We’ve been asking the same question about prison tech training for 50 years

A slight man wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a suit with a pocket square gestures as he stands before a group of men in blue jumpsuits. They listen attentively. A guard tower and chain link fence loom in the background.

"He offered these Arizona State Prison inmates a chance to escape from the past," the text below the photo reads. "Could there be a future in computer programming for prisoners?"

The photo is from an ad in Scientific American that’s more than 50 years old.

Yes, 50 years. Not much has changed in conversations about prisons, education, and technology since then.

The benefits of tech training in prison were already known in 1970. People are less likely to return to prison if they have marketable skills that lead to jobs in high-demand fields with livable wages. But despite the promise of such programs, the pitfalls also remain the same: They can be costly; they can be difficult to scale; and they are subject to the whims of tech-averse prison officials.

While the pandemic helped make technology like tablets more common in prison, perceived security risks often trump opportunities for learning and rehabilitation. And as much as technological advances have allowed more wide-scale access to tablets (some of which come with high fees), they can just as easily be taken away.

Learning something useful for the future

The slender man in the ad photo is Glen McDermed, a marketing executive from IBM. In 1967, he proposed training incarcerated men to program computers to meet growing industry demand as tech companies began jumping on the information processing bandwagon.

"The men would learn something useful for the future," McDermed said of the program in a quote accompanying the ad.

IBM employees taught the initial classes to 11 men. Long-term prisoners eventually took over training to make the program self-sustaining. The program offered the men "real-world" experience that saved Arizona millions of dollars in lucrative contracts between corrections and other state agencies, according to a 1970 cover story for Computerworld.

Similar programs were launched elsewhere, including Oklahoma and New York. A 1967 story in the New York
In 2023, the benefits from tech training in prison remain much the same. One big difference? Keypunch coding has been replaced by cloud computing and JavaScript. In 2022, the D.C. Jail launched an Amazon Web Services cloud certification in collaboration with APDS, an education technology company that provides tablets to people in prison, at no charge to the students.

Being able to provide the training on the APDS tablets was significant because “it’s really hard to provide any kind of STEM programming inside that leads to some sort of industry certification or a living-wage job afterward,” said Amy Lopez, former deputy director for the D.C. Department of Corrections.

Out of the 21 men who started the program, 11 completed the training. Most of those who didn’t finish chose to drop out or were transferred out of the jail, said Arti Finn, APDS co-founder and chief business development officer. The remaining men were able to take the high-stakes test to earn the Amazon credential inside the D.C. Jail, which was already set up to provide secure exams such as the GED.

Leonard Bishop, who participated in the program, hadn’t touched technology in the 17 years he served in the federal system prior to transferring to the D.C. Jail in 2018. When he first got a tablet, he said it took him a few days to figure out how to navigate through it, but then “I couldn’t put it down.”

Bishop said he was surprised by how easy it was to learn the skills he needed to earn the AWS certification. He said he looks at it as a career opportunity, rather than “just” a job. “It helps you transition back into society, especially for someone who has been gone so long,” he said. The average annual pay for an entry-level AWS cloud practitioner position is almost $90,000, according to ZipRecruiter.

The pilot program at the D.C. Jail supplemented the tablet-based curriculum with face-to-face instruction by Amazon employees and other experts and incorporated opportunities to practice job skills such as interviewing. But the hope is that the AWS curriculum, and other industry certifications, can be scaled to allow people to self-study for the certification on the APDS tablets, Finn said. It also increases access for people who aren’t able to take part in face-to-face classes due to schedule conflicts, such as with their prison job.

When APDS started talking with Amazon, one of the goals was to reach the large number of people who sit
behind bars without any access to any kind of programming, Finn added. The tablets are also equipped with video communication and messaging services, and could be used to offer online apprenticeships that create additional opportunities for hands-on learning.

Certifications by themselves are not enough

In Dec. 2022, slightly less than half of the 17,500 hours that around 1,000 residents of the Maine Dept. of Corrections spent on their tablets were used for “productive” programming, which includes free academic, vocational, life skills, and therapeutic content. The most popular courses completed were adult basic education, job search, and job skills. Source: Maine Department of Corrections

Still, some are skeptical that tablet-based training alone will translate into high-paying jobs. It’s difficult to learn on a tablet, said Jessica Hicklin, who taught herself to code in prison. She’s now the chief technology officer of Unlocked Labs, a Missouri-based nonprofit that trains incarcerated software developers.

