COLLEGE INSIDE
A newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.
May - June 2024

Danielle Carter is a participant in the Prison Pet Partnership.

Behind bars, women in Washington learn to care for pets – and themselves.

By Charlotte West

Photos: Ellen Banner / The Seattle Times

GIG HARBOR, Wash. — A golden retriever on a leash led by a pet technician in scrubs saunters through the lobby of the Washington Corrections Center for Women. It bypasses the metal detector and makes its way across a yard and through several locked gates to its destination: a doggy day care operated by incarcerated women.

Members of the public can send their dog here for boarding, grooming and training through a program founded with the belief that human-animal bonds could be beneficial to people in prison.

It also offers participants something more: tangible skills that prepare them for in-demand employment once they leave. Through the program, the women can learn to train service dogs and earn industry certifications in pet care and grooming, jobs that are part of a booming pet economy.

The Gig Harbor program — which is run by a nonprofit called the Prison Pet Partnership that operates on the prison's grounds — was the first prison pet program in the country. The program, which was founded in 1981, became the model for at least 290 such programs operating across the country today, including six at other Washington prisons.

Amalia Castillo is the handler for Patrick, a one-year-old Labrador retriever who is one of two service dogs currently in training. He goes everywhere Castillo goes and sleeps in a kennel in her room.

"When I got here, I felt defeated. I thought my life was over," Castillo said. "When they talked about the dog program, it sparked something in me."

Castillo said she has seven kids, and the program provides an outlet for her maternal instincts.

"These dogs, they become like our babies," Castillo said.

Range of skills

The pet partnership opens up opportunities to train women in a range of skills. Beyond the pet care certificates they can earn, they learn how to problem solve and create business plans.

The women can earn basic and advanced industry-recognized pet care and grooming credentials accredited by professional associations. In addition to getting certified in pet CPR and first aid, they learn about nutrition, animal anatomy, common health issues, how to read dogs' body language, coat care and breed-standard cuts.

The program supplements the training with workshops on business plans, mock interviews and resume writing. The organization gives them kits with clippers, combs and scissors upon release as well as scholarships for continuing education.

The pet services fees from the kennel do not cover all expenses and the nonprofit also relies on grants and donations, said Sam Zuanich, canine behavior and training director.

"We can provide that extra amount of education that they need to either open their own business or be eligible to be hired right away," said Olivia Simmons, programs director at Prison Pet Partnership.

Jobs for animal care and service workers are projected to grow 16% from 2022 to 2032, much faster than the average for all occupations, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Having access to education and training that provides a direct pathway to jobs is essential for successful reentry into the community.

Some of the women who participate in the Prison Pet Partnership are serving long sentences for serious and violent crimes and have spent years in prison with limited access to job and educational opportunities.

Formerly incarcerated people are almost five times more likely to be unemployed than the general population, with women experiencing particularly high rates of unemployment, the Prison Policy Initiative estimates.

The program also offers a service dog trainer certification program: Participants learn to train dogs who can help people with mobility concerns, seizures and combat-related PTSD, Zuanich said.

One of the hardest parts is having to say goodbye. Zuanich said they spend a lot of time talking about why the dog is there in the first place. "This dog is not a pet," they said. "They might save somebody's life. They might give that person independence."

Building bonds

The program was originally founded by Sister Pauline Quinn, a Dominican nun whose relationship with a German shepherd helped her overcome trauma, abuse and homelessness she experienced as a young woman. The program developed out of her work with Leo Bustad, the former dean of Washington State University's veterinary school and a pioneer in the field of animal-assisted interventions.

The program continues to have positive mental health effects and serves as an important emotional outlet in the often hostile prison environment.

"We're told not to touch, not to hug. We don't have a lot of physical interaction with other people," program participant Danielle Carter said. "So getting to love on an animal and having an animal love on you gives you back something that prison takes away."

Pets help reduce stress and anxiety, encourage people to be physically active, and increase social connections, according to a March 2024 survey from the American Psychiatric Association and the American Veterinary Medical Association. Experts say that animals may also help people in drug and alcohol recovery, as well as those experiencing depression and other psychiatric conditions.

The animals also improve relationships between participants and staff.

Being able to take Mozzy, her high-energy Australian shepherd puppy, to work with her has been a lifesaver, said correctional officer Alice Kaleopa. She didn't know what she was getting herself into when she brought him home.

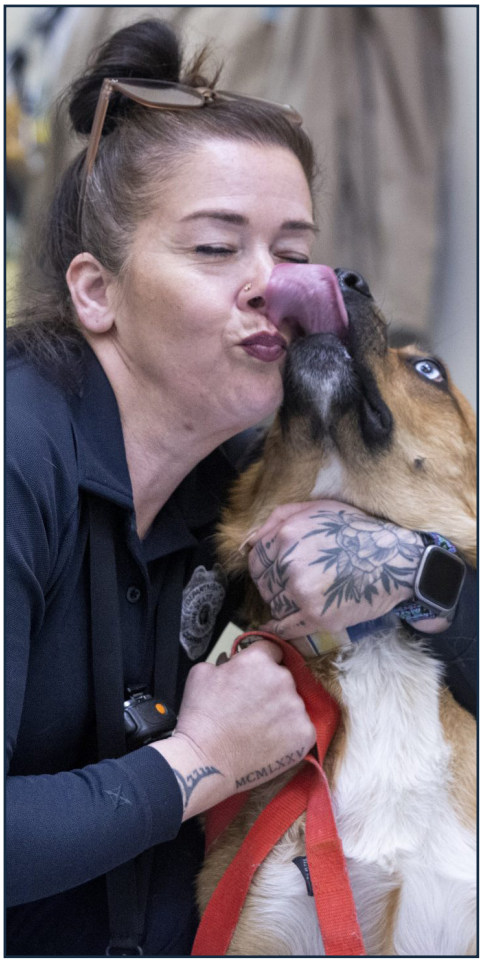
But after a day at doggy day care, Mozzy is ready to go home and sleep rather than get up to his usual mischievous antics.

Kaleopa said the program has also improved her relationship with the women who are incarcerated. "Having Mozzy come here has kind of changed my perspective a little bit, with me engaging with the women in a different way," she said. "They definitely have a passion for what they do. And they're really, really good at it."

Animal rescue services also use the program to help socialize animals for adoption. Feisty Felines, a nonprofit cat rescue that serves Pierce and Thurston counties, partners with the prison to run a foster program in which the cats live with women in their housing units. Eighteen cats currently reside at the prison.

In turn, the animals bring companionship and affection.

