

RESEARCH
BRIEF

The Expanding Role of Colleges in Prison Education

The opportunities and obstacles in
educating the incarcerated

WITH
SUPPORT
FROM

Ascendium¹

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.



Ascendium Education Group is committed to removing barriers so more learners from low-income backgrounds, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans, can achieve their academic and career goals. We see access to postsecondary education programs, cost and programming that is disconnected from career opportunities are obstacles for incarcerated adults. This is why one of our key grantmaking focus areas is [Expanding Postsecondary Education in Prison](#) and why we are supporting this research brief.

Nearly all incarcerated individuals will return to their communities at some point, and research has demonstrated that postsecondary education dramatically improves the odds of successful reentry into the community and workforce. This research brief underscores growing interest in expanding postsecondary education programs in prison, but also identifies several barriers. From this, we hope to better understand the opportunities and challenges as we work with partners to transform postsecondary education in prison systems.

Beyond investing in data and research to better understand incarcerated learners and the educational systems serving their needs, we also work with partners in the field to develop and scale high-quality postsecondary education in prison delivery models. We also support strategic partnerships between postsecondary education providers, correction systems, employers and community-based organizations to remove institutional barriers to program quality and accessibility.

We are encouraged by the restoration of Pell Grants for incarcerated learners and the energy and commitment around postsecondary education in prison that this research brief highlights. Thank you for your interest in The Expanding Role of Colleges in Prison Education.

To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Amy Kerwin

Vice President – Education Philanthropy
[Ascendium Education Group](#)



4 Executive Summary

6 Introduction

9 A New Future

12 Commentary: 'Freeing My Mind Prepared Me for My Physical Freedom'

14 Second Chances and Empty Seats

20 Assessing What Works

24 Commentary: College Leaders: Take a Chance on Incarcerated People Like Me

26 Conclusion

28 Further Reading

Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

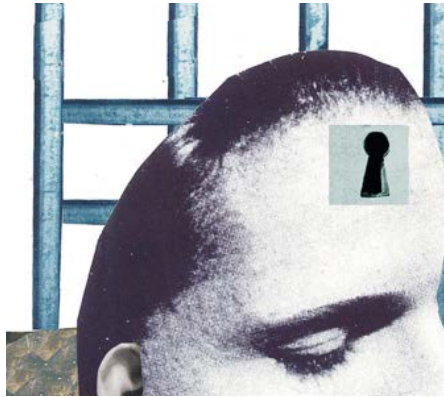
The *Expanding Role of Colleges in Prison Education* was written by Katherine Mangan and is underwritten by Ascendium Education Group. Chronicle cover image from iStock. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. ©2021 by The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. All rights reserved. This material may not be reproduced without prior written permission of The Chronicle. For permission requests, contact us at copyright@chronicle.com.

Over the past four years, thousands of incarcerated students have tapped into federal Pell Grants to pursue college credentials that could help them land better-paying jobs, support their families, and make positive contributions to society when they're released. That number could swell to some 463,000, due to a bipartisan agreement Congress reached in December lifting a ban that has existed for more than a quarter century, according to the Vera Institute of Justice.

It's unclear how much appetite colleges that are reeling from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will have for expanding degree programs behind bars. Will some colleges look to prisons to help shore up sagging enrollments? And at a time of intense racial reckoning, will colleges embrace prison education as a way to make up for past inequities in educational opportunity? Or will the complex needs of incarcerated students and the technological challenges of teaching in a setting where internet access is generally banned prove too daunting?

To get a better sense of higher education's views on and participation in prison-teaching programs at this pivotal moment for the field, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* conducted in November a survey with support from the Ascendium Education Group, a nonprofit organization that supports expanding educational opportunities to incarcerated people. Responses from 763 college administrators and faculty members revealed overwhelming support for prison education. The respondents work at colleges and universities nationwide, with 40 percent at private institutions and the rest at public institutions, including community colleges. About 40 percent of the respondents were faculty members, the rest administrators, with a few librarians and trustees weighing in. In addition, *The Chronicle* interviewed more than two dozen students, instructors, and prison-education experts whose views are reflected in this report.

The report that follows will examine the challenges and opportunities higher education in prison poses to both incarcerated students and educators.



A New Future

Prison was a revolving door for a young man whose troubled past left him feeling angry and powerless. That changed when he earned degrees from the Bard Prison Initiative. Stories like his helped persuade Congress to reinstate Pell Grants for incarcerated learners, offering hope for a better future for those living behind bars as well as new educational opportunities for colleges.



Second Chances and Empty Seats

As hundreds of thousands of incarcerated students become eligible for federal financial aid, a couple of factors may sway colleges considering whether to introduce or expand prison programs. Among them: the desire to offer second chances to a population that's disproportionately poor and Black, and the need to fill their seats as enrollments decline and budget chasms widen.



Assessing What Works

From carpentry to philosophy, colleges have struggled during the pandemic to teach practical skills and analytical tools to incarcerated students who crave face-to-face contact with instructors. A chaotic year has raised new questions about how to measure success in ways that go beyond recidivism rates and how the field can expand responsibly without diluting quality and short-changing students.

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to educate incarcerated students seem to stand at a crossroads. The decision to open up Pell Grants, and the chance for a college education, for more people in prisons has been welcomed as a way to turn lives around while reducing crime and saving taxpayers money. Laying the groundwork for the decision was the Second Chance Pell experiment, launched by the Obama administration in 2016 and expanded by the Trump administration last year.

One literature professor who responded to the *Chronicle* survey about how faculty members and higher-education administrators view educating the incarcerated described prison work as a passion that will extend into retirement. “I love my traditional students, but in most cases they have won the lottery of life; they would be well served whether I was there or not,” the professor wrote. “Working in prison provides a sense ... of making a real difference.”

Eighty-four percent of the more than 700 respondents strongly agreed that incarcerated people should have access to higher education, while another 15 percent somewhat agreed. The reasons they cited: the opportunity to rehabilitate, to grow personally, and to obtain skills that will help them successfully reintegrate into society. Three-quarters of the respondents

wanted to see their own institutions offer those courses, and nearly as many favored extending tuition assistance to incarcerated students.

