

Building Effective Partnerships and Programs for High-Quality Postsecondary Education in Correctional Facilities

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Fact Sheet

In 2015, the United States Department of Education announced the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, aimed at supporting postsecondary education programs for people in prison. The success of such programs and the students they serve depends on the quality of partnerships between colleges and corrections agencies. To support the implementation of new partnerships and strengthen existing ones, this fact sheet shares lessons learned from successful programs across the country.

Pell grants for incarcerated students

Starting in 1972, the federal Pell Grant provided need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students, including students who were incarcerated. However, in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, eligibility for students incarcerated in state and federal prisons was revoked. Twenty years later, the U.S. Department of Education's new Second Chance Experimental Sites Initiative, announced in July 2015, aims to once again open Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated students, potentially making college a possibility for thousands of students in prisons across the country. To date, over 200 postsecondary institutions applied to participate. In spring 2016, the Department of Education will select a limited number of postsecondary education institutions, in partnership with correctional facilities, to participate in this initiative. Students in local jails and juvenile facilities continue to be eligible for Pell Grants.

- > **Postsecondary education promotes safer communities.** Incarcerated people who participate in prison education programs are 43 percent less likely to recidivate than those who do not.²
- > **Postsecondary education is cost-effective,** offering a 400 percent return on investment over three years for taxpayers, or \$5 saved for every \$1 spent.³
- > **Postsecondary education improves the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities.** Those who participate while in prison experience increased opportunities for employment and earnings, increased intergenerational educational achievement, and more frequent and meaningful civic engagement.⁴
- > **Postsecondary education in prison improves safety in facilities.** Facilities with college programs report fewer conduct issues and less violence, making the prison safer for staff and incarcerated people alike.⁵

In the academic year 2009 to 2010, fewer than 71,000 prisoners in 43 states participated in postsecondary education programs—just six percent of the total state prison population in the United States.⁷

Why postsecondary education for incarcerated people matters

- > **Incarcerated people need educational opportunities.** From 1972 to 2010, the number of people incarcerated in prison increased from 174,379 to 1,403,091, a significant proportion of this 700 percent increase was concentrated among those with no college education.¹



Only

35-42%

of state prison facilities report providing college courses to incarcerated individuals



Developing college-corrections partnerships

To ensure growth and success, partnerships between institutions of higher education and corrections agencies should have clear and purposeful guidelines in place. These partnerships should aim to:

- > Develop a shared understanding of what is needed programmatically and logistically to support a high-quality postsecondary education program.
- > Be clear, intentional, and honest about what can be done—don't overpromise or oversell deliverables.
- > Develop and execute a written agreement that details shared goals, a commitment to partnering, and each institution's roles and responsibilities integral to the success of the program. This agreement should be reviewed and updated annually based on actual implementation experience.
- > Develop and update policies, procedures, and processes that promote and strengthen the efficacy of the partnership in supporting postsecondary education programs. These policies should identify the specific needs of the correctional facility and participating college and corrections organizations. (See "Teaching in Prison.")
- > Implement and maintain regularly scheduled meetings between college and corrections representatives to foster relationship- and trust-building, engage in ongoing planning, and troubleshoot emerging issues and challenges.
- > Innovate, but learn from prior and existing efforts so as to avoid repeating unnecessary mistakes in implementation and execution.

Teaching in prison

Teaching in prison can come with unexpected challenges. For example, faculty will need to get security clearance to enter the facility, which may take weeks and require corrections trainings. Once clearance is acquired, both students and faculty members may still require escorts from corrections officers to reach their classrooms. Because students in a classroom may not be allowed to wait unsupervised for the instructor to arrive, even slight delays in arriving at the facility can wreak havoc on corrections schedules. This may result in the facility cancelling the day's class, leading to frustration for all parties involved.

College program administrators should also take into account facility transfers. People in prison do not typically serve their full sentence in a single facility and transfers to another facility can occur at any time during the academic year. Transfers to facilities without college programs or that inhibit instructors from reaching their students to complete coursework can stall or end academic progress, wasting program dollars or student financial aid. Pending transfers are often kept confidential for security reasons, even from facility staff. Those planning college programs should work with corrections partners to plan for the eventuality of facility transfers well in advance. Where feasible, transfer "holds" should be utilized for enrolled students.

In addition, classroom space is often at a premium in facilities, where many educational and therapeutic courses may be running at a given time. Scheduling class times can be challenging and should begin well in advance of the semester start. The development of course schedules should also consider students' work schedules, as their limited wages are necessary to purchase food and other supplies, as well as to save money in advance of release.