Amalia Castillo works with Patrick, a service dog in training,



***Left**: Alice Kaleopa, a corrections officer at the Washington Correction Center for Women in Gig Harbor, says goodbye before sending her dog Mozzy to doggy day care at the prison. **Above**: A woman incarcerated in Gig Harbor fosters a cat in her housing unit. **Below**: Toby gets groomed by an incarcerated participant in the Prison Pet Partnership.*

As correctional unit supervisor Ed Schulze pulls a blue wagon with a cat carrier into the medium-security housing building, the conversation dims and heads turn.

"They're here!" someone calls out.

"Aww," more people chime in.

Schulze delivers two white and tabby kittens, Dionne and Tai, to their temporary home. He warns the two women who will be fostering them that the kittens are pretty wild and "one of them's a biter."

The felines are supposed to stay in the women's rooms, but Schulze said he's pretty sure the more acclimated cats are allowed to run around the unit every once in a while.

More than a job

Employers say program graduates like Melissa McKee demonstrate the program's promise. She earned several certifications in pet care, grooming and training during the nearly 11 years she spent at the Washington Corrections Center for Women.

Before she was released in 2017, McKee sent out a letter to all the grooming shops in Olympia.

Jason Grant, the owner of Grateful Dog Grooming, came to the prison to meet McKee and was so impressed by her skills that he hired her on the spot. Most people learn how to groom in a corporate environment where the focus is on volume, not quality, he said. Besides McKee, he's hired two other women who trained through the program.

As soon as she got out, McKee started working at Grateful Dog, where she groomed for more than two years while attending The Evergreen State College. "I groomed while I put myself through my undergraduate career," she said.

McKee says the relationships she developed with animals got her to where she is today.

She finished her undergraduate degree in 2021, started a career in public policy, and is expected to graduate from a master's program in public administration in June. She also has her own tortoise, two cats and three dogs, including Harper, a black lab she trained inside.

"Grooming was the fast track to employment," she said. But it also taught her other important skills: consistency, self-regulation and independence. She also learned how to relate differently to other people.

"A dog gives you an opportunity to rewrite the story of how you showed up in other relationships," she said. "The things that the dogs themselves taught me changed my entire person."

This story was co-published with the Seattle Times on May 17, 2024.

‘A culture shift’ as Colorado starts its first bachelor’s degree program at a women’s prison

Serena Ahmad, the first incarcerated woman in the U.S. to teach as an adjunct professor at a women’s facility, with Adams State prison program coordinator Jim Bullington (left) and director Lauren Hughes (right). Photo courtesy Lauren Hughes

By Charlotte West

Twenty women at Denver Women’s Correctional Facility will be part of a new bachelor’s degree program later this month.

Students in the program, run by Adams State University, will be able to choose between a sociology or business track. The program gives a unique opportunity to women in the state, something that educators and correctional staff say they hope to see more of. Women make up 8% of Colorado’s incarcerated population but this is the first four-year degree available in the state’s prisons for women.

The program is also unique in the country because of one of its new professors.

Serena Ahmad, who holds a law degree from University of Denver and is serving a 14-year sentence at Denver Women’s, will be teaching in the program, making her the first incarcerated woman in the U.S. to teach as an adjunct professor at a women’s facility. Ahmad will teach a course in business law this summer. In the future, she’ll also be teaching criminology.

She’s excited about the opportunity, but gets anxious when she hears someone say the word “first.”

“Being the first of anything is always going to have a unique pressure, and that what I do is going to reflect on every single woman that follows me,” she told Open Campus during a video interview on Zoom. “The nervousness comes when I sit down and think about it. But when the greater goal is the success of incarcerated women and minority women, that sounds far more motivating than my fear or nervousness.”

Teaching inside

Earlier this year, David Carrillo became the first incarcerated professor in the country to teach students also inside. Carrillo was released at the end of January after Colorado Gov. Jared Polis granted him clemency in part due to his work as an educator at the Alamosa-based Adams State.

Besides teaching in-person at the women’s prison, Ahmad will teach a virtual class for the men studying with Adams State at Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility and Bent County, a private prison.

Ahmad said that she’s trying to build flexibility into her course design given the frequent disruptions that can happen in a prison environment. “Sometimes we might get locked down, or there’s a power outage,” she said. “Various things will happen, which will interrupt the flow of doing a homework assignment or taking a quiz.”

Students have about 30 assignments to choose from. They must submit 10 by the end of the semester.

Ahmad said that at first some of the incarcerated women at her facility were skeptical when Adams State announced she’d be teaching in the program. She has only been incarcerated for three-and-a-half years, half of which was spent in a county jail.

There’s a hierarchy and seniority in prison, she said.

“There were people who have been here for 10, 15, 20 years who were greatly upset. Rightfully so,” she said. “They’ve done their time so they feel that they’ve earned a spot, but they just don’t have the education.”

Ahmad’s graduate degree makes her unusual inside. About 40% of people in Colorado prisons hadn’t earned a high school diploma or equivalent prior to being incarcerated, according to the corrections department. That makes it difficult to find incarcerated people who have the academic qualifications to teach college classes, which usually require at least a master’s degree in the specific discipline.

One woman approached Ahmad’s room after the announcement was made in March. “I’m like, ‘Oh boy, this could go one of two ways,’” Ahmad said.

"But then she told me, 'But what you're doing is going to change the world of women's prison education,'" Ahmad said.

Limited opportunities for women

Research shows that incarcerated women sometimes have fewer educational opportunities than men, partly because they are fewer in number. But there are subtler issues, as well.

Lauren Hughes is a formerly incarcerated woman who is now director of Adam's State's prison education program. When Hughes first went into Denver Women's and told prospective students about her own history, two incarcerated women walked out of the classroom. The stigma of having a criminal record is sometimes upheld by those who have a criminal record themselves.

But Hughes said that's changing.

"Now there seems to be a culture shift and a recognition of the systematic changes we're trying to make," Hughes said.

The Denver Women's program is just the third bachelor's program at Colorado's 19 state-run prisons.

By fall, Limon and Four Mile correctional facilities will also offer four-year degrees. The number of prison education programs in Colorado is expanding following the 2023 return of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students.

La Vista, the state's only other women's prison, offers up to an associate's degree.

A 2022 study from the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit that provides technical assistance to prison education programs, found that while women are overrepresented in prison education programs, they disproportionately earned fewer credentials compared to men. They are more likely to have shorter sentences, leaving them with less time to complete degree programs.

In some places, gender stereotypes have also shaped the offerings: Culinary and cosmetology programs are available at women's facilities, and welding and carpentry are available for men.

But there is a need for more options for women: Nationally women's incarceration rates have grown at twice the rate as men's, as solutions designed to decrease prison populations have worked better for men, according to the nonprofit Prison Policy Initiative.