While they’d like to see more programs offered, many described feeling in the dark about whether their institutions offered prison programs and who exactly they served. One in five respondents had been involved in an educational effort in prison.

“I love my traditional students, but in most cases they have won the lottery of life; they would be well served whether I was there or not,” the professor wrote. “Working in prison provides a sense ... of making a real difference.”

Of those, 93 percent said the experience was valuable to incarcerated students, and 92 percent said they themselves were better off for it.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents — including 68 percent of faculty members — said they would like to participate in a prison-education program. Many cited the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on low-income and minority

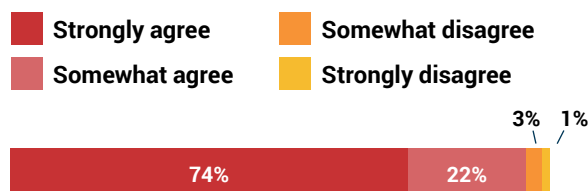
people and the challenges of finding a job — even in a good economy — while having a prison record. Among those who weren't interested in participating in a prison-education effort, a few said they'd rather focus on the needs of students who haven't broken the law. Others questioned whether incarcerated students could keep up with rigorous coursework and worried that they wouldn't be able to complete certain labs and clinics.

Among the biggest challenges respondents saw were a lack of money, a lack of support from college administrators, and

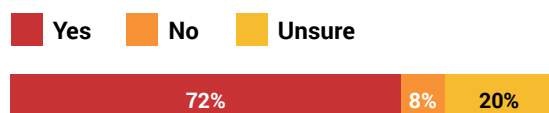
the difficulties of working with bureaucratic corrections systems. "Fear and racism" is how one respondent summarized the barriers facing higher education in prison.

On the other hand, those who had taught incarcerated students described the experience in personal ways, saying it made them better, more empathetic teachers. "It was the one of the richest teaching experiences I have ever had," one faculty member wrote. "Students were focused, engaged the readings closely, came to class prepared, and took each other seriously. They were eager to learn."

How would you describe your support for the statement: "People who are incarcerated should have access to courses at my institution"?



Would you support an effort by your college to provide tuition assistance to students who are in prison?

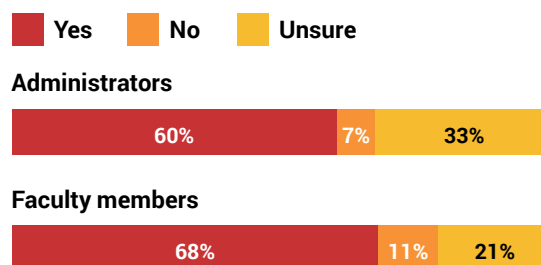


Source: Chronicle survey of 763 faculty members and college administrators.

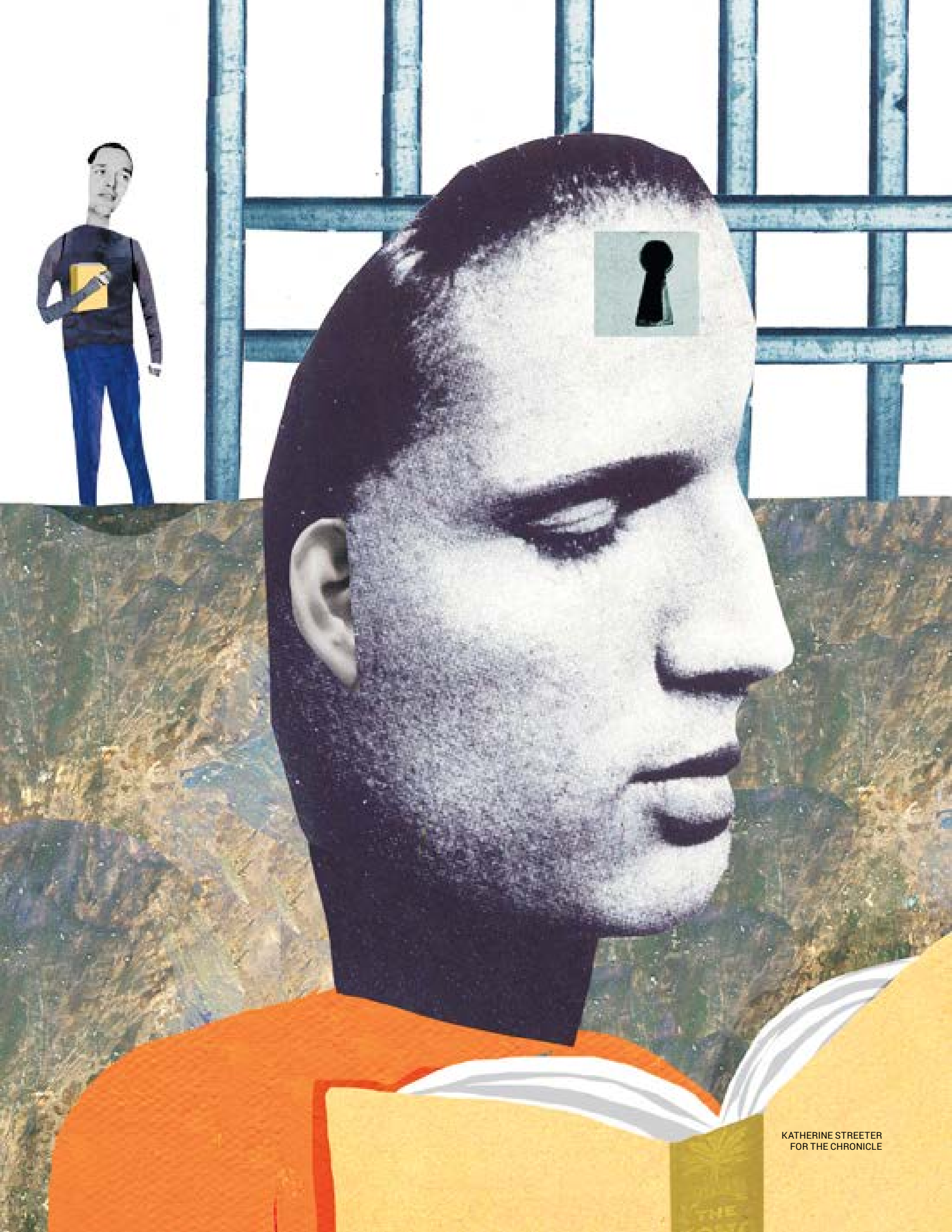
Have you ever been involved in a prison-education effort?



