

How a Tufts program gives inmates college degrees

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As a child, Juan Pagan was physically abused by his father. By the time he was 16, his mother, who had battled mental illness all her life, was in prison, and Pagan was expelled from school and had run away from home. His only family became the Lowell gang he was a part of. In May 2006 he stabbed a member of a rival gang, Alexander Castro Santos, and was convicted the following year of first-degree murder — a charge reduced to second-degree in 2008, giving him the possibility of parole down the road.

Now 33, he'll be awarded his bachelor's degree from Tufts University Tuesday. He'll collect it at a ceremony at MCI-Concord along with nine other incarcerated students in the first-ever graduating class of the Tufts University Prison Initiative of the Tisch College of Civic Life.

"Many of us are imprisoned because of bad choices that felt like the only choices," Pagan wrote in a graduation speech he shared with the Globe. The Tufts program "helped us to see, feel and aspire to more."

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“Professors affirming that I am worthy and have something positive to offer society is the greatest gift I have ever received. I now know that I can be an asset to my family and community because [the program] helped me gain back that ineffable part of me that prison repressed — my humanity,” he wrote.

All of those lock-'em-up-and-throw-away-the-key folks might want to ponder that for a moment.

The Tufts program, which awards a bachelor's degree in civic studies and also awards associate's degrees through Bunker Hill Community College, allows students who begin their studies while incarcerated to finish on campus.

Jody Boykins was one such student. Charged with armed assault at age 22, he began his studies at MCI-Concord in 2022, and on the day of his release at age 27, “I went to lunch with my sister and my two little nieces,” he said. “I paid \$20 [from the \$120 given to him at the prison gates] to give her gas to drive me all the way to Medford so I can make my class. And so yeah, that's the only thing I wanted.”

Today Boykins is living and working at Haley House in Boston and maintains a 3.95 GPA. He'd like to continue working with those who are unhoused or doing some kind of social work when he completes his degree in a couple years.

“You know how powerful [this program] is,” he added. “It didn't only change the way I see things, it changed my life forever. My life will never be the same because of education.

Especially within prison walls, “This program is changing lives,” Boykins said. “It is bridging communities. And it is building a new sense of belonging for a lot of people.”

The Tufts University Prison Initiative is the brainchild of Hilary Binda, who started it in 2016 in cooperation with the Massachusetts Department of Correction, although it exists almost entirely on grants and donations. It initially offered classes taught by Tufts professors to the incarcerated at MCI-Concord but has since been expanded to the Northeastern Correctional Center and the maximum security Sousa-Baranowski.

A companion program, MyTERN, offers academic studies outside prison walls along with a restorative justice component and reentry support, including acquainting its participants with advances in technology they might have missed during incarceration as well as financial literacy instruction.

“We also draw students who weren't fortunate enough to get into a program behind the wall,” Binda said.

With a grand sum total of about 2 percent of the state's prison budget going to programming of all kinds, there are never enough opportunities, and waitlists for in-prison programs remain formidable.

The Tufts program admits about 60 in-prison students each year and another 30 to the MyTERN program. The “why” behind the program is easy. Nearly a decade ago a [RAND Corporation study](#) found formal education programs in prison reduced recidivism and increased chances for post-prison employment.

Education is also a critical component for those who come up for parole — as Juan Pagan will again in a couple years. That being the case, you’d think the state would provide greater support for in-prison education programs. But incarcerated people don’t have lobbyists when budget time comes around. They remain largely voiceless — unless someone takes up their cause. Unless a professor is ready and willing to teach a class that requires going through a metal detector and hearing those prison doors clang behind her to get to.

Binda and her team have given their students more than just a college degree. They’ve helped give them a voice. And that has helped give them hope.

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