The whiteboard at the back of the room details the class schedule for the week, which includes an Ethnicity, Race & Migration course and a Physics course. Previous offerings included English classes such as "Readings in American Literature," a Philosophy course, and an introductory Latin course taught five days a week over the summer. These are rigorous Yale classes taught by esteemed professors to a select group of engaged learners. However, this was not taking place in a lecture hall in New Haven, but instead in Suffield, Connecticut, where the Yale Prison Education Initiative offers courses at the MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institute.

Founded and directed by Zelda Roland (BR ’08 & PhD ’16), the Yale Prison Education Initiative (YPEI) offered its first courses in the summer of 2018 through Yale Summer Session, marking the first time an incarcerated student was enrolled in Yale College. YPEI also offers not-for-credit courses five days a week during the fall and spring semesters; Roland hopes to offer B.A. courses for credit soon. Enrolled students go through a competitive admissions process and they are connected with Yale resources such as graduate and undergraduate peer tutors and editors. Roland explains, “Every time we put up flyers [advertising the courses] we get 600 applicants.” They only admit ten to twelve students, making YPEI statistically more selective than Yale College itself.

Similar programs aiming to bring higher education opportunities to incarcerated individuals exist at other universities—including nearby at Bard, Wesleyan, Cornell, and Princeton—and are changing the lives of their students by acknowledging their dignity and giving them an opportunity to exert more control over their lives, something often denied to people in prison. One student at MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institute writes in a testimonial posted on YPEI’s website that “For the first time in 12 years I have had a real positive change in the quality of my day to day life. Thank you so much."
for being the spark of that change, I have it because of you and it makes me work harder knowing that it’s a responsibility not a gift.” The drive and passion exhibited by these students were also evident when I spoke with Jenny Greene—the Co-Founder and Academic Director—and Jill Stockwell—the Program Director—at the Prison Teaching Initiative (PTI) at Princeton, which currently offers courses to fulfill an Associate’s degree and a small number of courses that count towards a four-year Bachelor’s degree. “They’re just the most engaged learners I’ve ever worked with... It’s a wonderful environment to teach in,” Greene told The Globalist.

From my conversations with those involved in both PTI and YPEI support from other educators and faculty has been just as positive. Roland described widespread support throughout different departments at Yale, among both faculty and students. This semester, Paul Tipton—the former Physics Department chair—is teaching a course, and Professors Frederick Ferguson, Daniel HoSang, Liana Love, and Leah Mirakhor are co-teaching a seminar through the Ethnicity, Race, & Migration department. Two graduate students are implementing a Latin curriculum, another is serving as a Teaching Fellow for Professor Tipton’s course, and one is serving as a Graduate Professional Development Fellow. Undergraduates also volunteer in prison as peer tutors and on-campus as research partners. Similarly, at Princeton, there’s strong support from the faculty, with about 100 volunteers—professors, graduate students, and post-docs—teaching each semester. PTI is “one of the largest volunteer opportunities for graduate students,” Greene tells me. Stockwell herself got involved with the program initially by teaching literature classes as a graduate student.

Despite the success of these initiatives and the incredible faculty support, YPEI finds itself clash with administration on several levels. Yale is incredible faculty support, YPEI finds itself clash with administration on several levels. Yale is currently deliberating if YPEI can offer classes for graduate students, and one is serving as a Graduate Professional Development Fellow. Undergraduates also volunteer in prison as peer tutors and on-campus as research partners. Similarly, at Princeton, there’s strong support from the faculty, with about 100 volunteers—professors, graduate students, and post-docs—teaching each semester. PTI is “one of the largest volunteer opportunities for graduate students,” Greene tells me. Stockwell herself got involved with the program initially by teaching literature classes as a graduate student.

A country failing to provide equally for its citizens will necessarily have problems with the strength of its democracy, and this troubled relationship between incarceration and democracy in the United States is the focus of some of Stockwell’s research and scholarship. She explains, “The U.S. disproportionately incarcerates people who have had fewer educational opportunities than the general population,” which further emphasizes the entanglement of these issues. In this part, it is because incarceration disproportionately impacts people of a lower socioeconomic status, and these individuals also have fewer high-quality educational opportunities pre-incarceration. With a Bachelor’s degree becoming the new high school diploma, it becomes difficult to find a steady, well-paying job. Furthermore, the policies mentioned above essentially criminalize homelessness and poverty, creating a direct pipeline to prison for economically disadvantaged communities.

