

**'We Don't Need No Education: An Analysis of Postsecondary Education Within Carceral Spaces**

**by**

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## 1. TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter One: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Methods.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Literature Review .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Policy Implementation.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Recidivism.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Economic Benefits .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Post-Incarceration Employment.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Funding .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Correctional Education.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Criticisms .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Barriers to Student Success.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Implications and Improvements for the Future of Prison</b>	
<b>Postsecondary Programs .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Chapter Six: Discussion and Policy Recommendations .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>94</b>

## **Abstract**

Before 1994, persons incarcerated throughout the United States had the ability to utilize Pell Grant funding to obtain a college degree. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act removed ultimately removed the ability for prisoners to seek higher education. In 2015, the Department of Education rolled out a new pilot study entitled Second Chance. This afforded colleges across the nation to teach college in prison programs and award certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees to a vast population of individuals who were previously not afforded the opportunity. Since the implementation of these programs, a large majority of research has been focused on recidivism rates and higher education in prison. Little is known concerning the quality and merit of these programs. Even more so, there are relatively few articles with respect to how these programs function along with their shortcomings and strengths.

*Keywords:* Second Chance Pell Grant, prison education, higher education, postsecondary education, prison.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Postsecondary education programs in prisons are scarce. Postsecondary programs existed in carceral settings until the tough on crime era of the 1990's. since then, incarcerated individuals have had minimal opportunities to receive and education while incarcerated. Many of these individuals are adult style learners who are interested in obtaining college degrees. Often, they are unable to do so because of financial hardships or restrictions due to their incarceration. Pell Grants are provided to free world individuals through the Department of Education who are beneath a certain annual income level. Postsecondary education holds the capability of transforming entire communities. For individuals who will be released, they are outfitted with certificates and/or degrees to enthusiastically return to society in a valuable and constructive manner. Not only this, postsecondary education has capabilities to influence family members and entire communities on the outside to resist criminal offenses and lead productive and meaningful lives.

For those who were incarcerated, they were only able to seek higher education if they, or their family members, could afford to cover the cost of tuition. Up until 1994, after a wave of crime bills, incarcerated persons were able to request Pell Grant funding to obtain degrees. After a moral panic ensued as a result of the “tough on crime” atmosphere of the 1990's, incarcerated individuals were no longer able to apply for federal Pell Grants to cover the cost of a college degree. Enrollment rates within the prisons plummeted, forcing many colleges and universities to no longer offer courses within the prison system. In less than eight years, only eight colleges were still offering degree programs to incarcerated individuals. This downturn of enrolling

students was the result of incarcerated person's inability to afford a college education on their own. Through the Department of Education, Federal Pell Grants are not required to be repaid as a result of many incarcerated persons income status. As is in the free world, Pell Grants are awarded to individuals who fall below an income threshold to allow them to opportunity to seek a college education.

In July of 2015, the Department of Education announced the Second Chance Pell Grant Pilot Study. This pilot study, citing previous research, was permitted under the notion that this would lead to fewer people returning to prison upon release and allow for safer communities. With this program, incarcerated persons who are within five years of their earliest release date were eligible to apply for the Pell Grants. Pell Grants would cover the cost of not only tuition, but enrollment fees, textbooks, and other required supplies. Applications from interested colleges and universities to participate in this program were due by September 2015. Institutions would apply through the experimental sites initiative to receive a waiver of sorts to be permitted to begin teaching programs within carceral settings. Courses were to begin in 2016. Sixty-five universities and colleges were granted permission to participate in this pilot study. These institutions offered certificates, associate, or bachelor's degrees, while some provided all or a combination of the three.

This study focuses on those institutions that were invited to participate in this pilot study. Very little is known about how postsecondary programs in prisons actually function. Much of the research circulating prison education tends to lean heavy on the effects of education on recidivism rates. Research of a qualitative nature is limited. This study's purpose is to contribute to this field of research beyond how education influences social order. The objective is to provide a framework of what makes a postsecondary program in prison successful and what

improvements can be made should these Pell Grants be extended. This lays groundwork for future researchers to continue to explore and analyze how postsecondary programs in prison could optimally function. My intentions with this study were only to provide a baseline understanding of how these programs began, instruction methods and setbacks within teaching inside of a correctional facility, support received from the correctional facility and university or college participating, and how the administrators and faculty interviewed believed these programs would look like in the future.

Fifteen interviews were gathered from six different universities and colleges across the United States. Interviewees were a mix of faculty and administrators of postsecondary education programs. The questions engaged interviewees to understand what actual college-in-prison programs look and function like. This area of research is relatively new, considering Pell Grants were a primary source of funding for incarcerated individuals. Interviews obtained qualitative information on what could make postsecondary programs in prisons more effective, but also what barriers and setbacks they faced while teaching in these spaces. This study consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their views of postsecondary programs. Administrators and faculty members were intentionally chosen because of the interest in displaying the differences in teaching in correctional facility as compared to traditional on-campus courses. This research hopes to provide future scholars and legislatures with the data to make necessary changes and reforms within prisons and prisoner reentry.

Incarcerated individuals have unique problems that must be assessed from an adaptable perspective. Security concerns and safety of the correctional facility are reoccurring justifications for the setbacks that students, faculty, and administrators face. Faculty and administrators must continuously readjust their course content to comply with the standards of the correctional

facility. Furthermore, some students are woefully underprepared for the coursework expectations. Many of these students are adult learners, having spent years away from educational settings, or barely graduating high school or obtaining their GED. From the application process up to graduation, incarcerated students overcome a plethora of hurdles in order to receive their degrees. Issues with apathetic staff, correctional facility lockdowns, little to no study time, and technological malfunctions for those who are able to take classes remotely are just a few examples of barriers students and faculty must overcome in order to continue these courses. Many of these complications are the direct consequence of teaching inside of correctional facilities.

To continue these programs, participants of this study urged changes that could ease the tensions and frustrations of teaching inside of correctional facilities. Suggestions were in the form of expanding the programs to other incarcerated individuals, comprehensive support before, during, and after these programs to set incarcerated students up for success, and better accommodations for those teaching these programs. Individuals who wish to teach or advocate for postsecondary programs in carceral spaces must not be discouraged from the obstacles that are part of these programs. Sincere dedication from colleges and universities, department of corrections, society, and the students will allow for successful programs. Otherwise, these are ineffective and obsolete.

Research suggests that education while in prison boosts one's ability to seek meaningful work upon release. There are also trickle effects on other parts of the communities they will return to. One of the largest changes involves recidivism. Those who are college educated are less likely to reoffend upon release and will look for purposeful ways in which they can contribute to the societies they once caused harm and damage to. Policy makers and other



academics must continue to look into these postsecondary programs, not only to better explain their functioning, but to begin working with one another to upheave the carceral environment and take larger strides towards safer communities, great human capital, and safer correctional environments.

In order for success to be reached, these postsecondary programs beseech involvement from other social institutions. A college education is not enough to elicit change and reform. All stakeholders are socially and morally responsible to work alongside one another to promote success and safer communities. This research is only the beginning of a dire and long overdue conversation on a person's ability to access to education. Education is a fundamental human right, yet many are denied the opportunity towards growth and cognitive change. Postsecondary education is that tool that can cause ripple effects and repair the seams of broken communities.

## **Chapter Two: Methods**

This study explores postsecondary associate and bachelor's degree granting programs offered to incarcerated individuals in the United States from the standpoints of administrators and instructors. The goal of this study is not to provide recommendations for more efficient prisoner postsecondary education programs, but rather to provide a basic understanding of the types, methods, challenges, and successes of postsecondary programs used in carceral settings.

This study draws upon fifteen interviews with administrators and faculty members from six postsecondary education programs across the country. Interviews conducted were of a qualitative nature, with questions formed to obtain lengthier and more reflective responses. The responses intended to produce a larger framework of programs and their effectiveness.

