

Module 5

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE LAB

Module 5

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RESTORATIVE JUSTICE LAB

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Module 5

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT

At a Glance

This module provides an overview of the following topics:

- **Program duration versus average sentence lengths in the United States**
- **How to create and leverage opportunities for continuous engagement in carceral settings**
- **Sample structures and projects for continuous engagement beyond coursework**
- **Ceremonies that honor milestones in continuous engagement**

Guiding Questions

1. **Why should HEP programs engage students continuously?**
2. **What are the challenges and benefits of continuous engagement with students in HEP settings?**
3. **What co-curricular and extracurricular structures, projects, and trainings can provide opportunities for continuous engagement?**
4. **How can we mark and celebrate continuous engagement through ceremony?**

Why should HEP programs engage students continuously?

According to the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison's landscape survey, "most institutions of higher education offering classes to incarcerated students in prison are public two-year institutions" offering associate's degree programs.[1] In 2020–2021, there were 104 associate's degree pathways and 38 bachelor's degree pathways.[2] While the time to degree in prison varies based on course availability, security lockdowns, and transfers, an associate's degree program for full-time students on the outside typically

takes two years to complete.

The United States not only incarcerates more of its own citizens than most other nations, it sentences them to more time. The Council on Criminal Justice notes that both the average imposed sentence length and the actual amount of time served are substantially longer in the U.S. than in other countries.[3] The U.S.—and Alabama in particular—leads the world in terms of the proportion of the prison population sentenced to ten or more years.

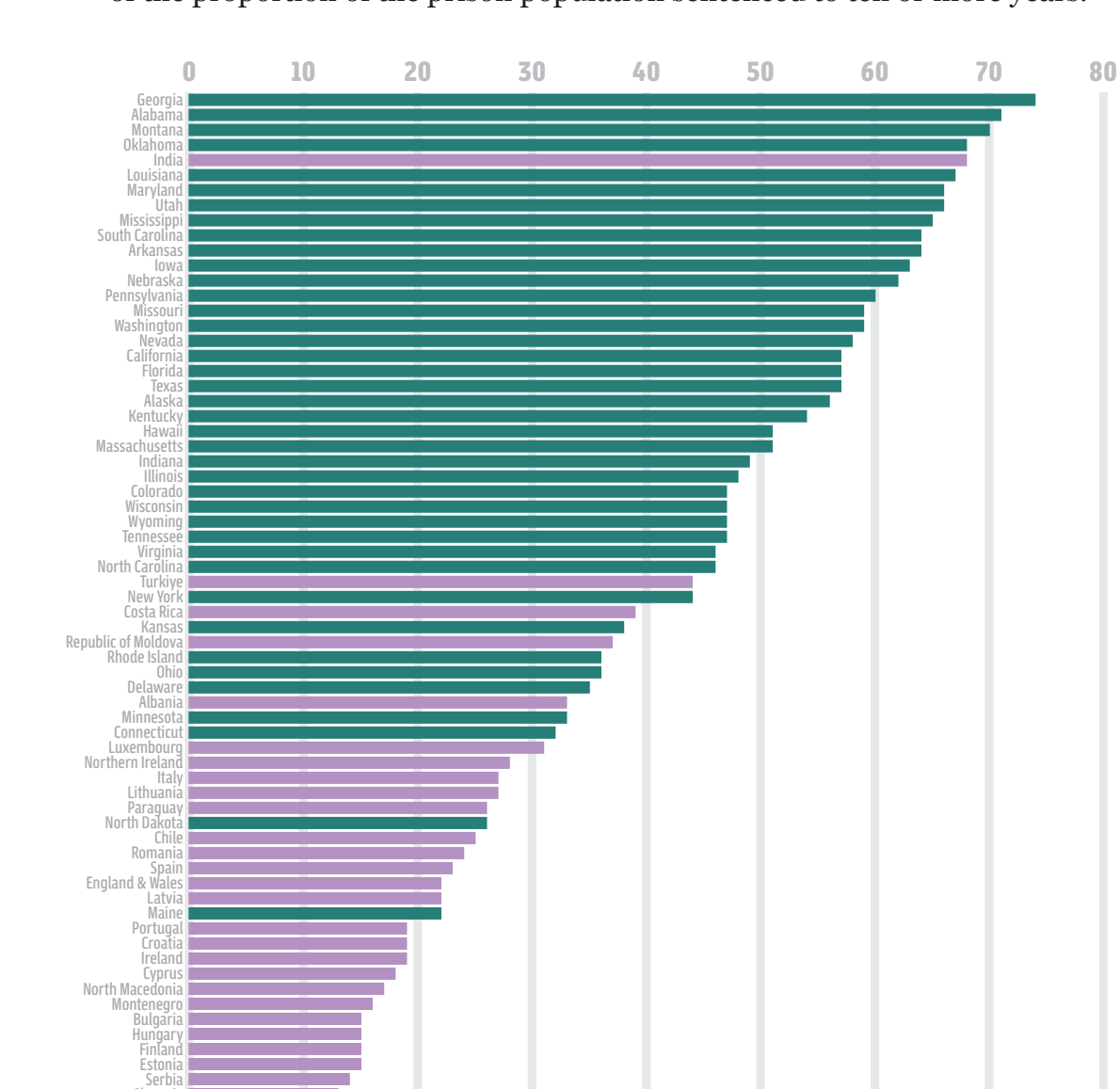
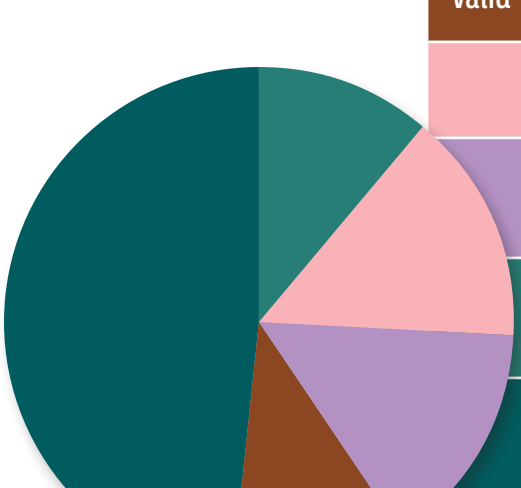


Figure 1. Percentage of the prison population sentenced to 10 or more years, in 77 jurisdictions across the world (including countries and U.S. states).[4]

Faculty from the Restorative Justice Lab used the data collection tool in *Module 1: Building a Strong Cohort* to calculate sentence lengths for students in our program. The following data, extracted from SPSS, represents these calculations.



TIME REMAINING ON SENTENCE		FREQUENCY	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
Valid	0-9 YEARS	3	11.1	11.1
	10-19 YEARS	4	14.8	25.9
	20-29 YEARS	4	14.8	40.7
	30-39 YEARS	3	11.1	51.9
	50+ YEARS	13	48.1	100
	Total	27	100	

Nearly half of the students in our program (48%) are facing 50 or more years in prison and 89% are facing ten or more years. According to the Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, one in five incarcerated Alabamians is serving a life sentence.[5] When we compare these sentence lengths to program duration—in our case, two years—we get a clearer picture of why students in HEP programs may experience a sense of grief, loss, and even despair when programs end.

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EDUCATION. EMPOWERMENT. OPPORTUNITY.
Letting experience inform research—and research inform experience.

When we were first developing the certificate program, our friend Jarrod M. Wall of Directly Impacted Educational Consulting, LLC challenged us to include opportunities for ongoing engagement.

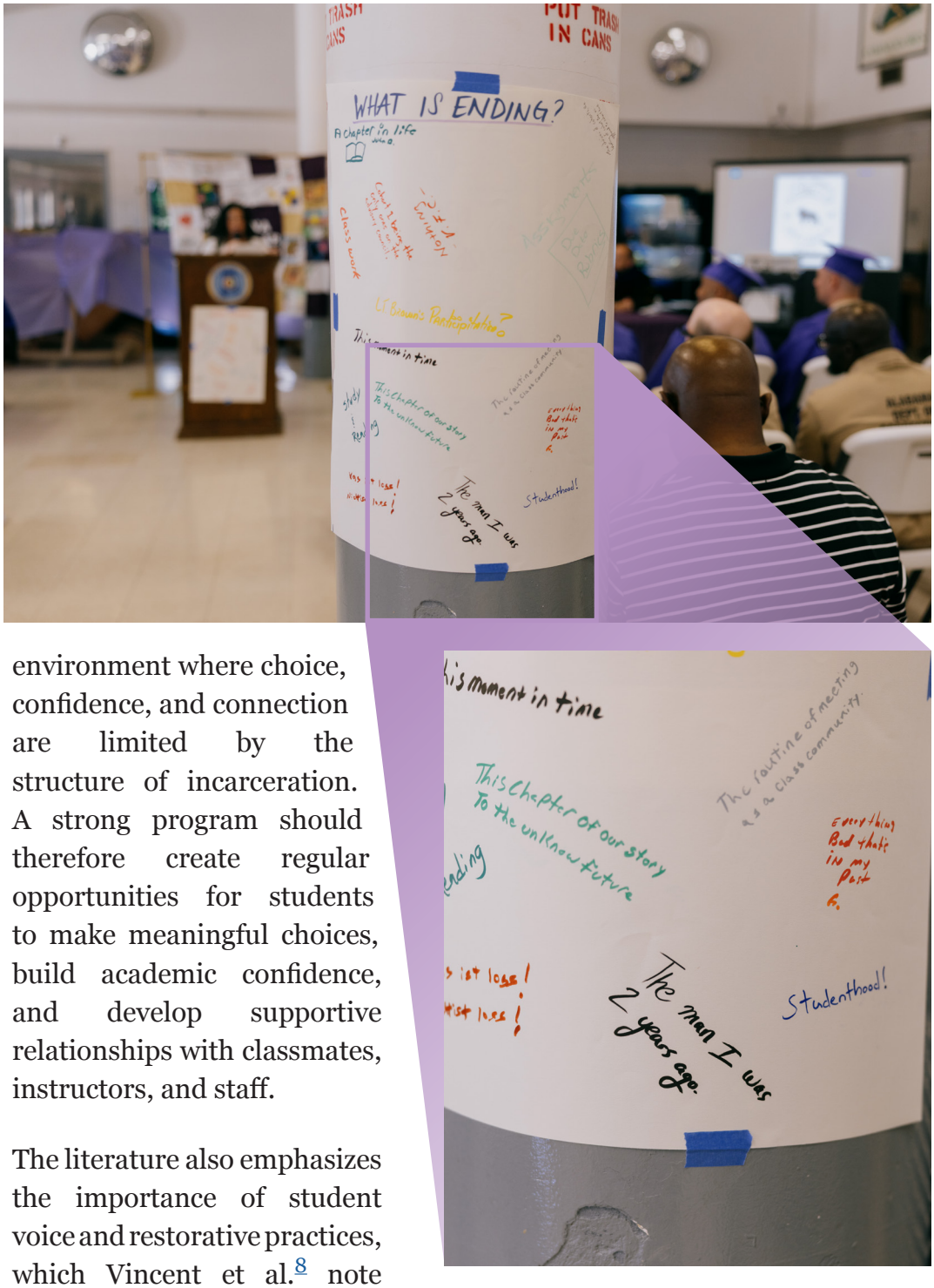
The question we have to ask: Is our job finished at the four-year degree? When I was in college in a maximum-security prison, the nature of time itself seemed different. It felt infused with more—more life, fireworks, explosions of new ideas, technicolor instead of greyscale, the sense of a sports car racing 100 miles per hour with weekly assignments, goals, accomplishments, not to mention the relationships with professors and non-DOC people. Then, after graduation, students return to the cellblocks, the prison routines, the deprivation once again cinching the circumscription of their lives.

