

Title: Overcoming higher academic language as a barrier to incarcerated students

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Abstract

Institutional language in higher education is often treated as neutral, yet it functions as a powerful and underexamined barrier for formerly incarcerated students and individuals entering higher education after lengthy periods of incarceration. Academic terminology and communication practices routinely assume prior exposure, creating unequal access to participation, comprehension, and belonging (Colbert, 2025). This article argues that institutional language operates as a form of cultural capital that shapes who can engage and who is pushed to the margins. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Vincent Tinto, this paper introduces a targeted, immediate intervention: treating institutional language as content that must be explicitly taught. By making expectations visible at the point of entry—and reducing the perception of language as evaluative or punitive—this approach disrupts a key mechanism of exclusion and creates a more equitable pathway into academic participation.

Institutional language in higher education is often treated as neutral, yet it operates as a barrier that disproportionately impacts incarcerated students and individuals entering higher education after or during periods of incarceration (Johnson & Manyweather, 2022). Academic systems rely on terminology and communication practices that are rarely explained but consistently enforced. Words such as “syllabus,” “participation,” “learning outcomes,” and “discussion board” are embedded within course expectations and presented as if universally understood.

For students who have remained within continuous educational pathways, this assumption may hold. For justice-involved students entering higher education, it often does not. These students are often expected to perform within a system whose rules are implied rather than taught. As a result, they are placed in a position where they must simultaneously learn course content while attempting to decode the structure in which that content is delivered.

The consequences are immediate. Students hesitate to engage, delay participation, and attempt to interpret expectations through trial and error (Colbert, 2025). In many cases, they withdraw from interaction altogether.

These behaviors are frequently misinterpreted as lack of motivation or preparedness, reinforcing deficit-based assumptions about incarcerated students. For individuals entering higher education after incarceration, this barrier extends beyond confusion.

Institutional language often carries a tone that is formal, evaluative, and tied to compliance. Phrases such as “failure to meet requirements,” “academic integrity violations,” or “participation expectations” may be standard within academic contexts, but for students with involvement in correctional systems, this language can feel familiar in a different way. It can echo environments where mistakes carried immediate consequences.

As a result, engagement is not simply about understanding expectations—it is about perceived safety. When language feels unclear or potentially punitive, students may avoid participation rather than risk making a mistake that exposes them as unprepared or out of place. What appears as disengagement may instead be a protective response.

Institutional language reflects a form of cultural capital that is not equally distributed among students. Familiarity with academic terminology and institutional norms is acquired through prior exposure, not inherent ability. Students who have been socialized within educational systems enter with an advantage, while incarcerated students must navigate both content and context simultaneously (Bourdieu, 1986).

This disparity has direct implications for student persistence. Integration into both the academic and social dimensions of the institution is central to retention. Language plays a critical role in this process. When institutional language remains implicit, students who are unfamiliar with it are effectively excluded from full participation, limiting their ability to engage and belong (Tinto, 1993). Educational attainment has been associated with improved reentry outcomes, increased employment opportunities, and reduced recidivism among justice-involved individuals (Cantora & Zander, 2025).

Ways to fix this:

Step 1: Make Institutional Language Explicit

Treat academic language as content that must be taught. Define key terms such as syllabus, bibliography, literature review, learning management system, and evidence-based practice.

Step 2: Prioritize High-Impact Language

Clarify assignments, deadlines, and expectations that directly affect participation. Include tables

that outline and organize due dates visually.

Step 3: Translate, Then Reinforce

Use plain language and provide examples of expectations. For an online class based on discussions, include an example of the level expected in a discussion post and response.

Step 4: Require Active Understanding

Have students restate expectations in their own words. Add an ungraded welcome assignment asking students to explain what they understand the requirements of the class to be.

Step 5: Normalize Clarification

Encourage questions and reduce stigma around not understanding. Include a section in the syllabus or announcement in the LMS encouraging students to reach out and ask questions.

Making institutional language explicit disrupts a key mechanism through which inequality is reproduced in higher education. Access to academic language functions as a form of capital that shapes participation (Bourdieu, 1986). Clear communication also supports integration into academic environments. When students understand expectations, they are more likely to participate and engage (Tinto, 1993). Reducing uncertainty lowers perceived risk and increases confidence, leading to stronger early engagement.

Institutional language is not neutral—it is a gatekeeping mechanism that shapes access, participation, and belonging. For incarcerated students entering higher education after or during periods of incarceration, unclear or implicitly defined language creates immediate barriers. By making expectations explicit, educators can remove a critical obstacle and create a more inclusive pathway into higher education.

Meet your authors

Frank Sgro, SUNY Empire State University. Mr. Sgro is currently earning his bachelor's degree in Addiction Studies at SUNY: Empire State University and is Dr. Green's research assistant. He has a passion for supporting the incarcerated and previously incarcerated population so they can break down barriers that limit them in succeeding in higher education situations. This passion stems from his own previously incarcerated history and this research comes from his lived experience.

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