The fragility of prison education

A student who — after someone he knows gets a job at the prison where he is incarcerated — is transferred midway through his college course.

A student who is told he can’t enroll in classes the next term because his cellmate brought back “contraband” food from the chow hall and he has a possible disciplinary infraction. (His name is eventually cleared.)

A woman who served an additional year in prison because she didn’t receive time off her sentence for earning a degree after her college program shut down.

These are just a few of the examples of how education inside can be delayed or ended altogether. The collateral consequences that go far beyond not finishing a degree.

Earlier this year, I started reporting on the closure of the Washington State Reformatory and the way it disrupted education for the students of University Beyond Bars, the college program that operated there. It was an extreme example of the type of interruptions that occur on a daily basis in prison.

There were a lot of potential issues to dig into. Should a college program be a reason to keep a prison open? What are the trade-offs that incarcerated students have to make about their education? Do they transfer to another prison that has a program they want even if it’s far away from friends and family?

But what stood out most to me was just how little control students have over their education in prison. Unlike their peers on the outside, incarcerated students don’t have freedom of choice when it comes to college or major. If you want to study sociology but the only thing available is a welding program, you study welding.

And there’s unequal access to college options across states and even within facilities, exacerbated by things such as length of sentence and conviction.

For the final story that we co-published with the Seattle Times, I wanted to focus on what happened to the 50 students who were transferred to other prisons all over Washington state. Tracking them down wasn’t easy, but thankfully the prison grapevine is alive and well. Using JPay, a secure email service, I wrote to over 50 people who referred me to their former classmates.

The results were disappointing but not surprising. Over half of the 38 associate’s students in the program had been unable to continue their education.

Twelve of the men were receiving a bachelor’s degree in the liberal arts through Adams State University at the time of the closure — none of them have been able to finish their degrees as they lost access to the private scholarship funding their correspondence courses. A handful of the advanced students...
were within a few courses of earning their bachelor’s, and some had helped with grant-writing and fundraising in the years prior to the closure.

One student who got out said they were waiting until they got more familiar with technology before they continued their education outside. Another still inside said he’s taking whatever classes he can inside and hopes they’ll count towards his degree. Many of the others who weren’t able to enroll have given up, want to transfer to a different prison with the program they want, or are waiting to see if Pell Grant restoration brings more opportunities.

‘Working towards solutions’

The story of University Beyond Bars and the Washington State Reformatory raises questions about who – correctional agencies, colleges, or non-profit partners – is responsible for ensuring continuity in prison education. The landscape will become increasingly complicated as Pell Grant access expands next year.

Ultimately, the department of corrections has exclusive control over where the students are transferred. When the reformatory closed, officials said they “were committed to working toward solutions” with partners such as the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, which coordinates the state’s 34 colleges.

Under normal circumstances, the Washington corrections department has an education hold that prevents students from being transferred while they are enrolled during a degree program. But when the reformatory shut down, students were sent all over the state.

Although University Beyond Bars provided the department of corrections with a list of the students enrolled during the final term the program operated, students said that no one from the department, or any of the colleges serving the prisons where they were transferred, ever followed up with them.

When I contacted Seattle Central about the impact of the closure, the campus spokesperson referred the inquiry to University Beyond Bars. The college staff, with the exception of faculty, were working on top of their regular job duties and had little to no direct contact with students. Without having a dedicated staff member working with incarcerated students, college staff didn’t know who their students were.

When the prison closed, University Beyond Bars staff lost access to the students. The staff tried to ensure that all associate’s students were equipped with copies of their transcripts and an understanding of what classes they still needed to finish their degrees, but couldn’t otherwise provide further support.

With full Pell Grant expansion next year, colleges and their partners will need to figure out how to minimize disruptions and find ways to allow students to continue to build on the work they’ve already done.
When a prison closed, dozens of college dreams died with it

Despite its crumbling walls and tiny cells, the 112-year-old Washington State Reformatory was a sought-after destination.

Over two years, he had earned 30 credits — about a third of the way toward an associate degree. Then, in summer 2021, it all evaporated. Washington state announced it would close the prison. And suddenly the college educations of Davis and almost 50 others were ending mid-stream.

“I just knew in my gut that if [the prison] closed, most likely my college career was over,” Davis said.

Now, only a handful of students have been able to continue in college programs at other prisons around the state. Davis ended up at Airway Heights in eastern Washington. There, he’s been on a waitlist for a vocational program for more than a year.

The power of education

What happened after the reformatory closure illuminates the fragility of prison education. Even as college offerings are poised to expand across the country next year, with incarcerated students again becoming eligible for Pell Grants, the story of the Washington state students shows just how fleeting even established programs can be. Access to higher education often comes down to a matter of geography — and luck.