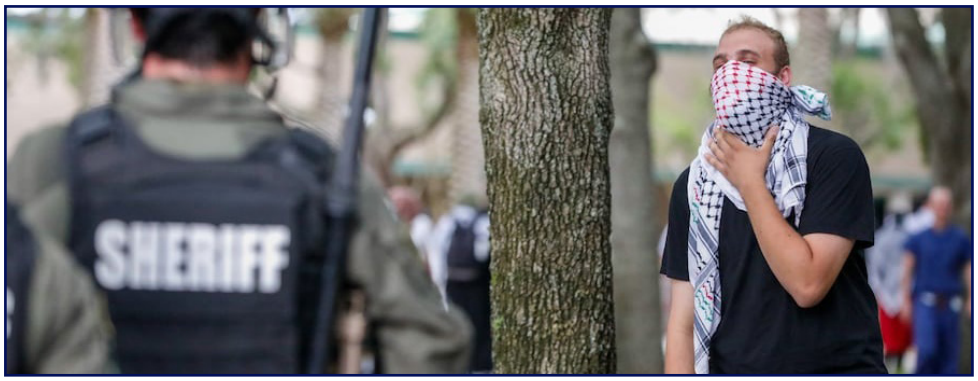
At Denver Women's, there's a growing interest in the Adams State program. Ahmad has gotten involved with several other programs as a tutor and mentor, so people are starting to get to know her. As the program gears up to start later this month, Ahmad and her students are coming together around a "women's empowerment vibe," she said.

This story was co-published with Chalkbeat Colorado on May 2, 2024. Open Campus partners with Chalkbeat Colorado on higher education coverage.

The risk of protesting with a criminal record

By Morgan Godvin

Tens of thousands of students have consciously risked arrest to protest Israel's ongoing bombardment of Palestine, and about 3,000 have been arrested since demonstrations began on campuses earlier this spring. Many of the students are also calling on their universities to cut financial ties with weapons manufacturers and others doing business in Israel. But for those of us who have already been ensnared in the criminal justice system, risking arrest means something altogether different.



A pro-Palestinian protester screams at a Hillsborough County sheriff after tear gas canisters were shot toward a human barricade at the University of South Florida on April 30, 2024. Photo: Jefferee Woo, Tampa Bay Times

I watch young protestors balk at police orders to disperse, defiantly facing off with police clad in riot gear. Once upon a time, during Portland's outpost of the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011, I did the same thing, even as mounted cavalry trampled us while we linked arms to hold the line.

Later, I was sent to prison on drug-related charges, sentenced to five years. That experience has made it harder for me to willingly subject myself to arrest by participating in protests, because I already know what is waiting for me on the other side. The mere sight of a police officer fills my mind with scenes from my own arrest: a SWAT raid, being held at gunpoint, and officers saying I may die in prison.

A past criminal record makes any future sentence more punitive, meaning I could be sentenced to more time than my fellow protestors for the same offense. For those on probation or parole, simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time can be sufficient to be shipped back to prison. Merely having police contact can result in a violation, much less getting new criminal charges.

After I was released in 2018, I immediately enrolled at Portland State University in Oregon. Since then, there have been at least two mass waves of protest. Having experienced and witnessed grave injustices in our policing and court system, I am highly sensitized to human rights abuses, dedicating much of my life fighting against them. The war on Palestine is no different.

Yet the lingering legal consequences and traumas of my own experiences keeps me at the farthest edge of the protest, or away altogether. When I do feel brave enough to engage, there is another, more surprising factor that gives me pause: the protesters, with whom I am ostensibly ideologically aligned on our shared crusade, make me feel like I do not belong. For many of them, protests are the first time in their life they are being exposed to police oppression, arrest, and the legal system at large.

In early May, faculty and students were arrested at the University of Texas at Dallas. History professor Ben Wright wrote in an essay, "What my students and I learned in jail," about how he and his students were forced to reconcile with the very discord that has, at times, left me feeling alienated from those protesting for justice and against oppression:

"Most of the students were incredulous at policies clearly designed to increase suffering. The other inmates in turn were often incredulous at the students' surprise. Many knew from past experience that this is how the system works. Now we know that, too."

Wright notes that the repression of the Freedom Rides in the 1960s exposed a generation of college students to the stark realities of state violence — something that his students and others across the country are just experiencing now. Their experiences are not those of unique or exceptional brutality, as if they were being targeted for their political activity, but are rather run-of-the-mill encounters with the criminal justice system that those of us who are formerly incarcerated know all too well.

In 2020, when federal officers roamed the streets of Portland, arresting protesters by snatching them into unmarked white vans, many people were outraged. "That's not how arrests are supposed to happen! This can't be legal!" I could only shake my head in disbelief, that people so committed to justice that they'd taken to the streets could be so woefully uninformed as to the experiences of injustice that millions of Americans live through. I hope that this time around, protestors' sudden exposure to the system makes them committed to fighting for justice there, too, instead of seeing their treatment as political repression for their support of Palestinians.

Aside from the legal risks, there is the legacy of trauma. People within encampments and those occupying campus buildings defiantly refuse police orders to disperse, but many formerly incarcerated people have visceral memories of police violence, of being awakened by flash bangs and their front door flying off its hinges behind a battering ram, of the flying spittle of snarling police canine. For those who have lived through sudden, random strikes of police action, the prospect of remaining when one is imminent seems unfathomable.

As with everything in the system, the burdens do not fall evenly, with people of color and the poorest among us always receiving harsher treatment. At Columbia University, which has been the site of high-profile protests, only 19% of first-year students are Pell-eligible, while at The City College of New York it is more than half, showing wide economic disparities in the student bodies. The police were deployed in full force to both, but protestors at Columbia were charged with misdemeanors while those at City College face felony charges that carry up to 7 years in prison.

For those who are forced to remain at the edges of protest and too endangered to engage in civil disobedience, there are other ways we can show our solidarity, whether with the people of Palestine or other causes near to us. I work tirelessly behind the scenes. I publish opinion pieces, speak to the media as a subject-matter expert, conduct academic research, and maintain a strong presence on social media.

Still, I fret over my absence from the protests, worrying it will be seen as indifference. No matter how righteous the cause, those of us who have been churned through the justice system or are barely scraping by must consider the practical, pragmatic implications on our lives. If we are food or housing insecure, we may be forced to think more acutely about our own survival. For those who are already justice involved, the prospect of being returned to prison weighs heavily in our calculations about how we express our beliefs.

The right to protest should be a right. Someone who is formerly incarcerated should not be hamstrung, forced to choose between incarceration or standing idly by as our country tacitly supports a genocide.

Morgan Godvin is a writer and the former engagement editor for JSTOR Daily's American Prison Newspapers collection. She graduated from Portland State University in 2021, and will start PhD in public health at San Diego State University this fall. This essay was published on June 6, 2024.