Generally, access to education programs and books serves to build dignity in a system that has become brutal and that culminates dehumanization. Besides educational and rehabilitation programs in prisons, there are a number of nonprofits across the country focused on expanding access to books and other educational resources. Books Through Bars NYC is one of these groups. Completely volunteer-run, they work to match requests mailed in from people in prison to the books they have collected through donations. They then package and send books directly to individuals. On their website, they state, “We believe literacy and access to reading material is a human right.” This is a right that the U.S. government has continually taken away, curtailing funding for education programs in prisons and

Discriminatory policies have led to a one-in-three probability that a black man in the U.S. will be incarcerated in his lifetime. A country failing to provide equally for its citizens will necessarily have problems with the strength of its democracy, and this troubled relationship between incarceration and democracy in the United States is the focus of some of Stockwell’s research and scholarship. She explains, “The U.S. disproportionately incarcerates people who have had fewer educational opportunities than the general population,” which further emphasizes the entanglement of these issues. In this part, it is because incarceration disproportionately impacts people of a lower socioeconomic status, and these individuals also have fewer high-quality educational opportunities pre-incarceration. With a Bachelor’s degree becoming the new high school diploma, it becomes difficult to find a steady, well-paying job. Furthermore, the policies mentioned above essentially criminalize homelessness and poverty, creating a direct pipeline to prison for economically disadvantaged communities.

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Bard College liberal full-time in courses which extends the Bard Prison Initiative, New York State. began a pilot program called the Second Chance to make millions of dollars available to them through Ending the ban on incarcerated individuals would grants awarded to low-income undergraduate education and incarceration are addressed through programs like PTI and YPEI are shown to greatly reducing recidivism, which translates into numerous prisons and explore just alternatives to incarceration. nor has supported this idea, explaining that PTI is a program for you “don’t want to be around forever.” There is a hope that widespread access to higher education is eventually implemented throughout the country and that issues of disenfranchisement surrounding education and incarceration are addressed through policy and reform. The debate surrounding access to education and books in prison gets at a bigger question: what are prisons for? Some Republican senators refuse to give up their “tough-on-crime” ideology, but decades of statistics have shown that this is not successful. Though prisons have traditionally been viewed as being a place for punishment, there is reason to believe that the current measures go too far. It may be that taking away someone’s freedom is punishment enough. High recidivism rates across the U.S. demonstrate that these measures are not acting as a deterrent and that what is being done in prison does not go far enough in the way of rehabilitation. If the goal of the penal system is to improve the wellbeing of society, then it is clear that rehabilitation programs, including prison education initiatives, should take the place of traditional incarceration. The United States only needs to look abroad to see the efficacy of implementing higher education programs and other comprehensive rehabilitation programs in prisons. Norway’s system of incarceration has garnered global attention and has proven to be so effective that other countries are beginning to use it as a model. The key is that they focus on rehabilitation and emphasize access to education and health services. As a result, they boast one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world, with 20% of those released from prison being arrested within two years, and their incarceration rate is less than a tenth of the U.S.’s. In comparison, 68% of people who are released in the U.S. are arrested again within three years. Educational rehabilitation programs are just the beginning for the prison abolition movement in the U.S., which embraces these types of reforms and pushes further. As Rachel Kushner noted, “people who are incarcerated are not alone in seeking access to their families, to privacy, to dignity, to the right to work, to the ability to make amends for acts of harm.” The groups and activists supporting this movement believe in addressing these issues by reducing or eliminating prisons and the penal system and replacing them with systems of rehabilitation. U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez noted that we have more than enough room to close many of our prisons and explore just alternatives to incarceration. “These alternatives would work to improve society as a whole by making way for true rehabilitation. Serious prison reforms and shifts in the way we conceptualize punishment and imprisonment in this country are required before the cycle of incarceration begins to break.”

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