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### Alexandra Cavallaro TSSA Report Fall 2018

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TSSA Report  
Dr. Alexandra J. Cavallaro  
Assistant Professor of English  
Director, Center for the Study of Correctional Education

Conference Attended: The National Conference on Higher Education in Prison  
(Indianapolis, IN, November 2018)

Teaching Strategies Studied:

- Applying for grant funding to support prison education programs
  - Biggest pitfall: in the search for important funding dollars, be aware of “mission creep”—don’t move away from your mission in pursuit of money to fund your project.
- Refining mission statements and effective strategic planning
- Refining learning outcomes for prison education programs
  - A common justification for higher education in prison programs is that it reduces recidivism and saves taxpayer dollars. While this is certainly true (and is a good way to speak to the things that wardens and lawmakers care about), it sets different standards for incarcerated students. Simply put, reduced recidivism is not a learning outcome. We don’t apply this metric to our campus students, so we should not apply it to our incarcerated students. It also positions formerly incarcerated people who participated in higher education initiatives as always defined by their criminal record.
- Ethical teaching for prison education programs: how do we avoid—or mitigate—harm on our most vulnerable students?
  - Setting boundaries—it can be particularly hard in a carceral space to stop trying to fix, solve, and heal.
  - Don’t confuse your own needs with the needs of the other—don’t project your needs onto students.
  - Vulnerability often propels practitioners into the field, but we need to always investigate that so that we are always holding ourselves accountable, so we aren’t doing anything that feels too much like we are trying to heal ourselves.
  - Sometimes we feel like we are sharing the experience of incarceration with our students because it is such a singular and unique experience, and many people in our lives can’t relate to this work. It’s important to realize that we are *not* sharing the experience with our students. One of us gets to leave; the other doesn’t. Need to change our relationship to incarceration—instead of focusing on trauma, focus on healing. Bring your healed self to the work—don’t ask for the work to heal you.
- Restorative justice—an ethos, a way of being in the world that recognizes that everyone is capable of being harmed and causing harm. We have to lean into that tension. There are humans on both sides of that tensions at all times.

Impact On/How Applied to Current Teaching:

Since attending this conference, I have begun to work with the Prison Education Project, a program that offers educational opportunities to incarcerated people throughout southern California. Beginning in October 2019, I will co-teach a course called "Reading, Writing, and Rising Together" with Dr. Vanessa Ovalle Perez at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco. This course will meet once per week for seven weeks. A group of CSUSB students will participate in the class in order to learn alongside the incarcerated students and to facilitate dialogue across difference. In the class, all students will be invited to read and discuss a variety of texts written by currently and formerly incarcerated people. Students will also have the opportunity to write in response to these readings in a variety of genres, culminating in a workshop and class publication. CSUSB student interns will attend and participate in the class alongside the incarcerated students, and they will also have the opportunity to help plan discussion and workshop activities.

While I have an extensive history as a prison educator, the information that I gathered from this conference has been instrumental in helping me to pitch the idea for this class to the prison facility, to plan the content of the course, to secure funding for supplies, and to train interns in ways to effectively and ethically run a course in a prison. For example, rather than bring in interns to teach part of the class and observe the rest of the time, we view all participants as co-learners. When interns are not teaching or facilitating an activity, they will participate as learners in the class rather than sitting on the sidelines and observing. Given the inherently unequal power dynamics between incarcerated and non-incarcerated people, Dr. Ovalle Perez and I are working to make this as collaborative a learning experience as possible.