“WE NEED MORE HIGH-IMPACT LEARNING PRACTICES IN PRISON.”

Takeaways from the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison

By Charlotte West

NOV. 14, 2023

ATLANTA – “What’s next?”

That’s a question that looms large for many college graduates.

But for those who earn their degrees inside, the traditional metrics of success don’t always apply. College graduates may continue to sit behind bars for years or even decades before they can enter the labor market, if at all.

Maine and other states like Colorado are trying to tackle this issue through internships and employment opportunities that allow incarcerated students and graduates to put their professional knowledge and skills into practice — and in some cases, earn a living wage while doing so.

Employment and professional training opportunities inside were a major theme at the 2023 National Conference for Higher Education in Prison, where 800 educators, administrators, students and alumni from dozens of prison education programs gathered in Atlanta, Georgia last week.

“One of the things that’s missing inside of prisons is high-impact learning practices: internships, fellowships, apprenticeships, and work learning opportunities,” said Ved Price, executive director of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, during the plenary session last Thursday.

Though the number of students enrolled in prison education programs is expected to grow over the next few years, there are currently few opportunities for students to continue to develop professionally after they earn a credential.

He said that as the pandemic ushered in remote work more broadly and Zoom became nearly ubiquitous, the Alliance began to think about how that might apply in a carceral setting. As a result, they,
along with other organizations such as Jobs for the Future and ed tech start-up Unlocked Labs, began a pilot partnership with the Maine Department of Corrections to hire incarcerated students and pay them free-world wages. The Alliance has two current fellows, Victoria Scott and Leo Hylton.

Some prison education programs are also looking at how they can incorporate experiential learning into their curriculum. In May, North Hennepin Community College in Minnesota graduated its first class of five incarcerated paralegals. The paralegal students had to complete an externship during their last semester as a graduation requirement, according to Mary Fenske, paralegal program director, in an email.

JD students enrolled at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law were also able to do an externship during the summer, the same time their outside classmates typically do clerkships and externships. Because they were still enrolled in classes, they had some internet and tech access. While the students were not paid for the externships, they did receive academic credit.

"Internships have always been valuable tools for gaining experience as an entry level professional, and incarcerated students are no different," wrote Mary Fenske, paralegal program director, in an email.

"Most importantly...these internships allowed the incarcerated students to give back to the community without any expectation of reward...That's incredibly powerful stuff toward restorative justice."

The case for living wage jobs inside

Studies have shown that educating people in prison increases their ability to find a job after release and decreases the likelihood that they will come back to prison. In the same vein, allowing incarcerated people to earn a living wage is good for both the individual and society, said Randall Liberty, commissioner of the Maine DOC. People who don’t want to create opportunities that allow incarcerated individuals to become productive members of society are “dumb on public safety.”

It’s less expensive to educate and train someone than it is to incarcerate them, Liberty said.

Having a job that pays market wages helps incarcerated people support themselves and their families. The way most people are released today does not set them up for successful reentry, Price said. “People do...15, 20, 30 years and then come home with 50 bucks.”

Earning real money while incarcerated allows individuals to build savings to reestablish their lives, such as being able to pay a deposit to secure stable housing. Gaining relevant professional experience before they are released also helps individuals find better jobs.

Over half of people in prison have "work assignments," but those jobs often pay pennies, if anything at all, and don’t build marketable skills; instead, they are usually designed to help keep the prison running, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. In prison jobs, incarcerated workers usually have few protections compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts.

Beyond the social stigma of having a conviction, formerly incarcerated people already face barriers in many professions due to licensing requirements, as well as extensive gaps on their resumes because they may have been out of the labor market for decades. Some were so young when they were incarcerated that they have never worked or even filled out a job application. Sometimes parole requires people to find and maintain a job or they risk going back to prison.

Almost three quarters of people who are formerly incarcerated are still unemployed a year after being released, according to the federal government. The Prison Policy Initiative estimates that the overall unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated individuals is 27%.

