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*Perspectives* covers new developments, discusses emerging ideas, and features practical resources in the areas of research, planning, assessment, and community college leadership. It is sent out to more than 5,000 higher ed professionals every other month.

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Truly,  
Olivia Loy  
Director of Communications  
The RP Group

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### [The Trust Factor: An Invisible Loophole in Maximizing Student Success](#)

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## Articles

### The Trust Factor: An Invisible Loophole in Maximizing Student Success

**Dr. Sabrena Turner-Odom**  
**English Faculty and Student Success Center Director**  
**LA Southwest College**

*Dr. Turner-Odom has served as an educator in her south Los Angeles community for 19 years. This article is based on her dissertation, [Beyond the Cell. Former Incarceration and First Year College Success.](#)*

There are many students who arrive at our campuses each year full of grit and fortitude who do not achieve success, i.e. do not earn an associate's degree or a certificate, nor do they transfer to a four-year institution.

The variables associated with this travesty are numerous, and we can create a laundry list that documents the challenges community college students face that discern why some succeed while many others do not. From experience, I know that many students arrive at our campuses each year in an uncomfortably vulnerable state embedded with high levels of fear. There is also data to support the assertion that many marginalized students of color equate school with prison, thus, the term "school to prison pipeline" (Heitzeg, 2009; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011).

Community college students are not afraid of learning; however, many are fearful of being further emotionally and/or spiritually wounded in their quest for higher education and self-sufficiency. The fear that students bring to campus sits dormant within them until an interaction with an institutional agent activates it. The most powerful way for us to address this fear and keep students on a pathway of completion is with trust (Turner-Odom, 2016).

The concept of trust and how it promotes student success is elusive. Trust can be viewed as a silent agreement that is not acted upon until an action (or non-action) deems us trustworthy or not. Marginalized students understand when they are being further marginalized, though they may not always be able to articulate it. Other times, some are expecting these kinds of negative outcomes (Turner-Odom, 2016).

Students who don't trust us may stop attending class or stop performing at their best. The idea of trust for marginalized students is embedded in a lifetime of interactions with institutions that equally recruit and then devalue them, or worse (Heitzeg, 2009; Neal, D. & Rick, A., 2014; Turner-Odom, 2016).

One way that trust can be established is by authentically addressing students' strengths and ability to adapt and transform. When we give students permission and empower them to trust themselves, we build an invisible bridge that they will cross because they trust us.

### **Eddie's Story**

Eddie enrolled in college after he was released from a long stint in prison. Early in the semester, he was uncomfortable in his new role as a college student. Each day, he sat "poker-faced" in the back of his developmental English class wearing dark sunglasses and a hoodie.



Turner-Odom in her classroom.

Eddie was always on time and had excellent attendance, but he never spoke to me nor his peers. At times, I wondered if he was sleeping. Each day I made an effort to build trust with Eddie. In general, there are several ways I try to build trust: calling students by name, asking questions, complimenting them, showing interest in their learning style, and even sharing snacks (animal crackers are usually a hit).

One day, in a class discussion on a piece by Malcolm X, he finally raised his hand and asked, "Do you really believe that knowledge is power?"

A student in class snickered at his question and then others joined in, and before I could answer, Eddie had left.

I went after him and said, "This is your class. You paid for it, and you have every right to sit in your seat in the corner with your sunglasses and hoodie and pretend that you're not interested -- and you have the right to ask questions... but I'm not okay with you leaving."

Eddie returned and allowed me to answer his question and over the next several weeks, transformed. He led class discussions, came to office hours, and more. He eventually became an English tutor in the Student Success Center and received numerous awards from the English department.

He later told me he would have never returned to campus if I had done nothing, and that deep down he knew he needed someone who would trust that he could succeed. Today, Eddie is a senior at California State University, Dominguez Hills, and is preparing to graduate with a Bachelor's degree in English next spring.

### **Resources/References**

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## A Glimpse at Learning in Prison Town, USA

**Olivia Loy\***  
**Director of Communications**  
**The RP Group**

***\*This article is based on a session delivered at the 2017 Strengthening Student Success Conference. Presenters included: Brian Murphy, Associate Dean of Institutional Effectiveness and Research (FMR), Lassen Community College; Amy Langslet, Coordinator of Inmate Education; and Carl Oberriter, Instructional Support Specialist***

If you ever happened to walk into Brian Murphy's old classroom, some details might have jumped out at you: the printer locked in a security cage, a projector mounted high up out of arm's reach, and the fact that it was located inside of a federal prison.

