



Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons. I'm Charlotte West, a national reporter for Open Campus.

February 9, 2022

Calls for college for incarcerated youth

Nothing to do after a high school diploma

Four years ago, Alexandra Fields, an English professor at Middlesex College in Edison, New Jersey, was approached by a social worker from the county juvenile detention center who asked if she would be able to provide any college programming for incarcerated youth. The facility housed a large number of teenagers charged as adults who were awaiting sentencing.

Young people could earn their high-school diploma at the facility, but there was nothing for graduates to do after that. Fields says that juvenile detention facilities have historically been meant for short stays, with an intentional lack of programming with the idea that youth would be moved in a matter of weeks or months. Instead, some youth have languished for years. "I have a kid that has been in there for six years," Fields says.

To help fill the gap, Fields worked with some of her undergraduates to develop informal workshops and a book club for incarcerated high school grads. Those early efforts



have led to English composition courses for credit in two county juvenile halls and a new associate's program for youth incarcerated in New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission facilities.

While there had been some college classes offered in the state's youth prisons previously, there was no degree pathway. The first cohort of 20 young men in six facilities will start working on an associate's degree from Middlesex in mid-February, with plans to expand the program to young women, Fields says.

A shifting population

Along with New Jersey, several states, including Utah and California, have made efforts to increase access to higher education for incarcerated young people. The need to offer more higher education opportunities partly stems from recent juvenile justice reforms that allow young adults to stay in youth facilities for longer.

"Our population is shifting," says Brett Peterson, director of Utah's Division of Juvenile Justice Services, which oversees five long-term secure facilities for youth up to age 25. "We're keeping younger, lower risk youth out of the system. We house youth into young adulthood more commonly now. And so we needed to start aggressively thinking about programming."

The Utah legislature passed a law last year that allocated \$300,000 in ongoing funding to create a program that allowed incarcerated youth to take college classes at Dixie State University. High school students can earn college credit through dual enrollment and graduates are able to start working on their associate's degree. The program has been able to leverage the state's distance learning technology used to deliver college classes to rural high schools.

"It makes you feel smart"

These reforms in Utah and



Open Campus is a nonprofit newsroom focused on covering higher education. This newsletter is supported by Ascendium.

elsewhere are driven by a growing understanding of adolescent development. Research has shown that young people's brains aren't fully formed until their early to mid-20s. That's another reason why having access to higher education can be critical for incarcerated youth, experts say.

The purpose of the juvenile justice system is inherently different from the adult system, says Katie Bliss, project coordinator at Youth Law Center, a San Francisco-based nonprofit. It's centrally focused on rehabilitation. "We're talking about key developmental periods," she says. "It's really setting the stage for the rest of their lives."

Around 60 of the 80 some young people confined to Utah's state juvenile facilities have benefitted from the new law. Eighteen-year-old AA is one of them (we are using the initials of the young people interviewed for this article to protect their privacy).

Taking college classes from Dixie State University changed her perspective on education. "I didn't really like school to begin with, but I'm starting to like it," AA says.

The best thing about it? "I like the part where you think something is hard, and then you get it," she says. "It makes you feel smart."

Elsewhere, California passed legislation in 2019 that requires both the state's three youth prisons (which will be phased out by June 2023) and 59 county probation departments to provide incarcerated juveniles access to college classes as well as career and technical education. More recently, San Francisco State University's College of Ethnic Studies launched the first certificate program offered inside the state youth prisons by a four-year university.

Raising the age

Juvenile justice reforms in a number

of other states, too, have increased the need for higher education in youth prisons – the population of which is increasingly traditional college age. In 2018, Vermont became the first state to "raise the age", automatically keeping most 18-year-olds in the juvenile system. Since then, Michigan and New York have followed suit.

Some states – such as Washington and Oregon – have also recognized the unique needs of young adults by allowing youth sentenced as adults to remain in the juvenile system up to age 25 before they are transferred to adult facilities. Other states like Colorado have separate adult facilities for young people that provide more education and rehabilitative services. Connecticut and Washington, D.C. have created special housing units for 18-25-year-olds.

