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# Supporting Incarcerated Seminary Students

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**ABSTRACT** How can we provide access to theological scholarship for students in a maximum-security prison? This session will discuss how the North Park University library supports seminary students in two different Illinois correctional institutions. We discuss the founding and history of the School of Restorative Arts, how Brandel Library built and managed remote prison collections, and how we support the research and writing of these students. We then discuss future plans for SRA library services and questions for seminary libraries to consider as they plan to serve incarcerated students. Finally, Tony Pizarro will share from his experience and work within the SRA program and as the assistant director of North Park's Writing Center.

## INTRODUCTION

*Matt Ostercamp*

In 2018 North Park Theological Seminary, in Chicago, Illinois, launched the School of Restorative Arts (SRA) which offers an MA in Christian Ministry with Restorative Arts to incarcerated students. We currently are offering classes in two locations: Statesville Correctional Center, which is a maximum-security men's prison in the Chicago area, and Logan Correctional Center, which is a multi-level security women's prison in central Illinois.

In this paper, Matt Ostercamp will share some of the big picture issues we've faced and some questions we hope you think about if you try to provide classes and library services in similar contexts. Then Evan Kuehn is going to share in more detail how the library is currently assisting SRA students and plans we have to improve our services. Finally, our Writing Center colleague, Antonio Pizarro, will

share his unique perspective of starting off as a student in Statesville in the School of Restorative Arts; then, after being granted his release and finishing his degree on the outside, he subsequently was hired by North Park as the full-time Assistant Director of the North Park Writing Center. In his current professional capacity, he continues to support SRA students as well as our general campus population.

## **NORTH PARK UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF RESTORATIVE ARTS**

### *Matt Ostercamp*

North Park has had a long history of connecting with our home city, Chicago. If you're on our campus for more than an hour, you'll probably hear somebody talk about being "city-centered" as part of our ethos. We started off as a Swedish immigrant school, and the Seminary particularly has consistently sought out ways to address social justice issues and be a redemptive presence in our city.

Former North Park Seminary faculty member, Dr. Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, was for many years a leader in advocating for theologically informed social justice on our campus. She would eventually become the Dean of the Seminary. While on the faculty, she became engaged in the national conversation around mass incarceration and dedicated a sabbatical to exploring inequity in education. Her research agenda included spending time inside Statesville building relationships with the inmates and administrative staff. As she started asking how a seminary could play a constructive and redemptive role in that space, she heard from inmates that they wanted to acquire knowledge and develop skills that would allow them to be agents of transformative change in communities that in many cases have suffered from generations of trauma and injustice. The vision for the School of Restorative Arts emerged from these conversations and the potential students played an active role in developing the curriculum and shaping the degree.

In reviewing this history with Dr. Clifton-Soderstrom, the two points she suggested for you to reflect on start with how you will collaborate, ideally from the very start, with the students you hope to serve. Being invited to help create and implement a program gives your incarcerated students ownership and agency. In our experience this builds a rich community dynamic that doesn't replicate the existing authoritative and dehumanizing prison social dynamic.

The second point to reflect on is how doing this kind of work connects with the existing mission and ethos of your seminary. Clifton-Soderstrom emphasized in conversation with Evan and Matt that strong institutional mission alignment is absolutely critical to sustaining this work in the face of inevitable obstacles. I would encourage any institution considering starting a program like the School of Restorative Arts to reflect deeply on your existing identity and call. Why does your seminary exist? How does offering classes in a prison connect to that purpose? This type of education may not be for every school and in our opinion should not be pursued as a side project. For North Park, our history of serving marginalized communities in Chicago and advocating for justice provided the rich institutional soil for a program such as this to take root and sprout.

One of the obstacles for seminaries offering programs to incarcerated students will likely be funding. This was true at North Park. An initial donor came forward with a gift that allowed the School of Restorative Arts to get off the ground. North Park was also awarded a Lilly grant, and used part of this grant to assist with start-up costs. To sustain the program a tuition model for SRA students was created to make credit hour costs as low as possible. For example, faculty were all assumed to be either adjunct or teaching in SRA on overload which lowered the costs for faculty. It remains unclear if the current model of low credit hour costs will be truly sustainable for our institution and also clear accreditation hurdles. North Park administration has been asking churches and individuals to sponsor students in the SRA program. We do not charge the students directly for tuition. A challenge in implementing this model is to ensure the tuition covered SRA students aren't seen as a lower priority than the traditional tuition paying students. We share the financial challenges of many small seminaries and can feel the pressure to categorize students according to how they contribute to the bottom line. This is seen as a real danger for the long-term prospects of the SRA. We would encourage you to anticipate these pressures and think about how you will continue to hold students with less financial prospects on an equal playing field as you allocate student services.