Prison education has been shown by a large body of research to reduce violence and keep people from going back to prison. In fact, the higher the level of education, the lower the chances of going back. One 2018 article analyzing studies of post-release outcomes found that people who participated in prison education were 28% less likely to return.

But recidivism alone does not fully capture the benefits of prison education. Studies have also shown the value of providing education to people who won’t ever go home. People serving long sentences often become role models and mentors to others.

Inconsistency threatens to undermine the transformative power of those opportunities.

Unlike their peers on the outside, incarcerated students don’t have freedom of choice when it comes to college or major. There is unequal access to college options across states and even within facilities. Some end up being transferred to another institution before they finish. Colleges may end their programs. Or, like in Washington, a prison can close altogether.
National shifts

The closure of the Washington State Reformatory is part of a larger movement to reduce prison capacity around the United States, partly due to a declining incarcerated population. Other aging facilities that could be on the chopping block offer some of the best-known college programs in the country. Historically, prisons were often built near population centers, and now those aging facilities host some of the most-rigorous education options because of their proximity to colleges, nonprofit groups, and others that support those programs.

In the Bay Area, San Quentin — which has been targeted by the California Legislative Analyst’s Office for possible closure because of the high cost of maintaining a 170-year-old facility — is seen as a national model of prison education. The prison is home to Mount Tamalpais College, the first independent liberal-arts institution specifically serving incarcerated students.

Stateville Correctional Facility, a nearly 100-year-old prison outside of Chicago, has the most college programming of all Illinois prisons, with four colleges serving about 300 students a year. The population there has been reduced by half in recent years. As a result of transfers, one college program there recently lost about one-third of their total enrollment, Injustice Watch reported.

Groups working at these urban prisons found ways to continue to offer college programs in the wake of the 1994 federal crime bill that eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners. Conservative lawmakers argued that people in prison were diverting resources from other students, but grants to people in prison did not affect the availability or size of grants for others, according to a 1994 analysis by the Government Accountability Office.

After the crime bill gutted federal financial aid for incarcerated students, the number of college-in-prison programs nationally dwindled from more than 700 to just a handful. The surviving programs were able to find private financial support and a steady stream of volunteers, including professors from nearby colleges. Such programs are difficult to replicate in more remote areas.

In December 2020, Congress reinstated widespread access to Pell Grants for people in prison, building on the Obama administration’s Second Chance Pell program, which now has approximately 200 sites across the country, one of which was University Beyond Bars, the Washington nonprofit. There are currently three active Second Chance Pell sites in Washington prisons.

University Beyond Bars is now shifting its focus to reentry support due to the changing landscape of prison education and uncertainty around what Pell Grant restoration will mean for third-party organizations, according to Kelly Johnson, operations and community resource manager.

A unique opportunity

The Washington State Reformatory, surrounded by 30-foot red brick walls, was the second-oldest in the state. It opened in 1910 in Monroe, about a 40-minute drive northeast of Seattle, perched on top of a hill with a view of the Cascades. At the time the closure was announced in July 2021, 370 men lived there, in 6-by-9 foot open-bar cells stacked in four tiers.

Many of the incarcerated men said they view the reformatory as one of the safest prisons in Washington State — and credit University Beyond Bars, also known as UBB.

Tim Pauley has been in 11 prisons in Washington and other states over 40 years. “UBB changed the entire culture of this prison,” he said. “Most of the other prisons that I’ve been to are like human warehouses. I’ve seen people that, at one point in time, were in rival gangs…sitting down in the day room tutoring each other.”
He became involved with University Beyond Bars shortly after he arrived at the reformatory in 2010. He finished his associate degree through the program and is one class away from completing his bachelor's degree from Adams State.

Many of the men in the prison were serving life sentences, for serious crimes such as murder. For people like them, the reformatory offered one of the few pathways to a degree inside. Despite legislation that passed last year to expand access to postsecondary education in Washington prisons, in practice, people with sentences longer than 10 years remain at the back of the line.

Thomus Davis, who is 26 years into a life without parole sentence, says he initially sought an education in prison because it was something he could do that would give his family a reason to be proud. Recent resentencing reform for people convicted as young adults could also mean he has a chance of eventually being released. “There’s a possibility of my life changing, so it’s actually something I feel like I now need, to prove to society I can be a part of it,” he said.

Priority for education is based on “risk level, individual needs, expected release date, and availability of program resources,” according to state corrections department policy.

Now, the only opportunity for men to earn a four-year degree with public funding is a bachelor’s of applied science through a community college at a prison in eastern Washington — located 200 miles away from Seattle.

The state community and technical college system offers a number of applied associate degrees and other vocational programs.