Unlocked Labs is trying to add the Amazon cloud certification to its own training platform because the underlying knowledge is useful. But, Hicklin said, it would be difficult to break into the tech industry without direct connections to companies that engage in second-chance hiring. “I’m not sure it overcomes the stigma” of having a record, she said.

There are other criticisms of tablets, too. APDS has committed to never charging incarcerated people for its content or services. (Corrections departments or other state agencies pay for their tablets, Finn said). But other technology vendors routinely charge exorbitant prices for communications services and entertainment content. Critics also argue that they provide surveillance creep, creating more opportunities for corrections officials to monitor people in prison.

And with the prospect of higher education becoming more widely available in prison with the restoration of federal financial aid later this year,

The June 1974 issue of La Roca, the newspaper of the Arizona State Prison, focused on a coding program for people in prison.

Today, most people in Colorado prisons still don’t have tablets. And across the country, the question posed in the IBM ad back in 1970—“Could there be a future in computer programming for prisoners?”—remains unanswered.

News & views

• In what might rival the oft-cited 2014 Rand study, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy released in January a summary of the largest meta-analysis of the positive impact of prison education and workforce programs. Those programs reduce the likelihood of recidivism by almost 15 percent, professors Steven Sprick Schuster and Ben Stickle of Middle Tennessee State University found in their review of published research. They also found positive employment benefits for formerly incarcerated people, including a 7 percent increase in the likelihood of employment and an extra $131 in quarterly wages.

• The Prison Journalism Project released a database of current prison newspapers published across the country. They estimated that there were 24 operational, prisoner-run news publications in 12 states as of February 2023.
Hope vs reality as Pell returns to prisons

Hey there, I’m Ryan Moser, filling in for the indefatigable Charlotte West for this exciting issue of College Inside about the return of Pell in prisons. I started my journalism career behind bars and now I am working as a freelance writer. With thousands of incarcerated students eager to start college this year, we’ll be looking at the potential obstacles these students could face, and the role of departments of corrections and colleges in the rollout.

When I was a resident at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Florida, I learned first-hand about the gap between the hope of starting college and the reality of doing this inside a maximum-security warehouse. I met some men who couldn’t attend college because of defaulted student loans, while others couldn’t prove state residency, even though they lived in a Florida state prison.

Pell is not enough

At the opening of our virtual event in February, Stephanie Gaskill, a research fellow at Loyola University New Orleans, shared her research, “Pell is Not Enough,” on the problems with the grants not covering necessary costs like college staffing, student transcript fees, and more. “That’s the biggest issue we’re going to face, that Pell simply can’t cover the cost of programming for university administrations or incarcerated students,” Stephanie explained. “Offering college courses inside prison is labor intensive and can cost the school thousands of dollars, not to mention the expense of staffing the classes.”

She said that a lack of information is one of the biggest challenges for Pell. For example, students don’t know that they have a lifetime limit (12 semesters) of Pell eligibility. “People need to be able to make informed choices about Pell dollars,” Stephanie said. “That’s your money as a student, and that’s being used on your behalf. And so I think it’s a responsibility for those of us helping to bring programs in to make sure that people are making informed decisions.”

Give everyone a chance to redeem themselves

When Angel E. Sanchez started serving what he thought would be a 30-year sentence, he asked about education and was told that he couldn’t go to school until he had five years left on his sentence. “When I got down five years I was put on a waiting list and never got enrolled,” he said. After getting out and going to college, Angel eventually became a lawyer. Now he describes the unavailability of college to those with long sentences as one of the biggest challenges to Pell reinstatement.

Lifers encourage others to take advantage of opportunities inside. “This is a barrier that could keep the program from being a success,” Angel said.

The Pell Grant has been touted as a universal benefit that is “sentence blind and crime blind,” Angel said. Institutions
have been encouraged to offer college applications to everyone, regardless of their length of sentence, but states have a lot of leeway in how they determine who can enroll in programs.

Prison officials must help, not hurt

The gatekeepers to state institutions are typically wardens, but every staff member down to a correctional officer or a kitchen contractor can hinder facility operations or make things run smoothly. Incorporating a college program into a prison involves a lot of planning that needs support from the top, but also day-to-day support from the guards on the ground.

“We must get the administrations to buy into college inside if we want it to succeed,” said Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, a formerly incarcerated award-winning podcaster who earned his associate degree at San Quentin State Prison.

