Exploring Portfolio Development in Inmate Education Programs
Justin Garcia, West Hills College-Coalinga, California, USA

Inmate Education Programs and Post-Traditional Students

The literature on inmate education programs showcases innovative practices and approaches for creating educational opportunities for individuals behind bars. The Last Mile nonprofit organization offers entrepreneurial classes in San Quentin State Prison (San Quintin, California), including classes in software engineering where individuals learn coding such as JavaScript, WordPress, and HTML/CSS in two, six-month cohorts (Lapowsky, 2016). Lockard and Rankins-Robertson (2011) described an approach where undergraduate interns reviewed and commented on writing produced by incarcerated individuals. An online platform allowed prison staff to post the writing products for undergraduate interns to retrieve. Interns reviewed and uploaded their comments to the platform for prison staff to download and return to inmates. This partnership created opportunities for incarcerated individuals to participate in an educational opportunity resembling college courses.

Practices documented by postsecondary institutions also demonstrate innovative ways to overcome the challenges associated with delivering high-quality education behind bars. Meyer, Fredericks, Borden, and Richardson (2010) examined postsecondary academic programs in 38 prisons across Iowa, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina during the 2008-2009 academic year. Twenty institutions delivered instruction leading to an Associate of Arts degree using distance learning pedagogy such as "assignments from texts and study guides, workbooks, and CD-ROMs" (p. 159). Students reported improved writing skills, study skills, and critical thinking skills. Institutional site coordinators serving as the liaisons between educational institutions and the prison reported behavioral improvements. According to the researchers, half of the site coordinators reported improved behavior among inmates as evidenced in the comment: "There's better interaction and talking" (p. 166).

O'Grady and Hamilton (2019) discussed the effects of combining incarcerated and nonincarcerated students in the same classroom and using a dialogic pedagogy on attitudes of "us versus them." Student feedback suggested that the dialogic approach impacted students' identities about themselves and others. One student reported: "You sometimes forgot they were in prison at some points in the course … this was a real surprise to me" (p. 83). Another student commented: "They're not bad people; just people that have made bad decisions" (p. 83). Still, referring to the program facilitators, another student commented that they "spoke to us like human beings and dealt with us like normal" (p. 86).

Amidst these innovations, the question of whether prior learning assessment had a place in inmate education programs emerged. The challenges articulated by colleges and universities delivering inmate education contain a familiar tone to the challenges educators face when serving all post-traditional students. For example, in 2019, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office reported findings from colleges piloting face-to-face instruction inside California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) institutions. The report, *Incarcerated Students: Encouraging Results from Pilot Programs* (Arambula & LeBlanc, 2019), reported challenges such as students transferring from one "yard" to another or between facilities during an

academic term that prevented them from continuing in face-to-face courses. Colleges also reported challenges in scheduling courses that maximized student enrollment within designated CDCR timeframes. For example, college courses scheduled during Second Watch (6 a.m. to 2 p.m.) were inaccessible to students with work assignments at the same time. The report further indicated that the CDCR may choose to have courses scheduled during the Third Watch (2 p.m. to 10 p.m.), a window of time that includes inmate count (4 p.m. and 5 p.m.) when classes cannot be scheduled. In addition, some colleges reported challenges securing instructors to teach within correctional settings or within the available timeframes.

In many ways, the challenges post-traditional students face resemble the challenges of inmate education programs. For post-traditional students, earning a degree or credential is a priority, but must fit within their busy lifestyles that include family and full-time work schedules (National Adult Learner Coalition, 2017). The need to be at home with children and maintain full-time employment can prevent adults from returning to school (Kobena Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Scobey (2016) argued that for institutions to understand the well-being of post-traditional students they must recognize the "complex ecology of roles" (p. 111) these students hold and must remain responsive to throughout their academic careers. These experiences reflect the need for flexible credit-earning options and emphasize reduced time to degree. This preference for flexibility and a shorter time to degree may also reveal an option that can overcome some of the challenges related to inmate education programs. Portfolio development, and thus the possibility of earning credit through prior learning assessment, could become a very important ingredient of this flexibility.

