Fresh starts and forgiveness

We start with several news developments this week:

■ More on student loan relief for incarcerated borrowers
■ Big expansion of the number of Second Chance Pell sites
■ Some demographic data on who exactly used Second Chance Pell during the first five years of the program.

As I reported a few weeks ago, the Education Department is launching a “fresh start” for student loan borrowers in default, including those who are incarcerated. Student loan default has been one of the biggest barriers to participation in Second Chance Pell programs, with the current process to bring loans into good standing being difficult – and in some cases nearly impossible – from behind prison walls. While folks on the outside can pick up the phone or log onto their online account, incarcerated borrowers don’t have that luxury.

The fresh start will bring all eligible defaulted loans into good standing. All borrowers, including those in prison, will have: the default record removed from their credit history, their eligibility for federal student aid restored, and loan collection efforts stopped.

I worked with incarcerated journalist Ryan Moser on the story. Ryan talked to men at Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami who had faced challenges applying to Miami Dade College’s Pell program because of outstanding student debt. Ryan himself stands to benefit from the “fresh start” announced last month, especially as he looks forward to getting out of prison later this year after serving an 8-year sentence.

Ryan wasn’t able to enroll in two different Second Chance Pell programs in Florida due to a $5000 loan balance. “Although I was excluded during my sentence, learning that I can get some relief of college debt when I go home this year renews my interest in returning to school,” says Ryan, who is thinking about journalism school.

While the details have yet to be announced, incarcerated borrowers may also benefit from possible wide-scale loan forgiveness through executive action being considered by the Biden administration. One of the current plans being floated is forgiving at least $10,000 for borrowers who make less than $125,000.

Any forgiveness may be subject to income limitations and there will likely be legal challenges about whether the president has the legal authority to cancel student loan debt. There is also speculation that Biden will extend the moratorium on student loan payments from August 31, 2022 at least one more time to allow more time to implement any possible forgiveness programs.

At the end of April, the Education Department also announced the addition of 73 new Second Chance Pell sites, bringing the total of participating colleges and universities to approximately 200.

President Barack Obama announced the Second Chance Pell program in 2015 as the first step toward restoring Pell Grants for incarcerated students since they’d been eliminated in the 1994 crime bill. In 2020, Congress lifted the 26-year ban, with full reinstatement of the Pell funding for incarcerated students currently slated for July 2023.

Forty-two states and the District of Columbia had Second Chance Pell sites prior to the most recent expansion, which represents the third cohort of colleges. New programs were launched in Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Dakota, and Wyoming, along with Puerto Rico, the first U.S.
territory to have a Second Chance site. Now all but two states – Alaska and North Dakota – have Second Chance programs.

The vast majority of selected schools are public two- and public four-year institutions. Twenty-four of the newly selected educational institutions are historically Black colleges and universities and minority-serving institutions. Selected schools may begin accessing Pell Grants as early as July 1, 2022.

In addition to the new Pell sites, the White House also announced a $145 million investment to fund a collaboration between the Justice and Labor Departments focused on job skills training and reentry programs for federal prisoners. President Biden also used his clemency powers for the first time, granting pardons to three people and commuting the sentences of 75 people, all of whom have made efforts to rehabilitate themselves through educational and vocational training and drug treatment.

Who participates in Second Chance Pell?

A new report from the Vera Institute reviewed the first five years of Second Chance Pell from 2016 to 2021. Over that period, around 28,000 students have enrolled in higher education through the initiative. Since 2016, more than 9,000 students have earned credentials. While the number of students receiving bachelor’s degrees has increased each year, the vast majority of programs offer associate’s degrees or certificates.

The expansion of the Second Chance Pell program, which has since its inception been billed as “an experiment”, is to “allow for opportunities to study the best practices for implementing the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students,” according to the Education Department. But systematic data on outcomes has thus far been limited, so this new Vera report on who is participating in Second Chance Pell, what credentials they are earning, and where they are studying provides an important early look.

The report looked at the race and ethnicity of Second Chance Pell participants compared to the U.S. prison population, based on data from the Department of Justice:

- White participants are overrepresented, making up 43 percent of Second Chance Pell students compared to 30 percent of the prison population.
- Twenty-nine percent of Second Chance Pell students are Black compared to 33 percent of the prison population.
- Approximately 8 percent of Second Chance Pell students are Hispanic/Latinx compared to 23 percent of the prison population. While they were the group most underrepresented in enrollment, Hispanic/Latinx students earned credentials at nearly twice their enrollment rate.
- Eighty-five percent of Second Chance Pell students are people housed in facilities designated for housing prisoners.
for men, compared to 93 percent of the overall prison population.

Approximately 15 percent of Second Chance Pell students are in facilities designated for women, compared to 7 percent of the prison population. Although they are enrolling and participating at twice the rate as their presence in the prison population, women disproportionately earned fewer credentials compared to men.

