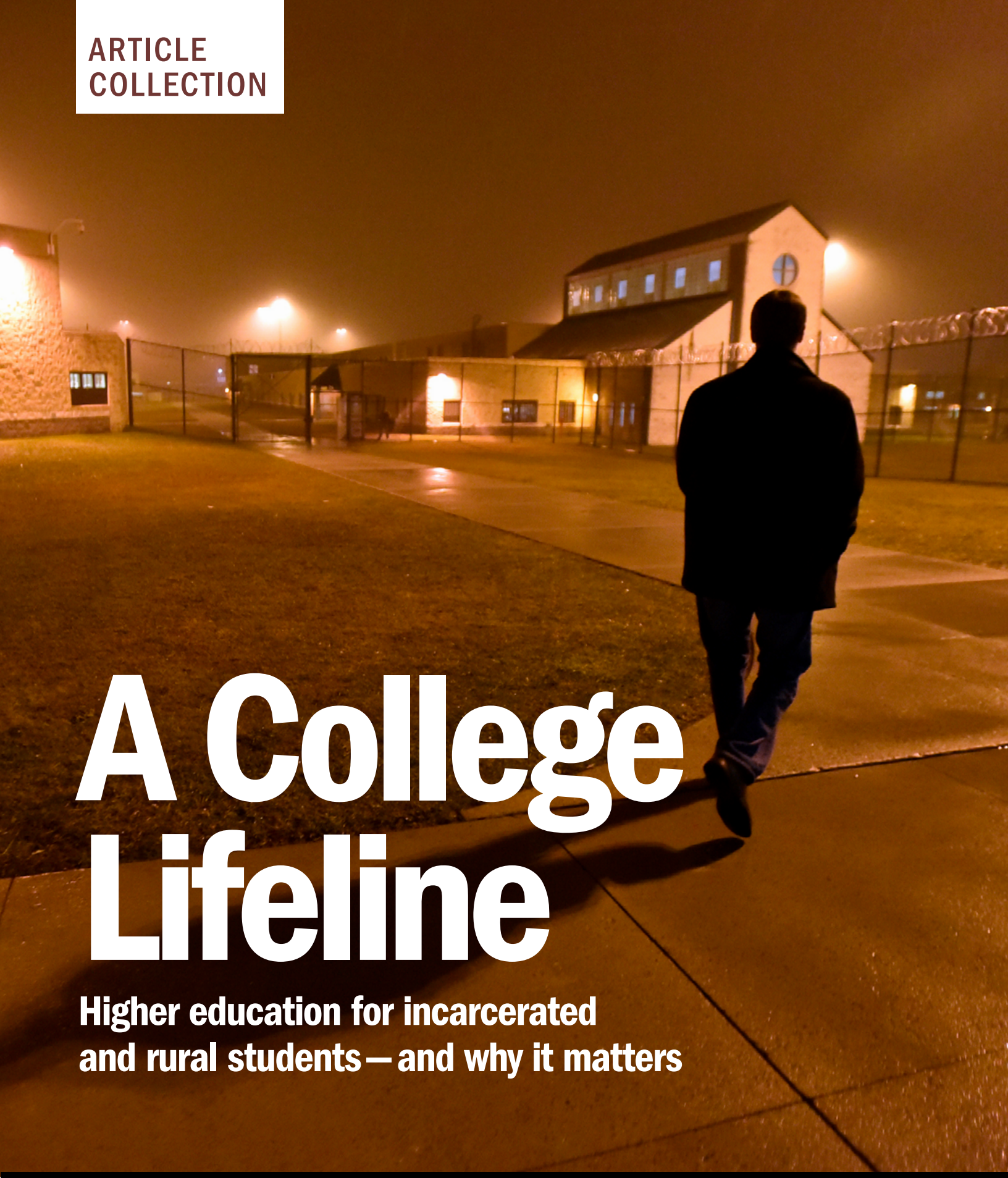
ARTICLE COLLECTION



A College Lifeline

Higher education for incarcerated and rural students—and why it matters

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

A College Lifeline

Higher education for incarcerated and rural students — and why it matters

For years, college leaders have talked about becoming more diverse and inclusive, although they did not always succeed in committing to those goals. In a country where education is the primary engine for social mobility and opportunity, incarcerated and rural students face special challenges in accessing higher education's promise. Within the next five years, the total number of students entering college is expected to plummet more than 15 percent, and so for many colleges, enrolling students from underrepresented populations has become not merely a moral imperative, but a financial one as well.

Prison education has been shown to reduce recidivism rates among participants and can help colleges raise their enrollment numbers and expand the local work force — but the risks and challenges are stark. Rural students face barriers of geography, regional culture, and broadband access, among other issues.

Campus leaders who intend for "equity" to be more than a buzzword must adapt or expand their academic programs — no easy task in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, where so many priorities compete for attention — to meet the unique needs of these sometimes overlooked populations. To do so will serve their core missions, increase the diversity of colleges' own communities, and build a better pipeline to a more vibrant economy.

This collection of *Chronicle* articles and commentary takes a look at higher ed's efforts with and impact on these two groups.

4 Pell Grants for Prisoners? A Limited Program Sparks Hope for Broader Change
The Obama administration offered Pell Grants to some prisoners, the first adult inmates to be eligible for the grants since Congress barred prisoners from receiving them more than 20 years ago.

7 3 Things to Know About Higher Education in Prisons
The answers to three key questions about higher ed and the incarcerated.

9 Can a College Education Solve the Nation's Prison Crisis?
Professors hope a federal experiment will prove that offering Pell Grants to prisoners is a good investment. It's just as likely, though, that the program will be shut down by its political opponents.

16 From Prison Uniforms to Graduation Robes
Two books about the Bard Prison Initiative argue for the wisdom of offering liberal-arts-degree programs in prisons.

18 Ending Ban on Pell Grants for Prisoners Is Said to Yield 'Cascade' of Benefits
Increasing the number of prisoners who get postsecondary education would reduce recidivism, expand the labor pool, and give them better-paying jobs.

20 The Lonely Country Road to College
Students from rural areas have particular worries about going to college: being unprepared, having their skills go unappreciated, and abandoning their communities.

22 College Fairs Might Seem Ho-Hum. Until You Meet the Rural Students at This One
A regional gathering attracts teenagers from small-town high schools that few admissions officers ever visit. Here's how it changed one student's perspective on college.

30 A University Draws Rural and Native Students From the Vastness of Alaska's Interior
Homesickness and cultural isolation are challenges at one college, where home might be hundreds of miles and two airplane flights away.

32 To Improve Completion, Remember the Countryside
Rural areas and rural-serving institutions must be included in the national drive toward greater academic success and college completion.

Cover photo by Nabil K. Mark for *The Chronicle*

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BABITA PATEL, SPICY INDIAN

Students at Sing Sing Correctional Facility take college classes through a program brokered by the Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison.

Pell Grants for Prisoners? A Limited Program Sparks Hope for Broader Change

BY MARY ELLEN MCINTIRE

The Obama administration is poised to announce on July 31st that it will offer Pell Grants to some prisoners, the first adult inmates to be eligible for the grants since Congress barred prisoners from receiving them more than 20 years ago.

The scope of the offer will be very limited: Only a small, as-yet-unspecified number of inmates will be able to participate. They'll do so through a pilot program that creates an "experimental site" — a lab, of sorts, that allows the Education Department to study the plan's effec-

tiveness without approval from Congress. The law blocking prisoners from receiving Pell money will remain on the books.

Still, for advocates and colleges working to bring higher education to prisoners, the announcement is significant. The past two decades have been a trying time for supporters of prison education programs. In 1995, shortly after Congress barred state and federal inmates from receiving Pell Grants, 350 prisons nationwide offered degree-granting programs. Most of those programs ended when colleges backed out.

The loss of federal funding triggered "a near crash of higher-education programs in prisons," said John J. Dowdell, an editor of the *Journal of Correctional Education* and director of the Gill Center for Business and Economic Education at Ashland University, in Ohio.

Then funding for an Education Department program that subsidized education for young offenders ran out a few years ago, Mr. Dowdell added. "That was really the last bastion of federal funding in direct support of correctional education."

A few states, like Ohio, have been able to sustain limited public funding to continue prison-education programs over the years. But most new and surviving programs rely almost solely on private money. It's hard to count how many programs nationwide work with prisoners, said Rebecca Ginsburg, director of the Education Justice Project of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She said there were probably 40 to 50 programs like hers, which offers for-credit courses to male prisoners at the Danville Correctional Center.