Although we attempt to make student education and services as commensurate with campus as possible, I often remind practitioners not to forget the "P"—prison—in HEP. Universities have the resources to provide several opportunities within their programs whether that be establishing tutor positions, alumni advisory councils, student and professor orientation committees, research collaborations, or think tanks. I always remember the words of a friend who later died of an overdose, who, after we had graduated, said, "Ya know, your bid changes after college." While we can't "cure" prisons, we can do more.

— Jarrod M. Wall

Continuous student engagement is important in HEP programs because learning does not just happen during a class meeting, a semester, or a program activity. Engagement grows over time through relationships, trust, student voice, meaningful participation, and continued connection to the program community.

Student engagement is often described as a complex and multi-part process. Vincent et al.[6] (drawing on Li et al.)[7] explain that engagement requires three key elements: autonomy, meaning that students feel they have some choice and control in their learning; competence, meaning that students believe they can work toward and achieve their goals; and relatedness, meaning that students feel connected to others while pursuing those goals. In a HEP setting, these three elements matter because students are learning in an



environment where choice, confidence, and connection are limited by the structure of incarceration. A strong program should therefore create regular opportunities for students to make meaningful choices, build academic confidence, and develop supportive relationships with classmates, instructors, and staff.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of student voice and restorative practices, which Vincent et al.[8] note can help build environments where students and teachers feel connected, capable, and respected. This is especially important in settings shaped by strong power differentials. Restorative practices can help reduce these differentials by focusing on trust building, relationship building and repair, accountability, and community support. For HEP programs, this suggests that engagement should not be limited to coursework compliance such as attendance or assignment completion. Students should also have structured ways to share feedback,

participate in community-building, help shape program expectations, and take part in problem-solving when harm or conflict occurs.

Continuous engagement requires ongoing reflection and collaboration among educators and program partners. Kulow et al.[9] emphasize that supporting engagement requires educators to keep learning, adjusting, and working with others over time. Instructors must continue responding to the changing needs of students and the changing teaching conditions. This is especially relevant for HEP programs because prison education involves many partners, including students, faculty, correctional staff, program coordinators, volunteers, and community agencies. Regular communication among these groups can help clarify program goals, identify barriers, and improve student support over time.

Student involvement theory helps explain why continuous engagement matters. Jorgenson et al.[10] describe connectedness as the process through which students come to feel that they belong, are accepted, and have meaningful relationships with institutions. Connectedness includes both social connectedness, which comes from relationships with others; and institutional connectedness, which comes from feeling accepted by programs, faculty, and the larger institution. In HEP programs, students may feel more engaged when they experience both forms of connection: supportive relationships with people in the program, as well as a clear sense that they belong in the educational community.

Connectedness does not happen all at once; as Jorgenson et al.[11] explain, it develops through relationships over time. Students become more connected when they fulfill academic roles while also having their interpersonal needs met. This means that HEP programs should think about engagement as a long-term process, rather than a single activity. Course meetings, study halls, advising, peer support, program events, graduations, and alumni connections can all help students remain tied to the learning community. Even small interactions matter. Jorgenson et al.[12] note that institutions should recognize that interactions between a student and an employee can shape whether a student feels connected to a program. In a prison education setting, this can be extended to interactions with faculty, program staff, correctional partners, volunteers, and community agencies.

Ongoing faculty–student interaction is another key part of engagement. Wirt and Jaeger[13] identify it as a fundamental component of engagement in higher education and connect it to both student success and persistence over time. They also note that, for many community college students, the

classroom may be the main place where academic and social integration happen. In HEP programs, incarcerated students have precious few opportunities to connect with the larger campus community. As a result, the classroom space carries added weight, contributing to HEP students' sense of academic confidence and social connection. Program faculty and staff should treat these spaces as opportunities to build trust, encourage persistence, and strengthen students' connection to the program, and to each other.

Alumni Engagement

Alumni engagement helps students see that their relationship to HEP does not have to end when a program is complete. Larsson et al.[14] explain that alumni are well positioned to help students see the real-world value of their coursework. For example, they can help students understand how education connects to future goals, personal growth, career pathways, service, leadership, and community contribution. In HEP programs, alumni may include formerly incarcerated program graduates, currently incarcerated program graduates, and other students who have completed earlier parts of the program. Their experiences can make the value of education more visible and concrete for current students.

The literature suggests that continuous engagement in HEP programs should be intentional, relational, and program-wide. Students are more likely to remain engaged when they feel respected, capable, connected, and included in the learning community. Faculty, correctional staff, program partners, alumni, and community agencies all play a role in building this sense of connection. Strong HEP programs create repeated opportunities for students to participate, share their voices, receive support, build relationships, and stay connected, before, during, and after their formal program experience.

Universities engage alumni for a number of reasons, from providing feedback about their programs to assisting with fundraising and other types of institutional support. They host a variety of social and professional events for alumni, including mixers and career networking events. Oetjen et al.[15] note that alumni engage with programs in a variety of other ways, too, including the following:

- Mentoring current students and other alumni
- Offering career guidance and opportunities
- Acting as ambassadors for the program

- Contributing financially through scholarships and sponsorships
- Providing internship and fellowship positions
- Serving as adjunct faculty, guest speakers, or panelists
- Attending program events, such as award ceremonies or graduations[16]

Likewise, HEP program alumni may continue to engage with their programs through similar activities, including mentorship, acting as ambassadors for the program, and attending program events and ceremonies. They can also engage in other ways, including the following:

- Providing peer tutoring or teaching assistance for current students
- Contributing organizational support to the program
- Participating in program-related research, such as program evaluation
- Participating in continuing education and professional development opportunities
- Participating in policy think tanks

Whereas many university campuses report that "maintaining contact and engagement with alumni is a significant challenge"[17] (as many students do not provide contact information after they graduate), HEP programs have a unique opportunity to engage alumni who have finished the program but remain at the same facility.

Taking alumni engagement seriously counteracts what Dewey et al.[18] refer to as HEP's inherently neoliberal model, which narrowly defines program success through employment and recidivism rates:

> *The core features of U.S. higher education—knowledge of self and community, clarity of thought and expression, the development of moral and ethical frameworks, the cultivation of communication skills, civil dialogue, creative thought, engagement with political process, and the encouragement of intellectual curiosity (to name but a few)—are rendered irrelevant by neoliberal regimes absent a market outcome (e.g., employment) or state expectation (e.g., reduction in recidivism).*[19]

When we prioritize continuous engagement, we show a long-term investment in students that deepens and broadens program outcomes beyond the usual market-driven statistics on employment and recidivism.

Because more people at the facility remain engaged in program activities, creating opportunities for continuous engagement also creates space for a culture shift within the prison itself. In our case, the more people who actively use and model restorative practices in their daily lives, the greater their impact on other residents and even facility staff. Collectively, the program's participants shift the culture toward healthy relationships and meaningful forms of accountability, even outside of the classroom.

Case study

RJ Lab students have shared stories about culture shifts in language use outside of our program. Because they have opted for people-first language in our community agreements, they have learned to facilitate restorative conversations with prison staff about why they prefer not to respond to harmful labels. Officers have gradually shifted toward replacing labels with terms such as "residents," and even referring to students more frequently by their names.

What are the challenges and benefits of continuous engagement with students in HEP settings?

Challenges for HEP Programs

Prisons do not have many programs that run continuously without formal start and end dates. Some programs, such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), as well as some religious and cultural affinity groups, do meet continuously. However, most court-mandated and self-help programs, including substance abuse and pre-release programming, last for between twelve and fifteen weeks and end with a certificate ceremony, and many prison administrators expect university programs to follow the same model. Additionally, many prisons include rules in their volunteer training about "**undue familiarity**," which may restrict communication between program staff and students and make it difficult for programs to maintain contact with students once they have completed the program.

HEP program staff and faculty will have to help prisons understand the purpose of creating opportunities for continuous engagement beyond the program's duration. HEP can build opportunities for continuous engagement into a program's **memorandum of understanding (MOU)** with their state Department of Corrections (DOC). We detail how to develop MOUs in *Module 6: Building and Maintaining Institutional Relationships*.

Benefits for HEP Programs

Opportunities for continuous engagement allow relationships to be sustained in a professional environment and within the bounds of the program. They also enhance community-building by creating a network beyond the academic program's limited duration.

> Continuous engagement has afforded me an opportunity to fulfill my desire/need to give back. It also provides an avenue to fulfill my need to belong.
>
> *– RJ Lab Student*

Programs also benefit from the sustained support of alumni who want to give back, many of whom are motivated to return in leadership and/or support roles. For example, our student alumni have returned to serve our program in roles such as librarians, tutors, technology support, and on our student advisory council, which we detail later in this module.

What co-curricular and extracurricular structures, projects, and trainings can provide opportunities for continuous engagement?

HEP programs can support continuous engagement by offering learning and leadership opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. Students benefit from ongoing co-curricular activities that create structures rooted in a range of activities, from civic engagement to research to advisement. Together, these structures can help students build confidence, practice leadership, connect learning to real-world issues, and remain part of a supportive educational community.

Co-curricular and Extracurricular Activities

Programs can provide meaningful opportunities for continuous engagement outside of academic coursework. Pendleton[20] describes a prison college model that used extracurricular opportunities to support students' growth, including a parent–child event, a criminal justice conference, and a student government association. These activities gave students opportunities to practice leadership, serve others, and take part in democratic processes. For HEP programs, this suggests that engagement should include structured activities where students can contribute to the learning community, develop responsibility, and see themselves as capable leaders.

Research on co-curricular involvement shows that the quality of involvement also matters. Vetter et al.[21] found that meaningful involvement can support student thriving, including academic, social, and emotional success. Their work suggests that engagement should be measured not only by participation time, but also by whether students are meaningfully invested in the activity. This is particularly important for HEP programs because students have limited access to traditional campus activities. Programs should focus on providing strong opportunities that allow students to participate actively, build relationships, and connect activities to their goals. Examples include study halls, peer learning groups, leadership roles, service projects, discussion groups, and program events.