Scott, an undergraduate student at the University of Maine Augusta who attended the conference virtually, said that doing the fellowship with the Alliance has meant she doesn’t have to rely on her family for her basic needs. “Having this semblance of independence has given me a sense of self-efficacy and progression in my life that I’ve been craving,” she said.

“I’ve been able to pay off the entirety of my restitution...and I’ve been able to save.”

In addition to a large number of low-security individuals employed in the community through work release, the Maine DOC currently has 15 incarcerated people working remotely with six different organizations in positions ranging from fellowships and internships to full-time employment opportunities. Supervised internet access allows incarcerated people to work and study virtually from maximum security institutions such as the Maine State Prison. The state currently has around 1700 people in custody.
Remote workers in the Maine DOC have the same standard deductions such as Medicare taxes, child support, workers compensation, etc. as any other employee. Those who are working remotely while incarcerated also pay 10% of their income towards room and board. That’s low compared to some other states. In Arizona, which has prison industry contracts with both government agencies and private companies, anyone who makes more than $2 an hour has 30% of their paycheck docked to cover their living expenses, according to a 2022 investigation into prison labor done by the Arizona Republic.

Other states are also experimenting with paying incarcerated people outside wages. Earlier this year, Adams State University hired an incarcerated graduate from their MBA program to teach in their undergraduate program in the Colorado Department of Corrections. The corrections department had originally approached program administrators Lauren Hughes and Jim Bullington during the pandemic when staffing issues reduced students’ access to education. Bullington said that they were excited to implement the department’s proposal, but their one stipulation was that the instructor be paid the same wage as other adjuncts.

Adams State recently received a $150,000 grant from The Mellon Foundation to help fund the initiative, called Turning Graduates Into Instructors. The goal is to help train more MBA graduates to teach in the program, as well as develop a model that prison education programs in other states might replicate.

Speaking at the conference via Zoom, David Carrillo said that he never would have imagined that someone with his background would be allowed to become a professor. He was incarcerated over three decades ago at the age of 19, just a few years before Pell Grants for people in prison were eliminated.

Carrillo co-taught Introduction to Business during his first semester, and is now teaching two sections of macroeconomics on his own. “The interest in taking my classes continues to grow even despite the fact of how challenging my classes are,” he quipped. “There are no participation trophies coming out of my class.”

---

**A letter from Dr. Napoleon Wells**

**NOV. 17, 2023**

By Napoleon Wells

In April, we did an interview with Napoleon Wells, a clinical psychologist who works as an anxiety and trauma disorder specialist at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Several College Inside readers responded to his insights on trauma and education. He has asked us to publish this response.

Dear Family,

I appreciate hearing so much from so many of you, and I can’t begin to tell you how moved I am in knowing that my conversation with Open Campus has meant so much to you. I had been thinking of ways to impact and address both the mental health and educational needs of our family who are, and were previously, incarcerated, and you have all given me much to consider, and have gifted me with some truly inspired approaches to the work.

All of what you have said reminds me that I am a tool, among many, and have been given opportunities to aid you in shifting these systems to better serve our family in the ways that are best, and necessary.

I have heard you, and I am listening. You have inspired me to learn how I can better be directly involved in the delivery and availability of Mental Health services, in all stages, for our family who are, and were, incarcerated. There is a lot of work to do, and a lot for me to do, personally. I want to use some of the leverage provided for me in my career to visit more of you, and to see what we as a family can do in the spaces where you are living and being. More is coming.

Every kind word and recommendation resonated, and has stayed with me. I am here for the work, and will keep all of you updated as I will need guidance, feedback and encouragement. Thank you all so much, and know that you are seen, and loved.

Yours truly,

Napoleon

---

Napoleon Wells, Ph.D.
Department of Veterans Affairs
Columbia, SC
This spa in Thailand is staffed by incarcerated women.

By Charlotte West

DEC. 6, 2023

CHIANG MAI, THAILAND – There are a couple of things everyone does when they visit the city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand: go to a few of the 300-some Buddhist temples and find somewhere to get a traditional Thai massage.

