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

MAY 5, 2023
BY CHARLOTTE WEST

Illinois’ governor is letting this man out of prison after 26 years so he can earn his Ph.D.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker commuted Pippins’s sentence for a gang-related murder he committed decades ago. In the next few days, Pippins, 53, is expected to walk out of Iowa’s Anamosa State Penitentiary after more than 26 years behind bars. He will start at the University of Iowa in the fall.

Pippins has been waiting for news about the outcome of his clemency petition for nearly three years. He originally filed his request in July 2020. In Illinois, petitions for clemency – which include both pardons and sentence commutations – are submitted to the Prisoner Review Board, which then makes a confidential recommendation to the governor.

Things like remorse, disciplinary history, and post-release plans are all taken into consideration.

Pippins’s educational accomplishments and aspirations made for a strong application, his lawyer Nate Nieman said. In addition, Pippins had already served the majority of his sentence. His case has raised questions about how big of a role education should play in clemency decisions.

Update: Pippins was released from Anamosa State Penitentiary on Tuesday, May 10.

Johnny Pippins will soon celebrate two major milestones: enrolling in a Ph.D. program and getting out of prison.

Illustration by Emily Forschen for Open Campus. Photos courtesy of Johnny Pippins and Fortepan Iowa.
out in August 2022, he decided not to apply again until he had a firm release date.

Things changed in March. A representative of the Prison Review Board reached out to Nieman asking whether Pippins would still be able to enroll in the Iowa program.

That was a first for Nieman. In a decade of working on clemency petitions, he said he’s never had the board ask for additional information.

But Pippins’s case is unusual, Nieman added. “Johnny has done things that would be amazing accomplishments for somebody on the outside, but that on the inside are nearly impossible.”

Pippins reached out to the sociology department at University of Iowa, which expedited a new application for this fall.

With a Ph.D. acceptance in hand, Pippins then submitted a notarized affidavit to the review board attesting that he intended to enroll in graduate school if he was released. Pippins said he was more than happy to sign something promising that “you’re gonna go live your dream.”

That dream is to become a professor. Earning his Ph.D. will take years, even if he finishes more quickly than the average of nearly a decade for a social science degree.

Pippins was convicted of murder and other charges in Illinois and Iowa in 1997 after he and several others embarked on a summer robbery spree in the Quad Cities, four towns that straddle the border of the two states. During a robbery, someone was killed when Pippins shot a lock off a door. He ended up with consecutive sentences in Iowa and Illinois and was expected to serve nearly 30 years behind bars.

Pippins remained in Iowa for the majority of his sentence through an interstate compact, an agreement that allows people in prison to relocate and serve their sentence in another state.

Pippins plans to tour the University of Iowa campus soon. But first, he plans to enjoy a meal of surf and turf at Red Lobster and catch up with friends and family on the new cell phone his daughter bought him.

He also has another milestone to look forward to: His daughter is getting married in September. He had hoped to earn some money to give her a wedding gift, but she told him that the most important thing to her was that he would be there to walk her down the aisle.

This story was co-published with WBEZ Chicago.

How a new law will help incarcerated Coloradans reduce their sentence through a college education

BY CHARLOTTE WEST
APRIL 27, 2023

On April 12, Colorado Governor Jared Polis signed House Bill 1037 into law.

When the law goes into effect in August, incarcerated people convicted of nonviolent offenses in Colorado can gain one year of “earned time” — time off their sentences or period of parole — for completing an associate or bachelor’s degree, 18 months for a master’s degree, two years for a doctoral degree, and six months for a credential or certificate that requires at least 30 credits.

The number of prison education programs in Colorado and the United States is expected to grow in the next few years with the return of Pell Grants — the federal financial aid for low-income students — for people in prison as of July 1. Pell Grants were eliminated for people in prison with the 1994 federal crime bill. Out of a prison population of around 16,000, only 32 women and 87 men in the Colorado Department of Corrections were enrolled in formal college classes at the end of 2022, according to data Open Campus obtained in a records request.

The bill’s primary sponsor is Rep. Matthew Martinez, a Monte Vista Democrat, who is serving his first term in the Colorado house. The goal of the bill, he said, is to incentivize incarcerated people or people who are on probation to pursue education. The bill won’t be retroactive and will only apply to those who earn degrees or certificates going forward.

Charlotte West recently talked with Martinez about the new law he sponsored.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you make the leap from higher education to the Colorado state legislature?

I worked in higher education for about 9½ years before I came [to the legislature]. I originally started at Adams State University running their veterans program, and that was actually my first dive into the incarcerated population.

Can you talk a little bit about how you drew on your background in prison education to craft House Bill 1037 and give a brief overview of what the bill entails?

I really tailored this off of my previous work, specifically with the prison education program. Other states have done some version of this. California has a very similar program to this where
they grant six months off a sentence for all incarcerated students per degree that they earn. When I started in the legislature, I [thought] the timing is right if I do it this session, especially with the onset of Pell Grants coming back for incarcerated students in July. I crafted this legislation off of California.

Associate and bachelor's degrees are potentially available through existing programs with state and federal funding. So does the bill mean that there's talk of expanding access to graduate programs in Colorado prisons? [Editor's note: Pell Grants can only be used for first-time undergraduate degrees. Adams State currently offers one of the only master's programs in prison via correspondence, but it's only available to students who are able to self-pay.)

I totally want expansion ... But I think that this sets the ground level and says that this can be done. Also crafted in the bill is the cost savings that this is going to generate since we're not incarcerating as many people. I didn't really want that to go back into the general fund. I was like, 'how do we craft this to make sure that it's still beneficial to this population?' So one amendment that got added on in the senate, with my senate sponsor, Sen. Julie Gonzales, who has been an amazing advocate for this population for many years, is to take all of that cost savings and give it directly to the higher educational institutions that are offering these classes so that way they can continue to expand.

One of the criticisms of this bill is that only people who've been convicted of nonviolent offenses are eligible. Can you talk a little bit about that? Is this the stepping stone to expand earned time opportunities to more people in the future?

