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

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

Rethinking the student experience in prison education programs

This issue of College Inside focuses on the 2022 National Conference for Higher Education in Prison. The biggest highlights occurred when students incarcerated at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in southern Colorado had the chance to interact virtually with keynote speaker Ruth Wilson Gilmore, geography professor and director of the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics at the City University of New York. A debate team from the Maine Department of Corrections also beat MIT in a debate about term limits for Supreme Court justices.

Other conversations centered on the tensions between scalability and quality, the role of educational technology in program delivery, and who might be left behind with so much focus on Pell. It also provided an opportunity to hear from Education Department representatives on how they are working with colleges and departments of corrections to prepare for the return of Pell Grants for people in prison next year.

What’s next for Pell Grants in prison?

Over the last five years, almost 30,000 students have pursued postsecondary education in prison, and over 9,000 students have earned a degree or certificate through the Second Chance Pell program, according to the U.S. Education Department. That pilot program was put in place in 2015 under the Obama administration, opening up eligibility for people in prison for the first time since the 1994 crime bill gutted federal funding for higher education behind bars.

Now those numbers are poised to expand as an estimated 450,000 incarcerated students will once again become eligible for Pell Grants as of July 2023. In a session at the 2022 National Conference for Higher Education in Prison, moderated by Bradley Custer of the Center for American Progress, Education Department officials laid out some of the issues they are thinking about ahead of Pell restoration next year.

“The Second Chance Pell experiment has demonstrated that college, universities, and correctional systems can work together to transform teaching and learning and prison classrooms,” said Amy Loyd, assistant secretary of the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education at the Education Department.

She noted that two of the biggest barriers – such as failing to register for Selective Service and or having a drug conviction – to Pell Grant eligibility have already been removed. The Education Department is also rolling out the “fresh start” initiative for defaulted borrowers, including those who are incarcerated, to bring their student loans into good standing. The measure restores Pell Grant eligibility for people who were previously in default.

Pell restoration has required the federal student aid office to rethink the ways
that they have traditionally provided financial aid to students, particularly when it comes to technology, said David Musser, director of policy innovation and dissemination at the Education Department.

The Education Department has created a paper FAFSA application specifically for incarcerated students that will be available in the next few months on the Federal Student Aid Knowledge Center website, Musser said.

“We recognize that so much of what happens with individuals that are incarcerated happens on paper,” he said.

He said that because incarcerated students generally only apply to a single college, “the school that works with them has the unique ability to guide them.”

The final rules will be published by November 1 and the department will also provide “plain language guidance” for colleges in what is known as a “Dear Colleague” letter.

The Education Department has already begun to make changes that make the process more transparent for incarcerated students, Musser said. While failing to register for Selective Service and having a drug conviction have not disqualified students from Pell Grants since the 2021-22 academic year, those questions have been removed for the first time from the 2023-24 Free Application for Federal Student Aid, known as the FAFSA. The application opened on October 1. Previously students were often unsure about whether or not they needed to answer those questions.

The Education Department is also working on ways to improve the verification process, Musser said. Verification is a process where students are selected to make sure the data that they provided is accurate. One of the lessons learned from Second Chance Pell was that many people who are incarcerated don’t have access to documentation to prove their answers are correct.

The department has confirmed that students who are incarcerated will not be required to complete verification for the 2023-24 year. “Schools can simply indicate that they are incarcerated, and they can bypass that entire process,” Musser said.

Another challenge with Pell expansion is the need to simultaneously increase secondary education in prisons, said Sean Addie, the department’s director of correctional education. More needs to be done when it comes to providing high school equivalency in order to prepare more students to be able to take advantage of Pell, he added.

Addie said that many states currently leave federal funding, such as Perkins dollars, for secondary education on the table. “[We] need to be thinking proactively about how we can get students who maybe are not yet ready for postsecondary education ready for postsecondary education now that there are these new opportunities,” he said.

