



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 14: DR. JESSICA GROSHOLZ – ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS JUSTICE

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

There are all sorts of contexts in which people commit crime. And so, without having a full understanding of that context, it becomes really problematic to judge people.

Phil Wagner

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real, human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome to yet another episode of Diversity Goes to Work, the podcast where we center real, human lived experiences that can help us inform our approach and the strategies we use to make the world of work more diverse, equitable, and inclusive place for all. I'm particularly excited about today's episode. I'm joined by a true expert, but also a dear, dear friend and colleague who I've known for quite some time. Dr. Jessica Grosholz is an Associate Professor of Criminology and the campus chair and director of the Masters in Criminal Justice program at the University of South Florida and the University of South Florida Sarasota campus. She's a research administration fellow. She's an award-winning faculty member. She's actively involved in community-engaged work and service-learning. So we are truly in for a real treat today. Jess, welcome to our podcast. Thanks for joining us.

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

Thank you so much for having me, Phil. I'm excited to be here. I'm excited to speak with you and see you. It's been too long, and I'm just excited to put the word out about diversity and inclusion in terms of my research, in terms of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated population.

Phil Wagner

So, Jess, I feel like this is sort of this episode is a little bit like a bad joke set up like a criminologist and a communications guy walk into a podcast at a business school, and everybody turns and says, what are you all doing here? So, Jesse, you're a criminologist by trade. Tell me, how does a criminologist get involved in entrepreneurial work?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

That's a really good question, Phil. So I did my graduate work at Emory University, and while I was there doing my dissertation work, I interviewed formerly incarcerated men in the Atlanta area and really just to understand their experiences with incarceration and then how those incarceration experiences shaped their reentry experiences. So did their time in prison make it harder? Did it ease the transition? How did it impact housing, family reunification, and employment in particular? And as I was speaking to the men, really that employment piece became a sort of focus. Right? We know they're not able to find employment. The research really suggests that a year after being released, about 75% still cannot find stable employment. And as they were talking to me and as we were having these discussions, I started to realize that they were sort of taking their employment into their own hands, so to speak. They were starting their own businesses. They were taking nontraditional routes to find employment and by nontraditional routes, meaning sort of those legal avenues. Right. They want to be prosocial contributing members of society. So they were becoming Reverends, pastors, starting barbershops, starting lawn services. And I started realizing that entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial training was really important for this population. Fast forward a few years. When I started at USF Sarasota Manatee, I met a colleague, Dr. Jean Kabongo, in the College of Business, and I realized his area of expertise was entrepreneurship. And we started talking, and light bulbs went off in both of our heads. We realized we could be providing entrepreneurial training to incarcerated populations, both in prisons and in jails, to sort of provide them with the tools, skills, and what we call sort of that entrepreneurial mindset for when they are eventually released because, as we know, 95% of incarcerated individuals are eventually released.

Phil Wagner

All right. So this is a lot to unpack, and I really want to get to that work with Jean Kabongo. I'm familiar with that work, and I think it's incredibly powerful. But there's an important sort of off-ramp here that I want to take before we really settle into our conversation. And it's an off-ramp focused on language. So I hear you, Jess, and I hear you using very specific terminology, and I hear you not using terminology that I might suspect. So we're talking about you use the term formerly incarcerated folks or incarcerated folks. Is that the language we should use here today? Do we say, prisoners? What do we say? What do we not say as we're talking about this population?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

So we really want to avoid those traditional words that we hear all the time. Right. Prisoners and inmates, those are really dehumanizing. They're sort of derogatory. There's a lot of stigma that comes with those phrases, those words. Right. We want to refer to individuals as individuals first. They are human beings. We want to make sure that we use that humanizing language. They are individuals who just so happen to be incarcerated at the time, or they just so happen to be formally incarcerated at the time, or they're individuals caught within our criminal justice system.

Phil Wagner

I love that. And I think that people-first language is an approach that we utilize across sort of the gamut of diversity and inclusion work. And maybe that's where we should go next. Jess, our focus here is, of course, on diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I'm wondering how you see your work folding into the sort of larger framework of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Do you have any thoughts?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

