

FCCCC President's Address
CCC Board of Trustees Meeting
Thursday March 7, 2019

Good afternoon Chairman Massey, Board of Trustees, Chancellor Salgado and Provost Potter. I am happy to be here today to speak on behalf of faculty council.

For this report, I will update this body about a project we have been working on that we hope will become a City Colleges program in the near future. Jessica Bader, Keith Sprewer and myself have been volunteering on our own time, and using our own resources, teaching at the Cook County Jail since last June. We have about 14 guys from Division 10 in our class every Monday. What I am very happy to report from the outset is that this volunteer work has been highly successful, and we would like to propose college credit in the jail for the fall semester. When we started this work we didn't know if it would be successful. We started from a notion that education is good for everybody, but we really didn't know what this experience would be like. After 9 months I am happy to report that the students enjoy and benefit from the class and we have developed great relationships with the staff, the superintendent, and the correctional officers. I have worked on a lot of great projects over the years and still I say: this is the most meaningful and important work I have ever been a part of. I have statements from our students to share with you that reaffirm the value of educational programming for incarcerated people. I will read partial quotes from these statements and will submit them in entirety with the Board Report.

We team teach this class, and it is a combination of art with Professor Bader, reading and writing with Professor Sprewer and cognitive science with me. I have here in front of me a copy of the book we are currently reading. Teaching at the jail is truly different and it isn't going to be a good fit for everyone. As you see here, we had to cut the book in thirds to be allowed in at the page maximum that is one of the many rules at the jail. We have to have special pens, and submit

a list of all of the materials for approval way ahead of time. Nevertheless, through this work and over time we have earned the trust of the students, who engage thoughtfully with the material and have spread the word with other guys on the tier so much so that we now have a waiting list!

I'd like to share a little more information about our students. For them, being allowed to live on these particular tiers is a privilege that has to be earned and can be taken away. Being able to take part in any "programming" at the jail: such as classes with DePaul University, Northwestern, Contextos, and us is a privilege that is earned by having no "incidents" during their time. It is also a privilege that can be taken away. Our classroom is overseen both by a correctional officer who is always at the door as well as cameras. Our students are respectful, well-mannered, very appreciative for reading materials, and class time with us. The jail has found an overall change in the very culture of these tiers when programming is available: "incidents" on tiers with programming are down 70%. From one of our students: "the art segment is very therapeutic for me. I found a hidden talent that was nurtured by our illustrious professors. Another plus is this class is a priority in my life so when someone approaches me in a violent manner I think about missing my classes and weigh my options and walk away because it's not worth me losing my lectures and art time. When before I responded in a negative way. So I am enthusiastic about turning this negative into a positive through education and enjoyment of the literature and arts program with Professor Bader, Professor Alexander and Professor Sprewer."

As you can see from the student's statements, they really appreciate and enjoy the opportunity to better themselves. As a point of clarification I would like to add that people inside the jail are awaiting trial and **HAVE NOT BEEN CONVICTED**. In today's Chicago Tribune, they explain that as of February 13th, of 5,736 inmates, 5,390 were pre-trial. Of those, 48% cannot afford bail or lack a residence for electronic monitoring. From one of our students: "I do

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my best to excel at opportunities like these. The instructors are amazing. They really care and teach with enthusiasm. Programs in this facility are rare but when they are available I can see the extremely positive impact that it has on detainees who participate. Learning and education is very important to one's mind, as it keeps me in a positive light. This knowledge learned only helps individuals prepare for the world upon release. Society only benefits by having people that want to better themselves." They are waiting sometimes years to finally have their day in court. We have a chance to change lives and in fact are already doing so. From a student: "We're human, that's all, not better or worse than everyone else... There is no part of rehabilitation in sitting in a cell isolated from the world. More than anything you see a group here who are human beings. Jail alone deprives us from humanity. We deserve more programs like this to bring us closer to humanity"

It's interesting and humbling to see the students every week who go so far out of their way to say "thank you" to us. We have gotten to know them, and created a culture of learning and art in a place where deprivation and hopelessness are the norm. They are deprived of freedom, sunlight, fresh air, and so much more of what makes us human. They acknowledge to us that many people outside don't care about them one bit and regard them as "filthy rats." One student said "nobody cares about us except you-all." I tell them no, you have people on the outside rooting for you! You just haven't met them! In fact, at this very moment, I am surrounded by people who support this work. College Presidents and other administrators have told me of their support, you heard community members, students, and faculty take time out of their day to show their support for this work. Chancellor Salgado and the Provost have told us that they support this work. Certainly there are Trustees on this very Board who support it too. We would like to do this work on behalf of CCC, and not simply as volunteers. We believe this

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work aligns with our mission perfectly, and we have proven we can do it, and do it very well actually. We have big bold plans for the future that I would love to share with you! There is literally only one thing that is holding us back and that is our General Counsel's Office's unwillingness to draft an MOU with the jail. We have been waiting for even a draft of an MOU since June. CCJ has provided MOU's to look at from the other Universities that are already teaching at the jail. We agreed to also sign waivers. And yet here we sit, no MOU in sight, 9 months later.

Board of Trustees, don't let this be a missed opportunity! From a student: "only a handful of us get to take advantage of these amazing opportunities. The rest are just isolated. Isolated from community with no possibilities for productive work or rehabilitation in sight. Isolation alone is not enough. We need the tools to better ourselves not just for ourselves, but for the entire community. This program and others like it give us vital tools for a better tomorrow. It sparks within us the ambition to succeed.." The City Colleges has a special opportunity to be on the right side of history as our society begins to reexamine the justice system and mass incarceration. Another student writes: "I have seen for myself how the programs offered to those who take advantage in participating transform their lives and how they interact with others. It's giving hope and aspiration to better themselves in a productive way. This doesn't only benefit us, but also the communities we live in by helping us to reconnect with society."

If anyone is going to claim "safety" as their concern about educational programming at the jail, I ask for any data whatsoever to support this concern. There isn't ANY reason to believe that teachers or other volunteers who work in jails or prisons are in any more danger than we are teaching-outside. I have been a teacher for 23 years and I know how to read a classroom's tone

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and tenor. We would not be doing this work if it was not fulfilling and enriching for ourselves as educators as well as for our students. We could choose to use our time in other places, and we would have left the jail if it was tense or uncomfortable or in any way “threatening”. We are all very busy people who could certainly volunteer elsewhere.

This work is too meaningful and important to ignore the actual experience of your faculty. I ask for the same respect that you may show to one lone person who has an unfounded position. Trust and respect your faculty who have ACTUAL experience in this setting and furthermore: trust and respect our community partners at the Sheriff’s office, who hold our well-being in the utmost importance and continue to enforce many rules that contribute to the safety of volunteers and also detainees.

And so, I would like to thank you. In the words of one of our students: “God bless you all who care to make the difference in changing our lives for the better.”

This concludes my report. Thank you very much for your time today.

Student Artwork

Jennifer Alexander

March 7, 2019