The luscious greenery, wooden lounge chairs, and paper lanterns paint a pretty picture at Naree Thai Massage and Spa and cafe. As we learned, if you don’t get there by 11 am, you might have to come back the next day. (They don’t take advance reservations).

Situated just a few streets off of one of the major thoroughfares in Chiang Mai’s Old City, the spa offers the typical Thai treatment menu: a 1-hour foot massage or a full body massage for 200 baht (around $6) or a 2-hour full body massage for 400 baht ($12).

But there’s one thing that makes Naree different from most Thai spas: All of the massage staff are currently incarcerated women. It’s easy to miss the sign on the edge of the garden that says “Chiang Mai Women’s Correctional Institution Vocational Training Center” when you get distracted by the mermaid waterfall.

Despite its serene atmosphere, there are a few hints of the spa’s carceral affiliation. A giant sign featuring a rosy-cheeked cartoon correctional officer in a tan uniform greets visitors as they enter the garden and the name of the wifi network in the adjoining cafe is “inmate_massage.” A female correctional officer—also wearing a tan uniform—sits at the front desk taking reservations for the day.

Today, the women who work here reside at the Chiang Mai Women’s Correctional Institution on the outskirts of the city and travel into the Old City every day for work. Twenty to 25 women work in the spa at any one time. The women are paid 8000-9000 baht ($225-$255) per month, plus tips. (The national minimum wage, which varies by region, starts at around $260 per month).

When you arrive at the spa, you store your shoes outside and are given a pair of slippers to shuffle into the changing room. The spa provides a pair of loose cotton Thai fisherman pants that easily roll up—though it takes a few minutes to figure out how to wrap and tie the oversized waistband. Then you find your lounge chair in a room with about 20 other people.

My partner and I opted for foot massages, which weren’t exactly gentle but were what you would expect for a traditional Thai massage—including working out a lot of pressure points and even some moves that felt like calisthenics. It wasn’t a bad way to spend a few hours on our first day in a time zone that was 15 hours ahead. It was the first of several massages we got during our three-week trip in Southeast Asia, and one of the best we received.

After my massage, I sat down with Archaree Srisunakhu, the former director of the prison who was recently transferred to Bangkok, in the spa’s cafe. (The center also has a culinary training program where women staff the cafe and bakery). I wanted to learn more about the history of the vocational center, which has been operating since 2006.
The goal of the prison’s vocational training is to give the women professional skills and prepare them for life after prison, she said. The women complete 300 hours of training in traditional Thai massage and receive a national certification recognized by the Thai Ministry of Public Health. They also study basic English and other languages such as Chinese to be able to communicate with their customers.

Srisunakhua said that one of her goals as director is to develop programs that meet the specific needs of women. As in many other countries, the number of women in Thai prisons has grown more quickly than men’s over the last few decades. And, working as a massage therapist is a common job in cities like Chiang Mai dependent on the tourism industry.

Thailand has the second highest per capita incarceration rate of women after the United States. The US incarcerates 64 women per 100,000 of its general population, followed by Thailand with 47, according to the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, a U.K.-based think tank. The vast majority of incarcerated women in Thailand are serving sentences for drug-related crimes, particularly methamphetamine.

The vocational training program receives no funding from the Thai government; it’s self-sustaining with around 70% of proceeds going to the women, 20% to program operation, and 10% to the correctional staff who work with the program, Srisunakhua said.

Such a program would be rare in the U.S.—I’ve seen very few vocational training programs that allow currently incarcerated people to interact with the public as much as the women at Naree Spa.

Cosmetology and barbering programs are common, but those often serve the prison population and sometimes staff. A few reentry and transitional programs seem to provide similar examples of this, but not while folks are still in prison. (One cool exception to this is the Mates Inn, a restaurant in Trenton, New Jersey run by the N.J. Department of Corrections and staffed by incarcerated men receiving culinary arts training.)

