



Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.

AUGUST 11 2022

## 'Nothing academic is offered here'

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

### Limited opportunities almost everywhere

In most states, it turns out, the majority of prisons do not have higher education programs, especially ones that lead to college degrees. Incarcerated people in less than a third of state and federal prisons have access to postsecondary education. And for some populations,

When I started covering prison education last year, I sent out a lot of messages asking people what kinds of educational programs were offered at their prisons. It took Jennifer Graves, who is incarcerated at the Florida Women's Reception Center in Ocala, Fla., a while to get back to me.

"I had NO idea what opportunities we have," she wrote. "After a little research, I found that we have none. Nothing academic is offered here, which is pretty sad because the University of Florida is about 30 minutes away."

Graves' response is not surprising. While I receive a lot of letters from people in college-in-prison programs, I get just as many, if not more, from people who want to earn a degree but don't have the opportunity. For this issue of College Inside, I wanted to get an overview of how many places offer higher education in prison, and who is excluded from it.

For example, in Florida, which incarcerates 80,000 people, only six out of the 143 correctional facilities in the state offer incarcerated students the opportunity to earn associate's or bachelor's degrees according to the Florida Department of Corrections. If those six programs enroll 50 students each (which would likely be on the high side), only 300 prisoners are attending college in the third-largest prison system in the United States.

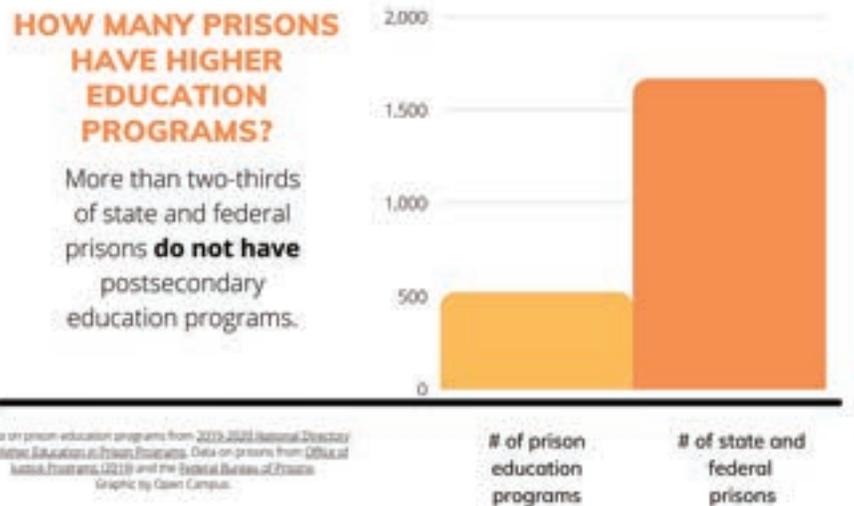
academic options are even rarer. Some states explicitly ban people with long sentences from participating in higher education or don't offer any degree programs, while others prioritize enrollment based on time to release.

There are some exceptions. Since 2014, California has allowed community colleges to use state funding to enroll incarcerated students. As a result, California, which has the second-largest

state prison system (behind Texas) with 97,000 prisoners, is one of the few states offering classes in nearly every prison. Face-to-face college programs leading to an associate's degree are available at 33 prisons, and people at all 34 facilities can enroll in community college correspondence courses. Six California prisons currently offer in-person bachelor's programs according to the California Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.

Nationwide, there were 374 prison education programs operating in 522 facilities in 2019-2020, according to data collected by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison. Those numbers include programs that offer certificates, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees, as well as those that offer college classes but not credentials, and require a high school diploma or equivalent for admission.

Most of those programs are offered at the 1,566 state prisons and 100 federal prisons in the United States. People in the 5,000 some local jails, juvenile facilities, immigration detention



facilities, military prisons, and other facilities are even less likely to have access to higher education.

While the actual number of prison education programs is likely higher due to the expansion of Pell Grants and the fact the data is self-reported, those numbers indicate that the majority of people in prison do not have access to postsecondary education.

As of 2020, states like Delaware, Idaho,

Montana, and South Dakota did not offer any bachelor's or associate's degrees to their prison populations. All of those states now have at least one Second Chance Pell site with the latest expansion of the program in April, but those programs won't start until fall 2022 at the earliest and not all will lead to two- or four-year degrees.