When asked what measures are being considered to make sure that state departments of corrections act in good faith partnership with colleges and universities, Musser noted that the Education Department does not have direct authority over correctional agencies or facilities.

“So our efforts in this area are more around ensuring that [educational] institutions work with those facilities to ensure that they’re following the rules and then the Department [of Education] evaluates the institutions on whether the overall regulations have been followed,” he said.

The Education Department conducts annual audits of all higher education institutions and they can conduct program reviews if there is indication of noncompliance.

Musser said that colleges are required by accrediting agencies to provide a “teach out plan” to allow students to transition to another program if a campus or instructional site shuts down.

“Obviously, the limited nature of postsecondary education currently in carceral settings makes that part very challenging,” he said. “It’s not yet clear to us...how institutions will be able to transition students. Perhaps they can work out if there are facilities where students are routinely transferred within a state.”

He also noted that incarcerated students in a program that shuts down could be eligible for restoration of their lifetime Pell Grant eligibility for the period that they were enrolled.

Quality, scalability and the role of tech in prison education

The return of Pell Grants for people in prison allows programs to do more long-range planning and invest more resources in prison education, said Sheila Meiman, director of the Returning & Incarcerated Student Education program at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey.

There was always concern during the Second Chance Pell pilot that the funding might dry up. “It’s going to give a lot of colleges the certainty to be able to invest in the program without worrying whether we’re on a year-by-year basis,” she said.

Meiman added that it will also address students’ concerns about program sustainability. “The scars from the mid 90s are still there, and the population wonders, ‘Will education go away?’”

While Pell Grants will expand access for many students, others will be left behind.

A student at the Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility who had earned a college degree before he was incarcerated noted he’s excluded from the expansion because they can only be used for first-time undergraduate programs. “In truth, the Pell Grant doesn’t do me any good because I don’t qualify,” he said.

Meiman said that colleges need to continue to think about continuing to increase access and provide financial support to students who are not Pell eligible.

Two giant bureaucracies

With the expansion of Pell Grants next year, many new programs are just getting off the ground. Prison educators are finding themselves caught between two giant monoliths: higher education institutions and departments of corrections.
“I have been surprised by the challenges of the academic bureaucracy and how those rival the challenges of the prison bureaucracy,” said Keramet Reiter, criminology professor at University of California, Irvine. She is the director of LIFTED, the first prison bachelor’s program in the University of California system.

Pell reinstatement will not only help make programs more sustainable, but also allow them to scale, said Heather Erwin, a consultant with American Institutes for Research and former director of a prison education program at University of Iowa.

But “there’s some fear or concern that higher education in prison scalability can’t coexist with high quality,” Erwin said.

The role of ed tech in prison education programs are central to the debate about quality and scalability, particularly when it comes to determining whether programs are virtual or face-to-face. Many of the more established liberal arts programs put a primacy on their physical presence in facilities, but offering in-person programs can be challenging at prisons located in rural areas.

Brandon Brown, a PhD student at George Mason University who started his graduate education while incarcerated in Maine, said that using technology will be necessary because it will be impossible to immediately expand the number of in-person programs.

Technology also needs to be embraced to provide student services such as academic advising that might not always be readily available in prisons, Brown said.

Freedom of choice

The Prison Education Partnership at the University of Maine at Augusta blends a cohort model with online options. The program serves 140 students across seven facilities.

Students start in a cohort to take their general education requirements, but then they can branch off into different majors. “We try to blend it with the best of both worlds,” said director Amanda Nowak. “They start off together having that strong support network as they transition into college. But then it transitions into [prioritizing] their freedom to choose their own courses and their own degree paths.”

They offer some synchronous online classes across multiple prisons, and incarcerated students can also take asynchronous classes available on the main campus, Nowak said. Online classes also expand the freedom of choice that students have.

Prison education programs are often constrained in what they can offer by issues ranging from instructor availability and classroom space to whether or not they have enough students to fill a particular class.