Co-curricular spaces can help students learn leadership through practice. Rosch et al.[22] found that alumni often described leadership as something developed through group-based experiences. Leadership is not simply about one person being in charge; it often grows through working with others, solving problems together, and contributing to a shared purpose. This idea fits well with HEP programs because students can develop leadership through community-building, peer support, group projects, and helping prepare the way for others. Henderson et al.[23] connect co-curricular learning to citizenship, community-building, diversity, and social responsibility. In HEP programs, co-curricular structures can help students connect classroom learning to broader questions about justice, community, and change.

Civic Engagement

Terhorst et al.[24] frame civic engagement as involvement in issues that matter to a community and efforts that support the well-being of others. This broader view is useful for HEP programs because incarcerated students may not have access to all the traditional forms of civic participation. Civic engagement can happen through dialogue, community problem-solving, service-oriented projects, writing, peer education, leadership groups, and projects aimed at improving the learning community. Albright et al.[25] explain that civic engagement can also involve shaping and improving one's community through activities such as volunteering, community meetings, and efforts to create positive change. These ideas suggest that HEP programs can support civic identity by giving students practical ways to contribute to others' well-being and think about their role in community life.

Civic engagement also involves students using their voices and taking part in decision-making. Asherov and Gross[26] emphasize that engagement

grows when students have real opportunities to speak, make decisions, and take part in meaningful group action. Although their study focuses on youth councils, the principle applies to HEP programs as well. Students are more likely to stay engaged when they are not treated as passive recipients of programming. They need meaningful ways to help shape activities, identify community needs, participate in group decisions, and contribute to shared goals.

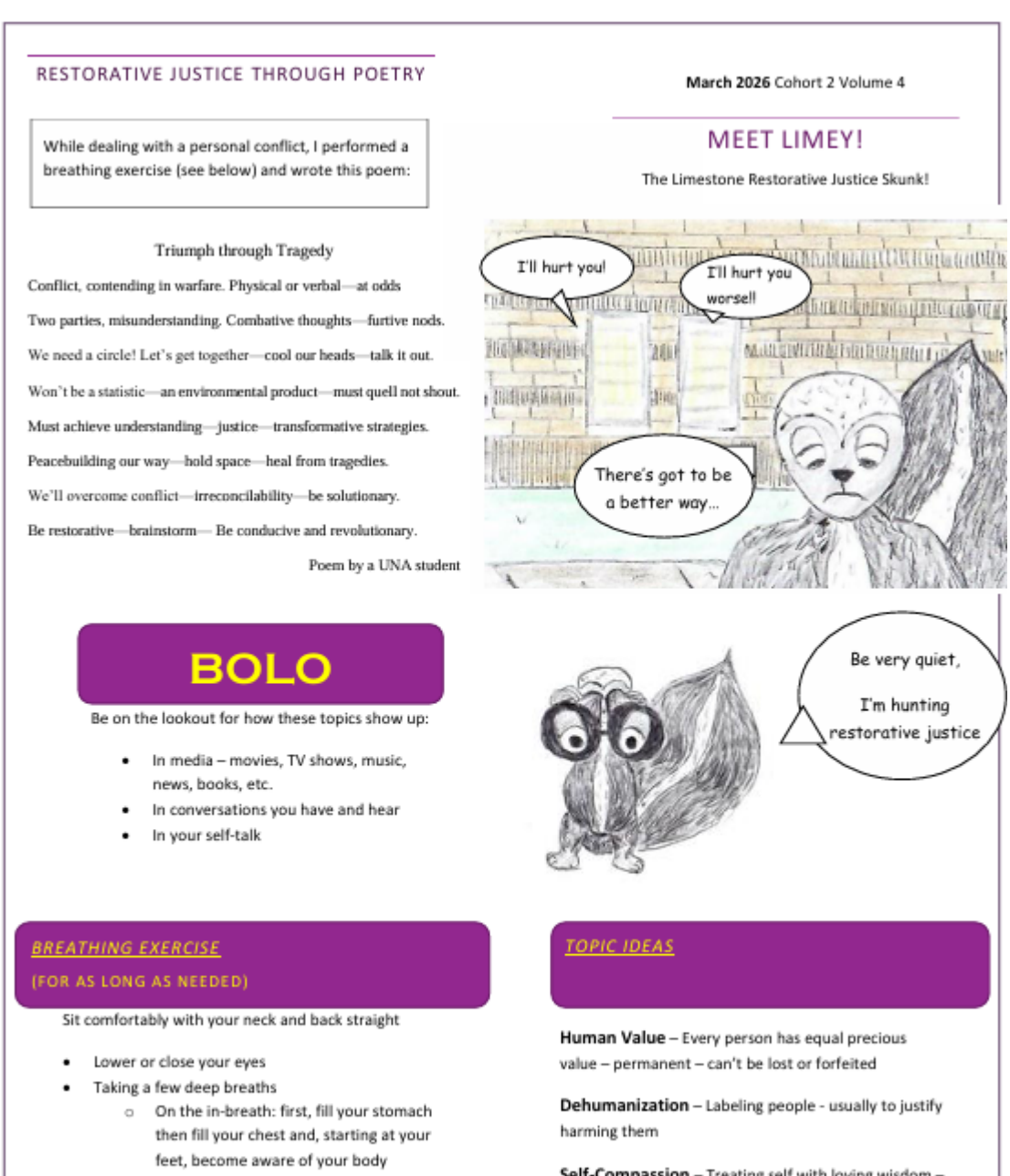
Student Media

Most college campuses have student-led organizations that produce newspapers and broadcasts for the wider campus community. Student media is a great way to reach those outside of HEP programming through peer-produced content. It also provides experiential learning for students who are interested in journalism and creates opportunities for narrative-setting and centering student voice. It can help HEP programs meet broader learning objectives, such as the following outcome used by the RJ Lab:

> **Learning outcome:** Students will understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create the ways in which restorative justice shifts power away from systems back toward community stakeholders. [Knowledge, attitudes, skills]

One of the ways we meet this outcome is by enabling "students [to] create their own RJ media through quarterly newsletters," which are distributed at the facility and on campus. This empowers students to set their own narratives about justice, and to see that their efforts and experiences are reaching a broader audience outside of our program.

The newsletter also provides those outside the program with a glimpse into our work. It serves as a recruitment tool while also providing opportunities for students to share what they are learning in our program. Students who work on the newsletter learn new skills, such as formatting documents on a word processor or scanning and incorporating hand-drawn images. The RJ Lab's newsletter has become more complex over time, with more recent issues including cartoons and greater use of color.



RESTORATIVE JUSTICE THROUGH POETRY

March 2026 Cohort 2 Volume 4

While dealing with a personal conflict, I performed a breathing exercise (see below) and wrote this poem:

Triumph through Tragedy

Conflict, contending in warfare. Physical or verbal—at odds
Two parties, misunderstanding. Combative thoughts—furtive nods.
We need a circle! Let's get together—cool our heads—talk it out.
Won't be a statistic—an environmental product—must quell not shout.
Must achieve understanding—justice—transformative strategies.
Peacebuilding our way—hold space—heal from tragedies.
We'll overcome conflict—irreconcilability—be solutionary.
Be restorative—brainstorm— Be conducive and revolutionary.

Poem by a UNA student

MEET LIMEY!

The Limestone Restorative Justice Skunk!

BOLO

Be on the lookout for how these topics show up:

- In media – movies, TV shows, music, news, books, etc.
- In conversations you have and hear
- In your self-talk

BREATHING EXERCISE
(FOR AS LONG AS NEEDED)

Sit comfortably with your neck and back straight

- Lower or close your eyes
- Taking a few deep breaths
  - On the in-breath: first, fill your stomach then fill your chest and, starting at your feet, become aware of your body
  - On the out-breath: first, empty your chest then empty your stomach and relax your body
- Let your breathing return to normal while continuing to pay attention to your breath and body

TOPIC IDEAS

Human Value – Every person has equal precious value – permanent – can't be lost or forfeited

Dehumanization – Labeling people - usually to justify harming them

Self-Compassion – Treating self with loving wisdom – different from self-indulgence which can be harmful

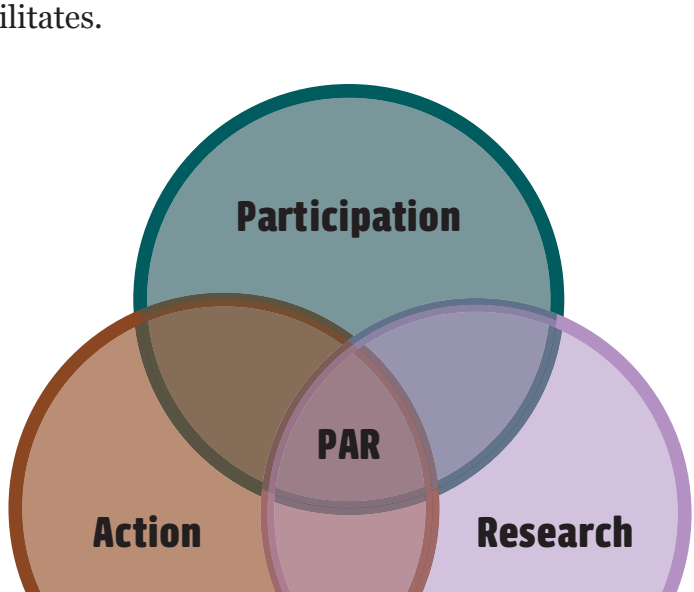
Empathy – Walking a mile in the other person's shoes

We include another newsletter in Appendix A. You can find an archive of RJ Lab newsletters on our website at www.una.edu/pjlp/restorative-justice-lab.html.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) can provide opportunities for students to remain engaged with the program beyond graduation. PAR

is defined as collaborative research done *with* rather than *on* or *about* communities.[27] This approach fits well with restorative practices, which are defined as working with communities rather than doing things for or to them.[28] Aktas explains that PAR allows students to become co-creators and co-investigators in the research process, rather than simply receiving information.[29] In this way, it supports both student voice and alumni engagement by treating students and graduates as active contributors to the learning community. This gives alumni a structured way to stay connected, contribute their experiences, help identify program needs, and support future program improvements. Jarrod M. Wall developed the following graphic to explain the combination of participation, action, and research that PAR facilitates.



PAR has been used to create more democratically driven research questions and outcome measures in HEP programs.[30] Walker and Loots[31] describe PAR as an approach that supports voice, participation, social justice, and transformative change. Rell et al.[32] explain that PAR can help researchers better understand prisons by involving people who live and work in those settings, and can build trust, improve data, and give voice to people who are often undervalued in research. Payne and Bryant,[33] using an Inside-Out model, emphasize how PAR empowers inside students to see themselves as researchers who can think critically, act with purpose, and contribute to shared responsibility. In the RJ Lab, program alumni who were interested in continuous engagement were invited to establish PAR-based evaluation metrics for our program.

