alumnus of the program. And so I was released from prison in 2017. Completed my degree, math major, at Bard College in 2018. I've been working in politics in various ways ever since.

In my role at BPI, my real job and my real priority is to bring legislators to prioritize people over prisons. And so a lot of my work is getting New York City representatives at the Senate, at the Assembly, at the city council level to acknowledge their relationship to their constituents in prison, right? They represent those individuals also, and that type of grounding and advocacy in different ways has led to the first time ever funding on the reentry side of what we do with BPI from the New York City Council, right?

In acknowledgment too that there are people incarcerated in New York State. Over 50% of them come from New York City. They're going to return to New York City. And that the work that we do at BPI has a value on the ground back in those communities. So supporting our students as they leave prison is really, really powerful politically, because for us at BPI, the culmination of our work is not in granting a degree, right? The real culmination is what our students go back to the communities and do with those degrees.

And overwhelmingly, they are on the ground in positions of leadership, changing the forces and factors that send people to prison in the first place. So having New York City, having New York State support people in their reentry, support college in prison makes total sense, you know? We should be funding this from an economic perspective, because it saves money overall.

But again, we can get lost in the economics and lose sight of the people and the value of this beyond economics. And so you know, my real emphasis, again, is on people over prisons. And then another aspect of my work is working out some legislative stuff. And so what that looks like, for example, I've been working on a bill this past year, passed the assembly back in June, trying to put it through the Senate maybe in a special session in the next month or so that would essentially give incarcerated people merit time in New York. Like, they can get out of prison earlier for earning a college degree, right?

As it now stands, if you're incarcerated in New York State for a nonviolent crime, you can get out of prison early for doing 400 hours on a work crew, for spending six months in a vocational program, for earning a GED, but not for earning a college degree, right? That is wrong.

And so again, as a formerly incarcerated person with proximity to the issues, it's really, really my priority to foreground people, and how this system impacts people, and how we can get people out of the system in ways that benefit communities. And so with that said, and I'm sure we can get down into the details and have a robust conversation around my work and BPI's work, I'm going to pass this to Zelda over at Yale. Hi, Zelda. You're amazing.

ZELDA ROLAND:

- Hi, Dyjuan. Thank you. You're amazing. Yeah, thank you so much for inviting me to participate on this panel. And thank you especially to Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein for putting the docuseries *College Behind Bars* together that has really ignited so many important conversations in its wake.

So my name is Zelda Roland, and just as a short introduction, I'm the Founding Director of the Yale Prison Education Initiative at Dwight Hall. I'm also an alum of Yale College and its Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

And I got involved in this work during graduate school, finishing my PhD when I started volunteering with a prison education program at Wesleyan, working with the incarcerated students there at the Center for Prison Education in a high maximum security adult prison called the Cheshire Correctional Institution. Working with those students changed the way I thought about my own education, about who universities like Harvard and Yale imagine to be students or leaders or citizens.

And it was those students in that program, students who had been disproportionately impacted by the racism of institutions like these elite higher education institutions, as well as the institution of mass incarceration, who disproportionately came from black and brown communities and disenfranchised and overpoliced neighborhoods that surround some of our campuses. Those students who were truly the best students I had come to work with in my time teaching and who encouraged me and colleagues at Yale to find a way to start a program here.

So taking great inspiration from programs like BPI and Wesleyan CPE, YPEI was founded officially in 2016 as a program of Dwight Hall, Yale Center for Public Service and Social Justice. And it expands on decades of informal and unrecognized Yale participation in prison education through, for example, faculty or graduate students who volunteer or teach one-off classes and other programs like BPI, or through undergraduates who at many campuses are engaged in tutoring or volunteer services in prisons.

But what we wanted to do was create a program where we could really bring the tangible impact of a university credential and credit to students in prison. So I regret to inform you that it was not easy, and it took many years on our campus at Yale, many committees, many delays, many bureaucracies and bureaucratic hesitations.

But in 2018, we offered our first credit-bearing Yale courses at MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution where 600 people in a total incarcerated population of 1,500 asked to be considered for our admission to our first 12-person cohort, which gives you a sense of the extraordinary need and desire. And this also marked the first time any incarcerated student had ever earned a real Yale College credit on a real transcript, the first time that any student in prison could say they were part of a real Yale program.