Would you be interested in being involved in a prison-education effort?



Note: This question was only presented to respondents not involved in a prison-education effort.



KATHERINE STREETER
FOR THE CHRONICLE

A New Future

When Elon Molina was sentenced in 2005 to 18 years for armed robbery, the road ahead looked bleak. The mopping and sweeping the prison assigned him weren't providing skills he'd need to support himself when he finally got out, as a middle-age man. But it did offer a program that would give him something to work toward and a reason to hold on to hope.

The [Bard Prison Initiative](#) promised a rigorous college curriculum that applied the same standards behind bars as it applied to Bard College students on the outside.

The message he took away, he said, was that “even though you may not believe in yourself, we're going to show you, like we show the public, that you're just as smart as the students on campus.”

College wasn't always in his plans. If you'd asked him when he was young what he wanted to be when he grew up, Molina, now 43, said his answer would have been “stronger.” Strong enough to stand up to a stepfather who molested him when he was 10 and abused his mother. Strong enough to hold his own among the rough kids he gravitated toward. The streets of East Harlem made him tougher, but they didn't make him stronger.

“We're going to show you, like we show the public, that you're just as smart as the students on campus.”

What did, he said, was a demanding liberal-arts program that opened his mind to new ideas and taught him how to communicate effectively and understand why his life had spun out of control.

The first time he applied to the Bard program, known as BPI, which enrolls more than 300 students in associate- and bachelor's-degree programs in six prisons across New York state, he didn't make the cut. After a year of honing his academic skills in a prison theology program, he reapplied and was accepted. The work, he said, was grueling but motivating.

"I used to write and get frustrated. As my writing got better, one day I looked up and said, 'Oh snap — I'm becoming a better thinker.' I had new ideas to wrestle with."

Molina, who earned his GED in prison, went on to earn an associate degree from BPI in 2015 and a bachelor's degree in political science two years later.

He was released from prison in March 2020 and is now working as a counselor in a non-secure detention center for teenage boys who have had brushes with the law. "I tell them I am a product of what your behavior can become," he said. He's also tutoring with Bard's [microcollege](#) program and doing funded research on the psychological lives of impoverished people.

Molina, who was in and out of prison when he was young, said pursuing a college degree made him feel more in control of his future. This time, when he was released, "I wasn't afraid to look someone in the eye and say no to something," Molina said. "I had found my voice as a man."

Molina is one of thousands of incarcerated people who completed college degrees in prison with the help of the [Second Chance Pell](#) program, an experiment started in 2016 to provide a limited number of federal need-based Pell Grants to inmates in federal and state prisons. During the first three years of

Pell Grants for Prisoners: a Timeline

1965 Title IV of the Higher Education Act provides access to Pell Grants to incarcerated students.

Early 1990s An estimated 772 programs provide college education to people in 1,287 correctional facilities.

1994 The Violent Crime and Control Act bars prisoners from receiving Pell Grants.

1997 Number of programs providing a college education to incarcerated students drops to eight.

2016 The Obama administration starts the Second Chance Pell pilot program with 67 colleges participating.

2020 The Trump administration expands the Second Chance program to 130 institutions. In December, Congress enacted legislation to lift the ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students as part of a Covid-19 relief and omnibus package.

Sources: U.S. Education Department; Washington State Department of Corrections

the Second Chance experiment, nearly [17,000 students](#) enrolled in a college program in prison with the help of a Pell Grant, according to the Vera Institute of Justice.

Success stories like Molina's helped persuade Congress in December to lift a

26-year-old ban on federal financial support for inmates. With the ban lifted, the number enrolled could grow to some 463,000 students, the Vera Institute [estimates](#).

For advocates of prison education, the change was long overdue.

Until 1994, incarcerated people could receive Pell Grants to help cover the cost of college courses. But during President Bill Clinton's administration, they were excluded in a crime bill championed by then-U.S. Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. The argument was that, at a time when law-abiding citizens were taking on massive college debt, the government shouldn't be paying for convicted criminals to attend college.

Enrollment in prison courses evaporated at the same time that prison populations were exploding and recidivism rates were rising.

By 2016, with public sentiment shifting away from mass incarceration toward rehabilitation, the Obama administration started what became known as the Second Chance Pell program to start resurrecting higher-education options for prisoners. Biden, now president, has [said](#) his support for the Pell

ban was a mistake.


To progressives and student advocates, offering college courses to incarcerated individuals was a humane way to allow them to restart their lives and support their families when they were released.

And conservatives also see an opportunity

to cut down on crime and save taxpayers money. Last year, the Trump administration, citing its ["transformative impact,"](#) expanded the Second Chance Pell program to 130 colleges in 42 states, plus the District of Columbia.

Ultimately, an expansion of educational opportunities will have the most profound effect on incarcerated people. For a student walking into a prison classroom,

"psychologically you are removed from the matrix of carrots and sticks, from the constant reminder of whatever your conviction and sentence and relationship to the state might be," said Max Kenner, founder and executive director of the Bard Prison Initiative. "You are removed from the chaos of the prison yard, and you are in a space that is fundamentally about the future and not the past."



"I used to write and get frustrated. As my writing got better, one day I looked up and said, 'Oh snap — I'm becoming a better thinker.' I had new ideas to wrestle with."

‘Freeing My Mind Prepared Me for My Physical Freedom’

A former inmate reflects on his educational journey.

Thomas Anderson is a 53-year-old junior at the University of Baltimore, where he started taking classes while serving time in Jessup Correctional Institution, for first-degree murder. He was released in 2019 after 23 years behind bars and is now taking classes as a free man, studying business and real estate.

In his youth in the outskirts of Baltimore, he took a few college classes before getting involved in drugs and a deal that turned deadly. Life inside the maximum-security prison was grim, but the courses he was able to take from Coppin State University, whose program was supported by a grant from the philan-

thropist George Soros, gave him hope for the future. When that ended in 2000, the violence and tedium of the daily prison routine returned.