PAR is a long, slow process that involves many steps: building trust and group rapport, teaching research and evaluation, facilitating community conversation, and guiding individuals to use their lived expertise alongside academic training. As a result, perhaps the greatest obstacle to conducting PAR in prisons is maintaining direct access to incarcerated students for the required amount of time it takes to conduct PAR. To address this, programs need to find creative ways to reduce the need for direct access.

Case study

In the RJ Lab, we conducted hybrid summer seminars to supplement the program's coursework on research methods and adapt it to program evaluation, HEP, and PAR. Jarrod M. Wall of Directly Impacted Educational Consulting developed the curriculum and recorded lectures on the readings. The RJ Lab director brought in the reading materials, played the videos, facilitated discussions with the group, and took notes to share with Jarrod. Jarrod conducted in-person visits to the RJ program for one week each summer to conduct intensive PAR work. We used this hybrid process to teach the fundamentals of research design, evaluation, higher education studies, higher education in prison studies, data analysis, and data visualization.

When designing an evaluation (PAR or otherwise), all stakeholder priorities should be considered and discussed with students. In addition to students, stakeholders may include funders, the university, the Department of Corrections, and other nonprofit and foundation partners. Do these stakeholders have specific metrics, priorities, or deliverables that require reporting? For example, if a funder prioritizes disrupting intergenerational poverty, programs could track how many participants are first-generation college students. This raises an important question: Should this kind of information be collected as part of the PAR evaluation, or should it be collected as part of a program's intake process? Real-world evaluation involves deciding which stakeholder objectives you will prioritize.[34]

A sample syllabus for teaching PAR for program evaluation appears in Appendix B. We sought to provide the class the necessary foundation for conducting a HEP-specific evaluation. We included seminal works from when HEP was first staking its claim as a field and extricating itself from the criminal legal paradigm, where the gold standard markers of success were post-release metrics: higher employment rates, higher earnings, and especially reduced recidivism.[35] These metrics are sometimes referred to as "return on investment" or ROI and are also used on university campuses to

justify the cost of college.[36] Early writings critiqued the recidivism metric as being, among other things, reductionist,[37] inconsistently defined,[38] an instrumental goal not placed on campus students,[39] and a focus that maps disproportionately onto communities of color, reproducing racialized forms of surveillance and state violence.[40] These post-release outcomes are not necessarily traceable to the educational program itself, nor are they selected by students as especially meaningful.

PAR evaluations instead center one important question: What does success mean to you as a student? The work of Ayesha Boyce[41] provides one model for how student-driven metrics can create new evaluative frameworks beyond typical post-release outcomes. In her study, participants identified becoming an "educated man" as a meaningful outcome, which Boyce then helped them parse into operationalizable domains. The Education Justice Project provides another example of participant-generated evaluation metrics: "emancipated humanity," "resilient dignity," and "critical transpersonal consciousness."[42]

In the RJ Lab, students identified four domains that encapsulated how they believed the program benefitted them: accountability, social engagement, perspective-taking, and systemic analysis. For more on the PAR process, see Appendix C.

> For me, being able to stay continuously engaged has meant the world. Without it, I know it would have been much harder, if not impossible, to continue practicing RJ. Through the advisory council, I have been able to develop data analysis skills that I really enjoy. Plus, it's just cool to continue engaging with the program.
>
> *– RJ Lab Student*

Professional Development Workshops

Professional development opportunities benefit students and program faculty and staff alike, providing training that allows all HEP stakeholder groups to work in greater alignment with one another. For example, Murray-Johnson[43] describes a professional development workshop that helped museum educators build the necessary skills to have difficult conversations about race. Murray-Johnson[44] reminds educators that they may need to rethink how they use their expertise during difficult conversations and

should remain open, reflective, and willing to listen. Opportunities like these are crucial for enhancing communication and community-building among program stakeholders.

The RJ Lab brings in outside consultants to train students, faculty, and staff on topics related to having difficult conversations about race and gender. (Some of these materials are included in *Module 3: Navigating Conflict*.) Other professional development workshops, requested by students, focus on specific skills such as public speaking and instructional technology. One of our favorite workshops was a "digital storytelling" tutorial that showed students how to use Microsoft PowerPoint. Students who were already familiar with the software were able to explore its more advanced features. We placed stock images on student laptops (including their hand-drawn program mascot, Limey the skunk) and paired them up to develop a story about education and restorative justice. What follows are a few examples of their work, which featured animation and audio.



We also work with consultants to help us sharpen our listening and facilitation abilities. Below are a few examples of models and trainings that have worked well for us.

Train the Trainers

We provide restorative justice facilitation training during our winter and summer workshops, using a **train-the-trainers** model. We bring professional coaches and consultants from across the nation to share their skills and expertise with RJ Lab students, who will ultimately become trainers and facilitators themselves. This model empowers students to imagine, develop, and implement their own programs and practices, which can be adapted to suit their needs and local environments within their housing units.

Initiating new programs requires a strategy for securing institutional support, especially in prison settings. In the RJ Lab, the student advisory council created community-building Circles in the chapel and the structured dormitory dedicated to substance abuse programming (SAP). This required various levels of institutional approval, from program staff (chaplain, SAP director) up to the warden. We used our student advisory council meetings to develop a five-semester curriculum for the Circles, called the "Elevate Initiative," which we describe below.

Elevate Initiative: Program Overview

Semester 1: RJ Foundations, Practices, and Principles

Focus: Establishing a strong foundation in RJ concepts, values, and practices

Semester 2: Conflict and Trauma Through RJ

Focus: Understanding the roots and impacts of conflict and trauma and how RJ addresses both

Semester 3: Healthy Boundaries and Harm Reduction Through RJ

Focus: Building personal and interpersonal boundaries and reducing harm using RJ principles

Semester 4: Accountability and Relationships Through RJ

Focus: Exploring accountability, trust-building, and maintaining healthy relationships

Semester 5: Repairing Harm, Reflection, and Reintegration

Focus: Applying RJ to healing, personal growth, and reintegration into the community both during and after incarceration

These additional Circles help to further our student advisory council's mission to "engage in ongoing professional development for continued practice and transform the prison environment into a more restorative space." They also provide opportunities for members to sharpen their facilitation skills and expose those outside our program to restorative practices, as well as creating opportunities for recruitment (which we detail in *Module 1: Building a Strong Cohort*). In the RJ Lab, many program applicants for our third cohort came from Circles led by program alumni.

Case study

The student advisory council invited the RJ Lab program director to observe a Circle they were facilitating in the SAP dormitory. In addition to experiencing and appreciating how these alumni were paying it forward, the director provided the following facilitation notes for continuous improvement:

Positive takeaways

- Big Circle, strong engagement. I was impressed by the number of people who felt comfortable sharing.
- Strong and robust community agreement.
- Everyone respected the talking piece, which prevented crosstalk.
- I can see that their understanding of core concepts such as accountability is developing as a result of their time in the Circle.
- The Circle's co-facilitators do a nice job of working together and leading from the rear. They also do a really nice job with modeling their responses when they participate in the Circle.

Suggestions for consideration

- Make use of the "parking lot" for big ideas/questions outside the Circle's scope (e.g., the question about RJ as an alternative to the criminal legal system).
- Ground storytelling rounds in a guiding concept with strong boundaries so that discussions do not become repetitive (perhaps

create an agenda for the day to share with participants). You may have already done this with your class schedule, but it may be helpful to remind participants at the beginning of each Circle.

- Build enforceable time limits into the community agreement (e.g., one minute or less) so that people don't hold onto the talking piece for too long.
- Consider ways to discourage the creation of dichotomies of deserving/undeserving, innocent/guilty, emphasizing solidarity instead (perhaps build this into the community agreement as well).
- Guide participants away from the criminal legal framework and language (e.g., "mitigating and aggravating" factors) toward a more non-Western lens to honor the indigenous roots of RJ. Guide participants away from labeling language ("victim/offender," etc.).

> Continuous engagement means that I stay positively focused and remain informed about current progress in RJ and how cohort members in other dorms I have limited or no contact with, save in our meetings due to security, are doing and if they have any questions or issues where I may be of help. It also helps us to stay strong and connected to our community, and to keep RJ moving forward in our institutional situation.
>
> *– RJ Lab Student*

Deepening Practice

Professional development opportunities also invite us to deepen our practice. Our friends at Collective Justice, for example, helped us develop a listening practice called **holding space**, which challenges us to create a supportive structure that can hold difficult emotions such as pain, shame, and discomfort.

We have practiced holding space within the cohort when students experience the loss of a loved one and ask for support in processing their loss. We also hold space for program staff who experience difficult personal, family, or social dynamics that affect how they show up to work. We invite violence survivors into our Circles to share their stories while we hold space for their grief—a practice that grounds us in maintaining the survivor-centered nature of restorative justice and allows us to better understand the many impacts and ripple effects of harm. This practice requires skills related to

> This is a social place wherein I am challenged to improve myself through education and the exercise of the educational skills I am learning. It is a constant motivation toward genuineness. Being in long-term relationships brings out who a person really is, when people know you and you them it makes interacting easier and more sincere.
>
> *– RJ Lab Student*

listening, self-regulation, remaining present, and challenging us to reverse our social and cultural conditioning to fill uncomfortable silences with words and hollow platitudes. As Collective Justice reminds us, healing is not about "feeling better" but about "getting better at feeling."[45]

Skill-based strategies for holding space include tracking our bodies, listening with presence, allowing space for breath and silence, prioritizing agency and self-determination, mirroring language and body language, asking open-ended questions, and centering the speaker. We include the full exercise and guidelines in Appendix D.

Ongoing Advisement

We discussed academic advising in *Module 4: Modeling Accountability*. Advisement is a key structure for continuous engagement and should not be limited to currently enrolled students. DeCapua et al.[46] describe advising as a process that helps students set academic and career goals, overcome barriers, and move through their educational pathways with confidence. They also explain that holistic advising addresses academic, social, and emotional needs. This is important in HEP programs, where students may face complex barriers related to incarceration, limited access to information, changing program requirements, transfer questions, reentry planning, and uncertainty about future opportunities. Strong advising can help students understand their options and feel better supported.

Advising also supports belonging. García et al.[47] describe advising as an opportunity to build trust, help students navigate resources, and create a stronger sense of community. Yuan et al.[48] found that advising relationships can shape students' sense of belonging, especially when advisors show cultural empathy and build rapport. Yenney[49] identifies rapport, clear expectations, and positive feedback as important advising practices. Pitts and Myers[50] also emphasize the importance of confirmation in advising, meaning that students feel recognized as unique people, listened to, and

given responses that fit their actual experiences. In HEP programs, advising should be clear, respectful, consistent, and personal enough to make students feel seen rather than processed.