Because tourism is such a big business in Chiang Mai, it makes a lot of sense that the women need opportunities to practice their massage and language skills with the steady supply of foreign visitors. It also provides the women an opportunity to support themselves and their families while they are still incarcerated. Most of the women are able to send money home and save for their eventual release, Srisunakhua said.

She said that when the program first started it was difficult for some women to find employment because of the stigma of their incarceration, but now massage shops in Chiang Mai actively recruit graduates. Some local businesses even have official agreements with the prison to hire women upon release, which creates a direct route to employment. The former director of the women’s prison started a chain of spas, Lila Thai Massage, after she retired in Chiang Mai that specifically hires and supports formerly incarcerated massage staff.

Since 2010, around 1,200 formerly incarcerated women have been placed at partner spas in Chiang Mai, Srisunakhua said.
In the last decade, there’s been a lot of media coverage about the fact that many incarcerated people now have access to “prison iPads.” The pandemic accelerated this trend even more, with tablets becoming one of the few lines to the outside world when in-person visiting was suspended.

We wanted to know how people in prison actually use their tablets and whether they were fulfilling the educational purposes that are often touted by tech companies and corrections departments. So we sent out a survey to our incarcerated College Inside readers. We asked them to rate their tablets, share the pros and the cons—similar to a consumer product review—and tell us if and how they used their tablets for education.

We heard back from around 80 men and women from across the country who shared their insights on how technology is changing their lives inside—for better and worse (thank you to everyone who took the time to respond!). In some places, people had access to multiple devices, some for entertainment and others for college. Elsewhere, people say they have no access to any kind of technology at all.

In September, we co-published the first story on our survey results with Slate’s Future Tense. Those responses demonstrated not only how little people use their state-issued devices for education, but also how important they had become for communication and entertainment.

This issue, we’re also co-publishing a first-person essay with Slate by Kunlyna Tauch, a writer incarcerated in California, as part of a package of stories that explores how technology is changing prison. Kunlyna writes about how the laptop issued to him as a student at California State University Los Angeles was the first computer he’s used in 17 years of incarceration.
Here’s what College Inside readers had to say...

How do you use your tablet?

“Email only. In the Michigan Department of Corrections, it’s the only service available.”
Michael B. Putman, Sr., Michigan
Tablet: JPay

“I message my family a few times throughout the day and I call them daily as well. I enjoy reading the business and politics articles on the news and sports app at least a few hours a day...On the...GTL library I find interesting books / textbooks. Lastly, I like to play candy crush on the games app, but only for 30-45 minutes a day.”
Fabian Garcia, California
Tablet: GTL

“Due to the fact we are in solitary confinement, we don’t have much on our tablets but the e-messages really. They took away our media stores (games, movies and tv shows, music) and podcasts, which [are] really good for mental health.”
Kiera Henderson, Texas
Tablet: Securus

“I have not bought one yet as it has no value to me: 1) no learning or educational content (classes, books, study information); 2) it has no productivity applications (word processor, spreadsheet, calendaring, etc). All it has is entertainment (movies, games, music). I borrow someone else’s if I want to play a game.”
William Batton, Federal
Tablet: Keefe

“Email only. In the Michigan Department of Corrections, it’s the only service available.”
Lawrence E. May, California
Tablet: GTL

“I have not bought one yet as it has no value to me: 1) no learning or educational content (classes, books, study information); 2) it has no productivity applications (word processor, spreadsheet, calendaring, etc). All it has is entertainment (movies, games, music). I borrow someone else’s if I want to play a game.”
Daniel Strode, Tennessee
Tablet: None

“I use it mostly for messages and a looping white noise track (I’m sensitive to ambient noise).”
Elena, Pennsylvania
Tablet: GTL

If you left a customer review of your tablet, what would it be?

