



Research on College in Prison and After Release

Recommendations from Those Who Know Best

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Earning a postsecondary credential is a critical pathway to economic success.¹ However, for more than 70 million people with a history of arrest, conviction, or incarceration, involvement in the criminal legal system results in a series of collateral consequences that limit their upward economic mobility.² Limited access to education is one of these consequences. For decades, individuals who were incarcerated were not eligible for Pell Grants, a form of federal financial aid to help eligible students pay for college. As a result, higher education in prison was rare.

The July 2023 reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility increased access to education for thousands of individuals and a growing number of colleges and universities are offering degree programs to people who are incarcerated.³ Despite this growth, there are no regulatory bodies to set standards for higher education programs within prisons, and there is a limited understanding of the academic needs of this subset of students. Rigorous evidence detailing students' educational experiences or examining their long-term educational and employment outcomes is scarce. Instead, most evidence focuses on the effects of these programs on recidivism, or a relapse in criminal behavior, which is often measured by rearrest, reconviction, or reincarceration.⁴ Even less systematic evidence exists about how to help people who are pursuing a degree after release.⁵

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Within this context, MDRC drew on existing research to identify opportunities to build more evidence about best practices to assist students who are pursuing higher education in prison and after release. To inform a research agenda that would be useful to program practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and students, the research team had several dozen conversations with college program staff members, college administrators, academic researchers, state officials, people working to assist individuals while incarcerated or who have recently been released, and students.

This brief offers insights and recommendations from interviews with five students and seven staff members who work closest to them to inform more responsive research efforts on higher education for students who are incarcerated or have recently been released.

Overview

For the research reported on in this brief, the team used purposive sampling and interviewed 12 people who are closely involved with higher education in prison and after release: five students or recent graduates, four staff members who work in higher education in prisons or who assist students on campus after their release and were formerly incarcerated themselves, and three staff members who work in the field but have not been incarcerated.⁶ Staff members' roles included: a director in a state office of higher education, coordinators and counselors in campus-based initiatives to help students who were formerly incarcerated, prison-based student support specialists, and an advocate for higher education in prison.

Although the interviews conducted for this research effort include a small sample and cannot fully capture the diverse experiences of individuals involved in educational programs during or after incarceration, the 12 participants offered valuable insights. Their experiences span a range of educational programs in different states, providing meaningful examples that help illuminate the varied realities of these experiences.

Areas for Further Research

To build evidence that is most applicable to the field, researchers should be responsive to insights from the people who know these systems the best: current or former students and the staff members who support them. Interviewees offered valuable direction for researchers seeking to understand how best to help students in prison and after release. Following are several research considerations gleaned from these interviews.

Account for Technology Restrictions in Prison-Based Higher Education Programs

Research involving prison-based higher education programs should be responsive to how widely technology access policies vary by carceral facility, and should explore how technology access,

restrictions and workarounds influence students' experiences and rates of success. Limited technology access has been cited as a common barrier to pursuing higher education in prison and after release.⁷

In many prisons, policies governing Internet use prevent access to educational materials (such as online databases), remote instruction, or learning management software.⁸ However, some prison-based higher education programs have secured access to offline or modified resources (such as SPSS, a statistical software; Python, a general-purpose programming language; and Canvas, a learning management system). One program in Maryland was able to provide laptops with installed software to students while adhering to state Department of Corrections security policies, which enabled engagement and learning with technology and coding software. Researchers should take these technology constraints into account by not assuming uniform technology access across programs, being specific about how best practices could apply across programs with different levels of access to technology, and elevating program models that use innovative methods to provide modern course instruction and technology exposure to students, while contending with these restrictions.

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Study the Link Between Digital Literacy and Student Success

Practitioners would benefit from research that builds evidence on curricula and strategies to promote digital literacy in prison. Access to technology by individuals in prison is highly restricted; some students do not have access to any technological devices.⁹ Interviewees said a lack of familiarity with the digital world can make the transition to life at home and on college campuses — where so much is done online — overwhelming. This issue has been established in the literature.¹⁰ One staff member who was formerly incarcerated asked, “How do we...make sure that people aren't held in a vacuum, don't see any of society, and then are dumped in the streets? I had illegal cell phones when I was locked up. I had access to technology that gave me a glimpse of what the world would be [like]. I know guys who have never seen a cell phone, or the Internet.” Other staff members discussed homegrown efforts to promote digital literacy, such as a student-designed technology crash course in prison and a staff member circumventing prison policy to expose students to the Internet.