Continuous advisement can occur on an ad hoc basis. Once students have completed their coursework in the RJ Lab, we no longer schedule regular appointments with them. However, we continue to keep up with program alumni through the student advisory council and schedule one-on-one sessions with individual students as needed. As our program alumni continue to navigate life's challenges—from family reunification to preparing for parole hearings—they know that we are still here to offer guidance, resources, and tailored support.

Student Advisory Councils

Programs also benefit from being advised by seasoned alumni. A number of programs have begun developing student government organizations and **student advisory councils** to keep program alumni engaged and continuously improve program delivery.

> The student advisory council has meant a lot to me because it keeps me mentally active, and I am part of an ongoing community.
>
> *– RJ Lab Student*

The Restorative Justice Lab developed a student advisory council that meets monthly and continues to inform and improve the program. When pitching our proposal for the student advisory council to the prison administration, we submitted the following written justification and outline.

Student Advisory Council
Restorative Justice Lab @ UNA

Purpose:

- To keep each cohort engaged in the program and to invest in their professional development through continued trainings in best practices
- To continue to prepare students for reentry
- To reinforce the rules, community agreements, and protocols attached to the program
- To serve as models and motivators for other students by holding ourselves to RJ principles

- To design and assist with program evaluation
- To liaise between the program and facility
- To provide additional program support for subsequent cohorts

Areas where program support is needed:

- Library support
- Technology support
- Writing support
- Newsletter development
- Tutoring during study hall (especially research methods)
- Recruitment and retention
- New student orientation
- Circle training support

Meeting frequency:

- Every month

Suggestions for a Successful Pitch:

- Mission alignment: We used language related to DOC's mission—accountability, professionalism, preparation for reentry—to show the council's alignment with DOC objectives.
- Lean resources: We strategized on how to align our meetings with study hall periods for subsequent cohorts so that they would not require additional space or staff from the prison.
- Program sustainability: We demonstrated concrete program needs that would benefit from ongoing alumni participation and connected these needs to opportunities for leadership and professional development.

We also developed an application form for the student advisory council to create a more formal onboarding and accountability process for new members. The full application form, which includes the council's community agreement, is provided in Appendix E. Below are examples of student responses to Question 1 on the form, showing the range of motivations and skills that students bring to the council.

1. Why are you interested in joining the student advisory council, and what gifts or talents could you bring?

I want the opportunity to give back to a program that has given so much to me. I want to use my gift of encouragement to let others know that if I can do it, they can, too.

1. Why are you interested in joining the student advisory council, and what gifts or talents could you bring?

I would love to be apart of this student advisory council, so I could keep the RJ program alive. I bring the gift of love, trust, unity, + understanding of a Good community, plus I get to learn more.

1. Why are you interested in joining the student advisory council, and what gifts or talents could you bring?

To be part of (HEP) Higher Education in Prison, practice professionalism, and continue moving forward

1. Why are you interested in joining the student advisory council, and what gifts or talents could you bring?

* I MUST HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN COHORT 3! THIS PROGRAM HAS BEEN TRANSFORMATIONAL IN MY LIFE AND I WANT THAT FOR OTHERS.
* I WANT TO USE MY BACKGROUND IN HIGHER ED AS A TUTOR.

1. Why are you interested in joining the student advisory council, and what gifts or talents could you bring?

I want to help others grow while keeping my mind active. I'm creative, persistent, and good at processing and transferring information.

1. Why are you interested in joining the student advisory council, and what gifts or talents could you bring?

I am interested in giving back to the program and helping the program grow. I am dedicated, a critical thinker, analytically minded, and great with computers.

More recently, the RJ Lab created a parallel outside student advisory council made up of program alumni who have been released from prison. Like the inside student advisory council, it meets monthly. Council members are paid to advise our program and discuss how we can better prepare students for reentry.

I'm so proud and happy to serve on the Outside Student Advisory Council for the University of North Alabama's RJ Lab. I deeply believe in the mission of the RJ Lab and the work it's doing to help create meaningful educational opportunities in carceral spaces.

This role gives me the chance to strengthen my professional skills while giving back to the community of incarcerated learners. I carry my own experience of pursuing education while incarcerated, and I use that perspective to support others who are navigating the same challenges.

Education inside prison is both quite difficult and transformative. If I can help even one person who feels unsure of themselves—someone standing right on the border of possibility—then this work is worth every moment.

– RJ Lab Outside Student Advisory Council

In summary, continuous engagement in HEP programs should be built into the full program experience. Courses matter, but they are only one component of engagement. Professional development helps educators and partners prepare for meaningful dialogue. Co-curricular involvement gives students opportunities to practice leadership and build community. Civic engagement helps students connect learning to the common good. PAR positions students as contributors to knowledge and change. Academic advising helps students navigate barriers, set goals, and feel connected to the program. When these structures work together, HEP programs can create repeated opportunities for students to participate, lead, reflect, receive support, and remain connected to the learning community.

How can we mark and celebrate continuous engagement through ceremony?

Definitional Ceremony #1: Graduation

Restorative justice practitioner Frida Rundell describes **definitional ceremonies** as opportunities to mark, honor, and celebrate growth through ritual.[51] Graduation ceremonies are typically marked by caps and gowns, processionals, guest speakers, the conferral of certificates and diplomas, and refreshments. In the RJ Lab, we schedule graduation ceremonies

"Restorative Justice is not just practice based, but a way of life. A way to address harm and trauma while focusing on healing."





THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS AND FUNDERS

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Ascendium Elevating opportunity

Mellon Foundation

LAUGHING GULL FOUNDATION COMMITTED TO JUSTICE. ROOTED IN THE SOUTH.

2024 - 2026

UNIVERSITY OF North Alabama

Graduation Ceremony

UNA RESTORATIVE JUSTICE LAB

COHORT 2

UNA RESTORATIVE UNIVERSITY OF 18 30 NORTH ALABAMA JUSTICE

July 16, 2026

Mission:

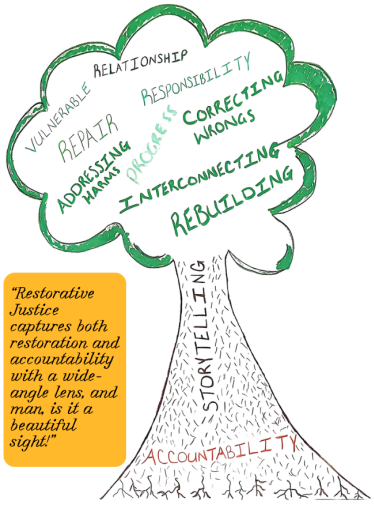
The Restorative Justice Lab prepares students to make systemic change in their communities by providing skills that foster community accountability, perspective-taking, and social engagement.



Program:

- **Welcome**
- **Cohort 2: Narrative Skit**
- **Remarks from Program Faculty, Staff, Administration, and Guests**
- **Class Song**
- **Awards**
- **Certificate Ceremony**
- **Closing Poem**
- **Invitation**
- **Reception**





"Restorative Justice captures both restoration and accountability with a wide-angle lens, and man, is it a beautiful sight!"

keeping the gift in motion in a way that is open and diffuse, so that the gift does not accumulate and stagnate but keeps moving. like the gift of berries through an ecosystem.



"Restorative Justice through the UNA RJ Lab is more than a class, it's a lifestyle. It is full of life lessons that change how you see the world and your relationships."

during the summer so that we have time to work with students to design a ceremony that is meaningful to them. Our first cohort designed a ceremony where they performed a Circle, which gave them an opportunity to showcase what they had learned and express what their participation in the program meant to them. Our second cohort performed monologues highlighting their takeaways from each course. We used art they created in the graduation program pamphlet to mark and commemorate the experience.

Following the ceremony, we set up a long line of tables for a family-style lunch where students, faculty, facility staff, and guests ate together, enjoying a menu designed and selected by the cohort. For our recent graduation ceremony, graduates requested to have our unofficial program mascot, Limey the skunk, featured on the cake.



Definitional Ceremony #2: Milestone Celebrations

Because ongoing programming does not have an end date, it is important to continue marking effort, growth, and sustained engagement through definitional ceremonies. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, distributes chips or "sobriety coins" with different colors and meanings to celebrate various durations of sobriety—from 24 hours to yearly anniversaries—as "tangible markers of progress" that also foster "community support and accountability" through the public ritual of renewed commitment.[52] As Rebecca Solnit writes, "Change often happens so subtly, so slowly, that only

a milestone lets you know that it has been taking place all along, lets you see that many small changes add up to a large one."[53]

In the RJ Lab, we offer certificates of achievement for each completed class to currently enrolled students. For our student advisory council, we offer certificates of achievement for each six-month and two-year engagement, as shown below. These certificates, which are copied for each student's parole jacket, signal to them and the facility that they are working to achieve milestones.


UNIVERSITY OF
North Alabama

CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT

AWARDED TO

NAME

AIS Number

in recognition of completing

TWO YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

DATE

WARDEN

We also offer end-of-semester celebrations that invite all the cohorts to celebrate together. These, too, are marked by certificate ceremonies that invite reflection and gratitude. We invite students to confer their certificates to one another along with an affirmation, providing another opportunity to practice community building and mutual support.

The ritual of combined celebrations helps students widen the Circle. As we discussed in *Module 1: Creating a Strong Cohort*, Circles can become their own territories, especially in prison settings, and some cohorts may want to close the Circle around themselves. Continuous engagement and combined definitional ceremonies provide opportunities to demonstrate how we can create concentric Circles that broaden and enrich community-building. Upon graduation, each cohort de-centers itself to make space for the next



incoming group of students, moving from the center to the periphery while continuing to provide support and structure for the program. Featured here is a photo of our student advisory council supporting the program's second cohort during their graduation ceremony alongside our program faculty and friends from Collective Justice. Students from the first cohort were instrumental in setting up and organizing the ceremony so that the graduating cohort could enjoy their special day.

> The first word that came to mind was therapeutic. Continuous engagement helps me to stay grounded and connected to the process and program. It gives me an outlet to express my thoughts and ideas to my cohort to see if they are adequate enough for the betterment of the program. It keeps my mind open and allows my thoughts to be challenged, which in turn challenges me.
>
> *– RJ Lab Student*

Recap of Module 5: Creating Opportunities for Continuous Engagement

Key takeaways:

- **Continuous engagement beyond coursework completion enhances students' sense of community and belonging, especially for students serving long sentences.**
- **HEP programs will need to frame continuous engagement for prison facilities in ways that show alignment with both educational and carceral institutions' values and objectives.**
- **Co-curricular and extracurricular activities, events, and structures can take many forms, from single workshops to long-term projects and advisory councils.**
- **Advancement and growth can be marked and celebrated through restorative ceremonies.**

In the next and final module, we explore how we can create and sustain relationships at the institutional level to enhance the sustainability of HEP programs.