Yeah. So I think my work fits very well into this diversity, equity, and inclusion sort of framework. We can't have a fully thriving society without including the formerly incarcerated population. As I mentioned before, 95% return home if they're not included as a contributing member of society. Our society in and of itself isn't successful. Our society can't thrive. Our economy can't thrive. We can talk about all those economic issues in a little bit. But having a fully equitable society means including formerly incarcerated individuals within all institutions in all aspects of our society.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I love that. And there's so many takeaways, I think, for the organizational sphere because that primary mechanism of equitability and inclusion has a significant organizational component, right. Plugging in employees into meaningful and gainful employment to create that sort of ongoing engagement in our democratic society. I think a lot of us would think about the idea of inclusion and the idea of criminal justice and really draw our attention to sort of the mess that the criminal justice system sort of is right now as a whole. And that system has been critiqued and held to increase scrutiny over the recent years, following multiple instances of recorded violence against communities of color and beyond. I'm curious if your work explores how the post-incarceration experience specifically plays out differently for people of color versus white people and maybe also for men and women. That diversity piece, how does that follow the post-incarceration experience?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

Great question, Phil. So we know that people of color minorities are disproportionately affected by our criminal justice system, so it should not be surprising that those that come out for reentry. Reentry is a more difficult experience for people of color and minorities. They are significantly less likely to find employment. They're less likely to find stable housing bouncing around from house to house. They're returning to communities that are under-resourced performer incarcerated individuals. So my work really does focus on those on diverse groups, on men and women in particular as well. So we know that women go to prison or go to jail for very different reasons than men likely to have been involved in some sort of domestic violence situation prior to going to prison or jail. And so, coming home is a very different experience for women and black women in particular. They may not feel safe returning to the environment that they came from prior to going to prison or jail. So that housing plan is up in the air, they're more likely to be full custody parents. And so going to prison or jail means that their kids are likely to be with relatives, whereas when a male goes to prisoner or jail, it's likely

that the mother takes care of the children. And so, returning home is a big issue for females. For women where they need to find stable housing, they're more likely to, as some of the research refers to that as ping pong, from short term housing to short term housing without finding stable long term housing. And they are often, while being reunified with their children is really important, less than half, or about half, aren't actually reunited with their children. And then I'm working on a new project, actually, with Dr. Sandra Stone and Dr. Sandra Fogle on the Tampa campus to investigate how the reentry experiences are different for older formerly incarcerated individuals. So a lot of the work really talks about reentry in general, talks about reentry in terms of usually ages up until about 40, 45. We get a lot of information about reentry for that age, very little, not as much, I should say, on the older incarcerated population that's returning home. And we know that those individuals face significantly greater challenges. They are in worse health, more likely to have chronic conditions, have a harder time reunifying with family, especially if they've been incarcerated for a long period of time. The family may not be around anymore. They may have, in a sense, burned bridges. The family may not want to talk with them anymore, or the family may have simply passed on. So they may not have people to go home to. And then, in terms of finding employment, bringing it sort of back to this employment workpiece, older formerly incarcerated individuals, they don't just face the stigma of having a criminal record, but they also face that ageism stigma as well. So you've got employers that already might have some ageist tendencies, and then you've got someone that's, in a sense, tristigmatized, is that a phrase? I'm going to make that a phrase if it's not.

Phil Wagner

We'll make it a phrase that's good. I love that. And really invokes that framework of intersectionality. Right. That there's not just one monolith of experience of what it means to be incarcerated or post incarcerated, and then it's complicated and that even that post-incarceration experience is not just glorious sunny days. Right. There are still obstacles to be addressed as you move on. I think part of your work, Jess, really seeks to sort of bring about better education about the entire timeline, for lack of a better term of that experience. And you've done a lot of work just bringing awareness of the role of education and what education can do to make that post-incarceration experience better. I know that you're part of the Florida Coalition of Higher Education in Prison, and your goal is to improve our understanding of what access to education can do for those who are currently incarcerated. Can you speak to that work just a little bit and what that work seeks to do?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

Yeah. So the Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison is really about bringing higher education to our state prison system and giving access to those who are incarcerated, giving them access to higher education potentially credits potentially being able for them to succeed when they get out. Right. They need some sort of education while they're incarcerated. One of my colleagues in this organization or two of my colleagues in this organization at Miami Dade College, they received second chance Pell and have been working to provide classes at one of the state prisons down in the Miami area. But they run into huge obstacles. Right. The state

has their state you need residency requirements trying to get individuals who are incarcerated knowing that they were residents prior might be a year or so prior to being incarcerated. Their time in prison doesn't count as a Florida residency requirement. It's very, very difficult. But they have stayed the course. And I think bringing higher education to incarcerated populations is vitally important for success when they get out. And it's vitally important for our institutions to begin to, in a sense, we talk about banning the box for employment, but starting to potentially think about banning the box when it comes to applications for higher education.

