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## HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON PROGRAMS NEED MORE FACULTY OF COLOR AND FACULTY WHO ARE LEGAL SYSTEM IMPACTED

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## **Higher Education in Prison Programs need more Faculty of Color and Faculty who are Legal System Impacted**

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Program administrators must be intentional when hiring faculty and selecting electives in order to hire faculty the students will be able to relate to, perceive as role models, and who will be able to provide students in higher education in prison (HEP) programs with knowledge about racial issues in our society often from personal experience. Having White allies teach in HEP programs is significant, but the impact of seeing Black faculty who possess post-secondary degrees and prominent positions in the community (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017) is especially imperative and can be inspiring for this student population. As a former Academic Coordinator for a HEP program where the majority of the student body is comprised of people of color, I believe faculty of color, as well as faculty who are directly impacted by the legal system, need to be recruited on a larger scale.

Following the introduction of de facto segregation in the 1960s, the inclusion of Teachers of Color has been disproportionate in the P-20 education system. Research shows that Students of Color perform better academically when they have teachers who look like them (Miller, 2006; Gershenson et al., 2021). Additionally, Black children who have at least one Black teacher in elementary school are more likely to aspire to go to college (Gershenson et al., 2021). It is therefore appropriate to infer that minority students enrolled in higher education in prison (HEP) programs would experience similar academic benefits if they had more Faculty of Color. However, Teachers of Color are underrepresented. For example, in New York city public schools, 79% of public-school teachers are White, while close to 80% of students in NYC public schools are Black or Hispanic (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). Faculty of Color are just as rare in higher education, representing just 20% in 2013 (Turner & Grauerholz,

2017), with Black representing 6% of the faculty population in 2015 (Moore et al., 2020). Therefore, this paper focuses on making an argument that HEP programs need more Faculty of Color and faculty who are legal system impacted.

I believe faculty who have lived experience with the carceral system should teach in HEP programs. With their understanding of the prison culture, they would be able to use culturally relevant pedagogy to reach the students on a different level. As a formerly incarcerated person, I can attest that my decision to go back inside carceral spaces to administer a HEP program has been a source of inspiration for the students. I have now also taught courses inside prisons. Oftentimes, during class discussions, the students ask me questions about re-entry, navigating parole, or what life is like living as a formerly incarcerated person who works at a university and is pursuing a doctoral degree. I do not want the students to think I am an exception. There are countless people who are impacted by the legal system across the nation who are doing marvelous work, and many of them inside carceral spaces. As students who are incarcerated are more proximate to these directly impacted people in a classroom setting, it gives the students hope that they too can succeed. My experiences in the legal system, in addition to the literature, inform this paper.

### **Effect of Same Race Teacher on Students**

The value of same-race providers and service recipients has been extensively researched in the fields of clinical therapy and education (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2021; Hoag, 2021; Milner, 2006; Sue et al., 1991). Studies in clinical therapy show that “Black therapists are able to provide more culturally congruent treatment given their nuanced understanding of Black communities” (Hoag, 2021, p.

28). In education, Students of Color who have same-race teachers also fare better academically, have better attendance, and are held to higher expectations than when they are taught by White teachers (Milner, 2006; Gershenson et al., 2021). There are various factors at play that contribute to these findings. The first explanation for the effectiveness of Teachers of Color who teach minoritized students is that those teachers use culturally relevant pedagogy (Milner, 2006; Gershenson et al., 2021). This ranges from using material that is culturally relevant to the students in their classrooms (Hoag, 2021), correctly interpreting student behavior, and using cultural references to comprehend how students perceive authority figures (Gershenson et al., 2021). In discussing culturally relevant pedagogy, Milner (2006) describes that:

minority educators bring diverse family histories, value orientations, and experiences to students in the classroom, attributes often not found in textbooks or viewpoints often omitted [...] but these teachers' text pages are inundated with life experiences and histories of racism, sexism, and oppression, along with those of strength, perseverance, and success. (p. 92)

Faculty of Color would thus be able to bring in different perspectives to the students enrolled in HEP programs. Discussions with Faculty of Color around navigating racism in a field where they are underrepresented could provide guidelines and tips that these students can use.

A second benefit of same-race teachers is that they serve as role models to students. Students of Color in underserved communities may not have been exposed to educated People of Color, therefore having teachers who look like them can help erase the thoughts that higher education is not for them (Gershenson et al., 2021) and provide the students a glimpse of their possible selves. As many incarcerated students have shared that they were told at a young age that school was not for them, maybe having

Faculty of Color share their educational journey with them might help the incarcerated students undo this false narrative. Seeing Faculty of Color who look like students and share similar experiences can help students in HEP re-imagine what is possible for themselves (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017).

A third element at play between students and teachers of the same race is what Hoag (2021) refers to as “embodied empathy” or the non-verbal recognition of shared experiences between people of the same race (p. 1498). Although there are differences within one’s race, because of the race hierarchy in this country, a bond is created between people who share the same racial background due to their common lived experiences (Hoag, 2021). This cultural connection is what the research calls the “hidden curriculum” because the relatability between Teachers of Color and their minority students is not something that can be planned for, but rather something that happens as a result of their common experiences (Milner, 2006). Thus, program administrators must be intentional in the hiring of Faculty of Color. Race alone should not be the sole determinant as if to fill a quota, but rather making sure that the same-race faculty also has had common lived experiences that the students will be able to relate to and be inspired by. Students will more readily relate to Faculty of Color who grew up in similar neighborhoods, with comparable means, and who have faced parallel challenges.