“The tablets are good for composing emails at our leisure + listening to music, whether in the cell or out in the yard. They give us a chance to collect our thoughts, reflect on our relationships with the outside world, + escape from our current one. The downside is that the quality of experience is not all that great. The software gets glitchy, but overall its worth it.”
Demetrius Murphy, New Jersey
Tablet: Securus

“The tablet needs more legal material, specifically Lexus Nexus! The tablet also comes with a trade off, specifically more control measures.”
Craig Muhammad, Maryland
Tablet: GTL

“Having a device that is more in alignment with the technological advances utilized in daily life, outside the walls, humanizes those who are system impacted. However, costs are not competitive, wi-fi is inefficient, services need updating, and no educational content is available in our location.”
Shawnette Green, Illinois
Tablet: GTL

“I believe that the tablet is an excellent tool. But, it is only a tool. Presently, we receive no directed studies, unless enrolled in GED/HiSet classes. The tablet is also a wonderful platform to use to build community, but this is too does not appear currently to be a goal. The DOC seems satisfied to use the tablet primarily as a babysitter.”
James Keown, Massachusetts
Tablet: Keefe/APDS

“I have a gallery app on the tablet, but cannot receive pictures. Also, I have a camera that doesn’t work, a limited selection of games, and a music catalog that is mostly constructed of German pop songs.”
Name Withheld, Rhode Island
Tablet: SCORE

“It is a useful, convenient tool to maintain familiar relationships, stay well versed in current events, educational learning...Unfortunately the convenience of tablets also creates learning, sedentary life styles, dissociation with peers, complacency, distractions, unhealthy dependency, and anxiety when it doesn’t work.”
Tomeikia Johnson, California
Tablet: GTL

“Limited gaming with a few very good games and the ability to rent older movie titles. Zero educational or reentry content. The calculator and FM radio functions are a welcome touch. Overall, pricing for both the tablet and the limited content are high for someone on a prison job salary.”
David W. McDaniel, Federal
Tablet: Keefe
A professor is attempting to teach 24 of us how to log-in to Canvas, a learning management system many universities use to collect student work. She says something about saving our homework to the student cloud, but I’m not paying attention. I’m lost in my obsession with learning what these laptops are actually capable of. I open all of the apps—Microsoft Excel, Word, PowerPoint. And then, momentarily, I freeze: Google Chrome. I open the app and am immediately let down, realizing I can only access a few URLs preapproved by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Still, the gates are ajar, and it feels like freedom—or at least a road there.

This is the first time I’ve ever had a laptop. I’m currently enrolled in one of the first bachelor’s degree programs inside California prisons. The program is offered by California State University Los Angeles, and the laptop is one of its perks. The students in my cohort—the program’s third, but the first to receive personal laptops—were all incarcerated at very young ages and sentenced to prison terms that reflect football scores. I’ve served 17 years of a 50-year-to-life sentence, and none of us foresaw living past our 18th birthdays, let alone attending university. But here we are, in our senior year of a communication studies degree.

On the day I got my laptop, I returned to the housing unit skipping and giddy. I entered my cell with a Kool-Aid smile, excited to show my new Dell computer to my cellie, who had been in the second cohort of the college program. “How the hell are we in prison and you got a whole laptop in the cell right now!” he exclaimed. When he was working on his degree, he remembered having to pay people who had access to a computer at their jobs to type up his homework.

As Cal State students, we attend three hours of classes three to four times a week. Most of our homework is done on our loaner laptops and submitted through Canvas, which can only be accessed through Wi-Fi. The Wi-Fi, in turn, can only be accessed in the education department or the dayroom area of our housing unit.

As a result, the dayroom has turned into what I like to think of as a prison coffee shop. There, my fellow students and I work together on our laptops, sipping coffee out of our “hard-time” mugs—large, clear plastic cups with black handles that will be familiar to anyone who’s served time.

Sip, clack; sip sip, clack clack. The sound of the keyboards typing in unison is like a symphony. The temperature inside the dayroom is a lot cooler than the blistering desert heat. Fourteen students huddle around tables, focused on classwork. We’re still surrounded by cell doors, huge blocks of metal that boom when they shut. There’s still a watchtower overlooking everything that we do. But it feels a lot less tense here, almost as if prison had melted away. Almost as if we’re in a Starbucks on a busy afternoon.