“If the government and its citizens really want to ‘rehabilitate’ prisoners, then education and job training should be a top priority,” wrote Shawn Bell, who is serving a life sentence at the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, S.D. “If people don’t have something positive...like education, they find other, more negative ways to fill their time in prison.”

## Too much time

Even within facilities that have postsecondary programs, some categories of prisoners, including lifers like Bell, are often excluded from higher education. Half of the states impose restrictions on participation in education based on the length of an individual's sentence, while 11 states have restrictions related to conviction, according to the Council of State Governments Justice Center. Many states also prioritize enrollment based on release date.

For example, people with life sentences in Alaska are excluded from vocational education and individuals on death row in Georgia are not allowed to formally participate in education programming. States like Colorado, Louisiana, and Missouri specifically prioritize those who have less than five years on their sentences.

Kamau Bentley, who is serving a life sentence in Wisconsin, has tried repeatedly to enroll in higher education programs. In the early 2000s, he tried to sign up for a college program, but was ineligible for state financial aid because he hadn't registered for the Selective Service. He gave up on his education.

Almost 20 years later, Bentley heard about Pell Grant reinstatement and decided to apply to another college program. Although the Selective Service requirement had been waived, he encountered another obstacle.

“It was determined that I had too much time on my sentence to be enrolled at that time,” he said. “I was once again denied, and once again defeated. As of this writing, I am still trying to figure out a way to gain my degree, but in all honesty, every year I go without getting it done, the more unlikely it will be for me to do it.”

Although people with long sentences account for a relatively small number of state prison admissions, their numbers add up over time, according to a recent study from the Council on Criminal Justice. At the end of 2019, 57 percent of people in prison had been sentenced to 10 years or more. More than 200,000 people in the United States are serving life sentences.

Mary Ann Webb, who has been incarcerated at Anson Correctional in Polkton, N.C., for 18 years, said that the criteria to take college courses at her facility is to have a release date within 10 years. “Since I have life without parole, it’s impossible for me to grow mentally beyond trade classes,” she wrote. “The reason I’m offered trade classes is so I can keep the prison clean and running.”

Prison without opportunities for rehabilitation is “a life of stagnation,” she wrote. “I feel as if I have no purpose because I’m considered a waste of time and money to educate.”

## News & views

•Based on our reporting, the Chicago-Sun Times’ editorial board published an op-ed urging Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker to grant clemency to Johnny Pippins, who has served 26 years of an expected 30 years.

•College Inside was featured in the June/July issue of San Quentin News (see page 5).

•For PBS Newshour, Cresencio Rodriguez-Delgado writes about university support programs for formerly incarcerated students, a growing population on California’s college campuses.

•Eric Kelderman dives into the oversight powers granted to departments of corrections in the Education Department’s proposed rules for Pell Grants for people in prison for

The Chronicle of Higher Education. Advocates for prisoners worry that corrections agencies are not equipped to evaluate the educational quality of the programs, and that prisons will limit the available courses because they’re more concerned with security than access to knowledge, he writes.

•The Visiting Room is a digital project featuring 100 filmed interviews with people serving life without parole at Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary. The project was spearheaded by Marcus Kondkar and Calvin Duncan. Kondkar is chair of the sociology department at Loyola University New Orleans, where he researches incarceration and sentencing patterns. Duncan, who served 30 years at Angola for a murder he didn’t commit, is a law student at Lewis & Clark in Portland, Oregon [www.visitingroomproject.org](http://www.visitingroomproject.org).

•For the Prison Journalism Project, Joe Garcia writes about the first in-person graduation at San Quentin’s Mt Tamalpais College. Twenty students from the graduating classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022 attended the event at the end of June.

•Florida passed legislation that allows people on state probation and community control in the state to receive education and workforce credits, rewarded by shortening probation terms. Each citizen can earn up to 60 days off their probation per completed educational activity, reports Rashad Milligan for Rolling Out.

