



Rethinking College Behind Bars

Groups join forces to reach prison learners newly-eligible for federal financial aid



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For decades, people in the prison system have been stymied in their pursuit of higher education. Despite efforts by colleges across the nation to help potential students through various prison-education programs, there remained a shortage of opportunity. Incarcerated learners now have a reason to be optimistic: The return of Pell Grant eligibility.

In July, [new federal rules reversed a 1994 law](#) that had banned people in prison from using Pell Grants, the federal government's signature instrument for helping low-income students afford college. By disqualifying many, if not most prisoners from college courses, the prior law had a chilling effect on prisoner-education programs formed by colleges and universities — leading many programs to languish over the last three decades.

Now, with thousands of prisoners newly-eligible to tap Pell benefits, departments of corrections, higher-ed institutions, and several nonprofit organizations — including some supported by grants from the Ascendum Education Group — are joining forces to ensure that these prison-education programs are focused on maximizing the student experience and success of incarcerated learners.

The renewal of Pell eligibility is seen as an animating force that will help prison-education partners reach more incarcerated learners, improve the quality of the courses these students take, offer them wraparound services that help them succeed, and prepare them for the workforce once they are released.

Advocates note the advantages that come with prison-education programs, including making facilities safer and improving the prospects for incarcerated learners once they are released. Such programs can bump up students' employment prospects by seven percent, while lowering their chance of returning to prison by nearly 15 percent, according to [one recent study](#).

Of the 2.2 million people currently in U.S. jails and prisons, around one-third could be eligible for Pell Grants, according to the [Alliance for Higher Education in Prison](#), an organization that advocates for policy change and conducts research.

Still, delivering higher education within the nation's jails and prisons presents a host of challenges for all who participate in running them. Few efforts are made at helping prisoners gain better awareness of education programs, and a lack of resources and support within the prison system can also make it difficult for prisoners to improve key skills like critical thinking and relationship-building.

The return of Pell Grants gives college programs a fresh opportunity to help prisoners overcome some of those problems, says Ved Price, executive director of the Alliance for

Higher Education in Prison. Programs that can build incarcerated learners' critical thinking and help them develop valuable workplace skills will become the gold standard, he adds.

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"In this new Pell environment, we'll see new education programs," says Price. "We'll see many programs that are better, but also some that will be worse. As we work to develop them, we'll need to be mindful of what works in these situations and what doesn't."

Designers of strong prison-education programs rely on two guideposts. Firstly, to build better curricula, they look to lessons learned from a federal pilot program, [the Second Chance Pell Experiment](#), that made grants available to 40,000 incarcerated students at 75 colleges from 2016 to 2022, according to [a study](#) by the [Vera Institute of Justice](#), a research and policy group.

Secondly, prison-education partners will continue to lean on another pillar of program-building: Each other. Colleges, groups, and prison systems are working together to

develop best practices and provide better pathways for incarcerated learners.

“Second Chance gave us an opportunity to learn about prison programs and how to use them,” says Ben Jones, education director at the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. “It’s quite a hill to climb, one that can be complicated. We rely on colleges and universities looking to fulfill their mission to get us there, as well as organizations that offer solid support.”

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Coordinating Efforts

During the Second Chance years, organizations formed and banded together as the prison-education field began once again to grow. An informal cohort of professionals had been meeting for several years. By 2016, it had swelled to the point where one organization was needed to handle its annual conference. The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison was created that year to handle the crush of an attendee list that had mushroomed to 400 people — and now stands at around 700 people.

Since then, the group has become a clearinghouse for prison-education data and analysis of prison programs across the nation. [The Landscape of Higher Education in Prison](#),

created by the Alliance, the [University of Utah Prison Project](#), and others, functions as a handbook for many program builders.

“We wanted to hold up a mirror to the entire field,” Price says of the report, which covers 46 prison-education programs and the 540 academic institutions that had helped create or enhance them. “We wanted to show people what was going on as things began to get moving again.”

Besides convening groups and offering them research-based guidance, the Alliance has developed fresh ways to improve the prospects of incarcerated learners. One of its programs, Education in Action, finds opportunities for college-educated degree holders still in prison to land virtual fellowships and internships.

