An engineer bought a prison laptop on eBay. Then 1,200 incarcerated students lost their devices.

By Charlotte West

When Wenting Zhang bought a clear plastic laptop on eBay, he had no idea about the chain of events he would kick off. The device turned out to be a secure computer used for jail and prison education, and he was initially unable to get past a black login screen.

That’s because the laptop was working the way it was supposed to. Many typical features, such as a USB port, were missing because the device is designed to restrict users’ ability to communicate with the outside world.

Zhang, an electrical engineer in Boston, decided to post about trying to unlock his Justice Tech Solutions Securebook 5 on the social platform X. The thread went viral — also catching the attention of Washington corrections officials, who have used the device for college programming since 2020.

Of particular concern was an article about Zhang’s thread published on a hacker website that shared the default password for the underlying software that starts the laptop’s operating system, presenting what the Department of Corrections considered a security concern.

The department then announced Thursday, five days after Zhang’s viral post, that it would collect all secure laptops from incarcerated students statewide “to provide an immediate system update.” By Saturday, corrections staff had collected around 1,200 laptops, spokesperson Chris Wright said in an email.

Wright confirmed no one incarcerated in Washington prisons had attempted to unlock their devices but said the decision was “made out of an abundance of caution.” It wasn’t immediately clear whether other states whose corrections departments use Securebook 5 laptops have also pulled the devices.

“DOC recognizes how crucial educational programming is and we do everything we can to avoid disruption to classes,” Wright said in an email.

Students react

Students said they were given little information about when and if the devices would be returned, and many wondered if they’d lose access to the work saved on the laptops, which need to be placed into a dock to upload or download information. Students enrolled in community colleges also expressed concern that they lost access to their devices immediately before winter quarter finals.
Steven Pawlak, who’s incarcerated at Washington Corrections Center in Shelton, said the laptop issued to him in January at the beginning of his first college course has been a huge help. While he meets with his Centralia College instructor and fellow students twice a week, he works exclusively on the laptop, as the teacher has all the students doing math problems using Excel spreadsheets rather than by hand. “We already have computers,” he said his instructor told him. “You don’t need to be one.”

After his laptop was collected at the beginning of March, Pawlak was frustrated because he doesn’t know when he’ll get it back. “If this is how my first class goes, I have no idea what the rest will be like,” he said.

Students enrolled in the bachelor’s program through the University of Puget Sound, in collaboration with the Freedom Education Project Puget Sound (FEPPS), were particularly frustrated because they’re in the final semester of their program.

“This is a critical moment because students in our BA program are preparing to graduate and finish research and writing for their capstone projects,” said Tanya Erzen, faculty director and former executive director of FEPPS. “It’s already a struggle to conduct research without access to the internet or databases, and this will only exacerbate the situation.”

Several women at Gig Harbor’s Washington Correctional Center for Women reported that they were placed on lockdown Friday while correctional officers came to collect the laptops.

They were told the laptops needed an update, but “they wouldn’t come in like it was a raid for a simple systems update,” said Lisa Kanamu, one of the prospective FEPPS graduates.

She’s not looking forward to the possibility of having the hand write her papers again. “Can you imagine writing a 12-page paper and needing to make significant changes on page two? You have to rewrite the entire paper,” she said.

Other students in a community college coding and web design program said they were informed web development classes were canceled until further notice.

Security concerns

Wright said the department was concerned students could use the default administrative password to reset the laptops and “remove the security framework,” allowing them to install new operating systems and “override all security protocols.”

Securebooks, like most prison tech, are programmed to only boot up from the operating system that’s installed on them, said Jessica Hicklin, the chief technology officer at Unlocked Labs, a St. Louis education tech nonprofit that uses Securebooks and other Justice Tech hardware.

That operating system is set up so the user can only access certain programs and files. “Most corrections departments are nervous about incarcerated users having full access to administrative functions of the operating system,” she said.

Hicklin, who’s formerly incarcerated, said the Washington officials’ decision to pull the laptops was unnecessary given the limited amount of potential for actual harm. “As long as the network is properly secured, then there is no real credible security threat,” Hicklin said.

But former corrections officials from Washington and other states found the decision reasonable, given the possible security concerns.

The man who made the devices said there’s little someone inside could actually do with a hacked Securebook. They’d need to fashion a USB port, be able to install another operating system, and get access to a docking station, said Jeremy Schwartz, Justice Tech president. Even when the devices are docked, they’re not connected to the wider internet.

“A lot of states actually felt very good when they got into the technical details of the levels of security that were there,” he said, noting that the work of outside hackers couldn’t be replicated in a prison environment. “That’s why it went viral.”

So how does a prison laptop end up on eBay?

The laptop that Zhang bought came from a state whose corrections department contracts with a Milwaukee-based nonprofit to dispose of its old laptops. But instead of recycling the devices, the organization resold them, selling out of 100 Securebooks after Zhang’s post went viral.
It’s not uncommon to find personal tablets from prison tech companies on reseller sites. In some places, incarcerated people pay for their own music and communication devices and are allowed to take them when they’re released.

But it’s much more unusual for secure laptops to find their way to the internet marketplace. Justice Tech only sells devices directly to colleges, correctional agencies and other organizations that work with incarcerated learners, not to individuals, Schwartz said.

Stacy Burnett, who oversees a program at research organization ITHAKA that allows incarcerated people to access research materials, said many prison officials have done the best they can in building technology infrastructure, but security concerns sometimes require them to shut everything down.

“In those instances,” she said, “the only line of defense is to confiscate student devices until the problem is diagnosed, isolated, and resolved.”

“It can take months, and creates considerable disruption for the students and the colleges or vocational program providers.”

Washington corrections officials said they’re working to minimize disruptions for incarcerated learners by expediting delivery of new Securebooks in late March, backing up student work and increasing lab time on desktop computers. The department also expects students from the women’s prison bachelor’s program to be able to earn their degrees on time.

Tomas Keen, a writer incarcerated at Washington Corrections Center in Shelton, contributed reporting. This story was co-published by The Seattle Times on Mar. 4, 2024.

I’m an atheist enrolled in a prison seminary

By Phillip Vance Smith, II

I walked laps around the beaten red clay track on the rec yard at Nash Correctional with a Muslim friend who told me, “You’ll learn a lot in the seminary, but the professors have no problem condemning you to hell for not following Christ.” He was in his second year in the North Carolina Field Minister Program.

As an atheist considering enrolling in the program, I needed to learn everything I could. “So they accept all faiths, but they don’t tolerate those faiths once they’re in school?” I asked.

“It’s not about what they tolerate,” he said. “It’s about you tolerating what they preach in order to get a college degree as a man serving life without parole.”

He was right. I had no other option for education. North Carolina ended state funding for higher education in prisons in 2011, opting instead to offer only vocational training at select facilities. And while higher education in North Carolina prisons might be expanding with the return of Pell Grants last summer, those serving longer than 10 years, especially lifers like me, are currently excluded. If I wanted a college degree, I had to enter the field ministry program. Graduates of the program earn a bachelor’s degree in pastoral ministry through the College at Southeastern, the undergraduate school of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, a regionally accredited private not-for-profit college.

Seminaries emerged as a form of higher education in prisons after the federal government eliminated Pell Grants for incarcerated people in 1994. With the first starting at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, there are now more than 20 across the country. All follow the Angola archetype of being funded solely by private donations. While the state of North Carolina has refused to fund prison education for lifers, it has been eager to embrace financially independent programs and to display incarcerated graduates as shining examples of moral rehabilitation. Nevermind that most participants are lifers destined to die in prison.

The field ministry program deploys its graduates to prisons across the state to proselytize to other prisoners. Seminary programs with this model are not meant to bolster education where it lacks in carceral systems. By only accepting those serving decades behind bars, the seminary program guarantees the extended servitude of agents employing Jesus in an attempt to emasculate the violent prison culture.

I know this because I enrolled in the fall of 2019.

