

Educating the Incarcerated

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An incarcerated student takes part in a commencement ceremony of the Bard Prison Initiative at Eastern Correctional Facility, in New York. Incarcerated students in six New York prisons are enrolled in programs that lead to an associate or bachelor's degree from Bard College.

Prison education has been shown to reduce recidivism rates among participants and save states millions of dollars in incarceration costs.

For colleges, it can be a way to raise enrollment while fulfilling a mission to serve the community, expand the local work force, or advance racial justice.

But educating the incarcerated also comes with risks and challenges. For colleges that are considering starting a program, here's a primer.

History and Context

Prison-education programs have been around for decades and multiplied after 1965, when Congress created the Pell Grant program. Among the most established are the Bard Prison Initiative, the Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, and Mount Tamalpais College, formerly known as the Prison University Project, at San Quentin State Prison. The first two are in New York,

the third in California.

But the number of colleges offering programs has dropped sharply since 1994, when Congress cut off Pell Grants to prisoners as part of a sweeping “tough on crime” bill.

In the early 1990s, nearly 800 college-in-prison programs operated in almost 1,300 correctional facilities. During the 1993-94 academic year, the federal government awarded Pell Grants to 23,000 inmates.

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

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depended largely on private funding, though some programs (mostly vocationally oriented ones) got modest state and federal support.

Colleges and prison-education advocates have long sought to overturn the 1994 ban, and 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 it dubbed “Second Chance Pell.”

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 nearly 1.5 million people in state and federal

prisons in 2018, according to Department of Justice data. Sixty-eight percent of state prisoners are rearrested within three years of their release.

The Obama administration pointed to a frequently cited [study by the RAND Corporation](#) that found that inmates who participated in prison education were 43 percent less likely to commit new crimes than were those who did not, and 13 percent more likely to find a job after their release. (A 2018 update of the RAND study found a lower, but still substantial, reduction in recidivism of 28 percent.)

Republican leaders condemned the move, saying President Barack Obama had overstepped his authority and made an end run around Congress. But the experiment went ahead and eventually gained bipartisan support. This year the Trump administration expanded the pilot to a total of 130 programs.

Today, there are at least 300 college programs operating in the nation’s prisons, a recent survey by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison shows. That’s more than six times as many programs as there were a decade ago, but less than half the number that existed before the 1994 ban. Only 9 percent of incarcerated individuals earn a postsecondary credential in prison, most of them a certificate.

Lifting the Pell Grant ban completely would enable close to half a million people to enroll in postsecondary education, according to the Vera Institute of Justice. The organization estimates that doing so would increase employment rates among participants by 10 percent and shrink states’ incarceration costs by close to \$400 million.

Risks and Rewards

Running a prison-education program involves financial, political, and reputational risks.

First, there are the costs, which typically extend well beyond the \$3,500 a college might pay an adjunct to teach a course. Students in prison classes often attended underperforming school systems

that left them unprepared for the rigors of college; to succeed, they require access to all the wraparound supports that traditional students need — and more.

If a program is eligible for Pell Grants, it might be able to eke out a profit. If it isn't, or if the college chooses to subsidize students who don't qualify for the grants, the program may lose money, advocates caution. In a recent study of the Pell pilot, more than half of responding colleges reported that they had charged incarcerated students less in tuition than regular students paid, even though the prison programs had additional overhead costs.

Then there is the political risk: Prison-education programs can become targets of state lawmakers who believe prisons should be places of punishment, not enrichment. Those legislators will sometimes push for cuts in state support to the college, or to higher education generally.

Finally, there is a risk to an institution's image. If the inmates succeed, a college may be suspected of lowering its standards; if they fail, it will be accused of wasting scarce resources.

But prison-education programs can also be tremendously rewarding. Colleges that have taken the leap of faith say it has helped them meet an institutional mission: to transform lives through liberal education; to serve underrepresented and marginalized students; and, for some religious institutions, to practice Christian principles of redemption and forgiveness.

Faculty members who have taught in prisons say that the students are more motivated and engaged than are students on their home campuses, eager to learn and grateful for the opportunity.

Colleges also have a financial stake in reducing recidivism. Over the past two decades, state and local spending on corrections has increased by nearly 90 percent, while spending on higher education has been largely flat, according to a 2016 report by the U.S. Education Department. Lowering incarceration costs

could free up more money for education.

And in this moment of reckoning on racial injustice, when African Americans make up 12 percent of the nation's population but a third of the country's prison population, some advocates argue

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that prison-education programs can be a form of reparations — a way to make amends for policies that excluded students of color in the past.