“I was fortunate,” Rahsaan said. “Not every prison is supportive of college classes, and someone shouldn’t have to hope to end up at a place like San Quentin in order to get an education.”

Rural prisons struggle to provide college-in-person programming

I’ve been in prisons that offer a lot of educational opportunities and those that don’t; the fact is, rural prisons might be the most underserved.

Last year, I had a conversation with Katie Owens-Murphy, an English professor at the University of North Alabama about what it would take to expand access to prison education in her state.

“It’s difficult to find university instructors who have the ability to drive long distances to teach,” said Katie, who also directs Inside-Out classes where North Alabama students come inside the prison to study alongside incarcerated classmates.

With hundreds of prisons sitting outside the convenience of urban areas, thousands of incarcerated people may lose out on college. For example, the University of North Alabama cannot expand into a degree program at this time because of the shortage of faculty; for that reason students won’t be able to take advantage of Pell.

However, some colleges like Auburn University arrange to have prisoners from rural institutions moved to a more central prison to provide in-person programming.

I asked Katie if Zoom could be an alternative to in-person classes, potentially allowing many more incarcerated students to enroll in college and get a degree.

It really depends on the facility, she told me. When North Alabama recently started a program at the women’s prison that’s four hours away, they had to limit the number of participants because it was hard to see and hear everyone on the screen.

And while the bigger issue might be a lack of opportunities in rural prisons, geography can also be a disincentive even when education is available. During our Pell webinar, Angel Sanchez mentioned that people will often forgo education if it means being transferred to a prison far away from their families.

“One of the ways we address that is by making the benefit universal—by not putting it in one place but not the other and forcing people to pick,” he said.

The tension between access and profit

One of Open Campus’ publishing partners, The Marshall Project, distributes a print publication, News Inside, in hundreds of prisons, and recently launched a video series, Inside Story. In a article published in January, they explained their decision to publish content on the controversial prison tablets. This is also an issue that colleges and prison ed programs are increasingly grappling with as online education becomes more prevalent.

The tablets, which have always been touted as educational tools, have regularly cost disadvantaged communities a lot of money for additional features such as email, photos, and video messaging.

While the debate about whether to boycott tablets rages among advocates on the outside, the answer is definitive on the inside: 96 percent of people surveyed by the Marshall Project said they wanted information on tablets even if they were provided by for-profit companies.

Having used the personal tablets in a positive way to communicate with my family, take educational courses, and for entertainment purposes, I believe that organizations should not boycott the services. But they should work harder to pressure private companies to establish fair pricing and best practices for incarcerated consumers.

Student loan update

Student-loan borrowers who were previously behind on their payments — or in delinquency — are benefitting from President Joe Biden’s “Fresh Start” plan, according to a quarterly report on household debt and credit by the New York Federal Reserve released in February. Over $34 billion defaulted loans have been brought into good standing, amid the continued repayment pause on student loans, since the “Fresh Start” program was launched in April 2022. Bringing a defaulted loan into good standing allows borrowers to access federal financial aid such as Pell Grants.

The Supreme Court heard oral arguments in two separate cases challenging the Biden Administration’s student debt cancellation program on Feb 28. A decision is expected by the end of June. The debt cancellation program would forgive up to $20,000 per borrower. Student loan payments will be paused at least until the outcome of the court cases.

Write to Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062 if you would like to receive our guide on “fresh start” and student debt cancellation for incarcerated borrowers. (Note: student loan cancellation is on hold while waiting for the Supreme Court ruling, but “fresh start” is unrelated to the court proceedings).
Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.

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BY DONOVAN DIEGO

First person: ‘There’s no equality’ for disabled students in prison

Shutterstock

The article was co-published with the Prison Journalism Project.

“You find the measure of slope by dividing the change in the two Y points, by the change in the two X points.” I said as I helped a student study for his math exam.

He shook his head. “I’m not going to get this,” he said, discouraged. “This is not making sense.”

This kind of struggle with math is something I see everyday as a GED tutor at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Stillwater.

“What’s an accommodation?” was his reply.

This student is one of the many people incarcerated in the Minnesota Department of Corrections who have not only been denied access to extra supports like extended testing time or having text read aloud to them, but also didn’t even know they might qualify. That’s a serious problem.

