

Second Chance Pell: Four Years of Expanding Access to Education in Prison

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The Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, launched by the U.S. Department of Education in 2015, provides need-based Pell Grants to people in state and federal prisons. The initiative examines whether expanding access to college financial aid increases incarcerated adults' participation in postsecondary educational opportunities. In 2016, 67 colleges were selected to participate, and in 2020, the initiative was expanded to include 130 colleges from 42 states and Washington, DC.¹ This report summarizes the fourth year of the experiment using survey data collected in December 2020 from administrators of 59 colleges from the original 2016 group.² This information can inform the expansion of access to college for people in prison that will result from congressional action in December 2020 to lift the ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students, which had been in place since 1994.³

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) is providing technical assistance to the participating colleges and corrections departments to ensure that the programs provide high-quality postsecondary education in prison and after release.

Impact of postsecondary education in prison

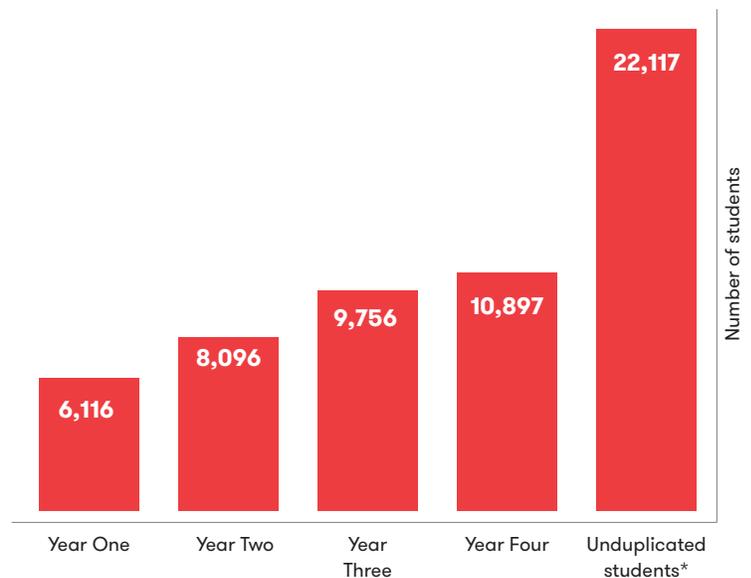
Postsecondary education in prison contributes to successful reentry for people who have been incarcerated and promotes public safety.

- > **Preparing for post-release jobs and successful reentry.** Seventy percent of all jobs in 2027 will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.⁴ However, only 11 percent of incarcerated people in state prisons and 24 percent in federal prisons currently meet this requirement.⁵
- > **Racial equity.** College is a primary avenue for upward mobility—especially among people of color, who disproportionately make up the prison population.⁶ Given this, postsecondary programs during or after prison provide people with

knowledge, skills, and connections they can share with their children and families, multiplying the impact of a single college degree.⁷

- > **Public safety.** Incarcerated people who participate in postsecondary education programs are 48 percent less likely to return to prison than those who do not.⁸ As incarcerated people achieve higher levels of education, the likelihood of recidivism decreases.⁹
- > **Facility safety.** Prisons with postsecondary education programs have fewer violent incidents than prisons without them, creating safer working conditions for staff and safer living environments for incarcerated people.¹⁰
- > **Taxpayer savings.** Postsecondary education leads to less recidivism. This means that every dollar invested in prison-based education yields four to five dollars in taxpayer savings from reduced incarceration costs.¹¹

Figure 1
Second Chance Pell students, 2016–2020



**Unduplicated students* refers to the number of unique participants who have enrolled through Second Chance Pell over the four financial aid years reported here. (Some students participating in longer programs enrolled in multiple years.)

Enrollment and credentials earned

Vera’s survey of programs found that enrollment increased at Second Chance Pell colleges for all four years (See Figure 1), in spite of the challenges that programs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. (See “Impact of COVID-19 on programs” on page 3.) In total, 22,117 unique—or “unduplicated”—students enrolled in postsecondary education through the Second Chance Pell Initiative over the first four years. In that time, more than 7,000 students have earned either an associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, or career and technical certificate or diploma—an increase of more than 2,600 since last year. These programs vary—from applied career and technical training, such as the automotive technology program at Chemeketa Community College in Oregon, to baccalaureate degrees, such as the bachelor of arts in rehabilitation services program at Langston University, a historically Black university in Oklahoma.