It has been a long-standing argument that higher education within carceral spaces greatly reduces the chances of recidivism (Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, and Wilcox, 2005). Though this information has been widely acknowledged, this particular research provides an analysis of what exactly these programs are and how they function. The methods and study of this research are constructed to provide a baseline knowledge of carceral postsecondary education programs in order to contribute to future researchers the opportunity to explore the qualitative needs and outcomes of higher education.

### **Population and Recruitment**

Originally, my goal was to focus on currently incarcerated individuals and providing their personal narratives of education with prison settings. In order to recognize the efficacy of a

program, I believe that there is no greater individual to question than those directly affected by it. However, prisoners fall under a category of protected populations, making it quite difficult to interview them personally. Protected populations are those who are considered unable to fully volunteer to be interviewed without coercion (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Because of this complication and the vulnerability of the prison population, I chose to interview instructors and administrators of postsecondary education programs. Professors and administrators are in direct contact with prisoners and they have specific knowledge of working programs. In essence, they hold considerable knowledge of the strengths and defects of current programs, making them the greatest alternative interviewees. They offer a different lens from an institutional standpoint, providing a mechanical framework of postsecondary programs. Many of these professors and administrators have held these positions for a number of years, allowing them the authority and advantageous perspective of witnessing policy implementations and changes throughout their tenures. This aided in a more analytical response from participants in the ability to compare the prison college programs to the best practices they have learned throughout their careers in traditional college settings. Due to constraints, this study is limited in responses from only faculty and administrators of these postsecondary education programs in prisons. There are no interviews with incarcerated students, therefore their opinions are not reflected in this study.

Participants were chosen from the Second Chance Pell Grant Pilot Study roster on the Department of Education's website. The Second Chance Pell list provided sixty-seven participating universities. These universities were located across the United States and provided either a certificate, associate degree, bachelor's degree, or some combination of the three. The universities taught college style courses to anywhere from 10 to 1,305 inmates. For the purposes

of this study, sites that were interviewed either taught at only one correctional institution or multiple facilities. Students taking part in the programs were qualified for Pell Grant funding. Pell grants are provided to low income students without the obligation to reimburse the government for the college funds obtained. Working inmates earn anywhere from zero to six dollar per day in their respective facilities, making it near impossible to afford a college education (Sawyer, 2017). Pell grants ease the burden on many of these individuals who would fit well below the federal poverty line, allowing them to utilize these grants towards higher education.

The institutions were found on the Department of Education's website (United States Department of Education, 2019). Initially, only colleges that provided bachelor's degrees were chosen, but, due to low response rates, the participants were expanded to universities that also offered an associate degree. From there, colleges that offered associates or bachelor's degrees – and possibly a combination of either and/or certificates – were chosen from their respective university's website. Institutions that provided associate and/or bachelor's degrees were intentionally chosen because of the current economic state in the free world. More often than not, a bachelor's degree or higher is required to find meaningful employment within the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The criteria of this study included colleges who offered these types of degrees among the sixty-seven participants in the Pell program. From there, I chose and emailed prospective participants to inquire their interest in partaking in the study. I emailed 23 colleges and universities. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Of the twenty-three universities contacted, six were responsive and agreed to move forward with the interview. Ten sites did not respond, while seven sites had expressed interest. From the seven that were interested, interviewees from these colleges and universities had expressed an interest to

participate but had indicated that they would need clearance from their administrators in order to participate, though they never responded with approval. One university administrator had asked that no one from their university be contacted for interviews. Within this group, colleges administrators of degree granting programs for incarcerated students and the professors who were teaching the classes were interviewed from six states across the United States. Both groups were given consent forms and provided with the same questions.

## **Interviews**

The research questions intended to gather information in five main areas: the start of these college programs, the current methods of teaching within these settings, setbacks and perceived accomplishments with these classes, the support from both the correctional facility and the degree granting institution, and assumptions regarding the future of these programs. To prepare for these interviews, I consulted one of my faculty advisors to refine the questionnaires to ensure accuracy and clarity. The average time range of interviews lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. One university administrator agreed to a video conference, both faculty and administrators from four other programs agreed to recorded phone interviews, and the sixth site agreed to in-person interviews with six of their administrators and faculty members.

The interview construction was influenced by narrative inquiry, which allows interviewees to answer questions candidly without measurement scales and provide more in-depth responses to gain a better overall understanding of these types of programs (Thomas, 2012). Narrative inquiry provides a larger understanding of the perceptions and framework of these college programs, rather than surveys that lead to shorter and more precise responses. These programs are complex, requiring interview responses to be a bit more worded and thought out. By avoiding surveys, this allowed the participants to delve into greater detail on concerns

that were not initially recognized by the researcher as problem or exceptional areas. The interviews consisted of twenty open-ended questions, allowing the participants the opportunity to speak more openly about the college programs and their functions. Questions were arranged from four different categories: basic information concerning the university and participant, including their role in the program; information concerning the inmates themselves; an analysis of the correctional facilities involvement in the program; and the perceived or hoped future of these programs along with suggestions for more efficient practices. Interviews were recorded to allow the researcher the ability to reanalyze the information when coding the responses, and so not to misinterpret the responses given.

These questions followed a guideline of interview protocol refinement (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Protocol refinement uses a four-phase approach of tailoring the interview questions towards the larger research, framing a conversation style interview, reanalyzing the questions, and asking the questions during the interview. In using this process, interview questions then become refined and specific towards the fundamental goal of resolving the larger research questions. By using this method of fashioning questions, it strips the possibility of receiving responses that cannot be interpreted towards the larger research. The more deliberate the questioning towards the research, the less complicated the coding becomes when attempting to evaluate and interpret the information gathered. The questions were tailored to the ultimate goal of understanding the education programs in place. The interview questions were presented in a manner in which the respondents would build a narrative of the programs from beginning to end/foreseeable future. The interview questions can be found in “Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire.”

Finally, interviews were conducted in-person when possible, via Skype, or over the phone, some of which were recorded with consent from the participants. Phone interviews were more difficult to interpret due to the inability to accurately assess the interviewee's reactions and body language (DeLorme, Zinkhan, & French, 2001).

Fifteen interviews were recorded on small handheld recording devices. Because most sites were spread across the United States in six different states, many interviews had to be completed via telephone. Those interviews done in person were also recorded on the small devices. With these recordings, I was able to find common themes among interviews and begin to code and group those responses accordingly. The recordings on the devices were destroyed after publication of this research to ensure anonymity.

### **Role of Researcher**

As researchers, the one of the main goals is to seek truth in information (Tapani, 2009). My role in this study follows the same objective. I received a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, graduating with high distinction. I have partaken in college courses within correctional facilities, learning alongside incarcerated men. From this, I became a think tank member for a prison group that meets twice monthly within the same correctional facility. While participating in this group, I also assisted with a non-profit organization that specifically deals with conditions of confinement. Most recently, I have gained employment with an The Youth Justice Fund that aims to provide services to individuals returning home from prison that were sentenced to a term of adult prison years as a juvenile. In the time I have spent collaborating with both organizations and the incarcerated gentlemen, I noticed a thirst for education sprouting from many of these prisoners. Specifically, within the think tank group, I recognized a sort of frustration with the inability to access higher education due to their current incarceration status.

This furthered my curiosity and interest in understanding the programs that are currently in place within prisons across The United States. My overall goal for this research is to better understand the current programs in place in hopes of providing researchers groundwork to build from, ultimately furthering the idea and argument that post-secondary in carceral settings is vital to offender and societal success.