A differing opinion

As an atheist, I am not an enemy of religion. My earliest memories depict me squirming in an ill-fitting suit on the red velvet pews of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s church. I disavowed belief in a deity after studying how Romans blended their rituals with Christianity to create the Catholic church. Looking past the mysticism supporting religion helped me view all faiths as modern mythologies, not realities. My opinions differ from many, but I never profess to be right about anything. For me, belief is preference, not a provable fact. I entered the field ministry
As a seminarian I witnessed the unconstitutional merger of church and state daily. According to North Carolina’s prison policy, incarcerated field ministers cannot serve as clergy because ministry roles extend leadership over others. Unofficially, students and graduates are encouraged to preach in cell blocks, hold raucous weekend revivals, and host Christmas parties that unfairly infringe on non-Christians. From what I’ve seen, no other faith group is allowed to hold religious ceremonies aside from their allotted one-hour weekly service.

Prison officials give preferential treatment to Christianity because they consider it safer than other faiths, such as Islam, by promoting good old fashioned Southern Baptist values.

During junior year, my Christian ethics professor stood at the head of class shouting, “Exodus 20:24 declares ‘an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, and a death for a death!’” He was trying to justify the death penalty in a classroom full of men who had been convicted of murder. Similar tone-deaf sermons masqueraded as college lectures in most classes, and Christian students usually agreed with the professors’ declaration of their own condemnation. Professors sought me out for a differing opinion.

“Since you don’t believe in creation,” my theology professor began, “how did the world come into existence?”

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“If you don’t believe in God, surely you believe in Darwinian evolution! The big bang theory!”

“I don’t believe in anything,” I said coolly. “I don’t know how the world began. I wasn’t there, and neither were you.”

Our theological discussions usually ended in the professor’s frustration. For them, the Bible offered an inerrant authority in all things. For me, the Bible fostered a flawed compilation of ancient religions that presented more questions than answers about life, morality, and the origin of Earth. If the Bible considered abortion murder, no shift in modern thought could convince them otherwise. Professors asked my opinion not because they cared, but because they wanted to argue their position.

In American literature, we studied how slave masters exploited the Bible to justify slavery by labeling a slave’s condition God’s will. I found seminarian programming no different. Program leadership preached obedience to, and acceptance of, our draconian prison sentences as God’s will and expected us to teach others the same. I vocally disagreed.

Seminary faculty often pointed to data suggesting these programs lessen prison violence. What they don’t mention is that the same data they quoted would also show how public, secular colleges could achieve, or do achieve, similar results. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has always credited education with reducing recidivism and violence. Violent recidivism remains one of the greatest public fears when discussing criminal justice reform. Reductions in violence cannot solely be attributed to Christian college programs, especially when participants explain how religious programs are not what they appear to be.

Geoff Martin has served 21 years of a life without parole sentence. He entered the field ministry program as a “moderately engaged” Christian with “no real interest in theology.” After graduating, Geoff now identifies as an agnostic who is “no longer committed to Christianity.” Geoff believes the seminary can benefit the prison system, but “thinking critically about theology,” as a result of his theological studies, made him doubt Christianity.

Robert Odom, a Muslim lifer who served 20 years, transferred after graduation in December 2022. Before deploying, he was concerned that he would be forced to reach character-based classes, such as Thinking for a Change and Fatherhood Accountability. Both classes were formerly taught by salaried employees, not field ministers earning $3 a day. Odom said he doesn’t like being used as a supplemental state employee.

If given a chance, Martin and Odom, who were both incarcerated with me at Nash Correctional Institution before they were transferred to be field ministers, would have rather attended a secular, public college than a Christian school.

There’s no freedom of choice

After finishing junior year, I was forcibly removed from the seminary when school officials found an article I typed for a law journal on my flash drive. Using school computers for personal projects is an ethics’ code violation. I was told the expulsion would last one year. I hated leaving for a number of reasons.

Although I do not believe in a deity, I learned how to think critically by examining every piece of literature I read. I enjoyed helping others learn the difficult skill of academic writing. And I hated losing my only chance to earn a bachelor’s degree as a man serving life without parole. Currently, for people like me, there is no freedom of choice for education in North Carolina. It’s the seminary or nothing at all.

I reapplied the following year, but I was told that I didn’t seem repentant enough to atone for my transgression, so I was not readmitted.

How ironic. An atheist is not repentant enough.

Luckily I earned 96 credit hours to be applied toward a degree that I can finish through correspondence,
but it will cost thousands of dollars that I don’t have. No matter. I made the best of my education while it was available.

Several field minister cohorts have graduated and deployed to other prisons. There has been no specific change in prison culture since the seminary began classes at our institution in 2017, and I don’t believe there will be. Field ministers cannot transform prison culture as long as carceral systems refuse to address systemic deficiencies like poverty in prison with low paying job assignments, drug addiction with no drug treatment programs, and lengthy mandatory minimum sentences that cannot be reduced through a display of positive transformation. Improving the criminal justice system is too much for field ministers to handle alone without meaningful changes to the damaging laws that created the negative prison culture in the first place.

Illinois state senator provides incarcerated men a chance to shape policies that impact them

By Charlotte West

When Rachel Ventura was running for the Illinois State Senate in 2022, she agreed to meet with a group of incarcerated men interested in public policy.

The men were ready for her. They wanted to know if this was more than a one-time, politically opportunistic visit. Would she ever come back? If she won, would she consider them her constituents?

And they had a proposal: Hire someone like us as an intern.

The following spring, Ventura, a Democrat, became the first state senator in Illinois — and likely the country — to offer a legislative internship behind bars.

Stateville Correctional Center is in Ventura’s district, but Illinois law prevents the more than 3,000 men that reside there — as well as anyone who is serving time in prison — from voting. The internship offered a way for them to help shape the criminal justice policies that directly affect them.

“The incarcerated community is perhaps the largest group of people who are impacted by policy they have absolutely no say in,” said Raul Dorado, one of Ventura’s current interns.

In my experience, prison seminaries are a novelty for states to extol, not a necessary solution to mass incarceration.

Phillip Vance Smith, II has been incarcerated for 22 years. His collection of poetry, “LIFE: Learning Instructions For Everyone...in prison and out,” was released by Bleakhouse Publishing in 2024. This essay was published on March 6, 2024.

More experiential learning in prison

Prison educators do their best to offer incarcerated students the same academic experience as students on campus. But students in prison rarely have access to experiential learning like internships that are essential to a college education. And there is little opportunity for people to use their degrees inside.

A few places are starting to address this gap in programming. In Colorado and Maine, incarcerated graduates of master’s degree programs have been allowed to teach undergraduate classes and get paid outside wages. Incarcerated paralegals and law students in Minnesota have done externships with law firms. Several prison education programs, including in Illinois, hire former students to work as tutors or teaching assistants, sometimes as their official prison job assignment.

Ventura said one of her initial concerns with offering an internship at Stateville was that she didn’t want to exploit the participants’ labor. As a result, she worked with DePaul University so they could earn college credit for their work at no cost to them.

Eric Watkins, who was the first to propose the idea to Ventura, said while education inside has expanded somewhat in recent years, opportunities to use that education have not.

Most jobs in prison rely on physical labor, not on professional skills. Opportunities such as Ventura’s internship recognize inside graduates’ accomplishments: They are seen and valued as “able-minded people” who can contribute to society, not just “able-bodied people” who keep the prison, said Watkins, who earned a master’s degree from North Park Theological Seminary.
Creating an internship behind bars

It’s been nearly a year since Ventura hired the first incarcerated intern, Lynn Green. At the time, Green was an undergraduate student at Northwestern University and serving a 50-year sentence. Green has since earned his bachelor’s. Much of Green’s internship was spent figuring out the logistics of running such a program behind bars. Ventura, for instance, learned that using paper clips could prevent documents from getting to the interns for weeks because of security concerns.

Unlike the interns on Ventura’s staff at her office in Joliet, Green didn’t have access to the internet, a workspace or even a computer. He was reliant on outside staff for research support and faced challenges with communication. At one point, he lost almost all his paperwork and research when he was reassigned to another housing unit.