A student from Arkansas Valley, the prison in Colorado, said that people who have long sentences are most interested in gaining practical skills, such as policymaking. “Those of us doing life really don’t care whether we get degrees or not,” he said. “We just want to be able to speak the language.”

But for those getting out soon, they “really would like their degrees in what it is that they are looking to pursue when they get out.”

Colleges are also looking for ways to address issues such as students being transferred to other facilities part way through degree programs. Penn State will be using Pell funding to offer for-credit classes for the first time, eventually leading to a bachelor’s degree. They are considering how to build in different certificates, such as a certified recovery specialist certification, as students move through the bachelor’s program.

“We’re trying to figure out how we can get the most out of those credit hours that students will be taking and make sure that if they leave at year one...or if they stay all the way through the bachelors, they have all sorts of options...that they can take with them,” said Liana Glew, prison education program manager.
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BY RAHSAAN "NEW YORK" THOMAS

Two lifers on the role of college in prison: ‘I found a new habit. Education.’

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas and David Luis “Suave” Gonzalez both graduated from college while serving a life sentence in prison. Illustration by Charlotte West/Open Campus. Photo of Thomas by Eddie Herena. Photo of San Quentin by Shutterstock.

David Luis “Suave” Gonzalez was sentenced to life in prison when he was 17. In many states – including Pennsylvania, where Gonzalez was sentenced – there are few, if any, college opportunities for people with such lengthy sentences.

Still, Gonzalez eventually fought his way into Villanova University’s privately funded college program at Graterford Prison, the maximum security facility where he was incarcerated. There he earned a bachelor’s in education and marketing.

While incarcerated, Gonzalez developed a decades-long friendship with journalist Maria Hinojosa. The two would later work together to document his time in prison and subsequent release, in 2017 after a Supreme Court decision that ruled automatic life sentences without parole for juveniles as unconstitutional, in an eponymous podcast, Suave, which won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize.

Now, Gonzalez is a support coach with I Am More, a reentry program for formerly incarcerated students at Philadelphia Community College. He also co-hosts Death by Incarceration, which will be featuring episodes this fall focused on the various ways people in prison get an education.

In August, journalist Rahsaan “New York” Thomas called Gonzalez from a phone booth on the ground tier of San Quentin’s North Block. Thomas, who was sentenced to 55-years-to-life in California, is the inside host of the Pulitzer-nominated podcast Ear Hustle.

Like Gonzalez, Thomas was able to earn a degree behind bars, which was one of the factors cited in the commutation he received from California Gov. Gavin Newsom earlier this year. At the end of September, Thomas got word that he is suitable for parole following Newsom’s clemency and he expects to go home sometime in early 2023.

Thomas and Gonzalez talk about fighting the system and the role of education in prison when you think you’re never getting out.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:
What was the highest level of education you completed on the streets?

David Luis “Suave” Gonzalez: Tenth grade. I didn’t even know how to read, bro.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: So when did you start going to college? How did that happen?

David Luis “Suave” Gonzalez: When I got out, I’mma get my GED.” Then I got out of

Open Campus is a nonprofit newsroom focused on higher education. Our coverage of education in prisons is supported by Ascendium.
the hole [and] I took my GED. I tried eight times before I passed it. Then one day, I’m walking down the hallway and one of the guards asked me to interpret for another Latino guy. So I did and I looked over and seen a class. It’s nothing but white guys in there. I asked the teacher, “What the heck is going on in there, a Klan meeting?” She was like “Nah, it’s a college program.”

I said, “I want to be part of that.” So when I went in, everybody looking at me like I was crazy-like, “here comes this troublemaker.” So I signed up [in 1998]. But what I didn’t know was that the college program was only part-time studies. If you in it, you in it for the long run. What takes four years out here, might take 16 years in there because they come in once a year...That’s why it took so long to get a bachelor’s degree.

You had life without parole. What gave you the motivation even to keep breathing, bro? Like to keep doing anything positive, even think about education. Like, if you never go home, what does that matter?