The programs are few and far between, and often beset by long waiting lists, yet research strongly suggests that greater access to education in prisons helps reduce recidivism. A 2014 study by the RAND Corporation found a 43-percent reduction in recidivism among prisoners who had access to some sort of education while behind bars. (There's uncertainty, however, about which types of higher education are most effective for prisoners.)

SHIFTING STATE POLITICS

A growing sentiment that "a high-school degree is basically worthless" has helped bring the topic back into discussion on a federal level, said Stephen Steurer, executive director of the Correctional Education Association. But a growing bipartisan push behind criminal-justice reform has had a large impact, too.

The Pell Grant announcement, which will be made at a prison in Jessup, Md., by officials from the Departments of Education and Justice, comes a few weeks after President Obama announced broader plans of his own for criminal-justice reform, through which he hopes to take on issues like overcrowding in prisons.

The issue is far from a clear winner. In 2014, when Andrew M. Cuomo, New York's Democratic governor, proposed spending about $1 million to improve higher-education access in the state's prisons, lawmakers in both parties pushed back. He then said he would seek private funding for such a program.

A 2014 study by the RAND Corporation found a 43-percent reduction in recidivism among prisoners who had access to some sort of education while behind bars.

If education access for prisoners gains traction at the federal level, that could make it easier for state governments to follow suit with support of their own, said Sean Pica, executive director of the Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, which brokers deals between college programs, incarcerated students, and prisons.

Where New York failed, however, California found some success. In 2014, the state passed a law that created a $2-million pilot program connecting four of the state's community colleges with prisons

to offer certificates, associate degrees, and transferable credits.

The colleges will offer traditional services to students, like counseling and academic planning, which are "as important as the actual instruction," said B.J. Snowden, director of inmate education at the California Community Colleges chancellor's office. "The idea of counseling and academic planning is going to be essential to the students who are currently incarcerated really being able to see an end to the path."

The California initiative is covered by the community colleges' fee-waiver program, but Mr. Snowden said he was in favor of programs that would allow inmates from across the country to have greater access to education.

"I hope we can be the trendsetters," he said. "I hope that the innovative approaches that we are making towards making education accessible and high quality will be models throughout the country."

SUCCESS STORIES

Some experts said it was too early to weigh in on the Obama administration's experimental plan, but they contemplated the effects of broader federal support for prison education. Prisoners' eligibility for Pell Grants would alleviate stress on the programs within colleges and working with colleges to offer higher education to inmates, said Ms. Ginsburg, an architecture professor who co-founded the Education Justice Project at Illinois. The initiative could make partnerships with prisons more attractive to colleges that abandoned programs years ago, as well as to other institutions, she said.

"I really hope that as the Pell Grants-funded program starts to operate, it will produce success stories, which I think it will," she said. "I hope it will be an incentive for further reform, inside prisons in the U.S. and on the outside."

Funding from Pell Grants would also make it easier for the program to continue supporting students after they're released from prison, she said. Students don't always complete their certificate or degree program before they are released, so it's important that they are supported once they're back outside.

Pell funding would also let Ms. Ginsburg and others who run privately funded programs know that they would have money coming in from year to year. That would be "such a relief," she said.

"It would mean some security," she said. "We could put down stronger organizational, structural roots, be able to plan more into the future, have a stronger learning experience for our students."

Mr. Pica, of the Hudson Link, said more confidence about funding sources would be a helpful outcome of broader Pell Grant eligibility. "Every single semester, I don't know if there's going to be another semester," he said. "It really stinks to operate not knowing what next semester is going to look like."

Mary Ellen McIntire was an editorial intern at The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Originally published July 31, 2015

3 Things to Know About Higher Education in Prisons

BY BECKIE SUPIANO

The Obama administration is expected to announce that it will allow some prisoners, all of whom have been barred from receiving federal Pell Grants since 1994, to receive them under a limited pilot program. The change is small in scope, but it sends a strong signal.

Debates about educating inmates — and especially using taxpayer money to do so — are often heavy on heated rhetoric and light on facts. Let's see if we can even the balance a bit.

Cries for more research are common throughout higher education, but there's a real case to be made that correctional education merits further study. That said, some well-regarded work has already been done on the subject.

Experts cite a 2014 paper by the nonprofit RAND Corporation that, among other things, provides a good overview of the state of education — including postsecondary offerings — in prisons and the best available sense of its impact. Here's how it helps us answer three key questions:

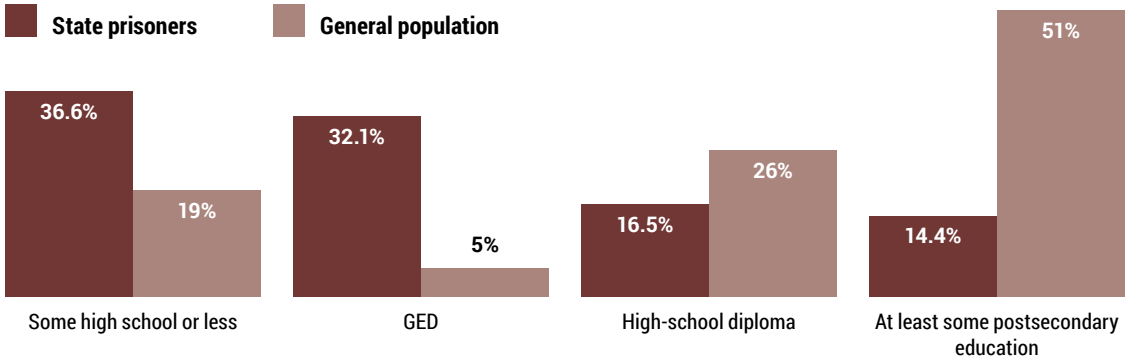
HOW MUCH EDUCATION DO INMATES HAVE?

The incarcerated population differs from the general population in a number of ways, including socioeconomic background, race, sex, and yes, educational attainment. Put simply, prisoners have lower levels of education than do Americans in general. In a country where education is the primary conduit of opportunity, this disparity has big implications for ex-offenders' ability to re-enter society.

The graph below compares education levels in the general population with those of state prisoners. (State prisons, not federal ones, hold most inmates.) In 2003 more than half of Americans had at least some postsecondary education, but in 2004 only about 14 percent of prisoners could say the same.

ON EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, PRISONERS LAG BEHIND

As a group, inmates in state prisons lag behind the general population when it comes to education. Here are the percentages of inmates who have reached different levels of education, compared with those achieved by the general population.



Note: Data for prisoners are from 2004; data for the general population are from 2003.
Souce: Prisoner Reentry Institute, John Jay College of Criminal Justice

WHAT'S THE CASE FOR EDUCATING PRISONERS?

Some 700,000 inmates leave state and federal prisons each year, according to the RAND report. "Within three years of release," it says, "40 percent will have committed new crimes or violated the terms of their release and be reincarcerated."

That's a distressingly high rate of recidivism, and it's only natural to turn to education as one way to reduce it. But correctional education takes several forms, and only so much research has been done on any of them.

The RAND report statistically combined results from the existing research on the broad spectrum of correctional education for adults. Considering only those studies that met a higher bar in terms of research design, it found that educating prisoners was associated with a big drop in recidivism: Inmates who participated in correctional-education programs had 43 percent lower odds of "recidivating" than inmates who did not.

WHO PAYS TO EDUCATE PRISONERS NOW?

With prisoners ineligible for Pell Grants, the funding that provides them with postsecondary education comes from a patchwork of sources that varies from state to state.

RAND asked states' correctional-education directors to indicate which funding sources were used in their states. Here's what the survey found:

HOW PRISONS PAY FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

State prisons rely on a variety of sources to pay for college classes for adult inmates — if those courses are available at all. From a sampling of 45 states that responded to a recent survey, here are the strategies used.

FUNDING SOURCE	NUMBER OF STATES USING IT
College or university funding	12
Inmate benefits or welfare funds	7
Personal or family finances	28
Private funding	20
State does not offer courses to adult inmates	7
State funding	16

Note: Respondents were asked to mark all funding sources that applied. The survey was conducted in July 2013.
Souce: RAND Correctional Education Survey

The Pell pilot program would change that picture, at least for some inmates. And because it would be run through "experimental sites," the program would also improve our understanding of correctional education.

Beckie Supiano is a senior writer for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Originally published July 31, 2015



NABIL K. MARK FOR THE CHRONICLE

Eric Miller, an assistant professor of communications at Bloomsburg U. of Pennsylvania, has found that "the classroom conversations are way better" in his prison classes than on campus. "These guys always want to talk."

Can a College Education Solve the Nation's Prison Crisis?