All the research cited previously comes from studies done in various traditional school settings, and although research needs to be conducted to confirm these phenomena in carceral settings, there is no reason to believe the same principles do not apply to students who are incarcerated and attend college-in-prison programs. Students

who were funneled through the school-to-prison-pipeline have a special need to build trusting relationships with professors, and having teachers who look like them helps with trust building (Hoag, 2021). Many students have shared with me that they never thought they could make it through college because they never had anyone encouraging them to do well in school, they were pushed into special education, or they simply did not think higher education was something people from their communities achieved. Therefore, recruiting faculty who have faced similar challenges or who come from similar neighborhoods will help inspire and provide a vision of what is possible to the incarcerated students.

### **Why It Matters**

Because faculty representation on traditional college and university campuses is overwhelmingly white (Moore et al., 2020; Turner & Grauerholz, 2021), since there is no demographic data for HEP programs, it is reasonable to infer that faculty in HEP programs are also predominantly white. For this reason, critics may argue that since incarcerated students have been successful thus far, why would there need to be a change in representation? As discussed earlier, minoritized teachers who share the same race as their students can be more influential because they might relate to students' needs and situations (Milner, 2006). This helps minoritized teachers connect with Students of Color who "often bring a set of situations that have been grounded in racism, inequity, and misunderstanding [...] through their daily interactions but also through institutional and structural circumstances" (Milner, 2006, p. 93).

Research shows that students from marginalized communities doubt the social institutions that have oppressed them, increasing the likelihood that they feel rejected

and out of place on predominantly white college campuses (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). Additionally, Students of Color who feel marginalized and underrepresented in the curriculum and on college campuses are more likely to experience impostor syndrome and discriminations (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). Other body of research show that minoritized students experience “stereotype threat [which] can occur in situations where students perceive that a stereotype regarding their ability will come into play” (Dee, 2004, p. 52). For these reasons, institutions of learning must be intentional in creating environments that are conducive to a sense of belonging for Students of Color (Harper & Griffin, 2010; Johnson et al., 2019; Mendoza et al., 2002), including those who operate in carceral settings. Although I have not come across research conducted specifically to assess the influence of formerly incarcerated faculty on incarcerated students, because of the conclusions drawn from same-race teacher-student research, it is fair to infer that a sense of relatability and hope is also engendered in students who are taught by professors who have been impacted by the legal system.

### **The Future of Higher Education in Prison**

Higher education prison programs are an opportunity for people who are incarcerated to have access to higher education. The majority of the students enrolled in HEP programs are Black and Brown people who come from underserved communities with poor educational outcomes (Sander & Knox, 2021). Because Pell Grants have been reinstated for students in carceral settings, an increasing amount of people who are incarcerated will have the opportunity to enroll in college programs. It is therefore important to make provisions to ensure students succeed in HEP programs.

An element identified by HEP providers is the need for students to relate to the faculty and program administrators (Arroyo et al., 2019). In their article, Arroyo et al. (2019) observe that “it can be more comfortable for incarcerated students to share the struggles or challenges they are facing with someone who has sat in their seats and already knows what life is like from their vantage point” (p. 116). The authors add that formerly incarcerated providers also serve as role models who can provide advice on re-entry because they have navigated the process themselves.

### **Providing Support for Underrepresented Faculty**

In conversation with some faculty who teach on college and university campuses, I discovered that the responsibility of teaching in a HEP program is often an extra duty on top of their regular teaching load. This could potentially be a reason why Faculty of Color, who tend to be more junior faculty (Robinson et al., 2022), do not sign up to teach in carceral spaces. In my experience as an Academic Coordinator, I observed many faculty members who taught in the college prison programs were retired professors or adjunct instructors. Institutions of higher education could support faculty by considering teaching in the HEP program as part of the teaching load, thus removing the extra burden, and making it more appealing for Faculty of Color to sign up to teach.

Going back inside a jail or prison to teach as a formerly incarcerated person may cause some anxiety. Additionally, seeing bars, guards, and the smells and sights can be triggering. There may be barriers imposed by the departments of corrections that prevent legal system impacted faculty from even being granted access to teach inside correctional facilities. Therefore, it is imperative for program administrators to form good relationships with the heads of the departments of corrections, but also with the



administration and the staff at the facility level. Building such relationships ensures buy-in from the departments, that all rules and protocols pertaining to entry of formerly incarcerated faculty are followed and lets the directly impacted faculty members know that they are being supported. If they are treated poorly because of their legal system involvement, these faculty members need to know they will not be alone.

### **Conclusion**

As established at the beginning of this paper, the majority of students enrolled in HEP programs come from low socio-economic Black and Brown communities. In my experience, these students were told by teachers, most who were not of the same race as them, that they would never amount to anything. These students are even more in need of faculty who look like them and share common experiences to serve as role models, and with whom they can relate. Hiring more Faculty of Color as well as faculty who have been directly impacted by the legal system will greatly benefit students in college-in-prison programs as it will give them hope and allow them to see themselves in their professors. Race is a very complex matter. I refrained from using the term “diversity” because it can carry the connotation of race quota as opposed to an intentionality on who is being hired. Further research needs to be conducted to pinpoint which attributes aside from race, do Faculty of Color need to possess to have the desired impact on minoritized students, how to incentivize teaching in carceral settings, and which material provides the most cultural relevance to students.

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