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Appendix A: RJ Lab Student Newsletter Sample

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

UNA NEWSLETTER

HARM AND HEALING IN THE GOTHIC SOUTH

How Can We Heal Through Writing About the Gothic South?

A UNA Student's Perspective

The Gothic South, in my opinion, represents a time of harm and oppression. Utilizing writing to work through the harm that was perpetrated gives a voice to those that have been harmed and disenfranchised during this period of time. The author, Jesmyn Ward, encapsulates this perfectly when describing the character she created in her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing:* Richie, a Black preteen who was wrongfully convicted and incarcerated at Parchman prison in the Jim Crow South. She said, "I want to write him back into the present. I wanted that child to have the kind of power and agency that he had been denied in life, to act and have a certain amount of power and freedom in the present that he hadn't had in the past." [1]

> "[GOTHIC] ALWAYS GOES BACK TO ENSLAVEMENT … THAT'S THE DARK HEART OF EVERYTHING."
> ~JESMYN WARD

A UNA Student's Perspective

Jesmyn Ward 's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* describes darkness as grief, trauma, and loss in the racially turbulent South. This darkness lingers today as the pangs of the past continue to resonate. This system of privilege and power diminishes the voices of the less fortunate. Restorative justice is an opportunity to break cycles of injustice that is cloaked in this darkness. It is a light that has the ability to shine on and disrupt the chaos of history within the realms of race, class, and social structures. In this way we can reclaim power.

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UNA STUDENT REVIEWS OF JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING*

Sing, Unburied, Sing is an excellent contribution to Southern Gothic literature. Jesmyn Ward magnifies the lives of so many families in the U.S. South. She also takes us to the spiritual world and challenges us to wonder how many souls are still in search of everlasting peace.

★★★★★ 5 out of 5 Stars

When spiritualists talk about ruling spirits, they are mostly referring to principality in high places. In the novel Jesmyn Ward talks about "the tree of ghosts." It's like she is almost performing an exorcism by telling the ghost to "go home" by singing to them. Jesmyn Ward's use of imagery is what I liked the most about this novel.

★★★★★ 3 out of 5 Stars

Appendix B: Sample Syllabus, Participatory Action Research Training

Restorative Justice Lab
Research and Training Institute
Summer 2023

Week One, May 16–18: Introduction to HEP and PAR

Guiding Questions:

- What is PAR?
- What is HEP?
- How do we move beyond the "Beyond Recidivism" narrative?
- How do we measure change?

Readings:

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Week Two, May 23–25: What is Program Evaluation?

Guiding Questions:

- What is program evaluation?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- What are common HEP evaluation questions?

Readings:

- Palfrey, Colin, Thomas Paul, and Ceri Phillips. 2012. *Evaluation for the Real World: The Impact of Evidence in Policy Making*. Chicago: Policy Press. Chapter 2 (pp. 16-54)
- Stakeholder Missions
- Lerman, Amy E., and Jacob Grumbach. 2016. *The Prison University Project Qualitative Evidence on the Impact of Prison Higher Education*. UC Berkeley.
- Winterfield, Laura, Mark Coggeshall, Michelle Burke-Storer, Vanessa Correa, and Simon Tidd. 2009. "The Effects of Postsecondary Correctional Education: Final Report: (719182011-001)." Table of Contents, Executive Summary & Appendix D: Focus Group and Stakeholder Interview Questions (pp. iii, v, 21-22).

Further readings:

- Winterfield, Laura, Mark Coggeshall, Michelle Burke-Storer, Vanessa Correa, and Simon Tidd. 2009. "The Effects of Postsecondary Correctional Education: Final Report: (719182011-001)." Table of Contents, Executive Summary & Appendix D: Focus Group and Stakeholder Interview Questions ((pp.1-48).
- Lerman, Amy E., and Jacob Grumbach. 2016. *The Prison University Project Qualitative Evidence on the Impact of Prison Higher Education*. UC Berkeley (pp.1-51).

Week Three, May 30-June 1: Two Types of Evaluation (Program-focused and student-focused)

Guiding Questions:

- What are common metrics to capture program health?
- What is the goal of a restorative justice program?
- What is a restorative justice program evaluation?
- What is the RJ program doing for you?

Readings:

- Brick, Michael Scott, and Julie Ajinkya. 2020. *Supporting Success: The Higher Education in Prison Key Performance Indicator Framework.* (pp. 1-21).
- Palfrey, Colin, Thomas Paul, and Ceri Phillips. 2012. *Evaluation for the Real World: The Impact of Evidence in Policy Making*. Chicago: Policy Press. Chapter 3 (pp. 55-92).
- Boyce, Ayesha. 2019. "A Re–Imagining of Evaluation as Social Justice." *Critical Education* 10(1):1–20.

Further readings:

- Scott, Robert. 2018. "Reducing Recidivism via College-in-Prison." *Critical Education* 9(18):1–15.

Week Four, June 4-8: Evaluation & Measurement I

Guiding Questions:

- What do we want to measure?
- How do we measure what we want to measure?
- How do we ask questions?

Readings:

- Palfrey, Colin, Thomas Paul, and Ceri Phillips. 2012. *Evaluation for the Real World: The Impact of Evidence in Policy Making*. Chicago: Policy Press. Chapter 4 (pp. 93-124).
- Rubin, Allen & Earl Babbie. 2016. "Chapter 9: Quantitative and Qualitative Measurement Instruments." *Essential Research Methods for Social Work*. 4th ed. (pp. 157-176).
- Multiple Choice Questions (Handouts)

Further readings:

- Allred, Sarah L., Lana D. Harrison, and Daniel J. O'Connell. 2013. "Self-Efficacy: An Important Aspect of Prison-Based Learning." *The Prison Journal* 93(2): 211–33. doi: 10.1177/0032885512472964.

Week Five, June 13-15: Evaluation & Measurement II

Guiding Questions:

- What is a Likert scale?
- How do we create Likert scales?
- What is the difference between even-numbered and odd-numbered Likert scales?
- What is a research question?
- What makes a good research question?

Readings:

- White, Patrick. 2017. *Developing Research Questions*. 2nd edition. London: Red Globe Press, Ch 2-3 (pp. 39-92)
- Creating Likert Scales (Handouts)

Further readings:

- Pelletier, Emily, and Douglas Evans. 2019. "Beyond Recidivism: Positive Outcomes From Higher Education Programs in Prisons." *Journal of Correctional Education* (1974-) 70(2):49–68.

Appendix C: Participatory Action Research for Program Evaluation

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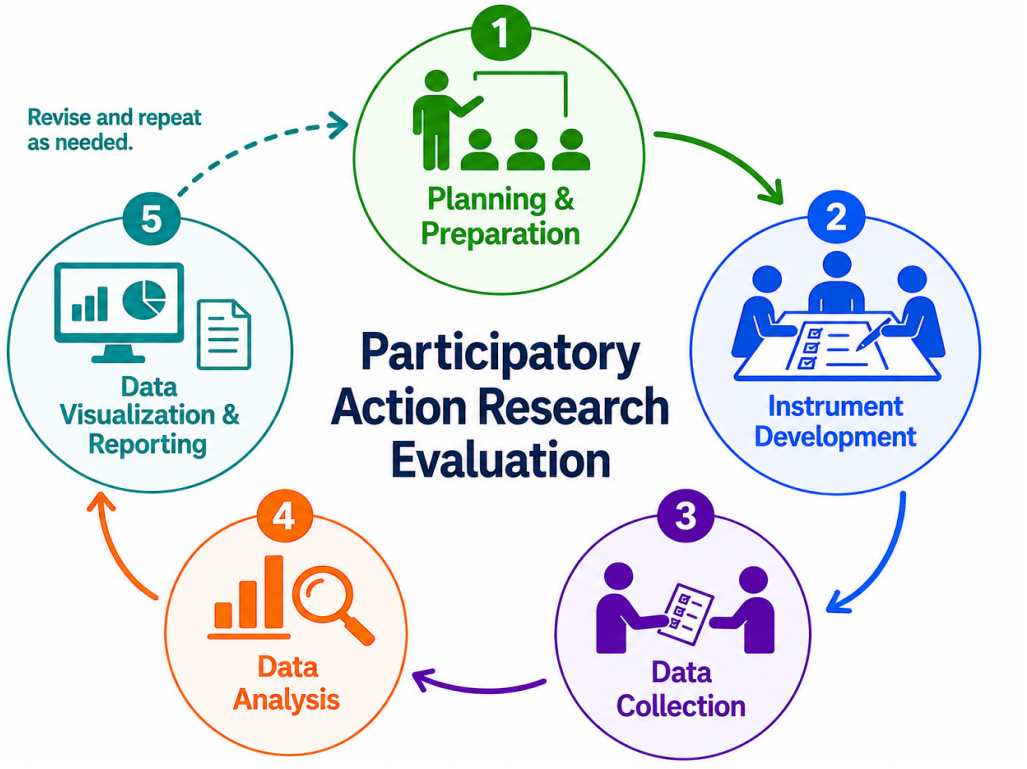
Participatory Action Research (PAR) program evaluation is **iterative**, which means that it is a continuous process that requires planning, development, collection, analysis, and reporting. What follows is a description of the process, based on its implementation in the Restorative Justice Lab.