### **Data Analysis**

The participants were set into two different categories: administrators and faculty. This was done to see if there were any stark differences between responses from the two groups. After conducting these interviews, the recordings were transcribed, and the interview data was coded according to common themes found within the interviews. Data was deleted from the recording device as soon as it was uploaded to my computer. After the interviews were uploaded, they were transcribed on a software program Express Scribe Transcription. This allows the researcher to slow down or speed up the interviews while transcribing to confidently articulate what was being said by the interviewee. After this, transcriptions were uploaded to Nvivo where I could begin coding. A coding software program named Nvivo was used to code the interviews. With this software, I was able to group quotes from interviewees in thematic bundles according to their responses. Some themes included relationship dynamics – in some combination of incarcerated students, faculty or administrator and/or the university, and the correctional facility and its staff, difficulties and setbacks, logistics, and successes of the program. From there, I was able to theorize on what an efficient college program would ideally be inside of correctional settings and interpret the improvements that would need to be made in order to continue these programs. This method of grounded theory deciphered data to form the theory of best practices within institutional settings. Grounded theory is aimed at gathering data and forming theories



based on the data found within the research (Tan, 2010). From this methodology, best practices were found by interpreting interviews from both the administrators and professors of these prison college programs. Once the results section had been completed, I deleted transcriptions from both Express Scribe and Nvivo to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research was approved by The University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board (IRB). According to the American Educational Research Association (AERA), certain guidelines must be followed when conducting research with human subjects. Researchers must adhere to standards including, but not limited to integrity, professional competence, social responsibility, and respect for people's rights (American Educational Research Association, 2011). In following the rules set forth by the IRB and AERA, confidentiality of those surveyed was strictly followed. Even more so, there are ethics to consider beyond what is listed in the University's ethical protocol. Individuals being interviewed must consider the overall well-being of their institution when responding to questions, potentially influencing the fashion in which they choose to respond (Resnik & Kennedy, 2010) From this, it is to be understood that some questions may have been responded to a bit differently than the participant intended. For this, the researcher was dedicated to reminding the participant that the interview would be confidential and anonymous. Of those who did agree to participate, they were informed that they were doing so voluntarily and that there were no immediate foreseeable risks to their involvement. With this verbal assurance, there was also a Consent to Participate form that each participant was given and signed. These forms were voluntarily signed and was presented in an easy to understand context (Brehaut, Carroll, Elwyn, Saginur, Kimmelman, Shojania, & Fergusson, 2015).

Although protocol was followed, there are still some concerns to the ethical consequences of those who were interviewed. The information provided by those surveyed was stripped of identifiers, but there may have been instances in some small quotations used that would potentially expose the person surveyed. The risk of revelation became greater due to the small pool of study chosen in this research. Often, the smaller the chosen study group, the less difficult it becomes to identify those who were interviewed (McCormack, Carr, McCloskey, Keeing-Burke, Furlong, & Doucet, 2012). Because of this added burden, direct quotes were avoided or used extremely rarely as to continue the protection of participants. It is a researcher's duty to maintain privacy within the interview and not lead the participant into revealing data that is irrelevant to the intended research (Peter, 2015). In addition to this, some participants may have been hesitant in responses given pertaining to frustrations or obstacles with the programming for fear of retaliation from either the correctional facility, college, or fellow staff members. There may have been potential social repercussions if colleagues were to find out that the individual surveyed agreed to be interviewed.

To ensure confidentiality, certain quotes were slightly altered as not to reveal the interviewee, correctional facility, or the college or university. For instance, in 2018 there were only 98,319 women incarcerated compared to 1,186,941 men in state correctional facilities (Carson, 2020). Due to these statistics, logistically there are not as many women's correctional facilities as there are men's facilities. This would make it easier to determine which women's facility these individuals were working alongside. In order to assure that these correctional facilities would not be revealed, the gender specification of correctional facility was intentionally left out or listed as a male facility. In other cases, correctional institutions were former mental

health facilities or had been repurposed from other types of government facilities. Again, this was removed from quotations used to secure the privacy of these facilities.

## **Limitations**

One common limitation with qualitative research is understanding what sample size is adequate enough to produce meaningful research. Although sample size is a determining factor, researchers like Sandelowski assert that the value of the information is more important than the interviews conducted (Sandelowski, 1995). This study only contained fifteen interviews, though the nature of the interviews and the interview questions allowed for interviewees to elaborate on their responses and provide numerous examples. Research dealing with sensitive topics – i.e. violence, sexual abuse, depression, exhaustion – can hinder the researcher’s ability to accurately validate data (Wray, Markovic, & Maderson, 2007). Despite this research not directly involving depression and exhaustion, the subjects were more prone to sensitive environments with more gloomy content which was picked up easily during the interviews. The tones of these interviewees were noticed and could have easily influenced the data analyzing process. Dealing with human emotions and responses can alter the type of results found from these interviews.

This research was being conducted during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time that I had contacted some of these potential sites, colleges and universities were beginning to shift their courses to remote teaching via online style courses in order to adhere to Center for Disease Control recommendations of social distancing. Many of those that responded did cite the pandemic and uncertainty of shifting all of their course loads to online modes with even one interviewee claiming that this was the reason they were unable to participate. The uncertainty that surrounded much of the world may have caused even fewer individuals to respond to email inquiries for interviews, thus resulting in only 15 interviews total.

Another limitation frequently recognized within qualitative studies is determining when the researcher has reached saturation. Failure to reach saturation impacts the research greatly. In order to determine when saturation has been reached, further coding will not be necessary and “there is enough information to replicate the study” (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This determination becomes convoluted with fluctuating guidelines (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Another way to understand data saturation is argued through the term “information power” (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015). Information power alleges that it is not the number of interviews reached, but the amount of information obtained during interviews. With these interviews in this study, participants were able to enhance and elaborate their responses due to the open-endedness of the questions they were presented with. Therefore, saturation was reached within about five interviews due to the similar content described by the interviewees. Though almost half of the interviewees were faculty and administrators from one program, their responses echoed those of other interviewees.

Overall, this is a pilot study that is intended for further researchers to continue to explore this topic. These findings are not entirely representative due to the small sample size. However, this does not discredit the results found within this study. It merits further research to better understand these programs and their effectiveness. Further research can be in the form of longitudinal studies that follows incarcerated students and/or colleges and universities that administer these degrees to better understand the effectiveness of these programs.

### **Chapter Three: Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Prison and education are at a continuous clash with one another. Prisons are expected to punish while simultaneously attempting to reduce crime (Dick, Rich, & Waters 2016). Reduction in crime does not directly translate to the idea of punishment. Rather, this can be viewed as a proactive approach with a utilitarian goal in mind (Duff, 2000). In looking at a utilitarian approach, the idea then is to benefit the whole of society. Those individuals deemed deviant by society and legal actors then require some form of punishment tailored to their crime (Humphrey & Schmallegger, 2012). One instance of punishment in the United States takes the form of incarceration. Incarceration leads with one goal of reducing crime by removing those individuals who partake in illicit activities. By removing these individuals from mainstream society, the idea is not directly to reduce crime. Rather, the goal becomes punishing those offenders. On the other hand, reduction in crime can take the shape of many different forms. One particular avenue is education (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Education comes in three phases: before, during, and after incarceration. Within carceral spaces, or the during period, education then looks to transform the offender more than just delete them from society (DeBaun & Roc, 2013). Education during incarceration poses numerous benefits to society and the individual (Bazos & Hausman, 2004). Some benefits include lower recidivism rates, economic benefits, higher self-esteem, and a greater sense of responsibility from the individual (Girtz, 2014).

## **Policy Implementation**

“America’s public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage an all-out offensive.” In 1971, then-president Richard Nixon announced this now-infamous “war on drugs.” Nixon’s strategic assault on African Americans and “the anti-war left” resulted in numerous new procedures and policies aimed at targeting anyone who opposed his ideologies (Drug Policy Alliance). Following Nixon’s policies, numerous other presidents chose to take the same route in eliciting fear in the masses. In 1986, Ronald Reagan and his wife, Nancy, pleaded to Americans from the West Hall of the White House to “just say no” to drugs (President and Mrs. Reagan Address on Drug Abuse, 1986). The Reagan administration’s efforts to combat this war resulted in almost doubling the prison population, from 329,000 to 627,000, during his presidency (Cullen, 2018). A vast majority of this increase was, in part, because of Reagan’s enactment of the United States Sentencing Commission. This commission ultimately stripped judges and courts of discretion and required offenders to be punished within a specific term of years according to specific sentencing guidelines (28 U.S. Code § 994).