Since then, we've run a range of classes and programming classes in everything from sociology, English, Latin, art, rigorous courses that are offered on Yale's campus that compensate instructors fairly, that maintain the rigor, expectations, academic standards, and structure as their on-campus counterparts, and that treat students with the same dignity as students on campus. But I think what Dyjuan mentioned is really important, that the credential and the degree are not the end point of an education like this. And for us, another important component is all the informal academic structures and time and space that we spend on not-for-credit programming, workshops, academic resources, support structures, study hall time, peer tutoring, office hours that you get as a conventional college student on a college campus, but a lot of times people don't consider when thinking about higher education in prison. All the other college components that go into the college experience that are just as important for students inside.

So I'm here because I'm hopeful and eager about the future of prison education at Harvard. And BPI has been offering degrees in prison for two decades now, so we're already-- Yale and Harvard, we're very behind. And I'd like to see us leverage our mutual universities to really commit to students who have been impacted by the greatest expression of racial injustice in our country, which is mass incarceration. So with that, I will turn the virtual floor over to one of my heroes, Max Kenner. Max?

MAX KENNER:

- Thanks Zelda and Kaia and everyone at Radcliffe. And what a terrifically friendly group of panelists here. Lots of usual suspects and old friends. And it's great to meet you, Lynette. My name is Max Kenner. I'm very pleased to be speaking to everyone here at Radcliffe. I am the Founder and Executive Director of the Bard Prison Initiative. We've been doing college in prison, like Zelda said, for roughly 20 years now.

We founded the organization based in a recognition of the broken priorities we exhibit in the United States, and particularly that we exhibit through our public institutions. We recognize the extraordinary investment made in punishment and a focus punishment on certain communities, urban communities of color, particularly young men of color throughout the 1990s. And a commensurate divestment in public institutions of education.

1988, New York State spent twice as much money on its state and city university systems than it did on its prison systems. And by 1998, we were spending half a billion dollars more on our prison systems. That wasn't unique or special to New York. That was a trend that happened across the United States.

And also, as a student at a terrific liberal arts college like Bard, it was very easy to recognize how much better we could do as a college, as an institution, as an institution which believed it had something real and meaningful and profound to offer its undergraduates. Then it therefore

had a responsibility to offer that kind of education to more and different kinds of people, particularly people who were traditionally and currently systemically excluded.

So we started BPI after the collapse of higher education in prison. It happened with the Clinton crime bill in 1994, taking effect in 1995. We started offering classes in 2001, and have since enrolled many hundreds of students. We have about 600 alum home. We have alum who've gone on to complete graduate degrees at places like Columbia, Yale, NYU, Cornell. They work in leadership positions in philanthropy, in government, in not-for-profits all over New York City and New York State, and in fact, the United States.

And what's important to emphasize before I pass to my friend Craig Wilder is that the education we provide in the prisons is very purposefully not special. It's not different. It's not designed for a group of people who we imagine to have some specific sets of talents, deficiencies, interests, shortcomings, or virtues. It's the same education we provide on campus.

It's the same education we would hope people we love most, we hope our own children might have. It doesn't presume a set of politics or capacities. It is the full breadth of a liberal arts education. Science, math, anthropology, studio large, computer science, natural science, you name it.

And we're very proud that our alumni go on to deploy those skills and that knowledge on behalf of their communities and their families all over, again, New York State and New York City. There's much more about our work that we can talk about. It's hard to fit it into three or four minutes.

But I'd only add that in this moment of crisis for the United States that there is so much more than our colleges and universities have to offer and can and should do. And so it's terrific to have this conversation now this perilous week, and I'm thrilled to turn this microphone over to my old friend, a terrific historian and wonderful teacher, Craig Wilder.

CRAIG STEVEN WILDER:

- Thank you, Max. I'm Craig Steven Wilder. I'm the Barton Weller Professor of History at MIT. And for the last 13 years or so, I've been a Senior Fellow at the Bard Prison Initiative, which means that I have taught classes, I have done a commencement address, I've done student counseling and thesis advising.

And it all began, in fact, with a phone call with Max, one that I wasn't expecting to get. He called me in my office one day and started telling me about the program. And I did my best to resist him. And he invited me out to BPI and actually just asked me to come do a one-day visit where I would do a guest lecture and a couple of classes, as he put it. And that's exactly what happened. I did a guest lecture and a couple of classes, and he put me back on Metro North, and I was headed back to my own life, I thought.

