

## SHOW NOTES

### *The FEPPS Program*

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#### **Presenters**

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Ben Tucker

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We are joined in this webinar by Tanya Erzen and Ben Tucker. Dr. Erzen is an associate professor at the University of Puget Sound and the executive director of the Freedom Education Project, Puget Sound (FEPPS), as well as a Soros Justice Media fellow. Tucker is a social sciences and scholarly communication liaison librarian at the University of Puget Sound. In this session, he and Dr. Erzen talk about their knowledge of issues related to providing college library services to students in prison.

In the first half of the presentation, Dr. Erzen introduces FEPPS. Started in 2011, FEPPS is a nonprofit organization running a college program inside of the Washington Corrections Center for Women, which has enabled roughly 100 women to date to earn associates of art and science degrees. The program was introduced to the local correctional facilities at the request of a

committee of women inmates. They had learned of a similar education program available to male inmates and requested a program for themselves. The University of Puget Sound responded with FEPPS.

The program takes about 3 years for students to complete, given their other obligations. It consists of 100 courses total, ranging from introductory math and writing, to lab sciences, and guest lecturers. The faculty is volunteer based, as FEPPS is affiliated with a community college

and is an initiative of the University of Puget Sound. The funding for the organization is raised privately and through donations.

The rationale behind the Freedom Education Project Puget Sound program is based on the idea of education as a solution to the problem of mass incarceration. This program attempts to provide tools for individual success upon release, thereby lowering the recidivism rate and building stronger community connections and personal relationships. The focus of FEPPS is towards women's prisons – a sharply growing demographic that faces unique hardships. Many of these hardships are related to the women's backgrounds: 75% are domestic violence survivors, 82% are survivors of child abuse, and 10% will be sexually assaulted while incarcerated (statistics provided by the presenters).

FEPPS has found that most of their students possess these three characteristics: they are the first member of their family to go through college, this is the first time they've been incarcerated, and they are the primary caretakers for their children, even while incarcerated. The program battles the mindset of individuals who otherwise wouldn't see themselves as college students or the type of person who would earn a degree. In addition to providing academic support, FEPPS strives to establish an environment and mindset of learning. The goal of the program is to give incarcerated women the resources and the confidence they need to break the cycle their family is in and facilitate the improvement of their situation.

The University of Puget Sound is a liberal arts school, and they offer a wide range of liberal arts courses as a part of FEPPS. This is so students can experience a multitude of studies and find one they're particularly interested or talented in and pursue it if they desire.

On average, FEPPS graduates between 15 and 20 students a year. The school uses the program to create connections: students at the campus are encouraged to visit the prison and act as study partners with student inmates. This builds community between each group and breaks down preconceptions that may exist. The program doesn't end upon release or earning a degree. The alumni are encouraged to stay involved with FEPPS and become active in the community, attending and speaking at conferences and helping others through the program.

In the second half of the presentation, Ben Tucker describes the technicalities of the FEPPS program, as they bring university-level courses to students in a correctional environment. This includes questions such as who will teach classes, how will the demands of the curriculum be aligned, and most importantly, how will students be able to research the information needed to complete college classes? Without knowing what resources would be available, Tucker began reaching out to prison systems running similar programs, through the Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison, a national group with various institutions involved.

Different institutions have different resources—some have local copies of databases, some have the ability to check out books from university libraries, some have volunteers from campuses providing reference help. Examination of the resources available at the Washington Corrections Center for Women revealed a lack of Internet access and the reality that not all students have access to the library, which isn't geared towards college classes, although they do have access to inter-library loan services.

With students' access limitations in mind, a custom research framework was created specifically for FEPPS. There are now three different ways for students to get the information they need: student volunteers from the university providing in-person assistance, select electronic databases, and a Web form where students can request documents. Balancing security concerns with convenience is a challenge; in the past portable flash drives with research materials were able to be brought to the prison, but that's no longer a possibility. Inter-library loans are able to provide each student with up to 6 books or articles at a time. While not fully implemented, laptops configured to the prison's security specifications are going to be available for students to use during their coursework.

This program is fortunate in that their prison system is supportive, there's institutional backing, and enough private funding to operate it. The FEPPS program is not pursuing state funding because of the myriad restrictions that carries (certain offenders with specific convictions may not qualify, individuals with longer sentences may not qualify, etc.). Some of the students with the program are long-term, and revoking their access would be against the spirit of the university and the program. The ability to provide university-level classes and degree programs, as well as the research solutions that FEPPS have introduced, make attaining college degrees while incarcerated a realistic goal for many of these women, contributing to their future success.

### Resources

The following resources were referenced:

Could an Ex-Convict Become an Attorney? I Intended to Find Out, Betts, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/magazine/felon-attorney-crime-yale-law.html>

About Us, The Freedom Education Project Puget Sound, 2018, <http://fepps.org/about-us/>

National Projects – Bard Prison Initiative, Bard College, n.d., <https://bpi.bard.edu/the-work/consortium/>

Prison Education Partnership, Goucher College, 2019,

<https://www.goucher.edu/learn/goucher-prison-education-partnership/>

States of Incarceration: The Global Context, Prison Policy, 2014,

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/>