Older youth who have adult sentences also have the added incentive to focus on their education because refusal to participate in programming or behavioral issues can mean they are transferred to the adult system earlier.

"Ideally, 'raise the age' should not be about keeping youth in the system for longer, it should be about recognizing that developmental science shows that young adults have great capacity for change," Bliss says.

An inadequate education

But although juvenile facilities put more focus on rehabilitation than the adult system does, the secondary education offered to incarcerated youth is often inadequate and doesn't prepare them for college. Some estimates found that only around 1 percent of justice-involved youth ever earn a college degree.

A 2019 analysis from Bellwether Education found that students in juvenile justice schools have less access to higher-level math and science courses than their peers in

traditional schools. The same study showed that only 1 percent of juvenile justice schools had dual enrollment courses compared with more than half of traditional high schools.

And the states that have raised the upper age for juvenile jurisdiction have faced challenges as they try to accommodate more young adults. At the end of January, Vermont hit pause on expanding plans to keep most 19-year-olds in the juvenile system while it puts "services in place to deal with this age group," according to a local prosecutor.

In New York, a recent investigation by the Times Union found that "the programs that were supposed to support the state's Raise the Age statute...have arguably failed to provide many of those teenagers with the services needed to rehabilitate and reintegrate them into their communities."

"With 'raise the age', building out community college and higher ed programs is about making sure that students who graduate from high school have access to a supportive array of reentry and diversion services," Bliss says, adding that college programs in detention facilities should never be a justification for keeping youth locked up.

'It makes me feel like I'm not just locked up'

That's where states like Utah, California, and New Jersey could provide models for college programs in youth facilities. These programs serve the dual purpose of degree pathways for high-school graduates, but also provide more challenging classes for current high-school students. And research shows that youth who do achieve higher levels of education while in the juvenile justice system are more likely to experience positive outcomes in the community once released.

JG, 18, has been taking college

classes from Dixie State since he graduated from high school last November. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my future, so I decided to give it a chance,” he says.

His favorite class is ethics, where he’s currently learning about Adam Smith and utilitarianism. He enjoys “understanding the what’s and the why’s of everything.”

JG is set to be released from the Division of Juvenile Justice Services next month, but he’ll be able to finish the semester online. Nathan Caplin, who directs the Dixie State program, says he’s hoping to have a scholarship in place that would cover tuition and allow JS to continue his education.

College programs for incarcerated youth should also provide support services after their release, says Bliss of the Youth Law Center. “You have to have a warm handoff to different aspects of the campus so that you’re not blindly navigating the college experience,” Bliss says.

As for AA, she’s looking forward to taking more college classes before and after she graduates from high school: “It makes me feel like I’m not just locked up in here. It makes me feel like I have an opportunity to do something better.”

Young voices

I was excited to talk to several young people about their journeys through education for this issue of *College Inside*. AMR, a 17-year-old incarcerated in southern California, reflected on overcoming a learning disability and graduating as high school valedictorian while she was working on her second semester of college:

“When I was in a school classroom with a pencil and a worksheet in front of me, it was my safe place. But for the first 11 years of my life I struggled to understand why when I read, the letters floated off of the

page.

“We learned that I had comprehension problems, that I had dyslexia and that I had years of hard work to catch up to all of my classmates. When middle school came around, I had finally caught up with the rest of my peers. Actually most days I exceeded my classmates. Middle school was my turning point and for a long while it was toward the worst.

“I ended up being the smart girl who still got A’s while on drugs. I could pass a class drunk and grieving. The two worst years of my life happened to be during middle school and they led to right now sitting in a cell writing this. I had all these plans and then it felt like they swirled down the drain.”

JS, 16, is a high school senior with the Utah Department of Juvenile Justice Services. He shared about overcoming his hesitation to take dual enrollment classes through Dixie State and how education is helping him become a better dad:

“At first I was like, ‘I’m gonna fail these college classes. I feel like I’m just gonna screw up.’ But I didn’t. I’m taking the opportunity to better myself, so I put all I had into it. I’ve been doing really good with it. It looks good on my transcripts. I’m starting to embrace [education] a lot more than I used to.