You would have also seen laptops for the students to use and would have learned that there was a heightened focus on business, with courses geared toward earning a certificate of entrepreneurship -- and in the longer term -- an Associate Degree for Transfer (AD-T). These elements and the unique focus gave these students the chance to "get their feet wet and get them used to being in the classroom again," said Murphy, co-presenter of the "Community College in Prison Town, USA" session at the 2017 Strengthening Student Success Conference.



Photos courtesy of Community College in Prison Town USA session presenters and their organizations.

### **Institutionalized Learning and Living**

Lassen Community College (LCC) and Susanville, the town it calls home, are both unique. One half of LCC's 2,300 students are incarcerated -- getting their education via correspondence learning or face-to-face instruction.

The numbers make sense when you factor in the town's three incarceration facilities: High Desert, California Correctional Facility and Federal Correctional Institution - Herlong. Security in these campuses ranges from low to high, and each has its own unique culture.

Even with more than half of the workforce in Susanville serving the prison industry, there is considerable skepticism about inmate education, especially *free* inmate education, one of many obstacles unlike those in other community college environments.

### **Unique Challenges of Inmate Education**

While it may be no surprise there are extra layers of difficulties in teaching inmates, some of the pain points are not what you might think. Here's a breakdown of the top culprits:

*Correspondence education.* Because not all inmates can receive face-to-face education, they partake in correspondence education, the dominant mode between the two of inmate learning since the 1990s. In this mode, inmates receive work packets, fill them out, send them in, and then wait three weeks to get the graded versions of their work back. This lag time isn't great, according to Langslet.



Also, because a majority of these students have learning disabilities (though often not self-declared nor diagnosed), according to the presenters, correspondence education lacks key elements that help foster success, such as understanding and trust, elements that face-to-face learning tends more to support.

*False placement scores.* Inmates often intentionally score low on placement tests because it allows them to take more (and often unnecessary) courses than if they had scored higher. They do this because in the prison system, courses equal credit, which equals time off of their sentence, making the temptation to under-perform highly incentivized.

*Lockdowns.* Strangely, said Langslet, lockdowns always seem to occur around exams or finals time. This is problematic and can result in canceled classes and delayed opportunity for certificate, degree,

or transfer.

*Perception:* As noted before, even though the majority of "Prison Town's" work population is in the prison industry, Murphy and the others still get the question: Why do *inmates* get free textbooks, when others have to pay for the expenses of school?

Murphy and his colleagues find that sharing [videos like this](#) help with public understanding.

Despite the challenges, he says, "These folks have been down [in life] quite a number of years. Teaching them is the most rewarding thing I've ever done."

### **The Dollars and Sense Answer**

A quick Google search on the cost of incarceration versus education in California returns almost a unanimous answer: it's a lot more expensive to incarcerate than to educate here. In fact,

"The cost of imprisoning each of California's 130,000 inmates is expected to reach a record \$75,560 in the next year, ***enough to cover the annual cost of attending Harvard University and still have plenty left over for pizza and beer.***"

- [California Prison Tuition: \\$75,560: A year in a California prison costs more than a year at Harvard](#), Associated Press.

Murphy also talked about how funding now largely comes from grant money and equity funding. Plus, he said, "education can be a powerful tool for improving outcomes for incarcerated populations."

### **Words of Wisdom For Those Considering Inmate Education and Prison Partnerships**

Below are some lessons learned and tips from Murphy and his co-presenters:

- Recruit instructors who are adaptable, flexible, culturally sensitive, and who are not antagonistic. "You need a cheerleader."
- Don't shy away from face-to-face education. It's arguably more effective and not as risky as many think, though different prison environments can affect this.
- Ask student services to walk hand-in-hand with you. Consider hiring a dedicated, face-to-face incarceration counselor as well.
- To help mitigate people's negative perception, [share this video](#).
- Have a plan for transfer for each of your students.

*For more information, [view the presentation](#) or email [oloy@rpgroup.org](mailto:oloy@rpgroup.org).*

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