And then the next few weeks, some of the men from those classes actually wrote through BPI to ask me if I would come and teach a class. And that's actually how I got hooked on BPI, somewhere around 2007.

That question, would I come teach a class, was actually a significant one for me. It was a transformative question for me, because it forced me to think about why I didn't want to go in the first place. What was it about prison that made me immediately sort of not recoil, but at least reluctant to say yes?

And I think the answer was simply that in many ways, I had designed a life for myself and a life of activism for myself that simply didn't include prisons. I had been taught and taxed into forgetting about prisons. Like many people in the United States, I had actually put prisons in the back of my mind, and I had sort of moved on.

Despite the fact that many of the men who were in that class were from my old neighborhood in Brooklyn. They were from the neighborhoods that I sort of grew up in and went to school with in the South Bronx. They were from the neighborhood-- they were from neighborhoods just like mine.

I had actually managed to in some ways distance myself from that world, or at least think about it largely in academic terms. And so the request that I come back and teach a class was really a transformative request for me, because it forced me to realize that there were all these people not only who were just like me in prison, but who were simply students, and what they needed was a teacher.

And to the extent that I see myself as a teacher, I had as much an obligation to them as I do to anyone else who passes through my class and who has the privilege to sort of wander through elite college and university campuses. And to the extent that I consider myself a teacher, the space that I occupy on an elite university campus is paid for by my willingness to bring education beyond that campus, to bring what we do beyond that campus, and to make it matter. And I think as Zelda was pointing to, one of the things that actually happens that we're challenged with today is figuring out, in fact, why university and college education matters in the 21st century. Colleges and universities are now faced with a moment of crisis, and what I think will be a transformative crisis.

And one of the paths that we have, one of the ways that we have to escape that crisis or at least to begin negotiating it is to demonstrate the power of what we do in the places where it's been excluded. Bringing college, bringing university education into prisons is actually not just a possibility today. It's actually what I would describe as an academic obligation. It's one of the things that our institutions not only have to be willing to do.

We actually have to have the confidence in what we do to know that it's precisely behind bars where we should actually be teaching. It's precisely behind bars are the most transformative aspects of education occur. And now I have the honor to return the virtual stage to Lynette Nicole Tannis, who I'm also happy to be speaking with and working with again.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. Thank you so much, Craig, and thank you, panelists, for your introductions. Some of you shared sort of a challenge on your journey or sort of in this space. I would like to pose, just based on, Craig, you in your professor role, and of course, Dyjuan as a student or a learner within where you were, and Zelda and Max just as founders, executive directors, what was a

challenge that you faced that you were able to overcome? And how were you able to overcome that challenge?

I ask that just in thinking about, just even as I see questions coming in, there are some individuals who really want to start a similar program and kind of run into resistance. And of course, even what's seen in the docuseries about the, well, why are they-- again, knowing that many people think that education is a privilege and not a right.

So just in this work, in the time that you've been involved with it, what's a challenge that you encountered? And how were you able to overcome that challenge? And that's open for anyone, so whoever would like to jump in first, please do.

DYJUAN TATRO:

- So great. You know-- and I highlighted the work I do politically for BPI in my introduction. And so it's basically my job to convince policymakers why they should be making investments into people through via college in prison. And so my job here today is kind of to convince people on this call why colleges should be involved in this work.

And I think one of the things that I have had to overcome and I'm very sensitive to politically is the idea of academic type of exceptionalism. And so people like to exceptionalize me. And I always tell people that I'm not an exceptional person. I had an exceptional opportunity.

And so very recently, I had a city council member who kind of randomly met another BPI alumni, right? And he kind of said, communicated back to us that every time I meet one of your alumni, I think that you're sending me kind of your best people, right? And then I meet another one, and that guy's just as great. And I'm realizing that this-- and I know this-- but I'm realizing through experience when engaging with alumni that these are amazing individuals that have accomplished amazing things.

And so think about this from an institutional perspective. In the way that we exceptionalize people in the academic space, we exceptionalize people in this reverse way. We think of, who is deserving of an education, right? And there are certain classes of people in this country that institutions are looking to engage and cultivate, right?