Green’s work primarily focused on juvenile justice reform. Last year, Ventura filed a bill that would have shut down county juvenile detention facilities and transferred their authority to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. The bill was an attempt to provide oversight to county detention centers, including one that was shut down by the courts at the end of 2023 for failure to meet state standards for care of youth in custody.

Ventura wanted to take a different approach in a new juvenile justice bill, so she had Green scour through inspection reports of county youth detention facilities to catalog the most egregious breaches of state standards and identify solutions such as alternative sentencing and wraparound services. Green did his work in a parking space-sized cell with the constant din of feet plodding up stairs to the upper tiers of his cell block. He often felt isolated. He kept going because, above all, he didn’t want to let the senator down.

Green also interviewed men at Stateville who had served time in youth facilities about their experiences and what interventions could have made a difference for them. Their stories helped demonstrate why the bill is important, Ventura said.

As a result of Green’s experience, Ventura decided to expand the number of interns to allow them to work together as a cohort. She also hired another outside intern, Jenny Schulty, to serve as a dedicated liaison between her office and the incarcerated interns.

In January, three new incarcerated interns, Joe Dole, Dorado and Watkins, came on board. Green has also stayed on with the official title of “legislative intern mentor.”

Between the four of them, the interns already have years of experience working on legislation and policy. For instance, Dole and Dorado co-founded a nonprofit, Parole Illinois, tackling issues related to parole, which was eliminated in Illinois in 1978.

Ventura also recently filed a bill Dole wrote last year that would remove a provision in the Illinois corrections code that increases sentences as a way to “deter others from committing the same crime.” Currently, that provision can be used to increase how long someone has to serve, but the way those sentences are calculated is extremely complicated and opaque, Ventura said.

“Who even knows that that person got an increased sentence as a deterrent to the rest of the people in the community?” she said.

That bill, Ventura said, is a direct result of working with Dole. He had unique insight into identifying problems with the current sentencing structure that Ventura said she wouldn’t have recognized on her own.

Setting an example

The men say Ventura’s support helps elevate the work they were already doing.

“It gives us a chance to set an example of what other incarcerated men here can accomplish if they set their minds to using their time productively,” said Dole, who like Dorado graduated from Northeastern Illinois University.

They also stress how rare their situation is among the incarcerated population, both in terms of the internship as well as the degree programs available to them. Stateville currently has four universities and a community college offering classes there because of its proximity to Chicago; many prisons in Illinois don’t offer any higher education opportunities at all. They are also unique because they all had life or de facto life sentences and have been able to earn a degree.

Ventura has had other state lawmakers reach out to find out more about how they might run a similar program, she said. In addition, she recently expanded the program to include two interns confined within the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, which faced a programming gap for young people who remained in custody after completing high school.

Ventura’s understanding of her own role has also evolved after working with the men at Stateville. She originally wondered, “If I want to be the voice for the voiceless, what does that look like?”

She quickly realized that she was asking the wrong question.

“They are very much not voiceless,” she said. “My job is not to be their voice. My job is to provide the platform.”

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An incarcerated instructor taught that Jim Crow literacy tests were racist. Then he was fired.

By Charlotte West

An incarcerated educator was fired from his teaching job at an Illinois prison after arguing with a prison counselor about whether he could teach students that literacy tests given to voters during the Jim Crow era were a racist attempt to suppress the Black vote.

Now the instructor, Anthony McNeal, is suing in federal court, claiming the counselor and the prison warden violated his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights.

McNeal was teaching a peer-led civics class the state is required to provide for people exiting prison at Centrailia Correctional Center in southern Illinois. At the end of February, a federal lawsuit against the counselor and the prison warden was filed on behalf of McNeal, who said he was fired because he told students the literacy tests were racist.

“This case is about a prisoner, a Black man who was teaching about the history of racism in the South and the suppression of Black votes, who got fired for telling the truth,” said McNeal’s attorney, Alan Mills.

A spokesperson for the Illinois Department of Corrections wrote in an email that they cannot comment on ongoing litigation.

**Voter education inside**

The Re-Entering Citizens Civics Education Act, which went into effect on Jan. 1, 2020, requires Illinois prisons to educate incarcerated people about their voting rights in the year before they are released. The law says the program should be taught by trained peer instructors who will provide students with “nonpartisan information on voting history procedures.”

McNeal began teaching the civics course in 2019 while he was incarcerated at Pontiac Correctional Center. He offered to teach it at Centrailia Correctional Center after he was transferred there in early 2022.

According to the lawsuit, McNeal taught the class at Centrailia for almost a year before he was fired. On March 1, 2023, a student in the class asked McNeal about the Jim Crow laws. McNeal then described the use of poll taxes and literacy tests as a means to suppress the Black vote.

Nathan Tucker, the prison counselor supervising the class, interrupted McNeal and instructed him to present literacy tests “as having a legitimate nondiscriminatory purpose of ensuring that voters ‘knew what they were voting for,’” according to the complaint. Tucker did not respond to a request for comment.

McNeal argued that the fact that Jim Crow laws were intended to suppress the Black vote was part of the curriculum and was covered under the 2019 law.

At the end of class, Tucker demanded that McNeal hand over his teaching notes. When McNeal refused, the counselor had an officer confiscate the notes, according to the lawsuit.

In a subsequent disciplinary report provided verbatim in the complaint, Tucker wrote that McNeal said the Jim Crow laws were “all about racism to black [sic] people.” He said he intervened when he saw the class “start engaging with the racist direction McNeal was leading them down.” McNeal continued to argue with him, Tucker wrote, and he “was worried that the class would get out of order.”

Tucker’s disciplinary report charged McNeal with insolence, disobeying a direct order and bringing unauthorized material (his teaching notes) into the class. Tucker also noted that McNeal “argued against me in front of my class.”
A contested history of voting

Professor Christina Rivers, who teaches African American politics at DePaul University, wrote the section of the voter education curriculum that focused on poll taxes and literacy tests, which were used mainly in the South from the late 1800s until the 1960s to prevent Black people from voting.

“We wanted people who are on the inside to understand why voting is important,” she said. “So I wrote it to put voting in fuller context and to make sure that people understand that voting has always been contested in this country, particularly for people of color and African Americans.”

If instructors are being told not to call literacy tests racist, that’s an example of “complete willful ignorance of painful truths,” Rivers said. “This isn’t even critical race theory, it’s just history.”

Critical race theory — an academic and legal approach that holds that systemic racism is part of American society — has been the target of conservative groups through attempts to ban books about race in schools and libraries.

The idea for the voter education bill came out of a public policy think tank that Rivers runs at Stateville, a men’s maximum security prison outside of Chicago. Access to information about the political process is important because many people who are exiting prison in Illinois don’t know that their voting rights are restored as soon as they step outside the prison gates, Rivers said.

One of Rivers’s students, Michael Simmons, suggested that the voter education be taught by peer educators, who already run reentry workshops on topics such as employment and healthcare.

Using peer facilitators made it not only more likely that students would engage with the material, but also difficult for the corrections department to object on the basis of cost, Rivers said. The peer teachers don’t get paid, but they can earn credit toward getting time off their sentences.

Brian Beals taught the civics education class at two prisons before he was exonerated last December after serving 35 years for a crime he didn’t commit. He said that he never received any pushback when he was teaching the curriculum, but he’s not surprised by what McNeal alleges. Some of the staff who were supervising the classes he taught had never been exposed to the material he was teaching about the history of race and voting rights, he said.

Beals said many of the incarcerated students he taught thought that voting didn’t matter, but after the workshop “we saw quite a turnaround in that attitude.”

Since the voter education law, which passed with nearly unanimous, bipartisan support, went into effect in 2020, around 350 incarcerated peer educators have been trained, according to the nonprofit Chicago Votes which helps provide the civics training.

A matter of civic engagement

McNeal, who had previously been a certified peer educator on topics such as HIV prevention, wrote in an email to Open Campus that he wanted to teach the civics class because he wanted “to help them see that the major problems they saw within our communities could be solved with a ballot in the voting booth.”