What follows is a discussion of the lessons learned from delivering a "portfolio development course" at a federal correctional institution. Although all students prepared portfolios to complete the course, only one student prepared a portfolio that earned additional credit for a separate course. Nevertheless, the discussion documents the lessons learned from facilitating the course, including the challenges reported by students and the need for coordination between institutional partners required for students to be successful. For educational practitioners considering the deployment of prior learning assessment practices as part of their inmate education programs, this article seeks to offer insights into what postsecondary institutions may consider when integrating prior learning assessment practices, specifically portfolio assessment, into their respective inmate education programs.

Portfolio Development and Student Experiences
In the fall of 2019, the rural, two-year community college scheduled and enrolled students incarcerated at a federal correctional institution in the course, Portfolio Development (Interdisciplinary Studies [IS] 051). Two sections of this credit-bearing course (one unit/one credit) were offered, one located at the high-security facility (49 students, 63% passed) and the other at the low-security facility (nine students, 33% passed). The purpose of the course is to support students requesting college credit through portfolio assessment for a course already within the college's course catalog. The course was scheduled for 12 weeks; each class meeting was scheduled for 75 minutes. The design of the Portfolio Development course followed practices documented in the literature, including learning activities articulated by Boden et al. (2019). The course began with a review of David Kolb's experiential learning cycle (McLeod, 2017), which served as the basis for reflecting on previous experiences (inside and outside of prison) where these students gained knowledge and skills. As the course continued, students reviewed the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network (O*NET) to aid them in writing about responsibilities and duties related to previous occupations (O*Net, n.d.). These learning activities coalesced into the longer, narrative essays students were expected to create for their portfolios. Students prepared a rough draft and a final draft of their learning narratives. Finally, students used the final weeks of the course to revise the final draft of their learning narratives and retrieve the supporting documents to complete their portfolios.

Approximately four students in both sections of IS 051 reported experiencing challenges. Many reported having difficulty understanding David Kolb's experiential learning cycle and carrying out the written assignment that involved reviewing the experiential model and summarizing it in 1 to 2 pages. Based on the grades they received, some reported feeling discouraged by receiving a grade lower than they had expected. Others had trouble articulating themselves in writing assignments.

Many reported that, early on, their expectations about the course interfered with their learning. For example, two students expected the course to be similar to other prison educational programs, which use traditional exams as the basis for assessment. Others expected the class assignments to have clear right and wrong answers. Others reported that they were unaware of how much work was going to be involved in the course, such as weekly assignments and weekly readings. One reported that his tendency to be wary and suspicious of others interfered with his learning; until he was able to relax his reservations, he remained on guard and had trouble focusing during class meetings and completing homework assignments. After students acknowledged how their expectations interfered with their performance in the early weeks, they also reported having gained important insights into the process of learning.

For example, when they understood that the nature of assignments involved sharing thoughts and reasoning as opposed to producing right or wrong answers, some felt they had a breakthrough. One student explained that he realized the assignments allowed for the space to share his thinking.

Another student explained that he was unreceptive to instructor feedback at the start. From previous experiences receiving feedback only when he misbehaved, he was unable to view instructor feedback on assignments as constructive. Accepting the fact that assignment feedback could be an opportunity to better himself was a struggle he experienced earlier in the course; it was a challenge he eventually overcame.

Given that many of the assignments involve reflecting on previous experiences, one individual reported having an emotional reaction while completing one of them. He explained that reflecting and documenting his strengths and unique skills in an assignment reminded him of the things he used to do well and that he had believed he would not do again for several more years.

By the ninth week of the course, when asked about the same challenges, students reported successfully overcoming those described earlier. Students attributed overcoming the challenges they faced to the interventions coordinated between the course instructor and the educational specialist at the institution. The educational specialist coordinated institutional schedules to provide students access to study areas, allowing informal study groups and peer-to-peer tutoring. In coordination with the prison, the instructor was able to provide greater assignment feedback and extended class meetings an additional 45 minutes.