So in regards to that, I really wanted to take a step towards this. Something I've always wanted to do [is] when we push this to do a state study and show its effectiveness. Again with onset of Pell and all the reporting that the institutions are going to have to do, the data is going to be readily available. I think that with these nonviolent offenses, you're talking a lot shorter sentences, and you're going to see that return on investment really, really quickly, especially including the parole and probation piece.

What do you see as the role of state legislatures in expanding prison education, particularly as it relates to Pell coming back?

We're primed. We're in a position that we haven't been since the '90s. And we're able to actually address this issue and have multiple delivery formats at our fingertips to really be able to do true rehabilitation for the students.

Do you have any sense of how many people will actually be able to take advantage of the programs that would allow them to earn time off?

It's hard to say. We tried to do as much fiscal analysis as we could on that but because it's a brand new thing, and we haven't had anything in comparison in 30 years, it was a little bit difficult. When I was at Adams State, I used to say to my staff that every student that has not been able to take courses for the last 30 years but wanted to is now potentially eligible.

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MAY 10, 2023

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

Inside the frustrating, error-ridden, expensive world of prison messaging

Prison messaging apps are a lifeline—until they break.

For over two weeks, every time I tried to log onto GettingOut, I got the same error message:

“We’re sorry, but something went wrong. We’ve been notified about this issue and we’ll take a look at it shortly.”

As an education reporter covering prisons, I use the messaging app primarily to communicate with incarcerated writers and sources. I talk to people in multiple facilities across several states on a fairly regular basis. Suddenly, to all of them, it seemed like I had just disappeared. I got emails from people inside via their outside contacts asking if I was ok. I was no longer on their contact lists, and all of our messages were suddenly gone.

The somewhat ironically named GettingOut is used by corrections departments in states including California, North Carolina, Oregon, Maryland, and Ohio. The company is a subsidiary of Viapath, a prison tech company formerly known as Global Tel Link (GTL). Together, Viapath and its biggest competitor, Securus, dominate more than 80% of the prison e-messaging market, according to a recent report from the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI). Prison telecom is an estimated billion dollar industry.

When I couldn’t log onto the app, I tried to go through regular customer service channels, calling Viapath’s 1-800 number several times, usually to find out that the option to speak with a human had been disabled. At least six emails went unanswered.

Several other reporters had experienced the same disappearing account phenomenon, and it wasn’t until we played the journalist card that we got some answers from the company. Several executives agreed to meet with me last week. Matt Caesar, chief strategy officer at Viapath, was the only one who answered a few questions on the record. (The night before my meeting, my account and its content were restored).

It turned out that the glitch was due to “an unexpected issue during a system conversion from a prior provider to GettingOut” that affected around less than 1% of users, a Viapath spokesperson said in an email. The company declined to share the total number of users, but from previous reporting earlier this year we know that the company has deployed around 500,000 tablets in prisons.

Here’s the thing: Everyone has crappy customer service stories to tell, whether it’s an airline, a bank, or calling the Education Department about student loans. That’s not really what this story is about.
For people inside, it’s about cutting off a lifeline to the outside world, even just temporarily. And the fact that they have few options when something goes wrong. As College Inside contributor Lyle C. May — who was on the other end of the app issues — put it, “I’m in prison. I have no recourse.”

For me, it was annoying that I couldn’t log onto my account and spent several hours trying to fix the problem. But I had other communications channels, and I could spend time on it as part of my work day. I wasn’t trying to send a goodnight message to my partner or look at photos of my kids.

I asked Lyle about this. “Incarcerated people don’t have the luxury of picking and choosing how to communicate,” he said. “Speed and certainty of the contact are the two top concerns.”

Lyle, who is incarcerated in North Carolina, relies on his tablet to communicate with various editors as well as the academic adviser for his college program. While his adviser and I were the only two contacts that disappeared in this glitch, such problems imperil his professional life: We thought a short story (which, fittingly, was about the educational content offered on Viapath tablets) he had submitted to me was gone forever.

This kind of inconsistency of prison tech also makes getting a degree inside even more fraught. Losing contact with his academic adviser means that Lyle can’t quickly resolve issues related to completing his degree program, which is already a fraught process.

Lyle didn’t have another way to contact customer service or tech support. There’s an app on his tablet where he’s supposed to be able to submit support requests, but there’s no way to send a message, he said.

Lyle isn’t the only person I talk to inside who has had these tech issues. In Ohio, Heather Jarvis said that because the state is in the process of converting from Securus to Viapath, there’s a technician who is holding open hours for in-person support while they work out the kinks, but “the line is insane.”

So what did Viapath have to say about the challenges of customer support inside?

“[In each of the facilities, there’s] different methods that an incarcerated individual has to request a refund or contact our support,” Caesar said during our meeting. “And that’s generally through the tablet.”

**Paying to be monitored and recorded**

Once my account was finally restored, Lyle and I went back and forth about this issue for a few days. I sent him 45 messages at $0.25 each for a total of $11.25, while Lyle estimated he spent about 120 minutes for another $12. So all in all, we paid Viapath $12.40 to discuss its business model.

(To put this in context, Lyle says that most people in North Carolina prisons make between $4.00 and $1 a day. Lyle pays $15 for a package of 1,500 minutes — or around $0.01 a minute — of messaging and entertainment. If people can’t afford to buy a package, they pay $.03 a minute.)

There are practical implications too. Because incarcerated people don’t have something like Google Drive to back up their content, they often pay for messaging as a way to store their writing. The good news? Viapath assured me that no users lost their data with the glitch that I experienced last week and that data is backed up and restored.

That brings me to another set of issues that I saw this past week: privacy and information retention. The same companies that provide the messaging also provide phone services. As PPI put it, “there are...grave privacy concerns when one company controls all communications channels to which incarcerated people have access.”

The reason all that data is stored is a reminder that everything said or written over prison communication channels is being recorded. I asked Caesar about this in our meeting, but he agreed to answer only in writing. But generally, he said, the company’s retention policies vary based on the facility — lasting potentially multiple years — and their contracts with corrections agencies. And, the company retains everything from phone calls to videos — “anything we’re recording and monitoring for them,” he said.

