

Diversity Statement

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I've always found volunteer work rewarding and important. From a young age, I was involved in volunteer activities in my local community. However, in college, my perspective on volunteer work changed. I previously viewed volunteer work as an important way to help foster my local community. While this is a nice thing to do, it is limited in scope and application. As I learned how privileged my life was, I realized that helping those who are disadvantaged is much more important than providing minor conveniences to those who are already in power.

This realization has shaped much of my perspectives on education and diversity and inclusion (D&I) work. By teaching equitably, I can help students who lack the background to otherwise thrive. By focusing my volunteer work on those with disadvantaged backgrounds, my work can have the highest impact on those who need it most. Towards this goal, I volunteered for the Princeton Prison Teaching Initiative (PTI) for much of grad school.

Prison Teaching PTI teaches classes, accredited by Raritan Valley Community College (RVCC) to incarcerated students around the state. The classes are typically taught with a “pod,” a group of 3-5 teachers who work together to run the course. During this time, I taught math courses up to intermediate algebra, and helped tutor for a variety of math and statistics classes.

As a course instructor, I learned how much promise so many of these students had. Many had a weak educational background, but they had innate abilities and the will to learn – what they lacked in background they made up in grit. As long as I provided enough materials for those students to teach themselves the background knowledge, many with weaker backgrounds were able to pass the class.

However, since my first class, I was able to see that these students were not set up for success. The Department of Corrections (DOC) imposed strict requirements for the students, including rules like “students cannot bring their own writing implements.” I was expecting these types of rules. I was not expecting the informal, ad-hoc rules put forth by individual guards. Rules like “students cannot have pads of paper” and “students may not use the restroom without checking in with a guard first” and once “students cannot bring course materials back to their bunks.” Inside, the guards had all the power. Neither I nor my students could argue against these rules, even if the rules hurt the students’ education.

A formative experience I had during this time was during a lockdown. There was a fight in a nearby ward, so the students and I were stuck inside for 2 to 3 hours. This enabled us to talk informally about non-course related topics. My time working with PTI got me to see them as students rather than inmates, but this lockdown helped me understand them within the broader context of their lives. Many spent their teenage years in gangs or were incarcerated due to gang activity. All of them complained about culture outside the classroom, and expressed wishes for change, but felt individually incapable of instigating this change. One mused about why prison was punitive rather than rehabilitative, and how little beyond the potential for schooling provided them ways to escape the cycle.

This experience helped me change my views again. By teaching them, I stopped viewing the students as inmates, and instead viewed them as “my students.” But I then realized that I must see them in the broader context of their lives. They are students, but not everybody will see them as such. People don’t know that one student is particularly good at factoring in their head, or another is great at explaining concepts to the struggling students. Instead, many will simply view them as felons. I’m not sure how to solve this issue, it’s a much more complex one than simply finding out how to teach them. I’m doing what I can by telling the student’s stories and writing them letters of recommendation, but this is an area I want to dedicate more time to learning about and helping fix in the future.

Many of the students had interest in programming and computer science. Despite being incarcerated for up to ten years, they understood that the world was changing and knowledge of computers would give them

a leg up. One went so far as to read an intro to java book I printed out for him. During the last two years of my PhD I turned my attention towards developing and teaching a class that could serve as an introduction to programming for the students.

These classes require two approvals, one from the DOC and one from RVCC. Namely, we had to balance the tension of DOC limitations on how the students can access their computers with the requirements RVCC put towards ensuring students who passed the class would have the requisite knowledge to take follow-up classes. Fortunately, we were able to find something that worked for all parties. Because students may not have access to computers without us in the room, the class is organized as a flipped classroom. Namely, students do readings and simple pen-and-paper exercises for homework, and come to class for problem solving and live coding. However, even with this approach, we didn't feel the students would have enough time to internalize the material. Additionally, many students had been incarcerated for a number of years, so operating computers may be quite foreign to them. To handle this, we decided we would make the course two semesters long.

This semester a computer literacy course is being taught as a trial run at Garden State. Our syllabus for Computer Concepts and Programming has been approved and should be taught at Garden State in Fall of 2022.

Future D&I Initiatives Most of my experience in organizing D&I initiatives comes from my experience with PTI. I would like to continue this line of work. Namely, I would be interested in setting up some sort of prison education program, or contributing to one if it already exists.

Additionally, I would like to help students after their release. For example, one of the faculty involved in PTI, Janette Carey, has provided research positions to previously incarcerated students, and I would love to do something similar. Going further, I want to set up a fellowship that provides funding for other researchers interested in providing this type of postprison on-the-job education.

Finally, while every underrepresented minority has unique and distinct challenges, I think my experience working with PTI can generalize to other D&I initiatives. Access to computers is a complexity that must be addressed when teaching both incarcerated individuals and low-income communities. Most of my students had experienced racism in some form. I would like to provide assistance to other communities who have experienced forms of discrimination like racism, sexism, and transphobia. I believe part of being faculty at a university lies in having the power and responsibility to lead and organize such initiatives. In addition to creating new initiatives, I would also like to bring existing, established programs like AI4All to any university I join.