His attorney Mills, who is executive director of the civil rights law firm Uptown People’s Law Center, said the incident at Centralia isn’t necessarily a reflection of the positions of Gov. JB Pritzker or Latoya Hughes, the acting director of the Illinois Department of Corrections. The law center filed the complaint to clarify that peer educators can’t be fired for teaching the approved curriculum, Mills said, and that McNeal didn’t do anything wrong.

If he were to prevail, McNeal would not be able to receive any monetary damages, which federal law prevents prisoners from receiving unless there has been a physical injury. “This lawsuit is not about money,” McNeal wrote.

He sees it as an act of civic engagement — the type of action he was teaching his students about: “It is about cutting through a culture of racism and unfair and inequitable [treatment] that are pervasive throughout the Illinois Department of Corrections.”

This story was co-published by WBEZ Chicago on March 21, 2024.
Georgia State University pulls the plug on prison education

By Charlotte West

Georgia State University is blaming federal rules for the return of Pell Grants as a primary reason for its decision to close its prison education program this summer.

The program won’t admit any new students but the university said it has a plan to help currently enrolled students at two state prisons finish their programs, which could take up to two years.

Officials cited the administrative challenges of securing federal financial aid, as well as a $24 million budget shortfall, as factors leading to the university’s decision to halt classes at three correctional facilities, according to a statement sent to Open Campus. The program has been operating since 2016.

Pell Grants are the federal financial aid for low-income students. In July 2023, incarcerated students became widely eligible for the grants for the first time since the 1994 crime bill, which banned federal financial aid for prison education. More than 750,000 students are now eligible for aid, but they must be at a correctional facility that offers a college program approved by the federal Education Department.

“These students have been disappointed in their lives over and over and over again,” said Katherine Perry, an English professor at Perimeter College, which is part of Georgia State. She was one of the three faculty members who co-founded the prison education program in 2016.

“For me, it’s so important that they not put education in that bucket of things that let them down because that’s why most of them didn’t get their education before.”

Perry felt blindsided when faculty and staff received an email at the end of November from Cynthia Y. Lester, interim dean of Perimeter College, announcing the decision. The email cited “financial constraints and the substantial administrative demands” of seeking Pell approval from the federal Education Department.

“The decision was not made lightly, but it does reflect the university’s commitment to responsible fiscal management and ensuring existing educational initiatives receive the necessary support and resources,” Lester wrote in the email.

The program has received at least $700,000 in grants since 2022, which may help fund the program for continuing students. In 2023, Georgia State also received a $669,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation to fund a literary journal that will publish incarcerated writers.

Students at the two state prisons have also been able to use Pell Grants since 2020.

According to the statement, Georgia State University faced a substantial budget cut of $24.4 million in fiscal year 2024 and anticipates another shortfall next year. The university estimated that the instructional and administrative costs of operating its prison education program across three correctional facilities would be around $180,000 in addition to money that they have received from donors.

The university also noted the challenges of meeting the “complex requirements” and “ongoing commitments” of the Pell application process, including navigating the paperwork for the federal Education Department, the accreditation process, and meeting key indicators such as job placement, expected earnings, recidivism rates, and completion rates. The spokesperson also expressed concerns about Georgia State’s ability to commit to providing services such as tutoring, counseling, and career guidance to incarcerated students.

Georgia State is exploring alternative avenues to recognize “the importance of supporting the educational needs of individuals
Big questions about the future

At the end of March, Georgia State students launched a campaign calling on the university to reverse the decision. As of Wednesday, 46 faculty members had also signed a letter of support asking Provost Nicolle Parsons-Pollard to continue the program.

Some experts in the field are also concerned about what Georgia State’s decision to shutter its program might foreshadow for other college-in-prison programs across the state and country.

“We have the fourth largest prison system in the country and we have a really underserved population here,” said Stacy Bell, an English professor at Emory University and board member of the Georgia Coalition for Higher Education in Prison. “And without Georgia State, it raises really big questions about what’s happening to the higher education in prison movement here in Georgia right now.”

There are currently around 50,000 people incarcerated in the state. The Georgia Department of Corrections did not respond to a request for comment.

Ruth Delaney, director of the Unlocking Potential initiative at the Vera Institute, a nonprofit that provides technical assistance to prison education programs, expressed disappointment at the decision.

“The federal regulations for Pell-funded prison education program require colleges to deliver postsecondary educational programming that is of comparable quality to that which the students at the other location of the college receive,” she said. “Many of the services, reporting, and processes GSU describes are standard practices that accredited colleges already follow to serve their non-incarcerated student bodies.”

Last May, nine men at Walker State Prison in Rock Springs earned their associate’s degrees from Georgia State, becoming the university’s first class to graduate inside. Three more incarcerated students at Phillips State Prison in Buford graduated in December.

“For me, it’s so important that they not put education in that bucket of things that let them down because that’s why most of them didn’t get their education before.”

- Katherine Perry

Around 19 students at the federal United States Penitentiary Atlanta started their associate’s degree in September through Georgia State. In January, university officials announced they would no longer be continuing to offer classes at the penitentiary. Georgia State then asked the University of West Georgia, which is planning to launch a Pell-funded bachelor’s program at the federal facility in the fall, if they would accept the associate’s students, according to Tiffany Parsons, a sociologist and director of West Georgia’s prison education program.

West Georgia currently offers classes toward a bachelor’s degree to one cohort at Hays State Prison, a maximum security men’s prison. It’s one of two prison bachelor’s programs in the state, Parsons said.

The other four-year program is offered at Lee Arrendale, a women’s prison, through Life University. That program is also in flux after corrections officials announced last year they were downsizing the prison.

Faculty have been working with the students at the penitentiary to help with the transition, Parsons said. She will be going into the federal facility to better understand what the students’ needs are and what kinds of support services West Georgia can provide going forward. “We will have to be there a while and earn those students’ trust,” she said.

The incarcerated students were informed about the decision in mid-February. Perry, the English professor, said her students at Walker seemed fearful that they wouldn’t be able to finish their degrees, despite assurances that Georgia State had a “teachout plan,” including the possibility of another college picking up the program in the state prisons.

“Maybe it’s because they’re so used to systems letting them down,” Perry said.

A teachout plan outlines how an institution will help its students graduate if it stops operating before all students have completed their programs. Georgia State did not respond to follow-up questions about the details of its plan.

Many of the students who graduated in 2023 began their associate’s program when the program started in 2016, so it’s unclear how the current students, most of whom started last fall, will finish within two years.

Perry said the students asked her to quantify the odds that they’d be able to finish with Georgia State. One student felt particularly strongly about graduating from the same college because his kids were also enrolled at the university.

Just like on the outside, incarcerated students feel that being at a particular college is part of their identity as a student. “That’s what it means to be a proud Panther,” Perry said.

This story was published on March 21, 2024.
Every prison library in Illinois is getting a copy of a book about the Attica prison riot

By Charlotte West

When Pulitzer Prize-winning author Heather Ann Thompson sent a copy of her 2016 book “Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising and Its Legacy” to three people locked up in Illinois prisons, two of the three copies were rejected because of security concerns.

So she sued.

Last year, the Illinois Department of Corrections settled the 2018 federal lawsuit by agreeing to approve “Blood in the Water”. Thompson’s publisher sent “Blood in the Water” to all prison libraries across Illinois this month.

The corrections department also agreed to pay Thompson, a professor of history and Afroamerican and African studies at the University of Michigan, $8,500. The civil rights law firm Uptown People’s Law Center represented Thompson in the suit.

“Blood in the Water,” which won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize, details the deadly uprising at Attica, a men’s maximum security prison in upstate New York, on Sept. 9, 1971. More than 1,000 prisoners took over the facility, taking 39 correctional officers as hostages. Forty-three people died during the riot, 11 hostages and 32 prisoners. The rioting men were demanding better living conditions and political rights. New York started offering higher education in prison in the mid-1970s partly in response to the riot.