•California’s 2022-2023 budget, signed by Governor Gavin Newsom at the end of June, includes \$15 million in funding to community colleges to provide postsecondary education for youth who are in the juvenile justice system. The funding occurs as the Division of Juvenile Justice is phased out, with California’s three remaining youth prisons set to be shut down entirely by June 2023. Young people will instead be under the supervision of county probation offices, which will be responsible for organizing education in conjunction with community colleges. The \$15 million will support up to 45 community colleges across California implementing programs modeled on Project Change at the College of San Mateo.



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## 'Leave your culture and assumptions at the door'

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

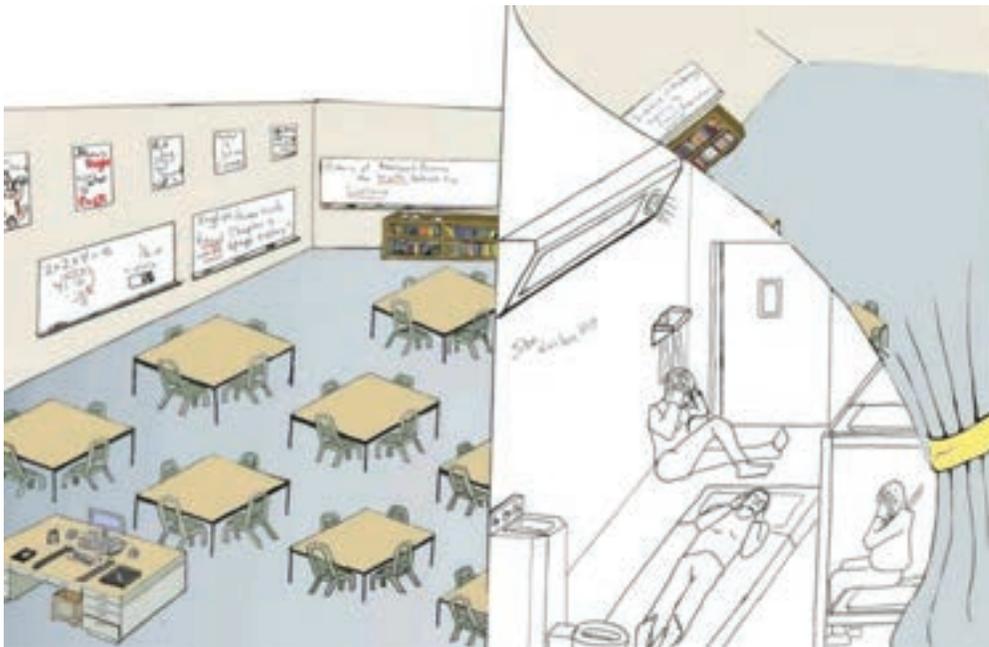


Illustration: Daniel Longan for Open Campus

## An educator's guide to the American prison

*What should educators know before walking into a prison? The landscape may look vaguely familiar, Nick Hacheny and Tomas Keen write, but don't be fooled. There's a lot outsiders can't see, and need to understand.*

*As prison education programs are poised to expand, the two incarcerated writers offer a guide for working with students like them in this strange land. (Also a shout out to incarcerated artist Daniel Longan for the illustrations!)*

If given the opportunity to teach abroad, say in Papua New Guinea or France, you'd likely head to a bookstore and purchase a guide on the region's culture. You'd study the history of the place and how significant events shaped the things you were about to see.

But nobody buys a guide before entering a prison.

As prison-based education programs slowly return, many newly inspired educators are unknowingly about to walk into a foreign land. Few will get a

guide on what being in prison is really like. And even if they do take the time to scour the growing tome of prison-centered writing, they'll find little as been said about the ways in which outsiders should approach this place.

This guide aims to fix that.

Arriving at the prison gates, you'll find what you first expected: high walls, glistening razor wire, imposing towers with armed guards. Stepping inside you'll see polished "Programming Center" signs adorning buildings with neatly configured tables and chairs, inspirational quotes, and hastily-scrawled-upon white boards. It may seem for a moment very reminiscent of any other site of academia.

Because the setting is what you expected, the people look familiar, and the language is one you can understand, you might assume you know this culture. You couldn't be more wrong.