This raises some important questions that educators will have to contend with as the tech landscape in prison continues to evolve. While people in prison have never had privacy when making a phone call, advances in technology allow an even greater degree of surveillance of incarcerated people — and their contacts on the outside — than ever before.

Colleges working in this space are starting to weigh issues of student privacy with ease and speed of communication. Should messaging systems only be used to send mundane information? Who is responsible for providing tech support if a student sends an assignment that suddenly disappears? If a student submits an essay on their tablet, could the content later be used against them?

All of these issues become especially relevant as prison tech companies continue to position themselves as providers of educational content — and in some cases education itself.

Lyle had some thoughts about this. Educators and others on the outside are naive if they think that they aren’t being censored or they have any privacy when communicating with incarcerated people on digital platforms, he said. And practicality trumps privacy, because that doesn’t really exist in prison anyway.

“The problem with colleges waffling about that privacy is in thinking their flexibility extends to the incarcerated,” he said. “It does not. Incarcerated students have to communicate...by any means available, not necessarily the means they want.”

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Native Hawaiians are overrepresented in prisons. Here’s how cultural education could help.

At her home in Honolulu, Alisha Kaluhiokalani poses in front of a poster commemorating the death of her father Montgomery “Buttons” Kaluhiokalani, who was one of the top young surfers in the United States in the 1970s. Photo: Charlotte West/Open Campus.

Alisha Kaluhiokalani heard a mellow, hollow sound. “What was that?” she whispered to herself.

She looked across the yard and saw a prison staff member playing the ukulele.

“You play?” he asked.

She nodded, taking the instrument and starting to strum. She sang “I Kona,” a traditional Hawaiian song loved by her father.

“You want to continue to play that?” the man asked her.

“Yes,” she said.

“Stay out of lock.”

So she did.

It was the ukulele, a Hawaiian language class, and her encounter with the man in the yard more than 20 years ago that changed Kaluhiokalani’s educational trajectory.

‘Not knowing who you are’

Native Hawaiians like Kaluhiokalani are disproportionately locked up in the Hawaii criminal justice system, making up only 20% of the general population but 40% of people in prison. Similar imbalances are true for Indigenous people across the country.

Among other states with significant overrepresentation of Indigenous people are Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Utah, according to a recent report by the nonprofit Prison Policy Initiative. Native women in particular have higher incarceration rates than the general population.

Native Hawaiians are more likely to struggle with addiction, drop out of school and go to prison. Many feel alienated from Western education systems, Kaluhiokalani said, and that their cultural identity has been suppressed in the wake of historical losses of land and language.
“They call that the ‘eha … the hurt, and not knowing who you are,” she said.

That was something she has struggled with personally. She has often felt like a screw up given the life she has lived, she said. There have been times in her life when she had a hard time seeing herself as anything other than an addict or a prisoner.

Kaluhiokalani became pregnant with her first child at 17. She finished her GED before the baby was born by taking classes at night. Her boyfriend, Jacob, enlisted in the National Guard, and over the next few years they had three more children. During that time, they both struggled with addiction and cycled in and out of jail. She went to prison for the first time on drug-related charges at the age of 23.

In prison, shortly after that first year in solitary, Kaluhiokalani enrolled in her first college class, Hawaiian 101.

“That was a tipping point,” she said.

Being able to learn her language taught her about her identity, helped her see that there was a place for her in higher education. After that, she started working in the prison’s education department and created informal Hawaiian culture classes for her peers.

“I full-force dedicated myself to my culture, to helping people,” Kaluhiokalani said.

All higher education in prison has shown to reduce recidivism, but incorporating culture into college programs can empower incarcerated Native Hawaiians in different ways, said Ardis Eschenberg, chancellor of Windward Community College.

“Pushing back on the narratives of colonization and racism through Hawaiian studies,” she said, “fights the very systems that have led to our unjust incarceration outcomes and underscores the agency and value of our students in education, community and society.”

Despite the benefits, there are few college programs in the United States that specifically target Indigenous people in prison. Windward Community College’s Pu’uhonua program is an exception. It’s the only higher education institution in Hawaii offering culturally focused classes in prison, and one of only two offering degree programs.

Last fall, the college started an associate’s degree in Hawaiian studies at Halawa Correctional Facility, a medium-security men’s prison. The college was selected for a federal program known as Second Chance Pell, which has provided federal financial aid to people in prison on a pilot basis since 2015.

Eschenberg said that their focus on cultural education for incarcerated Indigenous students is part of Windward’s mission as a Native Hawaiian-serving institution. Almost 43% of their students on campus are Native Hawaiian, the highest in the University of Hawaii system.

For Native Hawaiians, learning about their culture is “validating them in a society where so much of Hawaiian existence has been invalidated in history,” Eschenberg said. And cultural education, she adds, benefits everyone.

“There’s robust research that shows that even outside of Native Hawaiian studies, ethnic studies courses in general helped to build resilience and success for students.”

Windward has also offered a psycho-social developmental studies certificate with coursework in sociology, psychology, and social work at the women’s prison since 2016. They offer Hawaiian studies classes as electives, and focus on the Hawaiian context for the other coursework, Eschenberg said.

In addition, Windward faculty teach Hawaiian music-related coursework, such as ukulele and slack-key guitar, at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility. The students earn both high school and college credit.
The college’s prison education program has primarily been funded by a five-year U.S. Education Department grant for Native Hawaiian-serving institutions that runs out this year. The expansion of Pell Grant eligibility for people in prison in July will help sustain the Pu‘uhonua program going forward. Eschenberg said that Pell dollars will help pay for instructor salaries for courses taught inside, but there are still costs not covered by federal financial aid.

Eschenberg had hoped that the Hawaii Legislature would approve a bill appropriating state funding for staff positions, such as academic counselors and coordinators, to support the Pu‘uhonua program because those positions aren’t covered by Pell Grants. The bill stalled in the Legislature in April. Eschenberg said she’s currently applying for two federal grants to secure the necessary funding to keep the program running.