A breakthrough happened in 2014 when he met Andrea Cantora, an associate professor of criminal justice at the University of Baltimore, who brought students majoring in her discipline to the prison for an educational [exchange program](#). Many of the students were planning careers in law enforcement. Anderson said the link with the outside world and the camaraderie with like-minded incarcerated men helped him turn his life around. Here’s his story, as told to Katherine Mangan.

Before becoming incarcerated, I took some college courses at a local community college. The streets grabbed hold of me and distracted me, and ultimately I ended up in prison. When an opportunity to go to college became available, I jumped on it. I was one of about 17 students selected to take 30 credit hours of courses from Coppin State University.

Even though I had a life sentence — very few people were getting out of that prison unless it was in a body bag — I still hoped I’d walk out that door.



THOMAS ANDERSON

Shortly after his release from prison, Thomas Anderson was invited to Harvard University to talk about prison education and rehabilitation.

Once I had finished the 30 credits, that was all I was able to take. That was hard. When an educational opportunity becomes available and is taken away, it’s like a part of you goes with it. That hope of “Can I get better? Will I be able to improve my life?”

I started tutoring people who couldn’t read or write. It gave me something positive to counterbalance all the negativity.

Dr. Cantora was teaching an enrichment class in criminal justice, and she brought her students in from the outside. We were starting to engage with them on an aca-

demic level. We brought insight to them, and we gained greater insight into them. Learning together, we became human to one another.


The classes created a different environment from the constant negativity, the constant violence — both emotional and physical. To sit at a desk and have someone invest in me really blessed my soul. The fact that people on the outside were caring for people on the inside meant a lot to me.

One of the most interesting classes I took in prison was in psychology. I was able to diagnose the mentality of the people I was dealing with and learn to maneuver in that environment. When an officer was being abusive of their authority I could talk to them without them feeling threatened, but allowing them to see that I'm a man who deserves respect. In humility, I would approach them and learn to articulate my thoughts.

When Pell Grants came back and college classes were offered for credit, I wasn't eligible to take them because I had a life sentence. You had to be within five years of your release. I went back to court and when I was given an opportunity to speak, I addressed the judge, the state's attorney, the victim's family, and my family. I communicated my sorrow and regret and poured out my soul to them. At one

point I got so choked up emotionally, I had to stop talking to get myself together. Even though I wasn't the principal, I take a great deal of responsibility for a man losing his life. If I hadn't been involved in drugs, it wouldn't have gotten to that point. It created an atmosphere for that to happen. A lot of other people were emotional and even said they forgave me, and the judge agreed to give me a second

Some people were jealous — they acted like, “He thinks he’s better than me because he’s getting an education” — and that created some animosity and conflict.



chance. My sentence was reduced and I immediately enrolled in the Second Chance Pell college program.

All the college students lived in one tier. We had study hall together. If there was a major project due, we'd pool our resources and energy so everyone got a good grade and passed. We'd go to class and eat together. We'd have intellectual conversations and analyze all kinds of stuff.

When a new prison administrator took over, we were moved back in with the rest of the population. It's hard to do something positive when you're surrounded by people who are very negative. Some people were jealous — they acted like, “He thinks he's better than me because he's getting an education” — and that created some animosity and conflict.

Sitting in prison with a life sentence, I had a lot of time to look at myself in the proverbial mirror. The reason I could follow others is because I didn't know who I was, and I let other people define me. I was being a people pleaser, trying so hard to fit in.

Back then, I thought there was one way to overcome obstacles, and that was through violence. Through my college courses, I realized there are other ways. I was able to focus on a goal rather than the obstacles. Freeing my mind prepared me for my physical freedom.

I was released on October 28, 2019. After I kissed the ground and got myself together, I had a couple of months before the semester started in late January. After being away from technology for 23 years, I was really lost in the sauce. I'd had very little access to computers in prison and no access to the internet. I didn't understand social media. I'm still catching up.

It's a lot easier to find your way out of a maze if you have a map. Education was my map.

Second Chances and Empty Seats

Two key factors that could propel colleges toward starting or expanding prison-education programs involve their social-justice missions and concerns about declining enrollment's effect on their bottom line.

The idea that people deserve second chances came up frequently in the *Chronicle's* survey responses. So, too, did the observation that Black defendants are more likely to receive long prison sentences that make it even harder for them to land jobs and support their families when they're released. "Most incarcerated individuals are not hardened criminals but people who were disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and marginalized in the first place," one respondent wrote. "Also, racial profiling is a huge issue in this country and leads to increased arrests, harsher sentences, and increased barriers."



MICHAEL MORGENSTERN FOR THE CHRONICLE

At a time when African Americans make up 13 percent of the nation’s population but [more than a third](#) of the country’s prison population, opening college doors to more incarcerated students is the right thing to do, the presidents of two historically Black colleges — Dwaun J. Warmack, of Claflin University, and Kent J. Smith Jr., of Langston University — wrote recently in [The Washington Post](#).

“When we empower incarcerated people

“Black women who are incarcerated don’t have the same access to educational opportunities.”

to start down a meaningful career path upon returning to the community, the cycle of poverty and involvement in the criminal-justice system is positively disrupted,” they wrote.

Educating disenfranchised and disadvantaged populations fits neatly into the social mission of historically Black colleges. But it is also becoming a priority for higher education more broadly as the twin pandemics of Covid-19 and racial injustice have made inequality impossible to overlook. Pressure is building on colleges to take concrete actions to shrink what has become a widening opportunity gap.

Before they can start on a college degree, many incarcerated people need to earn high-school credentials. In the general population, two out of 10 people lack a high-school diploma or GED, but for federal and state inmates, it’s nearly four out of 10.

Only 6 percent of incarcerated people held a postsecondary degree in 2012 and 2014, compared with 37 percent of non-incarcerated people, according to a 2019 report by Ithaka S+R.

Concerns about equity extend to women, who represent the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population. Because they still make up less than 10 percent of the inmate population, their needs are often given short shrift, advocates for incarcerated women say.