The majority of Second Chance programs are taught in state prisons. Nine colleges are teaching in federal prisons, with at least two more planning to teach in federal prisons in the recently announced Second Chance Pell expansion. For 2020–2021, the states with the most programs were New York (13), Texas (9), Kansas (8), California (6), and Maryland (6), while Texas, Ohio, Arizona, Georgia, and Missouri had the most students.

**A mother's education**

Dakota Shananaquet, a member of the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, is an incarcerated student at the Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility in Michigan. After earning three associate’s degrees from Jackson College in 2019, she is now enrolled in the prison’s food technology program. Shananaquet, 47, has been incarcerated since 2013 and has a release date of May 2023. Here she shares her story.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

I messed up college, like four or five times, out in the world. I would get my financial aid money and then I would blow it, not taking classes seriously. Every time I was on academic probation, I came up with stellar grades and earned a 4.0. I kept repeating this vicious, self-destructive cycle. My aunt would always say, “Oh, my God, she’s such a smart girl, but she makes dumb decisions.”

And that just killed my dream of any college. So when I got to prison, and they said that we had to fill out the FAFSA form, I thought I was going to get denied. Then I thought about my mom, who passed away in 2008. And she would always say, “What’s the worst they can say? No.” So I filled out the application anyway, and sent it in. And then I was surprised that I got approved.

Once Jackson College gave me an opportunity for the Second Chance Pell program, I fasted for four days and made a promise to the Creator that I would take full advantage of this program. And I’ve pretty much been on the dean’s list ever since I started college again. I retook a lot of the classes that I got low grades in out in the world, so that I could bring my GPA up. So today, my GPA is 3.98.

During my time in the college program, I got a job as a GED tutor. I maintained a high GPA and was inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa honor society in 2018. When I received my certificate, I said, “Wow! First I was indicted and now I’m getting inducted! God is good!” and we all fell out laughing!

In April 2019, my daughter Andrea died. Even though I had an excellent record, the warden denied my request to go to her funeral because he said it was “short notice.” This should have brought me to my knees, but it only brought me closer to the Creator and my cultural teachings. Two months later, I graduated with three associate degrees with high honors and brought a picture of Andrea with me in my medicine bag to honor her.

Then, because I have the Michigan Indian Tuition Waiver, I got to continue on and take other classes that Jackson College had to offer. A lot of the credits are transferable, so when we got a packet from Eastern Michigan University, I started tallying up what I need towards a bachelor’s degree in business. I was only 25 credits away. Two semesters, and I’d have my bachelor’s degree! It just blew me away. I was just happy to get an associate’s degree but now I have a drive to get my master’s degree.

One thing I think that needs to be improved is eligibility for the college program. To participate, you have to have a sentence between 30 months and eight years. There are a lot of people in here that have over eight years left. And there’s far too few role models. If you educate those ladies, they could be role models to the younger ones that are coming in.

When I started college in prison, it just set the tone at home, because two of my children were in high school at the time. So once I started being on the dean’s list, they started taking their high school academic endeavors seriously. And they were on the honor roll at their schools. My son graduated last year, and then my daughter graduates this year. Now it’s just getting everybody through college and setting an example for my granddaughter, who just turned 1 in December.

**News & views**

The 19th reported on gender disparities in education programs in men’s and women’s prisons in Texas. While incarcerated men can earn master’s degrees, the highest degree women in Texas prisons can obtain is a bachelor’s degree, wrote Nadra Nittle.

Earlier this week, Goucher College held what is believed to be the first commencement to confer bachelor’s degrees inside a Maryland prison in at least 25 years, the Washington Post reported.

Taylor Swaak explored the double edged sword of technology in prison education programs for The Chronicle of Higher Education. “When the Covid-19 pandemic shut down in-person classes, many college prison-education programs were forced to rely on companies that sell technology products to prisons,” Swaak wrote. “Now, as program leaders look to the future, they’re reimagining the role tech will play in a space that is uniquely restricted, and where some for-profit offerings have developed dubious reputations.”

Read Shani Shay’s powerful essay for the Prison Journalism Project on
her personal story as someone “whose very existence challenges assumptions about who can go to Harvard and what someone with early life trauma and incarceration can accomplish.”

**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 how prison education programs are accommodating students with disabilities and information on English as a Second Language programs in prisons. I’m also looking to find out more about the challenges and opportunities of conducting academic research in prisons.

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

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— 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.

June 2, 2022

Hard choices in a “show-me world”

Over the last month, I’ve been working with Khalil A. Scott, who is incarcerated at Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina, on an essay about the lack of college programming in the young adult unit where he works as a mentor. He shared the story of 26-year-old Quantae Priest, who recently transferred from Lee to another prison where he could take part in a college program offered by Claflin University, a historically Black college located in Orangeburg, S.C.