BY KELLY FIELD

At the center of the SCI Muncy campus, there's a stately stone building with a white bell tower and an American flag. Residence halls dot the grassy quad, and young women wander tree-lined paths between buildings. Inside a classroom, five students are vigorously debating the merits of civil commitment for opioid addiction.

Look past the razor wire that loops under the roof of the education building and the tall fence that encircles the grounds, and this could almost be a women's college.

But SCI Muncy, in Central Pennsylvania, isn't an educational institution. It's a state correctional institution. The students in this classroom wear rust-colored uniforms, not college sweatshirts, and they

have to pass through a metal detector to use the bathroom.

The women's prison is part of a federal experiment to test whether providing a free college education to inmates can improve their behavior inside the prison, increase their odds of finding work when they're out, and ultimately reduce recidivism. More than 60 colleges and 7,000 inmates are participating in the pilot, which has opened up the Pell Grant program to state and federal prisoners for the first time in more than 20 years.

For some of the women in this critical-thinking class in late October, opioid addiction is not just an academic subject but a highly personal one. So when Wendy L. Lee, a professor of philosophy at the nearby Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, asks them if states should be allowed to lock up addicts against their will for as long as 90 days, the women are conflicted.

"Ninety days isn't enough," says Autumn, 35, who has been in prison for three years for robbery and aggravated assault. (Prisoners' last names have been withheld at the request of the State Department of Corrections.) "It took me three years of being away from opioids to want to stop."

"Still," she wonders aloud, "is it OK to commit someone for that long?"

Ms. Lee, who affectionately calls her students "the ladies," hopes her class will "equip them with the critical-thinking skills that they can use to make better calls" outside the prison walls. She also has a broader goal: If the pilot is successful, it could persuade Congress to permanently lift a two-decades-old ban on Pell Grants for prisoners.

Is it worth it for the nation to subsidize higher education for the prison population? That's the question this experiment is supposed to answer. The professor and other advocates of restoring Pell Grants to prisoners say it is both the moral and the fiscally responsible thing to do. They point to a 2014 study by the RAND Corporation, which found that every dollar spent on correctional education saves five dollars that would be spent on incarcerating repeat offenders.

But the "Second Chance Pell" program, now in its third semester, has gotten off to a shaky start. Early enrollment numbers have been disappointing. Professors have had to learn (or re-learn) how to teach without technology, relying only on a whiteboard and markers. Colleges have had to adjust to a culture in which "safety trumps every other consideration, including academic ones," as James S. Brown, the dean of Bloomsburg's college of liberal arts, puts it.

Meanwhile, the political climate is threatening. Any plan to extend Pell would face opposition from some Republican lawmakers, who say taxpayers shouldn't be forced to subsidize college for criminals. The Trump administration has already killed four other federal experiments, leaving some supporters reluctant to speak about this one.

Even if it avoids the ax, the Second Chance Pell experiment is set to end in three to five years. Some longtime providers of prison education question the wisdom of creating a host of new programs that could soon disappear.

Is it worth it for the nation to subsidize higher education for the prison population? That's the question this experiment is supposed to answer.

For Second Chance Pell to work, colleges have to bet on a program — and an educational mission — with an uncertain future. Will we be offering Pell Grants to prisoners in five years? Should we?

Ms. Lee and other professors participating in the pilot say the experience of teaching in jail has been among the most rewarding of their careers. They say the students in their prison classes are more motivated and engaged than freshmen on their home campuses, eager to learn and appreciative of the opportunity they've been given.

Autumn, who already has an associate degree in human services, says returning to college in prison has "helped me remember

what life was like on the outside, and that I can do it again."

"And that," she says, tearing up, "means the world."

SECOND CHANCES

In the early '90s, higher education had a strong presence in prisons. Nearly 800 college-in-prison programs operated in almost 1,300 correctional facilities. During the 1993-94 academic year, the government awarded Pell Grants to 23,000 inmates, at a cost of $35 million — less than 1 percent of the $6 billion it spent on the grants that year.

Then, in 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act — a sweeping bill that aimed to be "tough on crime" at a time of concern about violent offenses. The bill's headline items were its "three strikes" policy on repeat offenders and its billions of dollars in funding for jails. But it also cut off state and federal prisoners' access to Pell Grants.

Will we be offering Pell Grants to prisoners in five years? Should we?

By 2010, there were only 47 higher-education programs in the nation's prisons, and nearly half the states had none at all, according to an inventory by Harvard University's Prison Studies Project. Most of the surviving programs depended largely on private funding. (Some programs, mostly vocationally oriented ones, received modest state and federal support.)

Colleges and prison reformers have long sought to overturn the 1994 ban, arguing that inmates ought to be prepared for productive lives after they are released. In 2015, they won a partial victory: The Obama administration announced it would restore Pell Grants to a subset of inmates through a pilot program that created "experimental sites."

The White House framed the move as part of its broader effort to reduce the costs and consequences of mass incarceration. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with 2.2 million people behind bars. Forty percent of them will return to prison within three years of their release.

"America is a nation of second chances," said the secretary of education, Arne Duncan, in a news release. "Giving people who have made mistakes in their lives a chance to get back on track and become contributing members of society is fundamental to who we are."

The release cited the RAND study's findings that inmates who participate in prison education are 43 percent less likely to commit new crimes than those who do not, and 13 percent more likely to find a job after their release.

Republican leaders were quick to condemn the plan, saying the president had overstepped his authority. But the experiment went ahead. More than 200 colleges applied, and 68 were chosen, including 40 community colleges, 13 private institutions, and 15 public four-year colleges.

Then the hiccups began. The pilot was set to start in the fall of 2016, but only half the institutions were ready by then. The remainder started enrolling students only in the spring of 2017, held up by waits for accreditor approvals or the need to build new infrastructure. Four dropped out before the experiment even began.

The slow start probably contributed to the lower-than-expected numbers in the pilot's first year. The Education Department had anticipated that 12,000 inmates would receive grants in the 2016-17 academic year; instead only 7,885 prisoners did so. Bloomsburg, which offers courses at Muncy and at a men's prison an hour away, had hoped to enroll 30 students. It ended up with 25.

But a bigger factor seems to have been the program's eligibility criteria. Not all prisoners are eligible for Pell; in fact the list of requirements is long. Male applicants must have registered for the Selective Service. They cannot have defaulted on a previous federal loan. They must meet college admissions standards and state eligibility rules. (In Pennsylvania, for example, in-

mates seeking Pell Grants must score above a cutoff on the Test of Adult Basic Education. They cannot have been convicted of a sex offense, and they cannot have any misconducts on the record in the past year.)

And some applicants have been turned down because they are too far out from their release dates. The Education Department, eager to research recidivism, has encouraged colleges to focus on inmates who are within five years of release — a suggestion some states initially took as a requirement.

The enrollment challenges have been particularly acute in Pennsylvania, one of two states conducting a randomized control trial of its programs. That's because half of its eligible students must be assigned to the study's control group. Those students can't take classes.

To date, 350 inmates have applied for a grant, but only 94 have been approved.

The low numbers have created financial difficulties for institutions that rely on Pell revenue to cover the program's costs. Bloomsburg, facing a $33,000 annual shortfall, decided it couldn't afford to enroll new students this fall. It's seeking outside funds to bridge the gap.

Like many of the participating colleges, Bloomsburg would like to see the Education Department waive some of its eligibility requirements, particularly the Selective Service rule. But Mr. Brown says the college isn't willing to lower its own admissions standards to increase its numbers.

"We don't want to admit inmates who aren't going to be successful," he said. "These folks have had enough of failure."

WHY PRISON?

Exporting an academic program into prison involves reputational risk. If the inmates succeed, the college may be suspected of lowering its standards; if they fail, the institution will be accused of wasting scarce resources.

The Pell pilot carries additional risks. No one knows if it will continue beyond the three years the department has promised, and many doubt Congress will permanently repeal the ban.

So when the experiment was announced, in the summer of 2015, Pennsylvania's secretary of corrections, John Wetzel, and his counterpart in the state Department of Education, Pedro A. Rivera, met with college presidents to make the "hard sell," Mr. Wetzel says.

Bloomsburg, he recalls, didn't take too much convincing. (Mr. Wetzel is both an alumnus and a trustee.) Five other colleges followed suit, and three were accepted into the program — Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Lehigh Carbon Community College, and Villanova University, which has had a prison program for more than four decades.

Why take the leap of faith? Each of them invoked an institutional mission: to transform lives through liberal education; to serve underrepresented and marginalized students; to practice Augustinian principles of redemption and forgiveness.

A couple of the colleges also noted the enrollment boost that could come if inmates continue their education after their release. In Pennsylvania, as in much of the northeastern United States, the traditional high-school population is declining. Institutions have to look elsewhere for growth.