When I wake up in the morning, I open my laptop, log-in, and see if there are any announcements from my professors. I check my agenda for upcoming assignments. I made a little book bag from some fabric I found lying around, and I use it to carry my laptop everywhere, including to my job at the prison program office. When little pockets of time present themselves, I’ll try to knock out any work I have pending. The way I see it, one day I’ll be out in society, and I’ll need to be able to work on things during the in-between moments. Here, I’m practicing for that.

After work, usually on Mondays, Wednesdays,
and Fridays, I’ll rush home, quickly shower, scarf down a sandwich, and go straight to the education department for my weekly classes. In class, my laptop stays open, ready to take notes while the professors are lecturing. On nights that I’m not in college, I teach self-help classes—mostly focused on getting people to reflect on the impact of their crimes or express themselves through storytelling. My laptop comes with me, and I teach from the lesson plans I’ve prepared on it. The correctional officers know these devices are for college use only, but they’ve gotten so used to seeing me carrying my laptop around that they no longer question why I have it with me. They know it’s my own teacher’s aide.

I was incarcerated at 18, and I’m now 35. Before prison, I had to go to the public library or different community centers to use a computer. The dial-up modems screamed at anyone who wanted to surf the net, but surfing was more like sitting in the water with some floaties and a pool noodle compared to today’s internet. I got on MySpace, and that was the extent of my computer knowledge.

When I received my prison loaner laptop, I was a technological dinosaur. But I cared for it obsessively. I would wipe the dust off it daily and place it on the corner of a table in my cell, where it would sit and charge. It made my cell a professional office space.

At first, the learning curve was steep. I was double-posting assignments on discussion boards; I preferred hard copies and would complain about navigating digital books. The mouse was too sensitive, often closing windows, deleting work, and dragging documents against my will. Initially, I wrote all of my homework by hand, and then transcribed it into the computer. It took about two semesters for me to get up to speed.

These days, I prefer reading digital textbooks, because I can find keywords using Ctrl F to complete my research papers. I move paragraphs around with copy and paste while I’m editing drafts. I save my teachers’ PowerPoint presentations to look back on key points. After a year and a half with my laptop, I now type 40 words a minute, and can do so without the hunting-and-pecking method I once employed. I’m proud of my typing ability, because it’s something I can take with me when I’m released one day, along with the degree in communication that I’ll eventually have.

With these new skills, I’ve also grown a sort of attachment to my laptop. I’ve covered the front with stickers—Vans, SPY glasses, Paws for Life K9 Rescue—and it stores my essays for class, the canteen list I type up on Excel, and the different story ideas I pitch to editors. I feel a sort of kinship to it because of how it’s helped me grow. My laptop is a privilege I know few incarcerated students have.

Sometimes, I walk out into the dayroom and sit at an available table to do my assignments. I set-up my laptop, my MP3 player in my ears and my textbook in front of me. Sitting next to me is my cup of coffee. It’s a table for productivity. There, I’m the CEO of my education, my work, and my life, and I’m busy changing their course.

People walk by and ask me what it’s like to have a laptop; they sit with me and ask about their college credits and talk about their aspirations to get into Cal State LA. It’s a conversation I invite, and in an odd way, it’s a reminder of the possibilities and opportunity that this place has.

When I work on this borrowed computer in the dayroom, I can see a future, one I’ve never seen before, where I’m out there, in a coffee shop, working on a laptop of my own.

Kunlyna Tauch is a Cambodian American storyteller who writes for Empowerment Avenue. Incarcerated at the age of 18, he has served 17 years and now writes about the more humanistic aspects of being incarcerated. He has bylines in Harper’s Bazaar, Business Insider, CalMatters, and Inquest.

Have any feedback?
What do you think of the new College Inside design? What topics do you want to read about in 2024? Let us know: Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062

Or send us a message here: charlotte@opencampusmedia.org
By Tomas Keen

JAN. 10, 2022

As a kid in Washington State, shuffling nervously into Miss Devries’s first-grade class, I had no idea how decisions being made in the other Washington that year would affect the future of my education.