For a chance to go to college, Quantae gave up living in a housing unit where he felt safe, was surrounded by like minded peers and had access to rehabilitative programming. He traded a single cell with a desk, chair and bookshelves for a noisy, crowded dorm with rickety bunk beds and a cellie. (“I miss my bookshelf because I love all my books,” he recently told me.)

I was drawn to Quantae's story because it demonstrates the hard choices that people often have to make in order to gain a higher education in prison. The theme of trade-offs has come up often in the conversations I've been having. Do you transfer to a prison on the opposite side of the state away from your family to participate in a college program? Do you delay your petition for resentencing so you can graduate before you get out? Or do you put your education on hold for a better job in the prison?

In the essay, Khalil also makes a case for why young adult units focused on rehabilitation and restorative justice are the ideal setting for college-in-prison programs. Not only is the physical environment more conducive to studying, the mentors in the unit teach classes focused on communication and addressing trauma. Anecdotally, the skills the young men learn can help lay the foundation for success in an academic classroom.

As I've written about before, a growing number of states are recognizing the unique needs of incarcerated young people, who are overrepresented in the prison system. This particularly applies to young Black and Hispanic males. Individuals ages 18 to 24 make up 10 percent of the general population but comprise 21 percent of people admitted into adult prison every year.

As Khalil notes, the young men in his unit are the same age as traditional college students. They are missing out on a time in life when most people figure out who they are and what they want to do in the future. Research shows that compared with older adults, young adults lack emotional control and are more likely to act impulsively, but they are also more receptive to positive interventions, including higher education.

Lee and Turbeville Correctional Institution are the two state prisons in South Carolina with dedicated housing units for 18- to 25-year-olds. But they only offer GED instruction to those who want to finish their high school studies and vocational training. For many of the young men that Khalil and the other mentors work with, those limited programs will not quench their thirst for higher education. Twenty seven out of 33 told him they wanted to take college classes.

Other formerly incarcerated people I've talked to have said that exposure to college in prison when they were younger was what encouraged them to go back to school when they got out. “Even though I didn’t earn a degree while I was incarcerated, being able to earn those hours put me on a path to go to college,” Andrew Hundley, a young adult housing unit at Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina, part of the Restoring Promise initiative. Courtesy of the Vera Institute of Justice.

Open Campus is a nonprofit newsroom focused on covering higher education. This newsletter is supported by Ascendium.
former juvenile lifer and founder of the Louisiana Parole Project, told me in March.

Quantae’s story also points to another challenge of prison education, what Columbia University sociologist Sadé Lindsay calls “the prison credential dilemma.” While Quantae has personally benefited from the programs offered in the young adult unit, the certificates and diplomas he's stacked up may not mean that much on the outside.

As Quantae put it, “This is a ‘show me world’, right? Well, I got this certificate, this certificate, this certificate. Well, who accredited that? Now, I gotta get a four-year degree that can actually help me when I go home.”

I recently caught up with Quantae about his experience in Claflin's college program. Since he arrived at the new prison, Quantae has gotten a job as a teacher’s assistant in the education department and has been able to finish a college literature class.

He had to drop a second course because he couldn't access it on his prison-issued tablet, and sometimes he and his classmates had to miss class because there weren’t enough correctional staff to escort them to the education building.

Now, instead of sitting at his desk, he has to lay on his bunk or contend with the noisy common room to study. While his cellmate is also in the college program, most of his classmates are scattered across multiple housing units instead of living together where they can create a sense of community.

I asked Quantae whether leaving the young adult unit was worth it. His reviews are mixed; he’s grateful for the opportunity to pursue higher education, but frustrated he had to move to a less-than-ideal environment to do it.

At Lee, “I could have done everything that I’m doing now way more efficiently,” he says.

But despite the challenges, Quantae remains optimistic. With a maximum release date of 2028, he intends to have a bachelor's in hand before he goes home. “This higher education is my redemption process,” he says. “So, when I get out I'm more equipped to do things to address some of the harm that I caused and redeem myself to my family, my community and the world at large.”

“Sometimes when you have great things that you want to accomplish, you got to make great sacrifices,” he adds. “And ultimately, I’m able to actually get a degree in prison. I think that's worth it, no matter what.”

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 how prison education programs are accommodating students with disabilities and information on English as a Second Language programs in prisons. I’m also looking to find out more about the challenges of the physical environment for teaching and learning in prison.

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— Charlotte
Prison programs don’t quench the thirst for higher education

Quantae Priest with a family member at his GED graduation at Lee Correctional Institution in 2017. Courtesy of Quantae Priest.

BY KHALIL A. SCOTT

Quantae Priest with a family member at his GED graduation at Lee Correctional Institution in 2017. Courtesy of Quantae Priest.