When you start getting educated in prison, you start seeing yourself in a different light. So I started visualizing and putting myself in places that I’d never been before. I like to say, I found a new habit. And that new habit was education.

Did you hope that education would lead to finding you a way home?

I wasn’t even thinking about it. Education was just another tool to fight the system. Instead of punching a guard in the face, I put that lawsuit in and make them pay. That’s the way I was thinking because in PA, life without parole, means till you die. So to me, education was about fighting the system and changing the law.

The only way you’re going to fight the system is if you know how to write the grievance, if you know how to file them pro se lawsuits. In order to be able to do that, you gotta’ be educated to some extent. You got to know how to read and write. So that’s what I did. I began reading every law book, I began learning their system, to the point where I could memorize all of the rules and regulations and pinpoint when they was violating my rights.

I heard in Pennsylvania prisons, if you’re a lifer, they ain’t trying to let you go to college, right?

That’s true, but it’s also bullshit because I was a lifer and I did it. You know the same way we grind when we hustlin’ on the corners, the same way you gotta’ hustle when you in the prison system. They told me I couldn’t get a degree, and I left there with two degrees.

You have to say, “you know what, I got nothing to lose and everything to gain. I’m gonna’ get my degree by any means necessary.” And what that means is start saving your pennies, start taking them correspondence courses, start accumulating them credits, and get that degree. If you wait for the DOC to give you permission to do it, it’s never gonna’ get done.

We had to fight DOC to create programs in order for us to have one chance to get in one class. And that’s what we did: “I’m gonna’ create a program for y’all and y’all gonna’ let me in that program.”

I never had a program that DOC gave me. Every program that I took, we created. When I say we, I’m talking about lifers.

I definitely respect that but the average person is not mentally strong enough to face a life sentence and then have more obstacles than opportunities and still become something. So like, wouldn’t it have been easier if the system allowed colleges to flourish in all their prisons?

I mean, of course it would have been easier, but guess what? The DOC is not there to make it easy for us, bro. So that’s where me and you gonna’ disagree at, some dude saying, “the DOC didn’t let me in,” is some bullshit because when your back is against the wall, you got to make a decision: “Do I want this education? Or do I want this jailhouse shit?” I decided I don’t get nothing from stabbing people up. I’mma’ try something new because I tried everything else and I failed. I failed drug dealing. I failed trying to take people’s commissary. I failed miserably in going to the hole for fuckin’ guards up. I failed all that shit. The only thing I succeeded at in prison was in getting an education.

Those incarcerated serving life and long terms, we gotta’ get out the mindset that we need permission from the DOC. You do not need permission to get an education or to educate yourself. You can do that on your own. I can send you a list with hundreds of schools that will offer you correspondence courses for free.

When you decide you want to do something different and good, obstacles are gonna stand in your way, how you deal with that is up to you. Me, I say, fuck this jail shit. I’m getting out of jail, and when I mean getting out, I mean mentally.

And there’s no excuse. I’m not gonna’ say I got a life sentence, so I can’t go to school. If you ain’t gonna let me in school, I’mma’ find a job in the educational building where I’ll be around that stuff and sooner or later, one of y’all gonna’ let me in.

How big of a difference would it make if institutions across the country really put a focus on education?

Education in prison would reduce the number of incidents, meaning violence because when you are enrolled in an educational program, your focus is getting that degree. Your focus is not nonsense no more. That means I can’t go to the hole because if I go to the hole, I’m gonna’ lose my slot in the program. At the same time, people knew who I was in the jail – I was a …renegade. I ran the Latino organization with like 300 people. So I was able to encourage them to go to school. I saw some of the hardest dudes in the jail walking down the corridor with school books, because they want to go to school. That’s what education does—all it takes is one cool motherfucker to walk down that school building for everybody else to think that it’s cool to enroll.

I [also] wanna talk to you about the Pulitzer prize, bro. Like, that’s big, man.

I mean, listen, I put it like this: our struggle and our journey in the prison system prepare us for this. We are ghetto or urban journalists, whatever they want to call us.