The number of incarcerated students who qualify for the help isn’t tracked. But people in state and federal prisons (38%) are about two and a half times more likely to report a disability than adults in the U.S. general population (15%).

About a quarter of the nearly 8,000 people incarcerated in Minnesota were enrolled in education and were eligible to attain their GED as of July 2022. But only 19 requests for GED accommodations had been submitted in the state since 2017, according to the federal Justice Department.

And that’s despite the fact that correctional staff — interviewed by DOJ as part of a four-year civil rights investigation — said the majority of their students may have disabilities. All of those 19 requests came from one teacher at one facility. There are nine other prisons in Minnesota where students received no accommodation at all.

The fact is, as a GED tutor, I don’t know how many of the men I work with would be eligible for accommodation, but I expect the number is much, much higher than the number who actually get the support they need.

In September 2022, the DOJ found that the Minnesota corrections department violated the rights of incarcerated students with disabilities by denying them opportunities to receive GED accommodations. In mid February, Minnesota reached an agreement with the Justice Department that it would revise its policies and procedures, hire an American Disability Act compliance officer and educate incarcerated individuals on the new policies and their rights. The department will also pay over $70,000 in compensatory damages to individuals with disabilities who were denied accommodations.

The Americans with Disabilities Act says that people in prison can’t be excluded from regular programming.
because of disabilities. While the Justice Department noted that Minnesota generally allowed qualified individuals with disabilities to enroll or participate in GED programs, it found that the DOC unlawfully denied them an equal opportunity to benefit from the program by failing to provide necessary reasonable accommodations.

Here’s why the GED is so significant in Minnesota: It has become a gatekeeper in the DOC for people to get access to higher paying jobs, learning a trade, and pursuing higher education. It will become even more important later this year as college programs will begin expanding in the facilities with the return of Pell Grants.

However, it doesn’t have to be that way. Official policy allows us to work a job and go to school to attain their GED simultaneously. But in reality, if you apply for a job you’ll probably get denied and referred to education. Nobody is allowing guys to do both. Many people have been trapped in this revolving cycle throughout their incarceration, to the point that they get released without a credential. This contributes to their inability to find a sustainable career upon release, and it may even lead to them returning to prison.

Identifying disabilities

Although I welcome the changes that might come with the Justice Department’s settlement, there’s more that can be done. Many people don’t know what an accommodation is because they don’t know what qualifies as a disability. We could start to address this by educating students on their rights, as well as on disabilities.

Students’ disabilities aren’t being acknowledged and they are forced to continue education on a playing field where they’re at a disadvantage. There’s no equality for people who are feeling discouraged every time they fail a test, and don’t even realize why they’re failing, or that proper assistance is available for them. I often see guys lose hope that they’ll ever earn their GED. By the time this happens, they’ve mentally given up on themselves when in reality, it’s the system that gave up on them.

To be eligible for accommodations on the GED test, a student must provide recent documentation of a diagnosis. Oftentimes, people who might qualify don’t have access to those records in prison. In addition, people sometimes develop disabilities after they are incarcerated. Someone might spend over a year in solitary confinement for a rule violation. Throughout that time, they can develop anxiety, depression, or PTSD. If that disorder hasn’t been documented, they won’t qualify for the modifications.

And, students currently have to rely on teachers to submit the accommodation request, and in some cases, determine if they should receive the extra help. One education director told the Justice Department that she considered people disabled only if they did not have “hands or arms, or are blind or deaf.”

These teachers and administrators aren’t psychologists. We’re in a controlled environment under constant surveillance, which makes it challenging for the teacher to identify if the student is actually displaying symptoms stemming from an intellectual or psychological disability, or is just being “defiant.”

And it can be particularly difficult for students with cognitive disabilities — which includes things like dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder — since those things aren’t as obvious. Nationally, about a quarter of state prisoners reported having a cognitive disability, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Accommodations work

Cole DeGroot, a student I tutored, is an example of someone who was successful when he was given the necessary accommodations. He’s one of the few able to receive this kind of assistance on GED tests because he’s had a formal diagnosis and has been in special education since he was a kid. He was allowed more testing time and had his test read aloud to him.

“It helped me out a lot,” he told me. “I have a hard time reading, so it was good to have someone read it to me and give me more time to understand what I’m doing.”

DeGroot is a great example why accommodations are paramount for students with disabilities. His success has motivated him to go further in education and employment — options that would not have been available without secondary education.

