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Going From ‘I Can’t’ to ‘I Can’: Larch Peer Mentoring Program is First Certified Prison Tutoring Program in the Nation

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Communications Office



Larch Corrections Instructor Lauren Zavrel (left) lectures incarcerated students during a class designed to get incarcerated students certified as peer tutors. (Rachel Friederich, Communications Office)

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YACOLT – Steven Eichentopf shared his experience tutoring a student who was failing algebra. The student grew frustrated sitting at a desk, reading word problems. No matter how many times he read the problem, he just couldn't get it.

So Eichentopf encouraged the student to take a different approach: Walk up to a whiteboard and talk out the problem. What happened next was like magic.

“Each time he would get a step right, he would go, ‘Bam!’” Eichentopf said. “We all learn in different styles and different combinations. When you're tutoring someone, you have to think about how that person prefers to learn. If you don't teach them the way they learn, you've stacked the odds up against them.”

Turns out Eichentopf's student was mainly a kinesthetic learner—someone who absorbs information through hands-on activities and movement.

This tutoring program is like most others in classrooms across America. Except, it's in a prison.

Eichentopf is one of about a half dozen incarcerated students in a peer tutoring program at [Larch Corrections Center](#). Participants can receive a certification from the [College Reading & Learning Association \(CRLA\)](#). The CRLA is the international standard for peer tutoring certification in higher education.

The curriculum teaches incarcerated individuals how to tutor peers within a prison setting. Since its launch in 2019, Larch has had 21 incarcerated students become certified tutors. Larch is the only prison in the nation to have this program.

How it Started

Lauren Zavrel, an instructor at Larch, came up with the idea for a peer tutoring program about five years ago. At any one time, Zavrel would have up to 23 students working on various GED projects at their own pace and at different skill levels. Teaching one subject at a time to an entire classroom with various needs was neither efficient nor student-centered.

Help came from an incarcerated individual named Chris. Chris' prison job was a classroom assistant, which at that time, involved making copies of and distributing class assignments and materials for students. Chris also happened to be a math whiz. So Zavrel decided to let Chris form a separate study group with the math students so Zavrel could focus on the needs of the other students. In effect, Chris had become an unofficial tutor.

After Chris formed the inmate-led study group, Zavrel said GED completions went up. And after the end of the quarter, many incarcerated students sought peer tutors out for help with their assignments. Zavrel recognized the demand and the idea for launching an official peer tutoring program was born.

“I realized this wasn't just a Chris thing, this was a peer tutor paradigm that needed attention and validation,” Zavrel said.

Zavrel looked into what kind of certifications for tutors existed and found CRLA. Since 1989, more than 1,000 college tutor training programs worldwide had gotten International Tutor Training Program Certifications from CRLA. However, no correctional education program had ever received one. Zavrel decided to write a correctional-education specific curriculum to get certification from CRLA.

Zavrel enlisted the help of four incarcerated students, whom, like Chris, had been tutoring students, to write the curriculum.

Formerly incarcerated individual Tim Tipton was one of those students. The course they came up with requires 20 hours of formal training, plus a minimum of 50 tutoring hours. They also must complete a specified curriculum and take a test to be certified.

Tipton was the first tutor at Larch to earn a CRLA certification. Over the course of nine months prior to his release from prison, Tipton estimates he tutored around 120 incarcerated students.

Prisons Have Unique Tutoring Challenges

Figuring out a student's preferred learning style is just part of what tutors must learn, Tipton said. Prisons, by their very nature, present tutoring challenges unlike other classroom environments.

For example, being a tutor may have the potential to create a hierarchy.

"In a prison environment, you're dealing with people who have been convicted of crimes, so you navigate the environment differently," Tipton said. "You might live with the people you tutor, you're equal there, but in the classroom, there might be a power struggle."

Peer tutors may be put in situations where a student tries to bribe the tutor to get more classroom time. There may be perceived conflicts of interest if a tutor lives in the same unit or living cell as the person they tutor.

The course Tipton and incarcerated tutors helped Zavrel create addresses what tutors can do in situations that can compromise ethics.

Benefits of Tutoring

The positive impact tutoring has on incarcerated students far outweighs the minimal risks, according to participants.

Another benefit that comes from peer tutoring in a prison environment is creating an environment of trust. Tipton says when a student is getting help from a peer it can sometimes be more effective than getting help from an instructor.

"Most instructors are highly-qualified, but in a prison, they can be seen as a position of power or authority," Tipton said. "A student who struggles won't necessarily go up and ask for help if they have trust issues, or they're embarrassed. But someone who looks like them, who wears the same clothes and speaks the same prison vernacular as them, they might gravitate toward fellow inmates because they have a shared understanding of what it's like to be in that (prison) environment."