“I am thrilled that my book for folks to access,” Thompson wrote in an email to Open Campus. “Despite earlier civil rights victories to ensure people could read inside, prisons have become ground zero for book banning, just as have schools.”

In 2018, a corrections officer rejected one of the copies of “Blood in the Water” that Thompson sent to an individual at Pontiac Correctional Center, stating that it contained descriptions of activities that may lead to violence or disruption; encouraged criminal activity; and was “otherwise detrimental to security, good order, rehabilitation, or discipline.” The officer testified during a deposition that the man who received the book could use it “as a potential guideline and process by which to take a hostage, take over an institution.”

Thompson said she believes she succeeded in her suit because her claims in the Illinois case, and in a similar effort in New York, were based on her First Amendment right as an author. It is much more difficult to sue on behalf of prisoners because of restrictions placed on them by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, a 1995 law passed by Congress in response to a sharp rise in prisoner lawsuits in federal courts.

According to the Marshall Project’s database of banned books by state, other states that have banned Thompson’s book include Ohio, North Carolina, and Texas. The latter state banned the book for “sexually explicit images,” which Thompson said refer to photos of naked men being tortured during the Attica riot.

“This story was co-published by WBEZ Chicago on March 28, 2024.
With an incarcerated parent, pursuing a law degree was the natural choice

By Charlotte West

Mick Guile is a first-year law student studying at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law in Baltimore. As an undergraduate at Temple University, she received a scholarship from ScholarCHIPS, a nonprofit organization that supports the children of incarcerated parents. Guile graduated from Temple with a degree in criminal justice in 2023, inspired by growing up with a father who is incarcerated.

Guile, who uses she/they pronouns, explained the complications of navigating a parental relationship in 15-minute phone calls, and how family incarceration impacted their choice of careers. They last saw their dad, who is in prison in Michigan, during senior year of high school.

This conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Q: How has having an incarcerated parent impacted you and your educational journey?

A: Me and my dad were very lucky that my mother, despite their ups and downs, made sure that we stayed in contact with each other. My father has been incarcerated since 2002. Since I was 1, so basically, my whole life. His earliest release is in 2027 and max release is in 2052. He’s also in Michigan, which is very inaccessible to me since I’m in Maryland.

I don’t want to say ‘surprisingly’ because I don’t want it to be a standard that children of incarcerated parents don’t succeed, but he’s been one of my biggest motivators. Ever since I was a kid, he was always asking about my accomplishments. He’s been my number one hype man. Sometimes we’ll just be talking and he’ll get excited about nothing. I’ll be talking about something that I saw on the news, and he’ll be like ‘My baby girl was so smart. She’s so intelligent.’

As I got older, I was able to have conversations with him about history, politics, things like that. That encouraged me to get as much knowledge as I could. It really was a way for me to connect with my dad and also get praise from him. All kids want to be praised by their parents. I still do and I’m not even a kid anymore.

He must have been thrilled about law school?

Oh, my gosh, he could not have been any happier. Every time we got on the phone and there was a new acceptance he would be bouncing off the wall. I told him I got waitlisted at a school and I was breaking down crying. He was like, ‘Congratulations.’ I was like, ‘That’s horrible. You don’t want that.’ He was like, ‘But you didn’t get rejected.’

When you were younger, did you ever feel like people lowered their expectations for you if they knew that your father was in prison?

I think it has a lot to do with where you grow up. I was talking to another ScholarCHIPS recipient. She grew up in the suburbs, so her parent being incarcerated, it was a shock. But where I grew up was a majority Black county, and unfortunately, Black people make up a large proportion of the justice system. So nobody was really shocked. It was more like pity. I don’t want to say people lowered their expectations for me, but it’s more like they started to be a lot more amazed with whatever I was doing.

Has your father’s incarceration impacted how you approached your criminal justice major and now law school? You have some unique insights into the way in which the system functions.

I didn’t start thinking about it that deeply until recently, thanks to law school. At the time, I might have a little thing in the back of my mind that’s like, ‘What does that mean?’ But I would just naturally take a compliment. But now I feel like... don’t temper your expectations for me. Don’t pity me, just be happy for me.

It definitely impacted what I want to do when I graduate. I want to go into criminal law. And if you’re going to criminal law, there’s two places you can go: defense or prosecution. Prosecution was immediately out of the question for me.
I’m a Black person. That just doesn’t feel right. And I had a professor who said, ‘Would you rather there be no Black people in the prosecutor’s office? Would you rather it be all white people doing this job?’

I thought about it for a while, but then I just kept thinking about my dad. I would like to become a judge one day, but that also puts me in the same position where the time would probably come where I would have to say, ‘Yeah, take that guy away.’ Just thinking that there might be a kid like me who wouldn’t have a parent because of that is a little troubling.

It also had an effect on me in the way that I view prisons and issues related to incarceration. For example, my dad is the perfect example of sentencing disparities. His charge was armed robbery. Here in Maryland, the maximum sentence for armed robbery is 25. In Michigan, the minimum that he’s serving is 25 years. I don’t know if that would have even crossed my mind if he wasn’t there.

You said earlier that you didn’t have a dad who was able to be present in your day-to-day life. Even though he’s your hype man, he can’t be there at milestones such as graduation. Is that something you’ve talked about with him?

It’s difficult to grapple with because it’s something that he feels bad about. And on the other side, it’s something that I still feel a small amount of resentment about, especially considering the timing of things — I was already born when he was arrested. Now that I’m older, he’s talked to me more about why he did what he did and the trauma that led to him becoming addicted to drugs, which led to him committing the offense.

I know that now and logically, if somebody put this story in front of me, I would see that this person was failed. He had trauma, he asked for help, and he wasn’t helped. But as his child, I still feel his absence really heavily.

When I was younger, I would be like, ‘Maybe he’ll be home, and everybody will surprise me with him.’ And of course, that never happened. And going on field trips with school when I was younger, my mom couldn’t go because she’s disabled. And he couldn’t be there for obvious reasons. So people would have their dads there. And that would hurt just a little bit more than seeing the moms.

“I brag about my dad, even though I know where he is. And I know that he’s working to better himself...

As much as you can, improve yourself and become somebody that your kid can brag about.”

- Mick Guile

Whenever something goes wrong, he thinks, ‘Oh, if I was there, this wouldn’t have happened.’ And I’m like, ‘No, life does just tend to happen.’

But another thing is that sometimes he wants to try to parent me. Although I respect him as my dad, you can’t parent a 22-year-old, especially a 22-year-old that you haven’t raised. There’s always a temptation when something comes up to just be like, ‘Well, you weren’t there.’ But because I know that he feels so bad about that, I just kind of purse my lips and don’t say anything.

So every time I feel the words forming in my mouth, then I just don’t because I’m like, ‘It’s not worth it.’ Once he gets out, we might have a different situation.

Do you ever feel like sometimes you shield him from what you’re really feeling?

Your time with this person has been limited by circumstances outside of both of your control. So you don’t want to start a conflict or say something that can hurt somebody. But every now and then it can be pretty hard, because I want to be honest, but I also know that we only have this 15-minute phone call. If something happens in the middle of some sour conversation, where I’ve said something awful, and then we have to go and I don’t hear from him for another week, that’s a really bad feeling.

What would you say to all the parents on the inside?

I brag about my dad, even though I know where he is. And I know that he’s working to better himself while he’s in there. I know that resources are limited, but as much as you can, improve yourself and become somebody that your kid can brag about.

This story was published on April 4, 2024.
Many states don’t educate people sentenced to life. Now some are coming home.

By Charlotte West

When Yusef Qualls-El was 17, a judge sentenced him to life behind bars. It was the mid-1990s, an era when the U.S. prison population exploded.

Thousands of minors like Qualls-El received sentences of life without parole and entered prison at an age when their peers were going to college or starting their careers. But inside, education is often reserved for those who will soon return to society. As a result, those who were seen as the least likely to get out had the fewest opportunities.