The following president, George H.W. Bush signed the Crime Control Act of 1990 which broadened death penalty mandated punishments, limited plea bargaining, along with numerous other restrictions and harshened laws (Cohen, 2018). Former president Bill Clinton’s 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act held similar sentiments towards those who chose to break the law. In this act, individuals who would be convicted of their third offense would be sentenced to automatic life in prison. This attachment, commonly referred to as the “three strikes” law, only stipulated that one of the prior charges be a felony, no matter what type of crime it was (Harris, 1994). This 1994 Act removed Pell Grant opportunities awarded to those

who are incarcerated (Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994). Now, those individuals who were in state and federal prisons would not be eligible to receive Pell Grant aid from the Department of Education to pursue postsecondary education.

During the time of the passage of this Bill, numerous policymakers were on board, campaigning for stricter punishments for inmates. Then representative Jack Field announced that “every dollar in Pell grant funds obtained by prisoners means that fewer law-abiding students who need help... are eligible” (Robinson & English, 2017). Even today, numerous individuals who are incarcerated are stripped from what would be assumed an integral right: access to education. At the time that inmates were still permitted to receive Pell Grants, the government spent less than 1% of total Pell Grants on inmates (Robinson & English, 2017). Nearly seven years after the bill was signed into law, there were about only eight colleges still participating in prisons in the United States (Robinson & English, 2017).

### **Recidivism**

Recidivism is viewed as the likelihood of an individual reoffending after being convicted and release from a correctional setting (Maltz, 1984). Recidivism rates can be analyzed in a number of ways. Some include reoffending, rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, and technical parole violations, with reincarceration typically being the most common approach in studies (Davis, 2013). This also includes the relative amount of time from release to when the individual recidivates. To effectively measure recidivism, one can use a number of methods. These methods include interviewing the offender, analyzing official records (department of corrections and bureau of statistics reports, city and state crime records, and local precinct records), and considering the time passed between release and the crime committed (National Institute of

Justice, 2008). It is with these different tools that the correlation between education and recidivism is measured.

Numerous studies have shown that providing access to postsecondary education greatly reduces the risk of an individual reoffending upon release (Esperian, 2010; Duguid, Hawkey, & Pewson, 1996; Vacca, 2004). In an assessment conducted by Lori Hall for the *Journal of Correctional Education*, the author notes that recidivism is measured in three different categories: “re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration” (Hall, 2015). Although there is admitted fault in neatly labeling recidivism in these three manners, Hall acknowledges that there must be some distinction and clarification as to what exactly the term recidivism means. By narrowing down the details of recidivism, the attempt is to look at different factors that impact an individual’s recidivism probability. These factors include education, age, race, gender, and marital status. The idea of education is stretched onto family members of those incarcerated and attempts to argue that inmate education, in turn, improves the lives of their family members and society. From 1995-2010, Hall gathers data from a number of studies conducted on recidivism rates and lists her findings. From analyzing different data, Hall concludes that correctional education, whether in the form of GED, certificate, or college degree attainment greatly reduces the chance for recidivism. In the examples taught by incarcerated family members, free world individuals are more likely to also attend college courses.

Even more so, higher education within correctional settings has been found to dramatically reduce the chances of recidivism among inmates, more than any other educational programming offered within the facilities (Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, and Wilcox 2005). On average, an individual who is able to pursue postsecondary education while incarcerated is 48% less likely to reoffend and be convicted than those who do not receive any form of higher



education (Oakford, P. Brumfield, C. Goldvale, C. L. Tatum, DiZerega, M. & Patrick, F., 2019). In a meta-analysis from 1990-1999, similar results were found. Researcher Cathryn Chappell concludes that roughly 22% of those who completed postsecondary correctional education later reoffended compared to 35% of individuals who did not receive any form of postsecondary education (Chappell, 2004). Most notably, prison education has been found to be more effective at reducing recidivism rates than boot camps, shock incarceration, and even vocational training (Karpowitz & Kenner, 1995).

### **Economic Benefits**

Numerous studies have found that, by inserting more money into prisoner education, the overall economic benefits of postsecondary education become vast. In general, individuals who have obtained a bachelor's degree can, on average, earn incomes 93% higher than persons with only a high school diploma (Contardo & Erisman, 2005). Vera Institute of Justice conducted an analysis of the economic benefits of postsecondary education in correctional settings and find that the economic benefits of allowing for education within these types of settings would provide greater economic wealth to society as a whole. Upon release, individuals would be equipped with skill sets required for the demands of a technologically advanced society (Oakford, Brumfield, Goldvale, Tatum, DiZerega, and Patrick, 2019). By allowing for postsecondary education within carceral spaces, it opens the door for higher earnings upon release, lessening the chances of one to re-offend. Vera asserts that, by increasing funding towards postsecondary education, roughly \$45.3 million earnings increase among the formerly incarcerated population would follow. The authors also argue that, in turn, these benefits would reduce spending on prisons in general. By not having to account for those who would reenter prison if not provided with postsecondary education, annual budgets would be lessened dramatically.

In addition to the overall economic benefit granted to society from inmate education, there is a particular advantage towards universities who choose to accept these students. Since 2011, student enrollment has been at a steady decline (Fain, 2017). Free world students are not enrolling at the same numbers they once were. Colleges do see the impact this hold on enrollment numbers in the form of funding and employment rates. An uptick of students from correctional institutions would ease the institutional worry of declining student numbers.

### **Post-Incarceration Employment**

Many studies have shown that employment after incarceration will reduce an individual's chances of returning to prison. Even more so, reliable and consistent employment greatly reduces the chances of recidivism (Power & Nolan, 2017). However, job stability does not necessarily translate to higher wages. One study found that previous incarceration would lower a person's overall earnings by 19% (Western, 2002). Much of this can be attributed to these individuals being unskilled and undereducated prior to their arrest and incarceration, coupled with their pre-incarceration social environments (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Lower education rates can also attribute to these lower wages considering many inmates did not even obtain a high school diploma prior to incarceration (Harlow, 2003). Also, the more time an individual spends incarcerated, the more difficult it becomes for them to find employment upon release (Rhodes, Gaes, Kling, & Cutler, 2017).

Due to incarceration, many inmates have lost work skills, are not given useful work experience, or unavailable training programs (Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008). Handicaps in an individual's "human capital" are lost, including soft skills, education, job experience, and the loss of important social networking skills (Schmitt & Warner, 2010). For those who do obtain some skills during incarceration, their applications are often tossed aside due to prior felony

convictions (Prakash & Moore, 2009). State and federal laws also diminish abilities to find certain types of employment after incarceration (Legal Action Center, 2004). Some of these barriers can be overstepped by offering higher education during incarceration.

In one study, ex-offenders who continued their education post-release also noted that this inspired them to remain law abiding citizens due to their ability to find employment (Gillies, Carroll, Swabey, Pullen, Fluck, & Yu, 2014). Overall wages are noted to be higher among formerly incarcerated individuals who are able to obtain a college education while incarcerated. Wages from this group of individuals increases roughly \$45.3 million after only the first year post-incarceration (Oakford, Brumfield, Goldvale, Tatum, DiZerega, and Patrick, 2019).