Phil Wagner

And talk to us about banning the box. So for some of our listeners who may not know what that refers to, what are you talking about here?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

So banning the box means that you're not asked that question. Have you ever been convicted of a felony? Right. So you don't have that stigma that. Oh, no. They're going to ask me this question on the first page of this application. I'm never going to make it any further, whether it's a college application or a job application. And getting to the next round of interviews is vitally important for formerly incarcerated individuals because they might be able to explain what had happened, or they might be able to show that they are valuable members of society that they are willing to they're ready to make a difference.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's good. I want to go back to what we talked about at the beginning, which is some of your real seminal work, Jess, to spawned some of those awards and all the accolades that you've gotten, which is your work with Dr. Jean Kabongo in the College of Business on equipping those who are currently in prison or incarcerated with entrepreneurial skills. Talk to us about how you specifically have brought education into that space and what it's done.

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

So we began our class. Well, let me take a step back. We started talking about this project in 2015. I guess it was. And it took us a good year before we were able to get everything working with the Florida Department of Corrections with USF and our particular institution, which was Hardy Correctional Institution. It took us until September 2016 before we had our very first class at the prison. We have since taught eight classes, seven full classes. We were in the middle of our 8th class when COVID hit, and we couldn't finish the 8th class. So we have taught 118 men at the state prison. We then brought a different sort of entrepreneurship class to our local Sarasota County Correctional Facility. Instead of the eleven-week course that it is at the state prison, it can't be eleven weeks at a jail because of the transcendency of that population. Right. They're in and out in much shorter times. So we made it a four-day workshop, and we've completed two of those workshops before COVID hit. But to back up, it's sort of an overview of entrepreneurship. Dr. Kabongo teaches the class, and I'm there as sort of that researcher program evaluator side of things to ensure that every class we offer is roughly

the same. We're covering the same topics and to really get a sense of what the men are learning how they're transforming during the semester. And Dr. Kabongo teaches them all about developing an idea, finding the opportunities, feasibility analysis, target markets, developing a business model, writing a business plan, the whole gamut of entrepreneurship with the overarching theme of developing this mindset. Right. And we want them to have this mindset that even if they don't start their own business when they get out, they are able to handle failure, handle adversity and move on to the next challenges and move on and realize that one failure doesn't mean an entire failure. Right. It doesn't mean you're a failure. It means that it might not be the right opportunity at that time, but the next one is going to come along. We hold that mindset. I should say, really strongly. And I think one of the biggest things that we do in this class is that it's not just for individuals who are going to eventually be released from prison. We want individuals who are incarcerated for potentially life to also have this mindset because improving that mindset while incarcerated can also improve behavior while incarcerated. And so, as I mentioned before, 118 men have completed our class at the prison. Of those who are eligible for release, 31 have already been released, and only three have returned. So while we obviously cannot say that it is due to our class, we take some pride in knowing that only three have returned. And I keep my list updated. I check that list. I just checked it on Monday, wanting to make sure that I have the most up-to-date numbers of the people who have been released and those who have very few who have returned. We take a lot of pride in that.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. That's so good. And I sit here, and I come at this from a very different perspective from the perspective of communications and diversity work. What I love about what you do, Jess is that you are giving these folks space to rewrite their participation in the narrative. Right. And so, instead of seeing themselves through one lens, you're inviting them and giving them permission to rewrite who it is that they are both for the here and now and both for their future. And I think that's incredibly powerful stories playing powerful role in how we see the world and how we see ourselves. So I love your work. I'm a big fan, and not just because we're friends, but I really do believe in the value of it. And coming at this from the lens of sort of program manager, researcher, taking this all in from a justice perspective, you work with incarcerated individuals, many of whom hope to reenter the world and the world of work if it's possible. Can you share with us some of the recommendations that you have for those who are eligible and able to then reenter the workforce after being incarcerated? Any big tips or takeaways from your bird's eye view?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

I think the biggest takeaway is to not give up hope after one failure. Right? They're going to experience hardships. They're going to experience challenges. We know this. There are upwards of 44,000 state and federal barriers in place individuals who are returning from prisons or jails, things from the inability to volunteer at your child's school, accessing affordable housing, accessing student loans, receiving public assistance, serving on a jury. But I think one of the biggest ones is this inability to become licensed for certain types of jobs. And

that includes like Cosmetology. I was just reading or listening to a podcast that they said it's harder. There's more training in place for cosmetology than to become an EMT or a paramedic. And so, there are a lot of barriers that don't necessarily make a lot of logical sense. They're not necessarily set up to improve public safety, but for those who are reentering and want to rejoin the workforce and they want to be contributing members of society, it's finding those employers that are formerly incarcerated friendly. There are employers in all communities. You have to sort of be in the know, although we shouldn't have to be in that situation. But find those employers that are formally incarcerated friendly and do not take your first no as you give up because everyone hears no it's being able to handle that, handle that adversity, handle that failure and move forward and find the next opportunity because it is out there.