And so as politically I'm always overcoming the idea that BPI students are exceptional, I think speaking to institutions like Yale, like Harvard, like other schools that we've been involved with through the National Consortium for the Liberal Arts, you need to broaden your idea of what and who is exceptional, right?

And so overcome that idea of exceptionalism, but in a reverse way where we're expanding access to higher education in prison to the people-- some of the people in this country that are most talented and best placed to receive it where they are in their lives, right? And so the constant challenge for me is pushing back against kind of those reverse tendencies in different places.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. Thank you, Dyjuan. Anyone else want to jump in for that? A challenge that you, again, just based on in your scope and the work that you do, just a challenge that you were able to overcome, and how you were able to overcome that.

MAX KENNER:

- It looks like Craig was leaning in.

[LAUGHS]

Maybe not. I would say, the goalposts have moved so much in this field, and the United States decision makers at every level and people in general recognize the scale of the disaster of what we now call mass incarceration in a way that they really didn't 15 or 20 years ago. And by and large, that's a very good thing.

But I would say over that 15 or 20 years, it was still-- it was pretty easy. It wasn't hard. It wasn't a challenge to convince a decision maker, a person, a leader in philanthropy, a leader in government, the president of an elite college or university that this issue mattered, that education in prison was important in the United States.

It was much more difficult, really unusually hard to convince an elected official, a leader in philanthropy, the president of a college or university that education and prison should be done well, that it should be done with care, that it's a place that we should go and stay and actually invest in people, and not visit in some voyeuristic or symbolic kind of way. And that's a much different challenge.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Thank you, Max. Craig or Zelda?

ZELDA ROLAND:

- I would just contribute just from kind of another-- the sort of university side of things and building a program that a university like Yale or elsewhere. I have a theory.

I'm still testing it out, but I think that at a massive bureaucracy like one of our institutions, sometimes a lot thicker than the bureaucracies of the departments of corrections, in fact, it takes more than four years-- the system is set up so that it takes more than four years to Institute any real change, specifically so that no single group of undergraduates or single undergraduate can ever make an effective push against a university. It's wild.

And so that was a challenge, I think, of many predecessors at Yale who tried to start a program out of our university, faculty who thought they could do it alone, try to start up a new initiative, or undergraduate students who wanted-- who saw a program at Bard and thought that they could try to start something here.

And what we've been able to do has been the work of so many people, so many faculty members, formerly incarcerated students who have come into our program to work on our campus. Undergraduates, graduate students. It's been a massive lobbying campaign at Yale where it's

taken a lot of patience, and as I mentioned, a lot of committees, and a lot of relationships, and a lot of bringing people in to meet students in prison, to see, as Craig was mentioning, the impact of what we're able to do, to see the promise of students inside that we could work with.

And you know, one by one, finding allies across the university from all disciplines, from all fields. Definitely not just people who study criminal justice or are interested in prisons, but you know, physicists and activists and people who are reinvigorated in the study of their own disciplines and who are really thinking about, what is the value of the liberal arts? What does college mean? How do we produce active and engaged citizens on campus? You know, it reflects on the work on campus.

So just to say-- to speak to the challenge of working within a large university structure. I would just advise, because-- I know I wasn't supposed to look at the Q&A, but I see some questions coming in. And for no one to get dejected, and this project is one of persistence and extraordinary patience.

CRAIG STEVEN WILDER:

- And if I can just add, I think-- I've had a chance over the years just in traveling through the history department and for MIT to act as a kind of informal liaison for BPI as it's expanded into other areas, with other universities outside New York. And one of the things, one of the realities that I think confront is simply that as our universities have become wealthier and more privileged, we've also come to define education in more narrow and exclusive ways.

And I think that that creates all sorts of barriers to actually recognizing the potential of these institutions to do things that actually matter in our society. It creates institutional barriers. It creates financial barriers. It creates emotional barriers at a lot of these institutions where they simply aren't prepared to take the steps that they need to.

And I actually don't believe that elite universities are leading us on these questions at all. In fact, they're actually following. They're being pulled along by conversations that are happening at the grassroots level, by social actions that are happening at the grassroots level.

I'm not turning to my institution or any other for leadership on this question. What I'm hoping is that what's happening beyond our campus walls will actually help us correct our path and see the potential of what we do as being richer and potentially more democratic than anything that we do right now.