“Black women who are incarcerated don’t have the same access to educational opportunities,” said Erin S. Corbett, co-founder and chief executive officer of the Second Chance Educational Alliance, a prison reintegration program in Connecticut. In some states, classes amount to little more, she said, than “home ec and how to be a better mommy.”

The pathway to prison starts early. Black girls, Corbett said, are more likely to be suspended and expelled than their white

classmates in secondary schools, and are more likely as teens to receive harsh jail sentences. “The penal system is starting to chip away at a Black girl’s access to education even before she enters prison,” Corbett said. “It gets infinitely worse when they’re incarcerated.”

Because so many incarcerated women have suffered from trauma or abuse, they may not behave in a college classroom the way a professor expects. “They may not be as vocally or verbally engaged — or they may be overly so,” she said. “They may be less trusting, less willing to be vulnerable in a public space.” Because of this, their potential can be underestimated.

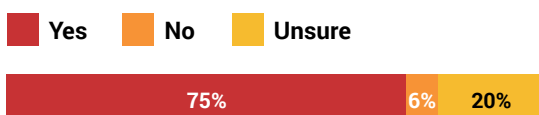
The challenges many incarcerated students face — poverty, trauma, inadequate education, and substance abuse — are shared by other vulnerable college students whose needs are being prioritized today as part of a broader student-success movement.

The challenges many incarcerated students face — poverty, trauma, inadequate education, and substance abuse — are shared by other vulnerable college students whose needs are being prioritized today as part of a broader student-success movement. Three-quarters of those responding to the *Chronicle* survey favored incorpo-

rating currently and formerly incarcerated students under that success umbrella.

Addressing such needs should be equitable and universal for all students, and leaving them out would only widen disparities, they argued. As one administrator wrote,

Do you think incarcerated students should be included as part of larger student-success efforts?



Note: Figures add up to more than 100 percent due to rounding.
Source: Chronicle survey of 763 faculty members and college administrators.

incarcerated students who aren't supported and drop out could sour on education and see it as a sign that they aren't valued.

But others argue that the needs of incarcerated students are different and that at a time of limited resources, the focus should be on those who haven't broken the law. Some also say incarcerated students have so many barriers to graduating that colleges with budgets tied to student-performance metrics could be penalized unfairly for trying to help them.

ENROLLMENT BOOST

Prisons could present a welcome influx of students for colleges that were facing enrollment challenges even before the pandemic. In 2018-19, 354 academic institutions were teaching in prisons; that number could increase significantly in coming years.

But with Pell Grants restored, "there is the chance that low-quality programs will move into the space to exploit this new source of funding," Kurtis Tanaka, a qualitative analyst with Ithaka S+R who researches higher education and technology

in prisons, wrote in an email. "The increasing presence of technology could make this even easier."

When Covid-19 hit and colleges on the outside scrambled to move online, prison-education programs were at a disadvantage, since incarcerated people typically aren't allowed on the internet and have limited access to technology, Tanaka said. Students struggled to write papers on tablets hardly larger than cell phones. Prison servers that weren't set up for educational delivery crashed frequently. Students were allowed infrequent visits to kiosks to download lessons.

As the pandemic prompted some prisons to relax rules on technology, it's become easier for education programs to shift toward remote delivery. While the technological skills will be helpful when they're released, many prison-education advocates say incarcerated students, even more than those on the outside, benefit from in-person interaction with professors and classmates.

But with Pell Grants restored, "there is the chance that low-quality programs will move into the space to exploit this new source of funding."

"The prison system is already intentionally structured to divide people from each other," said Molly Lasagna, executive director of the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative, a nonprofit that works with the state's corrections department and participating colleges. "One of the benefits we

bring is drawing students into community with each other, with their professors, and with the free-world staff.”

In states like Tennessee, where college funding is at least partly tied to completion, colleges that roll out prison programs too quickly could be penalized if students don’t graduate, Lasagna said.

Even with Pell Grants, incarcerated students often need wraparound support like counseling and intensive advising, as well as help staying enrolled when they switch facilities or are released into the community.

Because of these and other challenges, colleges with declining enrollment that look to prison education as a way to make money will likely be disappointed, Lasagna said. “This population of students is not going to generate a lot of revenue for your school. An incredibly high percentage of students are indigent — certainly while they’re incarcerated, where in Tennessee the majority of people are making 17 cents an hour.”

The costs and challenges of providing college courses in prisons hasn’t stopped one of the biggest and oldest players in prison education from expanding its reach. Ashland University, a private Christian university in Ohio, has been offering prison education since 1964 and now enrolls around 3,600 students in 11 states plus the District of Columbia. Since 2016, when it began offering classes online, Ashland has expanded rapidly, awarding associate or bachelors’ degrees to 825 students.

Officials there make no secret of their hopes to expand further, but they emphasize that they want to work with, not in

competition with, other providers. “We’d love to see every person who is incarcerated have the opportunity to go to college,” said Todd Marshall, vice president for correctional education and innovation.

Pell Grants allow Ashland to offer courses at no cost to inmates or the facility, he said.

“This population of students is not going to generate a lot of revenue for your school.”

Students communicate with their professors through secure content-management systems on their program-issued tablets or notebook computers. The university’s [critics](#) say the tablet-based program, which largely relies on recorded lectures and a single digital librarian for students nationwide, shortchanges students who may use up their Pell eligibility taking its courses.

But Marshall insists the programs are high quality and points out that the university offers an onsite director to each of the prisons and jails it works with.

Max Kenner, of Bard, said he’s wary of online providers who may move quickly to take advantage of thousands of newly Pell-eligible students. “The pressure to do work at scale is in tension with the reality of how things happen on the ground in prison,” he said. “When you see colleges wishing to offer distance learning in as many states as possible, you should be alarmed.”



Assessing What Works

Colleges are working with incarcerated students in myriad ways, from offering short-term work-force certificates to bachelor's degrees in the liberal arts. Because getting hired with a criminal record is especially hard, entrepreneurship courses — offered both by college and other [providers](#) — are popular in prisons. So too are programs that offer credentials in areas such as automotive mechanics, carpentry, graphic design, green building, and horticulture.