That year, in 1994, the government was gutting funds for college courses in prison, part of a “nothing works” narrative that was then dominating discussions about the criminal-legal system. Believing every dollar spent on higher education in prison was a dollar sent down the toilet, federal lawmakers passed a crime bill that, while expanding the carceral system, made “status as a prisoner” a disqualifier for Pell funding. The barely tacit message coming out of Congress: in the eyes of the government, prisons may be worthy of investment—but prisoners are not.

As a six-year-old with no expectation of future confinement, caring little for prison and less for what programs are offered there probably seems reasonable. But it wasn’t.

Before leaving elementary school, I began my hardly unique path to prison: I was the victim of abuse—the sort that’s just not polite to discuss with strangers. And from then on, churning beneath a placid surface, I was scared, I was isolated, I was on the verge of being broken. For years I struggled before finding solace in the bottom of a small ziplock bag. And what happened next is of little surprise to anyone: a 20-year prison sentence for first-degree assault.

By the time I entered prison in 2010, the fallout from gutted funding was everywhere. Scarce opportunities had soured the culture in prison. Without constructive outlets, many prisoners who otherwise would have excelled were left bored and stationary—and you know what they say about idle hands.

Old timers I met spoke of days when educational programs filled every room in the school buildings. But all I saw were classrooms retrofitted as office space.

Still suffering from first-grade naivety, I spent my first six years buying into and perpetuating the toxic culture clouding the facilities. I bounced from place to place, spending large chunks of time in solitary confinement.

My stints in general population were typically at notoriously violent facilities like the Washington State Penitentiary—known officially as the “West Complex,” colloquially as the “Wild West.”

I thought Tomas’ essay was an appropriate way to end the year. He wrote about how his access to education became a matter of luck when he was transferred to a Washington prison that had a college program open to people with long sentences. Tomas is now at another prison that doesn’t have a bachelor’s program, but with support from family and money he earns from writing he’s now only one class away from finally finishing that degree through Adams State University’s print-based program.

I wish you very happy holidays and hope you enjoy reading Tomas’ essay.

— Charlotte West
places where opportunities—for anything other than a fight—were few.

Eventually luck got a hold of me and I was transferred to the Washington State Reformatory (WSR). And there I learned that even after the government gave up on college for prisoners, many private funders did not. At this facility, a college-in-prison program—University Beyond Bars (UBB)—operated entirely by private funding. I quickly signed up and was soon neck deep in a smattering of liberal-arts courses: Social Problems, International Relations, English Composition, Oceanography, etc.

In the classroom I found a diverse group of students working together, solving problems, and developing new outlooks on life. I also found relationships being forged across boundaries that, at other facilities, due to pressured adherence to a racialized and predatory prison code, would have been impossible. It was the first time in years I sat in a room and felt a sense of normalcy. It was the first time I had seen a place resembling what the old timers spoke about.

Having access to vibrant college programs is what drives success for people in prison—my own life is testament to this. It’s no coincidence that my transformation to rehabilitate? Why are private funders being left to hold the bag?”

After a few moments of silence, I’d turn to my fellow grantwriters and ask, “How, then, can it be anything but the government’s responsibility to provide the services that actually rehabilitate? Why are private funders being left to hold the bag?”

Almost as if people from the government were listening, Congress has returned Pell eligibility to prisoners. And states, too, are getting involved. Washington recently passed HB 1044 that allows for funding up to a bachelor’s degree and contains fewer barriers than Pell, ensuring that nearly every prisoner in my state will have an opportunity to become a college student. Everywhere we look, governments are now working to reproduce the successes of privately funded programs.

Government funding brings all sorts of benefits because it simultaneously brings all sorts of added directives for prison administrators. At least in Washington State, administrators are now legally required to assist with application and planning processes, support people with learning differences, and consider providing access to secure internet. All of these will undoubtedly advance the quality of college education for prisoners.