“Hey, Khalil. Guess what? I got accepted.”

“That’s great news!” I responded to Quantae Priest, 26, who’d called out to me on the rec field of our high-security prison.

But his news wasn’t entirely good. I could tell from his face. We started to walk laps around the perimeter of the basketball and handball courts of Lee Correctional Institution in Bishopville, S.C.

“You already know what’s going on,” he said. “I’ve established bonds here. I’ve let my guard down with guys here. I don’t want to leave. But, at the same time, I have to.”

For a chance to earn a college degree while he’s incarcerated, Quantae traded the matching color scheme and single-person cells of Lee’s young adult unit for concrete-gray quarters the size of a small bathroom that he now shares with another man at Ridgeland Correctional Institution. There he’s been able to enroll at Claflin University, the only college in our state currently using federal Pell Grants for prison education. He had to leave behind the supportive community he’d been a part of at Lee.

Although happy for him, I hated the choice that Quantae had to make. Until his April transfer to Ridgeland, he was part of the Vera Institute of Justice’s Restoring Promise initiative for 18- through 25-year-olds. The program pairs those young adults with mentors, older guys like me, who are serving long sentences. We live with the young men on the unit and teach classes on topics that include effective communication, conflict resolution and restorative justice. The young men learn life skills and deal with traumas that many of them had faced in their homes and communities before they were incarcerated.

Most prisons aren’t built to promote healthy, human transformation, let alone to help people pursue a higher education. Most prisons don’t create an environment conducive to learning. Over the past three decades that I’ve spent in maximum-security institutions, I’ve often had to drown out a cellmate’s radio or uncontrollable snoring with earplugs made of wet toilet paper, just so I could concentrate on what I was reading.

But, in our unit at Lee, the cell that each of us has to ourselves resembles a college dorm room, complete with a desk and chair to study. Residents can do their time without being hyper-vigilant about watching their backs. Community rules, set by us mentors, are supposed to keep everyone safe. There’s zero-tolerance for violence; a person caught with a makeshift shank is immediately removed from the unit.

Lee and Turbeville Correctional Institution are the two state prisons in South Carolina with these dedicated housing units for 18- to 25-year-olds. But they only offer GED instruction to those who want to finish their high school studies and vocational training. Those limited programs— for many of the young men we’ve been teaching life skills and strategies to address their trauma — won’t quench their thirst for higher education.

Quantae isn’t the only young man in our unit aspiring to college and wanting what a degree might contribute to his life. They share their hopes every Monday and Wednesday when we come together in a community circle to discuss concerns and celebrate wins. During a recent circle, when I polled the young men to see who would be interested in taking college classes, 27 of 33 among them shot a hand into the air.
The young men in our unit are the same age as traditional college students. They are missing out on a time in life when most people are figuring out who they are and what they want to do in the future. Research shows that, compared with older adults, young adults lack emotional control and are more likely to act impulsively. But they are also more receptive to positive interventions, including higher education.

Ridgeland, a medium-security prison, where Quantae went to enroll in Claflin University’s courses and earn a bachelor’s degree, is part of the Second Chance Pell program. In 2015, under President Obama, that initiative restored need-based federal financial aid to incarcerated students. I had just finished my own college program when we lost those grants during President Bill Clinton’s tough-on-crime lawmaking of the 1990s.

“If you bring education, most everyone can change”

At 19, staring down a life sentence for murder, I began my long incarceration. Fortunately for me, men in a prison “lifers club” took me under their wings. As soon as I entered the institution, they introduced themselves. “You’re young, you got a life sentence. There’s no sense in you getting caught up with a bunch of foolishness. So, we’re gonna help you out,” they told me.

Because of that early encouragement, I ended up jumping right into the GED program and then took some college courses. If I had chosen otherwise, my prison journey could have looked a lot different, with me easily ending up in a gang or spending years in solitary confinement. Instead, I became a mentor to ambitious young men like Quantae who reminded me of myself at that age.

His decision to transfer demonstrates the sacrifices he was willing to make to get an education, building upon skills in communication and self-advocacy that we mentors helped him learn.

... If you bring education, if you actually tend to trauma,” Quantae says, “most everyone can change in some way or another.”

The personal change is real, he adds, but the diplomas he’s received from the informal classes he’s taken won’t mean that much outside of prison: “This is a ‘show me world’, right? Well, I got this certificate, this certificate, this certificate. Well, who accredited that? Now, I gotta get a four-year degree that can actually help me when I go home.”

At the end of April, the federal government added South Carolina’s Benedict College, Denmark Technical College, Southern Wesleyan University and Voorhees University to its list of Second Chance Pell sites. Details of the South Carolina Department of Corrections’ agreements with those colleges are being worked out, a department spokesperson said. It’s unclear whether the department will allow Restoring Promise unit residents to enroll, but I am hopeful seeing how supportive corrections department director Bryan Stirling has already been of the Restoring Promise units.