Washington state's [College in Prisons Program](#) provides job skills through partnerships with the state's community and technical colleges. The focus is on jobs with significant demand and decent wages, and when possible, those that offer apprenticeships.

The program also uses a system called Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training, or [I-BEST](#), which teaches basic academic skills in the context of the trades students are training for. Prison-based “re-entry navigators” help students line up financial aid and transcripts before they're released, while navigators on the

Most respondents — 63 percent — said that offering courses in a hybrid of in-person and online class time would be best. But access to technology is a challenge in prisons.

outside help connect them with housing, transportation, jobs, and other assistance.

On the other end of the educational spectrum, in October, University of Puget Sound trustees approved accreditation for a bach-

What do you think the best way to provide education to incarcerated people is?



Source: Chronicle survey of 763 faculty members and college administrators.

elor of arts in liberal studies to be offered by the [Freedom Education Project](#) at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Wash. The degree program, which will help the dozens of students who have completed associate degrees through the program continue their education, is backed by a \$1-million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

How instructors teach incarcerated students also varies. According to the *Chronicle* survey, most respondents — 63 percent — said that offering courses in a hybrid of in-person and online class time would be best. But access to technology is a challenge in prisons.

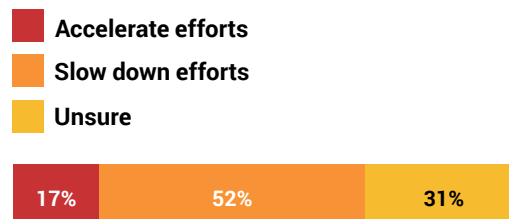
In Washington state, incarcerated students aren't allowed access to the internet or the use of course-management programs like Blackboard or Canvas. When the Gig Harbor prison was locked down last winter because of the pandemic, instructors had to switch to hand delivering paper packets to the prison, where staff members wheeled them around on a cart to students' rooms, retrieved the finished packets, and drove them to instructors for grading. The cumbersome process repeated for each lesson.

"Students have been very frustrated," said Jennifer Bright, executive director of the Freedom Education Project. "Staff have had to talk some students off the ledge academically."

Other prison-education programs have had to either shut down during the pandemic or shift to a correspondence mode of class. The drop in morale, administrators say, has reaffirmed the importance of in-person classes.

Covid-19 may have a long-term impact on prison education, too. While concerns about racial inequality and the expansion of Pell Grants offer a strong impetus for educating the incarcerated, there are headwinds, according to the *Chronicle* survey. Slightly more than half of the respondents — 52 percent — predicted that the pandemic, and the societal

How do you think the pandemic, and what it has revealed about societal inequities, will affect prison-education efforts?



Source: Chronicle survey of 763 faculty members and college administrators.

inequities it underscored, would slow down efforts to provide higher education to those in prison. A similar portion — 54 percent — said that lack of funds on campus would be the largest barrier to start or expand such work once Covid-19 subsides.

MEASURING SUCCESS

A key to sustaining and expanding prison-education programs, especially when money is tight, is showing that they work.

Privacy protections and limited technology access create barriers to tracking the needs and performance of college students in prison.

“The work we’re doing isn’t crime-prevention work. It’s education work.”

A common metric cited by supporters of prison education is lowered recidivism rates. [A 2018 study](#) published in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology* found that inmates who participated in higher-education programs while incarcerated were 48-percent less likely to return to prison. That translates to cost savings; for every dollar spent on prison-education programs, taxpayers save \$4 to \$5, RAND Corporation research found.

Conservative policymakers who support prison education point out that it can reduce crime by ensuring that inmates — more than 90 percent of whom will eventually be released — have a legal way to support themselves and their families.

But others argue that the benefits of higher education extend far beyond keeping students away from crime. “The work we’re doing isn’t crime-prevention work. It’s education work,” said Rebecca Ginsburg, director of the Education Justice Project, a program of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

“We’re not seeing our students as potential agents of harm and danger in the world, but as individuals with the potential to contribute” to their families and to society, she said. “We should think of them as scholars with the respect and dignity that goes with it.”

Recidivism rates don’t measure success, Ginsburg argues. “It just measures whether a person ends up back in prison,” which can happen for a technical violation like missing curfews.

She’s also skeptical about using employment as a measure of a program’s success. The kind of job matters, too, she said. “People with college degrees shouldn’t be working in slaughterhouses or sweeping streets unless they want to. The question is not just employment but meaningful employment that correlates to their level of education.”

The Illinois group enlisted the help of previously incarcerated students to identify what it considers more meaningful success metrics. “What if someone got involved in their childrens’ PTA meetings?” said Raphael Jackson, 43, who had been incarcerated since age 16. “What if they went home and became

What barriers will exist post-Covid on your campus to start or expand efforts to educate incarcerated people?

Lack of funds on campus

54%

Lack of federal tuition assistance for prisoners*

53%

Lack of federal and state political support

51%

Challenges working with the correctional system

49%

Concerns about safety of instructors for in-person class

44%

* Survey conducted before the recent expansion of Pell Grants for prisoners.

Note: Respondents were asked to select multiple barriers from a list of 10. These are the top five chosen.

Source: Chronicle survey of 763 faculty members and college administrators.

mentors to their nieces and nephews? If I come home, go to work every day, sit around

and drink, the fact that I don't recidivate to them means the program is successful. But how can it be successful if this person isn't engaged in any sense in the community?"

Extending education to incarcerated people has ripple effects on their families and communities. Incarcerated college students are more likely to talk to their children about the importance of higher education. Parents talk of being grateful they can finally help

“We’re not seeing our students as potential agents of harm and danger in the world, but as individuals with the potential to contribute.”

their children with their homework and feel that they're being positive role models.

Incarcerated students aren't the only people who benefit. More than nine out of 10 respondents to the *Chronicle* survey who taught in prison programs said they benefited personally from the experience. Andrés Pletch, who teaches Latin American and Caribbean history with the Bard Prison Initiative, said he started out with a few classes in 2017 and “got hooked.”

“What distinguished the BPI classroom from classrooms on the outside was the level

of engagement and investment students bring to the experience,” he said. “As a graduate student, there were classes where I was lucky if two or three students really engaged in the material.”