Student demographics

Overall, Second Chance Pell programs enroll more students who do not identify as white (59 percent) than colleges and universities do in general (48 percent), but this varies when looking at specific racial and ethnic categories. (See Figure 3.)

- › The percentage of Black students in Second Chance Pell programs (34 percent) is nearly 2.5 times higher than on college campuses (13 percent).
- › Eleven percent of Second Chance Pell students are Hispanic/Latinx compared to 20 percent on college campuses.¹²
- › Fourteen percent of Second Chance Pell students identify as other than Black, white, or Hispanic/Latinx compared to 15 percent of students on college campuses.

Compared to the overall prison population:

- › Second Chance Pell programs have proportionately more white participants (41 percent compared to 31 percent);
- › approximately 11 percent of Second Chance Pell students are Hispanic/Latinx compared to 23 percent of the prison population; and
- › thirty-four percent of Second Chance Pell students are Black compared to 33 percent of the prison population.

Figure 2

Degree or certificate programs completed among Second Chance Pell students, by year and type

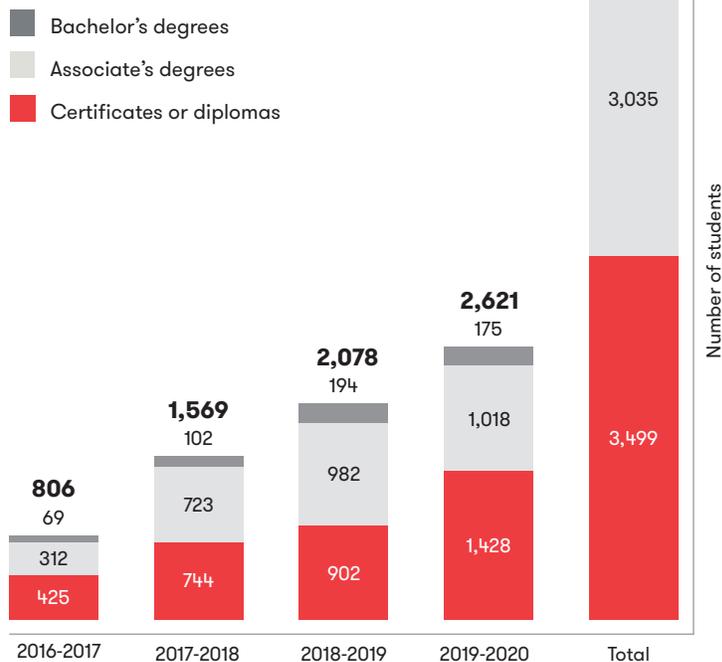
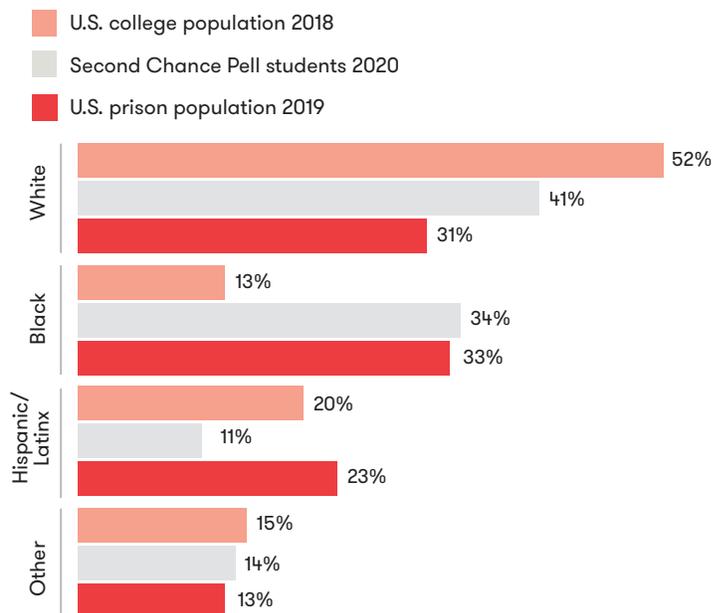


Figure 3

Race and ethnicity of Second Chance Pell students, U.S. college population, and prison population