Quantae, whose maximum release date is 2028, intends to have that bachelor’s in hand before he goes home. He sees a formal education as crucial to success on the outside, and the next step in his personal journey.

“This higher education is my redemption process,” he says. “So, when I get out I’m more equipped to do things to address some of the harm that I caused and redeem myself to my family, my community and the world at large.”

Open Campus national reporter Charlotte West contributed reporting to this story.

Khalil A. Scott is a mentor in the Restoring Promise unit, an initiative of the Vera Institute of Justice and the MILPA Collective, at Lee Correctional Institution in Bishopville, S.C. During three decades of incarceration, he’s become a GED tutor, certified peer support specialist and hospice volunteer. He’s passionate about individual growth and giving back to others.
Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons. I’m Charlotte West, a national reporter for Open Campus.

June 16, 2022

The legal education edition

I co-wrote this story with John Corley, associate editor of the Louisiana State Penitentiary prison news magazine, The Angolite. Open Campus and JSTOR Daily collaborated on this story using the American Prison Newspaper Archives.

The last class, 28 years later

Politicians don’t know what to do about crime. But they’re going to do something. Even if it’s wrong.

That was a provocative commencement speaker’s message almost 30 years ago. “The country is ready to spend billions of dollars on what politicians say are solutions to crime: more prisons, longer sentences, more death penalties, and the famous ‘three strikes and you’re out.’”

Just as unusual, perhaps, was the speaker. John P. Whitley, the warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, presided over the commencement for the Northwest Missouri Community College class of 1994.

“If these policies were effective, Louisiana would be the safest state in the union. Only a few months ago Louisiana was declared the most dangerous place to live.”

The warden’s solution? Education.

Whitley was hired as warden in 1990 to fix things after a federal judge declared a state of emergency at the prison, also known as Angola. As part of his reform efforts, he brought in the community college to offer computer and paralegal programs.

Whitley’s scathing graduation speech, published in the prison news magazine The Angolite, stood in sharp contrast to the tough-on-crime rhetoric of the 1990s.

In his address, Whitley mourned the possible loss of the programs he brought to Angola. “It’s a shame that after this administration has fought so hard to get education here at Angola, we may see it disappear,” he said. “Politicians say it’s not fair to taxpayers to be educating prisoners. I say taxpayers are either going to pay now or pay later.”

Sixty-two graduates received certificates in paralegal studies and computer technology on that day in May 1994, The Angolite reported.

“I never graduated from anything except grammar school and junior high,” paralegal graduate Lionel Berniard told the magazine on graduation day. “Since I came here I got my GED and a paralegal diploma, so this is a big day for me. I love law, and have a knack for it. I’m going to try to make it my life’s work.”

Berniard and his peers were members of “the last class,” the final group of incarcerated students who were able to receive financial aid before Congress eliminated Pell Grants in 1994. It won’t be until 2023 when wide-scale access to Pell Grants will once again be available inside state and federal prisons.

“The axe was poised a thousand miles away in Washington D.C. to cut off the possibility of ceremonies like these ever again occurring in prison,” wrote prison journalist Douglas Dennis of the commencement. “Congress was sacrificing Pell Grants...to public mood.”

Some of the graduates have continued to use the paralegal Image from The Angolite May/June 1994 via the JSTOR American Prison Newspaper Archives.
education that was financed with a $2,400 Pell Grant. Darren Hooks, now 62, is still at Angola working as an “inmate counsel substitute” – a type of jailhouse lawyer appointed by the prison. Others in the class, like Berniard, have gone on to use their paralegal course as the foundation for successful careers on the outside. Their stories chronicle the ups and downs of prison education at a time when a warden who believed in education was swimming upstream against a tidal wave of tough-on-crime policies.

An incentive for education

When Hooks arrived at Angola in September 1981, the foremost thing on his mind was survival. He was 22, fresh from service in the U.S. Army Reserves, with a life sentence for murder. Under relentless media scrutiny, Angola’s reputation as the bloodiest prison in America was cemented in the public consciousness. Despite his military training, Hooks was uneasy.

Like every other healthy man incarcerated at Angola, he was expected to work. Like every other new arrival, he was assigned to a farm line. These lines could consist of a hundred men marching in the early morning two-by-two, from the main prison or an outcamp compound, to work sites within vast agricultural plots.

There, the prisoners picked cotton, chopped weeds along snake-infested canals, and dug drainage ditches, with dull-edged spades beneath the oppressive Southern sun. The farms stretched over thousands upon thousands of acres, 28 square miles in all. Mounted guards with automatic rifles waited patiently for someone to step out of line—there would be only one warning shot.

