



## Navigating Change and Sustaining High-Quality Higher Education in Prison Programs

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The return of **Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students in July of 2023** marks a major milestone for access to higher education in prison. This decision came after a nearly 30-year ban on access to federal financial aid for higher education for those incarcerated as a result of the **1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act**, which dissolved higher education in prison programs across the country. Estimates suggest that as a result, **the over 200 programs that existed in 1972 shrunk to under ten** prison higher education programs nationwide.

With the reinstatement of Pell Grants comes a new chance to rebuild higher education in prison programs and simultaneously provide opportunity and access to education for those incarcerated. Research highlights the multitude of benefits of the provision of higher education in prison, including societal benefits, **reduced recidivism rates** and **increased success both in prison and upon release**.

Despite the many benefits, **tensions often arise between university and correctional settings**, as these two institutions operate under different rules, regulations, and policies. While universities focus on educational access, academic freedom, and learning, prisons often prioritize safety, control, surveillance, and custody. Without constant collaboration, these inherent differences can potentially cause real challenges for sustaining higher education in prison programs and subsequently, for the opportunities of the students enrolled in them.

### Understanding the Current Landscape

To date, over 250 colleges and universities have provided higher education to over **20,000 incarcerated students nationwide**. Yet, amidst political tensions, we must focus on the potential for change and the need to prioritize building and sustaining high-quality higher education in prison programs that prioritize partnerships grounded in trust, transparency, and mutual respect. Successful programs cannot simply offer courses, but must also **advocate for students, streamline communication, and recognize the transformative potential of higher education**. Thus, investment in these programs is not just smart policy – it is an important step towards a more just and inclusive society.

### Recommendations for Effective Policy Implementation

**1. Build Strong, Equal Partnerships.** Successful higher education in prison programs depends on transparent, collaborative relationships between universities and correctional facilities. Partnerships should be grounded in mutual respect, with clear expectations, shared goals, and agreed-upon standards for program delivery and quality. This must include protecting academic freedom, ensuring continued access to course materials, and maintaining transparency in decision-making and programmatic change. Additionally,

these partnerships should extend beyond prison walls and assist students with continuing their education post-release, transferring their credits, and navigating the reentry process with support from both institutions.

**2. Center the Voices of Those Directly Impacted.** Currently and formerly incarcerated students, alumni, and educators bring vital knowledge and lived experience to program implementation and development. These perspectives must be central in shaping policy, providing oversight and input, and assisting with teaching and implementation. Additionally, engaging community-based organizations and advocacy groups alongside these voices helps to ground programs in real-world experiences and needs to build long-term support among stakeholders, which is central for successful policy and program design, implementation, and collaboration.

**3. Train and Support Educators.** Certain aspects of teaching in prison are different from traditional on-campus teaching. Therefore, educators need training, inclusive of pedagogy and logistics, that details the potential impact of their work and the realities of working in correctional settings. Comprehensive training can help support high-quality instruction and retain committed educators, which is key to long-term programmatic success and sustaining high-quality higher education in prison programs.

**4. Secure Funding Beyond Pell.** Pell Grants help cover costs associated with tuition, but they cannot and do not fund everything. Programs need to build sustainable funding models that include a multitude of support from state systems, private donations, and partnerships with non-profit organizations. Without this, programs may lose the ability to provide critical services and opportunities, as long-term success depends on a strong, supportive foundation that can support not just tuition, but also materials, technology, student support services, and faculty development.

**5. Track Success and Share It.** To build public awareness, trust, and continued investment, higher education in prison programs must demonstrate their impact. This includes tracking outcomes such as credits earned, degrees completed, continued education after release, and short and long-term student successes. Clear, consistent data sharing and reporting help to inform policy decisions by highlighting program strengths and providing the real, tangible need for expanding and sustaining access to high-quality higher education behind bars.

## Transforming Policy into Real-World Impact

Higher education in prison is much more than just a policy initiative – it is a critical pathway to equity, access, opportunity, and second chances. Thus, the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility and the widespread attention to higher education in prison that comes with it is a momentous achievement and an important marker for social justice and economic mobility.

To fully realize the promise and potential of this historic policy shift, deliberate collaboration is required across institutions and sectors, including political leaders, institutions of higher education, and correctional agencies. Without this alignment and coordination, programs risk losing their transformative potential, which can have real consequences for incarcerated students nationwide. Thus, collaboration, strong programmatic integrity and transparency, and uplifting the voices of currently and formerly incarcerated students' lived experiences are essential to building a system and set of programs that help to break cycles of incarceration and contribute to healthier, more just communities. This moment presents a rare opportunity and a shared responsibility for intentional change, expansion, and implementation, and with the right set of structures and

support, has the potential to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.