Like all tourist traps, you're experiencing what prison administrators want you to. You're not seeing the cramped and dirty living units, you're not hearing the nonstop shrieking of amplified loudspeakers, you're not feeling the soul-twisting desperation to be somewhere, anywhere, other than this place. Despite a keen eye and keyed up senses, you're not experiencing what this place really is.

You've undoubtedly come intending to do some good. Yet that requires understanding something of the place you are in and the people you are with. Here are five cultural foundations that you should know about:

### The population

Almost all prisoners have experienced trauma – there are disproportionate numbers of people of color who have been subjected to racist systems, victims of violence, graduates of the foster-care system, people suffering from mental illness, and people who turned to substances to suppress pain. In no other place will you find these specific demographics in these sizable concentrations.

## Power

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Prisons create a culture that responds to power as a reflex, like a flinch. Prisoners understand that anyone who has power over them has the ability to hurt them – enemy and friend alike. The natural reaction is to distance yourself as far as possible: what you don't have cannot be taken from you, what you don't love cannot break your heart.

## Trust

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Prisoners have trust issues. We have experienced extreme oppression from our custodians, been betrayed by our fellow captives, and been abandoned by some of our advocates. This leads to a truncated ability to give and receive trust, making it a measured commodity offered and taken only in the quantity we can afford.

## Agency

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The prison environment is one shockingly scarce in choices. We don't choose where we live or who we live with, what time we will wake up, eat our meals, or even use the toilet. The choices that are left to us are guarded fiercely.

## Animosity

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Education programs become baby carrots that barely grow in the shadow of monstrous sticks. An ever-present threat of having valuable things taken away spawns toxic selfishness and narcissism. In short, prisons are mean spaces with inadequate resources and a culture of survival.

It's wrong to walk into prison and think that terms like equity, fairness, and anti-discrimination are going to mean the same thing here that they do outside. Prison educators need to identify more closely with Harriet Tubman than John Harvard. You need to read the words of Michelle Alexander and look for modern day underground railroads.

Here are 12 tips to help you navigate this new land:

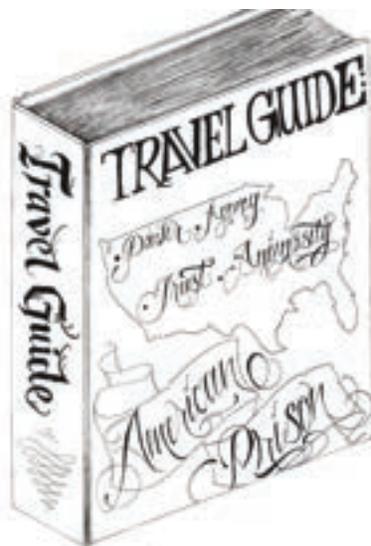


Illustration by Daniel Longan for Open Campus

## Travel tips

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1. Leave your culture and assumptions at the door.
2. Take the time to learn this culture. Sit with prisoners who live here and are doing the work day in and day out.
3. Understand that when you come to a visiting room or a prison classroom you are in a tourist trap. You will hear stories and have a better idea than most, but you will not see us in our cages or experience the violence and madness that are part of our daily lives.
4. Give up on the idea that your set of values will fix this place.
5. Become an agent of empowerment.
6. Don't spread yourself so thin that you end up helping no one by trying to help everyone.
7. Say no to the temptation to take risks that will endanger the whole community and deprive them of resources. Something that feels as innocent as bringing in a magazine or pictures of your vacation can get a program shut down.
8. An educator should never become a prison guard. A student comes into class frazzled and aggressive. But what you

might not know is that he was stopped on the way to class and harassed by an officer for not having his shirt tucked in. Give your students the benefit of the doubt.

9. Don't get sidetracked by the loudest or most disenfranchised or most manipulative.

10. Take a marathoner's approach. Commit to long-term solutions that are sustainable instead of short-term fixes that make you feel good.

11. Understand that if you do not take care of yourself, you will become another advocate who did their prison tour and left.

12. Accept the fact that prison has a pretty messed up culture filled with broken people.

Prison education is hard work. But it matters in ways that few other things can compare. It empowers transformation, prevents future victimization, and breaks cycles of incarceration, poverty, abuse, and disenfranchisement. It's rarely fun and only sometimes rewarding – but it's absolutely vital.