“My son’s going to be one in March. I was incarcerated a month after he was born. So that was a really big struggle for me. So I [wanted] to get a good education so I could get a good job so I can raise my son and financially support him the way I wanted to [be supported] when I was growing up.”

Research & resources

The Youth Law Center publishes *College Is For Everyone!* A

California Financial Aid Guide for Youth with Juvenile Justice Involvement. The guide provides practical types for navigating the confusing layers of state and financial aid and dispels myths that justice-involved youth aren’t eligible for money to go to college.

The Journal of Higher Education in Prison is accepting submissions until March 1, 2022 for its second volume on the question: What are the possibilities and limitations of teaching and learning in prison spaces? For more information, write to jhep@higheredinprison.org or Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, Attn: Journal of Higher Education in Prison, 1801 N. Broadway, Suite 417, Denver, CO 80202.

News & views

Mount Tamalpais College at San Quentin State Prison received its initial Accreditation by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges at the end of January.

Pennsylvania has launched a pilot reentry program that connects formerly incarcerated people in the northeastern part of the state with a bank, a community college, and a mental health provider. The program has the potential to be launched statewide, the AP reports.

For Mother Jones, Madison Pauly looks into a prison technology company’s foray into the education space. “Now, some critics worry that as financial aid becomes more widely available to prisoners, Aventiv will try to “own that market” on prison education,” Pauly writes.

David BenMoshe writes about the challenges of applying to graduate school with a record for *Business Insider*: “Prison is tough, but the three months waiting for a reply from the University of Florida was worse.”

Cassie M. Chew chronicles the impact of the 1994 crime bill on prison education in Illinois for Capital B News.

Let's connect

We'll be continuing to cover higher education in juvenile facilities, as well as support programs for formerly incarcerated youth, in upcoming issues. Please connect if you have story ideas or just want to share your experience with prison education programs as a student or educator.

Right now, I'm especially interested in speaking with anyone experiencing challenges accessing Pell Grants because of student loan default or people who are participating in prison apprenticeships.

You can always reach me at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org on JPay/Securus/Connect Network/Corrlinks or on Twitter at @szarlotka.

To reach me via snail mail, you can write to: Charlotte West, Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062.

— Charlotte



Welcome to *College Inside*, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons. I'm Charlotte West, a national reporter for *Open Campus*.

February 23, 2022

Pursuing a Ph.D. From Prison

Two years ago Brandon Brown became the first person to earn a graduate degree while incarcerated in the state of Maine. Now Brown — who was arrested in 2010 for attempted murder when he was 21 — is pursuing a Ph.D. in restorative justice from George Mason University, in Virginia.

Brown was the first person to take advantage of a department of corrections policy that allowed supervised virtual learning when he enrolled in an online masters program. Now, halfway through the second semester of his doctoral program, he's been released on a community confinement program thanks to legislation that he helped author.

I talked with Brown about navigating higher education in prison and how his efforts have helped pave the way for at least six other prisoners in Maine to pursue online graduate programs.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q. How did you get involved in prison education?



A. I got really lucky. When I arrived at Maine State Prison from the county jail, I immediately started putting in requests to get involved in something positive. Because I had my high school diploma, the education department reached out and said there was an opportunity if I wanted to work towards a college degree.

Q. When did you decide that you wanted to pursue a graduate degree?

A. In 2014, I was two classes away from my bachelor's degree. And then I was transferred to a medium security prison from the maximum security prison. I thought for sure that there were going to be more opportunities for me. And the opposite was true, there was nothing to do at that facility.

The [administration at] the facility didn't care that I still had funding and the university was willing to assist me with independent studies. And so I was there for two years, without education, and without other positive aspects of contributing to my community. I just got in a really dark place. I was eventually able to secure my transfer back to the prison that I came from.

And so when I got back to that prison, I was able to get right back into the college program.

One of the last courses I took was in restorative justice with my favorite professor, and it was during that class that I had the realization that my bachelor's degree is ending, there was no other avenue for me to continue my education. And that was really scary for me, because I saw what it meant not to have the opportunity to continue to educate myself before.

