

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## THE CHRONICLE INTERVIEW

# A Filmmaker Followed 12 Prisoners Through a Liberal-Arts Education. Here's What She Learned.

By *Emma Pettit* | MARCH 11, 2019 ✓ PREMIUM

## WASHINGTON



Stephanie Berger

Lynn Novick

The documentary filmmakers who tackled such historical landmarks as the Vietnam War and the Prohibition era have trained their cameras on a new topic: the power of college for people behind prison walls.

*College Behind Bars* is a four-part documentary series that follows incarcerated people as they work toward degrees through the Bard Prison Initiative. Directed by Lynn Novick, with Ken Burns as executive producer and Sarah Botstein as producer, the series will debut on PBS in November. Clips of the series were screened on Monday at Georgetown University.

College access for incarcerated people has been scant since 1994, when

President Bill Clinton signed a sweeping crime bill that, among other things, made prisoners ineligible to receive Pell Grants. Before then, college courses in prison were relatively common. With Clinton's signature, funding for those programs ran dry. Meanwhile, America's prison population exploded.

The Bard initiative enrolled its first students in 2001, to provide a path to associate, and later bachelor's, degrees. According to program data, the vast majority of its graduates — 97.5 percent — who have left prison have never come back.

The film follows about a dozen men and women in three different prisons as they navigate the college classroom behind bars in New York State. *The Chronicle* spoke recently with Novick about her solo directorial debut, the transformative power of higher education, and what it's like to walk into a prison classroom for the first time. The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

**Q. Where did the idea for the series come from?**

**A.** In 2011, Ken Burns, Sarah Botstein, and I made a film about Prohibition. The following spring, Sarah and I were asked to teach a class in the Bard Prison Initiative inside the Eastern Correctional Facility. It was our first time inside a prison, our first time inside a classroom in the program, and it was a wonderful experience. The students were extraordinarily engaged and sophisticated and attentive viewers of the clips that we showed. We had a really profound conversation about justice and democracy and engagement and all the things our film was trying to raise.

As we walked back toward the exit to the facility, we looked at each other with our eyes wide open and literally said, "That was an extraordinary experience. Someone should really make a film about this."

I ended up becoming an adjunct faculty in the initiative and taught a course on history and documentary. Over that eight-week seminar, we really became more and more committed to making a film about the program and about the students. We wanted to show how education could be transformative. So from the very beginning we decided to film students entering the program, graduating, and being released from prison. Different students at different stages. We filmed from 2014 through 2017.

**Q. Do you remember how you felt walking into a prison for the first time?**

**A.** This is a maximum-security facility for men. It's an intimidating place. It looks like a big castle. You have to go through the different security gates and the metal detector and walk down a long hallway. The Bard classes are in an area that's designated as a school floor. But making our way from the entrance to the school floor was sort of overwhelming. For myself, there was a sense of, Wow. This is a whole world unto itself that's so cut off from the "free world," as people who are incarcerated often say.

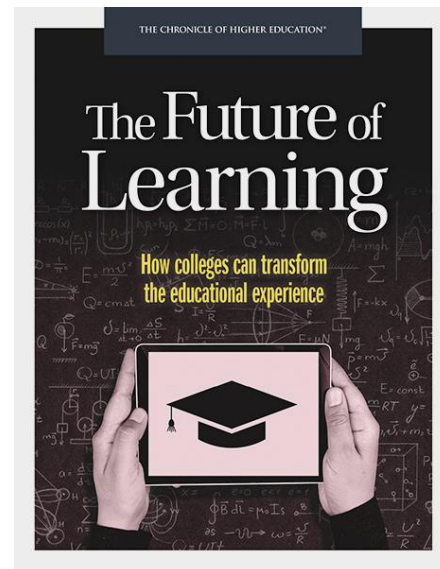
**Q. A lot of people don't know what a college class looks like in prison. Could you describe what you saw?**

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**“The students are not on their phones or on their computers. So there's total focus and attention on the conversation that's happening in the classroom.”**

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**A.** A college class in the Bard initiative looks very much like a class on the Bard campus, or at Yale, where I went to school, or at any other college, especially a small liberal-arts college. The biggest difference, frankly, is that there's not a lot of bells and whistles to the teaching because they don't have smartboards. They don't have streaming video or elaborate presentations from the professors or

the ability to go online and look something up. The students are not on their phones or on their computers. So there's total focus and attention on the conversation that's happening in the classroom.