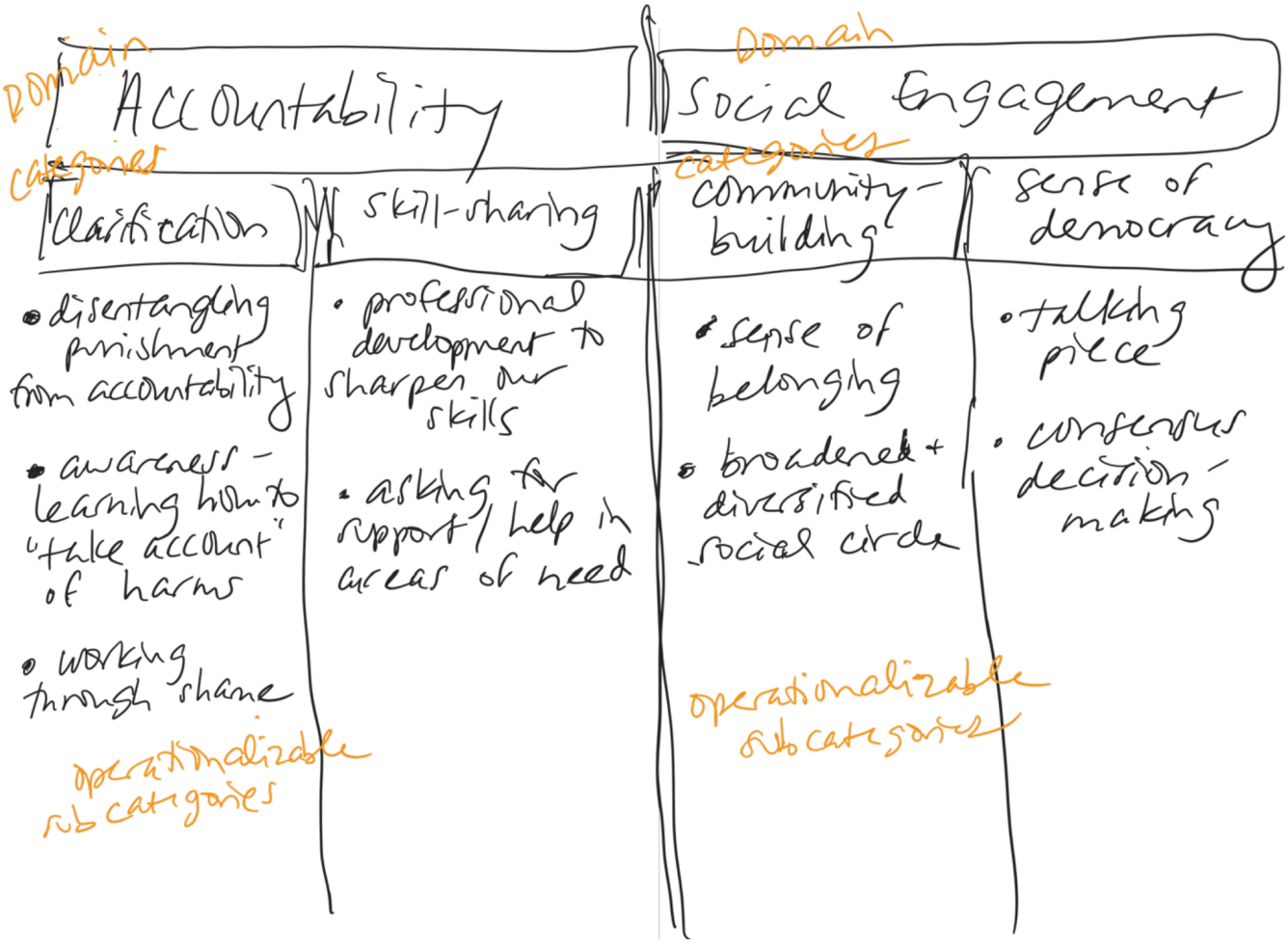


Stage 1. Planning & Preparation

The Planning and Preparation stage involves building community while teaching students the core concepts necessary for Participatory Action Research (PAR) program evaluation: Higher Education Studies, Higher Education in Prison Studies, research design, and evaluation. Covering this material requires both time and regular institutional access to students outside of coursework, and securing that access is often the greatest barrier to conducting PAR projects. Consequently, this stage often requires creativity in developing ways to prepare students to participate as co-researchers. Community-building activities are also important, particularly when researchers are not members of the same cohort.

Once this foundation has been established, begin "community conversations"[1] about what success as a student means to the inside researchers. Encourage alumni to reflect on their college experiences. A central aspect of PAR—and of working with lived experience more broadly—is learning to "step in, step out": moving between lived experience and objective analysis, or between positioning oneself as the research subject and the researcher. During the "step in" phase, inside researchers reflect deeply on how college changed them. They then "step out" by identifying those changes and giving them concise titles or phrases. We ask students to think about their own transformation—and the desired transformation of other students—as a "character arc," with the beginning representing who they were when they entered college and the end representing who they have become.[2]

This "community conversation" stage is often chaotic and resembles a brainstorming session. Next comes the ordering phase, which is similar to creating an outline based on emergent themes. Outlining will create domains or buckets with each domain potentially having subcategories or subdomains. Creating domains and subdomains is the first practice of "stepping out." The second is asking, "How do we capture this?"—or "how do we operationalize this?" This is where subdomains become developed into measurable metrics or questions. Below is an early draft from the RJ Lab's process based on the domains "accountability" and "social engagement."



Attempt to obtain **Institutional Review Board (IRB)** approval as early in this process as possible, both to protect students and to begin data collection. The Planning & Preparation period is full of relational, creative, and interpersonal richness that should be documented through journaling. Both outside and inside researchers should journal insights they gain, thoughts about the process, and perspectives they learn or wrestle with. Following IRB approval, these journal entries can serve as data that are not only valuable to revisit throughout the PAR journey but may also form the basis for co-authored publications examining the PAR process.

Stage 2. Instrument Development

The next stage involves creating the survey instrument for program evaluation. Inside researchers study different types of questions such as Likert scales, rank-order questions, sliding scales, and open-ended items as well as principles of question development. Questions should be read and re-read to identify potential sources of bias, confusing wording, leading language, or unintended interpretations, and researchers should adopt a critical "devil's advocate" perspective to identify weaknesses or unintended meanings in each item. It is often helpful to maintain consistency across domains. For example, if Domain A contains 8 Likert scale questions, two open-ended questions, and 5 rank-order questions, then consider doing the same for Domain B. When developing questions for domains or subdomains, always ask, "How do we capture that?" and scrutinize each question for validity—that is, whether it elicits responses directly related to the construct being measured. **Validity** refers to whether an instrument measures what it is intended to measure.

When determining question types, keep the final analysis in mind. For example, if you want to run regression analyses (e.g., "Do students who live in the same housing unit with two or more other college students show greater growth in developing a sense of community?"), make sure your Likert scales have seven or more possible responses (e.g., Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree) so the question can then be used as a continuous variable.

After you have created the survey instrument and the students have played devil's advocate, pilot-test the survey with all inside researchers, perhaps other incarcerated individuals, or individuals outside the prison. Also, consider conducting cognitive interviews, a process in which the person taking the survey vocalizes their thinking throughout the process.[3] This helps to check validity—that is, whether the question captures what you intend it to capture.[4] Be sure not to administer the pilot survey to any students who will eventually take the real survey, as prior exposure may

introduce testing (or pretesting) bias and influence their later responses.

Stage 3. Data Collection

In order to avoid potential coercion or bias, the outside researcher should not be the person to administer the survey, nor should they be present in the room while participants complete it. Participants should be reminded that participation is voluntary and that choosing not to participate or withdrawing will have no effect on their educational standing or their status in the program. Whereas computer-generated surveys permit fewer errors (e.g., each question must be answered before the respondent is allowed to advance to the next question), errors are common on paper instruments.

Please answer the following questions about your current *self-accountability practices* on a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree":

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4. I hold myself to a high standard.	✓			
5. It is easy for me to articulate my feelings.			X	
6. I struggle to ask for help/support when I need it.		✓		
7. I accept help/support when it is offered.	✓			
8. I am aware of who I am, where I am going, and what I value.	✓			

For instance, respondents may accidentally skip questions; they may create new categories on Likert scales, as seen by the respondent's "X" above; or, in rank-order questions where each number should be used only once, they may assign the same rank to multiple options, as seen below.

3. Please rank 1-6 (only using each number once), from 1 being the highest to 6 being the lowest, which of the following are most important to you regarding ***community accountability***. How can we, as a ***community***, make ourselves accountable?

1 Tell the truth about historical harm
2 Sentence lawbreakers to time in prison
3 Identify economic and social needs that generate harm
3 Pay back what is owed through financial restitution or reparation
1 Build and nurture relationships with others

To minimize administration bias, all participants should receive the same instructions, and administrators should clarify procedures but avoid interpreting the meaning of survey questions. The person collecting the completed surveys should quickly double-check each survey to ensure all questions are answered and answered properly. Whenever possible, this review should occur before the participant leaves the setting so that any inadvertent omissions or errors can be corrected without substantively influencing responses. Completed surveys should then be stored securely to protect participant confidentiality.

Stage 4. Data Analysis

Stage 2 or 3 is where many PAR researchers end the collaboration with community members, whether due to limited time and institutional access, believing community co-researchers are not capable of data analysis, or believing data analysis and reporting are the responsibility of "true" researchers.[5] Co-researchers can be taught data analysis during the Planning & Preparation stage or during this stage. They should be taught the value of both descriptive and inferential statistics and how each contributes to answering the research questions. Data analysis should always be guided by, and conducted in service of, those research questions.

Encourage co-researchers to experiment during Stages 4 and 5. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of different measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode). What does each reveal, and what might each obscure? Does the mean, for instance, mask the spread of the data, thereby flattening the true story the data tells? Stages 4 and 5 should be thought of as the process of constructing a narrative. Ultimately, research is about telling a story grounded in evidence.

Before providing inside researchers with the data for analysis, outside researchers must remove identifying information and assign anonymous participant codes to each instrument so that pre- and post-surveys can be linked without revealing respondents' identities. Because students responded on paper, the surveys should either be transcribed into a de-identified dataset or copied with all identifying information removed before being shared with inside researchers.

Before analyses begin, co-researchers should also participate in data cleaning. Together, inside and outside researchers should review the dataset for unanswered questions, duplicate responses, invalid rankings, multiple selections where only one response was permitted, and other inconsistencies or errors. Decisions about how to handle these issues—such as whether to exclude a case, code a response as missing, or recode an invalid response—should be discussed collaboratively, documented, and applied consistently across all observations. Involving co-researchers in data cleaning reinforces that seemingly small methodological

decisions can meaningfully shape research findings and interpretations.

When running both descriptive and inferential statistics, Microsoft Excel is often sufficient for many PAR projects. It can be used to calculate descriptive statistics, measures of central tendency, t-tests, regression analyses, and other common procedures. Because Excel is widely available and often already familiar to students, it provides an accessible and affordable alternative to specialized statistical software such as SPSS or Stata.

For any qualitative or open-ended questions, inside researchers will need to be taught coding. A codebook should be collaboratively developed, with outside and inside researchers discussing emerging themes, refining code definitions, and revising the codebook as needed throughout the analytic process.

In Stages 4 and 5, each co-researcher can analyze each question, but for the sake of saving time, the workload can be divided. Whether working independently or dividing the workload, the team should reconvene to compare interpretations, discuss any disagreements, and collectively decide on the final themes and findings before moving to data visualization and reporting.

Stage 5. Data Visualization & Reporting

Data visualization should be done in service of the research narrative and should be designed to best convey the information in a report. Data reporting should instruct the reader by reminding them of the research questions, helping them understand the results from data analysis, and guiding them through possible interpretations. Co-researchers should also consider the intended audience and tailor visualizations and reporting accordingly. A report written for prison administrators, for example, may emphasize different findings and use different language than one prepared for students, policymakers, or academic researchers, even when drawing from the same dataset.

Co-researchers should experiment with several different types of data visualization, including pie charts, bar charts, histograms, scatterplots, and line graphs. Often, especially in small samples, descriptive statistics might convey the research results more meaningfully to readers than inferential statistics. They should discuss not only how to create visualizations but also why one type of figure may be preferable to another. The goal is not to produce the most visually appealing chart but the one that most clearly and accurately communicates the findings while avoiding misleading representations of the data.