“We need to do more to help our incarcerated learners apply what they have learned,” Price says. The Alliance uses its relationships with departments of corrections, colleges, and employers to create connections that benefit those students.

Other groups know the necessity of collaboration for success, especially between widely-distributed college offices. As part of a drive to make financial aid more accessible and equitable for imprisoned learners, the [National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators \(NASFAA\)](#) works to bring college aid officers together with campus professionals who run prison-education programs. Doing so, the group hopes, will lead colleges to make financial-aid considerations a key part of their programs.

With the support of an Ascendium Grant, NASFAA created the [Prison Education Program Web Center](#) to offer colleges help in navigating through the thicket of approval applications and other Pell regulations requirements prison programs face. Because those regulations cover both educational and financial matters, more than one college office is responsible for carrying them out.

“This is new for everybody,” says Sheila Meiman, the NASFAA’s prison-education specialist. “We’re trying to find all the foibles, get some answers, and publish what we come up with so colleges can move forward.” NASFAA is also working with colleges and prison officials to help them get aid applications and expertise in filling them out to incarcerated learners. The association hopes that its efforts, which started in earnest three years ago, will help it fulfill its mission to help more low-income people attain college degrees.

Improving Education

While making prison programs more affordable is key, providing students with quality education, including skills that can help them re-enter the workforce, is part of the rationale behind the government’s restoration of Pell eligibility. Colleges will have to do more than entrust their prison programs to one volunteering professor or one academic department, as has often been the practice during most of the past 30 years.

“Today’s prison learners will one day be entering a labor market that puts a higher premium

on skills and credentials,” says Rebecca Villarreal, senior director at [Jobs for the Future](#), a nonprofit group that works to increase opportunities for low-income workers. “Pell Grants can help us reach low-income learners — and Pell eligibility is a real game-changer for institutions, particularly community colleges. But we need to go further to make these programs stronger. Are programs engaging prospective students in a meaningful way? Are they taking a long look at labor market studies? Are they interviewing students about their expectations?”

Jobs for the Future, working in tandem with two community-college systems and 20 four-year institutions, offers workshops and program templates, conducts evaluations alongside institutions, and encourages cross-campus collaborations that lead to richer educational opportunities within prison walls.

In the fall, Jobs for the Future plans to publish a “digital field guide” that will offer colleges ideas and practices for building out prison programs.

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Offering More Student Services

Along with developing best practices, some colleges have begun to expand student support services for incarcerated learners. At the 64-college State University of New York (SUNY) system, which serves 700 students in 21 prisons, student services is one of about a dozen points of emphasis surrounding Pell and SUNY's prison-education program.

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Advising, faculty office hours, library services, re-entry planning, and tutoring make up a suite of services for students in prison, along with comprehensive financial-aid support. SUNY will also expand its data gathering and analysis capabilities in the hope of identifying how to keep incarcerated students in the classroom until they earn credentials or degrees, as well as to learn when program officials should step in to offer them more guidance or help.

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Its Ready for Pell program will help both administrators and financial aid staff enhance the quality of prison education programs and ensure that eligible students are able to access and maximize the use of Pell funds as they pursue postsecondary education. 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.

“The new Pell rules allow us to take a systems approach,” says Rachel Sander, director of the [Higher Education Prison Program at SUNY](#).

“Fortunately, we have a robust community of practice across SUNY. We can strategize as a community about student services.”

An Expanded Role for Colleges

Some private companies now offer prison administrators the chance to purchase digital-only, tablet-based classes and curricula that incarcerated students can use while in their cellblocks. Price and others believe that such programs are a mistake. Traditional colleges and universities, long denied the chance to build out prison programs, remain the best option for jumpstarting prison education.

“Socialization is often missing in those tablet-based programs,” Price says. “There’s less hands-on mentoring, less interaction among students. I’ve seen too many people leave prison without interpersonal skills.”

And for this new era of Pell Grants-supported programs to succeed, education will need to be about more than book learning, Price adds: “If we’re preparing people for the workforce, as the government wants us to do, then they’ll need those skills.”