"Anything we can do to find more people who are not on a college trajectory helps," says Mr. Brown. "Not only is it making safer communities, it's actually helping our business model."

But even colleges in growing states have a stake in reducing recidivism. That's because rising incarceration costs are siphoning money away from higher education.

Over the past two decades, state and local spending on higher education has been largely flat, while spending on corrections has increased nearly 90 percent, according to a 2016 report by the Education Department.

In Pennsylvania, where the recidivism rate is 60 percent, it costs an average of $43,000 to lock up an inmate for a year — far more than it would cost to educate that person.

Faculty who volunteer to teach in prison have their own reasons for doing so. Many of them, like Ms. Lee, say they're driven by a belief that education can change lives. Ms. Lee, who made it through college with the help of food stamps and welfare, identifies with the young women she is teaching. As a single mother of four, she nearly turned to prostitution to cover tuition and feed her kids.

"I'm an atheist, but there's this feeling of 'there but for the grace of God go I,'" she says. "College was salvation for me."

Others imagine teaching in prison to be a kind of missionary work, or a way to challenge an unjust system, says Jody Lewen, executive director of the longstanding Prison University Project at San Quentin State Prison.

Those narratives are well-intentioned, she says, but they can shift the focus from student to teacher and reduce students to stereotypes. In training sessions, Ms. Lewen urges faculty to examine their own motivations and reflect on how they picture their future students.

She also teaches faculty how they're sometimes seen by prison staff: not as benevolent pedagogues, but as out-of-touch elitists, political radicals, or security risks. She reminds them that they are guests of the prison and will "make it hell for everyone" if they treat corrections officers with disrespect.

"You almost have to deprogram some academics to work in this environment," she says. "They need to understand that what matters is the safety of their students, and not their freedom to speak truth to power."

For professors and colleges, the negotiation between security and freedom plays out every day. Some prisons lack computer labs, and most withhold internet access altogether. Professors must submit to security clearances, and seek corrections officials' approval of any materials they want to bring into the classroom.

"Academe is a very open environment. Corrections, by nature and need, is not," says Randy L. Martin, dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, which is offering online courses in two prisons. "Reconciling those environments can be a challenge."

In his college's case, that meant negotiating a system through which inmates could get access to the course site but no other web pages, and chat with classmates at their own prison only. It also meant pushing back against the prison's request to monitor chatroom conversations, Mr. Martin says.

Professors conducting in-person classes say they've had to go "back to basics" — eschewing familiar technology for whiteboards, paper workbooks, and handwritten or printed drafts. Students conduct research in the prison library, not online, and professors mark up their essays by hand.

Larissa M. Verta, academic dean of Science, Engineering, and Mathematics at Pennsylvania's Lehigh Carbon Community College, says some professors were initially unsure "how to teach without the technology they were used to." Now, though, "some say they teach better without it."

"The classroom conversations are way better. These guys always want to talk, and it almost always goes back to race, class, and justice."

Max Kenner, one of the founders of the Bard Prison Initiative, at Bard College, says he instructs professors to do as they're told until they reach the classroom. But when they close the door, "it has to be a college classroom," with the same standards, intellectual freedom, and rigor as on campus.

"You have to convince people to do things the same, not differently," he says. "The temptation to water anything down is a dangerous one."

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

When Eric C. Miller, an assistant professor of communications at Bloomsburg, signed on to teach interpersonal communications, he was bracing for a roomful of "hardened men who would be intimidating."

What he found, instead, was a group of gregarious men who were much more talkative than his often-reticent regular students.

"The classroom conversations are way better," he says. "These guys always want to talk, and it almost always goes back to race, class, and justice."

The classroom demographics are different, too. On Bloomsburg's campus, 80 per-



NABIL K. MARK FOR THE CHRONICLE

Professor Eric Miller teaches at the State Correctional Institution at Mahanoy, in Frackville, Pa.

cent of the students are white, and only a third receive Pell Grants. In Mr. Miller's class at Mahanoy State Correctional Institute, more than half the students are black, and all of them get the grants.

Still, the debate taking place recently in Mr. Miller's interpersonal-communication class sounds a lot like the one that's occurring on college campuses across the country. Asked whether speech should be regulated to guard against hateful material, the inmates discuss the "recent tendency to shut down dialogue when things are offensive." They ask whether we, as Americans, have a "moral obligation" to be decent. And they explore what happens when "people in power are preaching hate."

"The president gave people license to say

what they want," says one student, named Frank. "The white-supremacist rallies on college campuses never would have happened without him."

Later, the men discuss how they've changed their nonverbal communication to adjust to life in prison.

"Here, if you touch another guy, you're a weirdo," says Shawn. "Outside, it's unconscious."

"We don't do hugs for thugs," agrees Valdeze.

He's joking, but Valdeze and the other men in this classroom are deeply serious about their studies. For many of them, the classes are not only a break from the crippling monotony of prison life, but a chance to change the trajectory of their lives.

As the Second Chance Pell experiment reaches its likely midpoint, it's unclear how many other inmates will get that chance. If Congress doesn't make Pell for prisoners permanent, the Bloomsburg program — like many of the other new ones — won't survive.

Optimists argue that public opinion toward correctional education has shifted over the last two decades, as prison populations have swelled and correction costs have consumed ever-larger shares of state budgets. They note that some prominent conservatives, including Charles Koch, have embraced prison reform.

Pessimists point to New York State, where Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's 2014 plan to provide a mere $1 million in public funds for prison education failed miserably. (The governor later revived the plan using funds from bank settlements secured by the Manhattan district attorney.)

Optimists argue that public opinion toward correctional education has shifted over the last two decades.

In Pennsylvania, officials in the Department of Corrections are seeking state support for the prison program as a supplement and a hedge — "so we're not so reliant on Pell," says Madeline McPherson, the agency's senior policy analyst.

Mr. Kenner, who created the Bard program in the aftermath of the Pell ban, says he fears a repeat of 1994, when scores of programs closed, and "everything was confiscated."

"The demise of Pell was really traumatic," he says. If the current experiment ends in dozens more closures, "it would be a moral and practical disaster."

For Mr. Miller's students, the Bloomsburg program has been a lifeline. Stan, 45, has served 10 years for aggravated assault and robbery, and will be up for parole in 2019. Now, he says, he's proud to be able to talk to his four kids about his education.

"Being in a college atmosphere, with a professor, and knowing I'm getting credits — it's surreal," he says. "Being able to say I'm in college is an awesome feeling."

When Valdeze, a four-time felon at age 52, started the program, he didn't think he'd last a semester. Now, with his release date approaching, he's making plans to continue his education at the Community College of Philadelphia.

"I've got something to go home with," he says, "so I don't have to come back to this place."

Kelly Field is a freelance reporter for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Originally published December 19, 2017

From Prison Uniforms to Graduation Robes

BY PETER MONAGHAN



Students graduate in 2008 at New York's Woodbourne Correctional Facility.

KARL RABE

Since 2001, about 400 men and women in six New York prisons have obtained liberal-arts degrees from Bard College. Through the Bard Prison Initiative, they have taken the same demanding courses as Bard's on-campus students.

Two new, complementary books celebrate those results. In *Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison* (The New Press, 2017), Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, a distinguished fellow in the initiative, notes that while nationally more than 50 percent of released prisoners end up back in prison within three years, only 2 percent of the graduates of the Bard initiative do. Taking college courses reduces recidivism far more than does completing prison high-school and vocational programs. Also well above average is the 75 percent of the project's alumni who find gainful employment within a month of release.

Projects like Bard's not only save prison systems many millions of dollars, Ms. Lagemann writes, they also allow graduates, and their families, to become more financially stable. Children of graduates become more likely to go to college, too, and, like many of Bard's prison alumni, to complete graduate degrees, including ones at well-regarded institutions.

Access to higher education should be extended from privately financed programs like Bard's to as many imprisoned Americans as possible, contends Ms. Lagemann, a former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Candidates for such programs are hardly lacking. Thanks to a decades-long incarceration boom, in 2014 some 2.3 million Americans were locked up. But college opportunities are very few. In 1994, then-President Bill Clinton signed tough crime legislation that ended prisoners' eligibility for Pell Grants. That shut down virtually all 772 college-in-prison programs operating in 1,287 U.S. correctional facilities.

Daniel Karpowitz, one of Ms. Lagemann's colleagues at the initiative and the author of the other new book about it, said in an interview that the effort can teach colleges a lesson about "inclusive excellence." It demonstrates that a population barely on admissions officers' radar — "highly capable students in the correctional facility 45 minutes away" — can pursue through the liberal arts what campus-dwelling students can: "the deeper purposes of fulfilling oneself intellectually; preparing oneself to be an informed, critical, or skeptical citizen; finding purpose in life." Mr. Karpowitz is the initiative's director of policy and academics.