### **Funding**

In 1965, Congress, under the Johnson administration, passed Title IV of the Higher Education Act which permitted those who were incarcerated the eligibility to receive federal Pell Grants (Higher Education Act of 1965). Under this Act, prisoners were now able to apply for and receive college aid that would not require repayment. Pell Grants differ from Federal Financial Aid in this sense because they do not require the borrower to repay the loan. This is because those who are eligible for Pell Grants fall in the poverty or lower income threshold enabling them to take advantage of funds to pay for higher education. This drastically shifted the number of inmates who received a college education. As noted earlier, those who typically find themselves confined to state penitentiaries are often those who would be eligible for Pell Grants in the free world, making Pell Grants the leading source of financing higher education. This ended in 1994 under former president Bill Clinton's 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (Harris, 1994). This Act removed the capability of incarcerated individuals to access Pell grants and pursue a college education (Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement

Act of 1994). This ultimately meant that anyone convicted of a felony would now be responsible for covering any and all costs associated with a college education, leaving them ineligible for federal grant money.

A few months after this Act was passed, most avenues to a college education for inmates were shuttered and many colleges began withdrawing from correctional institutions indefinitely (Zoukis, 2014). This left many prisoners with no ability to obtain a college degree before potential release from prison. These individuals would now have to wait until their sentence was completed, pending they were not sentenced to a long, indeterminate sentence, life, or life without parole. Some supporters of this bill argued that the money being spent on prisoners for education was removing the ability for non-incarcerated students to attend institutions offering higher education (Kovandzic, Sloan, & Vieraitis, 2004).

In 2015, under the Obama administration, the Department of Education, announced a pilot study entitled the Second Chance Pell Grant. Second Chance Pell Grants would be awarded to colleges who applied to participate. These colleges would then return to pre-1994 standards and provide a college degree to incarcerated individuals. These inmates would now be eligible to receive Pell Grants and attend schools who had specifically applied to the Department of Education's pilot program. Inmates now could receive anywhere from a certificate to an associate degree to a bachelors. These certificates and degrees would be obtained through Pell Grant funding; therefore, it would be at no cost from the prisoners, considering Pell Grants are, again, distinct from Federal Financial Aid. The 2016 school year marked the first cohort of incarcerated students to begin participating in college courses and work towards either a certificate or a degree. The pilot study allowed for sixty-five two-year and four-year universities to participate (United States Department of Education, 2019). Shortly thereafter, Vera Institute of

Justice and RAND Corporation conducted studies of the benefits of restoring these programs (Davis, 2013; Patrick, 2019). Both organizations found similar benefits in reduction in recidivism, higher sense of self-worth, economic advantages towards both the larger society and the incarcerated individual and their family members, and a number of other reportedly positive impacts because of this pilot program. Vera reported that, in the fall 2017 semester, over 5,000 students were taught across the country (Patrick, 2019). This is a marked jump from the virtually nonexistent inmate college population beforehand.

According to the United States Department of Education, Federal Pell Grants are reserved for undergraduate students who exhibit a need for financial aid above traditional financial aid (United States Department of Education, 2019). When looking at the income of many inmates prior to entering correctional facilities, they would have been placed into this exceptional category highlighted by the Pell Grant program. Currently, the average income of an inmate is less than \$3.45 a day, placing them well below the threshold needed to satisfy this requirement (Sawyer, 2017). Even if these prisoners were to work five days a week for an entire year, they would still be making far less than what is considered the poverty cut off point (Patrick, 2019). These inmates will not have to live with the added burden of student loan debt with other financial obligations like victim restitution fees and living needs. Inmates in both federal and state prisons would then be afforded the ability to ultimately contribute to society in a beneficial manner upon release.

The annual budget of Federal Bureau of Prisons currently sits at just over seven billion dollars (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). In another study conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice, it was found that the average cost of housing one inmate runs anywhere between almost \$15,000.000 and just over \$69,000.000 depending on the state (Mai & Subramanian, 2017). On

average, the cost to educate a single inmate is far less than it would be to keep them confined. In one study, it was found that an investment towards incarceration of one million dollars has the capabilities of seeing 350 less crimes being committed, but if this money was spent on education, it would result in 600 less crimes being committed, making “correctional education is almost twice as cost effective as incarceration” (Prison Studies Project). Overall, crime rates are argued to drastically reduce would more inmates be exposed to the attainment of a college education (Lochner & Moretti, 2001).

### **Correctional Education**

Under international human rights laws, access to education is a fundamental right that every governing entity should provide to its citizens. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted in 1948 states that “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages... and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (UN General Assembly Article 26, 1948). Federal Pell grant aid has permitted 67 universities to provide college courses to inmates across the United States. These programs vary in what is being taught and how the courses are being administered. Correctional education holds a two-pronged approach: adult basic education and college level education, with the primary focus on the former (Contardo, 2010). Providing education within a correctional setting varies greatly from traditional on-campus courses. Instructors must deal with their institutional standards as well as facility rules and regulations (Goldin & Thomas, 1984). In general, providing basic adult education is a difficult task that often places strain on those teachers. These educators are offered little in terms of support, marking high turnover rates (Smith & Hofer, 2003). Although institutional support is scarce, many instructors choose to remain because of the internal satisfaction they receive from the

belief they are transforming these inmate's lives (Kamrath & Gregg, 2018; Osberg & Fraley, 1993).

Overall, it is believed that prison education is unique and must be treated differently than traditional on-campus instructions. This belief stems from the idea that there are learning deficits, emotional and behavioral instability, and the original crime considerations to be taken when providing education within correctional settings (Wilson & Reuss, 2008). Even more, the facilities provide for a largely different atmosphere than traditional college campuses. Critics of prison education argue that providing education in carceral spaces is ineffective because of the contradictory nature of these environments (Castro & Brown, 2017). The correctional institution becomes the larger authority figure, overruling university beliefs and standards and practices to adhere to their own guidelines (Novek, 2019).

For those inmates receiving the education, their education relies on learning from and with one another (Novek, 2019). Inmate students are more isolated than free-world peers with limited or no access to libraries, internet, and many other resources available in the free world (Scott, 2012). This barrier to resources must be considered prior to entering these facilities. Facilities are often dilapidated or outdated, straining educational abilities (Maher, 2015). Although there are noted barriers and frustrations with educating in correctional facilities, the demand of education is still high. In one study, 70% of those inmates interviewed expressed a desire to enroll in college style courses and other academic programming (Rampey, Keiper, Mohadjer, Krenzke, Thornton, & Hogan, 2016). These students who express desire are also some of the very ones who were not provided much in terms of education prior to their incarceration. A majority of the prison population is compiled of inmate students that are defined as under

resourced (Jobe, 2019). These students, lacking in prior education express a marked desire to learn.

## **Criticisms**

Much of the criticism of prison education comes in the form of opposition to rewarding one for punishable behavior. Some conservative resistance to prison education and the overall standards of care within correctional settings are geared more towards the improvement of criminals than would-be and current victims of crime (Cullen & Gilbert, 1985). Even more, there are arguments made that there is not truly a definitive answer of what the solutions to eradicating criminal behavior. Even more, critics claim that there is nothing that can reshape or modify criminal behavior (Cary, 1993). Often times, language used during studies can be misconstrued or manipulated to offer favorable results towards the incarcerated individual and their needs (Logan & Gaes, 1993). If a study is presented or defined in a specific manner, there is the risk of biased discoveries, in this case, the overall benefits of higher education within carceral spaces. Further, if there are no supposed solutions, advocating for higher education within carceral spaces becomes a difficult task.

When looking at the claims of lower recidivism rates coupled with higher educational attainment, critics argue that even these claims are faulty. In one meta-analysis, it was discovered that these studies did not offer much evidence that the possibility of recidivism was actually lowered with a number of varying populations. Recidivism rates from an analysis of numerous studies conducted could not be predicted with females, minorities, white-collar criminals, and even the psychological state of the offender studied (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). For those who were able to analyze the provided data, little was found that rehabilitative attempts



had any profound influence on recidivism rates (Martinson, 1974). Education, then, would possibly serve no need or basis for rehabilitative efforts. For those who have committed crimes, it has been argued that rehabilitation is a failed effort. Two reasons can be identified: the naïve belief that it is simple to change an individual's character and the underestimation of the thought process of criminal (i.e. they behave and think far differently than socially responsible people) (Samenow, 1984).