Field work was backbreaking and demeaning. Prisoners constantly sought ways around it. Feigning illness and injury rarely worked unless there was visible blood or bone.

There was, however, one ticket to a break from the farm lines. Men enrolled in the GED classes received an automatic, half-day waiver from field duty. It was a huge incentive to go to school. In addition to the GED, Angola offered a handful of vocational training schools—but not to everyone.

“Guys with life sentences weren’t even considered” for enrollment, Hooks said.

Angola was—and still is—the prison where most Louisiana lifers were sent. Prison officials thought if you had a life sentence, you weren’t going anywhere. “Back then, the shortest sentences in Angola might have been fifty years,” Hooks said. “Those were the short-termers, the fifty-year guys.”

The educational doorway was cracked open for lifers not long after Hooks arrived, he said. The change was the result of a lawsuit filed by a man who, like many others, wanted his GED but was blocked. The new opportunities were well received, particularly by prisoners who would do almost anything to avoid the line. Including Hooks, He had already completed his high-school education but according to the prison’s education director, that didn’t matter, Hooks said.

A door opened, quickly shut again

Louisiana prisoners serving life sentences were also generally prohibited from higher education in favor of people with known release dates. But new policies and programs introduced under Whitley, the warden, expanded educational opportunities to all eligible prisoners regardless of their sentence.

The paralegal and computer technology classes were open to lifers for just a year when, in 1992, Congress removed eligibility for Pell Grants from people who had been sentenced to life without parole or the death penalty—a harbinger of things to come. In September 1993, the college kicked 61 lifers out of its programs, according to The Angolite, but the next year created a scholarship program enabling them to finish the courses.

Hooks already had an interest in the law, as do many people who find themselves in the prison system. When the community college came to Angola, Hooks signed up for the paralegal program, which crammed two years of coursework into one.

The course instructor was an attorney who came in every day to conduct the classes. “Being in prison, the first thing dudes wanted to know was about criminal law,” Hooks said. But the instructor told them to slow down — they first needed to learn the basics, which included worker’s compensation, civil law, and real estate.

That instructor, Lynda Price, helped Hooks and several other prisoners file suit in federal court when it became clear the program would be shut down because of the Pell ban, Hooks said. They asked for an injunction against shutting down the classes, since they were already underway and paid for through Pell. Ultimately, the court dismissed the case, finding that the men had no constitutional right to a postsecondary education.

By that time, Hooks had completed most of his studies, but students who had only recently begun their education had the rug pulled out from under them. In the end, education lost out to politics when Congress passed the 1994 crime bill. By February 1995, the community college had pulled out of Angola entirely, with Price and other faculty members losing their jobs.

After graduating, Hooks returned to a kitchen job. When the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary established an Angola campus in 1995, Hooks was lured by the prospect of earning a degree, not to mention the fact the classes were funded privately at no cost to the students. Hooks enrolled, earning his bachelor’s in Christian ministry several years later in 2002.

While Hooks was still a seminary student, Burl Cain, the warden who
came in after Whitley in 1995, announced that there was a dearth of qualified inmate counsel substitutes in the law library. Building on the foundation laid by the paralegal course, Hooks jumped at the opportunity and was assigned to his new job in the law library in 1997. He’s been there ever since, currently earning 83 cents an hour.

Success inside and out

While Hooks’ paralegal career has been behind bars, other members of the last class have been able to use their education on the outside. Lionel Berniard, who was quoted in the 1994 Angolite article, used his paralegal education to win a reversal and successfully reduce his charges from second degree murder to manslaughter. He was released in 2001 after serving 16 years and opened his own paralegal business, which allowed him to reintegrate into society, earn a living, and start a family, he said.

Another member of the last class was Calvin Duncan, who was released in 2011 after serving almost 30 years for murder he didn’t commit. He was exonerated in 2021.

Like Hooks, Duncan worked in the Angola law library. After he got out, he pursued a paralegal degree at Tulane University and was on the legal team for the 2020 Supreme Court decision, Ramos v. Louisiana, which struck down non-unanimous juries as unconstitutional. Now he’s enrolled at Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland, Oregon.

“Being in prison for a crime I didn’t commit and the state seeking to have me executed forced me to learn the law to save myself from execution,” he said. “The paralegal program helped me learn legal concepts and how to properly read court opinions and how to apply the law to the facts.”

Over the last three decades, Hooks has assisted prisoners with thousands of court claims, many of which have successfully granted relief. He is also a lead speaker when tours stop by the law library, explaining to academics, professionals, students, and others how a team of prison paralegals take on the criminal justice system every day.

Hooks said he’s humbled knowing that he was a member of Angola’s “last class” before Pell Grants were eliminated. For those who came after him, the lack of educational opportunities in prison “meant a continuing cycle of illiteracy and poverty.”