In College in Prison: Reading in an Age of Mass Incarceration (Rutgers University Press, 2017), he suggests that a privately financed effort like Bard's can provide a blueprint for college-in-prison programs.

Extending a college education to prisoners then becomes "less about how people in prison might change," he writes, "and more about how we, as a society increasingly defined by the scope and quality of our prisons, might change ourselves."

Advocates of such programs must start, he says, by facing squarely such realities as the presence of many violent offenders in programs like Bard's. To dodge that, he says, would be to dishonor a sincere objection to prison education: that it implies that "individuals are not rightly held culpable for their own actions," even that "there is something morally or politically wrong with punishment."

One response to that, says Mr. Karpowitz, who is also a lecturer in law and the humanities at Bard, comes from the initiative's graduates' greatly increased ability to acknowledge and understand their responsibility. Prison faculty members like him, he says, must make the case that when American incarceration so undeniably reveals "strong class and racial inequality,", the methods Americans use to hold people accountable for actions that affront "our avowed love of freedom … should strengthen both agency and dignity."

"Otherwise," he writes, "they become a mockery."

Peter Monaghan is a correspondent for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Originally published February 19, 2017



U.S. EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Incarcerated students participate in a lecture held at the Maryland Correctional Institution in Jessup, Md., in 2015.

Ending Ban on Pell Grants for Prisoners Is Said to Yield 'Cascade' of Benefits

BY EMMA PETIT

For 25 years, almost no pathway has existed for incarcerated Americans to receive Pell Grants, the most widely used form of financial aid for low-income students. Reopening that pathway, a new report says, would allow hundreds of thousands of people to take college courses, creating "a cascade of economic benefits."

The report, published by the Georgetown Law School's Center on Poverty and Inequality and the Vera Institute of Justice, describes a domino effect: With access to Pell Grants, it says, more incarcerated people could afford to take college classes while in prison. When they are released, they'd be less likely to reoffend and more likely to look for work. Businesses would have a larger pool of potential job applicants, the report says, and more former prisoners would get better-paying jobs.

Prisoners have been excluded from the federal Pell Grant program since 1994, when President Bill Clinton signed a sweeping crime bill that, among other things, enacted the ban. Before then, college courses in prison were relatively common. With Clinton's signature, funding for those programs dried up. Meanwhile, the prison population ballooned.

Advocates for the programs have tried since then to reopen the door. In 2015 the

U.S. Department of Education announced the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative. Through that effort, 65 colleges — most of them community colleges — provide training and education at nearby prisons, where prisoners can apply for Pell Grants. Those colleges serve about 12,000 prisoners annually, a sliver of the more than 1.5 million people who are currently incarcerated.

Both Republicans and Democrats have floated plans for lifting the ban. Last year Sen. Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican who leads the education committee, said the panel would consider eliminating the ban through the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, but that is not expected to happen anytime soon. The Democratic Party's version of the bill, called the Aim Higher Act, would end the ban.

The report examines what would happen if those efforts came to pass. Here are a few key findings:

Of the more than **1.5 million** people who are locked up in federal and state prisons, the vast majority will eventually be released. About **64 percent** of them, or **960,000** people, already had a high-school diploma or a GED before they went to prison. But only **9 percent** of prisoners complete some form of postsecondary education behind bars, the report says. Most receive a certificate from a college or a trade school. Just **2 percent** of prisoners get an associate degree.

However, those low numbers don't mean lower interest. A 2014 survey found that **70 percent** of incarcerated people wanted to enroll in an academic program. Of them, a little **under half** wanted to enroll in a postsecondary program. The problem isn't desire. It's access, said Margaret diZerega, a project director at the Vera Institute and a co-author of the report. Even if prisoners are academically eligible, she said, most cannot afford to enroll.

In state prisons, which hold the vast majority of America's prisoners, about **463,000** people are eligible for Pell Grants, the report estimates. (It defines "Pell Grant eligible" as an incarcerated person who is age 18 to 54, who does not have a life sentence, and whose highest level of education was a high-school diploma or a GED. Given that prisoners are not able to earn even minimum wage, the report's authors worked under the assumption that they all meet the income requirements for a Pell Grant.) The report does not estimate the number of federal prisoners who are Pell Grant eligible.

If **50 percent** of state prisoners who are Pell eligible were able to participate in a postsecondary program, the overall employment rate for formerly incarcerated workers would bump up by **2.1 percent** during their first year after release, the report says. Right now, only **half** of formerly incarcerated people find formal work within their first year out of prison, according to data from the Internal Revenue Service.

Eliminating the ban would also drive down spending on state prisons. Across all states, incarceration costs would drop by a combined **$366 million** per year, the report estimates. That's because higher education reduces recidivism rates. "It's a cost saver that's a better investment than the status quo," diZerega said. **Nearly half** of people who are released from prison are back behind bars within three years. But those odds fall by nearly **50 percent** for people who take college courses, the report says. There's some self-selection bias in that finding, the report says, but not enough to discount the decrease.

Access to Pell Grants won't eliminate the employment and wage gaps between formerly incarcerated people and people who have not gone to prison, the report notes. But it could improve their job prospects and earnings "in a very meaningful way."

There's a reason to talk about this issue now, said Arthur Rizer, a policy director at the R Street Institute, a center-right think tank that supports lifting the ban: "The iron is hot." Eliminating the ban is one of the few things that conservatives and progressives have expressed some agreement on.

And it would give people in prison "an ounce of hope," Rizer said. "In the classroom, they're seen as worthy investments," he said, "as opposed to another number to be watched" by corrections officials.

Emma Petit is a staff reporter for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Originally published January 16, 2019

The Lonely Country Road to College

BY PETER MONAGHAN



Sonja Ardoin

LYNDSEY AGUILAR

Rural high-school students who hope to go on to college face many barriers, and colleges are doing too little to remove those, Sonja Ardoin contends in *College Aspirations and Access in Working-Class Rural Communities: The Mixed Signals, Challenges, and New Language First-Generation Students Encounter* (Lexington Books).

Ardoin, a clinical assistant professor of education at Boston University, grew up in a small-town, working-class family in Louisiana before earning degrees at Louisiana State, Florida State, and North Carolina State Universities. So she has seen firsthand some of the challenges that the country's millions of rural high-school students face. Those start, she says, with too little funding from education-policy makers and are exacerbated by college recruiters' avoiding the rural schools as "not a good return on investment" because they produce few college attendees.

At her high school, she recalls, "we didn't have anybody to teach us all the courses we needed, and so the state had a consortium of rural schools, and we called in by phone to try to get some of the coursework that other schools have multiple sections of."

Recruiters, if they are to do their jobs effectively, need to realize how varied rural students are.

In addition to writing from personal experience, Ardoin surveys many studies on issues confronting rural students, and reports on her own fieldwork. She found that in rural areas lacking an adequate tax base, underfunded schools often have one or no college counselors and too few good teachers. As a result, students there struggle to find dependable information about going to college. Nor do they have access to Advanced Placement courses and other résumé-builders that college admissions offices commonly see as markers of academic preparedness.

In addition, Ardoin says, rural parents often urge their children to pursue "practical knowledge" in preparation for careers in blue-collar or semi-skilled technical jobs, or to stay on the family farm.

What's more, high schoolers who aspire to travel farther away than to nearby community colleges or regional universities know that, in seeming to contribute to a rural brain drain, they may struggle to fit in when they return for visits.

In recent years, Ardoin says, more college recruiters are visiting rural schools, thinking of them as a sort of niche market. But recruiters, if they are to do their jobs effectively, need to realize how varied rural students are, she says. Whether students live on farms or in towns plagued by substance abuse and other ills, or are from one racial or ethnic group or another, many are from families where no one has previously been to college, often because of poverty.

Many such students worry that colleges, particularly private ones, will dismiss their qualifications, such as those acquired through membership in organizations like Future Farmers of America, or through learning to be proficient at fishing and hunting. That is ironic, says Ardoin, because those activities do teach capabilities that translate well to college: planning, financial management, patience. "Students learn a lot of skills in all kinds of hobbies," she says.

What students mostly lack, she says, is the "college knowledge" they need to navigate to and within colleges. She blames college and state education officials, who muddle their pitches, brochures, and procedures with jargon and specialized knowledge that not only confuse potential students from rural areas, but also demoralize them.

"Students may think, 'If I can't even understand the recruiter, how am I going to go to college?'"