Still, there remains an indispensable role for private funding. Even when public sentiment rallied around the “nothing works” narrative, private funders held the line and committed to recognizing that all people, even prisoners, are worthy of investment. And this commitment remains just as vital today, as the different government funding streams have varying criteria and barriers, some even excluding people based on prior loans, sentence length, or citizenship status. Filling the gaps left by government programs is the future of private funders.

Tomas Keen is an incarcerated writer from Washington state. His work has been featured in Inquest, The Crime Report, The Economist, and Process, a journal at the University of Washington. He can be contacted on Securus or at tomaskeen310445@gmail.com.
Louisiana has convened a task force that will make recommendations about whether the state should spend more money and provide more programs for the education and job training of its prison population—including those on death row. The group will submit a report to the state legislature ahead of the next legislative session in March, Piper Hutchinson reported for the Louisiana Illuminator.

Over the past decade and a half, educational attainment in Connecticut prisons has dropped. A review by Connecticut Public found declining numbers of students are enrolling in classes, advancing to the next class level, completing vocation programs or finishing a high school level education. The declines aren’t only due to the pandemic. Some of the sharpest declines came earlier, in 2015-16 because of GED tests going online, and layoffs in the Connecticut Department of Corrections’ school district, Ashad Hajela reported.

On Dec. 1, 2023, Massachusetts became the fifth state to make prison and jail calls free. The law, signed by Gov. Maura Healey in November, also made video and emails free. Previously, the Massachusetts Department of Correction charged 12 cents per minute, and most county sheriffs charged 14 cents per minute, Sarah Betancourt reported for WGBH. The other four states with free calls are California, Colorado, Connecticut, and Minnesota.

Students enrolled at Mount Tamalpais College at San Quentin State Prison may soon be guaranteed admission to one of the 23 campuses in the California State University system upon release as a part of a new transfer program if they meet certain course requirements, Sara Weissman reported for Inside Higher Education. Mount Tam is the only accredited, independent liberal arts college in the United States based at a prison. Because it’s not part of the California Community College system, its graduates don’t currently have a clear transfer pathway to a four-year college. The new program will establish a direct transfer agreement with one of the California State campuses.

The nonprofit operating University Beyond Bars (UBB), a college program at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe, Washington, has relaunched as RECLAIM. The organization is currently focusing on reintegration support. Jarrelle Marshall, a UBB alumni, took over as executive director, while the former ED Joel Strom is now working with capacity building. RECLAIM staff would love to hear from UBB alumni, especially if someone is getting out soon, said Kelly Johnson, operations and community resource manager. Staff can be reached at RECLAIM, 3815 S. Othello St, Suite 100, Seattle, WA 98118.

Over the next year, we’ll be continuing our coverage of the role of technology in prison education. If you are in an in-person college program, what kind of access do you have to technology? Or, if you’re studying on state-issued tablets, please share your experience. What works, what doesn’t? How do you interact with your professors? You can write to us here:

Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062

Or send us a message here:

charlotte@opencampusmedia.org

About this newsletter

Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about prison education produced by Open Campus, a national nonprofit newsroom. We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a monthly print edition. The newsletter is also available digitally on Edovo, an app on some GTL and Securus tablets. (Please note that we are unable to distribute the newsletter electronically through the prison messaging systems).

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

You can reach us at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org, via JPAlinks, to Connect Network, GTL/Viapath, or at the postal address above.

Please note that Open Campus is a news organization that covers higher education. Open Campus doesn’t investigate criminal cases or report on crime-related issues, nor do we provide educational courses or assist individuals. When we receive a letter, we will add you to our mailing list to receive College Inside. Given the volume of letters that we receive, we cannot always respond personally, but we appreciate your interest in our work.

We work with incarcerated writers, but do not usually publish unsolicited manuscripts, essays that have been published elsewhere, poetry, or stories on topics other than education. We are looking for story pitches that offer new and surprising insights about higher education in prisons.

There is no cost to subscribe to College Inside. But as a nonprofit newsroom, we rely on grants and donations. If you would like to support our work, please send a check made out to Open Campus Media to 1 Thomas Circle NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005.