Elsewhere, other college-in-prison programs also have started to provide more opportunities for people to focus on their own cultures. In California, San Francisco State University last year created an ethnic studies certificate in state juvenile facilities. Portland State University’s prison education program also recently received a national grant to offer humanities courses focused on identity, including Indigenous Nations Studies, at Oregon’s only women’s prison.

While more programs in the United States are offering ethnic studies classes, few of those courses focus on Native people. Full degrees like Windward’s Hawaiian studies program specifically focused on Indigenous language and culture are even rarer, said Mneesha Gellman, political scientist and director of the Emerson Prison Initiative, which offers a bachelor’s degree in Massachusetts. Gellman’s research focuses on Indigenous language access and education.

Much of the cultural learning that currently occurs in prisons is informal education offered through community groups, prison arts organizations, or classes organized by incarcerated people. Those are valuable, Gellman said, but more academic programs should incorporate culturally relevant curriculum into traditional degree pathways.

Having culturally relevant content makes higher education in general more relatable to Indigenous students, she added, so they are more likely to go after a degree in the first place. And that in turn helps them get the credentials they need to get jobs when they leave prison.

A wake-up call

While Kaluhiokalani’s path through education has had plenty of detours, a connection to her culture has resonated throughout. When she thinks about her elementary school years, she remembers the kupuna – Native Hawaiian elders – who would visit her school to share their cultural knowledge.

“Everything that I learned, I held on to ... I loved to sing, play the ukulele, and dance hula.”

Kaluhiokalani grew up in Honolulu less than a mile from Waikiki beach, where she learned to surf.

She associates Waikiki with her father, Montgomery “Buttons” Kaluhiokalani, who was one of the top young surfers in the United States in the 1970s. As a young teenager, she would hang out with him at the beach and smoke pot. Buttons, too, struggled with addiction throughout his life.

“I was a surfer, party animal, like my dad,” she said.

Kaluhiokalani was in and out of prison for most of her 20s and early 30s. Her father’s death in 2013 was a wake-up call, she said, for her to do things differently when she got out.

In 2017, Kaluhiokalani was released for the last time. A few years later, she ran into a woman she had been incarcerated with who encouraged her to enroll in college. She immediately signed up at Windward when she found out there was free tuition for Native Hawaiians and she could pursue an associate’s degree in Hawaiian studies. She wanted to use what she learned in her classes to use Native Hawaiian practices to help others in the criminal justice system.

The Hawaiian language class, and the ukulele in the prison yard, started Kaluhiokalani on a 20-year journey. She earned an associate’s degree last year from Windward and then, this month, she crossed the stage to receive her bachelor’s degree in social work from the University of Hawaii Manoa.

The associate in arts degree in Hawaiian Studies that Alisha Kaluhiokalani earned from Windward Community College. Photo: Charlotte West/Open Campus.
‘I know how to walk the walk’ — the power of hiring a formerly incarcerated student

By Charlotte West

Donnie Veal, 51, doesn’t fit the profile of a typical student at University of California Santa Cruz. In fact, he served more time in prison than many undergraduates have been alive.

Veal has had to get used to his professors questioning whether he’s a student and his classmates mistaking him for the professor or a college staff member. “Sometimes people don’t know how to approach,” he said. “Students will talk to me as if I have some type of power over them or whatever. And it’s just like, ‘Nah, we’re in the same boat. I’m trying to figure this out, just like you.’”

But that confusion will soon be cleared up as Veal graduates with a degree in sociology from UC Santa Cruz in June and starts a new job at Cabrillo College. He’ll be the program coordinator of Rising Scholars, a support program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. His life experience was why he was hired for the job, he said. Veal spent 23 years in prison, and got out in 2019.

Colleges are well placed to hire formerly incarcerated graduates like Veal, Rebecca Villarreal and Basia Skudrzyk argue in a recent op-ed. As some of the largest employers across the country, colleges and universities can provide job opportunities for formerly incarcerated students in addition to educating them. For example, UConn Health, the medical system under University of Connecticut, has committed to filling 5% of its entry level positions over the next three years with formerly incarcerated people.

“They have a unique capacity not only to educate individuals currently in the criminal justice system but also to tap a new source of talent to enrich their community,” Villarreal, of Jobs for the Future, and Skudzyk, of Prison to Professionals, write.

Charlotte West sat down with Veal to talk about his educational journey from prison to college, the expertise that formerly incarcerated people bring to higher education, and what’s top of mind as he graduates and transitions into his new job. (Veal’s responses have been lightly edited for clarity.)

How did your education journey in prison get started?

I started taking some correspondence courses with Coastline [Community College] somewhere around 2010. I initially started just to give myself something to do. But I really didn’t get that college thing ignited inside of me until I took a public speaking course from Hartnell College. I researched the topic of recidivism because I didn’t want to come back to prison once I got out. And in the process of my research, I learned that the higher I go in education, the less chance I have of coming back to prison.

What was it like taking courses via correspondence?

The correspondence courses were challenging because there were courses or things that I didn’t know how to decipher. Some of the things were so foreign to me, I didn’t have anybody to fall back on to help explain to me...
what they wanted in a prompt, or even just what some of the readings were discussing. I would have to call home sometimes, and maybe ask people to look stuff up and I would have to wait for them to print things out and send it into the prison.

Can you talk about your transition to community college?

When I first started doing correspondence courses, I was in Salinas Valley State Prison. Then Hartnell started sending professors in. Once they started doing that, I was trying to burn the candle at both ends, taking correspondence courses with Coastline and taking in-person courses with Hartnell, just trying to expedite the process, getting as many units as I could to get myself closer to that associate’s. And while I was in the middle of school, my appeal was granted. I was released from prison. My brother offered me a proposition. He said, ‘Look, I’ll give you a place to live. I provide you with food. The only thing I want you to do is go to school.’

I was thinking I needed to get some form of degree ASAP to help me in the world. I left Salinas Valley State Prison on October 11, 2019. I enrolled in Cabrillo in January 2020. And then we were on COVID lockdown so everything went online.