College on death row: "Y'all aren't here to be rehabilitated."

PJP STILLWATER AWARD WINNER
BEST OP-ED

- The Stillwater Awards are an initiative of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Prison Journalism Project to recognize excellence in prison journalism. Incarcerated writers submitted 165 entries in 9 categories in the inaugural contest.
- The judges wrote: "The best opinion pieces contain more than just opinion. Other winners in this category cited facts and figures to back up their arguments. This one didn't – yet it still won. Why? As one judge said, 'It was just that good.' Sometimes the exception proves the rule. This personal story is less than a traditional op-ed but much more than a personal essay."

By Lyle C. May

Father Dan offered me a life-altering opportunity that initially sounded far-fetched.

"You need to get something on your mind," he said. "What would you say to enrolling in a few college courses?"

I struggled to smother my disbelief. I dropped out of high school and my education ended with a GED from a youth detention center in Maine. I hadn't had any kind of formal schooling since I came to death row in 1999 at the age of 21.

Yet, there was no doubt in my mind that I needed more than the horror of executions, more than the self-defeating behaviors that make prison violent warehouses of humanity. I needed the tools to separate myself from the person I used to be and reach for something better. The priest offered a way, and I took it.

On death row, the value of that offer was exponentially greater because it acknowledged my humanity and potential to overcome the odds.

Most prisoners struggle to learn, have impulse control and relational problems, and limited coping skills, which translates to an inability to set and reach goals, organize activities, or maintain a positive work ethic. Prison magnifies these problems, making stressful, difficult situations worse for people who already struggle to make effective decisions. Higher education is a way to directly challenge institutionalization, giving the incarcerated the tools to defeat criminality.

Considering the harrowing nature of prison, what, then, can be done to educate the incarcerated if it's not supported by the environment?

After all, there is no education on death row. Our programs consist of

Photo: Shutterstock

mental health counseling, religious services, and recently a restorative justice circle. I campaigned for a GED program for the 20 guys who need one and was denied because testing occurs online and the programs department would not allow it. Another guy received a letter from the warden that said death row inmates are not incarcerated for educational or reformative purposes.

That meant our only options for education were the privately funded correspondence programs like the one Father Dan offered me.

The challenges of learning in prison

Learning in prison is the most difficult thing I have ever done. Although at times overwhelming, higher education changed my thinking enough that I soon recognized behaviors and peers counter-productive to my academic success and disassociated myself from them. I made better day-to-day decisions and planned for the future. It took nearly nine years because correspondence courses are much slower than online or in-person classes, but in 2013 I earned an associates in arts degree through Ohio University.

This was a huge accomplishment, considering the environment I was in. The normalcy of exceptional brutality — this idea that penal violence and harsh treatment in

prison are ordinary and deserved — heavily impacts attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in prison. In addition to excessive punishments, no meaningful programs or positive reinforcement, people in prison are constantly told or shown they are worthless and will never be thought of as more than a crime.

This sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy: people who are treated like crap tend to make crappy decisions. For many in prison this increases the likelihood they maintain a criminal lifestyle. Public officials naturally seize on this, enforce draconian policies that exacerbate the cycle, and never stop to consider their responsibility for the fundamental failure of prisons: that they are intended to reduce crime, not cause it.

In 2021, a unit sergeant told me and another incarcerated student on death row the prison education coordinator had terminated our access to correspondence courses. It didn't matter that they were privately funded or we had caused no trouble. The only explanation came from the sergeant, who rather gleefully announced: "Y'all ain't here to be rehabilitated."

"There will always be haters."

The attack on my higher education is nothing new. There had been similar attempts to delay and obstruct my enrollment in an effort to make me quit and dissuade others from pursuing college at all. It would take nearly a year, with a fresh round of formal grievances, letters to prison officials from outside parties, and retaining an attorney who agreed to file a federal civil suit on our behalf before I was finally able to enroll in a course.

But the damage had been done. A new more restrictive policy was created to prevent degree programs on death row by granting access to one college course at a time, setting attainment of my bachelor's degree back by years. This isn't the case everywhere — in states like California, people on death row are allowed access to many of the same educational programs as the general population.

Higher education trained me to persevere and solve problems just like this. It also gave me a deeper understanding of the historical, political, and sociological roots of this latest attack on higher education in prison. Higher education will never be universally supported by prison officials, administrators, and guards. It is both what makes pursuing a degree on the inside so difficult and success so sweet.

Having a higher education is the ultimate act of resistance, one that establishes you are more than a number or label, you are someone who meets the opposition and is victorious.

Prison helps no one, but higher education empowers those who are marginalized and oppressed. There will always be haters who tell you it's impossible, naysayers who say you don't deserve the "privilege," and people who would rather put a boot on your neck than offer a hand up. But there are also people like Father Dan, who recognize the human potential left to rot in prison. By extending me the mercy of an education, he invested in that potential.

Having a higher education is the ultimate act of resistance, one that establishes you are more than a number or label, you are someone who meets the opposition and is victorious.

Lyle C. May is a prison journalist, abolitionist, Ohio University alum, and member of the Alpha Sigma Lambda honor society. He is the author of Witness: An Insider's Narrative of the Carceral State. This story was published on February 1, 2023.

About this newsletter

Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about prison education produced by Open Campus, a national nonprofit newsroom. Topics we cover include college-in-prison programs, Pell Grants for incarcerated students, and career and technical education. We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a monthly print edition.

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

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What it's like to graduate college behind bars

Open Campus spoke with four graduates of college programs in New York State prisons. They are all part of programs run in partnership with Hudson Link, a nonprofit that works with colleges and universities around the state to offer associate's and bachelor's degrees inside. In May and June, 156 men and women graduated from the program's nine college partners. The graduates we spoke to reflected on mentorship, community, and the role of higher education in healing. These profiles have been edited lightly for clarity.

"To be a part of something like that, you have to take notice."

Alonzo Miles, associate's of science, Mercy University

I got a story. I was actually the next door neighbor to the two guys that escaped from Clinton Correctional Facility [in Dannemora, New York]. I was in cell 624, and the two guys that escaped were in 623, and 622. They sent me to the SHU (Secure Housing Unit) for 30 days for 'security reasons' during the search for them, even though I had no infraction or anything.