When considering those who are able to obtain career and technical training while incarcerated, there is not much in terms of securing a job with the newly acquired skills. In one study, only 40% of those who had participated in this type of training had been able to find employment relevant to their certifications (Ward, 2009). In this instance, less than half of those who received prior training had been able to find work related to their specific training.

### **Chapter Four: Barriers to Student Success**

The academic experiences found in carceral settings simply do not mirror traditional, on-campus settings. Indeed, there are many distinct realities that set apart the experiences of traditional, on-campus college students from their incarcerated counterparts. Among these differences are issues of accessibility, academic preparation, environmental and housing restrictions, and student demographics. These barriers are found in the way faculty must readjust their course expectations and content. Faculty and administrators of these academic programs must be flexible in order to provide incarcerated students with academic settings that will even slightly mimic those they provide on campus. Barriers are those setbacks that remove or diminish the ability to provide quality education.

Likewise, these distinct realities also set apart the experiences of the administrators and faculty who facilitate college programs for incarcerated students. From the admissions process to graduation, both the correctional facility and teaching institution must overcome a series of hurdles to keep higher education programs running as smoothly as possible within the parameters of the prison environment. Incarcerated students must overcome their academic deficiencies all the while complying with the demands of prison life. Professors, in turn, face unprecedented stumbling blocks to providing these students with a sound college education. Ultimately, higher education in prison demands immense flexibility and understanding from all parties involved.

Through these teaching experiences, both professors and administrators are responsible for arranging courses and studies that will equip incarcerated students with the means to

effectively understand the material, but also apply this newly acquired knowledge to their everyday lives. What results from establishing and teaching within prison settings is a distinct teaching style that diverges from their traditional methods.

### **Barriers to Entry**

Administrators and faculty highlighted numerous barriers to program entry. These barriers are found from the very beginning of the student's academic journey and continue to completion. In the beginning stages, like the admissions process, there are a plethora of difficulties present that faculty and students must conquer in order to even be considered for the course. In a traditional setting, such as those found on campus, students are able to typically apply to their desired colleges online. Approximately all of their required application and documents are a simple click away and often require little effort beyond submitting their transcripts and attaching a letter of interest. For potential students who are incarcerated, the steps mount into difficulties that can often hinder them from even being considered. Many incarcerated students are required to undergo an admissions process slightly altered to fit the needs of their circumstances. Because many of the universities and colleges interviewed had a presence and relationship within the carceral institutions already, student recruitment was largely the product of word of mouth. As one administrator mentions,

A lot of our programing happens in the prison library. It has these huge glass windows so there's constant movement, [people are] walking past the library every day. We're [at the prison] every day so people just know that we're there. [The incarcerated individuals have to] head to the library, to apply get an application, and then they start the application process.

In this instance, students are made aware of potential college courses during their daily activities in the library or through others who have come across an individual who is currently enrolled in a college course. This dynamic allows for familiarity between the university and

potential students prior to their application process. For those universities who did not utilize this method, announcements were made for students to sign up to participate in the admissions process.

As administrators and faculty alike stressed, gaining acceptance to a higher education program is challenging from the moment a student decides to apply. Barriers to teaching incarcerated students are, indeed, present before students are admitted into higher education programs. For example, many students are unable to provide even the most basic personal information needed to apply, such as their legal name, date of birth, and social security number. As one administrator explained, “We have some students [whose] names in the system may not really match [what is written on] their birth certificates.” As the administrator noted, this also makes it difficult to track the student’s social security number down in order to apply for Pell grant funding.

In some cases, incarcerated students are asked to submit an essay from a pre-selected prompt of a university’s choice as part of the application process. Such prompts are often pulled from a number of different sources, including current media articles or even excerpts from classic literature. One administrator describes the process of the admissions essay as such:

By the time they come in for interviews, [they] have already sat for an essay exam that asks them to write an essay with very little prompting on a series of prompts that we give them which come from a variety of texts. For example, it might be an expert from Descartes another one might be a short bit from the New York Times so that’s the first part of how they apply. They write an essay for that in two hours and the only tool they could use is a dictionary.

Yet, providing students with nothing more than a dictionary and just a few hours to complete the essay such as this fails to address the students’ learning gap as described by many administrators and faculty. Even more, these students are shielded from many of the outside world’s happenings

so they may be unaware of political broadcasts or of current scholarly articles or novels that have recently published. It is also pertinent to mention that many of these incarcerated students are adult learners who have not been exposed to academia for quite some time (Contardo, 2010). These applicants are at a disadvantage from the beginning because they are being evaluated based upon their ability to comprehend current events and literature that are often removed from their comfort zones or are not as easily accessible to them as they would be to individuals in the free world. Essay prompt methods like these potentially eliminate large swaths of prospective students from the prison community. As one professor clarified, “[The incarcerated students] were probably [of a] higher IQ among this group of people in the correctional facility, because they had been selected from such a stringent criterion.” In different instances, students were not able to recall recently learned material that was aimed to measure their aptitude. This provides the university a cutoff line in figuring out which students to accept. As one administrator noted: “There is a line below which you think to yourself I’m not sure student below this line will really be able to succeed in the program.” For other interviewees, this line seemed arbitrary. When discussing the threshold for admitting students one interviewee described the process as needing to be expanded:

[Admissions could] open it up to more people. I mean, they only wanted to do people who could succeed, but I think all of these people were well above the bar of succeeding so I mean they could have opened it up to more people who scored a little lower and would have been fine.

For yet another university that utilized the cohort method – one that recruits students together and subsequently teach them in the same group until completion – they specifically sought students who had already obtained an associate degree. One administrator explains the

reasoning as being due to the fact that it speeds the process of providing students with bachelor's degrees. They continue,

We [are] looking for students who already have associate degrees or transfer credits [are] even better. So, when a student comes to us with transfer credits, it means that we basically are bringing them in as juniors.

In this case, the university sought students who had prior educational experiences, thus eliminating the frustrations that could be found at the admissions process. Many of these students would have some familiarity with applying for colleges, easing the strain on administrators of these prison education programs. In other instances, not all students who had requested applications were beginning from lower level comprehension. In fact, some interviewees argued that they had prospective students who held advanced degrees. One professor elaborated:

Occasionally I get students who will say that they have some college credit from before they were in prison, or they had some kind of white-collar job, which I assume required training and education and made them some money. I had a student who was some kind of mechanical engineer.

As this professor mentioned, not all incoming students were beginning from a disadvantage. Some had prior educational experience or held respectable jobs before their incarceration. They were able to complete the relative essays and admissions process with less trouble than those who were not on the same educational level, marking a much easier process for the universities as well.

Other universities allowed for the admissions process to mirror that of on-campus students. For all of these students, they were required, like traditional students to provide documentation of their certificates and legal documents, sometimes leading to larger difficulties

if they had spent decades in the prison system, making it difficult to track down items like their high school diplomas. One administrator described what this meant for those incoming students:

We have students who are in facilities who say 'I have a high school diploma' and the prison record says 'yeah, they have a high school diploma.' Okay for you to come to our college, we need a physical copy of that and they never got one. They may have walked [across the stage at graduation], but they don't have [a diploma]. We have to say 'sorry, you don't have a high school diploma.'

For those students, they are then excluded from receiving Pell funding for college courses.

Because the college or university cannot verify their credentials, they are unable to participate in courses, which could exclude a mass of students who would otherwise be considered eligible.