Ensuring quality in postsecondary education programs

To ensure that students are better able to seek admission to college programs post-release, transfer credits, or be competitive with college graduates in the community, the quality and content of college programming should be in all material ways equivalent to that offered to students on campuses in the community. Thus, college faculty must view the classroom in prison as an important space where students are challenged to think, question, learn and grow, just as they would in a classroom on any college campus in the community. To achieve this, corrections and higher education partners should aim to:

- > Offer only credit-bearing courses that are transferable to colleges in the communities to which incarcerated students return, and/or developmental courses (ideally accelerated) that directly prepare students for credit-bearing work. Moving students to credit-bearing coursework faster minimizes the risk of students giving up out of frustration or being removed from the program because of release or transfer prior to earning college credits. It also ensures that scarce program dollars go to transferable, credit-bearing coursework that can be used toward a degree or other credential.
- > Establish clear articulation agreements ensuring credits can be transferred from in-prison courses to community-based postsecondary institutions.
- > Plan courses that offer credits that build progressively (i.e., “stackable credentials”) so that students may attain certificates and associate and bachelor’s degrees using placement tests and transcript reviews. For career and technical education, consider workforce demands in the localities to which students will return in determining course offerings.
- > Recruit instructors with equivalent credentials and experience as those on the campus in the community. Whether adjunct or full-time, professors must have the experience and knowledge necessary to ensure students in prison have equitable opportunities for education.

- > Develop a plan to provide academic support to students in prison, such as access to computers and Internet research technology, access to library and other research materials, tutoring, and dedicated times or places for study.
- > Plan graduation and student achievement ceremonies well in advance, including a review of all relevant academic and prison policies and procedures. Discuss expectations regarding event procedures and requirements.
- > Incorporate the students’ voices in program planning and as an important component of a continuous program improvement. This can be through student advisory boards/councils.

Supporting education post-release

Academic support is imperative for students to continue their college education after they are released from prison. Stressors related to transitioning from life in confinement to life in the community complicate the other barriers students face—such as academic preparedness, financial challenges, and a lack of social support. Corrections and higher education partners should aim to:

- > Counsel students about enrolling in and transferring credits to postsecondary institutions following release from prison, including assistance in filing college admissions applications, financial aid forms, and links to post-release student support services on campus, such as tutoring and scholarship information.
- > Connect students to post-release reentry or basic needs support, such as substance abuse treatment, health, housing, transitional jobs, etc.
- > Explain partnership goals to the relevant community-corrections staff, addressing curfews that interfere with evening class times, work requirements that supersede educational goals, supervision meetings that occur during class times, and other rules that can negatively impact academic

persistence and success. (For example, rules that prohibit formerly incarcerated students to interact with each other discount proven research that peer support is vital to adjusting to and successfully navigating the post-release college environment.)

- > Explain partnership goals to the relevant community-based college staff and identify champions on campus who can mentor post-release students.
- > Develop peer networks for formerly incarcerated students on college campuses to affirm identity and provide a means to connect with others who have faced similar challenges in returning home and continuing their education.

Unlocking potential: pathways from prison to post-secondary education project

Launched in 2013, the Pathways Project is a five-year, Vera-led initiative that provides three competitively selected states—Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina—with incentive funding and technical assistance to expand access to higher education for people in prison and those recently released. The project, funded by five national foundations, seeks to demonstrate that access to high-quality in-prison and post-release postsecondary education, combined with supportive reentry services, can increase educational credentials, reduce recidivism, and increase employability and earnings. Through independent evaluation of the pilot sites, the project also hopes to spur national replication and long-term public investment.

Endnotes

- 1 Jeremy Travis, Bruce Western, and Steve Redburn, eds., *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2014), 64-68.
- 2 Lois Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy Miles, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 32.
- 3 Lois Davis, et al., (2013), 36-40.
- 4 Lois Davis et al., (2013), 41-47; NCHEMS Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis, “Wage and Earnings: Difference in Median Earnings between a High School Diploma and a Bachelors Degree”; Anthony Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, *Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010), 13; Le’Ann Duran, Martha Plotkin, Phoebe Potter, and Henry Rosen, *Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies: Reducing Recidivism and Promoting Job Readiness* (New York, NY: The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2013) 2; Wendy Erisman and Jeanne Contardo, *Learning to Reduce Recidivism: A 50-state Analysis of Postsecondary Correctional Educational Policy* (Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005), 8-11.
- 5 Laura Winterfield, Mark Coggeshall, Michelle Burke-Storer, Vanessa Correa, and Simon Tidd, *The Effects of Postsecondary Correctional Education* (Washington, DC: 2009), 9. Michelle Fine, Maria Elena Torre, Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Donna Hylton, Migdalia “Missy” Martinez, Rosemarie A. Roberts, Pamela Smart, Deobra Upegui, *Changing Minds: the Impact of College in a Maximum Security Prison* (New York, NY: Ronald Ridgeway Inc., 2001), 21-22; Correctional Association of New York, *Education from the Inside, Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison* (New York, NY: Correctional Association of New York, 2009), 8-9.
- 6 Laura E. Gorgol and Brian A. Sponsler, *Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons* (Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011), 3.
- 7 Ibid.

For more information

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety.

Through the Expanding Access to Postsecondary Education Project’s online resource center, Vera is providing technical assistance, publications, and webinars to policymakers and practitioners interested in developing or enhancing high-quality postsecondary education programs in corrections facilities and in the community. Find resources and more at www.vera.org/project/expanding-access-postsecondary-education.

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For more information about this and other Vera efforts to expand access to postsecondary education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, contact Fred Patrick, director of Vera’s Center on Sentencing and Corrections, at fpatrik@vera.org.