

HIGHER EDUCATION AND REENTRY

Checking the Box: Enduring the Stigma of Applying to Graduate School Post-Incarceration

White Paper by Andrew Cory Greene

“Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.”
— George Washington Carver

The year was 2002. I was twenty-one years old and had just begun serving an eight-year prison term at Otisville Correctional Facility in New York State. I sought relentlessly to place myself in positive environments that promoted both learning and discipline. During that pursuit, I volunteered for the Bridging the Gap Program and the Alternatives to Violence Program. The Bridging the Gap Program is a twelve-week integration of Vassar College students and men serving prison sentences in Otisville Correctional Facility. Every Friday for twelve weeks, college students and incarcerated individuals would meet in a prison classroom to learn about each other. Through debates, Socratic discussions, mock parole board hearings, and a series of listening exercises, this twelve-week groundbreaking program highlighted the humanity of all people regardless of their social position. The Alternatives to Violence Program was designed to help individuals, both incarcerated and outside volunteers, to develop strategies for handling conflict without the use of violence. After years of such exposure, my passion for learning and specifically higher education was renewed.

Two days removed from an eight-year prison sentence, I enrolled in LaGuardia Community College. During my three and a half years in academia, first at LaGuardia and now at New York University, I have learned that my unique prison experience offers a positive contribution to the university culture. I have earned an Associate of the Arts degree and now find myself one semester away from earning a Bachelor's of Science degree with Honors in Applied Psychology. With my undergraduate studies near completion and graduate studies looming in the next chapter, I decided to apply to five Ph.D. programs. Sadly, like so many others with criminal

histories, I was met with incredible opposition during my application process and now understand the long-lasting implications of serving time. Oppression does not end when you leave the confines of a prison cell. In the eyes of the higher education system, I will always belong in a box.

After revising my personal and academic statements over twenty times, spending countless hours studying for the GRE, emailing and harassing professors for letters of recommendation, and providing all of the required administrative forms, I was finally ready to click the submit button. Many students are filled with a sense of relief after submitting their application, since the process is almost over. Unfortunately, students with criminal histories rarely experience relief at this juncture in the application process. Fear, helplessness, isolation, apprehension, and uncertainty, among a long list of other emotions, flood our bodies. I feared that I would be marginalized by unfair stereotypes and a sense of vulnerability took residency in my being. Similar to the long walk to my parole board hearings, my desire to access higher education rested in the hands of others whose visions could be tainted by racism, classism, and preconceived judgments. The board assessing my application likely saw me as a criminal who belonged in prison, a street corner, project hallways, or maybe even the graveyard. Did they think I belonged in their space, in academia? Minorities often feel isolated whether we identify as a racial, sexual or formerly incarcerated “social deviants” because we know that, in the wrong hands, our applications may be treated as a potential liability. And so we wait.

Apprehension and uncertainty are always present. Will I be judged on the crime that sent me to prison eleven years back, or evaluated on the hard work that has earned me a position in the honors program at New York University? Anytime one is asked to “check the box,” he or she is instantly subjugated to the ideologies of dominant society that typically perceives individuals with criminal histories as “inferior,” “incapable,” and too much of a “risk.” If an applicant neglects *checking the box* to avoid the potential discrimination and is later found to have provided false or inaccurate information, they may be subjected to penalties such as expulsion from that college and/or denial of their transcripts. Applicants with criminal histories often understand the possibility of being stigmatized when *checking the box* and at times are so overwhelmed with defeat before applying that they withdraw their application. Some take the risk of not *checking the box* and others pray they are treated equally. Acknowledging that history often leads to an extended and convoluted version of the application process that is typically not elaborated upon on university websites.¹

Individuals who *check the box* within a week or two usually receive a follow up correspondence from the school in the form of an email, phone call, or letter seeking additional information about their past criminal history. Some schools ask applicants for their entire criminal rap sheets. Others request arrest records, court sentencing documentation, parole letters, and additional letters that speak directly to the individual’s character as it relates to the safety of a college campus. Below is an email conversation between an undisclosed university and myself.

Undisclosed University — “Hello Andrew. Thank you for your interest in graduate study offered at University of _____. In your application you mentioned an arrest for use of a firearm. Please provide more detail about this incident.

Please indicate the dates of the incident, what type of firearm, sentence, resolution and any other information that will help us to understand how this situation was handled.”