Beyond finances, another challenge is to find ways to integrate incarcerated students into the regular rhythms of your institution. You can easily let these out-of-sight students also slip out-of-mind. Thanks to the vigilance of many campus leaders, North Park has had some success on this front. For example, incarcerated teaching

fellows were asked to by plenary speakers at the fall faculty retreat in 2022. Speaking via a Zoom connection, these men addressed the whole university faculty and shared their experiences with and passion for Christian education. They also fielded questions from the faculty. The North Park Writing Center, to move to another example, has trained SRA students to be writing advisors and assign them to support classes throughout the university via Zoom. So, freshman composition students may be assigned to meet virtually with an SRA student to discuss their writing. The Writing Center also helped launch an SRA newsletter, entitled *Feather Bricks*. This newsletter is produced by the SRA students and provides them an opportunity to share their academic and creative writing as well as their visual art. It is a source of real pride for the SRA students. *Feather Bricks* issues are strategically placed around campus to give us all a chance to hear from and connect with our SRA students. We have also featured SRA artists in campus galleries. All these efforts have helped us remember that we have students in Statesville and Logan. I would encourage your campus to be intentional about finding ways that you can bring visibility to the education that is happening offsite.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that Dean Clifton-Soderstrom, who started the School of Restorative Arts, left North Park in the spring of 2022. North Park recently hired a new Vice President for the Seminary and is currently searching for a new Dean. Based on conversations with many others in the field, I know this type of administrative turnover is not unusual. Changing leadership often bring a reassessment of institutional priorities. While we hope our School of Restorative Arts is firmly planted, we acknowledge that even as we prepared this presentation there are questions on our campus about what place it will occupy in the future. A question we are currently wrestling with in the library is how much political and financial capital we want to invest in this program. Will we champion the SRA even if future administrators are pushing different priorities or is our support connected to the level of enthusiasm of our campus leaders? We see the real need and potential impact of providing quality education to incarcerated students, but we also know that as a library our resources are increasingly stretched thin. This makes determining the appropriate level of commitment a challenge and I would encourage others in library leadership positions to think about what the best answer is for your library and your staff.

## LIBRARY RESOURCES

*Evan Kuehn*

While the mission of the library as it supports incarcerated students remains the same as its mission for those on the outside, many challenges – as well as opportunities – present themselves in these contexts. We have found that access to the facilities and access to students has been difficult at times because of a lack of consistency. Rules about what can be brought into the facility and what items get checked by security staff can change over time. Sometimes this works in our favor when the rules are less strict. Developments and transitions over time can make it difficult for us to prepare, however.

The physical space of our resource room is also limited. In Logan, we have access to a closet-sized space for books, and room space for one or two students to occupy at a time. In Statesville, the room is slightly larger, with shelves lining all of the walls, and seating space for more students. But in both cases, there really isn't significant room to expand the collection that we have. Technology is limited as well; the students have some online access at desktops not associated with the SRA program, but this isn't a solution for research purposes. They cannot communicate by email, and when tablets are available to students, their effectiveness varies. All papers submitted for SRA classes are written by hand, as are communications with the North Park campus requesting specific research materials.

Enforcement of collection policies has been uneven, especially as a result of disruptions created by the pandemic. When we began the program, we had a checkout system where students wrote down their name and information when they checked out each book. This fell by the wayside during a period of more frequent lockdowns from the pandemic. We continue to circulate our collection, but there is no way to keep track of who currently holds a book and when it will be returned. Another impediment to returning books occurs when students are transferred to another facility. At these junctures, books are sometimes discarded rather than returned to the North Park Reading Room when prison staff are not aware of who owns the book.

Other libraries and educational institutions work within Statesville as well, including Northwestern University and a GED preparation program. This can be a source of collaboration, but also presents challenges related to overlapping room usage.

In order to build our collection, we have purchased new books from original grant money, and taken donations (usually from retiring faculty and pastors). We use the LC Classification system for the collections. SRA books are in our library catalog alongside other North Park books, with a separate location set for Statesville or Logan. We provide a copy of all required textbooks to each student, and these become a part of the collection. Textbooks are returned to the resource room at the end of each semester to be used for future cohorts. The collection also includes a small reference section with dictionaries and style guides. These reference books, as well as books on social justice, tend to be the hot commodities that leave the reading room and don't return.

The SRA library program would benefit from a needs assessment for the collection. We've heard from students that we have a good foundation in biblical studies, commentaries, church history, and theology, but when students reach upper-level classes in the program (mostly focused on social justice, conflict management, and trauma), our collection needs further development. We would like to work with our seminary liaisons on a clearer approach to a yearly budget, acquisition, and processing protocols.

We have also found that LC Classification is probably overly complicated for such a small collection and more than we need. We are looking for ways that we can simplify cataloging, then, and also adding larger ownership markings so that we can distinguish our books from personal books, or books from the law library at the prison facilities.

Another idea that we discussed was rotating our collections in order to make the best use of our small space. The SRA curriculum is a cohort model where everyone is taking the same courses at the same time from semester to semester. We want to explore ways to store a large number of books that were used in one semester, and replace them for the next semester with books that will be more helpful for the courses that students are currently taking. Finally, we are looking into the possibility of print serial subscriptions for magazines and newspapers.

