EDUCATION LIBERATES
How colleges and universities can help the US break free of mass incarceration

The numbers are more than grim: the United States has the distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the world. With 70 percent of convictions leading to incarceration, when it comes to criminal justice, the US is more in line with authoritarian countries, such as Russia and Turkey, than with other democracies.

But as Sonya Christian, chancellor of the California Community Colleges system, has pointed out in these pages, higher education offers an important way to help solve the crisis. Research shows that incarcerated people who participate in higher ed programs have a 48 percent lower chance of returning to prison once they leave than formerly incarcerated people who do not participate in such programs. With lower recidivism comes smaller prison populations and safer communities. In addition, when incarcerated people gain postsecondary education, they leave prison prepared to apply for more job opportunities than before they entered. And for each dollar invested in education in prison programs, according to the Vera Institute for Justice, four to five taxpayer dollars are saved in incarceration costs.

One major step to boosting higher ed efforts in prison came in July 2023 when Congress restored eligibility for federal Pell Grants—which offer need-based assistance to low-income students—to incarcerated people for the first time since 1994. With this change, an estimated 760,000 people became eligible for Pell support and will have more ability to enroll in higher ed programs. Currently, 465 colleges and universities are working to educate people in prisons across the United States, according to the Alliance in Higher Education. Here’s a look at some of the ways academic institutions can and are making a difference.

Sources:
- Alliance for Higher Education in Prison
- American University
- Bureau of Justice Statistics
- Center for American Progress
- Emory University
- Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality
- Mount Tamalpais College
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
- Prison Policy Initiative
- The Sentencing Project
- US Department of Education
- Vera Institute of Justice

The big number
1,230,100 people were in the US prison system at the end of 2022.

Two populations
A comparison of educational attainment

40% of formerly incarcerated Hispanic women over 25 have no high school diploma or GED—and almost half are unemployed.

How race factors into educational attainment among the formerly incarcerated

40% of formerly incarcerated Hispanic women over 25 have no high school diploma or GED—and almost half are unemployed.
Hope by degrees

The chances of returning to prison are reduced by 48% for those who enroll in higher ed programs in prison.

Rate of recidivism for ex-offenders based on education level

- Master’s degree: 0%
- Bachelor’s degree: 6%
- Associate’s degree: 14%
- Vocational training: 30%
- Some high school education: 55%

Benefits for society

Higher employment rates:

Formerly incarcerated people who received a higher education in prison can rejoin the job market with competitive qualifications.

More job candidates:

Employers in growing industries will have access to a larger pool of trained applicants from which to hire.

More community contributors:

As they re-enter their communities, those who received a higher education in prison will be better prepared to be civically engaged.

Rethink what success means

Decreased recidivism and lower crime rates shouldn’t be the only measures of success of higher ed in prison, argue advocates. Rather, efforts should be evaluated like other liberal arts and higher ed endeavors: track outcomes for the formerly incarcerated in areas such as employment, community involvement, and mental and physical health.

Plan for quality

What to keep in mind when developing a prison program

→ Structure: Programs need full-time staff, faculty professional development opportunities, and student and faculty advisory boards.

→ Clear roles: Outline the responsibilities of collaborators like academic institutions, correctional departments, and nonprofits. Written agreements are key.

→ Faculty support: Faculty should be highly qualified and properly trained and supported so they can successfully navigate challenges.

→ Curriculum development: A thorough curriculum should lay out an academic program and its value to students as well as what educators believe students can accomplish.

→ Administrative involvement: Administrators play an important part in making sure students receive a quality education and that faculty are properly supported.

→ Instructional materials: Students must have access to libraries, technology, school supplies, and other resources.

Students: In 2019, in an effort to increase equity and access in higher ed, the Common Application—a widely used undergraduate application—removed the section asking applicants about past convictions. Research has shown no meaningful difference between crime rates on campuses that ask about criminal backgrounds and campuses that don't. But research does show that criminal history questions deter formerly incarcerated people from applying. Even so, most institutions include the question on their individual applications.

Policy improvements

Address inequalities in K–12 schooling, ensuring all students receive needed educational resources. Students of color are likelier to attend schools struggling for resources.

Stop overly punitive approaches, like zero-tolerance rules, that exacerbate the “school to prison pipeline”—policies that disproportionately lead students of color to end up in the criminal justice system.

View education programs in prisons as necessary, not extraneous, for those re-entering society to be prepared for the current job market.

Ensure data is shared across systems to assess successes and areas for improvement and inform policy. Include data from academic institutions, from correction programs, and about the state workforce.

Count students in higher ed prison programs in enrollment data. This provides more accurate reporting and helps assess the effects of the programs.

Ban the box

In 2022, Mount Tamalpais College—previously the Prison University Project and Patten University at San Quentin, which served incarcerated students for nearly twenty-five years—became the first accredited higher ed institution created within a state prison. The private two-year liberal arts college offers an associate of arts degree, and students can transfer credit courses to California State University and University of California campuses.

“A unique campus

In 2022, Mount Tamalpais College—including the Prison University Project and Patten University at San Quentin, which served incarcerated students for nearly twenty-five years—became the first accredited higher education institution created within a state prison. The private two-year liberal arts college offers an associate of arts degree, and students can transfer credit courses to California State University and University of California campuses.

“Rehabilitation is the key. People will inevitably be locked up, but programs like this see a way forward. I’ve been reminded in this program that I still have a life when I get out.”

— prison scholar John Moore, as quoted in a news story from Georgetown University’s Prisons and Justice Initiative

Pell progress

$365.8 million estimated taxpayer savings in incarceration costs, due to a likely drop in recidivism rates with the restoration of Pell grant access—and therefore access to higher ed—for incarcerated individuals.

Combined decrease in states’ annual expenditures of incarceration if . . .

- 26% of Pell-eligible prison population participated in postsecondary education
- 50% of Pell-eligible prison population participated in postsecondary education
- 75% of Pell-eligible prison population participated in postsecondary education

Stop overly punitive approaches, like zero-tolerance rules, that exacerbate the “school to prison pipeline”—policies that disproportionately lead students of color to end up in the criminal justice system.

600,000 Number of people released from US state and federal prisons each year

6/4/24 3:24 PM

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13

Spring 2024 13

Research Corner.indd 13