What was it like being on a college campus?

As I was in Cabrillo and going to school, adjusting to going from a level-four prison institution to a college campus, everything that had been hardwired in me in prison — don’t go in crowds, or if you’re in a crowd, watch people’s hands — didn’t apply. I had to consciously remind myself, ‘You’re okay. You don’t have to put your back to the wall.’ I still have to catch myself sometimes.

In prison, if you violated my personal space, you would get a reaction and your reaction would determine how far we went from there. But in a college setting, I have to remember that people aren’t violating personal space because they’re trying to test you, they are simply oblivious. So I can’t be giving people death stares every time they bump into me.

Can you talk about the transition from Cabrillo to UC Santa Cruz?

When I came to UC Santa Cruz, I felt a little lost, I’m not gonna lie. I was blown away by just the sheer size of this place. There are no flat surfaces at UC Santa Cruz. Everything is hilly. You cannot see across the campus to any building, unless you’re right next to it. It was very overwhelming, it would have been very easy for me to become isolated here. As an older reentry student, once we set our sights on something, we still tend to keep moving through adversity. But there were some mental challenges and trying to figure out if I belonged at the UC system. Cabrillo College was more hands-on, you can always talk to somebody anytime you need to — whereas here, you make a career center appointment and it’s like two months away.

What work are you doing with Underground Scholars at UC Santa Cruz and how are you supporting other system-impacted students?

The Underground Scholars program really promotes hiring and dealing with people from within. That’s why their student and staff positions are filled by people that have been justice-impacted. So when the director Joshua Solis found me and listened to my story, he was like, ‘Yo, bro, we have a spot for you.’

I started working with policy analysis and then they offered me another position as the outreach coordinator. With my story, it’s a lot easier for me to pull people into our college system than it would be for anybody else. Because I know how to walk the walk. I have examples of these trials by fire and coming out the other end.

How did you end up with a job offer from Cabrillo College, doing work that builds on what you’re doing now?

Joshua forwarded me an email with the position for being a program coordinator for the Rising Scholars program, which also caters to system impacted students. I looked at the position initially, and just thought it’ll go to someone with more education or a fancy résumé. I thought that I don’t even stand a chance.
I wanted to go for the position, I just didn’t have the confidence. I had a conversation with my brother. And he told me to send him the job description. And he went over it and he says, ‘I don’t know why you wouldn’t be the perfect fit for this position. So go for it.’

I applied for the job at Cabrillo College and it was a panel. It wasn’t just a supervisor, one on one. There were five people shooting questions. I thought I blew the interview. And the next thing you know, at an event, the director pulled me to the side and said, ‘We were supposed to be starting the second round of interviews, but we’ve decided to cancel all the interviews and we want to move forward with you.’

I’ve gone from prison to community college, to university, and from university straight into my career. And I really believe that those are just some of the indicators that I am, in fact, on the right path.

I recently read an article about the fact that colleges should not only be educating incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, they should also be hiring them. I’d love to hear your take on that as someone now working in higher education.

This is a student population that is largely ignored — not just in education, but in life. Since colleges are supposed to be forward thinkers, I think it’s important that colleges lead by example and hire those same people. They should lead in as an example of giving people that are reentering society chances of having a normal life upon post release. I think that colleges have a huge responsibility.

Do you think there’s a danger of system-impacted folks becoming sort of pigeonholed into just working with reentry programs?

I don’t know if anybody else would have wanted to take a chance on me. I enjoy the work and I really feel good about staying within that realm, but there may be some people who think that they would like to explore some different parts of life and I think that they should definitely have that opportunity. I have so many more levels of myself than just prison.

Your start date at Cabrillo got pushed back because of a delay in your background check. What’s going on with that?

We’re still waiting on the Department of Justice. I talked to the director a couple of days ago and he was trying to reassure me that everything’s still okay. They’re just taking their time with that. In a way it kind of makes me nervous. But there’s nothing new that they don’t already know about.

I’m hopeful that it’s the DOJ taking their time and not something else going on. But I can’t help but worry that we’re going to have to jump through some extra hoops or ‘I knew it was too good to be true.’ In prison, we always prepare ourselves for the worst. A lot of the times I do have that feeling just so that if it does happen, then it’s not a blow. As a justice-impacted person, I’ve lived like that for a very long time. I know it’s kind of wrong for us to live like that on a day-to-day basis, but sometimes that’s just the best way for me to prepare myself for any bad news that may come about.

As you look towards graduation next month, what does your degree mean to you?

Society likes to set up these measuring sticks. And that piece of paper to me is one less thing that society can look at me and say, ‘We would put you in this position if you had this piece of paper to go along with it.’

That piece of paper signifies more opportunities, more independence, being able to be self-sufficient, and even helpful to family members. When you’re incarcerated, you’re basically a dependent to all those people that love you and support you. And as a man, sometimes those things can make you feel less than. I hated having to call people and be like, ‘Can you send me money?’ The independence and being able to give back, those are some of the important things that that piece of paper means to me.

News & views

- As California closes three more prisons and downsizes six others, some prisoners are worried about the future of their education, Adam Echelman writes for our partner, CalMatters. For more than 1,500 prisoners who attend college in these shuttering facilities, closures mean they could transfer to a new prison where the courses may not line up. And as the prisons close down, at least three community colleges stand to lose more than 10 percent of their student enrollment, collectively.

- California Governor Gavin Newsom has proposed $360.6 million in his revised state budget to demolish an 110,000 square foot warehouse currently used by the Prison Industry Authority and remodel it into a new education and vocational center at San Quentin State Prison, the oldest prison in California. In March, Newsom announced that the prison, which currently houses the state’s death row, will be transformed into a rehabilitative facility focused on education and training by 2025. People on death row will eventually be transferred to other prisons across the state.