But we're not going to get there on our own. That's actually happening all over the society in spaces that often folk at elite universities don't really pay attention to until we're forced to.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. Thank you all for that. A bunch of questions have just come in, so I'm going to lead us toward those. A couple of participants have shared that they're involved in some way in a college prison education program. There was one comment from Brown. And basically, they're providing sort of non-credit-bearing courses.

And so the question is, like, what are the most effective arguments that one can make? I mean, Max, you spoke so eloquently about ensuring that the same expectations you have for your Bard students in the classroom, in that classroom setting is the same expectation you have within BPI. How do you help make that argument that they should be entitled to receive college credits for the courses they complete?

MAX KENNER:

- Sure. It's an important question, and we're relatively short on time, and a handful of things that are important to say. You know, first of all, when I spoke a moment ago about convincing people like college presidents to get into this work, they're thrilled to visit prisons or have their students visit prisons, more precisely, in an effort to educate their students, the people they imagine as their students, right?

That's easy. Convincing that university president to imagine the person who is incarcerated, who lives in the prison as someone they should be as concerned with, whose welfare they should be as concerned about as their own students, that's what's hard, right? And that's the real push.

And the first thing I would say to that student at Brown asking that question is to resist allowing that university to use the prisons in that kind of way. If you're going to go, you need to treat people there with respect and dignity and be inclusive of the things you have to offer. And in some ways, we are a relatively conservative institution. We really believe an institution like Bard, like MIT, like Brown, like Radcliffe has something to offer. Right? And let's not forget that.

And just because we're here and we have had a role at BPI in starting programs around the country, including a couple in Connecticut with Zelda's terrific program, the program at Wesleyan was the first program off campus we were involved with. And it's just worth saying, Massachusetts is the capital of higher education in the United States, and it's accomplished all kinds of things and builds a really extraordinary array of institutions.

We have a long way to go in college in prison in the United States, but Massachusetts has a lot longer way to go in this space. And I'm terrifically proud we've had a hand in helping found programs at Emerson, and I know our colleague, [? Misha ?] [? Gelman, ?] is on this call, and also at Boston College where they do terrific work.

But Massachusetts, it doesn't-- I mean, we can make it make sense if we have to. But from a great distance, it makes very little sense just how poor Massachusetts is in this space and how much room there is to do better.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Thank you, Max. So this is just now for anyone who would like to answer this question. You know, people really want to begin looking at this. And although there may be a list of, I don't know, 1,000 things to do, what might be the key sort of tasks that one should even begin to look into or try in order to have a similar program and partnership between their college and a prison?

ZELDA ROLAND:

- Well, I guess I would-- I don't think this is directly answering your question, but there's something that we think about a lot, and I mentioned this in my introduction. But for anyone who's a college student or for anyone who went to college, when you think about your time in college, there's only a specific portion of that time that is spent in what we would call contact hours, right? In a class with a professor.

And there's a lot of places where you might imagine or a lot of people who want to get involved in college in prison and who maybe go teach a volunteer or not-for-credit class in a prison, or who do a one-off class somewhere. And to me, when I think about the college experience and all of that time that's not in class where students are on a college campus-- they're accessing library resources, they're getting tutoring, they're having office hours, they're getting peer support, they have extracurricular, they have all these groups-- that's really valuable, important social time, time where people build up their ideas of who they are and who they think they are and who they can be.

And at least on campus at Yale, we have this really crazy moment at the beginning of each semester called shopping period where you choose your classes. And it's such high drama where you're thinking about, what am I going to take this year, and what do my parents want me to take, and what negotiation can I figure out? Are they going to be disappointed in me if I don't do econ in college? And this kind of identity formation when you're selecting classes, right? And what's so amazing if you watch the documentary about Bard is the array of majors, but also the array of things that people do. It's not just like, here we are. We are teaching sociology this semester, and so that is what you're taking.

And obviously, when you're starting a program, you've got to start small, but with the idea of-- you've got to see what's going to work in the specific facility that you're working in, because each one is different. And maybe you have problems. This is a challenged classroom space or time, or you can't-- you're negotiating a lot of different factors between the prison and the university campus.

But to really always be thinking about, how can we match what we're doing on campus, right? What is it that a student-- when a student has this problem, where are they going to seek help on campus? And then it's our job as administrators of these programs to try to bring those same resources to students inside.