Instead of asking someone if they have a disability, staff should consider asking if they’ve ever been diagnosed with ADHD, depression, or anxiety. Asking if someone has a hard time staying focused while reading would also help identify students who might benefit from additional assistance.

Students should also be allowed to request a 504 Plan even if they do not qualify for an individual education plan, according to Eunha Jeong Wood, a former special education teacher and current college professor at the Minnesota Correctional Facility at Stillwater. The plan allows them to receive accommodations without a special education evaluation if they are seeking specific accommodations and have a medical diagnosis.

Another major change Minnesota could make is offering alternatives to the GED program, such as a high school diploma or an adult diploma, at all facilities. Those options allow students to demonstrate their knowledge without a high-pressure test, opening up multiple paths to academic success.

With the settlement agreement in place, we’re expecting to see a significant change in our education department at Stillwater, and hopefully throughout the Minnesota Department of Corrections. My hope is that teachers, administrators, and especially students can not only learn what an accommodation is, but also actually receive them.

Donovan Diego is a tutor in the education department at the Minnesota Correctional Facility at Stillwater. He’s earning a bachelor’s degree in education with a focus in special education at Metro State University.
Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.

MARCH 15 2023

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

It took almost 30 years for Pell Grants to return to prison. But, for many, college is still out of reach.

Students graduate in spring 2022 from the Moreau College Initiative, an academic collaboration between Holy Cross College and the University of Notre Dame, in partnership with the Indiana Department of Correction. They are part of the Second Chance Pell Experiment. (Photo: Peter Ringenberg Photography in South Bend, Indiana)

This story was co-published in USA Today.

Caddell Kivett is ready to go back to college. He sorted out some old, defaulted student loans. He figured out what he wants to study. And he thought he found a new way to pay for his classes.

Except Kivett, 52, is in prison.

He’ll be able, in theory, to use a federal Pell Grant to help pay for his education come July. It marks the first time in nearly three decades that incarcerated people — as many as 700,000 of them, according to the Education Department — are broadly eligible for the aid, and the policy change could open up new college opportunities across the country.

The expansion of Pell Grants has been a long-sought change since the 1994 crime bill eliminated them for people in prison and ended the majority of prison education programs. Although educating people in prison has been shown to have a number of benefits, the new money may be difficult for many to access for a host of reasons.

In Kivett’s case, the only higher ed option at his North Carolina facility is a theology degree. He wants to study journalism after working for the prison newspaper, the Nash News.

And he learned a harsh reality following months of phone calls and letters to colleges that offer accredited, paper-based correspondence courses: The federal aid can be used only at prisons that have Pell-eligible college programs. His doesn’t.

Studies show that prison education increases the chance of someone getting a job after release and decreases the likelihood that they’ll go back to prison. Providing education to those who won’t ever go home has benefits too. Lifers often become mentors to others, helping to create a more positive prison culture.

Pell Grants are the main form of federal financial aid for low-income students, which includes most incarcerated learners, providing a maximum annual award of $7,395.

But Pell funds won’t be enough to suddenly make college available to everyone like Kivett. Basic information gaps need to be filled, college support structures need to be built, and departments of corrections need to sort out their new role in all of this. Congress assigned them the task of approving new prison education programs.

That raises questions about how programs are assessed and who ensures they are actually meeting students’ needs. And it means opportunities
will vary widely by state. Right now, incarcerated people in less than a third of state and federal prisons have access to postsecondary education, and much of what is offered doesn’t lead to an academic degree.

Places like California that currently draw on state funds to allow incarcerated students to take community college classes will be using Pell funding to expand bachelor’s programs. Some states will be starting from scratch. Others might not participate at all.

A lot of states, including Washington and Kansas, will be building on programs that were part of the Second Chance Pell Experiment, which offered access to federal aid for some students starting in 2015. By last year, Second Chance Pell was offered at about 200 sites and had awarded federal aid to 30,000 incarcerated students.

All of this is happening as both prisons and colleges are still recovering from the pandemic, correctional agencies across the country are facing staff shortages, and everyone is still waiting on the final word from the Education Department on exactly how it will sign off on new programs. What it all adds up to is this: despite the return of Pell, most incarcerated people still won’t be able to get a college education this fall.

When information is ‘next to nil’

One of the biggest challenges is information. Many potential students are eagerly awaiting the return of Pell — but understanding what that means for them is difficult. Am I eligible? How would I sign up? What strings are attached? And where can I find out more?