- A man in a Delaware prison who tried to boycott the use of prison tablets has been stripped of his prison job and confined to a two-person cell for 22.5 hours per day, Xerxes Wilson reported for the Delaware News Journal in April. David Holloman organized fellow prisoners to boycott the tablets, he told Wilson. He also filed a lawsuit in federal court. “It boils down to a consumer complaint,” Holloman said. “I was stripped of everything… I am being punished and retaliated against for exercising my First Amendment rights.”
Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.

A look at education inside Washington prisons

BY CHARLOTTE WEST AND TOMAS KEEN

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

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A look at education inside Washington prisons

This week we’re zooming in on one state — Washington — to show what’s at stake as Pell funding for incarcerated students returns next month. A look at the Evergreen State demonstrates just how complicated the new prison education landscape can be.

That’s something Juan Hernandez knows all too well. Over the last five years he has been piecing together his education one class at a time, starting at the Washington State Reformatory. “Starting school is what helped me turn my life around,” Hernandez said.

Evergreen State College operates the Sustainability in Prisons Project, which offers education on a variety of science topics, in 12 prisons in Washington State. Women at the prison in Gig Harbor tend to beehives. Photo: Charlotte West/Open Campus.

“Starting school is what helped me turn my life around,” Hernandez said.

Evergreen State College operates the Sustainability in Prisons Project, which offers education on a variety of science topics, in 12 prisons in Washington State. Women at the prison in Gig Harbor tend to beehives. Photo: Charlotte West/Open Campus.

The classroom is where I finally found my voice and felt something close to freedom.”

Since getting on a waiting list for college after he transferred to another facility in 2020, he’s been offered only four classes. He now needs just one more class to finish his associate’s: a math course that he hopes to finish this fall.

He felt like another opportunity was opening when he learned that Pell funding would once again be available to incarcerated people this July for the first time in 30 years.

“I started to dream of going on to earn a bachelor’s,” he said.

But when word trickled in that Pell-funded prison education in Washington state wouldn’t be implemented until July 2024, “it felt like a gut punch.”

Hernandez has just four years left on a 20-year sentence. “Things in prison always take longer,” he said. “At this point, I don’t think a program will start up in time for me to get a BA.”

Incarcerated students in Washington like Hernandez are once again eligible for Pell Grants starting next month, but it will likely take a year before most people in the state can take advantage of the federal aid. Nationally, there are around 700,000 people in prison who will be eligible as of July 1, according to the federal Education Department.

Washington is not unique as it struggles to figure out how to use Pell dollars to expand access to higher education to the 13,000 people confined in its state prisons. Corrections officials, many of whom have limited experience with higher education, are entering into new territory as they take on the role of approving and overseeing Pell-eligible prison education programs.

As this look at Washington shows, the return of Pell brings welcome funding streams but also involves new actors with limited experience with prison education. Corrections officials have to...
sort out new policies and procedures, state laws have to be amended, and colleges have to figure out what kind of programs they want to offer and whether students are even interested in them. Long-standing programs that have previously operated independently also have to find their new place in all of this.

As we've previously reported, expanded Pell eligibility on July 1 doesn't mean everyone in prison will immediately have access to higher education. And for students like Hernandez who are hoping to complete their education before they get out, delays can have real consequences.

'Just a little bit longer'

Whether or not a college decides to offer a prison education program depends on a number of factors ranging from faculty interest to geographic proximity to facilities. Some colleges have run prison education programs for years, while others don't have any experience at all. Even programs that have been operating for decades will have to adjust to the new federal rules for Pell funding.

That's a factor the Washington State Department of Corrections took into consideration when they thought about how to roll out new programs. “We have a lot of existing programs now running. But there are facilities where this will be brand new and we want to be mindful of the student experience,” said Kristen Morgan, education services administrator for the department.

The state pushed back implementing more Pell programs for a year because it has to wait for the legislature to make a change in how prison education is paid for. (The state’s three Second Chance Pell sites will continue to operate in the interim.)

“I know folks are waiting but we need just a little bit longer to get things in place,” including assessing technology needs, Morgan said.

Open Campus requested Washington’s list of colleges interested in receiving priority consideration for Pell program approval. Nine community colleges, all of which are currently operating in or have previously offered courses in state prisons, submitted requests at the end of March. Seattle Central College, for example, noted it was interested in prison education because one-third of people leaving Washington prisons each year are released within a 2-mile radius of its Capitol Hill campus.

One-third of people leaving Washington prisons each year are released within a 2-mile radius of Seattle Central College’s Capitol Hill campus near downtown Seattle.

The college previously operated as a Second Chance Pell site in partnership with the nonprofit University Beyond Bars, which ended its program in 2021. Seattle Central proposed using Pell funding to allow students to enroll in its self-paced, print-based degree programs offered via correspondence. They would target students who would otherwise lack access to education programs or those on a waitlist.

The Second Chance Pell pilot program was launched in 2016 under the Obama administration in order to pave the way for broader access to Pell Grants for people in prison. Incarcerated students’ eligibility for federal financial aid was eliminated with the 1994 crime bill. Around 200 colleges around the country were selected to offer Pell-eligible programs since the program started.

Expanding bachelor’s programs

While the community colleges already have a strong presence in prisons, Morgan said the state is looking at ways to use Pell funding to expand access to bachelor’s programs. Through its contract with the state community college system, the department currently offers 8 direct transfer degrees, which offer pathways to a four-year college, and 14 associate’s of applied science. In 2022, 461 incarcerated students in Washington earned postsecondary associate degrees and certificates.

People incarcerated at the women’s prison in Gig Harbor can pursue a bachelor’s through the University of Puget Sound and the nonprofit Freedom Education Project Puget Sound, also known as FEPPS. Currently the only opportunity to earn a four-year

The Washington State Reformatory shut down in October 2021. The closure interrupted the education of 50 incarcerated students who were transferred to other state prisons. Photo: Charlotte West/Open Campus.
degree in men’s prisons is a bachelor’s of applied science at Coyote Ridge in eastern Washington.

Five four-year institutions, including two private colleges, submitted requests for consideration. Many of those focused on creating transfer programs in collaboration with community colleges. Western Washington University, for instance, proposed a bachelor of arts in multidisciplinary studies with a focus on culture and communication at Clallam Bay Corrections Center, in partnership with Peninsula College. The only college in eastern Washington that expressed interest was Whitman College.