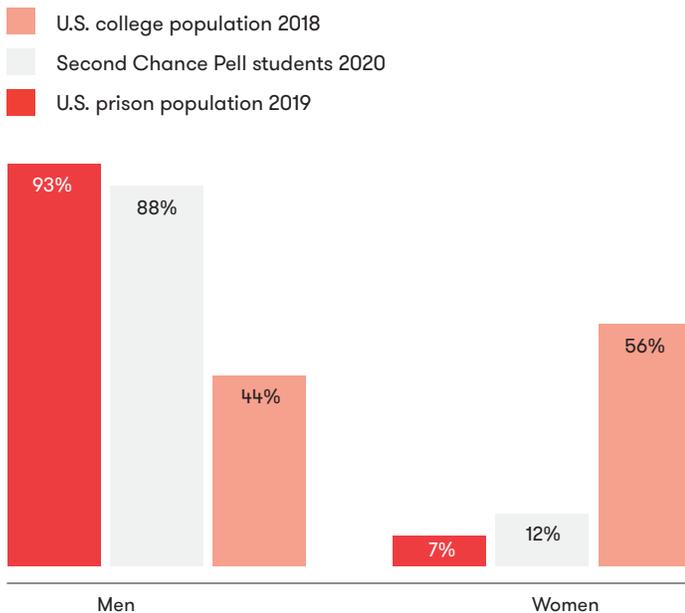


Sources: For U.S. prison population, see E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2019* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020), 6, <https://perma.cc/GG84-9DD5>. For U.S. college population, see National Center for Education Statistics, “Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities – 1976 and 1980;” Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Fall Enrollment Survey (IPEDS-EF:90);” and IPEDS, “Spring 2001 through Spring 2019 Fall Enrollment,” <https://perma.cc/JB95-C9HQ>. Except for “Other,” race and ethnicity categories reported here are mutually exclusive. “Other” includes Asian, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native, two or more races, foreign born, or unknown. The most recent data available on the U.S. college population was from 2018.

Additionally, regarding the gender of Second Chance Pell students compared to the overall prison population and the U.S. college student population:

- > the percentage of people housed in facilities designated for men is nearly the same in both Second Chance Pell programs (88 percent) and the overall prison population (93 percent);
- > there are far more people in facilities designated for men who are enrolled in Second Chance Pell programs (88 percent) than men enrolled on college campuses (44 percent); and
- > approximately 12 percent of Second Chance Pell students are in facilities designated for women, compared to 7 percent of the prison population and the 56 percent of students on college campuses who identify as women. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4
Gender of Second Chance Pell students, U.S. college population, and prison population



Source: For U.S. prison population, see E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2019* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2020), 6, <https://perma.cc/GG84-9DD5>. For U.S. college population, see National Center for Education Statistics, “Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities – 1976 and 1980;” Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Fall Enrollment Survey (IPEDS-EF:90);” and IPEDS, “Spring 2001 through Spring 2019 Fall Enrollment,” <https://perma.cc/JB95-C9HQ>. Gender for Second Chance Pell students refers to facilities and not to people (i.e., 88 percent of students were housed in facilities for men). One survey respondent reported two students as “other gender.” Of the 31 jurisdictions represented in this report, 20 have Second Chance Pell programs in women’s facilities. Twenty-eight of 59 responding colleges indicated that they operated a Second Chance Pell program in a women’s facility. The IPEDS system uses categories of “male” and “female” and has not published data about transgender or gender-nonconforming people. The BJS report also uses categories of “male” and “female” and does not discuss transgender or gender-nonconforming people. Finally, the most recent data available on the U.S. college population was from 2018.

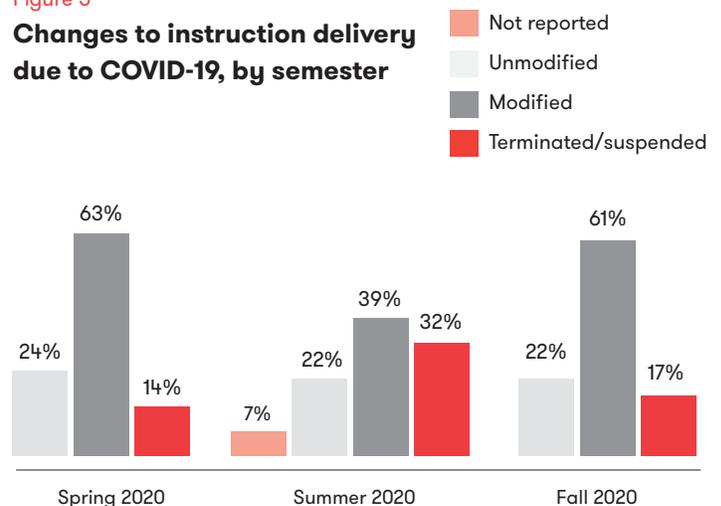
Impact of COVID-19 on programs

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on postsecondary education overall, including postsecondary programs in prison. Throughout 2020, unique constraints within prisons, such as movement restrictions and safety concerns, caused major disruptions in education delivery.¹³ Additionally, technology limitations in many prisons prevented programs from quickly shifting to distance learning and hybrid modalities.

