Today talk about the larger context of prison higher education efforts, both historically and what’s happening around the country today. On Tuesday more about EJP in particular. Still, today I want to start by showing some images of our project, because I find that one of the most difficult things about describing our work is that people have a hard time imagining it. What does college in a prison look like? So, although the focus of today’s talk is not our work at the prison, I want to show it to you to naturalize the notion of prison higher education. It looks a lot like higher education anywhere.

I’m going to try to make you fans and supporters of such programs, on the grounds that they have strong, proven benefits for incarcerated people, their families and communities, and society as a whole.

Might think about prison higher ed in relation to the American Dream, which holds that people’s access to education and other social goods should not be limited by their social status.
This is tricky proposition when it comes to the incarcerated because, some argue, people who have broken the law, especially those have broken criminal laws, have thereby violated the American social contract and forfeited their right to participate fully in society. For instance, formerly incarcerated people face various restrictions on voting across the country. The justification for such exclusion is neither deterrence nor incapacitation, but just desserts or retribution. In other words, disallowing on-site postsecondary prison programs, whether vocational or academic, which is the case in Vermont and South Dakota, or not allowing incarcerated students to earn credit for any postsecondary courses taken in prison, as is the case in Florida and Washington, is a gesture designed not to discourage others from committing crimes or to incapacitate people who are already convicted of crimes, but to register society’s disapprobation of crime and the incarcerated. Incarcerated people, according to this view, represent an exception, a justifiable exception, to the spirit of inclusivity and acceptance that the American Dream represents.

I acknowledge that the American Dream challenges us. Indeed, we can think of it as not so much a dream, as a mandate. The American Mandate is to query worn notions of who is worthy of full social inclusion; it is to examine critically the caste categories that we employ when allocating social goods. And it is a mandate to conduct such queries with a bias towards inclusivity, faith, and hope in people’s ability to rise to what James Truslow Adams, who is credited with coining the
phrase “American Dream,” called “their fullest stature.” A bias toward faith in all people’s ability to rise to their fullest stature. That’s certainly what we’ve seen in our work at Danville Correctional Center with the Education Justice Project, and early prison reformers in this country would not be surprised.

Early American penal reformers believed strongly that if states could produce just the right conditions of confinement, prisons could counteract the environmental conditions that, as they saw it, had led men and women to lives of crime in the first place. If a bad environment produced a person who did bad things, the right environment could counteract those early influences and restore her to her natural, good self. Or, in the words of David Rothman, one of the most important scholars of this early penitentiaries, “just as the criminal’s environment had led him into crime, the institutional environment would lead him out of it.” The competition between the advocates of the Auburn and Pennsylvania models respectively in the early 19th century is well known. But what both models shared was a belief in the necessity of separating prisoners from one another and subjecting them to lives of strict discipline in order to reform them. The early penitentiary movement was, at its core, a fundamentally optimistic one. Prisons, arranged and organized the right way, permitted rehabilitation.

Even before the turn of the 20th century, the public mood had shifted from one of rehabilitating prisoners to simply confining them, in part because rising numbers of
incarcerated men and women made it difficult to enforce conditions of isolation. (And we saw rising numbers because of the use of incarceration to control formerly enslaved African Americans as well as disproportionate incarceration of immigrants.) However, belief in possibility of reform never disappeared completely, not even during the dark days of the past few decades. The spirit of recent times is perhaps best expressed by sociologist Robert Martinson’s famous declaration that “nothing works” when it comes to rehabilitating criminals, in his 1974 article of the same name, and the Supreme Court’s assertion in 1989 that “the efforts of the criminal justice system to achieve rehabilitation of offenders had failed.” (Mistretta v. United States)

Despite the shift in public mood towards prisons and their functions, some groups continued to advocate for reform and to push for the implementation of prison programs that held promise to realize the potential of rehabilitation. Those pushing for postsecondary education programs in prison were among them. The earliest postsecondary education programs consisted of assorted university classes being offered at select prisons in the late 19th century. The number of programs grew slowly over the first decades of the 20th century, and Illinois is often credited with establishing the first degree-granting program in an American prison, offered through Eastern Illinois University in the 1950s.
I hope we can accept as given the good of higher education at its best, its capacity to transform individuals who participate in it as teachers or students, and its progressive potential. So that when I tell you that by 1975, 52 prisons hosted degree-granting college programs (this includes vocational and academic degree programs), you will all see that as a positive and encouraging trend. The creation of the Pell Grant Program in the 1970s bolstered the numbers even more and by the early 1980s postsecondary education programs served 8% of the US state prison population.