By the end, students prepared portfolios to meet the expectations of the course. To maintain student confidentiality, the table on the following page provides the page length of the portfolios submitted by students. With the exception of one student, the learning narratives submitted were handwritten. One student emailed a scanned copy of his handwritten learning narrative using the facilities-approved mail server to a family member who then typed it. In his portfolio, he included his handwritten narrative along with the typed version to demonstrate academic integrity.

Table 1 Number of Pages for Portfolios Submitted in Section A and Section B

	Portfolio Development A		Portfolio Development B	
	Low	High	Low	High
Learning Narrative	2	13	2	26
Complete Portfolio	4	64	6	33

Institutional Coordination for Success

The coordination between this rural community college and the federal correctional institution through the instructor of the Portfolio Development course and an educational specialist at the prison resembled the practices articulated by others interested in elements of effective institutional partnerships. Ezren, Gould, and Lewen (2019) described that a key component of a high-quality inmate education program is the cultivation of partnerships between the academic and student services departments at the college and the prison institution. The nature of the partnership that provides success included activities such as coordinating the location of class meetings to accommodate additional time requested by students, maintaining an up-to-date roster of students who dropped or transferred, and devising workarounds for delivering instructional supplies to students.

This partnership ensured students had access to supplies including notebooks, writing tools, and approval to take assignments offsite for grading and returning assignments to students. Ezren, Gould, and Lewen (2019) regarded course materials and supplies for students as an integral component of high-quality inmate education programs. The educational specialist regularly provided hard copies of assignment instructions and assigned readings for students. For one student for whom English was a second language, the instructor prepared assignment instructions in Spanish, while the educational specialist translated completed assignments from Spanish to English. The translation process involved typing the student's completed handwritten assignments, the educational specialist emailing them to the instructor who then translated them into Spanish using an internet-based translator tool for grading.

A component unique to the Portfolio Development course is the retrieval and gathering of supporting documents. Here, again, the educational specialist was vital to student success. For example, students coordinated with the educational specialist to secure documents such as transcripts that authenticated the completion of adult continuing education courses completed during incarceration. In retrieving vocational training certificates on behalf of students, sometimes the educational specialist had to make several follow-up calls to other prisons and mail hard copies to the facility. Students used phone calls with family members to elicit their help in retrieving supporting documents that sometimes involved accessing storage units to retrieve copies of photographs of them performing work at a previous occupation. The educational specialist helped students photocopy their certificates, transcripts, and various documents for inclusion in their portfolios.

The coordination between the college instructor and the educational specialist at the correctional facility continued to ease the overall day-to-day operation through all 12 weeks of the course.

Student Perceptions of Portfolio Development

At the final class meeting, the instructor sought to capture student perceptions with five questions. The design of the questions was based on Stevens, Gerber, and Hendra (2010). Question 4 was developed to assess student satisfaction based on the structure of net promotor score-style questions (QuestionPro, n.d.).

1. What impact, if any, did the portfolio development process have on the way you look at yourself as a college student?
2. What impact, if any, did the portfolio development process have on the way you look at your knowledge and skills?
3. Which learning activity had the greatest impact on the way you look at yourself as a college student/the way you look at your knowledge and skills?
4. How likely are you to recommend this class to a friend on a scale of 0-10 (where 0 to 6 means unlikely, 7 to 8 is indifferent, and 9 to 10 is likely)?
5. What impact, if any, would college courses have on others housed at the prison?

Regarding the first, open-ended question, student responses suggested the portfolio development process impacted how they viewed themselves as college students. For one student, developing a portfolio helped them realize their readiness to continue their education. Another student reported that the portfolio development process helped them recognize their readiness to complete a college course.

Regarding knowledge and skills, a common theme in the responses was uncovering skills and knowledge. One student responded that they discovered the knowledge and skills they had. Two students mentioned that the process of preparing a portfolio helped them realize that they possessed dormant knowledge and skills.