Peter Monaghan is a correspondent for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Originally published April 22, 2018



High-school senior Jade Knight, right, and her mother, Shannon, live in Woodruff, Ariz., a community of fewer than 200 residents. The aspiring biomedical engineer traveled with her classmates to Flagstaff High School's College Night "to see what else was out there."

College Fairs Might Seem Ho-Hum. Until You Meet the Rural Students at This One

BY ERIC HOOVER

LAURA SEGALL FOR THE CHRONICLE

FLAGSTAFF, ARIZ.

The admissions officers were coming, and they would need water. So on a Wednesday afternoon in late October, Katherine Pastor drove across town to buy some.

At Sam's Club, the high-school counselor rolled down the beverage aisle with a headful of concerns. Early-admission deadlines loomed. Some seniors were struggling with federal-aid forms. And hours earlier, a distraught young woman pulled her aside to say that she was being bullied by another student.

Still, someone had to run this errand. Someone had to get everything ready for tomorrow night's big college fair, hosted by Flagstaff High School. Each fall, the event attracts about 100 institutions of all kinds. Teenagers from far-flung towns — towns that few, if any, admissions officers ever visit — travel many miles to grab some brochures, shake some hands, and, if they're lucky, learn something that helps them reach the right campus. Or any campus at all.

A college fair might seem superfluous in places where colleges abound. But in this mostly rural swath of the Southwest, where many families don't live close to a single four-year campus, the Northern Arizona Region College Night spans the distance between higher education and a realm it often overlooks. For some lucky students, applying to college is routine; in outposts such as Lake Havasu City, Prescott, and Winslow, it can feel like tackling a riddle in a foreign tongue.

Pastor, a sincere 42-year-old with highlights in her brown hair, didn't mind loading three heavy packages of bottled water into her cart after a long day. A counselor with a caseload of 500, she lives and breathes logistics. For her, the fair was an affirmation. All students, regardless of where they live, deserve a chance to meet face-to-face with college reps. To stand in a gym full of colorful banners and think, *I can do this.*

Pastor grew up in Flagstaff and graduated from Northern Arizona University, where she later worked in the financial-aid office and earned a master's degree in counseling. When she started her job at Flagstaff High, in 2005, only kids with a 3.0 grade-point average could attend the fair, which took place during school hours, further limiting turnout. *That,* the counselor knew, was no way to open doors. So she helped speed the fair's evolution into its current form, open to all and held in the evening, when more parents might come, too.

College Night is now a widely promoted regional get-together. Whether you live amid Northern Arizona's pine-rich forests, or in its sprawling deserts, or at the far corner of one of its many Indian reservations, you're welcome to come join the bustling pre-college spectacle.

But first you have to find a ride.

Jade Knight woke up early the next day feeling feverish — bad enough to consider staying home from school. But that would mean missing the school-sponsored bus trip to the college fair, 100 miles to the west. *No way,* she thought.

Knight, an eloquent 18-year-old with bright-blue eyes, hadn't been to a college campus since she was 2. She grew up in Woodruff, which some outsiders call a ghost town. The community of fewer than 200 residents has a church, a library, and a post office, but no grocery store. Behind her family's one-story house live two goats in a pen, and open fields spread a quarter-mile to the Little Colorado River.

That October morning, Knight and her mother, Shannon, made the half-hour drive to Holbrook High School, home of the Roadrunners. The name is apt: Some of her classmates travel by car for an hour just to catch a school bus they ride for another hour.

Holbrook, a city of 5,000, is located in Navajo County, one of the state's poorest. In 2017, it had a median annual household income of under $39,000, (compared with $60,366 nationally). Just 16 percent of residents 25 or older have a bachelor's degree; in Flagstaff, it's 45 percent. Northland Pioneer College, a community college, has a campus in Holbrook; the nearest four-year campus is 90 miles away.

Knight's school enrolls about 650 students, a majority of whom are Native American. Because so many students qualified for free and reduced lunch, a state grant now

extends the benefit to all. Families sometimes must choose between gassing up their home generators and filling up their vehicles. No gas, no school.

Knight, a senior at Holbrook High, had a 4.0 grade-point average. She hoped to major in biomedical engineering, go to graduate school, and design the artificial organs and replacement parts that help people live. But when weighing the cost of a four-year college, she wondered if she should go at all. Her parents, both teachers, were still paying off student loans while raising six children.

She refused to sink them further into debt, or take on a lot herself. Though some students dream of faraway colleges, she didn't want to move more than a few hours from her family, from a place where she knew everyone, and where the night sky reveals every star. And as far as she knew, out-of-state colleges were too expensive.

Given those constraints, Knight figured that her only option was an in-state university, where she had the grades and ACT score to snag scholarships. There was one catch: She hadn't taken a foreign language.

Courses are limited at small high schools like Holbrook, and that can put students in a bind. Knight, who calls herself "super competitive," had taken a slew of Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment courses, putting herself on track to graduate with 38 college credits. But her ambitious schedule left her with no free periods when the school offered Spanish.

The three in-state universities Knight was considering required two years of another language for admission. "I don't think I'm going to college," she told her school counselor one panicked day in September.

Later, admissions officers at those universities told her that although she would still be admitted, the hole in her transcript meant that she wouldn't get the full-tuition scholarships for which she would otherwise qualify.

Knight had no desirable way to fix the situation. She could take a CLEP exam in Spanish, which she didn't know well, in hopes of earning the language credits she needed. Or she could take night courses at a community college, which would cost her time and money.

Her recurring thought this fall: *Maybe I'm totally screwed.*

Even so, Knight felt hopeful when she walked into her first-hour calculus class the morning of the Flagstaff fair. Soon she would board a yellow bus with her school counselor and 20 other students. Her college options, she had long believed, stopped at Arizona's borders. She wanted one thing: "To see what else was out there."

Maybe she wouldn't find much. Or maybe she would find opportunity in a place she hadn't known to look.

They don't know what they don't know. Counselors often say that about the underrepresented students they advise. A careless listener might tune the phrase out, or fail to grasp its implications.

Teenagers already struggle to find straightforward answers to questions that they *do* think to ask, like, How much will it all cost? Go on, Google "cost of attendance" or "affordable college," and read the dizzying results. Or type in "self-reported SAT scores" to see how much colleges' policies for what applicants should report — and how — vary.

Now try Googling the answer to … a question that's never once crossed your mind. Impossible, right? That's what many rural students experience.

It's a luxury, even a privilege, to assume that all students who come to a college fair think it's a waste of time.

The region surrounding Flagstaff was full of teenagers who didn't come from a collegegoing culture, as Katherine Pastor knew well. That's why she threw herself into the college fair. If she didn't do it, who would? Sure, the National Association for College Admission Counseling sponsors a huge college fair way down in Phoenix, two-plus hours to the south. In the top half of the state, though, College Night is the only game in town.



FLAGSTAFF UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Katherine Pastor, a counselor at Flagstaff High, helped turn the school's College Night into a widely promoted regional get-together. Open to all and held in the evening, when parents can attend, this fall's event drew about 800 people.

It's also a labor-of-love production.

Just before 1 p.m., five hours before the fair, Pastor raced through the halls in her pink Adidas as if trying to steal seconds from the clock. She rolled a cart loaded with the three cases of water and a spool of string down to "the dome," a big, bright gym with basketball hoops. Forget fancy convention centers: College Night happens among exercise bikes and worn wrestling mats.

Shelly Stearns, a charismatic social-studies teacher, came with a crew of student-volunteers in tow. A few boisterous young men helped Pastor arrange four long rows of plastic tables, unfold dozens of metal chairs, and drag volleyball poles to the end of each row. After tying a long run of string between the poles, a tall fellow in rainbow shoes hung a sign for each college above the tables.

Picking up trash from the polished wooden floor, Pastor looked up and frowned. Some signs weren't in alphabetical order. "Wait," she said. "Embry-Riddle goes *after* Eastern Washington!"

Pastor, an award-winning counselor, believed such chores served a deeper purpose. She wanted students to feel ownership of the fair, to see that it didn't come together magically. She also wanted to help them become leaders who felt comfortable conversing with adults, a skill many haven't practiced.

They don't know what they don't know. That applied here, too.

Outside the entrance to the dome, Pastor shared some tips with four student-council members who had volunteered to sign in the admissions officers. "Say, 'Hi,'" she told them. "Ask if they need any help. Make sure you smile!"

Around 4:30, the first rep, from Sierra Nevada College, arrived with a suitcase full of brochures. A ninth grader named Bella greeted him warmly and led him to his table, where a bottle of water and a meal ticket awaited. When she returned, Pastor high-fived her: "Nice job, Bella!"