This is what we do. We’ve been through this journey. So winning that
prize means that our issues are in the frontline right next… And to be the first formerly incarcerated person and the first juvenile lifer to really knock that off, man, listen, it’s a blessing.

Yeah, definitely, definitely, definitely. I know like all these publications publishing my story, the fact that you won that Pulitzer and Ear Hustle was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2020, it means that people wanna’ hear our stories. It has a value and people care.

America is infatuated with prisons and incarceration. They [are] infatuated with this, man. This is like cherry pie to them. Like they think that they could incarcerate the way out of every problem in America and they can’t.

I will say this, that when you do give one of us a chance to shine, this is what you get. I’m serious, bro, who would’ve thought that a juvenile lifer [who] learned how to read and write in prison, went to prison with an IQ of 56, would one day win the Pulitzer Award and the IDA award, which is like the Oscar of podcasts? … I guarantee you nobody saw that coming, bro.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas reported this story for Open Campus. It was co-published with Slate. National reporter Charlotte West contributed reporting.

Thomas is a writer, podcaster, and director. He was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and won the DuPont Award in 2020 for his work as a co-host and co-producer on Season Four of the Ear Hustle podcast. He’s a contributing writer for Current, the Marshall Project, and San Quentin News. Thomas is also the co-founder of Empowerment Avenue, a collective connecting incarcerated artists and writers with mainstream venues. All from a cell at San Quentin State Prison.

In August, President Biden announced that the Education Department will grant up to $10,000 in student loan cancellation for all borrowers with federal student loans who make less than $125,000 per year and up to $20,000 for people who received Pell Grants. Incarcerated borrowers also are eligible for student loan cancellation.

In mid-October, the federal financial aid office, Federal Student Aid, launched its online application for the one-time student loan forgiveness on Monday. The office says on its website that a paper application for debt cancellation for those who can’t apply online will be coming sometime “soon.”

In the meantime, incarcerated borrowers are left waiting for information. I logged onto the Federal Student Aid chat to see if they had information on how people in prison could find out about which servicer held their loans and what type of loan they had.

It turns out, at least according to the representative I chatted with (which may not represent the official policies of the Education Department), that there’s no way for someone who does not have access to the internet or the ability to dial a 1-800 number to contact the Federal Student Aid Information Center. There’s no address to write to, there’s no non 1-800 number, and they won’t talk to an authorized person on the outside.

The vast majority of prisons do not allow people to call toll-free numbers. Some departments of corrections, like Michigan, have put the numbers for the Federal Student Aid Information Center and the Debt Resolution Group (for defaulted loans) on a list of allowed numbers. But that seems to be the exception.

I asked a few incarcerated people to try and dial those 1-800 numbers. Some people thought I was being silly for asking because they knew they’d be blocked, but they indulged me and tried anyway.

Here’s what they reported back.

From Minnesota: “I called both numbers prepaid and collect 6 times. The message said this call is not allowed.”

From Indiana: “I tried as soon as I got your message, and they are not authorized. I know they can make 800 numbers authorized because we can call about tax stimulus.”

From Washington when calling the Info Center: “When I try the number it says, ‘Your account has been restricted by the correctional facility.’ I tried both prepaid and collect.”
We want to hear from you

If you are an incarcerated borrower, what challenges have you had contacting your student loan servicer? Are you able to call 1-800 numbers from your facility? Have your friends and family members tried to call the Federal Student Aid Information Center on your behalf and were they able to get information? What questions do you have about forgiveness and getting out of default? How does forgiveness impact your reentry plans?

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 adult and juvenile justice facilities, among other higher education issues.

We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a monthly print edition. You can subscribe to the email newsletter at https://bit.ly/3ToP2Uz or 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.

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We work with incarcerated writers, but do not usually publish unsolicited manuscripts, essays that have been published elsewhere, poetry, 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 if you have an idea. Please be patient. It may take several weeks before we are able to respond to specific ideas and may not have the bandwidth to reply to unsolicited manuscripts.

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