For Hooks, a Pell-funded paralegal education has given him a meaningful career in the Angola law library that has lasted 28 years. Hooks said a lot of men from his generation thought “‘College ain’t for me.’ When I got there, I realized that college is for anybody. The important thing is what you want to do with the education from college that you get.”

The prison-to-law-school pipeline

Another group of incarcerated students, in a paralegal program in Minnesota, will be among the first to participate in legal education programs funded by restored federal financial aid.

North Hennepin Community College in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota was selected as one of 73 new Second Chance Pell sites for fall 2022. Access to Pell Grants will allow North Hennepin to fund a cohort of 20 incarcerated students in the college's paralegal program, said Mary Fenske, paralegal program director.

The program began as a pilot with a cohort of 5 students, who will finish their 30-credit certificate in May 2023, at Shakopee and Stillwater state prisons. The 5 students are being privately funded by law firms in the Twin Cities.

Heather Horst is one of the students in the first cohort. She was interested in the paralegal program because she wants to help others understand the nuances of the legal system, such as disparities in sentencing for the same crime.

“Many women here don’t understand the law,” Horst said. “And if you’re going to hold somebody accountable for something, how can you do that if they don’t understand? I want people to be held accountable appropriately.”

The program is working with All Square, a nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis. All Square has also collaborated with Mitchell Hamline School of Law to create the Prison to Law Pipeline.

Maureen Onyelobi, who is currently serving a life sentence at Shakopee, will start in Mitchell Hamline's juris doctor program this fall. She is believed to be the first person to attend law school from behind bars.

The American Bar Association recently granted an exception to its regular requirements to allow Onyelobi to attend classes entirely online, which she will do from the Shakopee prison. Her tuition will be covered through private funds and the same scholarship assistance available to all Mitchell Hamline students. The association will allow Mitchell Hamline to admit up to two incarcerated students each academic year for five years.

Onyelobi took the LSAT for the second time in April, and didn’t know she had been accepted into the law school until she received a surprise visit at the prison from the law school dean Anthony Niedwiecki last week.

“I didn’t think I could get an advanced degree beyond a bachelor’s in any field,” she told Open Campus. “It’s so fitting that someone who’s actually been incarcerated and who could actually relate to what their clients are going through can actually earn a law degree.”

Let’s connect

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

—Charlotte
The prisoner and the professor

A prisoner from Mississippi and a professor from New York make an unlikely research team.

Leigh Ann Wheeler, a historian at Binghamton University, was first introduced to Glen Conley in 2017 by a prison chaplain familiar with her work on Anne Moody, a civil rights activist who published Coming of Age in Mississippi in 1968.

Conley, who is serving life without parole, began doing research on Moody after he read her autobiography through a prison book club. He was writing his own book of poems, Reflections in Black: Remembering Anne Moody and Others Who Paved the Way, and asked Wheeler to write the foreword.

Since then, the pair has been collaborating: co-authoring book reviews, presenting at virtual academic conferences, and engaging with Wheeler’s undergraduate students in class discussions. In 2021, Conley is believed to be the first prisoner in Mississippi to participate in an academic conference when he was invited to present on Moody to the Western Association of Women Historians.

“Scholarship...behind bars is possible, but achieving it is not a simple process,” Conley said.

While they’ve met in person several times when Wheeler travels to Mississippi, they primarily rely on phone calls and the U.S. Postal Service — limited to 5 pages printed from the internet at a time — to collaborate.

“Phone calls are pricey. I can’t call him but must wait for him to call me. Mail is slow. Email and texting are not available. In-person visits are infrequent and difficult to arrange,” Wheeler said.

When Conley, who is currently working on his master’s degree in theology from Nations University, was at a different prison, he often had to rely on prison staff to conduct online searches and locate primary sources. They were often reluctant to help him:

“On numerous occasions when I asked...for assistance I was told that they already had enough to do and had no time to do volunteer work for inmates. One teacher even opined that inmates should be doing hard labor, not academic research.”

Staff often gave him nicknames such as “Mr. Smartass” and “Dr. Know-it-all.”

“Not to mention the dirty looks,” he added.

A new kind of collaboration

Their co-writing process involves Conley sending handwritten drafts, Wheeler typing it up and sending his typed draft and her own revisions back, and then editing over the phone.

“I would read him my latest version and we would edit it together on the phone with me rereading passages aloud, him correcting, arguing sometimes over the word,” she said.

“I was also surprised to discover that such a writing collaboration is possible, and over the phone...and with the possibility...that someone else is listening in and, possibly, even recording our call.”

Currently, Wheeler and Conley are working with a group of 20 others in
the Anne Moody Scholars Workshop to produce an edited collection of essays and website on the activist.