In addition to identifying strategies to teach digital literacy during incarceration, interviewees suggested that research is needed on how campuses can help students who enroll after incarceration with low levels of digital literacy. Success in the post-release classroom can be challenging due to limited exposure to technology during incarceration. One recent college graduate from Louisiana said, “The biggest challenge for me coming out of prison was technology. I had numerous meltdowns. My professors tried to offer other ways of submitting assignments because I didn't know how to submit them as asked.” In campus or online programs after release, students may struggle with using learning management systems or accessing resources online. For example, researchers spoke with students who said they were unprepared to use email, find college resources online, or submit coursework online, which affected their ability to participate in their courses. Identifying

common technology roadblocks on campus for this subset of students—and strategies colleges can use to help students overcome them—has the potential to bolster student success.

Make Research on Effective Approaches to Help Students After Incarceration a Priority

Students and staff members suggested that research on student experiences after release—and strategies to help them with the significant challenges they face—is urgently needed. After their release, people face considerable competing demands, such as paying off fines and restitution, fulfilling community supervision requirements, needing mental health or addiction treatment, securing stable housing or transportation, and reuniting with their families, in addition to their education goals.¹¹ One New Jersey student described how challenging it was to start her college degree a few months after being released from prison. She said, “I also lost my father before going to prison, and I didn’t grieve until I came home. On top of that, I was trying to get a job to sustain myself and complete parole. There are so many obstacles to rebuilding my life, school couldn’t be a priority even if I wanted it to be. I dropped down to part time for a bit, and then paused for a bit.” Interviewees wanted to understand how programs and policies can best help students during this transitional period as they manage these competing demands.

Financial challenges also present a significant burden to students who are hoping to enroll in college after release. For example, an interviewee from Tennessee discussed her financial obligations as she tried to start college after her release. At the time, she needed a car to be able to get to class and work, but the cost of getting her license back was overwhelming. She said, “Money is the biggest problem. I owed \$8,000 on one felony charge, [and] city and county fines. I had to pay a \$680 reinstatement fee and special insurance.” Students who were formerly incarcerated may have to pay fines and restitution, in addition to paying for their basic needs. Nonpayment can lead to severe consequences, such as the issuance of warrants for rearrest (which could lead to reincarceration), depending on the state.¹²

Students and staff members suggested that in addition to studying effective support services, research on when to start (or continue) coursework after release and how many courses students should take is also needed. One student who finished her education after release in Louisiana said, “I wanted to take four classes a semester to finish up once I transitioned out [of prison], and an adviser talked me out of it. I took three classes a semester. It almost killed me.”

Staff members also suggested that researchers should compile case studies of students who were successful with postsecondary education after their release and what facilitated that success. Interviewed students emphasized the importance of learning about successful alumni, who they saw as role models in their journey after release. Research should focus on the characteristics of,

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and the strategies used by, successful students in college after release to identify effective forms of assistance.

Include Conviction Disclosure Policies in Research on Barriers to Student Success on Campus

Research on the barriers to success of students who were formerly incarcerated should investigate policies related to the disclosure of conviction history, the implications of these policies, and how institutions identify and assist students who were incarcerated. Disclosing one's conviction history in a college setting is a personal decision, with various benefits and drawbacks depending on the individual and type of criminal charge. Most U.S. colleges and universities, especially private four-year institutions, require applicants to disclose their criminal history during the admissions process, which can deter prospective students from completing their applications.¹³ However, some states have implemented "Ban the Box" policies, which prohibit colleges from requiring students to report their conviction history as part of the college application process.¹⁴ Of the 2020 passage of California Senate Bill 118, which includes the state's Ban the Box policy, a student said, "Once Ban the Box got passed where you don't have to describe criminal history to housing and law school and higher education.... By the time I applied...it felt like freedom."

While the majority of interviewees supported Ban the Box measures to stop *mandatory* self-disclosure, interviewees also suggested that there are potential benefits to having students *voluntarily* report their own conviction histories. These benefits can include additional resources or targeted support services, such as access to campus or statewide networks of students and alumni who were formerly incarcerated; financial assistance; and flexibility to accommodate the student's starting point, especially with regard to technology or institutional navigation. In some institutions, students who were formerly incarcerated may be able to gain access to initiatives with wraparound support services, such as academic and financial assistance, as well as the high-level college staff members who are directly responsible for these initiatives.