His incarcerated students “are adults with life experiences, and there's no pretense that these are empty vessels you're filling with knowledge,” Pletch added. While he's heard from friends teaching on the outside about students logging on to Zoom and then zoning out, his students have had to take a more active role in their education because their tools for communicating with him are limited, he said.

“Under normal circumstances teaching in a prison is all about navigating disruptions and difficulties,” Pletch said. Instructors can be delayed for hours going through prison security if a disturbance breaks out and the prison is locked down.

Since the pandemic hit, Pletch joins his students via a speakerphone that the prison's education coordinator locks in a box for security reasons after assembling the students.

“I get locked up and have the class to myself,” Pletch said. For each class, he assigns a student leader to help call on classmates. During a recent class on the politics of language, he could only make out pieces of an animated discussion that took off without him, voices ricocheting off cinder-block walls.

“After about a half hour, one of the students asked if I was still on the line. I said, ‘Yeah. I'm just going along for the ride,’ and everyone laughed.”

College Leaders: Take a Chance on Incarcerated People Like Me

By JOHN J. LENNON

Dear College President: After 26 years, the ban on Pell Grants for prisoners [has been lifted](#). About damn time. I mean, I've been publishing [essays from prison](#) for years calling for this. It finally happened in that omnibus bill, the one with the Covid relief that was 5,000 pages. You know Donald Trump didn't read that, but he signed it. His January antics made this great news a bit anticlimactic. But it's where we are.

It's impossible to understand this opportunity without seeing how much was lost when Pell Grants were taken away. I call those who suffered the consequences the Lost Generation. Except they weren't jolly and drinking and flirting and taking trains across Europe. This Lost Generation was in prison doing nothing, and idle time in the joint is the devil's ... well, you know the rest of that cliché.

So when a good opportunity

comes along, even the worst of us can spot it. I did. And maybe my story will help persuade you to see a nearby prison as a potential satellite campus.

I know it's quite the venture in these uncertain times — what with Covid still swirling, enrollment suffering, and national unrest — but it's worth the investment. Not just because it would help prisoners get jobs, lower recidivism, and save states money on incarceration costs. It's more than that.

Whenever the president of Hamilton College, who once approved funding for his English professor's curious venture to bring a creative-writing workshop into Attica Correctional Facility, sees my writings, especially in *The Chronicle*, I hear the guy perk up and sends my old writing mentor a beaming email. It's an amazing feeling, I'm sure, to see a student you taught succeed, a brimful, humble pride. That's why you educators do what you do. If that

president had passed on the idea, or the professor had been discouraged by the unkind guards, who would sometimes turn him away because they fumbled his gate clearance, you would never be reading these words, because I would never be a writer.

In December 2001, I was 24, doing drugs, selling drugs, and I shot and killed a man in Brooklyn. I was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to 28 years to life. When I was processed into state prison, I had a ninth-grade education, dumb as they come. About five years into my sentence, I landed in a facility in which the [Bard Prison Initiative](#) was interviewing students.

In order to apply for college courses, a prisoner has to have fewer than 15 years left in a sentence before coming before the parole board. With 23 years to go at the time, I was ineligible. I remember being at a table in the mess hall, hearing students talk about Kant and Kierkegaard and

Nietzsche, discussing their essays on existentialism. Chewing Tater Tots, staring off like I wasn't listening, I felt envious and invisible. Trouble soon found me in the yard. A familiar face from Brooklyn, a friend of the man I killed, greeted me with a dap and a half hug, then shanked me in the chest six times, puncturing my lung. He got away with it. I wouldn't give the guy up, so I got transferred to Attica, New York's toughest joint.


It was 2009, and there were no educational programs in Attica. Mom paid for correspondence courses from Ohio University. I took microeconomics, accounting, American government, and women's literature. I'd study game theory, balance sheets, the Great Compromise, and wrote reflection papers on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. I hated the book, and still remember the instructor's snarky red-ink comments: "Do they give you guys dictionaries in there?" The guy gave me a C. In a [recent *New York Times* essay](#), the novelist Michael Cunningham wrote, "Woolf was among the first writers to understand that there are no insignificant lives, only inadequate ways of looking at them."

One afternoon, while I was taking a proctored exam for microeconomics in the deserted Attica school building, the clerk, who used to be a teacher and was in for killing his wife, asked if I would be interested in joining a creative-writing workshop. I was. Doran Larson, a Hamilton College English professor, led a workshop geared toward publishing our

work. It was 2010. Michelle Alexander had just published her seminal book, *The New Jim Crow*. Mass incarceration and criminal justice reform were growing issues. We read *Best American Essays*, and I'd take note of where the writings had originally appeared and daydream that my words would one day appear in one of those publications.

I was hoping to eventually get a transfer back to a prison with Bard College classes. (Transfers are only approved for a region; you never know the exact prison in which you will land.) When Larson secured funding for Genesee Community College to come

That writing workshop was my most important educational experience.



in, I landed one of the 23 spots in the pilot program and decided to stay in Attica. I kept attending the workshop. In 2013, after perfecting an essay for months, I sent it off to *The Atlantic*. They [published it](#).

Today I am a freelance writer with scores of publications, and I'm on the masthead of *Esquire*.

I got what I needed from those correspondence courses. They prepared me for what came next, which was the writing workshop,

then community college, where I learned the layers of our nation's sins that helped me better understand why things are the way they are in this very moment. By the time I landed in Sing Sing and finished up my bachelor's through Mercy College, one of the several college programs funded and organized by Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prisons in New York, I was already an experienced writer and journalist.

That writing workshop was my most important educational experience. A part of me feels Doran Larson sacrificed his writerly ambitions so we in that workshop could, if only for a moment, feel like we were something more than inmate, prisoner, murderer, this evil thing. That something more was a published writer. He gave me that. I owe my career to him. With writing, editors don't look at where you went to college, they look at your work, your bylines — and mine, I'm told, measure up with the best. That has a lot to do with grit. College presidents, I hear, want more college students to have it. Prison is where you can find that trait in abundance.