Over in the kitchen, where a pot of marinara simmered away, students got a similar lesson in hospitality from Pastor's aunt, Patti Pastor, the culinary teacher. She and a handful of students had made 10 trays of lasagna, 95 brownies, 55 cream puffs, and three bowls of salad. Soon they would serve dinner to the road-worn travelers used to eating at Panera.

At 5, the admissions reps were arriving faster than students could greet them. So Jenny Bland, a school counselor with a calm manner, grabbed a sign-in sheet and entered the fray.

By 5:35, the sun was waning, and the crowd was swelling. Many guests had taken city buses, which provided free rides to and from the fair; that's the only way that some families could come.

At 5:44, more than 100 people crammed the hall outside the dome. Five Native American students kicked a Hacky Sack. Football players returning from a game ambled to the nearby locker room, cold pouring off their green jerseys. A young woman in shorts, just off a bus from a much warmer town, pulled a blanket around her shoulders. Two teenagers posed for selfies with plastic bags — donated by a local store — they soon would fill with pamphlets, free pens, and other admissions swag.

When the doors finally opened, families flooded in. Bland shouted encouragement: "Ask good questions! Get good answers! Write them down!"

At 6:13, a college rep who hadn't registered showed up. Pastor raced to her office to make him a sign.

Bland followed her down the hall. "Wait," she said. "Kat, slow down!"

Pastor turned around, but kept walking.



LAURA SEGALL FOR THE CHRONICLE

Jade Knight, a high-school senior, had a 4.0 grade-point average, and plans to major in biomedical engineering, go to graduate school, and design artificial organs. But when weighing the cost of a four-year college, she wondered if she should go at all.

Reps from 105 colleges and service academies had filled the dome, all because of a tireless counselor and many others who helped make the fair happen.

"You did good," Bland said. "That's a win."

"That's a win," Pastor said.

On the other side of the building, the bus from Holbrook High pulled up to the main entrance. An aspiring biomedical engineer on board wanted to find out where her future might lead.

Jade Knight, wearing a gray Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, stepped off the bus and looked around. She saw that Flagstaff High was much larger than her own school. Unsure how to get to the fair, she and her classmates meandered around, stopping to marvel at the indoor swimming pool.

"Why do they have a pool?" one student asked.

"Because they have a swim team," another said.

Their school did not.

Students at Holbrook, Knight thought to herself, could never stay out this late for extracurricular activities. Many teenagers there had no way to get around after hours; even if they did, it would take so long to get home.

Two schools, two worlds. Each year, at least 60 to 70 admissions officers from all over visit Flagstaff High. About a half-dozen in-state institutions come to Holbrook.

That limited how much information Knight had the chance to hear. Accomplished students like her who want to study engineering are supposed to have many options, but she felt like she had few.

At long last, the visitors from Holbrook found the dome, a maelstrom of nervous laughter and hi-there-hellos. She saw signs for unfamiliar campuses, in Oregon, Illinois, and New England, soaring overhead.

At first, the scene felt overwhelming. A teddy bear wearing a "Hugs From Adams State" T-shirt sat on a pompom atop the table closest to the door. A poster of a woman with luxurious curls drew the eye to Empire Beauty School. The rep for the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa sported a red bow tie.

Knight walked into the noise. Though some of her friends planned to stop at every table, she saw no need to inquire about colleges in other time zones. Or those that didn't offer the program she wanted.

"Do you have biomedical engineering?" she asked one rep.

"No," he said, pointing, "but UNM does."

U-N-M. Knight had heard a couple students say those letters before, but they never registered. She wasn't even sure of where the university was: "It was, like, this mythical school," she would recall later.

But the University of New Mexico was real. And so was Josiah Martinez, who stood behind the university's table. Yes, he confirmed, UNM had a biomedical-engineering major.

Knight hesitated. She couldn't swing out-of-state costs. Tuition alone was $23,000 a year.

Then Martinez told her something surprising: Out-of-state applicants could qualify for the in-state tuition rate, around $7,500 a year. They just needed a 3.0 grade-point average and a 23 on the ACT. She met both requirements.

Then she learned that she could qualify for another scholarship that, along with federal aid, would reduce her out-of-pocket costs to approximately $5,000 a year. That was roughly half of what she would pay at the in-state university she liked best.

When Knight told Martinez that she hadn't taken a foreign language, she got more good news: No, it wouldn't keep her from being admitted, nor limit the aid she got. A worry she had carried for months? Gone.

Encouraged, Knight sat down at a table and completed an application. She handed it back to Martinez. Then it was time to head home.

Back on the bus, Knight felt waves of relief. *OK,* she thought. *I'm not totally screwed.*

A college fair isn't transcendent. It can't rearrange the facts of an applicant's life. No one would call a three-minute chat between strangers in a deafening gym profound.

The ritual is often maligned. One former admissions officer calls college fairs "excruciating, soul-snatching hellscapes." Anyone who spends weeks on the road answering the same four questions from damp-palmed 17-year-olds is forgiven for questioning the value of the exercise.

Still, it's a luxury, even a privilege, to assume that all students who come to a fair think it's a waste of time. For those already saturated with information, it can be; for others, it's a meaningful moment.

As 8 p.m. approached, the fair was winding down. Tony Cullen, Flagstaff High's jovial, silver-maned principal, sat by the door, bidding families goodnight.

"Thanks for doing this," one father said, extending his hand.

"All right, buddy!" Cullen said.

A Mexican American family waved goodbye.

"Adiós!"

College Night had been a success, drawing about 800 people. After the last rep left the building, Katherine Pastor leaned into a volleyball pole and moved it back where it belonged. Jenny Bland took down the string and the college signs. Cullen helped Pastor's husband, Troy Lorents, rearrange all the tables: Tomorrow, students would take standardized tests in the dome.

After picking up some empty water bottles, Pastor gave Cullen a thumbs up. At 8:16, he cut the dome's lights.

Jade Knight boarded a bus with her counselor and 20 other students to head to Flagstaff High "to see what else was out there."

When she got home, Pastor took off her pink Adidas and put on her slippers. That day, according to her Fitbit, she took 18,945 steps.

Under a sky of dull stars, buses full of high-school students rolled away from Flagstaff in various directions. Sarah Skemp, a school counselor at Lake Havasu High School, headed west on I-40 in the company of a few-dozen sophomores. "I didn't know there were so many colleges," one told her.

Before going to the fair, the group visited Northern Arizona University, in Flagstaff. Seeing a campus for the first time, one young man said later, "changed my perspective on what college looks like: I had thought a college was, like, one big building with many people crammed in."

Skemp had tried for years to bring a group of students to the fair before finally succeeding. The first few times, she couldn't get the money, $1,000 or so, for the 400-mile round-trip journey. Then her school district couldn't find a driver who wasn't maxed out on hours, or hauling sports teams to games on the same night as the fair.

Sometimes, you just can't find a ride.

There are literal miles. Then there are figurative ones.

Being far removed from colleges often limits a student's understanding of what's possible after high school, Nicole Warner knew. "When you're *remote* to everything," she said, "it changes the way you view your whole life."

On the bus back to Holbrook High, Warner, the school's college and career-readiness coordinator, heard students excitedly discussing their futures. Awesome, she thought. In the weeks ahead, she would come to think that the fair had residual effects. The students who attended it seemed more motivated, focusing on things that she had been telling them to do all along, like completing their federal-aid forms.

Riding home, Warner counted the mile markers on the highway. She thought about the students who couldn't make the trip only because they had no way to get home afterward. She thought about the students she had known who, seeing no future for themselves in small towns, came to her with a question. *Can you help me get the hell out of here?*

Many end up staying, though. They attend a community college, or work at the county office building, in hotels and fast-food joints. Some who could've attended in-state universities don't go because, she said, "going to the other side of the state, leaving a comfort zone, terrifies them."

Warner was happy for Jade Knight, whom she had advised for months. But she knew that Knight was, in many ways, exceptional.

After a quick stop for dinner, Jade Knight ate some Chinese beef and broccoli and fin-



LAURA SEGALL FOR THE CHRONICLE

Behind Jade Knight's house in Woodruff, Ariz., two goats live in a pen, and open fields spread a quarter-mile to the Little Colorado River.

ished a biology assignment. For her, the fair was calming. Overhearing other students trying to figure out their future made her feel less lonely, and she felt more in control of her own.

The bus dropped everyone off at the high school after 10. Knight drove home in the car her parents had left in the parking lot. A half-hour later, she stood in their bedroom and said, "I'm actually gonna be able to pay for college!"

