

Supporting students from prison to the workforce



As I stood on an ice cream line with my daughter in the mall in June 2019, I heard a startling “Ay-yo, Miller!” Distracted by my daughter’s thoughts on chocolate ice cream with rainbow sprinkles, I saw a former student smiling, wide-eyed and sharply dressed. At no more than 27, he told me where he was working and how good life was going for him. In turn, I expressed how proud I was of him, of the exchange we were having in the mall and that I was hopeful for more.

It had been more than one year since our last exchange, where “Ay-yo Miller!” participated in a flagger course offered to men in an all-male, adult correctional facility in Delaware. At the time, as a Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) staff supervisor working in this setting, the certified education team and I delivered a range of instructional offerings from low literacy and numeracy refresher skills to secondary credential and high school diploma instruction. We also offered several vocational trainings as well as evidenced-based practices on evaluating one’s thoughts to bring about change in decisions and behaviors (MRT®).

My first year of teaching was in 2004 in Brooklyn, NY. I taught 6th to 8th grade students who had been diagnosed with emotional disabilities. Identifying their strengths and developing positive relationships with my students, while also providing academic instruction, was a balance requiring routine, patience and persistence. These qualities were required for facilitating and promoting learning in a middle school environment, and my colleagues in the correctional setting will agree that these qualities are essential there as well. It was here that I found my calling to support students impacted by what is acknowledged as traumatic experiences today. As a black male having Latin and Caribbean decent, I consider my role in education a privilege, providing essential instructional resources to all students who may need a second chance, particularly those from black and Latin communities.

Living in a small state like Delaware has many benefits. Our education program is one of four DDOE-run programs in maximum security facilities in the state. Our supervisors, administrators and instructional teams meet regularly to share best practices across programs. We maintain a shared perspective and practice about how workplace and employability skills are integrated into our programs, which is necessary for us to better support student transitions back to the workforce.

Another small state example is that Delaware's correctional system is unified, meaning the prison is not separate from jails. While the percentage of admissions to maximum security facilities decreased by 13.4 percent from 2018 to 2019, 60 percent of the population identified as black/African American while 5 percent identified as Hispanic/Latino (Planning, Research, and Reentry Office, 2019). As staff supervisor, it was important to see that instructors had qualified offender instructional aides to support learning the classroom. It was equally important to demonstrate inclusive hiring practices and to use instructional aides that feature people of color, different ages and those who have earned their high school diploma in our program. This allows students to better identify and connect with men who see the benefits of life-long learning, support the goals and achievements of students and the mission of the education department.

In 2019, of the 2,946 students enrolled statewide (in academic, vocational and MRT®/Life Skills), 62 percent were black/African-American and another 9 percent were Hispanic/Latino. One hundred and forty-seven (147) earned their GED®, 39 earned their high school diploma, 418 completed Life Skills and more than 1,200 earned a vocational certificate providing industry-specific competency skills (ACE Network, 2019).

For more than 10 years, I have worked with teams to support adult students in correctional education as a computer instructor, special education instructor, education diagnostician and staff supervisor. It was in 2010 when I first made contact with "Ay-yo Miller!" I delivered one-to-one services to students in a separate setting and at a different Delaware correctional institution. (Again, small state.) He was approximately 18 or 19 and sentenced to several years. While providing instruction, I learned about his previous experiences in school and his ambitions and connections with friends and family. Over time, he accepted that I genuinely cared about his future, as I do all students who enroll in our programs. Working with adults in these settings has several benefits as well as challenges; the obstacles may be numerous at times but having a team of educators who are truly dedicated to impacting student lives is what this work is all about.

References

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