We had a really progressive warden at that moment. And so I just approached him a couple times and asked him if he would support me if I could find a master's degree program that was correspondence or online learning. The Maine Department of Corrections (DOC) had a policy for a long time that allows you to do supervised online learning, they just never used it. When I was talking to the admin, they're like, 'This guy's out of his mind, nobody's going to accept him into a program.' So they just said, 'Yes, if you can get accepted, we'll facilitate it.' And then I got accepted and they had to keep their word.

Q. How were you able to secure



Open Campus is a nonprofit newsroom focused on covering higher education. This newsletter is supported by Ascendium.

funding for your education?

A. My associate's and bachelor's at University of Maine at Augusta were paid for by Doris Buffett's non-profit, The Sunshine Lady Foundation. When I was applying to graduate programs, and specifically in conversation with George Mason University, they wanted to know how I was going to pay for it. I told them that I would figure that afterwards. If you accept me, maybe I'll defer for a year, and secure funding over the next year, reach out to my family and friends. Luckily, while I was going through the application process, I had simultaneously applied for a couple of scholarships. My first semester was completely covered by a tuition discount that the university gave me for having an excellent application. And then I secured a \$9,000 scholarship that covered what was left of my first year. And then the second year of my master's degree, I was able to secure internal scholarships from George Mason.

Q. How did this lead into the Ph.D. program?

A. When I wrote to schools about applying for master's programs, I made it very clear that my long term goal was to get a Ph.D. before I got out of prison. The last semester of my master's degree, I went through the application process for the Ph.D. I got really lucky because of the research that I was able to get approved by the prison. I've looked and I've never found any other instances of a prisoner getting approval by an institutional research board to do human subject research in the prison that they're in.

I got accepted by George Mason, but they told me I could only really inch forward while I was in prison because it's an in-person program. And that's why I filed for commutation, which was denied by Governor Janet Mills in July 2020. But then, oddly enough, the pandemic really saved my academic life, because the university went completely online because they had

to. My whole first year plus half of a semester into my second year, I did from the facility.

Q. What is the subject of your doctoral dissertation?

A. I think what I'm going to end up doing my dissertation on is the idea of inclusive policy and law. So what happens when we include marginalized voices in the creation of policy and law that will govern their daily lives? And a specific kind of case study that I'll use is the Maine Department of Corrections, and this new supervised community confinement law, because there's a small group of [prisoners] that in collaboration with the administration, lawmakers, and other stakeholders, we actually wrote the law and the law passed, and then we helped write the policy that was implemented. Are people [skeptical] of it because there was some involvement from prisoners? Is it better law and better policy because we were involved in the process?

It's one thing to engage with a marginalized population in discussion. But it's another thing to empower them to actually write and create law. I know what happens in the prison more than some person in Augusta who's never actually been to the prison. I know what policies and practices are shaping the culture and all these other aspects of the institution. A lot of times, it's sexy to invite the inmate and the formerly incarcerated voices to the table. But a lot of times, those conversations don't necessarily bear fruit. And what I'm interested in talking about is what is the fruit that's born if we actually empower those people to write the policy and write the law.

Q. What do you want people to know about your story?

A. When people find out that I'm getting my Ph.D., I always get comments like, 'Oh, my God, you're so articulate, and it's so surprising.' And I'm like, 'Why is it surprising?'

Why is it surprising to you that a prisoner can rise to the same academic and educational level as you when given a chance to do so?' Because before I committed my crime, I was a kid, I was a student, I was a son. If you give people the chance to believe that they can achieve something, chances are that they'll achieve it. So for me, it was sad that I was the first person in the state of Maine to get an advanced degree while I was incarcerated. And at the same time, it was beautiful, and I was really proud of that. I don't believe I'm exceptional, only that I had exceptional opportunities. It gets under my skin when all people want to talk about is how I did this; it doesn't matter how I did it unless we can make it possible for other people.