For Wheeler, working with Conley has given her new insight into what she thought she knew about prison. “I’ll be honest — as a liberal I was, of course, concerned about mass incarceration, but I had no real understanding of how this vicious phenomenon affected people who are imprisoned and their families,” she said.

“A staff member would then bring the printed copies into the facility, handwritten notes and access to a computer lab with the offline index of JSTOR’s digital library.

“I could read the abstract, then hand write a request for the article that someone would review and print outside the facility,” she said. “A staff member would then bring the printed copies into the facility to provide them to me.”

“The affinity I developed for Oscar Wilde was acquired by sheer force of will, powered by the joy of discovery.”

Now, she wants to make that same resource available to other incarcerated students and anyone else in prison who is interested in doing research.

Burnett manages the JSTOR Access in Prisons Initiative, which is making its research resources available to correctional facilities for free through an online database of abstracts on a thumb drive. Prison librarians and education staff are able to customize the media review policy to fit the regulations of the specific facility.

A recent report from the Vera Institute found that while 3 percent of incarcerated students had no access to academic research materials, 70 percent of students in prison education programs had access to academic research materials through the college library. Twenty-two percent had access through a searchable database of academic literature or a combination of literature provided by instructors and access to a prison library.

“The critical thinking and analysis skills developed along the way not only enriched my education, but also prepared me for the rigors of post-release life,” Burnett said. “The time I spent with JSTOR in prison taught me research skills and how to make better life decisions.”

Expanding research access in prison

An obsession with Oscar Wilde and access to an offline database fueled Stacy Burnett’s passion for learning when she was incarcerated in New York from 2017 to 2019. As a student with the Bard Prison Initiative, she had access to a computer lab with the offline index of JSTOR’s digital library.

“The critical thinking and analysis skills developed along the way not only enriched my education, but also prepared me for the rigors of post-release life,” Burnett said. “The time I spent with JSTOR in prison taught me research skills and how to make better life decisions.”

Storytelling through qualitative research

The latest special issue of the Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity, an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed publication, is focused on racism in prison higher education. The journal is published by the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity, produced by the University of Oklahoma Outreach.

Editor-in-chief Cristobal Salinas Jr, an education professor at Florida Atlantic University, helped found the journal eight years ago with the goal of creating a space for scholarship that often is excluded from mainstream research journals. They often publish work that has been rejected other places.

“Everything I’m writing is from personal experience, watching news, and hearing staff at numerous facilities. I was not able to do any research at the facility library or through assistance from the education program/school due to staff shortage.”

Learning to read behind the fence

For the Salem Statesman Journal, education journalist Natalie Pate did a deep dive into the relationship between literacy and incarceration in “Learning to read behind the fence.” With support from the Education Writers Association, Pate and photographer Brian Hayes traveled to three prisons in Oregon and one in California, observing classes and interviewing educators and incarcerated students.

“A child’s ability to read is a key indicator of the likelihood they will graduate high school,” Pate writes. “Further evidence connects low literacy with the likelihood an individual could end up in prison — and keep returning.”

“It’s not clear whether Oregon prisoners are actually more literate since there is no state-by-state
comparative data or federal oversight. Corrections officials could not explain why the Oregon numbers are so different than national surveys.

“State law requires the majority of these prisoners take classes while incarcerated. Yet the Statesman found nearly half of Oregon inmates who qualify as low-level readers — those who read below an eighth-grade level — have never been enrolled. And funding and access to these programs are not prioritized.”

“Funding for adult education in Oregon prisons accounts for less than 6% of the Department of Correction’s overall budget. No money is allocated specifically for lower-level readers.”

Pate’s narrative intersperses the individual stories of people in prison with an analysis of the policy and practice of literacy education in Oregon’s prisons. I asked Pate why she wanted to do this story. Initially, she and her editor realized that there had been very little media coverage of the topic of literacy in prisons, and none that centered the voices of incarcerated people.

“At the heart of it ....reading and writing are tools most of us use every day,” Pate said. “They help us to understand and be understood by others...To not have that, especially as an adult in an isolated setting? It was hard for me to imagine. I wanted to explore that and look into how to make it better.”

Literacy is not only a requirement for completing high school and getting into college programs, it’s also crucial to communicating and holding down a job. “In a nutshell — literacy is so important,” Pate said. “For everyone.”

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. You can always reach me at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org on JPay/Securus/Connect Network/Corrlinks or on Twitter at @szarlotka. If you are a prison educator or a librarian interested in receiving print copies of College Inside, please reach out.

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

— Charlotte

About this newsletter

Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about prison education produced by Open Campus, a national nonprofit newsroom. Topics we cover include college-in-prison programs, Pell Grants for incarcerated students, career and technical education, and education in juvenile justice facilities.

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You can also reach national reporter Charlotte West at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org via JPay/Corrlinks/TextBehind/Securus/Connect Network/Getting Out.

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