There are a lot of basics that people don’t know: Pell can’t be used for graduate school or by people who have already finished a bachelor’s degree, for example, and there’s a lifetime limit of 12 semesters for eligibility.

“People need to be able to make informed choices about Pell dollars. That’s your money as a student, and that’s being used on your behalf,” said Stephanie Gaskill, a fellow at the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University New Orleans. She assists with the institute’s higher education in prison program and is a member of the Pell Is Not Enough research team at the University of Utah.

“It’s a responsibility for those of us helping to bring programs in to make sure that people are making informed decisions. Those may be limited choices, but people need to have information in order to make those choices for themselves.”

For now, the confusion seems ubiquitous. “The word around here on Pell is next to nil,” said Quadaire Patterson, 34, who is incarcerated in Virginia and runs a website, Brilliance Behind Bars, with the help of his fiancee. “There has not been one whisper of any upcoming higher education programs that will utilize Pell Grant funds.”

Because people know he’s active in criminal justice reform, Patterson is often asked about how they can tap into the federal money. He has to tell them that they can’t just sign up, that there has to be a Pell-eligible program at their prison. “The looks on their faces show so much despair.”

Patterson has paid out of pocket to take a few college classes in social sciences and is now taking a paralegal course with the ultimate goal of becoming a lawyer. “What I’ve learned is that being incarcerated presents a critical, daily ultimatum,” he said. “Will we choose to actively better ourselves or passively ‘do time’?”

Another big barrier is access. In many places the demand for seats way outruns supply, with waiting lists often running a year or more. Even in places that do have college programs, people might still be excluded because of their sentence or conviction.

The legislation that restored Pell Grants for people in prison removed any federal barriers to eligibility related to how long people’s sentences are or their specific crimes, but states still have broad discretion in who can take classes behind bars. Half of the states impose restrictions on participation in education based on the length of an individual’s sentence, according to the Council of State Governments Justice Center.

When Jevon Jackson, 45, who is incarcerated in Wisconsin, heard that Pell was returning, he thought that the educational floodgates will open.” He’d been at two facilities
with Second Chance programs, but had been excluded because of his life sentence.

Jackson always loved school as a kid, but he was locked up at the age of 16 and was only able to get his GED. Twenty years ago, he took a few correspondence courses that were paid for by an outside sponsor. Now he wants to study counseling and creative writing. But the return of Pell, it turns out, has not changed much about his chances at college for now.

Pell is first being offered to short-timers, he said education staff told him. They only will expand opportunities to people with lengthier sentences “when more spots become available.”

The challenges of scaling up

So what, exactly, does it take to get a college program in prison off the ground, how will existing sites scale up, and are colleges actually ready?

One of the biggest issues for increased capacity this fall is the tight timeline. Academic schedules are set months in advance, which ties up faculty, and other partners like accrediting agencies need to sign off.

Colleges have to redesign everything, including financial-aid processes and admissions applications, to operate in an environment that doesn’t often have internet access. Keremt Reiter, for example, had to create a paper-based application for people who wanted to apply to the University of California system’s first bachelor’s degree program for incarcerated students.

Reiter, a criminology professor who directs the program, and another staff member at the Irvine campus took screenshots of the undergraduate application for the University of California, printed them, took them in person to potential students, had them fill them out, and then entered them into the application system. “There’s four application essays, so I typed all 120 of them for our 30 applicants,” she said. “It’s a nightmare.”

Gaskill, the Loyola researcher, said that colleges starting new programs also need to realize that students inside don’t have direct access to the things they would on campus. “As a person who runs a program, you’re a conduit for them to all the resources of the university,” she said.

Many existing programs will have difficulties scaling up because they are often run by a single person, she added, and there can be a cost barrier. Pell coming back is essential for many programs to get off the ground, but it doesn’t always cover the full cost of attendance. Colleges have to be prepared to absorb unexpected costs such as transcript fees and past due balances from students’ previous college experience.

Starting small

Ultimately, only about 2 percent of the state and federal prison population – about 1.3 million people – is projected to participate in higher ed programs this fall, according to estimates by both the Education Department and the Vera Institute, a nonprofit group providing technical assistance to prison education programs.

In the short term, Margaret diZerega, director of Vera’s Unlocking Potential Initiative, says she expects college access to remain relatively restricted, given issues related to staffing shortages, a lack of facility space for classes, and slow adoption of technology. Given that, she says getting even 10 percent of the prison population enrolled in the coming years would be a good goal.