To prepare inside researchers to co-write the report, they need to read several evaluation reports to gain an understanding of the breadth and possibilities of the

genre. Assign reports that are drastically different, ranging from high-level, mostly summarized and abstract[6] to reports that rely heavily on qualitative quotations or narrative.[7] They also need to read reports where data—both descriptive and inferential—are integrated into the report effectively. Discuss why certain visualizations and reporting styles communicate findings more impactfully than others and how each contributes to telling the overall research story. Co-researchers should know that report-writing can be a highly valuable skill. Finally, emphasize that the purpose of reporting in PAR is not merely to document findings but to communicate them in ways that inform decision-making, improve programs, and promote meaningful change.

Notes

1. Jarrod Wall and Katie Owens-Murphy, "Positionality in PAR: Notes from a HEP Program Evaluation," *Critical Issues in Prison Education*, Ed. Erin Corbett. Under contract with Bloomsbury Press.

2. Katie Owens-Murphy and Jarrod Wall,"Participatory Action Research as Narrative Criminology," Accepted by editors; special issue on *Community Voices in Violent Contexts: Unwriting and Rewriting Crime through Collaboration and Participatory Research in International Criminology*, (2026).

3. Gordon Willis, *Cognitive Interviewing: A Tool for Improving Questionnaire Design* (Sage Publications, 2005).

4. Seymour Sudman and Norman Bradburn, *Asking Questions: A Practical Guide to Questionnaire Design* (Jossey-Bass, 1982).

5. Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre, *Essentials of Critical Participatory Action Research*, (American Psychological Association, 2021).

6. Laura Winterfield, et al., *The Effects of Postsecondary Correctional Education: Final Report: (719182011-001)*, (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2009), http://doi.apa.org/get-pe-doi.cfm?doi=10.1037/e719182011-001.

7. Amy Lerman and Jacob Grumbach, *The Prison University Project Qualitative Evidence on the Impact of Prison Higher Education*, (Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley, 2016), https://www.mttamcollege.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PUP-Lerman-White-Paper.pdf.

Appendix D: Holding Space



Breaking Silence

Holding Space

We live in a society that discourages us from sharing our experiences of harm and trauma. As a result, we are often not well practiced in holding space for one another to share or experience deep emotion. The experience of hearing others share can even be triggering or upsetting for us, which we may respond to by checking out, looking down or away, shifting in our seats, going deep into our own stories internally, or responding from a place of reaction, or judgment. These are understandable reactions though they may not serve other people's healing journey. When it comes to supporting one another as we share more about ourselves, the quality of how we listen and respond matters. In fact, just helping a person feel heard and understood can sometimes go a long way toward healing. Below are suggestions and tools for us as we practice holding space for one another. Remember, these are all tools, not rules. There is no "right" way to do this work. Instead, this is a collective practice of being in community with one another, and it is often messy and difficult. It is important for you to speak in your own style that is specific to you, your culture, and your authentic self.

Below are some possible techniques to hold space for others as they break silence:

Tracking Our Bodies. By tracking bodily sensations, we increase our awareness of our own reactions to the things we are hearing and absorbing. When we are aware of ourselves we are able to identify when something within us may be impacted and are able to address it instead of reacting to it. Connecting our sensations to how we are feeling, and breathing through them, allows us to come back to center and to be present for a person sharing. This process also allows us to notice our own felt sensations as information to be explored. Noting what is happening in someone else's body in real time can also be a way to support each other connecting to bodily sensations.

Engaged Listening. How do you *show* that you are listening? By listening with

your full body you create space for others to vent their fears, frustrations, and feelings. Maintaining eye contact and showing that you're interested in what they have to say with open and affirming body language can be helpful for people to feel heard. Engaged listening includes things like nodding, eye contact, facing the speaker with your body, etc.

Space for Breath and Silence. We often want to fill space when we are uncomfortable. Allowing silence and time for people to breathe, cry, catch their breath or focus is an important part of holding space for others. If you have a tendency to fill space, you can practice counting slowly to yourself before commenting, prompting, or inquiring (6 to 15 seconds usually does it).

Agency and Self-Determination. Autonomy and consent are at the core of equitable relationships and trauma healing. After someone has shared, it's important to ask what they need next. You can ask if they would like a break, a collective breath or if they are open to feedback from the group. Rather than diving in with advice or questions, which can cut off further exploration of feelings, it is helpful to wait until a person has sorted through their feelings, and then help them brainstorm solutions if they want. As listeners we may pick up on areas of growth for a person and we can name those things as invitations to explore. For example:

- When I heard you say x,y,z… it [insert how the statement impacted you]. Are you open to spending a few minutes talking about…
- Are you interested in exploring…
- You said you are concerned about [insert statement] and then I heard you say …. [insert contradictory statement, motivation or action]. Are you interested in talking about…

If we offer a suggestion or series of questions and a person appears resistant to exploring that area, it's okay to drop it. The same is true if a prompt or question isn't landing or seems confusing for the sharer. This is lifelong work and not everything will be processed and fleshed out fully in this group. Instead, we can work to understand the sharer better and offer support and exploration in areas they are ready to explore.

Mirroring. We often interpret people's words without realizing we have done so. Summarizing and repeating back what you hear someone say is a helpful way to ensure that we understand one another. Try using their words and checking to make sure you understand their meaning. Some phrases like, "what I hear you saying is…", "It sounds like [insert statement], did I get that right?" or "I noticed that…" might be useful ways to begin.

Open-Ended Questions. Ask a person to expand on something they said with

open-ended questions that allow room for depth and exploration, as opposed to closed-ended questions that only require a "yes" or "no" answer. Open-ended questions can gently challenge old assumptions or promote discovery and insight. Open-ended questions often start with who, what, why, and how?

- What was it like to..
- How did you feel about…
- What brought you to…
- In what ways is that similar/different from..
- What was your relationship like with…
- I noticed you [insert observation] when you said x,y,z, what was coming up for you..
- How/what are you feeling (right now)…
- What do you need from the group…
- I am curious about…
- I wonder about…
- Would you be willing to talk more about…

Open-Ended Question Exercise. Read off the below closed-ended questions and ask participants to rephrase it as an open-ended question.

Open-ended questions often start like:

- What was it like to..
- How did you feel about…
- What brought you to…
- In what ways is that similar/different from..
- Why are you hoping for…

Examples of questions + how you can shift them to an open-ended question:

QUESTIONS	SHIFTED TO OPEN-ENDED
Did you get along well with your father?	What was your relationship like with your father?
Are you tapping your foot because you're nervous? Or did you notice you were tapping your foot when you said that?	I noticed you tapping your foot when you said that, what is coming up for you?
Are you feeling better today?	How are you feeling today?
Do you need anything from the group?	What do you need from the group?
Was it x,y,z that made you feel sad?	You said you were feeling sad, can you say more about why you felt sad?
Are you still feeling sad?	I'm wondering if you can share more about how sadness shows up for you now? Or I'm wondering if you can share more about how you feel about this now?

Center the Speaker. Focus on the speaker's emotions and concerns rather than on the listener's experiences and advice. Rather than delving into a related story of your own, keep the focus on the person sharing until they have talked it out. Sharing how their story impacts you or how you can relate can be important to build connection and relationship, but remember to bring focus back to them quickly. It can be useful to ask yourself before responding to a person, "*does this story serve the group and/or the person?*" If you are sharing your own healing process and not theirs, you can write it down for later.

Remember the Group Agreements: It is helpful to review and try to hold yourself to the values and agreements that your group developed. These are the values that you collectively agreed upon to create a space that makes sharing and healing possible.

Facts vs. Feelings: We are practicing questions and responses to shares that allow people to stay in a heart space. This means staying away from questions or statements about facts or that are intellectual because it might pull someone out

of a feeling space and into a "head space" that doesn't actually allow for emotional growth.

Appreciations and Affirmations: It is important for people to feel heard and validated. We can offer appreciation and validation that recognize people's strengths, successes and efforts. Here, we want to avoid statements that seem insincere or too general (e.g., "Wow you're awesome!" or "that's great!") and instead focus on the individual's specific character strengths.

- I appreciate you for….
- In your story about [insert content], I heard an incredible amount of [strength-based characteristic]…
- I appreciated when you said…
- I'm here to support you.
- You showed a lot of [insert strength, determination, survival strategy] by doing ….. I'm so glad that you did what you had to do to survive that situation.

Growing Edge: As we hold space, it will also be helpful for us to support others in finding their growing edge. This means supporting the person who is sharing to deepen into feeling in a responsible way. "Healing is not about "feeling better," but about "getting better at feeling." It is about expanding the range of emotions we can sit in and experience. We can practice bringing people into a "feeling space" by asking the sharer how they felt at different points of their story or to "try on" a feeling and ask if it feels true.

- How are you feeling…
- What was it like to share that with the group…
- How did you feel when…
- I noticed [insert physical movement, voice change, deep breaths] when you talked about your mom. It looks like it might've been painful but you didn't say much, would you be willing to tell us about that relationship…
- What did it feel like when you got that news…

"There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors" ***- Adrienne Rich, Sources***

Appendix E: Student Advisory Council Application

Student Advisory Council
RJ Lab Application

Mission: to promote the growth of restorative justice (RJ) and higher education in prison (HEP) at Limestone CF by:

- Providing organizational support to the RJ Lab at UNA;
- Providing direct support to subsequent cohorts of the RJ program at Limestone;
- Engaging in ongoing professional development for continued practice; and
- Transforming the prison environment into a more restorative space.

Meeting schedule: 6 meetings per semester (1-2 times per month) on Wednesdays from 1-3:30.

Name: _____

Questions:

1. Why are you interested in joining the student advisory council, and what gifts or talents could you bring?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Are you able to abide by the attached community agreement? _____

_____ _____

Signature Date

Student Advisory Council Community Agreement

- We will develop commitments through consensus (fist to 5) and agree to participate for six months at a time.
- We commit to full participation and attendance.
- We will set tasks and deadlines to develop project management skills (last 15 minutes of each session).
- If we don't have the capacity to complete a task, we will proactively ask for help or articulate what we need.
- We will reassign tasks as needed.
- We will recognize our strengths, talents, and limitations.
- We will honor confidentiality.
- We will respect the talking piece.
- We will stay focused.
- We will manage our time carefully.
- We will set an agenda for each meeting with time stamps.
- We will treat each other with respect and approach difficult topics with transparency and open-mindedness.
- We will practice inclusivity.
- We will comport ourselves with professionalism as representatives of this program.
- We will be honest.
- We will hold ourselves and others accountable.
- We will stay curious.
- We will be supportive of one another and incoming cohorts.
- We will be mindful of the language we use.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