Phil Wagner

Love that. I'm sort of teed up well to go where I want to take the conversation next because you're talking about creating friendly work environments for post-incarcerated folks. And I have sort of two more finalized questions as we get to the end of our recording. And they both deal with the same issue, which is creating that friendly workspace, for lack of a better term. And the first really deals with colleagues. So I'm wondering if you have any advice or thoughts to normal, everyday lay people, people who are in the world of work doing their nine to five and find themselves working with or maybe alongside formerly incarcerated folks. I'm reminded that there's a lot of media lately in the last decade or so that's really maybe shaped our narrative of how we feel about incarcerated people. Everything from Orange Is the New Black to Scared Straight. Very different than the 1980s and 1990s cops, right? So I'm wondering if our ideas have changed or what ideas you have for how people working alongside formerly incarcerated folks can and should treat those individuals.

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

I think we need to realize that there are so many people caught up in our criminal justice system in the U.S. that it is likely you have been working with or have found yourself a customer of someone who has been formally incarcerated without even knowing it. And so I think it's important to sort of take that stigma away, to take that sort of fear of the unknown. We have these stereotypical views of certain groups of people that must be formally if they're in public and they're not in prison. They must be formally incarcerated based on how they look. But I think it's important to, in my opinion, it's not a lot of people's business to know your history. If you're doing your job well, then that should be what matters the most. There are going to be people who say, well, what about it's important to know if they've been convicted of certain offenses. There are all sorts of context in which people commit crime. And so, without having a full understanding of that context, it becomes really problematic to judge people, to judge people on past experiences, past poor behavior, past situations that they might have found themselves. And it's one of those things that I think about every time I go and teach the class at the prison or the jail or any time I bring my students with my service-learning class to the jail. I always have a list of the names of the people who are incarcerated that we're going to be working with. I never look them up ahead of time. I don't want to prejudge

someone before I get to know them. I want to be able to have sort of they have a clean slate for me. While they may be in a different circumstance, they might be incarcerated. They might be in prison. They might be in jail. I don't need to know why they're in there. I'm there to teach them, to help them be successful when they get out, or to help my students experience and learn what being incarcerated means and what leaving prison or jail means, those challenges that they face.

Phil Wagner

That's good. Thanks for sharing all that. And then my final question for you, Jess, is we prepare a lot of leaders. A lot of people listening to this podcast, we hope, are those of our MBA students, our graduate students, those who are going to go out and make a change in the world of work. And we are actively trying to prepare leaders for the world of tomorrow. I'm wondering what advice you have specifically for leaders, people in positions of power, people in positions that are able to create and cultivate change. I'm wondering what advice do you have for how they can cultivate a work environment that is truly supportive and a space that will lead to fulfilling and gainful employment for formerly incarcerated individuals? Any thoughts for leaders?

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

Yeah. So I think it's important for leaders, business leaders, to really understand the importance of this population and the importance of including this population in employment and in work without including the formerly incarcerated population, you're losing out on diversity. You're losing out on those sort of diverse viewpoints, creative individuals, innovative individuals, a whole population that is deserving of employment. The research actually shows that they're more loyal to the company when they're hired. There is a higher retention rate, lower turnover when they're employed. And that by not including this population, the GDP is actually reduced between 78 and 87 billion dollars by not putting these individuals in the workforce because many return home during the prime working age. Right. We want to be able to include them in the population or in the workforce, I should say. So it's vitally important to not miss out on this population.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, Jess, that's so insightful. I think particularly now as we gear towards sort of mid-COVID post-COVID referent space where I think employers are really struggling to fill many positions, it seems like a prime opportunity and then, of course, beyond. Again, I think your humanity and people-focused approach here is not only refreshing, but I think it gives us a lot of good food for thought as leaders, as managers, as change agents to rewrite the narrative to be more inclusive and also further our approach and our insight as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion. So Jess, my friend, thank you so much for taking time to chat with us on our podcast. It has truly been a pleasure. Lots of stuff to unpack. Thank you so much for your insight.

Dr. Jessica Grosholz

Thank you so much for having me, Phil. I really appreciate it, and I am blessed.

Phil Wagner

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