In early December, Knight was waiting to hear from the University of New Mexico, and she had every reason to expect an acceptance. She liked what she had read about the university's offerings, its biomedical-engineering program, and even the climate in Albuquerque.

She also liked the idea of living in another state for a few years, on a campus she once thought of as a mythical place. The university was 246 miles away, but somehow, it didn't feel that far.

Eric Hoover is a senior writer for The Chronicle of Higher Educaiton.

Originally published December 5, 2019

A University Draws Rural and Native Students From the Vastness of Alaska's Interior

BY CHRIS QUINTANA

A few dozen students from Alaska's most rural regions are chattering in a classroom as an admissions officer tries to get their attention. Some talk to their friends; others have fallen asleep in the semi-darkened room on the campus of the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. One young man suddenly stands up and declares he has to be alone. He leaves the room.

The recruiter, Amy Wald, continues her presentation undaunted. She describes campus traditions that include massive bonfires, and stirs some interest when she mentions the university's athletic programs. She asks if anyone has considered studying somewhere else through an exchange program. No hands.

Hawaii, she offers, is a popular destination.

The 34 students have been brought here by Take Wing Alaska, a group dedicated to helping rural students through college. That's a goal shared by the university's department



TODD PARIS, UAF

A member of the Inu-Yupiaq dance group at the U. of Alaska at Fairbanks helps to celebrate the opening of a park commemorating Native culture.

of rural, community, and Native education, which is overseen by Evon Peter, vice chancellor. The department's mission includes advising students from far-flung towns on the main Fairbanks campus and helping to serve rural students in the areas they live.

Indigenous people in Alaska govern themselves through regional and village corporations established by a 1971 Act of Congress. Because the state is so large, there are important differences between, say, the cultures of the Athabascan people, who live in Alaska's interior, and those of the Inupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik — hunting and gathering groups that live in the north, according to the Alaska Native Heritage Center. About 15 percent of Alaskans, according to the U.S. Census, identify as Alaska Natives or Native Americans. Some 21 percent of students at Fairbanks identify as one of those groups.

Native students at the flagship often face challenges that their peers from more populous areas don't. For many, Fairbanks — a small town by most standards, with 33,000 residents — is the biggest place they have ever lived. They may not have had access in high school to academic resources such as Advanced Placement classes or math courses beyond Algebra II. They often can feel homesick, and their family obligations may require more time and energy than typical university coursework might allow.

"The experience of our Alaska Native people — how we relate to the land and relate to each other and experience the human existence, if you want to put it out on that spectrum — is radically different than what you experience in a Western-structure bureaucratic system," Peter says.

Peter is Native himself, of Gwich'in and Koyukon affiliations, and served as tribal chief in the town of Arctic Village for three years.

Navigating structures like financial aid can be challenging for these students as well. How do you fill out the Fafsa if your parents don't have a tax return? The university's Rural Student Services department helps guide students through that process.

The university also has a special dormitory on the main campus just for Alaska Native students. It's called the Eileen Panigeo MacLean House, and it accepts a maximum of 20 students, to offer a sense of a tight-knit community. Native students are given other small amenities, too, like large refrigerators to hold traditional foods like caribou or salmon.

Part of the challenge, though, is the sheer time and distance it takes to reach some of these students for recruitment purposes or to offer intensive courses on the ground.

"It could take up to two days and three airplane flights for me to get to some of the communities we serve within Alaska," Peter says.

(Oh, and such a trip could cost more than $2,000.)

Online courses aren't always reliable in places with limited internet bandwidth. Another challenge is the sheer diversity of communities the college serves. In some cases, English might not be the student's first language. Peter says the university works with 13 different languages.

The department also hosts a summer intensive program for rural high-school students called the Rural Alaska Honors Institute, which serves as an introduction to college life. Students live in dorms while taking college-level courses. Robert Strunk, 16, is one such student.

He is studying to become an educator, and wants to work in his community of Quinhagak to help students like himself who may not have had the best instruction. Advanced math courses weren't available in his village, but he was able to take a more advanced course through the university.

A short walk away from the building where the students are gathered is a hill that requires a bit of a hike to reach. Once there you can see the campus far and wide. The university plans to build a park and an indigenous studies-center on the site. It's called Troth Yeddha', and the story goes that it used to be a place where Alaska Natives would meet and share their knowledge with one another.

That Alaska Native students can still avail themselves of such learning on this hill is a narrative not lost on anyone.

Chris Quintana was a staff reporter for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Originally published September 23, 2018

To Improve Completion, Remember the Countryside

BY SARAH BEASLEY AND NEAL HOLLY



MICHAEL MORGENSTERN FOR THE CHRONICLE

At a time when the White House, economic think tanks, and major educational foundations are calling for substantial increases in the number of postsecondary degree holders, rural America stands as an undiscovered country of potential success stories.

Only about 17 percent of rural adults 25 or older have a college degree, half the percentage of urban adults, and only about 31 percent of 18- to-24-year olds in rural areas were enrolled in higher education in 2009, compared with about 46 percent in urban areas and 42 percent in suburban areas. Moreover, approximately 25 percent of all public schoolchildren are found in rural school districts, representing more than 12 million potential collegegoers who should not be ignored.

Often unknowingly, education leaders and policy makers with the most financial and political leverage advocate policies and reforms that may marginalize students and educational institutions beyond the boundaries of urban centers, or at least they fail to consider the special challenges faced by rural students. This concentration on metropolitan areas is certainly understandable given the large number of people without degrees there, but we urge foundations and policy makers to include rural representation in their college-completion conversations.

Rural students have lower college aspirations and are less likely to attend college than their urban and suburban counterparts, perhaps because, research shows, they are more likely to live in areas with no postsecondary institution, have little access to college information, and have parents who did not attend college. Unlike students in more populated areas, rural students must often face the dilemma of choosing between going to college (and leaving their families) or staying in their communities.

Meanwhile, a decline in rural educational resources has added to the problem. With struggling local economies, many rural school districts have been forced to cut staff, curriculum (arts and technical programs), and programs that focus on gifted children and those with special needs.

And although people have pointed to online and distance education as ways to expand curriculum and choice for rural students, many rural schools and homes still lack high-speed Internet access. For instance, rural households, particularly low-income ones, are less likely to have personal computers and broadband Internet, making access to online classes difficult.

Furthermore, rural poverty rates continue to surpass those of metro areas, and the correlation between income level and college completion is well documented. Contrary to popular generalizations of rural communities, many towns, particularly in the South and Southwest, have high populations of low-income, minority residents. Much like their urban peers, they face difficulty finding quality educational facilities and staff, transportation, nutritious food, and cultural centers and experiences.

The issue is not merely about rural areas receiving grants for particular projects—it's about rural communities needing the same type of holistic, sustained support that is being developed and delivered for urban areas.

Despite all this, rural areas and the rural perspective are frequently left out of national higher-education conversations. That must change. Given the role large national and regional foundations play in setting the higher-education agenda, we hope that they will reserve a "rural seat" at the table and that all educational policy makers will seek rural input.

We acknowledge that rural areas are diverse and that defining "rural" can be difficult, but this should not keep rural voices from contributing to the general higher-education policy debate, including on the crucial

goals of access and completion. The issue we raise here is not merely about rural areas receiving grants for particular projects — it's about rural communities needing the same type of holistic, sustained support that is being developed and delivered for urban areas.

Educators and policy makers who primarily serve rural students and their families, from pre-kindergarten through college, must bring the challenges of rural education not to the forefront, but to equilibrium with other geographic interests. Here are some ideas worth pursuing to achieve that goal:

- Expand research support to better understand how to deliver equitable primary and secondary education to rural students and encourage postsecondary access and success.
- Put more experts and leaders who have backgrounds in rural education and community development in positions of authority at regional and national foundations and government agencies with educational oversight.
- Create a national support network for postsecondary institutions, with membership based upon the percentage of rural students an institution serves. Such a network could share best practices for promoting rural-student postsecondary access and success, encourage the establishment of economic-development relationships and of academic and career pathways that would enable students to return to their home communities, and serve as a united voice for rural students and institutions to influence education policy. Two-year institutions are already represented by the Rural Community College Alliance, but no four-year college equivalent exists that we are aware of.
- Strengthen relationships between local high schools and colleges, allowing for a smoother matriculation process to local academic or technical programs.

If rural areas and rural-serving institutions are not included in the national drive toward greater academic success and college completion, then we are not only failing a significant segment of our student population, we are forgoing opportunities to ensure academic equity and meet national postsecondary goals.

Sarah Beasley was director of academic initiatives and Neal Holly served as a research and policy analyst at the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.

Originally published May 13, 2013

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Washington, D.C. 20037

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