John J. Lennon is a contributing editor for Esquire Magazine. His 2018 story for the publication, "This Place Is Crazy," was a National Magazine Award finalist in feature writing and appeared in The 2019 Best American Magazine Writing. Lennon has been incarcerated for 20 years. He is currently in Sullivan Correctional Facility, in Fallsburg, N.Y.

CONCLUSION

Vivian D. Nixon was desperate for intellectual conversations of any kind during her three years of incarceration in upstate New York, which ended in 2001. Since college classes weren't offered in her prison, she tutored fellow inmates seeking high-school equivalency degrees.

She knows well the vital role education plays for those living behind bars and the importance of extending help to students as they make the transition to the free world.

When she was released, she received that help through a nonprofit she now leads, the [College & Community Fellowship](#). The organization offers individualized counseling, peer-support sessions, and small financial awards like ones to lift holds on transcripts from previous colleges to allow credits to transfer.

When Nixon joined the nonprofit, she met six women in similar situations who would remain close friends to this day. They supported her as she earned her bachelor's degree in nonprofit management from the SUNY Empire State College and then a master's in fine arts from Columbia University.

The nonprofit has fought for two decades for the restoration of Pell Grants — a breakthrough Nixon said will expand the higher-education options available in prison from one or two to a variety of short-

term work-force certificates and associate and bachelor's-degrees options.

Students will need help making sense of those options and using Pell Grants wisely. "When you open up the catalog of the City University of New York or the State University of New York, there's an infinity of options, and students get overwhelmed and confused," Nixon said. "In prison, no one tells you you need to go to the registrar or the bursar — and what is a bursar anyway?"

Students may also need support deciding how and whether to disclose their prior life, say, in a classroom discussion



LEE WEXLER

Vivian Nixon, foreground, greeting Turquoise Martin, a 2019 college graduate who was once incarcerated. Nixon, executive director of College & Community Fellowship, is a former inmate herself.

about crime or prison, she said. The restoration of Pell Grants is due, in no small part, to people willing to discuss their dual lives as incarcerated college students, Nixon said. "Every time we sat before elected officials, sharing expertise and stories about the transformative power of

education, we lived a paradox,” she wrote in a [statement](#) after the ban was lifted. “The power of our testimony came with the stigma of incarceration. Yet, chains held high, we claimed that we are worthy of educational opportunity. And many educators stood with us — keeping hope alive by providing college behind bars when Pell was not an option.”

As the *Chronicle*’s survey has reflected, access to postsecondary education is widely seen today as a necessity, rather than a perk, for incarcerated people who will need to rebuild their lives when they’re released. And as Nixon’s experience has shown, incarcerated students will need intensive support as they transition from prison to studies on the outside.

Smoothing re-entry will be easier if colleges can be part of a network of support. The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison connects people in the field and helps them develop high-quality programs.

Some states have been testing a coalition approach already, such as a five-year demonstration program in North Carolina, Michigan, and New Jersey. The program was coordinated by the Vera Institute of Justice.

In North Carolina, a partnership of the state’s public-safety, corrections, and community-college systems allowed inmates to earn certificates, a diploma in general education, or an associate of applied science degree.

Without someone on the outside helping navigate re-entry services, college applications, and financial aid, students can easily get overwhelmed and drop out, a RAND Corporation [analysis](#) of North Carolina’s program pointed out.

“Pathways students were expected to enroll in full-time college courses; secure part-time employment; find suitable housing arrangements; address transportation

needs; reunite with family members; and, in some cases, resume parental and financial responsibilities for their families while managing and seeking treatment for any substance abuse, depression, anxiety, or other mental-health issues.”

Smoothing re-entry will be easier if colleges can be part of a network of support.

To help keep them on track, colleges should allow re-entering students to attend college part time if they prefer and provide momentum through [stackable credentials](#) students can earn while they’re in prison, the analysis recommended.

Such innovation and experimentation will be needed if colleges want to seriously serve the incarcerated, especially as they also wrestle with safety issues and financial problems triggered by the pandemic. The restoration of Pell Grants, of course, offers a strong incentive to start or expand efforts. And long term, even as the country tries to heal the damage wrought by Covid-19 and systemic racism, prison-education advocates say that a watchful eye is needed to make sure that as program options expand, quantity doesn’t outstrip quality.

“At the end of the day, as Pell re-emerges, it’s going to be state and local decision makers who determine the quality and meaning of college in prison,” Max Kenner, executive director of the Bard Prison Initiative, said. “The more college in prison resembles college in America, the better off we’ll be.”

FURTHER READING

“Advancing Technological Equity for Incarcerated College Students: Examining the Opportunities and Risks,” by Kurtis Tanaka and Danielle Cooper, *Ithaca S+R*, 2020
<https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/advancing-technological-equity-incarcerated-college-students/>

“An Innovative Program Guides Former Gang Members From Prison to Promise,” by Katherine Mangan, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 11, 2016
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/an-innovative-program-guides-former-gang-members-from-prison-to-promise/>

“Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison,” by Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale, Laura Tatum, Margaret diZerega, and Fred Patrick, Vera Institute of Justice and the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019
https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/investing-in-futures-education-in-prison/legacy_downloads/investing-in-futures.pdf

“Moving Classes Online Is Hard — Especially in Prisons,” by Mia Armstrong, *Slate*, May 4, 2020
<https://slate.com/technology/2020/05/remote-learning-prisons.html>

“Their Stories Helped Lift a 26-Year Ban on Pell Grants for Prisoners,” by Katherine Mangan, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 30, 2020
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/their-stories-helped-lift-a-26-year-ban-on-pell-grants-for-prisoners>

“Unbarring Access: A Landscape Review of Postsecondary Education in Prison and Its Pedagogical Supports,” by Meagan Wilson, Rayane Alamuddin, and Danielle Cooper, *Ithaca S+R*, 2019
<https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/landscape-review-postsecondary-education-in-prison>

“Why Pell Grants Can Help Fight the Pandemic,” by Tony Parker and Stephen Sinclair, *Politico*, December 4, 2020
<https://www.politico.com/news/agenda/2020/12/04/pell-grants-coronavirus-pandemic-442884>

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

202 466 1000 | [Chronicle.com](https://www.chronicle.com)