Q. What advice do you offer other incarcerated people who want to pursue higher education?

A. Understand the power of your narrative even if it's a really shitty fucking story you have to tell. I apologize for cursing, but there's power in vulnerability and honesty, especially when you're looking to convince an institution to take a shot on you.

When I was applying, I wrote to my 10 dream schools that had what I wanted to study. And in every letter I wrote, I was just very honest about my situation. I was honest about the mistakes I made, honest about the stigma that's associated with those mistakes, but also honest about the fact that as a student, as somebody who knows this oppressive structure that I'm a part of, I am most situated to change it.

If you believe your story, and if you can tell it in a compelling way, then you can convince people to give you chances and opportunities. Because if you want to get an education, but you're apprehensive about telling parts of your story, or you're scared to be honest about what it is that brought you to prison and what your experience in prison has been, then how are you not going to

expect that apprehension from the people that make the decisions about your education? Explore within yourself what's powerful about your story and why it uniquely situates you to do something meaningful within the framework of what you want to study.

A change in narrative

Emma Hall, a student at Sacramento State University and a fellow with the CalMatters College Journalism Network, covered a new certificate program offered to young people incarcerated in California's three juvenile justice facilities. Ethnic studies offers young people a new narrative about their history and culture, Emma writes:

Ethnic studies—the social and historical study of race and ethnicity—was born in the Bay Area at San Francisco State University in the 1960s as a response from students of color who demanded increased access to higher education and new academic programs that centered their identities.

With its new collaboration with California's state juvenile justice division, which began this past fall, officials at San Francisco State want to broaden that mission to include youth directly impacted by the justice system.

Almost 90 percent of the approximately 750 youth in California's juvenile justice system are Black or Latino, and the San Francisco State program reflects those demographics. Black youth are 31 times more likely to be incarcerated in California, with Latino youth almost 5 times more likely, compared to their white peers.

Proponents of ethnic studies argue that students of color, who are at

greater risk of being kicked out of school and into the justice system, can become more invested in their education when they learn about the accomplishments of people who look like them, thus disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline.

“Poverty and over-policing in communities of color are a lot of reasons why people end up in the prison system,” said Professor Nate Tan, who teaches the class. “I think that's true for these young people.”

Expanding prison education in Colorado

Jason Gonzales, the higher education reporter at our partner Chalkbeat Colorado, reported on the likely expansion of Pell grants for incarcerated students in Colorado. Jason profiled 22-year-old Demetrius Herron, who earned two associate's degrees through a Second Chance Pell program at Trinidad State College:

“There's a lot of people who were victims of circumstance,” Herron said. “They weren't given the belief or confidence that they had all the same opportunities as everyone else.”

When he entered prison, Herron said he wasn't confident. He was sad and depressed. But education helped him grow in ways he never thought possible. He was a speaker at his graduation ceremony, graduated magna cum laude, and after release, enrolled at Colorado State University Pueblo.

Trinidad State College began enrolling students through the program in 2020 and enrolled about 74 incarcerated students in the fall, according to LiAnn Richardson, the college's division chair for prison education.

Eleven incarcerated students in the

fall 2020 class have earned associate degrees.

Research & resources

PEN America is distributing 75,000 copies of *The Sentences That Create Us*, a book on writing behind bars. A free copy can be requested online at <https://t.co/ST7zHTQawK>, or by writing to: Prison Writing Program c/o PEN America, 588 Broadway Suite 303, New York, NY 10012.

The University of Southern California Dornsife Prison Education Project is sponsoring the National Adult and Youth Systems-Impacted Writers Awards. They are inviting writers to share their educational experiences both inside and outside of the classroom in a piece of creative writing. Here are the instructions with an April 1 deadline:

Topic

In a piece of creative writing, describe and reflect on your relationship with education, however you define it (formal or informal). You may choose to focus on anyone or anything that helped or hindered you in relation to your education (i.e., programs, college staff, teachers, mentors, family members, etc.). We're interested in hearing about educational experiences both inside and outside the classroom, as well as the rewards and struggles that have defined your experiences.