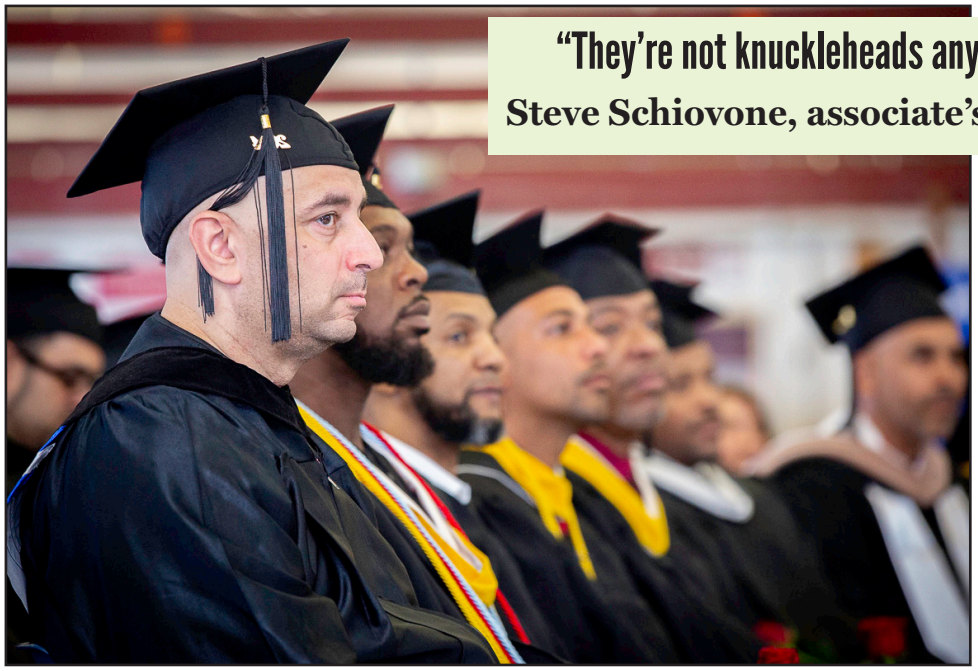
But actually, I needed to go through it. I had already decided at Clinton that I needed to do something different, but I didn't really know how to change. I assumed that as long as I'm not getting in trouble, as long as I'm not fighting, I'm doing the right thing. But you're not moving forward, right?

That time in the SHU allowed me to be able to identify the opportunities that was in front of me and the help offered by the people around me. That includes staff. Because even though prison is prison, I'm not taking that away from that, but the staff encouraged us.

When I got here to Sing Sing in 2015, they used to do the graduation at night. So this guy, he's a sergeant now, but he used to be the block officer in command. He got on the mic when everybody was coming back from graduation, and he made everybody in the entire block stand up and clap for the men who graduated. And you heard the whole block erupt when the guys came in. To be a part of something like that, you have to take notice.

Coming here to Sing Sing and being exposed to these different therapeutic programs, they steered me towards the self investigation for me to start to find out and understand who I am and why I am here. And then the education part of it helped me to start correlating the difference between how I feel and how I think.

I never in a million years would have believed that I would be receiving a degree, in anything really. That's not really what I thought I would be about. I was really intimidated by education. I didn't see no future for me in education, but now being a part of it, and having my daughters here today and being proud of me, really being encouraged by my professors, by my fellow students, as well as my family, I know the future holds more education for me.



"They're not knuckleheads anymore. They're college students."

Steve Schiovone, associate's of science, Mercy University

I dropped out of high school. I got my GED when I was in the street because I wanted to join the Marines and they wouldn't take me with no diploma. I joined the Marines, I came home, I did some menial jobs, I got arrested.

And then to think that I would get my college degree in prison? That made no sense. Why would I get it in prison if I didn't want to do it in the street? And then friends pushed me. They were like, 'Come on, try it, you might like it.' I took one pre-college class. I enjoyed it.

Now, I got my associates.

When I get home, I want to give back. I want to help the guys behind me, the knuckleheads, as they call them. I want to help them get ahead.

Security doesn't make this easy. Everything's an issue, trying to get this book, trying to get that resource. But when you have people that want to see you succeed, they don't let that stop them. Professor Wells, when I was in pre-college, would come in on Friday to tutor us. I was the only one that showed up. And she still came every Friday. And I felt bad. I feel like I wasted her Fridays. She goes, "if this is going to help you. I don't care. I will come." And she came every Friday for almost four months to help me get caught up and then get ahead. It's an awesome feeling that you're not alone.

You have to be in the system for a while to realize what you want to do, because when you first get in, you have to get settled. You have to figure out how everything moves. Then you have to hope that you associate with people that are doing the right thing, and not other knuckleheads, because a knucklehead with other knuckleheads is a problem: 'I don't want my friends laughing at me. I don't want you thinking I'm a weirdo because I'm going to school.'

But once you get them in and you surround them with good people, they start cleaning up. And they're not knuckleheads anymore. They're college students.

"You're breaking down and rebuilding yourself as a human being."

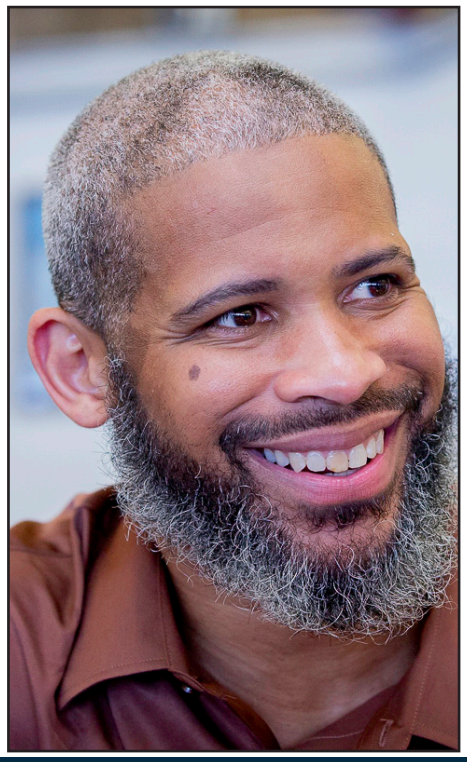
Salahuddin Townsley, associate's of science, Mercy University

I was just telling somebody my educational journey is 30 years in the making. That's because when I came to prison in 1995 at 19 years old, they actually stopped college after the crime bill.

My family life was really rough back and coming out of high school, I didn't really have any guidance. I knew I wanted to go to college, but exactly what and where I wasn't 100% sure about. I went to an alternative high school. Part of my struggles was getting in trouble, although I excelled academically.

It wasn't until I got to Sullivan Correctional Facility in 2018 that I was able to get into the Hudson Link program there with St. Aquinas. But I was there for a very short period, and they transferred me over here to Sing Sing. I thought I would go right into the college program here, since it's Hudson Link, but it took about a year before I could get in, and then COVID hit.

The beauty of receiving the degree that we do here at Mercy University is that it's in psychology and behavioral studies. Two classes I took dealt with child psychology.