My Response — *“How are you doing? I received an email from you that was kind of unclear. I am confused of why this explanation is needed and secondly how should I submit this explanation?”*

Undisclosed University — *“Hello Andrew. Did you apply to the Ph.D. program in Psychology at University of _____? There is an answer you provided to a question about conduct that I am following up on.*

The additional information can be provided to me as a reply to this email message.”

My Response — *“Yes I did apply to a Ph.D. Psychology program at the University of _____. To further elaborate on the questions you asked earlier: I was in prison from June 2002 to May 2009. The type of gun I was charged for using was a 9-millimeter pistol. I was sentenced to 8 years for gun possession and was released 11 months early for good behavior. Since being released from prison in 2009, I have earned my Associates Degree, I am one semester away from earning my Bachelor’s Degree, I have co-founded a youth mentoring organization (H.O.L.L.A! - How Our Lives Link Altogether!) and I am a father and a husband.”*

Undisclosed University — *“Hello Andrew. I appreciate the additional explanation. I provided the conduct committee with the additional information. The committee wants to see the court records, including the arrest record, sentencing documentation, court paperwork indicating that you have successfully completed all aspects of the sentence, including parole or probation. The committee is looking for evidence that applicants will not be a threat to our community. In addition to the court records, you might also consider providing letters of recommendation that attest to your character and a statement that describes how your behavior since being released from prison indicates how you will contribute to the university community.”*

The relevancy of these additional documents as they relate to schools’ admissions is rarely ever publicly or explicitly stated. These additional measures are not forewarned on the schools’ websites but are still cast upon individuals routinely. Applicants’ eagerness for university enrollment fuels our desire to persist despite these new obstacles. I had to spend additional funds on requested court documents and spend tireless hours sitting in courtrooms and parole buildings to obtain requested documents. All in the name of that *box*.

In this paper, I pose questions to institutions of higher learning that I can’t ask directly because I am, of course, vulnerable to the highly competitive and unpredictable admissions process. But if I could, I would ask the faceless persons on the other end of my application, what is the “box”? Whom does the “box” target? How is the “box” interpreted? What purpose does the “box” serve? These are questions our schools have failed to answer or have simply ignored because we are, of course, an expendable applicant pool considered too risky to be easily admitted. But they have failed to notice the gifts we bring.

The box represents a question on the college application that asks applicants if they have ever been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor. If the answer is yes, “*check the box*.” If the applicant *checks the box* indicating that they have been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor, they are

then asked to provide a “detailed description” of the felony or misdemeanor. The fantasy is, perhaps, that this kind of information will provide schools with concrete evidence helping them to select “safe” students and weed out risks. However, the top ten violent assaults on college campuses have not been committed by students with criminal histories.ⁱⁱ Which leads to bigger questions such as, who are “safe” students? How are “safe” students identified? What do “safe” students look like? Or, conversely, what do they *not* look like? And who is privileged enough to be viewed as “safe” and who has the expertise to determine who *is* “safe”? Answering these important questions may help us to distinguish who are the victims of these policies and may open a conversation about the collateral consequences of a policy inked in fear while lacking empirical justification.

Whom does the “box” target? Which groups and individuals does the “box” exclude? The invitation to “*check the box*” sits in a long history of racialized policies that may appear to be race-neutral but have fundamentally defined the U.S. criminal justice system, and increasingly, the higher education system.ⁱⁱⁱ “*Checking the box*” severely redlines the educational options for men and women of color who are disproportionately targeted by mass incarceration and thereby branded for life. The “*check the box*” policy simply extends racialized discriminatory policies such as mass incarceration into the sphere of higher education, advancing a circuit of stigma and denied opportunities to those who have served sentences, done their time, and been released. Mass incarceration in the U.S. reflects significant historically persistent racial and ethnic disparities. Blacks and Latinos collectively account for approximately 25 to 30 percent of the U.S. population but disproportionately account for 60 percent of the prison population.^{iv} Fine and Ruglis have termed these policies “circuits of dispossession” and they relate to both criminal and educational injustice. We can quickly notice stubborn patterns by which our society continues to fail certain groups, painting them with the taint of “risk” for life.^v

How is the “box” interpreted by the applicant and by the institution? For the prospective student, does it mean to suggest, please stop filling out the application because you have been spotted”? Does it mean, even if you are qualified for academic enrollment, we do not want your “kind” empowered by learning? What does it say about LaGuardia Community College and New York University, who viewed me as an asset instead of a liability? What are the internal experiences of individuals when asked to “check the box”? Is the “box” reflective of my life’s transformation or my past failures? Is this recycled oppression? Is this meant to keep individuals stuck in the past so they are unable to live in the present let alone dream about the future? Do these kinds of policies lead to self-doubt? Does this kill students’ morale and motivation to seek higher learning? Why is the “box” so important? Does it excuse schools from blame if a student with a criminal history commits an offense on campus?