In terms of the value of the learning activities throughout the course, there was overwhelming agreement that the reading and summarizing of David Kolb's experiential learning cycle was the most valuable. The activity ranked second was preparing their learning narratives. About Kolb's cycle, one student reported that Kolb's model helped serve as a framework for writing about their prior knowledge, while another commented that the model helped them frame their autobiographic sketch of learning they included in their learning narrative.

In total, 37 students across both sections of the Portfolio Development course provided student feedback (64% response rate). Overall student responses were positive. Question 4 on assessing student satisfaction is an industry-standard question of satisfaction referred to as the net promoter score (NPS), as mentioned earlier. Based on student responses, the combined NPS for both sections of IS 051 was 80, indicating a high satisfaction with the course. Performing the calculation for the NPS score involved taking the percentage of students who responded with a 9 or 10 (regarded as "promotors," which accounted for 80% of student responses) and subtracting the value from the percentage of students who responded with a 0 to 6 (regarded as "detractors," which accounted for 0% of student responses). (Note: Those who respond with 7 or 8 are intentionally left out of the calculation — regraded as "passive," which accounted for 20% of student responses.) The difference between promotors and detractors is then multiplied by 100 to arrive at a whole number as the final value. Based on the students' responses, the NPS score across both sections was 80, indicating a high degree of satisfaction where anything above zero is "good" and above 50 is "excellent" (QuestionPro, n.d.).

Conclusion
The observations reported here from instructing two, 12-week Portfolio Development courses in a correctional facility suggest promising practices for postsecondary institutions with inmate education programs. The first is the educational value perceived by students enrolled in Portfolio Development. Student responses are consistent with the findings of researchers who recommend reflective learning activities. Researchers highlight the value of student-centered learning activities such as portfolio development because they shift learning toward the learning process (Flores, Simão, Barros, & Pereira, 2015) and engage students in critical reflection (Jenson, 2011). Others recommend portfolio development for revealing new knowledge; that is, it creates an opportunity where "learners' cognitive engagement with their learning histories

gives rise to new knowledge — of self, of self situated within the trajectory of growth, and of self situated within the profession" (Conrad, 2008, p. 142).

Although educationally valuable, some students explained that their motivation for continuing in the course was to earn "good time" credits; that is, by participating in educational programs offered by the correctional facility or by a college or university, individuals received "good time credits" that enabled them to take time off their sentence (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Second, student backgrounds varied, with some who had extensive work histories and those with limited histories. More than 80% reported some previous college experience, while 33% reported that their recent college experience was within the previous five years. The remainder reported their previous college experience was within 10 years (12%), and in other cases, more than 10 years (21%). Regardless of experience, students were able to develop portfolios showcasing their knowledge and skills at the college level.

Next, the nature of portfolio development is rigorous. The process can be intimidating, such as writing multiple pages for a learning narrative. While scheduling the course for 12 weeks was optimal for students who produced high-quality portfolios, those students were registered for only the portfolio course and were not balancing multiple courses. Balancing a larger class schedule would place a greater demand on students to budget time.

Further, negotiating the protocols that ensure safety at correctional institutions is essential to facilitating a portfolio development course in an inmate education program. As noted, the educational specialist who served as the liaison between the correctional facility and the rural, two-year community college was instrumental in student success. This individual received the weekly assignments from the instructor to deliver to students ahead of the class meeting and ensured completed assignments could be taken offsite for grading and returned to the institution for redistribution to students. This individual maintained attendance records and was responsible for making classroom space available for each class meeting. What is more, as described earlier, the educational specialist helped students retrieve supporting documents through coordination with other correctional facilities.

Our example suggests that a new direction for prior learning assessment may be inmate education programs. The challenges and pain educators confront when operating in correctional facilities may be eased with the integration of prior learning assessment practices. Challenges such as unexpected inmate transfers and providing course offerings that guide students toward completion reflect the preferences for flexible credit-earning options and reduced time to degree expressed by many postsecondary students. Based on the observations from facilitating two Portfolio Development courses in a federal correctional facility, prior learning assessment is value-added to an inmate education program and may reveal an unexpected lever to student success.