One was children at risk, dealing with childhood trauma, and another one was social factors and psychopathology, and both were with Professor Downey from Columbia University.

Looking at these classes and what you learn in them, being able to apply them to yourself, it's extremely therapeutic. Not only are you learning to get your degree, you're breaking down and rebuilding yourself as a human being. You have to ask yourself, what led to a person to do what they did that led to their incarceration? If you can't answer that question, you can't resolve and deal with that issue. Although they may get their degree, which is helpful, that soul wound is still there.

I think that prison education provides an opportunity for us to demonstrate our humanity. We are subject to the same vulnerabilities, idiosyncrasies and frailties that everyone else is. We're healing. They say hurt people hurt people, and that is so true. But there comes a point in time where sometimes the person realizes the hurt they caused, and they try to heal themselves and help others heal as well.

"We're all going to leave here as graduates."

Jennifer Martinez, bachelor of arts, Marymount Manhattan College

This is an excerpt of Martinez' commencement speech as valedictorian at Taconic Correctional Facility, one of three prisons for women in New York state.

I arrived at Taconic in the fall of 2021 and the harsh reality of being in prison was overwhelming. I came to those gates with a terrible guilt for having made choices that not only changed the trajectory of my life, but it impacted everyone that I love. I often thought about the implications of having added 'convicted felon' to my list of identifiers. I was sentenced to serve five-and-a-half years, and I didn't know how I would survive this experience….I would spend nights asking myself, 'What am I going to do?'

And for months, I had no answer to that question.

I thought coming to prison was the absolute worst thing that could have happened to me. Then, just 90 days after arriving at Taconic, I received the news that my father had passed away.

The evening after receiving that news I called my brother to let him know, and as he comforted me through my grief, an officer passed out the mail…Later that night, sitting alone in my cell, I opened the letter, and it was my notice that I had been accepted into the college program.

Although I may not have realized it then, I now know that receiving that letter was my way of knowing that everything would be okay. From that moment on, I started to balance two identities, that of an incarcerated individual and that of a student.

And I wholeheartedly delved into my student identity. I could have remained consumed with thoughts of, 'How am I going to survive prison?' But instead, I chose to focus on, 'how am I going to pass this class? How am I going to earn my degree? How am I going to live my life after release'? How am I going to be the best version of myself?'

To my fellow graduates, at some point each of us lost our freedom, and along this educational journey, we each discovered the freedom that truly matters, and that's the freedom of our minds. And in the next few months, all seven of us will be leaving Taconic. We're all going to leave here as graduates.

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Immortal Studios' team (from left to right): Benjamin Frandsen, Charlie Stickney, Jen Troy, Rylend Grant, Payhuan Shiao, Hank Kanalz, Gene Ching, and Tomas Jegeus. Photo courtesy Comic-Con

I've always been a storyteller. But my professors in prison taught me how to write.

By Benjamin Frandsen

One incredibly surreal day in 2003, I was arrested by the FBI, thrown in jail, and informed that I was facing the death penalty. I remember gaping in disbelief as my court-appointed attorney tried to convince me that facing life in prison was "a safer alternative to the death penalty."

So how does a guy whose government wanted to kill him suddenly find himself standing on the main stage at the 2023 San Diego Comic-Con, being introduced as the newest graphic novelist at Immortal Studios, creator of the world's first interconnected series of martial arts fantasy comics?

What could possibly have brought me out of despair and defeat and onto such an unlikely platform to share my harrowing tale? The answer is education.

My time in prison began in 2005, after being handed two sentences of life without possibility of parole — times two. Back then, there were almost no self-help programs, and the paltry few that existed were not offered to people who were "never getting out." What was the point? But I stubbornly refused to let my brain turn to mush by slipping into the status quo lethargy of televised sports, movies, and endless Pinochle games. Lacking access to formal college classes, I realized I desperately needed a project.

I thought back to one of my earliest memories as a creator. I was five years old. My first "movie" was about to begin. My parents beamed as the dinosaur blanket curtain opened. "And . . . *action*!" I chirped. I knew precisely how many *Star Wars* action figures it took to defeat the evening's antagonist, my gargantuan stuffed gorilla. Though my *mise-en-scene* would have inspired no envy from Peter Jackson, and the applause was more loyalty than admiration, I was hooked. I had witnessed the miracle — my audience had experienced my inspired thought. I had participated in that most sacred of rituals.

I had created *a moment*.

> **"I was proud of myself for the first time in nine years."**

I remember standing in my tomb of a jail cell, scouring books: Screenplay, The Writer's Journey, The Screenwriter's Bible, The Book of the Samurai. As homemade "scene cards" blanketed my rusty metal bunk, I started working on my own scripts.

After a year of scribbling with jailhouse golf pencils, The Canton Experiment — my original screenplay about the only Japanese samurai in China, in 1725 A.D. — was born (logline: "Remember the Titans, with swords"). Thanks to a friend/typist playing Rosetta Stone to my tiny graphite scrawl, I signed an agreement with a producer named Payhuan Shiao, which allowed him to shop our project around to try to get the film made. Three rewrites later, as I was sweating in a desert prison, he asked me to write a treatment and screenplay for what he described as "the Buddhist Avengers."

Payhuan would later become the founder and CEO of Immortal Studios. Screenwriter and producer Matt Stuecken, known for 10 Cloverfield Lane and Knights of the Zodiac, became my story analyst. Every night, I typed into the wee hours. I'd complete a draft and FedEx it to Matt, and he'd FedEx back his notes, which were insightful and mercilessly blunt: "What is the point of this scene? Delete it." I have never learned so much so fast.

But still, I found myself longing to find more than a mentor-by-mail who could refine my act breaks. I needed professors who could help me polish my self-taught writing skills. With an educated mind, I could create stories that would inspire people and enrich their lives. I could create more moments.

Much as it had done for the vagabond prince, Aladdin, it was the desert that granted my wish. I was finally admitted into the associate's program at Palo Verde College in Blythe. Though at first, I was limited to taking distance-learning classes, the one-on-one feedback professors gave me deepened my understanding of the material and increased my thirst for learning. There, I earned three associate's degrees. As I held them in my hand, I ran my thumb across the gold embossed seal, and for the first time since my arrest nine years earlier, I was proud of myself.

"UCLA has always been part of my story"

After a transfer to a lower-security prison, I continued my studies via correspondence, earning new degrees in American studies and business. This put me at the top of the list when Merced College finally brought in-person classes inside the prison walls. This was the most significant boost yet to my academic mindset. I was no longer taking whatever classes were offered; I was studying English and working with teachers who were themselves skilled scribes. The critiques and suggestions of my professors had a profound effect on my writing. I gained the confidence to submit my work and watched as it found its way into the pages of publications around the country. In 2021, I graduated from Merced College. I was also in the first cohort of Fresno State University's in-person college program at Valley State Prison.