And that's the same for we have an Office of Career Services where when students are graduating, they sit down and they think about career paths or internships or mentorship, development. They're writing their resumes. And being able to extend those same services is a really important component to me of building a program, right? To have the advantage of having a college campus is that you also can extend the resources of those college campuses to students you're working with inside.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. Thank you. All right. So this next question is something that's also been raised just in terms of COVID-19. And how has COVID-19 impacted either the actual education programs and/or the funding for the programs? So if any of you can speak to that, that would be great.

MAX KENNER:

- I'll just take that quickly, because it might be simplest. You know, there have been two or three different ways that programs in our space have responded to COVID, and we are somewhat unusual at BPI.

The first is-- and it's a very reasonable one, even though it's horrible, is to say, this is too dangerous and too much work with too little reward, and we're going to pause and come back when this is over. And we should not belittle or question that decision. That is a rational and hard and terrible decision, but the situation is terrible.

The other and the most common-- and it's common among some practitioners. It's much more common among people who have opinions about practitioners or how practitioners should do their job-- is that this crisis should be common opportunity to create a more wired sort of technological set of classrooms in the prisons and have more conversations like this, an idea that on the face of it has some logic to it.

For us at BPI, that is terrifying. And the reason why is especially in New York, we have an unusual amount of college opportunity in the prisons. We also have some of the best family and child and spousal visitation rights in the country, as much room for improvement as we have. But we fear that that technology will inevitably, when decision makers are no longer looking, be used as a Trojan horse, purposefully or not, to diminish that capacity, that opportunity for real genuine human touch, human relationships in the prisons, which is what the prisons are designed to starve. And we can't risk diminishing that.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. Thank you, Max. This next question actually is for you, Dyjuan. And just in thinking about your journey through the program and how you serve now as an advocate, what words of wisdom do you have for those who actually still might be fighting this and don't think that this is even a good idea to have? Why bother?

DYJUAN TATRO:

- You know, I think, especially at this time in this country where we're seeing nationwide protests against police brutality, against systemic racism, against very, very deep inequities, at a time when we are seeing public budgets cut in a way that harms our most marginalized communities, and funds, corrections systems, and police systems, when we live in a country where we have colleges and universities that operate tax-free on the public dime, but do not make commitments to benefit society in the same way that they benefit from society in kind, I think that we really, really have to sit down-- and we all should be sitting down.

If you're not doing it already in response to what has happened over the past few months, maybe you do it in response to this conversation and really, really think about some of these issues, especially around college and prison, as issues of race and inequity, right? And white supremacy and systemic oppression.

As I said before, I'm not an exceptional person. I had an exceptional opportunity, right? If you look at-- it's too easy to think of students at Yale, at Harvard as exceptional, right? I'd argue, no, no. They have exceptional resources, right? They are exceptionally privileged. They have had exceptional opportunities, that they are not exceptional people.

So I think that we need to nurture some type of belief in human dignity and recognize the ways in which some people in this country benefit from the systems and institutions that we have and other people don't, and create ways to democratize, as Max would say, higher education, right? And especially, especially when we're speaking about liberal institutions, right? We have these liberal institutions in this country who are doing nothing to make society more equitable and inclusive, right?

And college and prison is one of the ways, I think, to make things, as Max would say again, radically better, right? And so when someone does 15, 10, 15, 20 years in prison and walks out of prison into a PhD program at Cornell or at NYU or at Columbia, that is fundamentally redefining how we think about a hold set of issues and whole categories of people in this country, right?

And so there is power in this work just beyond the work itself, right? You may not believe in criminal justice reform, right? But you may believe in social equity, right? You may not believe in educating people in prison, but you may be nurturing a belief, a reaction to some of the things that happen in this country that systemic racism is a real thing, right? And how do we correct for some of that?

And so we can get into this conversation of [INAUDIBLE]. And I remember, someone asked a colleague of mine, a fellow BPI student one day, whether or not they deserved the education they were receiving. And he said, I can't answer that question. But I can tell you what I'm going to do with it. And today, he's a dean scholar at Cornell in a PhD program in literature, right? And spent 25 years in prison. And so if we are to build a better society and the type of society that we can sit around talk about, that we want to live in, I think that we have to seriously think about how we prioritize resources and access.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. Thank you, Dyjuan.