Most of the college programs that have been open to all regardless of sentence are operated by third-party organizations. The Black Prisoners Caucus, a grassroots social justice and cultural group, runs BPC Teach, which offers community college classes leading to an associate’s paid for by external sponsors. But that program, which was slowed down because of COVID, doesn’t operate at all prisons and does not currently offer four-year degrees.

The main women’s prison, near Tacoma, offers an associate degree and bachelor’s degree through a partnership between the nonprofit Freedom Education Project Puget Sound, Tacoma Community College, and the University of Puget Sound.

Many of the men say they are hoping that Pell Grant restoration will bring more opportunities at more prisons to continue beyond an associate degree, or finish the one they’ve already started.

More than a year after the Washington State Reformatory was shut down, the 50 University Beyond Bars students have been transferred all over the state. In summer 2021, 10 of the 38 associate’s students were within one quarter of completing their degrees. Only two of those students were able to graduate by finishing via correspondence.

Often, students were left to fend for themselves when trying to enroll in other programs.

Open Campus was able to contact 30 of the 38 students and 19 have not enrolled in any other program. One student received clemency and was released a few months after the reformatory closed. Besides the two who graduated, only three have been able to enroll in other community colleges where they can take the final classes they need to finish their degrees from Seattle Central. All of them had release dates within five years.

Two others have been able to take transferable classes that they paid for themselves or were funded by another nonprofit.

None of the 12 students who were in the Adams State bachelor’s program have been able to finish their degrees as they lost access to the private scholarship funding their correspondence courses.

Even the few who have been able to continue to make progress toward their degrees have had their education disrupted by pandemic-related lockdowns and staff shortages.

The prison education experience, says Clarke Davis, a former UBB student who will graduate next quarter, is like “getting a full-body tattoo one little piece at a time, praying you don’t run out of ink.”

This story was co-published by The Seattle Times.

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<th>What happens to incarcerated students when their prison closes?</th>
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<tr>
<td>More than a year since the closure of the Washington State Reformatory, half of the University Beyond Bars associate’s students have been unable to continue their education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduated</td>
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<td>Received clemency and was released</td>
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<td>Enrolled in programs to transfer credits back to finish original degree</td>
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<td>Paying individually for correspondence courses</td>
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<td>Enrolled in an another applied degree program, essentially starting over</td>
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<td>Able to take some classes through a nonprofit program with private funding</td>
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<td>Have not enrolled in another program. (Many told they were not a priority because of length of their sentences)</td>
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[Open Campus logo] College Inside | Open Campus
What I’ve learned in a year of covering prison education

A few weeks ago, I was sitting in my car outside of the Washington Corrections Center, a prison about an hour and 45 minutes southwest of Seattle. I was there to spend a few hours with one of our inside writers, Tomas Keen.

As I waited for a negative COVID test to get the green light to go inside, I looked at the out-of-place Christmas lights in the guard tower and the remnants of a rare Pacific Northwest snowstorm. It was a surreal moment.

Eighteen months ago, before I started this job, the situation would have seemed bizarre. Now, it seems strangely normal. In the last year, I’ve learned that people create connections and find joy no matter how dire their circumstances. And reporting on this world, how people navigate it, and how education fits in, matters — which makes my job seem meaningful.

Tomas was the very first incarcerated writer we published in this newsletter. That day, it was very cool to sit down across the table from a man I’ve gotten to know over the last year via JPay and 20-minute phone calls punctuated by an automated voice reminding us that prison officials might be listening.

We talked about journalism, his attempts to finish his bachelor’s degree, and what he wants to do when he gets out a few years down the road. It was a very normal conversation in a very abnormal setting behind a series of locked doors — one that families of incarcerated people have to deal with on a daily basis.

Learning to communicate with people in prison

It took me the first few months on the job to figure out the various ways to communicate with people in prison. It’s a complex web of different technology vendors, the U.S. postal service, and messages relayed via friends and family.

At least half of my phone conversations these days start with the message “this call is being monitored and recorded.” And for some reason, someone calling from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation shows up as a Texas area code.

People in prison generally don’t have access to the internet nor can they receive phone calls. They can make calls that range anywhere from $.37 to $1.50 for 15 minutes, but the calls can drop without warning and sometimes there are long queues for the phones.

Besides the glitchy prison phone system, there is snail mail and secure messaging systems such as JPay or Viapath (formerly known as Global Tel Link).

Depending on where someone is incarcerated, they may or may not have access to one of those services. These services are similar to the early email clients of the 1990s, with no ability to add hyperlinks or format text. Some vendors limit the number of characters...
to 2000, which makes it very frustrating to cut and paste a longform article.

Some states like Texas and Colorado allow you to send a message that's printed off and then delivered to the individual, who can then call you or send a letter.