In recent years, changes to federal policies have removed some barriers to federal aid that will help people in prison. The same 2020 legislation that reinstated Pell Grants in prisons also restored eligibility for people with drug convictions and men who had failed to register for the Selective Service. The Education Department has also remedied another big obstacle to accessing Pell – defaulted student loans – with its “fresh start” initiative that was launched in April 2022.

Both corrections officials and educators say that the best approach to broadening college access in prison is slow and steady. Even in states that already have significant experience with prison education, there will be some facilities that have never had higher education and some colleges that have never operated in a prison.

“So sometimes we think that something is better than nothing, and I just don’t know that that’s completely true,” Gaskill said. “Sometimes, especially if you’re asking people to spend their Pell dollars, you want to make sure that what you’re offering is actually a good experience for students.”

Bills to watch

State lawmakers are busy considering prison-education bills, many of which would help pave the way for Pell Grant expansion. Others aim to help prevent employment and educational discrimination related to criminal history.

Notably, a bill in Oklahoma that would restore need-based assistance to incarcerated students passed the state senate. And, in Colorado, a measure that would allow people who are convicted of nonviolent crimes to earn time off their sentences for completing education programs moved from the house to the state senate. Here are some other recently introduced bills:

- **Illinois House Bill 3740** would allow incarcerated students to be eligible for the state’s AIM HIGH Grant Pilot Program, which provides financial assistance to undergraduates attending the state’s 12 public four year institutions. **House Bill 3818** would establish a commission on higher education in prison that would advise the state’s higher education board. The commission would include four former students who participated in prison education.

- **Connecticut Senate Bill 923** would prohibit both public and private education institutions from considering criminal histories during the admissions process. Research shows that even asking about criminal history on an admissions application can deter potential students.
• Texas House Bill 4251 would lay some of the groundwork necessary for the expansion of federal Pell Grants. It would require the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to establish a formal application and approval process for colleges seeking to establish prison education programs.

• Florida House Bill 939 would establish the “Florida Scholars Academy” within the state’s Department of Juvenile Justice. The program intends to provide incarcerated students in juvenile facilities with a chance to earn a high school credential, enroll in a degree program at a state college or university, or earn industry-recognized credentials.

• New York Assembly Bill 4893 would require public agencies to establish preliminary license application procedures to determine whether an applicant would be ineligible based on criminal history. It would allow people to know if they are eligible for a license before investing in training or education.

• There are several bills related to prison education in Oregon. Senate Bill 269 would require the state corrections department and Higher Education Coordinating Commission to enter into a memorandum of understanding on issues such as data-sharing, distance learning policies, and assisting incarcerated students with applying for financial aid. Another measure, Senate Bill 270, would allow incarcerated students to enroll in distance learning programs outside of the service area of the local college where their prison is located. Senate Bill 1082 establishes support programs for formerly incarcerated students modeled off of the California State University’s Project Rebound, while Senate Bill 517 would prevent licensing bodies from denying someone an occupational or professional license solely because of a criminal conviction.

• Massachusetts Senate Bill 822 aims to ensure that financial aid staff of public colleges proactively reach out to prospective incarcerated students and recently released students who had finished their GED to inform them about available state financial aid.

• Maryland House Bill 416 would require the state corrections agency to assist incarcerated students in accessing federal financial aid and consult with colleges. The state labor department would be required to set targets for the number of students enrolled in higher education and establish a data system to track enrollment. Housing support for formerly incarcerated students

When college students get out of prison, they may face a number of practical challenges. For starters: Where are they going to live?

Several California universities are starting to offer supportive housing for formerly incarcerated students through organizations such as Project Rebound, Gail Cornwall reported for the expansion of federal Pell Grants. It would require the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to establish a formal application and approval process for colleges seeking to establish prison education programs.

• Florida House Bill 939 would establish the “Florida Scholars Academy” within the state’s Department of Juvenile Justice. The program intends to provide incarcerated students in juvenile facilities with a chance to earn a high school credential, enroll in a degree program at a state college or university, or earn industry-recognized credentials.

• New York Assembly Bill 4893 would require public agencies to establish preliminary license application procedures to determine whether an applicant would be ineligible based on criminal history. It would allow people to know if they are eligible for a license before investing in training or education.

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