However, many programs did find ways to continue offering courses to their students. For example, some colleges that traditionally provided face-to-face courses were able to set up video classrooms for synchronous distance learning.¹⁴ Others were able to use existing e-mail communications systems to continue regular and substantive interactions—at no cost to the students—for asynchronous distance learning. Programs that traditionally offered asynchronous distance learning were less affected by COVID-related constraints within prisons.

During the spring 2020 semester—when the COVID-19 Emergency Declaration was announced—63 percent of programs modified their regular instruction delivery models, for example, from face-to-face to distance learning.¹⁵ Only 14 percent terminated their semesters. During the summer 2020 semester, 39 percent modified their instructional models and 32 percent terminated the semester. In the fall 2020 semester, 61 percent of programs modified their instruction delivery and 17 percent terminated the semester. Approximately 22 to 24 percent of programs never modified or terminated their semesters for various reasons: some already taught through distance learning, some did not have courses scheduled for the disrupted term, and some were able to continue face-to-face instruction. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5
Changes to instruction delivery due to COVID-19, by semester

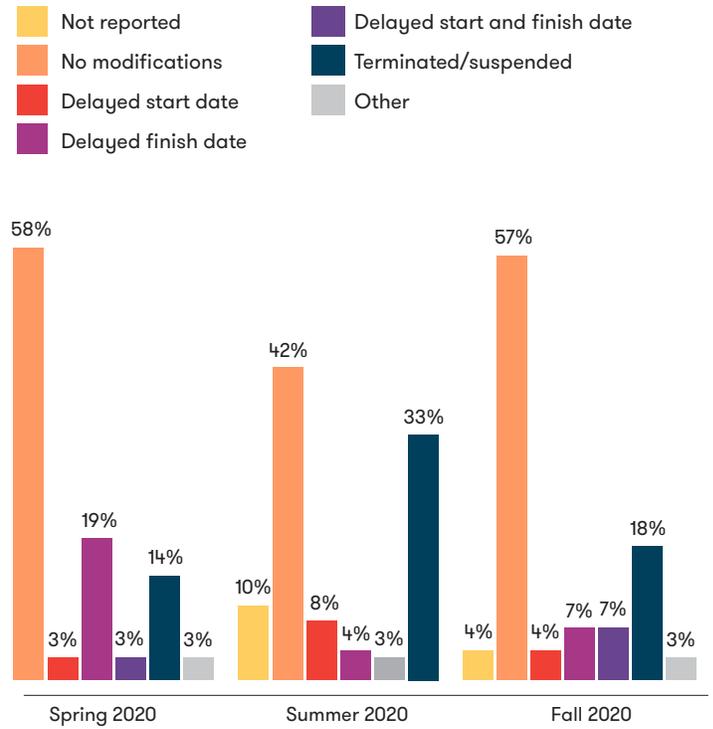


Note: Totals do not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

In some cases, the pandemic created incentives for corrections officials to expand the use of technology in ways that were not previously permitted, which allowed programs to continue. Prior to the pandemic, 78 percent of programs were using a face-to-face instruction model (see Figure 6); during the pandemic, that decreased to 4 percent. Conversely, the use of distance learning models, including hybrid, synchronous, and asynchronous models, increased from 22 percent to 75 percent (the remainder either suspended courses or did not report). However, once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, 64 percent plan to return to a face-to-face delivery model and another 15 percent plan to use a hybrid model—an increase from the 4 percent using hybrid models prior to the pandemic, suggesting that some programs will be permanently shifting to a combination of face-to-face and online learning.