Now, as courts and lawmakers have begun to rethink extreme sentencing policies for young people, thousands of those sentenced to spend their lives in prison are getting out. Suddenly, people who went to prison as teenagers are being released as middle-aged men and women.

Building a living-wage career — let alone going to school — often seems out of reach for people like Qualls-El, a 44-year-old with a criminal history and no formal education beyond a GED.

After he was resentenced in 2022, Qualls-El was still told no when he wanted to enroll in college. He didn’t have enough time left on his sentence to finish a degree. “I’ve spent 27-plus years plus in prison, hoping to get some sort of education, but wasn’t allowed, because of how much time I had left,” Qualls-El said on a call from prison at the end of 2022, about six months before he was released. “Now I have too little time.”

College is still something Qualls-El says he wants to do but he knows it will take some time. Before his release in June 2023, he wanted to earn a business degree to become an entrepreneur. But now, his priority is getting a job.

A recognition that kids are different

Qualls-El was convicted in 1995 of two counts of first-degree murder, and sentenced to mandatory life without parole in connection to shooting deaths of two people. He has maintained he was not the shooter, but Michigan law makes no distinction between the person who pulled the trigger and others who are present when a crime was committed. His sentence began not long after Congress passed the 1994 crime bill, which gutted most of the country’s prison education programs through the elimination of federal financial aid for incarcerated students. Although the national incarceration rate had been steadily increasing for decades, federal and state tough-on-crime policies dramatically increased the U.S. prison population.

Between 1995 and 2017, 11,600 individuals serving life without the possibility of parole were under 26 at the time of their sentence, according to a recent analysis by the Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy organization. Two-thirds were Black. And thousands more teenagers and young adults across the country were handed down sentences so long that they would die behind bars.

Things began to change as courts began to consider research that showed young people’s brains are not the same as older adults.

states began changing sentencing guidelines that automatically sent young people to prison for life. In 2016, the court ruled that those new guidelines should be applied retroactively, opening the door for juvenile lifers like Qualls-El to be resentenced.

Today, more than half of states have banned life sentences without the possibility of parole for people under 18. Some places, such as Washington D.C. and Michigan, have even begun to resentence those who were young adults when they committed their crimes. In January, Massachusetts became the first state to ban life without parole from people under 21.

While the sentencing reform means that thousands of people now have the opportunity to go before a judge, it doesn’t mean they are immediately being released, said Ashley Nellis, co-director of research at the Sentencing Project. Still, she said, policymakers need to be prepared to support this population as more people start to come home.
Limited education inside

While Qualls-El was in prison, Michigan excluded lifers from most educational opportunities. That’s not an anomaly. As of 2020, half of states imposed restrictions on participation in education based on the length of a person’s sentence, according to the Council of State Governments Justice Center.

In 2023, Michigan changed its policies to allow people with long sentences to access education following the return of Pell Grants for incarcerated people. About 130 students who are serving a sentence of life without the possibility of parole are now in college programs in the state, according to the Michigan Department of Corrections. That’s about 15 percent of the total student population inside.

But those who went to prison during the 1990s and 2000s came of age inside, missing out on key milestones. They often heard the same thing: Why should the state waste resources on educating them when they would never return to society?

As Qualls-El was trying to navigate an adult prison as a teenager, he was also trying to finish high school. But because he had no release date, he says he was always at the bottom of the waiting list.

“They didn’t want to put me in school at all,” he said. “But I convinced them to allow me to take my GED.”

He scored high enough on the high school equivalency exam to pass on the first try in 1998. That was the last formal credential that he earned during his 28-year incarceration, he said, aside from a food handler’s permit that only had a year of eligibility after he got out.

He did receive a range of certificates for completing limited programming run by the corrections department on things like food technology, hospitality and management, digital literacy and “Money Smart Computer Based Instruction.” The state of Michigan also gave him a “certificate of employability” signed by the corrections department education director when he was released. The certificate is intended to “help remove the stigma associated with hiring these citizens and eliminate the risk for employers,” according to the corrections department website.

While industry-recognized credentials can help improve employment options for formerly incarcerated people, certificates issued by corrections departments can have the opposite effect: indicating applicants’ criminal histories to employers, which could limit opportunities. One study found that there were nearly 14,000 laws and regulations that can restrict people with criminal histories from getting professional licenses, which are required for jobs ranging from health care to cosmetology.

Qualls-El’s only choice was to take charge of his own intellectual development, he said. He read, wrote and published poetry, and developed his artistic skills. He participated in the University of Michigan’s Prison Creative Arts Project, which puts on public exhibitions of work by incarcerated artists.

Lifers like Qualls-El who were released after decades in prison have one of the lowest recidivism rates of any group, according to several studies. Tarika Daftary-Kapur’s research on Philadelphia, which had the country’s highest number of juvenile lifers in the country at the time of the 2016 Supreme Court ruling, found that fewer than 1.5 percent were convicted again. Overall, about 40 percent of people who are released from prison go back within three years.

There’s also a psychological effect of getting out after thinking you never would, said Daftary-Kapur, a professor of justice studies at Montclair State University.

“Many of them look at this as the second chance they never thought they were going to get,” she said. “And it’s not something that they want to give up.”

Nevertheless, there’s still a sense of loss. It’s really hard to catch up for that lost time and lost ability. “I like to say they can’t reach their full potential.”

Success, she added, is about more than just not going back to prison.

The value of a degree in reentry

In the months before his release, Qualls-El wanted to enroll in a university program when he got out. But he quickly realized that balancing school and work — while also trying to rebuild his life — wasn’t realistic. Formerly incarcerated people are eight times less likely to complete college than the general public, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.
If he could have worked toward a degree during his 28 years inside, he said, he would be in a much better position to start his own business, which is his ultimate goal. It also could have eased his job search.

“There’s already a stigma attached to coming out of prison, so coming out of prison without an education limits my job prospects,” Qualls-El said. “Some of the jobs that were available to me were $11 an hour. How is a grown man supposed to support himself, really?”

For now, he’s found a promising path. After enrolling in truck driver training last fall, he earned his commercial driver’s license at the end of February.

Within two weeks, he found a job.

This story was co-published with the Washington Post on April 12, 2024.

Reader Response

“This article made my day! Many of us have come home and changed our lives around for the better!! I had the opportunity to create a small book club while in prison (BOP) and through this book club we had pushed each other to get our high school diploma. I created that same space when I came out in 06, and now I work for one of the best organizations in the country, Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, and we fight to ban life without parole for children and other extreme sentences.”

– Eddie B. Ellis, Maryland

“This is a great piece from Charlotte West about how lifers are often excluded from (already inadequate) educational programming in prison... This is yet another example of the way our system expects folks to succeed (become “rehabilitated” etc) and sets them up to fail.”

– Jody Kent Lavy, Washington D.C.

By Jason Gonzales and Charlotte West

David Carrillo often envisioned himself walking into a diner just like Jim’s Burger Haven in Thornton. Or maybe browsing in Walmart or some other store.

He had heard so many stories about others out on parole getting overwhelmed in new situations, especially after almost three decades in prison. He wanted to be prepared for his release at the end of January from the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility.

“I would kind of visualize myself walking through these different areas and being OK,” he said during an interview in April.

So far, as he’s transitioned into his new life, there have been very few moments where he’s felt uncomfortable, Carrillo said after eating Jim’s classic smash burger and fries. Sure, he has had to figure out his style — he really likes Levi’s — and the grocery brands he likes to eat and favorite restaurants.

But Carrillo, 49, has eased into exactly what he said he wanted to do before his release — continuing to teach and “pay it forward.”

After becoming one of the first incarcerated professors in the country to teach incarcerated students, Carrillo was released after Colorado Gov. Jared Polis granted him clemency in part due to his work as an Adams State University educator. Carrillo got back to the classroom just a week out of prison.

He works at Transcendence Recovery, a substance recovery center started by a colleague Carrillo served time with, where he said he gets to work with people struggling with addiction and help them “lift themselves up whenever they’re ready.”