## **LIBRARY SERVICES**

*Evan Kuehn*

So far, we have used staff and faculty from the North Park campus as intermediaries as we strive to provide library services for our inside

students. Students usually have classes two days a week, and this is when they have study hall time and access to the reading room for a few hours. Library staff can't be present in person for two days a week at two different facilities, but North Park staff are present to supervise study hall. We use these staff to help us understand what is going on in the program. Staff also have request forms that students can fill out if they have any questions or needs. Until the summer of 2023 these forms were generic and used for all communication, but we have developed a research request form that is specific to library research needs. These are brought out, scanned, and emailed directly to Evan so that the request can be filled. When books are requested that we own at Brandel Library, we can check them out to a designated SRA student account and send them in the next time a staff person is visiting the facility. We would like to develop a more regular courier system, both to make our interaction with students more frequent, and to reduce the burden on our other staff persons.

One significant recent success for library services has been the development of a library assistant position. SRA already employs writing assistants and teaching assistants. This spring, we were also able to hire two library assistants for the Statesville program. One of them will focus on circulation and organizing the collection, while the other will work as a reference assistant and help with research consultation for SRA students. We meet with these assistants once a week via Zoom to get updates, and they have already made great strides developing a checkout system for the collection, a suggestion box, and working with the law library to share collection space. These students are excited and feel empowered to take ownership of their reading room, and we are looking forward to where things are going in the coming months.

We have also started to develop a library newsletter, where we can include bite-sized information about library research and reviews of scholarly works that would be helpful for the students in their classes. These newsletters can then function as LibGuides for students who do not have access to the library website.

Finally, and related to the challenge of technological limitations, we have discussed how we can provide access to pdf resources for inside students. We think that developing an offline database of Atla resources, similar to how JSTOR has offline collections available for prison programs (<https://about.jstor.org/jstor-access-in-prison/>), may be a game changer for library research inside prison facilities and other contexts where online access is limited. This is an opportunity that we would encourage Atla to explore further.



## QUESTIONS TO ASK

*Matt Ostercamp*

Throughout our conversations with stakeholders in the School of Restorative Arts program, one of the most important pieces of advice we received was the necessity of having a foundation of trauma-informed pedagogy. Every incarcerated person has been a victim of trauma in some way. Many people housed in these facilities have contributed to cycles of trauma as well. When we step into this sort of environment unprepared and uninformed, this can create significant problems. Many seminaries have individuals who are trauma informed, but this is not often a programmatic priority for seminaries. Within this general commitment to being responsive to trauma, we need to ask ourselves:

- Why are we engaging with these students?
- What is our role?
- What do we know? What don't we know?
- What can we realistically promise?
- Who are the other stakeholders?
- Who is our support team?

## SUPPORTING THE SRA PROGRAM AS AN ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE WRITING CENTER

*Antonio Pizarro; introduction by Evan Kuehn*

Tony Pizarro works at the North Park Writing Center. He was released from Statesville Correctional Center after a judge overturned his sentence. While being housed at Statesville, Tony applied for North Park's Theological Seminary master's degree program called "School of Restorative Arts." Tony was accepted into the program and became one of the first writing advisors. Later, Tony became a peer mentor, and received several certifications for writing and grammar. He also facilitated workshops. Tony has since graduated with his Master of Arts in Christian Ministry and Restorative Arts. He is currently enrolled in a doctoral program and serve as Assistant Director of North Park Writing Center and Lecturer.



Supporting incarcerated students involves advocacy and giving voice to individuals who are normally silenced. The Writing Center assist through collaboration and providing resources that allow students to amplify their voices through their writing and publication. I have read and filled out the rubric for individuals who were applying to be a writing advisor. There is a newsletter called *Feather Bricks* that was created and written by incarcerated students. It has expanded to contributions from correctional staff and outside participants. I have assisted with transcribing incarcerated students handwritten articles. Support has come in the form of letters of recommendations for some of the students based on their character and quality of work. Since I serve as the faculty advisor for the Black Student Union, I collaborated with the Writing Center, Brandel Library, and the School of Restorative Arts to host an art exhibit displaying their artwork with students from campus.

### **ADVICE FOR LIBRARIANS TO CONSIDER**

*Antonio Pizarro*

Students incarcerated are still students. It is not your job or responsibility to judge or condemn. Operate according to the purpose and goal of your presence. Otherwise, you run the risk of losing objectivity. In due time, you will learn about some of the injustices and choose how to combat them. When you think about incarcerated seminary students, think about the Desert Fathers. Most of the Desert Fathers have done their greatest work in isolation. It's when they removed themselves from the populace that they had time to reflect and think. Introspection and reflection helped them to articulate a particular theology, method, and possibly identify the needs of the people.

For starting a program, I would suggest looking at the models that already exist. North Park Brandel Library has a model. They built a library for seminary students within the prison from the ground up providing all the resources that was needed for research. The resource library was better stocked than the institutional library with an array of books. Whenever the resource library lacked a source, students were able to write what they were looking for and send it to the campus librarian. Eventually, the campus librarian would forward the materials sought to the incarcerated student. There is a lack of technology within the prisons. Therefore, the process is long and tedious; however, it works.