**Q. Did the experience in prison make you think about your own college experience differently?**

**A.** One often has the feeling of, I wish I could go back to college because I would take it more seriously and I would probably get more out of it as an adult than as a teenager. Being in classrooms with the level of discourse as high as it was in the Bard program made me feel a little bit bittersweet about my own academic experiences. I'm not sure I really appreciated the opportunities that I had, being at a school like Yale.

I wish I'd taken Shakespeare. A bunch of the students [in the prison] talk about Shakespeare. But more important than that, for me, was seeing students who, in their lives prior to incarceration, did not have access to higher education at the level that they are now receiving through Bard. It made me grateful for the opportunity I had and also more aware of how rare that is and how unfair that is.

**Q. *College Behind Bars* isn't about nonviolent drug offenders or false convictions — two prison narratives we're seeing a lot these days. As you say in the news release, the series is about people who were convicted of serious, often violent offenses. Why was telling those stories, in particular, important to you?**

**A.** We were drawn to the people because of what they were doing in the classroom. Their criminal backgrounds did not enter into our calculus, really at all. But over time, we thought it was important for the film to include information about why they were incarcerated, and for them to explain it. Many of the students we focused on — and as it turns out, many of the people who are incarcerated generally — are there because of violent offenses. So the narrative of our prisons being full of nonviolent drug offenders is actually not accurate, as it happens. Many people are doing relatively long sentences for serious crimes.

**Q. Of the dozen people that you follow during the film, how did they view getting a college degree?**

**A.** A major theme of the film is their ongoing reflection on what this education means to them and why they're doing it, what they hope to get out of it, and how transformational it is for them. Many of them speak about how the experience of going through the program and learning to be a critical thinker and express themselves in a deep way enables them to become civic beings, to become more participant in our civil society, to understand themselves and their world, and each other.

**Q. Is there one particular moment or exchange that you filmed that has really stuck in your brain?**

**A.** We filmed a group conversation among a bunch of students who'd just started their bachelor's degrees. They started to reflect upon what does the liberal arts mean to them, and what does it mean to have access to the texts that they were analyzing. They were taking a course on the history of tragedy. So they started with *Oedipus* and they were moving on to *Othello* and I think *Hamlet*, eventually. One of the students said, "[Just] because we're in prison, we're not animals. These green colors don't define who we are. What defines us is our minds and our hearts. We have intelligent men, even in prison. We have morality, even in prison." He was connecting that to what it means to be a student in the liberal arts. That was a really powerful moment.

**Q. Something you've worked on for so long is debuting at a time when policy issues about education in prison are being actively debated. This series could have a direct impact on that debate. It seems like a different place than other projects that you've worked on.**

**A.** Yes and no. When we released our film on the Vietnam War, there was a lot of conversation about, Wow, the country is so divided right now, and we're having such a lack of civil discourse and polarization and just general disintegration of the social fabric. The Vietnam War seemed like the Rosetta Stone to try to trace all of that back to understand the disunion. It seemed to be coming out at the perfect time. We couldn't possibly have predicted that, but I think it speaks to the enduring questions of humanity that are always with us.

On another level, these questions of incarceration and education, opportunity and

access, have become more important. I don't want to speak for the people who shared their stories with us, but they felt it was important to be part of the film because they want other people to know what being in the program has meant for them. They hope it will move things along in this conversation and put a human face on mass incarceration and the lives of real people, caught up in the system.

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