He also works part-time at Red Rocks Community College assisting...
with the adult basic education certificate program the college is offering to students in prison. And this summer, he’ll rejoin Adams State as an adjunct professor teaching incarcerated students.

This time, though, he isn’t wearing the same green uniform as his students.

“I’m just hopeful that something great happens for all the people that I know and don’t know so they can get an opportunity to find another chance at life,” he said.

At the beginning of April, Chalkbeat Colorado and Open Campus caught up with Carrillo after his exit from prison. Here’s what he had to say about his reentry, goals as a teacher, and how he views his story:

‘A lot of discovery’

Carrillo had gone through the shock of a changing world once before. When he was younger and got out of juvenile detention as a teenager in the 1990s, he remembers getting overwhelmed by everything that changed after a year.

“Everything seemed so weird and strange to me,” he said.

This time, even after almost 30 years, the biggest shock was that he wasn’t as shocked by life on the outside.

He’s had at least one moment where he felt uncomfortable since his release. In a diner in Florence on the day he got out, he met with family and friends for breakfast. He ate with silverware and not a plastic spork for the first time in decades. He doesn’t even remember what he ordered because it was so amazing to be eating with his sister, but he said he felt anxiety creep up when a group of prison guards from the nearby federal penitentiary walked in to eat too.

He said his sister noticed a change in his mood. They wrapped up the meal and left.

Moments like that are rare, he said. Still, he has needed to navigate shopping for himself, although his sister offers her advice. He didn’t have a style, he said, because he wore a green prison uniform for almost his entire life. He also sought out healthier food than what he ate on the inside.

He also said he has to remember that he can use Google to get immediate answers to his questions rather than having to ask a friend or family member to look something up for him.

“There’s a lot of discovery going on,” Carrillo said.

Back in the classroom

Through Transcendence Recovery, Carrillo is learning how the business operates and has earned a certification to be a recovery coach that allows him to work directly with clients, he said.

In his part-time work with Red Rocks, he’s assisting faculty with an adult basic education certificate program. About 20 incarcerated students in the Colorado Department of Corrections are currently earning the certificate, which will allow them to work as GED tutors and peer mentors inside.

Carrillo said he’s excited to be part of an initiative that increases access to education for those inside: “It feels awesome to be able to Zoom back in on Fridays to help teach the program and to let everybody see me.”

The adult education certificate program is partially a response to staffing shortages within the corrections department. GED staff also have to act as guards, which takes time away from teaching.

Training incarcerated people as educators helps ensure that interruptions don’t derail incarcerated student’s education.

“Motivation is a hard thing to maintain inside,” he said. “And so when programs stop for an extended period of time, it’s kind of hard to maintain any kind of consistency and any motivation.”

He’s also excited to be part of the Adams State program in the summer. He will be teaching incarcerated students live on Zoom as well as working with students in the university’s print-based correspondence program.

Relating to his students’ struggles

Students trying to learn in prison face numerous challenges, and Carrillo knows exactly what they are going through.

One of the ways he has prioritized helping students during Zoom is by ensuring they get as much feedback as he can possibly provide them. He hasn’t gone back in since he was released. He enjoys being able to connect with his former students and others virtually, but he wishes they were out too.

Communication with people on the outside can be difficult, he said, and when he was completing his MBA through correspondence courses, most professors were willing to answer questions. But sometimes it would take a long time to communicate over snail mail.

“I hope to be able to answer my students as promptly as possible,” he said. “I want to give them a better opportunity to have timely information for their tests and everything like that.”

Teaching has opened up doors

Carrillo said that he started making better choices 15 years ago when he decided he wanted to take a different path. Those choices helped him build both a professional and personal network, including with corrections staff members.

“All of this stuff, the education and other programs, has allowed me to
walk out here and find a job. I still have a multitude of opportunities that if one happens to fall through,” Carrillo said. “Education on the inside, it also opened up more doors than just job opportunities.”

He's been invited to speak at a conference in Washington D.C. this summer. That's also a first – it’ll be his first trip since he was released.

“That wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the education that I did, and then becoming the first adjunct professor inside of DOC (the Colorado Department of Corrections.)”

His peers cheered when they heard he received clemency.

He's not sure just how much educating himself weighed into the decision, but it did help him change.

Carrillo said he was young when he went to prison. He didn't have much of an education. Over the years, as he decided to dedicate himself to learning, he grew as a person. He never actually expected his release to happen even as he prepared himself for the possibility.

His incarcerated peers cheered when they heard the news about his clemency.

“They were happy for me, but for themselves, they saw that there's opportunity here,” he said. “If that can happen for somebody with my background, what's possible for them?”

Reduced sentences may be eluding hundreds of people in Illinois prisons due to poor record keeping

By Charlotte West

By Carl Rogers’ calculations, he should be out of prison now.

But the Illinois Department of Corrections says his expected release date is in 2027.

Rogers is one of many people in Illinois prisons who believe they are not getting the full sentence reductions allowed under a new law that gives new credits for participating in education, work, and other programs.

As many as 1,000 people who are still in custody could be eligible for immediate release if they received proper sentence recalculations, according to Alan Mills, executive director of the civil rights law firm Uptown People’s Law Center.

There are inconsistencies in how the law is being applied at different facilities and poor recordkeeping. Meanwhile, a lack of transparency in how prison staff are calculating sentence credits has further complicated efforts by people inside to make sure they are getting appropriate credit for the work and education they’ve completed.

Many of the records used to recalculate people's sentences only go back to when the corrections department switched to a new digital information system in 2010. But most of the people like Rogers who would benefit from the new law have been incarcerated since the 1990s.

The law, which took effect in January, builds on 2021 criminal justice reforms that increased the amount of credit someone could earn for participating in programs behind bars.

The new law allows people to earn a day off their sentence for every day prior to 2021 they worked in a correctional industry job or participated in substance abuse programs, education, life skills courses or reentry planning. People inside had previously been allowed...
to earn half a day off for those activities, and the new law requires the corrections department to recalculate credits already awarded to now provide the full-day credit.

Illinois state Senator Robert Peters, the bill sponsor, wrote in an email that the law is also supposed to retroactively grant people a half day credit for participation in self-improvement programs, volunteer work, and some work assignments that they had not previously received credit for.

Incarcerated individuals, their lawyers and prison staff are confused about how the Illinois Department of Corrections is recalculating sentences. Memos the department issued to the prison population in October and January seem to have conflicting information about how the law should be interpreted. Lawyers say they are unclear why their clients are still in prison.

As of March 21, 1,750 individuals had received earned time through the new law, according to the state. Of those, 1,341 were still in custody and 409 have been released.

Peters said he empathized with the frustration of people inside at the slow adoption of the law, but preached patience as the state goes through “a period of implementation and refinement to address operational challenges.”

Many people in prison are still waiting to understand what the new law means for them.

Poor recordkeeping

Rogers, who is currently incarcerated at Robinson Correctional Center, received a 55-year sentence in 1993. In February, he was informed he was eligible for 1,011 days off his sentence – a little less than three years.

But the records used to calculate how much credit Rogers had earned only go back until 2010, according to documents reviewed by Open Campus. His new release date does not appear to take into account more than a decade of work and educational history.

The corrections department is supposed to keep records of everything people do behind bars, but several people who requested a copy of their master file summary – a document that is supposed to track everything they’ve done over their entire incarceration – told Open Campus that the information contained there only dated back to 2010.

Open Campus has examined four master file summaries that only show programming and work for the past 14 years.

Richard McConnell, who has been incarcerated since 1994, has disciplinary records that go back to 1998 in his master file. But his work and programming history only go back to 2010.

To show the missing work history in his master file, McConnell requested records from his prison trust fund account in order to show wages from a job in prison industries dating back to 1995. But even those records are incomplete.

In July 2023, he submitted a handwritten request for additional trust fund records showing his work history from 1994 to 1997. The response he received back was a note scrawled on the bottom of his letter: “We only have from 1997.”