I transferred, almost directly, from prison to UCLA in June 2022, after I paroled from Valley State at the age of 48. UCLA has always been part of my story. In 1974, I was born at UCLA Hospital. Having earned my first college units in prison classrooms surrounded by barbed wire and cinder blocks, it is difficult to overstate how much it meant for me to be admitted into the hallowed halls of this institution, with its Gothic-spired buildings standing proudly in their red-bricked majesty.

Frandsen with fellow UCLA English majors, Photo courtesy Benjamin Frandsen

My first ever social media post about the experience soon received over 1 million views. The editor of UCLA Magazine called and soon I — the same guy who had ditched high school more times than he had attended and whose most recent photo was a prison mugshot — was staring at his face on the cover of a magazine. In the two years since my release, my show called the Ben Free Podcast has just completed its fifth season and my nonprofit, the Ben Free Project, is already visiting prisons to provide literacy programs inside.

So how did I end up on that stage at Comic-Con? My mentors at Immortal Studios asked me to write their next graphic novel series based loosely on my own criminal justice experience. For Immortal, this would be the story of a wrongfully convicted man who finds his awakening as a hero in a very dark place. Soon I will be paired with an artist, and we will find out if my artistic vision is a match with his or hers. The first issue of my graphic novel will likely be published in mid-2025.

Earlier this month, the man who had begun his academic journey locked behind bars took the proud walk of "Pomp and Circumstance" and became a proud Bruin alumnus. My beloved red-brick buildings and sprawling green lawns at UCLA are already becoming mindscapes of nostalgia instead of landmarks on the way to class.

My freedom was taken away from me. Like the protagonist in my graphic novel, I was relegated to a solitary corner of a dungeon, without direction or purpose or hope. All that changed when I signed up for college and opened my first textbook. In April, I was accepted into San Diego State's highly selective, 3-year MFA creative writing program focusing on crafting fiction, writing memoir, publishing, and instructing. I also just found out that soon, I'll be in front of a classroom, teaching first-year students of my own. After all, if my education could become the guide that would lead me from the dark corridors of prison to the red-bricked hallowed halls of UCLA to the stage at Comic-Con, it could do the same for anyone.

Benjamin Frandsen is the formerly incarcerated founder and executive director of the Ben Free Project. He's an honorably discharged military veteran and a published poet, writer, and memoirist. He recently graduated from UCLA with a BA in English and is currently studying for his MFA in creative writing at San Diego State University. This essay was published on June 26, 2024.

Problems calculating sentence credits prompt hunger strikes at Illinois prison

By Charlotte West

Two men incarcerated at Robinson Correctional Facility in downstate Illinois went on hunger strikes earlier this month to protest delays in getting sentence credits they believe would make them eligible for immediate release.

Both men succeeded in getting prison officials to agree to review their cases, after failing to get movement through the traditional channels. Their experiences raise questions about how the Illinois Department of Corrections is handling the possibly hundreds of people behind bars who believe their sentence credits have been improperly calculated but have not resorted to such extreme methods.

A law, HB 3026, that went into effect in January gives some incarcerated individuals time off their sentences for participating in education, work, and other programs, but as previously reported by WBEZ, poor recordkeeping by the Illinois Department of Corrections has made it difficult for many people to get the sentence credits they say they have earned.

Many of the people who stand to benefit the most from the new law have been incarcerated for decades, but the department's own records only go back to 2010, when the corrections agency went digital.

Corrections spokesperson Naomi Puzzello previously acknowledged the limited scope of the digital records called "master files" that track everything an incarcerated individual does. The master files are the basis for the sentence calculations.

At the time Puzzello said the department would review documentation if people possess evidence that they are entitled to additional credit under the new law. But incarcerated individuals at Robinson report being told by facility administrators that their records would not be reviewed without specific instruction from Springfield.

A sign seen from outside Stateville Correctional Center in Joliet. Photo by Manuel Martinez / WBEZ

Puzzello disputed that, writing in an email last week that individual facilities have full authority to award sentencing credits under HB 3026. She said the corrections department is continuing to conduct additional reviews and is working to identify attendance records through multiple sources.

Hunger strikes as a last resort

Bernard "Benny" Lopez, who has been incarcerated since 1993, refused meals for 24 hours starting on June 10. He requested that administrators at Robinson review records such as his trust fund account, which show payments he received for working in various prison jobs, believing those records will show he is owed additional credits.

Lopez ended his strike on June 11 after prison administrators granted him work release and said they would review the records he submitted to determine if he was eligible for additional time off his sentence under HB 3026, Lopez wrote in an email.

Lester May, who has been incarcerated since 1994, came off a 7-day hunger strike on June 18 after the warden at Robinson promised to review his paperwork, May said.

Lopez and May both believe they would be out of prison now if they had been given all of the sentence credits they have earned over the last three decades they've spent in prison.

Going on a hunger strike was a last resort, May said. He was desperate to draw attention to an issue that may seem like a bureaucratic process to administrators but for him means his freedom. Every day his paperwork isn't reviewed is another day he spends in prison, he said.

Lopez wrote that he thought that going on a hunger strike would be the only way to get the prison administration's full attention.

As of June 14, approximately 1,985 individuals have had their sentencing credits reviewed under HB 3026. Out of those who have received credit, 1,354 are still in custody and 631 individuals were released. One hundred and fifty six of those people have been released since May 1.

This story was co-published by WBEZ Chicago on June 26, 2024.

You asked. We answered.

College Inside answers your questions about higher education.

What is credit transfer?

Credit transfer is the process of moving academic credits from one institution to another. It allows students to apply previously completed coursework toward a degree at a new school. However, each college has its own policies on what credits they'll accept.

How does credit transfer work?

You request that official transcripts from your previous school(s) be sent to your new school. The new school evaluates each course and decides whether to accept it for credit. Different colleges may make different decisions about the same courses.

Where do I send my transcripts to have them evaluated?

Request to have official transcripts sent directly from the first college to the admissions office or registrar of the college you're applying to or transferring to. Some colleges will accept unofficial transcripts for credit transfer, but check with your school. You'll need to have transcripts sent to each school separately if applying to multiple colleges.

elective

/ə'lektiv/ (adj.)

A course you choose to take that isn't specifically required for your major or general education requirements. Electives allow you to explore interests outside your main field of study or dig deeper into areas related to your major.

What is elective credit?

Elective credit counts toward your total credits for graduation but doesn't fulfill specific major or general education requirements. Some colleges may accept a course as elective credit even if they don't count it toward a specific major requirement.