### Don't forget to send us a postcard!

*Nick Hachene* is incarcerated at the Washington Corrections Center and is a longtime advocate for environmental and educational programs in prison. He has been previously published in *The Economist's 1843 Magazine*, *BioCycle*, and *Filter* and presented a *TedX* talk on the environmental program he started in prison.

*Tomas Keen* is a writer from Washington State, where he's been incarcerated since 2010. His work prioritizes issues of social justice and legal reform and has been published in *The Crime Report*, *The Appeal*, *Inquest*, and *The Economist's 1843 Magazine*.

*Daniel Longan* is serving a 40-year sentence in Washington State. His art has been featured in the *LeMay Car Museum* in Tacoma and in a video for *JSTOR Access in Prison*. You can follow him on Twitter at [@DanLonganArt](https://twitter.com/DanLonganArt).

## \$10-20K in student loan forgiveness

Yesterday, the big news we've all been waiting for became official. President Biden announced an executive order that will grant \$10,000 in student loan forgiveness for borrowers who make less than \$125,000, and up to \$20,000 for borrowers who were Pell Grant recipients.

This comes on the heels of the first concrete details of the Education Department's "fresh start" initiative, first announced in April, to bring defaulted loans into good standing. The Washington Post first broke the story, with Danielle Douglas-Gabriel reporting that 7.5 million borrowers will benefit from the program.

**Here's the crux: people will have one year from the end of the student-loan payment pause — now set to expire December 31 — to make payment arrangements. Notably this will restore eligibility for Pell Grants, currently a key barrier to participation in prison ed programs.**

The "fresh start," combined with the anticipated \$10K forgiveness announced on Wednesday, is good news for people who want to continue their education inside or outside of prison.

**Almost one-third of borrowers have debt but no degree, according to the Education Department, and about 16 percent of borrowers are in default. Some of these people are in prison.**

Borrowers who are in default can bring their loans into good standing and potentially qualify for forgiveness. And those who have debt but no degree will gain access to federal financial aid again so they can finish college.

Defaulted borrowers are currently not eligible for Pell Grants or other federal aid, so for students who stopped out and didn't finish their degrees — that one-third of student loan borrowers — and now want to go back to school, loan forgiveness plus "fresh start" is a game changer.

What's missing? There are scant details on how the Education Department will help incarcerated borrowers overcome logistical and communication barriers such as no internet access, limited phone calls, and an inability to call 1-800 numbers. The

Education Department had provided no further information at the time of publishing.



## Let's connect

We want to hear from you if you have story ideas or just want to share your experience with prison education programs as a student or educator. Please reach out if you are a formerly incarcerated student or a prison educator affected by student loan default and forgiveness. **How will the combination of fresh start + loan forgiveness impact you or your prison ed program?**

Please write to  
charlotte@opencampus.org  
or to the postal address below.

— Charlotte West

## 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, among other higher education issues.

We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly e-newsletter and a monthly print edition. You can subscribe to the e-newsletter at <https://bit.ly/3ToP2Uz>. You can sign up for the print edition at <https://bit.ly/3oMCmss> or by writing to **Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062**. We also publish the PDFs of our print newsletter on the Open Campus website - <http://www.opencampusmedia.org>.

You can reach national reporter Charlotte West at **charlotte@opencampusmedia.org**, via-JPay/Corrlinks/TextBehind/Securus/Connect Network/Getting Out, or at the postal address above.

Please note that Open Campus is a news organization that covers higher education. We don't investigate criminal cases or report on crime-related issues, nor do we provide educational courses or assist individuals in enrolling in education programs or obtaining transcripts. When we receive a letter, we will add you to our mailing list to receive

College Inside. Given the volume of letters that we receive, we cannot always respond personally, but we appreciate your interest in our work.

We work with incarcerated writers, but do not usually publish unsolicited manuscripts, essays that have been published elsewhere, or stories on topics other than education. We are looking for story pitches that offer new and surprising insights about higher education in prisons with a clear angle and broader takeaway. (A pitch should be a paragraph with the main argument, like a thesis statement, and an explanation of the unique perspective that you offer on the subject). We prefer to work with writers in shaping their story ideas, so reach out to Charlotte West if you have an idea. It may take several weeks before we are able to respond.

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