The pandemic also forced some programs to adapt their academic calendars. (See Figure 7.) For example, in the spring semester, when the emergency declaration was made, 19 percent of programs delayed the end date of the semester—

Figure 7
Changes to academic calendar due to COVID-19



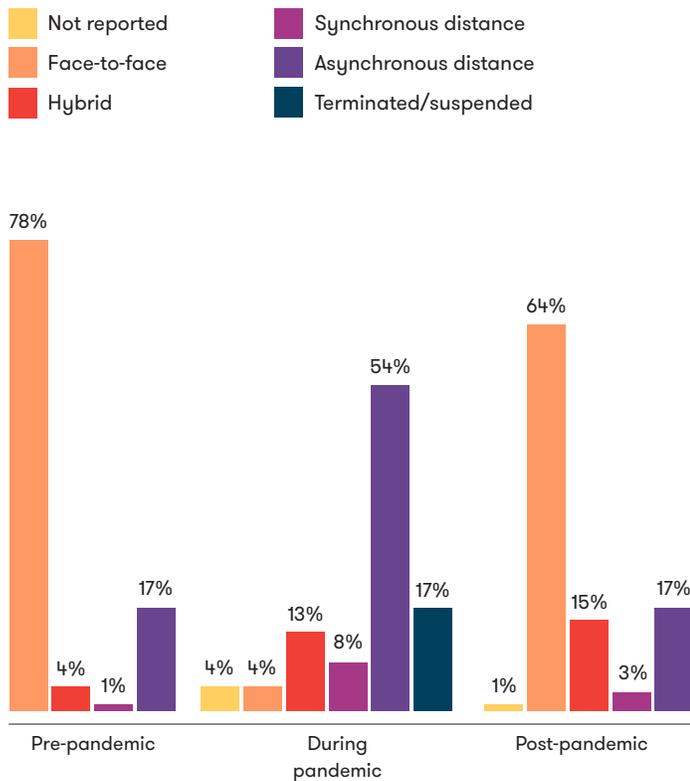
Note: The “Other” Spring 2020 category includes one program in two sites that modified its program by extending spring break to two weeks. The “Other” Fall 2020 category includes one program that “delayed” its academic calendar with no further explanation and one program that switched from a 16-week term to eight-week terms. Totals do not equal 100 percent due to rounding, and totals in the “Terminated/suspended” column are slightly different than the “Terminated/suspended” data in Figure 5 due to rounding.

in some cases, to give students time to complete assignments and/or faculty time to make adaptations. The majority (58 percent) did not change their calendars. In the summer semester, 42 percent made no modifications and about 15 percent delayed either the start, finish, or both dates. In the fall, 57 percent made no modifications, and 18 percent delayed their start or finish dates or both.

Students by jurisdiction

At the end of the 2019–2020 financial aid year, Second Chance Pell programs were operating in 30 states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and had enrolled more than 22,000 students over the first four years.¹⁶ Twelve states have one Second Chance Pell college operating within their prisons; five states have two colleges; six states have three colleges; four states have four colleges; the BOP has five colleges participating; and New York and Texas each have seven colleges participating.

Figure 6
Changes to instruction delivery, pre- and post-pandemic



Note: The post-pandemic figures do not equal 100 percent due to rounding. Survey respondents were asked about future plans for post-pandemic delivery of education; at the time the survey was administered, programs were still operating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1

Second Chance Pell students and colleges by jurisdiction, 2016–2020

Jurisdiction	Unduplicated students*	Second Chance Pell colleges
Texas	3,338	7
Arkansas	1,772	3
BOP	1,545	5
Michigan	1,476	3
New York	1,259	7
Connecticut	1,180	4
Ohio	1,130	1
Georgia	1,116	1
West Virginia	1,104	2
Louisiana	1,059	2
Oklahoma	996	3
New Jersey	950	2
Missouri	761	1
Alabama	723	3
California	719	4
Iowa	536	1
Wisconsin	325	1
Minnesota	318	4
Florida	254	2
Virginia	209	2
Maryland	201	3
Oregon	182	1
Arizona	165	1
Massachusetts	159	1
Maine	145	1
Washington	134	3
Indiana	131	1
Pennsylvania	124	4
South Carolina	44	1
Nebraska	38	1
New Mexico	24	1
Total	22,117	

*“Unduplicated students” refers to the number of unique participants who have enrolled through Second Chance Pell over the 2016–2020 financial aid years. This table reflects colleges that reported student enrollment from 2016 to 2020 across multiple geographic jurisdictions when applicable. Therefore, the college column will total to more than the number of responding colleges. See note 2 for more details on survey responses.