What is the purpose of the “box”? It is evident the box is not a policy based on research. There is no evidence that the “box” actually assists schools in predicting who will graduate or who will fail. The “box” is not helpful in determining who will or will not commit a crime on college campuses. Our colleges and universities must answer these questions. How many times will I have to provide a “detailed description” of the crime committed eleven years ago? Why are we not discussing how colleges and universities benefit from the presence of individuals with criminal histories?

Since integrating into academia I have earned a spot on the dean's list three out of seven semesters. I have been inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa honor society. I graduated from a two-year college in a year and nine months and then I transferred to and excelled in one of the most prestigious private schools in the country. I have mentored hundreds of students, some on a personal level and others as a Resident Assistant. I have co-created a mentoring program to serve economically deprived young people in the inner city. I currently teach middle school students in two schools in Brooklyn, New York about the struggle for community based educational justice. And I have maintained a 3.68 GPA as an undergraduate student. Although these accomplishments are important, they scarcely capture how my life experiences and sheer determination heightens the ways in which I participate in both classrooms and the larger university climate. The intellectual diversity and non-traditional additives that I and others with criminal histories, contribute to universities are seldom mentioned, or better yet, used as protocol for admission selection. Education must be recognized as a mechanism for liberation and not as an instrument of omission, an environment to transform, not reproduce, the class and race stratification of society. In an attempt to spark dialogue between those with criminal histories, educators, scholars, activist, and institutions of higher education, I echo the words of Victor Hugo, "he who opens the school door closes the prison."

I ask, what should we do? We have served our time and paid our debts to society, why must the punishment continue? Why are the collateral consequences so severe? Why are individuals trialed and sentenced time after time for the same act? Who benefits from these policies?

Individuals with criminal histories experience continued mental anguish upon leaving prison and entering into society because of so many barriers and policies. Andre Ward, an educator, community activist, and formerly incarcerated individual, once said, "we have been viewed as 'things' rather than human beings and although we are constantly 'unthinging' ourselves through many civic duty initiatives that include transforming lives and communities, we sometimes find the door to academia and employment shut in our faces."

In addition to highlighting the limitations of the "*check the box*" educational policy, which creates an artificial and dangerous precedent of sustained exclusion, this paper more fundamentally seeks to re-humanize individuals with criminal histories, by changing the face of formerly incarcerated people. I offer my story as only one of many. Every year approximately 700,000 individuals are released from jail or prison and many are eager to enter the halls of higher education to pave a life of transformation, contribution and civic participation.^{vi} But in order to contribute, we need institutions that will open the doors and understand we are somebody, we have something to offer society, and we should not be judged or defined by our past.

I have had the honor of learning from so many individuals with criminal histories and I share with you our story. We have mustered the courage. We have found the mental, emotional, financial, relational and psychic resources that are required to apply to college and enter into an institution of higher learning. We have crossed a threshold and made a promise to our families, our communities and ourselves. Instead of succumbing to a life of crime, we have rose up to the challenge of life dedicated to education. We carry no risk. We only carry hope.

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- i. Vivian Nixon, New York Reentry Education Network Pathways of Possibility Conference, Feb. 27 2013
<<http://www.reentryeducationnetwork.org/uploads/1/2/5/3/12534585/pathwayspeechformattedsecondround.pdf>>.
 - ii. CollegeStats.org, Apr. 19, 2013 <<http://collegestats.org/articles/2012/09/the-10-most-violent-acts-committed-on-a-college-campus/>>.
 - iii. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California, 2007. Print.
 - iv. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New, 2010. Print.
 - v. Michelle Fine and Jessica Ruglis, "Circuits and consequences of Dispossession: The Racialized Realignment of the Public Sphere for U.S. Youth," *Transforming Anthropology*, vol. 17(1), 2009, 20-33.
 - vi. Ibid.