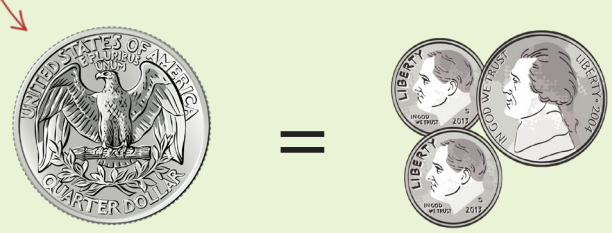
What's the difference between semester and quarter credits?

Semester systems typically have two 15-week terms per year. Quarter systems have three 10-week terms. ***One semester credit usually equals 1.5 quarter credits.*** Colleges have their own methods for converting between these systems.

1 semester credit = **1.5 quarter credits**

For example: if you earn 2 semester credits, you would have 3 quarter credits.

THINK OF IT THIS WAY: *When counting money, two nickels and a dime are worth the same as 25¢ quarter, just made up of more coins. The same principle applies for semesters and quarter credits. The terms usually both take 30 weeks, they are just divided differently. It takes a higher number of quarter credits (or coins, in this analogy) to equal one semester credit, but they're not worth any more or less.*



25¢ = **25¢**

What kinds of classes are more likely to transfer?

General education courses, lower-division courses (100 and 200 level), courses from accredited institutions, and classes with common curricula across schools are more likely to transfer. Upper-division major classes (300 and 400 level) are less likely to transfer. However, each college makes its own decisions about transfer credits.

Why didn't my new college accept all of my classes?

Credits might not transfer if the course content doesn't match anything offered by your new college, the previous school isn't accredited, your grade was too low, or the credits are too old.

What can I do if a college won't give me credit for a certain class?

If a college denies credit for a class, ask for a detailed explanation of why. You can try to submit the original course syllabus or request a course description from your previous school to show its content. This may also be available in the course catalog that is available on the college website. Sometimes the department head for the relevant subject can sign off on accepting a course. Ask if the college has a formal appeals process or if it's possible to test out of the course based on prior knowledge.

accreditation

/ə'kredə'tāSHən/ (adj.)

Accreditation is a process of external quality review for colleges and universities. Credits from accredited institutions are more likely to transfer because accreditation ensures a certain level of academic quality. Most colleges will only accept transfer credits from "regionally accredited" institutions.

I transferred all of my credits to one community college and have more than 60 credits. Do I have my associate's degree yet?

Having the right number of credits doesn't automatically mean you've earned a degree. Each degree program has specific course requirements beyond just the total number of credits. You need to fulfill general education requirements and specific major requirements, not just accumulate credits.

Is there anything else I should know?

Most colleges require you to take a certain number of credits from them before they will allow you to graduate, typically 25-50% of your total credits. For example, some four-year universities require you to take your senior year with them. They may also have a cap on the total number of transfer credits they'll accept.

PRO TIP: Save your syllabi!

They provide detailed course information that can help you appeal if credits are denied. Consider sending copies to a trusted family member or friend for safekeeping.

syllabus

/'siləbəs/ (noun)

A syllabus is a document that outlines the contents and requirements of a course. Your professor should give you one at the beginning of the semester.

News and views

A snapshot of prison education across the country.

VIRGINIA

The Washington Post reported that a group of formerly incarcerated people in Virginia filed a class-action lawsuit at the end of June against leaders of the Virginia Department of Corrections, seeking damages for the time they allege that the state wrongly imprisoned them beyond their release dates. The state legislature had created incentives for incarcerated people to reduce sentences by participating in education and other programs, but the suit alleges that the corrections department refused to offer some individuals the sentence credits they had earned. *(July 5, 2024)*

FLORIDA

The Florida state legislature passed a bill that establishes that Florida residents will not lose their residency status for in-state tuition purposes just because they are incarcerated. The final version stripped out language that would have allowed people to establish residency while incarcerated, which Open Campus previously reported on as a major barrier to higher education inside Florida prisons. The previous version would have also allowed people to use expired documentation to prove residency, WUFT reported in April.

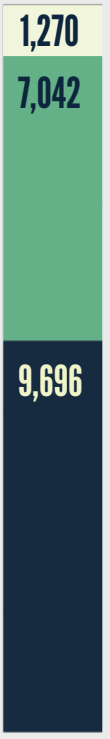
In June, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis vetoed the bill. The bill's sponsors told the Tampa Bay Free Press that without the protections proposed in the bill, these students may face the prospect of being reclassified as non-residents, resulting in a substantial increase in their tuition costs and potentially limiting their ability to afford and access postsecondary education.

CALIFORNIA

In June, the California State Senate placed a measure on the November ballot that would change the state's constitution to prohibit any kind of forced labor, including in prison, CalMatters reported. California prisons hand out about 65,000 work assignments to prisoners every year, according to a 2021 official estimate. Voters in Nevada are also expected to cast ballots in November on a constitutional amendment outlawing forced labor for people in prison. *(June 27, 2024)*

ONE YEAR OF PELL

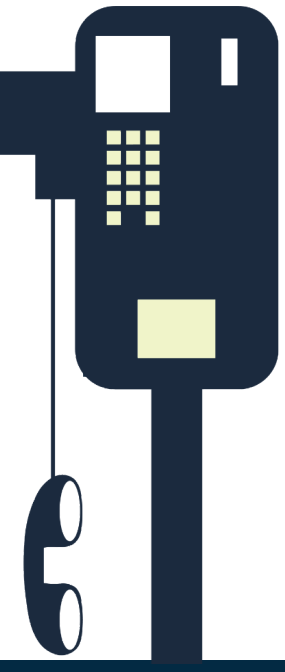
One year after incarcerated students once again became eligible for federal Pell Grants, the Vera Institute of Justice published an overview of states' progress towards expanding access to the federal grants. Since 2016, **more than 45,000 students across the country** enrolled in postsecondary education funded through Pell Grants and earned **more than 18,000 credentials**.



CREDENTIALS GRANTED

- Bachelor's Degrees
- Associate's Degrees
- Certificates

THE COST OF COMMUNICATION



In July, the Federal Communications Commission capped the cost of phone calls for incarcerated people, **dropping the cost of a 15-minute phone call**

from as much as **$11.35** in prisons and large jails to **90¢** *(6¢ per minute)*

and from **$12.10** in small jails to **$1.35** *(9¢ per minute)*

SECOND CHANCE ACT

The Bureau of Justice Assistance published new data in April showing that recidivism rates have been declining in the majority of states since the Second Chance Act, which authorized federal investment in strategies to keep people from going back to prison, was passed in 2008. State-level reincarceration rates are **down 23% since 2008** and 35 states have experienced a reduction in reincarceration. *(April 16, 2024)*