Acknowledgments

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About citations

As researchers and readers alike rely more and more on public knowledge made available through the Internet, “link rot” has become a widely acknowledged problem for creating useful and sustainable citations. To address this issue, the Vera Institute of Justice is experimenting with the use of Perma.cc (<https://perma.cc>), a service that helps scholars, journals, and courts create permanent links to the online sources cited in their work.

Credits

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Suggested citation

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Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, “Secretary DeVos Expands Second Chance Pell Experiment, More than Doubling Opportunities for Incarcerated Students to Gain Job Skills and Earn Postsecondary Credentials,” press release (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, April 24, 2020), <https://perma.cc/2UXK-JDXT>.
- 2 Although 67 colleges were initially selected, 63 of those remain in the Experimental Sites Initiative, and 59 participated in the survey. For three of the four colleges that did not participate in the survey, three-year totals (2016–2019) provided in a previous survey were used to tally the four-year totals provided in Table 1 and Figure 1. One program did not participate in either survey; therefore, its enrollment totals are not included. Two of the responding colleges were not able to provide race and ethnicity data. Three colleges did not have students in 2019–2020, but their responses are included in Table 1 and Figures 1 (three-year total was used in place of four-year total), 5, 6, and 7. One college operates in multiple states and is counted in the disaggregate in Table 1 and Figures 5, 6, and 7. Five colleges operate in their respective states and in a federal facility in their state and are counted as such.
- 3 Juan Martinez-Hill, *A Monumental Shift: Restoring Access to Pell Grants for Incarcerated Students* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/2D4E-P2HE>.
- 4 Goldie Blumenstyk, “By 2020, They Said, 2 Out of 3 Jobs Would Need More Than a High-School Diploma. Were They Right?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 22, 2020, <https://perma.cc/P6BK-K7V7>.
- 5 Caroline Wolf Harlow, *Education and Correctional Populations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2003), <https://perma.cc/NJ8Y-UCNU>.
- 6 Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, “Incarceration & Social Inequality,” *Daedalus* 139, no. 3 (2010), <https://perma.cc/V6V8-ZX2Y>; and Ruth Delaney, Ram Subramanian, Alison Shames, and Nicholas Turner, *Reimagining Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), <https://perma.cc/2RHD-VUCK>.
- 7 Susan Sturm and Vivian Nixon, *Home-Grown Social Capital: How Higher Education for Formerly Incarcerated Women Facilitates Family and Community Transformation* (Washington, DC: Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2015), <https://perma.cc/932R-EAUF>.
- 8 Robert Bozick, Jennifer Steele, Lois Davis, and Susan Turner, “Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States,” *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14, no. 3 (2018), 389-428, <https://perma.cc/NKE4-KDFK>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Amanda Pompoco, John Woolredge, Melissa Lugo et al., “Reducing Inmate Misconduct and Prison Returns with Facility Education Programs,” *Criminology & Public Policy* 16, no. 2 (2017), 515-547.
- 11 Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale et al., *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), <https://perma.cc/YP7W-UJ2J>.
- 12 The Second Chance Pell survey asked about Hispanic or Latinx ethnicity. When reporting ethnicity to the National Center for Education Statistics, postsecondary institutions report “Hispanic” for people who self-identify as Hispanic only or as Hispanic and any other race category. See Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Collecting Race and Ethnicity Data from Students and Staff Using the New Categories,” <https://perma.cc/S3ED-QWUD>. When reporting race to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, corrections administrators report “white” when referring to “non-Hispanic whites” and “Black” when referring to “non-Hispanic Blacks.” It is unclear how this race and ethnicity data is collected by corrections administrators. See E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2019* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020), 6, <https://perma.cc/GG84-9DD5>.
- 13 Although fall 2020 is not part of the 2019–2020 financial aid year, it is included in statistics about the pandemic in this section.
- 14 The U.S. Department of Education defines distance education as education that uses certain technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor. The interaction may be synchronous (student and instructor are in communication at the same time) or asynchronous. See 34 CFR § 600.2, <https://perma.cc/Z4UA-NE89>. Hybrid refers to a blend of digital and in-person instruction.
- 15 Executive Office of the President, “Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak,” 85 15337 Fed. Reg. (March 18, 2020), <https://perma.cc/7V4P-GMA3>.
- 16 Financial aid years run from July 1 to June 30.