Open Campus submitted a copy of McConnell’s records to the corrections department for review. Naomi Puzzello, a department spokesperson, did not respond to a question about whether McConnell’s sentence credits should be recalculated, stating that she was unable to comment on a specific individual’s record.

Puzzello said individuals who disagree with the amount of time they were awarded should submit a written request to their counselor asking for an explanation or file a grievance, the administrative process incarcerated people can use to file complaints. It’s a three-step appeal process that can take weeks or months, ending with review by a committee in Springfield.

Puzzello acknowledged that “the assignment history within a master file is limited in scope.” She said the department would review documentation if people possess evidence that they deserve additional credit under the new law.
The law states that the department should also award credits based on affidavits or documentation from incarcerated people indicating that they engaged in full-time programming or work assignments.

**Major equity concerns**

Candace Chambliss, legal director of the Illinois Prison Project, said her organization identified 10 people who should have been eligible for immediate release when the law went into effect on January 1. Of those 10, five have gone home.

The Illinois Prison Project represents people for clemency, resentencing and other post-conviction issues.

“When this bill was passed, we thought that this should be a faster route to get people out,” Chambliss said. “We thought we would be in a position of having to do reentry for many of our clients. And unfortunately, that is not the case because the law has not been fairly applied.”

Chambliss said there is great variety in how different prisons within Illinois are recalculating sentences. There are major equity concerns when there are “wildly different applications” of the law with little explanation, she said.

She has two clients who have very similar profiles. Both have more than two decades of work and programming, including participating in college classes and the same life skills class at the same facility. One of them is home, and the other is still incarcerated.

The biggest difference was where they were locked up when the new law took effect.

In anticipation of the Jan 1 law coming into effect, Chambliss ordered copies of master files for both clients. When she saw that the files didn’t reflect work or programming before 2010, she submitted a letter to the department’s chief of programs in December 2023 along with financial records and certifies her clients, Andrew Suh and Swavell Toliver, had saved.

Suh, who was at Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center, was initially told in early January that he had about 4.5 years left to serve. But after working with prison staff, including the warden, he was told they had found enough credits. He learned on a Wednesday that he was going home on Friday.

Suh, who was originally sentenced to 100 years in 1994, was released on January 26.

Toliver, in contrast, is still incarcerated at Dixon Correctional Center on a 69-year sentence.

That’s despite help from Chambliss, and documentation showing the department had undercounted his sentence credits. He currently has a release date in October 2028.

“They were just finding more reasons and ways to tell us, ‘You’re not gonna get it.’ And we’re still here because of it,” Toliver said.

Even people with lawyers are not getting much movement at many other facilities, Chambliss said. Some said they are being told prison staff are unable to award credit for programs that are not listed in their master file because the DOC headquarters in Springfield determines eligibility.

Puzzello said that the corrections department is not aware of concerns related to consistency of implementation across facilities. Staff across the department met months before the law took effect to try to make sure questions related to the process were answered and recalculations occurred quickly after January 1.

A lack of transparency

Another challenge for people inside is the limited view they often have into what’s getting counted or not. Prison staff do sentence recalculations by hand on paper, indicating the number of days someone has earned. But the sheets do not always list which work assignment or program the person is being given credit for. Open Campus reviewed several recalculation sheets, some of which had a general note such as “work” or “education,” but no dates of participation or program name.

It’s hard to challenge recalculations when people don’t even know what they’re being given credit for, Rogers and others said.

Most of the people who would benefit from the new law have spent decades working, going to school, and doing other programming. They are part of a population who is among the least likely to reoffend, according to several studies.

“These are the folks that have the most programming, the most positive work history,” Chambliss said. “And they’re still in prison.”

For the people who are left waiting, the uncertainty is taxing.

“The system as a whole is not honoring what the law says,” Toliver said. “You’re told you’re going home after all of these decades, You start to come back to life a little... And then you’re told you’re not. For these people to be playing the kind of games that they’re playing with our lives, with our family’s hearts, the only thing that you can compare it to is pure torture.”

This story was co-published by WBEZ on April 18, 2024.

Update: A week after Open Campus and WBEZ published this story, Richard McConnell was released from Robinson Correctional Center on April 24 after being awarded additional sentence credits.
A group of men in Massachusetts county jails have sued the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education over special education access for incarcerated students. The three men between 18 and 22 filed a class-action lawsuit against the state education department for reportedly not providing special instruction and services to students with disabilities — which they’re entitled to under state law, the Boston Herald reported. (April 16, 2024)

The Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services announced a new agreement with the University System of Maryland that will establish a framework to bring higher education programs to every state-run prison, utilizing newly reinstated federal Pell Grants, reported the Baltimore Banner. The department told the Baltimore Banner it was the first corrections agency in the country to formalize an agreement with an entire state university system. (April 11, 2024)

The latest federal budget earmarks almost $9 million for prison education programs, Katherine Knott reported for Inside Higher Ed. Some colleges turned to the earmark process to secure funding to expand their programs. The five colleges receiving federal dollars include $4.5 million for Bard College, $1.6 million for Morehouse College, $1.5 million for Chaminade University in Hawaii, $963,000 for Georgetown University, and $355,000 for Goucher College. (April 3, 2024)
In April, the U.S. Education Department announced that incarcerated borrowers can now consolidate their loans to get them out of default. Consolidation allows people to combine one or more federal loans into a new loan. Previously, incarcerated borrowers were not eligible for consolidation.

Borrowers in default who consolidate can access certain types of loans that will allow them to sign up for income-driven repayment plans like the Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) Plan. People on a SAVE repayment plan may eventually be eligible for loan forgiveness after 10 or 20 years, depending on their original loan balance.

Income-driven repayment plans mean that monthly student loan payment amounts are determined by income and family size. As a result, monthly payments for incarcerated borrowers can be as little as $0.

Incarcerated borrowers can also still sign up for Fresh Start, a temporary program launched last year to bring defaulted loans into good standing, until Sept. 30, 2024. Education Department officials urge borrowers in default to first take advantage of the Fresh Start program while it’s still available before seeking consolidation. There is no deadline for consolidation.

The Department noted that borrowers who remain in default may be unable to receive certain relief measures and may be subject to financial consequences. People with defaulted loans are ineligible for federal Pell Grants, which are the federal financial aid restored for incarcerated students in July 2023.

This measure does not allow incarcerated borrowers to take out new student loans to pay for education inside.

Borrowers who had student loans before becoming incarcerated can consolidate their loans by contacting their student loan servicer, as long as they are not students (such as being enrolled in a prison education program or Second Chance Pell program) when they consolidate.

You can access an FAQ on Fresh Start for incarcerated borrowers online from the Education Department at https://tinyurl.com/bdf3645w.

TO REQUEST A “FRESH START” VIA MAIL, WRITE TO:

P.O. Box 5609
Greenville, TX 75403

In the letter, include:
- Name
- SSN
- Date of Birth
- “I would like to use Fresh Start to bring my loans back into good standing.”

The National Consumer Law Center also advises incarcerated borrowers to note that they are incarcerated in their communication with the Education Department since the agency doesn’t have that information on file.

You asked.
We answered.

What is a federal student loan?
A federal student loan is a type of loan provided by the U.S. government to eligible students to help cover the cost of higher education. Individuals are not allowed to apply for and receive federal student loans for education inside.

What’s the difference between a loan, a grant and a scholarship?
Grants and loans are both forms of federal financial aid for higher education. The main difference is repayment. A loan requires you to repay the money you borrow, whereas a grant does not.

Pell Grants are the main federal financial aid for incarcerated students and you do not need to pay them back. However, to be able to receive a Pell Grant you must be at a facility that has a prison education program that has been approved by the federal Education Department.

Scholarships are more often issued by specific colleges or organizations, whereas grants are usually given by state and federal agencies. In general, grants are given based on financial-need, also called “need-based aid”. Scholarships could be based on financial need, but often they are also merit-based and could be awarded to students based on their academic achievements, field of study, specific identity, etc.