Criteria

Use the guidelines above to frame your piece, and demonstrate a genuine grappling with the topic, employing specificity and detail. Please submit either a traditional essay (max: 1000 words) or a piece in a different genre, this could be a piece of: fiction, poetry, songwriting, rap lyrics, journalistic expose, comic

strip, or another genre that interests you. If a genre other than traditional essay, please also submit a reflection discussing your reasoning for the artistic choices you made in your piece.

Eligibility

Submit to either the youth (under 21) or adult (21 or older) award. Any writer who is systems-impacted is invited to apply, which could include: incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, arrested and/or convicted without incarceration, or negatively affected by the incarceration of a close relative/caregiver.

Essay submission should include: full name, address, and email. To submit, send an email including the above information and your piece to uscpepwriting@gmail.com with the subject line: Last Name, First Name - 2022 National Adult Systems-Impacted Writers Contest or Last Name, First Name - 2022 National Youth Systems-Impacted Writers Contest. Or submit by mail: USC Prison Education Project, 950 W. Jefferson Blvd, JEF 150, Los Angeles, CA, 90049.

News & views

A bill on prison education put forth by Florida state senator Jeff Brandes, a Republican, is making progress. The bill calls for an investment of almost \$3.4 million to offer online high school classes to Florida's 1,600 some prisoners under the age of 22. More than 70 percent of them do not have a high school diploma or GED—a prerequisite for participating in any higher education program. There's a shortage of teachers because the Florida Department of Corrections pays its teachers \$10,000 less than county schools, Brandes told Florida Politics.

State senators in Kentucky have introduced a bill that would remove a ban that prevents currently incarcerated high school graduates

from receiving some state scholarships. The bill also deletes a requirement from the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES) — the state's merit-aid program — that currently makes all people with felony convictions ineligible.

In the wake of a February lockdown across all 122 federal prisons due to a gang fight in Texas, Robert Barton, who is incarcerated at FCI Coleman in Florida, writes about the detrimental effects of frequent prison lockdowns for Politico. "For the uninitiated, a lockdown means everyone in a unit or an entire prison is restricted to their cells for 22 to 24 hours a day, without access to education, recreation, or communication with family," he writes.

The nonprofit Freedom Reads and architecture firm MASS Design Group have partnered to install 1,000 Freedom Libraries inside American prisons and juvenile detention facilities, Eva Federly reports for Architectural Digest. Freedom Libraries were spaces that provided African Americans access to books during de facto segregation. The first Freedom Library was launched near Boston in November 2021 at MCI-Norfolk, where Malcolm X was incarcerated in the 1950s.

The Michigan Department of Correction is launching a bachelor's program for incarcerated students who finished their associate's degree through the private college Siena Heights University.

For Inside Higher Ed, Sara Weissman writes about a new program between University of Southern California and Long Beach City College that creates a pathway to college for 16 to 24 year olds who have been associated with gangs.

Jobs for the Future announced 22 recipients of Ascendium Education Group's Ready for Pell grant initiative, which helps institutions

that provide higher education in prisons navigate the upcoming changes to the Pell Grant program for incarcerated students. Two state systems and 20 colleges in 16 states will receive up to \$120,000 in funding to expand prison education programs in advance of the restoration of the Pell grant eligibility in 2023.

Jy'aire Smith-Pennick writes about his transformation from gangster to geek while in prison for the Marshall Project. "I spent my first couple of years in prison learning how to be a better drug dealer," he writes. "Eventually, incarceration forced me to stand still and look at my life more objectively."

For our partner the Prison Journalism Project, Bryan Noonan, who is incarcerated in Michigan, writes about the anticlimatic end to his five-year journey through higher education.

Let's connect

Please connect if you have story ideas or just want to share your experience with prison education programs as a student or educator. Right now, I'm especially interested in speaking with anyone experiencing challenges accessing Pell Grants because of student loan default and juvenile lifers who have been shut out of education programs because of the length of their sentence.

You can always reach me at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org on JPay/Securus/Connect Network/Corrlinks or on Twitter at [@szarlotka](https://twitter.com/szarlotka).

To reach me via snail mail, you can write to: Charlotte West, Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062.

— Charlotte

