On Campus

Would You Survive Parole?

A simulation captures the frustration of reclaiming a life after prison.

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|
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On a recent Tuesday night, an unusual crowd of alumni, employers, and formerly incarcerated men and women — many still on parole — gathers at Low Library for what will turn out to be a two-hour exercise in frustration and humility.

At the coat check, visitors are handed a name tag with a string of numbers and letters. On each of their seats is a unique profile of a fictional felon just released from prison.

“Do I look like an ex-con to you?” says a white, redheaded woman with a Southern twang standing at the front of the room. It is more icebreaker than question. Sue Ellen Allen served time for securities fraud. Now the speaker, author, and activist leads simulations of what life is like for a formerly incarcerated person (FIP) trying to reenter society.

“Tonight you’re a former prisoner — like me. You’ll get a taste, just a taste, of what it’s like to come home … That profile on your chair is you. That sticker on your shirt is your New York State correctional services ID.”

Participants dutifully read the profiles, which detail a four-week schedule of tasks that FIPs must complete to meet the conditions of parole. The simulation demands that people visit tables around the room to get each task done. Along with making rent and showing up to counseling, FIPs need a state ID, urine tests, bus tickets, a job, food — all the essentials.

A bell rings. Week one starts.

The tables are staffed by volunteers, almost all of whom are parolees. They have been told to treat people as officials treat them, which is to say rudely. Most people will need a state ID to get a job, but the ID line is twenty people deep. “Time’s up,” says Allen after forty-five minutes. “Back to your seats.”

Week two starts. Tasks pile up. Participants who cannot pay rent are homeless. One gets her state ID and makes it to the counseling table only to be told to pick a card at random. The card says she’s disruptive, so she’s kicked out of therapy. The bell rings again. It’s week three. She’s out of food.

By now, there’s a black market for bus tickets. The lines, already long, are made longer when a parolee working one table has to leave early to make curfew. When the bell rings and week three ends, Allen stops the exercise. Mercifully, there is no week four.

“How do you feel?” Allen asks.

Participants share their exasperation, anger, and sense of powerlessness. “The rules don’t work,” one man observes. “The playing field isn’t level.”

Each year, more than 650,000 people are released from US prisons. Two-thirds of those will be rearrested within three years. “With little social support, few job options, and an inefficient, often dehumanizing legal system, formerly incarcerated people face an uphill battle,” says Damon Phillips, codirector of Columbia Business School’s Tamer Center for Social Enterprise, which along with the Osborne Association and Reinventing Reentry, two nonprofits working on criminal-justice issues, helped organize the simulation.

He explains that one of the ways Columbia Business School is trying to help prisoners with that transition is through the ReEntry Acceleration Program (REAP). Created by the Tamer Center in partnership with the Center for Justice at Columbia, REAP takes a two-pronged approach: “It teaches incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals business skills, and it also gives employers tools and guides for hiring people with a criminal record,” says Phillips.

The simulation exercise is important, says Phillips, because it fosters empathy. A two-hour event will never capture the true pain of life after prison, but it can be a powerful way to bridge worlds that rarely connect.

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