For other campuses, it was a matter of the length of the admissions process that set the two groups of students apart. While traditional students are able to typically apply online to schools and register for classes, the incarcerated students relied on outdated methods. Everything was done by hand, including financial aid applications, which would often slow down the financial aid office, in turn, postponing the entire application process. The financial aid department, as one interviewee explained,

They do encounter problems with getting registration done because the students all have to fill out all the paperwork by hand and then it's sent to [the university] and then the people in the financial aid department actually type it into the computer. So, it's a lot of data transfer from handwritten paper documents to online documents. [Also,] they can't hire interns or anything to do that because [the financial aid forms are] sensitive information. So, they all have to do it themselves. Sometimes we end up with delays because of that. And I think that's what the registration delay is.

This process must be completed for each and every student that wishes to register for classes. If there was any error in paperwork or filing, from either the student or the university's end, the financial aid department then must first find the mistake and begin to work towards adjusting it, sometimes calling for continued correspondence between the student and the

university. This would lead to late admissions, leaving students further behind. As one interviewee explained: “Students who are still registering will be at the least an entire week behind. And they won’t have their book probably for two more weeks after that. So, actually, they might be three weeks behind.” These delays in admissions would then trickle into other areas of coursework that students would be swamped with.

Overall, both faculty and administrators explained that a large chunk of work needed to be accomplished behind the scenes, so to say, in order to track down potential students, verify their eligibility, and get them fully admitted into the program with all of the necessary paperwork. This path contrasted the methods that traditional students used where they are able to complete most of these tasks online with little to no needed support.

### **Institutional Barriers**

Once admitted and enrolled, incarcerated students must find ways to learn, study, and complete assignments within the prison environment, which is not very conducive to the demands of higher education. Institutional barriers are those stumbling blocks that are the direct result of the correctional facility incarcerated students are placed in. The barriers discussed by both faculty and administrators include inadequate studying spaces, protocols to safeguard the facility, staff and volunteers, and incarcerated individuals, structural deficiencies, and providing coursework and lectures to the incarcerated students. Hindrances like these are unique to correctional settings and, in some cases, are only recognized during the moment of difficulty.

To begin, incarcerated students are not often afforded the same studying abilities that traditional students were. While many, if not all, prisons do have a library for all incarcerated individuals to use, incarcerated students are not able to utilize the campus library to hang out and study with their peers as traditional students normally would. Because of the need to maintain



schedules and structure, students cannot simply spend the day in the library like on-campus students do. As one faculty member explained, “[The prison] libraries are usually too small and don’t have room for them to all go in there and study in the library.” This restricts some individuals from finding spaces that are slightly quieter to complete related coursework or complete assigned reading material. For some of those universities and colleges interviewed, they recalled that there was not a dedicated space for those incarcerated students to confidently continue their work.

In some cases, arrangements were made for students to obtain designated library or classroom times as a sort of study hall period that allowed them exclusive times to complete their coursework. When students are granted access to special “study hall” facilities, there are still number of logistical hurdles to overcome. For example, one interviewee explained that while the students he taught did have a devoted study hall with laptops for coursework, use of this space required coordination with prison staff. In this case, the correctional facility allowed them to enter the facility every day and set up study hall:

Our laptops were secured in the prison library and during study hall we go into a locked closet and bring out all of our laptops and set them up for students and then they can type their papers. They have no access to internet. It’s all typing, and they can do PowerPoint [and] they can do excel.

With this institution, incarcerated students are able to access basic necessities on a laptop but cannot take advantage of search engines during this time to further their knowledge of subjects as traditional students can. In academic settings, search engines and internet access expand the student’s ability to quickly comprehend material and research necessary articles to compose their papers and other assignments.

Although some facilities permitted this type of studying for the incarcerated students, others were not given the same opportunities. The constant distractions and background noises

were said by many to slow down students' learning or even halt them completely, causing students to possibly miss assignments altogether. As one faculty member pointed, "[It is] hard to get a lot of intellectual work done on your own when you're surrounded by this interruptions and irritations and inconveniences for bordering on just miseries." As another interviewee shared:

The student wrote to me 'do you understand that I live in like this huge pod with 80 other students and I'm trying to study on my bed with my flimsy little earphones and people are shouting across the room and throwing things.'

College courses compels students to absorb and consider information presented to them while fashioning their responses in educated manners. This requires concentration, among many other factors to produce quality work. If students are not able to concentrate on the coursework, they are left with little in terms of responding to the assignments. In many cases, as one professor reflected, "[incarcerated students were] probably a little less involved in doing their homework." The lack of completed homework, but momentum during the actual course could be the inability to disassociate themselves from their circumstances. They continued, "I think it's just hard to get a lot of intellectual work done on your own when you're surrounded by interruptions and irritations and inconveniences for bordering on just miseries." These environments that the incarcerated students were placed in are far from hospitable or ideal, causing serious intellectual handicaps in understanding and presenting material.

In light of such challenges, faculty, too, had to adapt to the prison learning environment. Institutional barriers were found in a plethora of different places when discussing postsecondary education in carceral settings. Some of those took the form of physical barriers to success that students faced, while others were roadblocks in the sense of academic or correctional facility barriers to the access of education.

For faculty members, they too must overcome barriers while teaching in correctional settings. Some barriers were found from the very beginning of hire, while others were the result of miscalculations or misunderstandings of how prisons function. Before courses even begin, faculty must be approved by the Department of Corrections relative to the state the university or college is working alongside. This can prove a lengthy process. As one administrator explained, there is background administrative work that must be completed in order to allow professors to come in and teach. One administrator described the process of staffing faculty and providing materials as:

[The faculty members] have to get the application for their background check [then] they have to go through orientation so it's actually a lot of work for the prison to accommodate us because we change everything at [the correctional facility] in terms of the people that we're bringing in. Every single material has to go through [security screenings] and [we're] bringing tons of books and supplies so all of these are difficult things that are [going to] have to happen before a semester even starts.

For faculty who have any prior criminal convictions, this may delay or, in some circumstances, prohibit them from entering and teaching in the correctional facility. This type of blockade may remove professors who would have the promise to understand the dynamics of prison life and be more sensitive to the needs of this special population of students, thus resulting in a more favorable learning experience.

As the administrator mentions, barriers were found in the manner of bringing textbooks into the facility. Some administrators mentioned that the correctional facilities were generally pretty receiving and efficient in terms of scanning and distributing books to students, with one explaining, "The prison has been very good about letting us bring in boxes and boxes of textbooks." Others mentioned the lengthy process it took for students to finally receive their required reading materials. For example, as one professor stated: "[We would] just bring [the

textbooks] in ourselves and they would be screened by the facility going in, basically run through an x-ray machine.” For a class size of anywhere from 15-30 students, this would seriously delay the entrance time for the faculty member to administer lectures and other required teachings, For one administrator, they described an item called a “gate pass” that would state what each intended item to be brought in was that had to accompany textbooks and other learning materials every single time. Gate passes are sheets of paper, sometimes laminated, that would describe the items to be brought in each week that would require prior approval by the warden or other prison staff. These gate passes and textbooks, as one professor mentioned, were up to the mercy of the correctional staff that were working at the time.

[When providing for] chalk and writing materials in the classroom, [the process of] getting those [inside the correctional facility], and trying to get books in, depending who the security guard was that day, and whether he knew you or didn't know you or knew about the program, would or wouldn't let you bring books in.

This meant that there were times where texts and other materials crucial to that day's lesson would not be permitted, changing the entire day's lesson plan, forcing the professor to improvise and still provide an educational experience.

For other materials and teaching items, the university and faculty members had to abide by their relative correctional institution's policies. Three professors from the same university describe how they were not able to bring spiral bound notebooks, printed exams, or staples inside. One of the professors stated the process in bringing simple items inside: “I had to count every paperclip I brought in to make sure I took that many [out with me].” This could ultimately slow down the process of entering the classroom and shorten the length of lecture that day.