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges in running a college program in prison is the lack of internet access. This limitation exists for security reasons: Prisons do not want inmates to view information that could be used to make a weapon, incite a riot, or attempt an escape.

Though many facilities offer a computer lab, the devices tend to connect only to a learning-management system or pre-approved webpages, and inmates can use them only at certain times. Email is limited or nonexistent, and online discussion groups are often prohibited or monitored by prison staff members.

While some prisons have started experimenting with tablets that can sync to a learning-management system, the devices often have small screens that can make typing a paper difficult. Even today, most prison-education programs operate in analog mode, with students



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At the Taconic Correctional Facility, in New York, incarcerated students in the Bard Prison Initiative take part in a “Language and Thinking” course. It’s designed for first-year students at Bard College, including those enrolled in its prison programs.

submitting handwritten or typed papers, and professors grading them by hand. Research is conducted in the prison library, where the collection tends toward general interest and law, not scholarly publications.

A lack of internet access also means that students in programs that qualify for Pell Grants must complete the paper version of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid — a time-consuming process. They often need the college’s help to gather tax returns, transcripts, and other documents that are typically requested online.

If students are denied grants because they have a loan in default or failed to register for the military draft by the age of 26 — a common occurrence — they also need the college to help them set up a repayment plan or to submit documents

proving either that they were not required to register or that their failure to do so had not been “knowing and willful.”

In short, having no internet means a lot more work for a program’s staff, and often requires a back-to-basics approach to pedagogy.

Another challenge for many faculty members is adjusting to a culture in which safety trumps academic freedom. Professors must submit to security clearances and seek corrections officials’ approval of any materials they want to bring into the classroom. Most prisons ban certain chemicals and equipment, making it difficult or impossible to run certain science labs. Some even prohibit pencils, on the grounds that they could be used as weapons.

Faculty members who attempt to simply replicate their on-campus classes

in prison, without making concessions to security, are often viewed with suspicion by prison officials, seen as out-of-touch elitists, political radicals, or security risks. They may find their relationship with the prison staff strained, and could quickly wear out their welcome.

A final challenge is scheduling. Colleges operating in prisons must compete with high-school GED programs for classroom space. They must also plan around students' jobs, inmate counts, and mealtimes, scheduling most classes for nights or weekends.

6 Steps to a Successful Program

1. Be clear on why you are doing this.

Seek high-level support and an external partner. Faculty and staff members seeking to start a prison-education program need a strong rationale for doing so. Are you aiming to increase enrollment? Tackle social and economic inequality? Better serve the surrounding community?

You also need to be able to communicate those goals to campus leaders and the governing board, which the program will depend on for political and financial support. Having a faculty champion is great, but it won't be enough for the program to succeed.

Colleges must also identify their partners in the community. Nonprofit organizations have been doing this work for years and can be sources of deep expertise and collaboration.

2. Create a memorandum of

understanding. Colleges need to understand the conditions under which they will operate, and they need to formalize those parameters in a memorandum of understanding with the corrections agency.

Prisons, like colleges, can be bureaucratic, political places. Their education programs are often underfunded, their staff pulled in multiple directions.

Each state's corrections

department — and indeed each prison — has its own culture and expectations. Many have policies that limit who is eligible for prison education, requiring students to be within a certain time of release, have a clean disciplinary record, or be assessed a low security risk. Most bar professors from bringing certain materials into the classroom.

Colleges don't need to blindly submit to all the rules put in place by a corrections system or prison, but they must take the time to understand the rationale behind them. Only by understanding the prison's perspective can colleges determine where they might push back and where they should yield. Perhaps you can persuade the prison staff to allow you to offer a physics lab, for example, but not a chemistry one.

And remember that most prison staff and college-faculty members enter their fields for the same reason: to help people. Their methods may be different, but both groups want inmates to leave prison with skills that will help them succeed on the outside.

3. Train your faculty members.

Professors who volunteer to teach in prisons are often motivated by a belief that education changes lives. They may imagine teaching in prison to be a kind of missionary work, or a way to challenge an unjust criminal-justice system. But most have only a sketchy idea of what prison is actually like, their images formed more by TV shows like *Orange Is the New Black* than by lived experience. That's why training is critical.

Many prisons with college programs train faculty members on facility rules and dangers to look out for. The training may include how to interact with prisoners — don't call them by their first names, for example, and don't share personal information — and provide opportunities for professors to role-play different

scenarios. The emphasis tends to be on safety and security.