Although most interviewed students did not personally have negative experiences with disclosing their conviction histories in a postsecondary setting, some students mentioned they feared being stigmatized by classmates or teachers if their criminal charges were known. One staff member who was formerly incarcerated discussed the pressure and constant decision-making required to navigate college campuses with a conviction history, and the imposter syndrome students feel as a result. She said of her experience, "You have to out yourself to ask for resources.... If I out myself in the beginning, that's all that anyone knows about me. If I don't, I walk through my time having this dirty little secret. Having to walk in between is really difficult. If you are already questioning whether or not you should be on campus...there's a part of you... sitting in every class...[that wonders] 'Should I share? If I talk about prison, will people know?' It's a constant dialogue."

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The research team strongly recommends further investigation of students' experiences after release as well as effective strategies to assist students who disclose their conviction histories. Research on how students experience college after their release should be mindful of disclosure policies, how such policies may affect access to student housing, internship and volunteer opportunities, and employment, and the impact of students' decisions to disclose their criminal histories on their sense of belonging.

Focus on Campus Climate and Belonging When Investigating Students' Experiences and Successes

Future research should identify institutional strategies that promote students' sense of belonging and bolster student success. Interviewed students and staff members affirmed the importance of dedicated campus assistance to promote a sense of belonging for students who were formerly incarcerated.¹⁵ Interviewees said that students who were formerly incarcerated face unique challenges that traditional students do not relate to; these experiences can result in feelings of isolation and stigmatization. For example, interviewees described the culture shock of adjusting to a campus setting, noting differences such as politically correct campus culture or generational greeting customs. One student from California shared that some peers opted to take virtual classes to avoid isolation on campus. A staff member who was previously incarcerated and later enrolled in college reflected on the discomfort of navigating these challenges, "You feel like you don't belong. Walking on eggshells, saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. It's one of the most stigmatized identities that you can be walking around with. There might be a group of students who are going to drinks. They think this person doesn't want to hang, but they have an addiction and are in a half-way house [and] need to get home.... Your classmates feel like [they] have [the] whole world. You're approaching life from [a] deficit."

Further research should focus on understanding the benefits of strategies to mitigate isolation and promote a sense of belonging. Such methods could include the creation of centralized spaces that allow students to connect with peers and mentors with shared experiences of incarceration or the hiring of staff members who were formerly incarcerated. Identifying successful strategies for campus belonging may be key to understanding how to promote student success.

Track and Report on Labor Market Outcomes for Graduating Students

A few interviewees suggested that research that tracks students' economic outcomes after degree receipt would be vital to understanding the value of a postsecondary credential. For example, are students securing high-quality jobs that offer family-sustaining wages related to their degree field? One staff member in Virginia said, "I want to go into prison to let people know about what college degrees offer what job positions. [There] might be something that they're really good at [in] a high demand occupation that pays well." Several interviewed students discussed the importance of finding a high-paying job, especially given their financial responsibilities after release.

Staff members stressed the importance of campus programs to prepare students who were incarcerated for success beyond their degree by helping them explore diverse career paths and secure meaningful employment. A staff member who was formerly incarcerated noted that many people who were formerly incarcerated find employment supporting other students or those recently released from incarceration, but he wanted to understand whether students were landing in other fields, and whether they were landing in fields that aligned with their career goals. He said, “There are so many jobs. What types of careers are people entering? Who got a degree that’s outside of supporting formerly incarcerated people? I don’t see enough of that.”

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An Informed Research Agenda

The conversations with students and staff members detailed here offer valuable direction to researchers seeking to understand how best to help students with a history of incarceration achieve their education, employment, and other goals. Drawing on these insights, researchers should consider exploring the following research questions that were informed by a review of the existing research, conversations with stakeholders, and interviews with students and staff members:

- What are the experiences of students who engage in postsecondary education while incarcerated and after release, and how do these experiences vary across facilities?
- What strategies mitigate isolation and stigma for this population and promote a sense of belonging on campus?
- What are examples of digital literacy courses and modern technology exposure for students who are or were incarcerated?
- Are there campus policies that are related to the disclosure of conviction history? What are the implications of disclosure for the success of students with a history of incarceration?
- Which factors, such as course enrollment timing, academic courseload, and transitional support services, contribute to success for students pursuing higher education after release?
- What are employment and earnings outcomes for individuals who have a history of incarceration and earned a postsecondary degree or credential? How do the outcomes vary by student characteristics or educational or incarceration context?

The developing MDRC research agenda will continue to include the perspectives of key stakeholders in the field, with special attention paid to the insights and recommendations of the people who know these systems the best: students and graduates who were formerly incarcerated and the staff members who work to support them. Likewise, the field of higher education and prison research should be responsive to these suggestions for how research efforts can best support the success of these students and programs.

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