Then the boom fell. Congress disallowed the use of Pell Grants for incarcerated students in 1994. Dozens of colleges and universities cut their prison programs. By 1997, less than 2% of the state prison population participated in higher education of any sort. No more recent figures exist about the total percentage of incarcerated people who participate in higher education, but there is evidence that the number of programs has rebounded since then, so that today most states offer some form of PSCE. However, as of 2005, only 11% of state prisoners who were eligible for postsecondary courses (i.e., who have a GED or high school diploma) were enrolled in PSCE; and 3% of such programs offered upper-division or graduate courses.

EJP sponsored a symposium and compiled a directory of independent PSCE programs. While PSCE in some form is offered in 46 states, we estimate that there
are between 25 and 35 programs like ours. In states as diverse as Alabama, California, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Jersey and Indiana.

Why does this matter, especially given earlier findings that nothing works when it comes to rehabilitation? Well, subsequent research, including Martinson’s own, suggests that earlier findings were rash, rooted perhaps as much or more on dominant prejudices as rigorous research. There are at least 3 good and important bases upon which to base support of higher ed in prison. I want to discuss each in turn and then suggest a fourth.

First, incarcerated men and women who participate in PSCE increase their earning potential. The job market poses distinct challenge for former prisoners. Not only do they tend to have fewer marketable skills than the non-incarcerated, but upon release they confront employer discrimination and state laws that restrict their employability. One study finds that inmates with some postsecondary education improve their chances of finding employment by as much as 27 percent.

For the majority of incarcerated people who have minor children, the urge to improve their employability is especially strong. They rightly consider prison higher education a form of insurance on their futures and those of their children.
A second set of rationales for psce concerns the further interests of children of incarcerated parents. They need their parents to be involved in PSCE for reasons besides employability. As a group, these children are at increased risk for a range of negative outcomes. One recent review of empirical studies found them 80 percent more likely than children without incarcerated parents to live in a household that experiences economic strain; more likely to use drugs and fail school; and carrying increased chances of suffering from depression. Some of these impacts, those rooted in the demands of negotiating an unhealthy relationship with an incarcerated parent, can be mitigated through a parent’s participation in prison education programs, insofar as education changes parents’ thinking patterns and, as a result, their problematic behaviors and habits. Indeed, one researcher has argued that prison systems that neglect to provide such education programs are guilty of contributing through “acts of omission” to the increased vulnerability of children of incarcerated parents.

Children of incarcerated parents do best when there is healthy and regular contact between them and their parents. Education programs provide opportunity for such engagement. Our Danville students, for instance, report that they discuss course books with their children over the phone, sometimes read texts in common with family members and discuss them during visits, and ask informed and critical questions about their children’s school assignments. Inmates’ participation in postsecondary education cultivates pride among those on the outside, reduces their
shame, and inspires them to succeed in their own academic endeavors. On Tuesday, say more about our FACE program.

Third, at the societal level, PSCE reduces crime. The drop in recidivism that recent studies have attributed to participation in PSCE ranges from 12.4 percent to almost 80 percent. Recidivism rates of men and women who participate in academic college programs in prison are lower than those who do not participate in education at all, and are also lower than those of inmates who participate in other types of correctional education.

The fourth reason to care about the availability of PSCE takes us back to our discussion of the American Dream. There is a cost associated with not providing access to PSCE to all in our country who wish it. That is the price a people pays whenever they do not live up to their expressed ideals. Americans pride ourselves on inhabiting a land of ever-expanding opportunities. As President Johnson said when he signed the Higher Education Act of 1965, “it is the obligation of your Nation to provide and permit and assist every child born in these borders to receive all the education that he can take.” With one out of every one hundred American adults in prison (Pew 2010)—and more than 3 out of every 100 black men—a good faith effort to meaningfully increase access requires taking higher education to our country’s prisons.
Martin Luther King Jr, in letter from Birmingham Jail explained that the civil rights struggle drew strength from the promise of the American dream. He referred to “those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers” and provided a basis upon which Black Americans could make a claim for inclusion.

Perhaps some of us take those wells to be deeper than the founding fathers intended. That’s all right. After all, the Constitution is a living and breathing document, and few things would better express its life, take care of the security needs of our nation, speak to the hopefulness of the American spirit, and allow us the privilege of knowing that we are being true to what many take to be the signature trait of the United States, our commitment to equal opportunity, than removing the stigma of caste from incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. The provision of higher education to those in prison is one way of doing that.