Some colleges offer a second orientation, focused on prison culture. They teach faculty members how they are sometimes viewed by the prison staff and challenge them to reflect on their own biases about inmates. The orientation may remind professors that they are guests in the prison and must abide by its rules, however unreasonable those may seem.

4. Recruit and screen students early.

It can take weeks for students to track down the academic transcripts and financial documents needed to establish eligibility for college courses and federal student aid, so it's wise to start early. The Vera Institute of Justice suggests recruiting students while

they're still working on their GED, and screening them for any disqualifying factors immediately. That way, if students need help to rehabilitate a loan or explain the circumstances that prevented registration for the military draft, they won't have to put off college enrollment while they complete the process.

Early screening also lets students whose eligibility has been suspended because of a drug conviction take steps to requalify, enrolling in a drug-rehabilitation program or submitting to unannounced drug tests.

If a student is truly ineligible for aid, figuring that out early will give the program time to identify institutional, private, or philanthropic funds to help cover the costs, Vera advises.

5. Get creative. Think about how you will



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Incarcerated students study in the Bard College library within Woodbourne Correctional Facility, in New York, as part of the Bard Prison Initiative.

work within the security restrictions imposed by the facility, particularly when it comes to online research. Some colleges have purchased offline research databases, installed them on a network of prison computers, and staffed labs where students can read the articles at set times. Others simply cart boxes of books between the campus and the prisons where they operate.

Colleges should also consider ways they can conduct science labs safely. This may require substituting some materials, for example, or using plastic equipment instead of glass.

But it is critical that colleges not compromise quality in the name of security. Prison programs, like on-campus programs, should have high standards and clearly defined learning objectives, and be held accountable for both. If they don't, the institution's reputation will suffer, and inmates will be left unprepared for the work force when they get out.

- 6. Think ahead.** It's not enough to educate students while they're incarcerated; if colleges truly want those students to succeed, they'll need to help them continue their education after they're released. This means that colleges must create pathways between programs, so students who transfer among prison facilities don't see their education interrupted by the move. It also means that colleges must help students transition to campus-based programs when they leave prison.

Preparing for a Pandemic and Other Disruptions to Learning

Though online-education providers have been making inroads into educating the incarcerated, most programs remain face-to-face. So when the coronavirus pandemic closed college campuses nationwide, in the spring of 2020, college-in-prison programs shut down, too.

But while students on the outside were able to pivot to online learning, students in prison could not, because of a lack of permitted technology. Though some were able to communicate with their professors by email or phone, or use a learning-management system, they generally couldn't participate in Zoom calls or stream live lectures.

Faced with those limitations, some programs switched to an old-fashioned correspondence model, dropping packets of work and recorded lectures at prison gates, and returning later to pick them up. Some colleges even purchased televisions so students could watch lectures.

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"Second Chance Pell" pilot are barred from offering correspondence courses because they don't provide "regular and substantive interaction" between professors and students, as the federal rules require. Though a few were able to transition to audio- or videoconferencing, many suspended classes altogether.

Those abrupt closures underscored the need for prison-education programs to prepare for disruptions to in-person learning. After all, viruses aren't the only thing that can shutter a facility; prisons can go into lockdown because of fighting, rioting, or escape attempts, too.

Some advocates and program directors say the solution lies in the

broader adoption of technology, such as tablets. Others argue that a rush to technology will deprive inmates of the humanizing connections that come from in-person learning. Their biggest fear is that states will decide that it is too expensive or too much trouble to continue face-to-face instruction in prisons, and move everyone to distance learning.

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So far, there has been little research on the relative benefits of in-person and online learning in prison settings. But advocates on both sides of the debate say the tension between online and in-person learning

will only grow if Congress lifts its quarter-century-old ban on Pell Grants for prisoners.

A Look Ahead

Momentum for repealing the Pell Grant ban has been building for years. Legislation to restore access to Pell Grants for prisoners has bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress and the backing of civil-rights groups and conservative organizations alike. State corrections officials and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have lobbied for repeal.

Privately, though, some longtime practitioners worry that reopening the federal coffers will lead to an influx of low-quality programs seeking to profit off prisoners. Those bad actors could take over the field, they warn, pushing out smaller nonprofit competitors.

A more immediate concern, however, is the recession. With many states facing budget deficits, programs that depend on their legislatures for support are bracing for funding cuts. When money is tight, college courses for prisoners typically aren't a top priority.

This “Market Primer” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.