References

Arambula, R., & LeBlanc, L. (2019). *2018 report: Incarcerated students: Encouraging results from pilot program*. California Community Colleges. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596593.pdf

Boden, C. J., Cherrstrom, C. A, & Sherron, T. (2019). Redesign of prior learning assessment in an award-winning degree completion program. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology, 10*(3), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.4018/IJAVET.2019070101

Conrad, D. (2008). Building knowledge through portfolio learning in prior learning assessment and recognition. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 9*(2), 139-150.

Erzen, T., Gould, M. R., & Lewen, J. (2019). *Equity and excellence in practice: A guide for higher education in prison*. Prison University Project and Alliance for Higher Education in Prison.

https://assets-global.website-files.com/5e3dd3cf0b4b54470c8b1be1/5e3dd3cf0b4b5492e78b1d24_Equity%2BExcellence-English-web.pdf

Flores, M. A., Simão, A. M. V., Barros, A., & Pereira, D. (2015). Perceptions of effectiveness, fairness and feedback of assessment methods: A study in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 40*(9), 1523-1534. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.881348

Jenson, J. D. (2011). Promoting self-regulation and critical reflection through writing students' use of electronic portfolio. *International Journal of ePortfolio, 1*(1), 49-60. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1107586.pdf

Kobena Osam, E., Bergman, M., & Cumberland, D. M. (2017). An integrative literature review on the barriers impacting adult learners' return to college. *Adult Learning, 28*(2), 54-60. https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159516658013

Lapowsky, I. (2016, November 2). Inside the classroom where San Quentin inmates learn to code. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/2016/11/san-quentin-inmates-learn-to-code/

Lockard, J., & Rankins-Robertson, S. (2011). The right to education, prison-university partnerships, and online writing pedagogy in the US. *Critical Survey, 23*(3), 23-39. https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2011.230303

McLeod, S. (2017). *Kolb's learning styles and experiential learning cycle*. Simple Psychology. https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html

Meyer, S. J., Fredericks, L., Borden, C. M., & Richardson, P. L. (2010, June). Implementing postsecondary academic programs in state prisons: Challenges and opportunities. *The Journal of Correctional Education, 61*(2), 148-184.

National Adult Learner Coalition. (2017). *Strengthening America's economy by expanding educational opportunities for working adults: Policy opportunities to connect the working adult to today's economy through education and credentials* [White paper]. https://www.dropbox.com/s/2osz0ofzqlmh5w3/Strengthening%20America's%20Economy%20-%20National%20Adult%20Learning%20Coalition%20White%20Paper%20Web%202017.pdf?dl=0

O'Grady, A., & Hamilton, P. (2019). "There's more that binds us together than separates us": Exploring the role of prison-university partnerships in promoting democratic dialogue, transformative learning opportunities and social citizenship. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry, 6*(1), 78-95. https://doi.org/10.25771/307x-2d27

O*NET. (n.d.) *O*NET OnLine*. https://www.onetonline.org/

QuestionPro. (n.d.). Good net promoter score (NPS): What is it? *QuestionPro Survey Software*. https://www.questionpro.com/blog/nps-considered-good-net-promoter-score/

Scobey, D. (2016). College makes me feel dangerous: On well-being and nontraditional students. In D. W. Harward (Ed.), *Well-being and higher education: A strategy for change and the realization of education's greater purpose* (pp. 109-121). Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Stevens, K., Gerber, D., & Hendra, R. (2010). Transformational learning through prior learning assessment. *Adult Education Quarterly, 60*(4), 377-404. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609358451

U.S. Department of Education. (2009, March). *Partnerships between community colleges and prisons: Providing workforce education and training to reduce recidivism*. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/prison-cc-partnerships_2009.pdf