



# Campuses Behind Bars

A new, virtual college partnership in New England aims to reach more people in prison



PHOTO BY ISTOCK

**M**ackenzie Kelley's journey through life has been waylaid by drugs and hard time. Her years behind bars have given her a chance to reconsider her choices and unravel the nature of her addiction.

"I'd been incarcerated for so long and into drugs for so long that it's like I've had to learn who I am all over again," says Kelley, a 38-year-old prisoner at Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center, a minimum-security prison in Windham, Me. "I didn't know where in the world I belonged, except when it came to drugs. I've tended toward self-sabotage."

But doing time has also given Kelley a rare opportunity afforded to female prisoners, and one that offers the potential to turn her life around: college education. Completing college coursework "gave me a whole new level of confidence," she says. "It's like learning a whole new language."

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That was especially true last summer when, along with 30 other inmates at several facilities in the Northeast, Kelley attended a course that teaches computer programming languages and how to build websites from scratch, thanks to a partnership between a few dozen correctional institutions and colleges and universities in New England.

Quilted together two years ago by the Educational Justice Institute (TEJI), a postsecondary prison education organization based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Massachusetts Prison Education Consortium holds the promise of expanding the reach of higher education.

Necessitated by the in-person classroom limitations that emerged during Covid-19, TEJI developed a virtual learning system that reaches beyond the walls of any one college or prison, and that includes not only people in prison and professors, but non-incarcerated college students.

## Limited Access for Prisoners

The consortium was created to overcome several obstacles to educating prisoners. For one, only seven percent of higher-ed institutions run postsecondary education programs geared toward prisoners, according to Ascendium Education Group, a leading postsecondary education philanthropy committed to helping people reach their education and career goals. And even at those institutions, the opportunities are limited.

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Incarcerated people who take college courses are frequently forced to transfer between correctional facilities, some of which don't offer access to college education, making typical pathways to academic success difficult. Having several higher-ed institutions serving prisoners at a variety of facilities could lead to more continuity, and hence more college completion, TEJI believes.

Internet use—essential to most postsecondary education prison programs—is often tightly restricted and many inmates are limited to supervised access. Meanwhile, online connections at prisons can be weak or intermittent, affecting how well students learn. By creating a live, synchronous, remote platform that allows for real-time interaction and discussion, TEJI hopes the consortium can create more reliable access to coursework and, ultimately, a larger learning community.

Finally, the consortium allows TEJI and MIT to offer high-quality college courses (if not MIT credit; other consortium colleges will instead offer credits to inmates who successfully complete courses conducted by MIT) beyond its Boston-area footprint, while ensuring that its general student population gains more knowledge of the outside world.

“The institute looks to deal with both outward- and inward-facing problems,” says Lee Perlman, a lecturer in MIT’s Experimental Study Group and co-director of TEJI; Perlman has taught philosophy courses in prisons since the 1980s.

“On the inward side, MIT students tend to have been on the success track for their entire lives and could benefit by being exposed to other types of people in the world,” he says. “Meanwhile, MIT sees its goal as making the world a better place, and undeniably there is no greater intervention you can make in the life of a prisoner than to give them educational opportunities.”

## Reducing Recidivism

As the consortium grows its membership and offerings, it will do its part to lower the rate at which ex-inmates return to prison while offering them a stronger possibility of future success. Adds Carole Cafferty, also a TEJI co-director: “The sooner we can make this intervention, the more likely it will add up to something.”

Studies show that programs that offer post-secondary education in prison lead to better outcomes. A study by the RAND Corporation found that formerly incarcerated learners who had completed some post-secondary coursework were 43 percent less likely to return. What’s more, the study found, inmates who took college courses had a 13 percent better chance of obtaining employment upon their release than those who didn’t.

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The growing number of corrections facilities, court systems, and police agencies joining the consortium reflects the rehabilitative value college study can have, Cafferty says. With two million Americans currently in jails or prisons, and with taxpayers footing an annual \$46,000 bill to incarcerate one individual in Maine, for example, programs that improve the long-term prospects of inmates are becoming more popular nationwide.

That the consortium can also help non-inmates understand the lives of those on the inside adds value for everyone, say program participants.

“Prisoners come in and they’re mildly intimidated by the prestige of MIT students,” says Victoria Scott, a prisoner at Southern Maine Women’s Correctional Center; Scott serves as a teaching assistant for Perlman’s courses and as a liaison between other prisoners and the University of Maine at Augusta. “Then, as they relax into the class and we begin to form an online community, they start to share stories. They come to realize they provide a counterbalance, a new perspective to the MIT kids. Very human connections, even friendships, have grown from that. It does wonders for their self-esteem.”

Sometimes, students manage to complete entire degrees—readying themselves for new and completely different lives on that day when the cell door swings open—hopefully for the last time.

Mackenzie Kelley will leave that door behind later this year. When she does,

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she’ll have earned a bachelor’s degree in business management from the University of Maine at Augusta. And unlike the timid young woman who was locked into a cell many years ago, she has a plan: opening an artisanal glass-blowing shop that sells its glassware and teaches students how to make it.

The web-building course, along with several MIT philosophy courses and the shared experiences they afforded her, have helped change her mindset.

“I know now I deserve to have a future,” she says.

*Ascendium Education Group is committed to removing barriers so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their academic and career goals. Ascendium recognizes that access to postsecondary education programs, cost and programming that is disconnected from career opportunities are all obstacles for incarcerated adults. This is why one of Ascendium’s key grantmaking focus areas is [Expanding Postsecondary Education in Prison](#) and why the organization is supporting opportunities to amplify examples of student success.*

*Ascendium is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, and students of color and veterans. Ascendium’s work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](http://ascendiumphilanthropy.org).*