Tutors Expanding Educational Opportunities

Incarcerated tutors have also taken the lead in expanding educational opportunities facility-wide.

Students in the program are partnering with the [Department of Corrections' Sustainability in Prisons Project \(SPP\)](#) to start a garden at Larch and award credits to the students in the High School Plus, HS+, program.

SPP is a partnership between the Department of Corrections and [The Evergreen State College](#). It provides opportunities for incarcerated individuals to lead science and environmental sustainability programs in correctional facilities. SPP has programs at all 12 of Washington's prisons.

HS+ is a high school credit recovery program where students can earn diplomas using credits earned in high school and combining experience in DOC work programs.

Most DOC facilities have gardens that incarcerated individuals maintain. Produce grown in the gardens is donated to local food banks to help alleviate food insecurity in communities. A portion of the produce also supplements food served to incarcerated individuals within facilities.

Tutors will have the chance to help develop this partnership as well as that of a curriculum of a mycology course to complement the facility's current horticulture course.

Additionally, Larch is looking at starting a partnership with [JSTOR](#), a digital library containing millions of academic journals, books and scholarly works. The partnership would offer a corrections-friendly offline database that would allow students to do research for class assignments, without the use of the internet. Incarcerated students have limited access to institutional libraries and computer labs, and for security reasons, students don't have public internet access. Since incarcerated individuals don't have access to online libraries, professors print copies of research materials for students. The partnership would create a pilot program and tutors would teach students how to use the database.

Impact on Students

Many students also say they have college aspirations as a direct result of becoming tutors.

Eichentopf says the experience made him want to become a better student. He says becoming a tutor has unlocked a love of learning he wants to share with the world. Even when the world appears to have come to a stop.

For example, the COVID-19 pandemic caused cancellation of in-person classes Spring quarter of 2020. Instructors were allowed in the prison, but not being able to teach in person made pro-social group learning settings impossible and making sure assignments were distributed difficult.

Teachers assembled homework packets. Eichentopf would coordinate with other tutors to pick up the packets, deliver them to students in their living units and return completed packets back to their instructors. The student tutors helped students submit questions through their J-Pay kiosks and made sure they got answered by appropriate faculty. J-Pay Kiosks electronic tablet devices that allow incarcerated individuals to send emails and other documents to family and friends as well as to instructors.

"We'd come down, drop the completed bundle off at the teacher's office, pick up the new bundle and give it to a correctional officer up in the unit, and they would distribute it to make sure everyone was getting their homework," Eichentopf said.

Through his efforts, he helped two students graduate with their high school diplomas during in-person class cancellations.

He added the most rewarding part is witnessing students understand a concept they didn't before.

“Seeing the students I work with go from hating it and fighting it to success, where they really see their progress and go from ‘I can’t’ to ‘I can,’ that change is incredible.”

Tipton, who released from prison in June of 2019, says tutoring transformed his life. He’s not shy about talking about what led him to prison in the first place. Habitual drug use and vehicular assault.

“Before, I worked in the service industry and I’d keep the job as long as I could before I got high and got fired and then I got my income selling drugs,” Tipton said. “But I have these really good things in my life now.”

Tipton is now a student at [Clark College](#), where he worked as peer mentor in the transitional studies department at the college’s [Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#). Tipton is planning on transferring to the [Washington State University](#) campus in Vancouver this fall with a major in computer science. He wants to get a job in the computer programming industry upon graduation. He says he owes his success to his time at Larch.

He said watching the tutoring program take off at Larch and seeing his peers change for the better because of his actions motivated him to change his own life for the better.

“Seeing a student go from having no self-worth, thinking they’re dumb and watch them break free of that and gain self-confidence and start thinking maybe I can do this, OK I am doing this,” Tipton said. “I’ve seen these big, grown dudes you wouldn’t want to meet in a dark alley and watching them graduate and break down and cry. To watch somebody go from nothing to something, I’ll never forget that experience, and I can’t believe the momentum that I’ve made myself.”

Seth Primozych is hoping for the same type of success. He’s a tutor-in-training and like other tutors, he said seeing others learn has inspired him to use education keep him from coming back to prison.

He gets out of prison in 2022 and plans to go to college—something he never thought he would be capable of before. He wants to become a reentry navigator—someone who works with people releasing from prison to connect them with resources like job placement, transitional housing, health care and other community supports that have proven to help deter recidivism.

“I understand where a lot of these guys are coming from when they first walk into a classroom,” Primozych said. “A lot of these guys have been run down their whole lives and seeing them get this knowledge and take this information and articulate it is awesome to know that you had a part in it. The more I learn about this education environment, the more I want. I get to come down here and help change people’s lives for the better. My main driver is that purpose.”

87 Shares





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