MAX KENNER:

- There's no scholar in the United States that's talked about [INAUDIBLE] this more importantly than Craig Wilder. So I-- it's embarrassing to weigh in here, but he should jump in. But I do want to just say that Du Bois talked about the educational achievements during Reconstruction as the crown of Reconstruction. And that unlike the franchise, unlike money, unlike real estate, unlike political power and the kinds of privilege and power that we are able to provide through an education are the only kinds that can't be confiscated from a person, and that can withstand the periods of reaction that follow more liberal or revolutionary periods. And I think that is one of the reasons why we believe so profoundly in the work we do in exactly the context that Dyjuan just described.

CRAIG STEVEN WILDER:

- And I'll just say, Lynette, I think the-- as a first-- my sisters and I were first generation college students. We were from the inner city, from Brooklyn, New York. We had a single mom who

raised us, who worked her way off food stamps and welfare and who worked two jobs for 20 years to give us a chance to go to college.

I have tremendous sympathy for the public outrage about the cost of college education, the increasingly distant opportunity of college for so many people in the United States, as someone who's taught at elite universities for the last quarter century. I have great sympathy for that public outrage.

College isn't more distant. College isn't less affordable because we're teaching in prisons. College is more distant, less affordable, less reachable for so many Americans because we've actually turned education into a simple economic func-- reduced it to an economic function and stripped it of its social meaning. We've stripped it of its individual meaning. We've stripped it of the role that it plays in a democratic society.

And if you want to make the argument for democratizing education for middle and working class people in the United States, one of the best places you can look to to show the power of elite education and liberal arts education are the college in prison programs. Rather than getting angry at them, actually, let's use them as a model.

There is a way to deliver high-quality education to people across the United States, and there is a way to get our institutions to open up and rethink who is eligible for an education. But we actually have to start by looking at the places where it works best. And one of the places where it works best has been behind bars over the last 20 or 30 years.

And it's not because the programs have gotten there. I think BPI is an extraordinary program, but BPI would actually be a failure without the students. It's actually the work that's being done by the men and women behind bars who take advantage of those opportunities and who actually really recognize the transformative power of education, who get people like me hooked on teaching them.

And so I actually have sympathy for the outrage, but I actually think the thing we need to recognize is that we all need to rethink the value and the purpose of education in our society to get to the place that we want to be. And college in prison is just one step toward a more democratic society.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome, Craig. Thank you. Very well said. We are actually approaching our time. I do recognize that this is a conversation that can be had, needs to be had much more than sort of within this hour time slot.

There are questions that have been posed in the Q&A section. Many just even want resources. And so my hope is that they will get in touch with you all. Your information is posted there. But if you could just, as we wrap up our time together, if you could just share, just-- there's been so much wisdom already shared today and so many insights. But just something that you would just like to leave with those who have tuned in today. We had almost 200 people on this webinar. And so if you could just think of what it is that you would just like to make in terms of just a closing remark briefly before we wrap up. And that's for everyone.

DYJUAN TATRO:

- I would say that one of the tendencies we have, especially in the criminal justice space, is to make all types of investments around people's lives to help them to the tune of \$80 billion a year. You know, enough money to make our public colleges and universities tuition-free, we spend it on prison, right?

And so we are perfectly willing to bear the financial burden in ways that we have been convinced make us safer or better, but the facts have shown us that they don't. The reality shows us that they don't.

But we are very unwilling as a society to make investments directly in people. And especially in the most marginalized, impoverished people in this country, right?

And so the takeaway I'd like to leave everyone with today is to think about that, to think about those both public and private decisions that institutions make all around people, but that they won't make to invest directly in people. There is this real, real reluctance to give somebody a handout, as you would call it, right? And we are worse off for it.

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Awesome. I know that I asked that from everyone, but I'm seeing the time, and I want-- I just so appreciate those profound words. We are going to leave it on that note.

I really want to thank you all. It's been so awesome just to connect with you all virtually. Just thank you so much, again, just for the insights that you shared. And also, audience, thank you for the questions that you posed.

Before you all sign off, again, I just want to encourage you all to participate with the sort of part 2 education justice in the series for the virtual Radcliffe programs. Again, that is happening on Tuesday, November 10, at 4:00 PM. And if you need more information, you can visit radcliffe.harvard.edu. Thank you all, and all the best to you.