Several states have also started scanning physical mail through third-party vendors, such as Text Behind or Smart Communications. Officials claim that this is to reduce contraband, but incarcerated people say it's really a way to increase surveillance. It also takes longer for people to get mail, and removes an important physical connection to loved ones who send cards and children's drawings. Some state, like Florida, are now delivering the scanned mail electronically and then charging for hard copies.

I've gotten used to having copies of the newsletters rejected by prison mail rooms. Sometimes it's operator error, like I mistyped someone's DOC number (people become numbers, not names), but other times it gets sent back because someone has been transferred or some other mysterious violation of a DOC mail rule. My favorite rejections are when there's a note that someone has been released.

Working with incarcerated writers

One of the highlights of the past year was having the opportunity to collaborate with incarcerated writers like Tomas. We published a number of essays detailing various aspects of higher education in prison, such as this essay about the need for college programs for young adults in prison by Khalil A. Scott. We also asked Rahsaan "New York" Thomas to interview Luis "Suave" Gonzalez about the role of college when you think you're never getting out.

And I had the opportunity to co-report stories such as this one on student loan default that I wrote with Ryan Moser (who is scheduled to go home next week!). While incarcerated writers don't have many of the resources that those of us on the outside take for granted, they do have access to sources inside. Ryan was able to get interviews with students who faced difficulties enrolling in college because of student loan debt from before they were incarcerated.

We've also been able to share our content with prison publications such as San Quentin News, which is produced at San Quentin and distributed across the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. When I visited the San Quentin media lab at the end of October, it was cool to see an article from College Inside laid out for one of their upcoming issues.

Working with inside writers requires flexibility and time, but it's immensely rewarding. We've transcribed handwritten stories, had paragraphs dictated over the phone, and made edits one message at a time.

Learning about the criminal justice system

I like to say that I'm an education journalist covering prisons. While I had previously done some reporting on the juvenile justice system, courts, crime, and the criminal justice system were new to me. I have had a steep learning curve on issues where criminal justice intersects with education.

Here are six specific things I've learned this year:

- Academic bureaucracy can rival that of prison bureaucracy, as Keramet Reiter, criminology professor at University of California, Irvine, put it during a session at the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison. Sometimes the obstacles to prison education sit in higher education institutions, not correctional agencies.

- Most of the people I've talked to who went to college inside have gotten an education in spite of prison, not because of prison. As I reported earlier this year, the majority of prisons do not have higher education programs, especially ones that lead to college degrees.

- Despite the lack of formal education programs in many places, people in prisons are extremely creative and find ways to educate themselves. Glen Conley, who is incarcerated in Mississippi, for example, began working with a professor at Binghamton University to do research on civil rights activist Anne Moody.
While many states exclude people with long sentences from education, lifers play an important role in both encouraging others to go to school and setting the culture of the prison. Many of the stories people have shared about their educational journey in prison began with an old timer cajoling a reluctant kid into signing up for a GED program. Some people have told me that the only programs being offered at all in some places are taught by lifers.

Prison education can be interrupted for all sorts of reasons, ranging from a prison closing to someone being transferred to another facility. There are collateral consequences of interrupted education that go far beyond not finishing a degree, including loss of good time credits and even decisions about parole.

There’s a great hunger for education inside. Every week, I get letters from people inside hoping that Pell Grant restoration next year will mean that college is coming to their prison. While the expansion of federal financial aid in 2023 will mean increased access, it’s still unclear whether the supply will meet the demand. State correctional systems are currently working out the details about the process for colleges to apply to become an approved prison education program and how they will be selected.

Reaching inside and out

When I started this newsletter a year ago, I hand addressed envelopes to a dozen people inside so they could get the issues along with the hundreds of digital subscribers on the outside. That quickly became unsustainable as the newsletter grew, first by me reaching out to people who were highlighted in local publications and then by word-of-mouth.

A year later, in addition to our outside audience of 800 policymakers, educators, and advocates, we’re now sending College Inside to around 800 individuals in prisons across the country as well as to a number of libraries and prison education programs.

As I started reporting on this beat, I quickly realized that there was a dearth of information about higher education options in prison. People have heard rumors about Pell Grants coming back, but have no information about how they will actually work. Many incarcerated people could benefit from President Biden’s student loan relief and new programs to bring defaulted loans back into good standing, but don’t have the ability to call 1-800 numbers or check online with their loan servicers.

We’ve tried to help close this information gap through College Inside and we hope to reach even more people next year. We look forward to hearing from you in 2023!

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 email newsletter and a monthly print edition. You can subscribe to the email newsletter at https://bit.ly/3ToP2Uz or by writing to Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062. You can also sign up for the print edition. (https://bit.ly/3oMCmss)

You can reach us at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org, via JPay, Corrlinks, Securus, Connect Network, GTL, or at the postal address above.

Please note that Open Campus is a news organization that covers higher education. Open Campus doesn’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, 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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