

Detainees to Diplomas: Prison Education with Colette Correa-Bruzzese

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Measured per every 100,000 individuals, Missouri's incarceration rate exceeds the United States' national average, dwarfing those of the UK, Portugal, Canada, France, Belgium, and Italy combined. Law enforcement agencies and academics nationwide have pursued many solutions to bring down incarceration rates, but one stands out: prison education programs. In these programs, universities partner with correctional facilities and prisons to provide degree programs for inmates.

WashU has its own version, the Prison Education Program (PEP), and Colette Correa-Bruzzese is on the case. Colette Correa-Bruzzese is a sophomore pursuing a double major in International Affairs and Latin American studies, with a minor in Spanish.

Correa-Bruzzese admits her research is a bit outside her global studies field, but says "if you're interested in something, you could find a way to make it work, [you] go for it." Her interest in prison education bloomed during high school, where her social justice class learned about prison reform. "My mom was my teacher for that class and so this is . . . a passion of hers," she says. Her mom now works as a science teacher for an Albuquerque jail and is good friends with a Louisiana prison education graduate, whom Correa-Bruzzese describes as "family-friendsish."

Her education on social development continued after joining WashU, where she learned about social capital in College Writing: Power and Commodity Culture. Correa-Bruzzese's work is her final research paper for the course, a dive into the lived experiences of PEP participants in the context of WashU's history in St. Louis and social capital.

Using her connections to former PEP faculty members, including her college writing instructor Professor Eileen G'Sell, Correa-Bruzzese collected interview responses from faculty members and survey responses from PEP graduates. The survey contained 5 demographics questions and 4 questions about the participant's experience in the PEP program, requesting a ranking from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" with additional space for long-response submissions. The survey questions were designed to measure participants' perceptions of self-efficacy as a result of the program, confidence as a result of studying with WashU, and a space to describe additional thoughts and experiences in the program.

Correa-Bruzzese notes there were a few hurdles to her work. "My goal [was] to send [the survey] to as many participants in the program as possible. I was only able to send it to three people . . . because of the confidentiality reasons." These participants were either directly known to Professor G'Sell or were contacted by other participants; the PEP program maintains confidentiality, and any record of participant contact information is not available to the public. Faculty contact information, however, is publicly available, though only three members responded to Correa-Bruzzese's request for an interview. "That's also like, a pretty limited number of people to interview but . . . it was a limited timeframe," she says, noting the small window of time college writing students can work on their research papers.

Despite the small sample sizes, Correa-Bruzzese's work yielded surprising results. She says of her goal, "I was basically looking at how . . . by attending an elite university like WashU, you increase your social capital because you have these connections to . . . powerful people . . . [and] how being in the PEP would affect [the participants'] social capital." Her results corroborated a national trend of increasing participant social capital but also revealed a new perspective on PEP-style programs, one not found in previous Boston or New York studies with purely positive responses. From an interview with a faculty member, Correa-Bruzzese discovered that participants are thinking, "'Why is WashU showing up for me in this way now, and not at any time before in my life?'" Like, now that I'm in prison, now WashU is available to me when before, it might have been completely inaccessible."

The future of the PEP program is bright, however. The three participants in Correa-Bruzzese's study all graduated with degrees, one even continuing studies on the Danforth campus and obtaining a STEM degree, which Correa-Bruzzese notes is rare for prison education programs overall. The PEP program has expanded to facilities for both men and women and continues to celebrate new graduates.

When asked about further studies, Correa-Bruzzese said, "We could expand a survey . . . to more people and more participants in the program to get a better understanding of how it works," suspecting that the participants and faculty she interviewed were more likely to have a positive experience considering they were willing to participate in this study. She also wants to see "different perspectives within the prison, like what does the correctional officer think . . . or you could compare the difference between, like, the men's prison and the women's prison."

Another avenue of further study is WashU's relationship with St. Louis. After WashU rebranded to remove "In St. Louis" from its previous title, the university's motto, "In St. Louis, For St. Louis," is all the more relevant. Correa-Bruzzese plans to continue her PEP research in some capacity and encourages other students to look beyond the WashU bubble as well. She said, "I think while there's . . . a general understanding about the university's past within St. Louis . . . it's important for people to just be aware of the different experiences of people and [how] other people see WashU and interact with WashU." "If you're a student here," she said, "you also have a place in that. Like you are now a member of the community, and that means something."

As for Correa-Bruzzese's future, her interest in prison reform continues to grow. "I just got involved with a new organization on campus called Missouri Prison Studies," she said, "and they're looking at creating a . . . yearly publication of people, incarcerated people or formerly incarcerated people, [and] sharing their stories, especially ones that may have participated in the PEP." "I might be on the publication end of that," she laughed. "Look out for it." ■