The public institution with the most experience operating prison education programs is Evergreen State College in Olympia. In 2022, the legislature allocated $600,000 to the college to “develop and expand” its prison education program. In addition, over 125 faculty, staff, and administrators have signed a letter supporting expansion of education and reentry services for currently and previously incarcerated students.

Evergreen also expressed interest in developing bachelor’s degree pathways for incarcerated students, starting with two men’s prisons. However, given the new timeline for Pell implementation, the college will focus on both non-credit courses or workshops and courses for college credit without Pell funding during the 2023-2024 academic year, spokesperson Kelly Von Holtz said.

The college noted that its “upside-down degree” would serve incarcerated students well because it allows students who have earned applied associate’s degrees to transfer their credits and earn a bachelor’s degree. In many cases, four-year colleges will not count technical courses towards their degree.

Evergreen’s program requires students to take at least 32 credits of liberal arts coursework unrelated to their technical degree.

University of Washington Tacoma submitted a broader proposal, which included forming a development team that would work on creating its prison education program with the intent of filling in gaps and avoiding duplicating programs already provided by other colleges. UW Tacoma would initially focus on the five prisons within an hour driving distance from its campus. Much of the work would be led by several formerly incarcerated faculty.

Tanya Erzen, a professor at Puget Sound and FEPPS faculty director, said that while she’s glad that Pell will expand access, she’s concerned that some of the institutions that are now wanting to develop programs had previously expressed disinterest in prison education. “Why are you proposing a program in the prison now? Because your enrollments on campus are dipping?” she said.

She also wondered whether colleges had talked to incarcerated students about if they were even interested in the degrees that are being proposed. “From the beginning, a higher education program in prison should be going inside and asking students questions and fostering and supporting existing student leadership inside as co-creators of the program,” Erzen said.

A unique prison ecosystem

A unique aspect of the prison education ecosystem in Washington is the number of nonprofits and community-based organizations operating programs, including FEPPS. While the University of Puget Sound can apply for Pell as an eligible prison education program on behalf of the nonprofit, it’s less clear what might happen to other programs such as the Black Prisoners’ Caucus’s T.E.A.C.H. program. That program has until recently used private funding to pay for classes open to all prisoners, regardless of sentence, in three men’s prisons. The group recently lost its outside sponsoring organization.
Kimonti Carter, who founded the T.E.A.C.H. program at Clallam Bay Corrections Center in 2013, said that in its efforts to streamline education programs, the department of corrections is creating more restrictions that have the potential to suffocate privately-funded, prisoner-led programs.

“Ultimately, the DOC gets to determine who gets what in areas where we already have space,” said Carter, who was released in 2022. “The question is: are they going to ultimately create a reason to take that space from us?”

Morgan said that there is no intention to push out programs like T.E.A.C.H. or to only offer Pell-eligible programs. She did say that space is always a consideration as they make room for four-year programs. “We just don’t know how many schools are going in,” she said.

Darrell Jackson, T.E.A.C.H. co-chair at the Washington Corrections Center, wonders how the department will engage currently and formerly incarcerated students in its implementation of Pell. Like Erzen, the Puget Sound professor, he’s concerned that students’ options will be limited to only what the department of corrections wants to offer, not what students actually want.

“As for regards to Pell, my feelings are mixed,” Jackson said. “On one hand, opening access to funding is great and a step in the right direction, but I believe the process of education should always be liberatory.”

As for Hernandez, he’s anxious to start a bachelor’s program but he’s mindful that it’s better to do it right than do it quickly: “I think the slow pace of two-year degrees is mainly from poor design and few safeguards. So I hope as new programs roll out they take the time to make sure they’re quality.”

Tomas Keen is an incarcerated writer from Washington State. His work has been featured in Inquest, The News Tribune, and the Economist. He can be contacted on Securus or at tomaskeen310445@gmail.com.

Federal financial aid is returning to PA prisons. But getting a college degree inside won’t be easy.

For about two decades, a college education has been out of reach for Robert Anthony.

The former Wilkinsburg resident briefly attended what’s now Pennsylvania Western University Clarion, but he was later incarcerated at 21. Anthony, now 42, is serving a life sentence at State Correctional Institution [SCI] Rockview, in Centre County. Like most of the state’s prisons, his facility doesn’t offer college degree programs.

He could try to transfer to one that does, but he’s secured a tutoring job that he doesn’t want to lose by going elsewhere. He tried to take a course through Ohio University, but it would’ve cost him about $1,000. It’s not feasible when he earns up to 50 cents an hour for working in prison, netting about $45 to $50 a month, he said.

Anthony, who is pursuing a commutation of his sentence, wants to earn a bachelor’s degree, particularly in psychology or criminal justice. So, when he met with a counselor at SCI Rockview one April morning, he agreed to be placed on a waitlist for college-in-prison programs supported by federal Pell Grants.

For nearly 30 years, the U.S. government has barred incarcerated people from accessing these grants, which provide up to $7,395 in yearly financial aid to low-income students.
Many people in prison had relied on the aid to pay for college, given the wages they earn inside, but the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act revoked their eligibility. As a result, college opportunities in prisons – of which there were hundreds – largely vanished.

That’s changing in July. More than 700,000 incarcerated people are expected to become eligible for aid, including some of the roughly 40,000 people in Pennsylvania state prisons. Most, though, won’t be able to access a college education right away. While several colleges in the state are set to operate programs this fall, according to the Department of Corrections, others will likely crop up over the next year. Some colleges may not offer programs at all. “This will be a work in progress,” a department spokesperson said.

Even with programs and grants available, people inside may face educational challenges and barriers to access. Late last fall, about 100 people in Pennsylvania state prisons – nearly all men – were enrolled in college programs, while about 200 were waitlisted. Their choices for programs could be limited, as Pell funds often do not fully cover tuition at four-year universities. Enrolled students must learn with limited technology, restrictions on materials and facility lockdowns that can impact class schedules.

Above all, people in prison need to know that the opportunity exists, and how it works. And many don’t.

Despite the potential obstacles, expanding college programs in prison is an important undertaking. Those who participate are less likely to be reincarcerated and more likely to gain employment upon release. The benefits also extend to people serving lengthy or life sentences, who can gain enrichment and a sense of purpose.

A college education “would mean so much,” Anthony said, speaking over the phone shortly after meeting with the counselor. He’d be able to show his family, “I still did something positive. I didn’t stay down when I was knocked down. I got over it, and I achieved something great.”

“Right now? I feel great,” he said. “I feel motivated.”

When asked in May, none of the universities in Pittsburgh shared formal plans to offer Pell-funded programs in prison. The University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University offer Inside-Out programs, which allow incarcerated people to take free courses alongside outside students who come into the prison, but those do not directly lead to a degree or credential.

Lessons from the trial run

Some incarcerated people in Pennsylvania state prisons have already participated in Pell-funded college programs through a federal pilot program, the Second Chance Pell Experiment. The pilot – essentially a trial-run of the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility – began nationwide in 2015. Five universities in the state offer such programs at six state prisons.

Jy’Aire Smith-Pennick remembers hearing rumors that his prison, SCI Chester, might offer an associate’s degree program – “and it came to be,” he said. The 27-year-old is now pursuing a degree in liberal arts through Eastern University’s Pell-funded program.

“Education has opened a lot of doors for me, and it’s given me a new perspective on life. It’s really breathed some hope into me,” said Smith-Pennick, who has been incarcerated at SCI Chester for about six years. He hopes to eventually earn a doctorate after he finishes the 14 years he’s still expected to serve.

His time at Eastern has also shown him where prison education can improve. For one, Smith-Pennick said he and his peers aren’t able to use computers for their classes, meaning all of their coursework is done by hand, and they can’t easily contact their professors afterward. The state’s programs have “very limited” access to technology, according to the corrections department.

Several university administrators told PublicSource that greater access to technology would be valuable, but some said professors have found ways to navigate the gaps. Villanova University, for example, taught a coding class by having the professor copy over the students’ handwritten code onto computers back on campus. But with the expansion of Pell Grant eligibility on the horizon, Smith-Pennick said that access is essential.

The prison environment, where security is paramount, can also complicate efforts to educate students. At the University of Scranton, professors send books and print packets to SCI Dallas roughly four months in advance, as they’re unable to bring in paper materials. The prison has removed students from the program when it’s determined that they’ve engaged in misconduct.

While some university administrators acknowledged that prison operations can cause friction, several spoke positively about their relationships with the partner prisons or corrections department. Successful partnerships require mutual effort, but universities have to be flexible, creative and willing to accept that corrections departments prioritize security over education, said Kate Meloney, director of Villanova’s program at SCI Phoenix.

“Theyir main goal has to be security, and that is not going to change, and you are not going to change that. But there is a desire there to better the lives of the residents,” she said. “Most of the time, the Department of Corrections will want to work with you to make this a success.”

Going forward, Smith-Pennick wants to see some of that support trickle down to the people who staff prisons, too. He said his professors and classmates have dealt with sly remarks and a lack of buy-in from some prison staff.

“You can have the best ideas, but if the people that are in the positions of power don’t support it, and they put obstacles in your way, it’s going to be very difficult to maneuver around that. That doesn’t mean they won’t be successful. But it’ll be a long road,” he said.
What comes next

As Pell Grant eligibility expands, the corrections department will be responsible for approving and overseeing new programs. In its oversight role, the department plans to track the progress and outcomes of enrolled students, wrote Maria Bivens, a department spokesperson, in an email.

The department will need to assess whether the prison education programs have faculty with “substantially similar” credentials to those teaching other programs on campus; whether students can generally continue their education at the university upon release; and whether the provided academic and career advising is largely comparable to that offered on campus.

So far, several community colleges and universities have expressed interest in offering associate’s or bachelor’s degrees, Bivens said, though she did not identify the institutions.

Interested universities may face another hurdle: cost. Pell Grants often do not fully cover tuition at four-year universities, and incarcerated people in Pennsylvania are ineligible for state financial aid. To offer accessible programs, these universities will likely need to figure out how to afford them. At Pitt, where in-state tuition totaled $19,760 this academic year, Pell funds alone would leave a gap of $12,865 per student.

The Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, which offers a certificate program at SCI Muncy and Mahanoy through Second Chance Pell, is facing a similar challenge.

“Our tuition is set where it is, and we’ll have to find a way to close that gap if we are going to continue to run this program,” said James Brown, dean of Commonwealth’s College of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. “Ideally, it’s my hope that the lawmakers and the decision-makers in Pennsylvania will see that this is a worthwhile investment.”

In May, the spokesperson with Pennsylvania’s corrections department said that it’s “still working through how the PA DOC can support the policy change that will allow incarcerated individuals to receive state funding.” As of last April, two states have repealed statewide bans on financial aid.

Providing a ‘lifeline’

Meloney, at Villanova, is hopeful that the expansion will allow the university to grow its course offerings and serve more students. Villanova has offered college inside since 1972, having managed to fund its programs after the crime bill’s passage. In the last 50 years, about 100 students have graduated from the university with a certificate or bachelor’s degree in liberal arts.

Larry Stromberg, who’s incarcerated at SCI Phoenix, hopes to join the alumni network. He’s wanted to enroll in the program for years, but as of mid-May, he hadn’t yet passed the university’s entrance exam. In the meantime, Stromberg, 57, enrolled in a certificate program in theological education and completed a course at Temple University.

Education provides people in prison with a lifeline and vision for the future, Stromberg said. Now, thousands of people in the state like him await greater access.

“I have a fighting spirit,” Stromberg said. “I want to get in Villanova. Hopefully I’ll get the opportunity, and I’ll pass the test.”

Emma Folts covers higher education at PublicSource, in partnership with Open Campus. She can be reached at emma@publicsource.org. Charlotte West contributed reporting.

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, and career and technical education.

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)

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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.

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