For those universities and colleges that provided face-to-face meetings with students, one faculty member admitted she changed a great deal of course content to adhere to the facility's

standards. In traditional settings, students were not required to purchase textbooks because they had access to the internet. Because incarcerated students were not able to use this same method due to facility restrictions, the professor had to find a relevant textbook for the course. This same professor noted her frustrations with not being able to assign an article or short story she had found during the week for the next week's discussion like she would be able to with traditional students, explaining:

You have to just go with what you've assigned the week before; you can't make changes. In my course on campus, I can have an idea during the week and email my students and add a reading and so, in that sense, I can't do that.

This would stall or completely disable the instructor's ability to integrate any new or relevant material that could be used to further the incarcerated students' knowledge of the subject matter. In some situations, the textbooks were a smaller factor of students' inability to succeed. One administrator mentioned the loss of students by way of transfers. If a student were to be transferred to another facility, they would no longer be able to participate in the program at all, simply stating, "If they go into a different prison within the system, they can't [remain a student]." This would not only completely halt the student's learning experience, but also disrupt the flow of the professor's teaching methods when dealing with these types of unexpected setbacks.

For another university, technological barriers caused continuous delays, sometimes hindering the entire semester. These types of delays were found in the form of electronic tablets that would allow for professors to deliver course content to an application that would be displayed for students when they would sync their tablets via plug into a larger kiosk. This was done because students were not permitted access to the internet on a regular basis, only to retrieve relevant learning material. They utilized these electronic tablets to remotely teach

“online” style courses to students that the students would then sync to a kiosk, enabling the student to access weekly lectures, messages, and other items related to the course. For some students, these devices were a brand-new learning process. One professor clarified, “When a student has been in prison already for quite a while, they have much more difficulty interacting with the technology than the students who are newer the prison system.” These long-term students have been removed from the technological advances found in the real world, providing a substantial amount of struggle in terms of navigating the coursework and other materials displayed on its screen. For those students who had little to no prior experience with technology, they would have to first learn to navigate the handheld devices then must acclimate themselves to the material. These struggles are in addition to the student’s handicaps in the form of large gaps between educational experiences.

These tablets, in one particular university, were able to accompany the incarcerated student at any facility they would be transferred to, allowing them to continue their education. One professor mentioned that, while some institutions allowed the incarcerated students 24/7 access to these tablets and kiosks, others were more regulated. For example, one interviewee shared the story of a particular student who was not allowed a reasonable amount of time to complete expected coursework due to these regulations:

The student had access [to their tablet] three hours, three days a week so nine hours total during the week. And, they were taking three courses and I don't know why [the correctional facility was] not allowing them access to their tablet. They was allowed to have their book.

Although the student had access to the textbook that accompanied the online course, the administrator continued by explaining that:

It's the only book they're allowed to keep when they leave the program, so [the student] was able to kind of keep up but even then [they] still had to spend so much time transferring the work [they] had done in the workbook, typing it up

onto the tablet... and so [they] requested an incomplete [at the end of the semester].

In situations like these, the student would be spending the majority of their time completing coursework on the tablet, taking away from the time the student could use to access new material when synced into the kiosk.

Sometimes, little changes on behalf of the manufacturers can disrupt the learning process. Regarding this, one interviewee mentioned how the slightest change could disrupt the learning abilities of some of the incarcerated students. While speaking on the handheld tablets the students would use, the interviewee said:

We had actually started with 10” tablets and then the manufacturers quit making them in 10” and I was kind of saddened by that because the 10” was so much easier to read and look at,” (when describing the manufacturer’s decision to replace the tablets with the smaller, 7” tablet).

The interviewee provided the researcher the ability to view these tablets. The handheld tablets, as described, are just over a ½ foot in length. When utilizing the keypad, this minimizes the screen, causing the reader to squint and strain while typing the required assignments. Other times, faulty machines would cause a communication breakdown. In one instance, a student’s tablet broke down halfway into the semester, causing them to wait over three weeks to receive a new one and continue their studies.

Even when students had constant access to their tablets, unforeseen circumstances often postpone classes, hindering the student and professor’s abilities to communicate effectively with one another. Some professors would speak on inclement weather barring them from entering the facility, while others detailed natural disasters and lengthy lockdowns that would remove the student’s ability to access their tablets or partake in in-person classes. There were also noted

instances where these kiosks would malfunction, causing delays in communication between students and their professors. One interviewee recalled a natural disaster that resulted in students being “offline” for a little over three weeks. For those instances where students were able to participate without delays, other restrictions and changes caused major delays. Reminiscing on this moment, they explained “A couple of semesters ago, there was a [natural disaster] and the students had to be relocated and they were offline for three weeks.” Three weeks is a hefty amount of time that stalls the entire semester, forcing professors to readjust their entire lesson plans to account for lost time.

While speaking with instructors, the idea of flexibility and patience was prevalent in many interviews concerning correctional education. One of the most prominent delays were when the correctional facility experienced lockdowns. Lockdowns occur when there is a breach in security, causing the entire prison system to come to a halt while the situation is assessed, or the deemed threat is taken care of. For instance, one instructor remembered being stuck inside of the correctional facility for several hours during a prison lockdown right before he was to be escorted out of the facility. This professor explained:

I was on lockdown once and [we have] had many other delays. Sometimes, if a prisoner or a person who is a part of the correctional facility is not accounted for for a time period, then they go on lockdown to look for the person. Usually, and almost always it’s just a mistake in various counting mechanisms they have. Their headcounts are imperfect. But they go on lockdown in that circumstance. So, I was stuck on lockdown for several hours once, which is sad. Also there were just delays because they have serious movement restrictions that sometimes take place within the correctional facilities and you just have to roll with the punches.

For this instructor, they were stuck inside of the correctional facility until the issue was sorted out, requiring him to stay put for several hours, cancelling any other plans or potential course related activities he had set for the rest of his day. Other times, interviewees expressed frustration over delays occurring just to enter the facility. As one interviewee recounted:



You would have to go through the line of security, [go through] a shakedown every morning on your way in and depending on how many people were in front of you in the line, that could be ten minutes, that could be 45 minutes.

In instances where this would be the case, the classes start times would be pushed back to whatever time the professor was able to physically make it into the classroom. If the professor was then late roughly 45 minutes, that would remove 45 minutes of course content expected to be covered that day. Traditional courses would be held for no more than two hours, resulting in 1/3 of the class content for the day to be removed from the lesson plan.

For other universities it was a matter of getting students to the classroom that hindered the class dynamics. One administrator recalled their experiences while teaching and remarked the time length faced from entering the facility to getting the students together:

In addition to the access, us getting in, one of the consistent challenges is movement. When the students can actually move to the school building. And they're very regimented. There's a specific time when they can move from where they're at down to the school building. It's meant to happen 15 minutes before our class is supposed to start. In theory, it should all work like clockwork. In my own experience from teaching there, very often movement gets delayed, students end up getting there anywhere from 15 minutes to a good 30 minutes later than the class.

Students who arrived late could then become a disruption to the flow of class that day by asking questions or requiring a pause in the curriculum for the day to be brought up to speed. As another interviewee explained, the action of producing students was a finicky process: "The students have to be on something called a count letter and basically it was up to the bureaucracy to make sure that the right person was on the right letter for the right time." If the student was mistakenly left out, or if the count letter was not updated to reflect the current class members, the student would miss out on important material learned that day. Because students cannot communicate via email or office hours, the student would then have to wait until the next lecture to speak with the professor about the previous week's material. Another interviewee described an instance in

which students were never brought to classrooms because their names were not placed on the appropriate lists either:

[The correctional officers] purposely [will not] release the [incarcerated students] to go to class, or you're calling someone out and they're say 'oh I didn't get that call.' [The correctional officers are] not telling the students that they can go [to class].

These “call out papers,” as some facilities describe them, made it so prisoners were often missed on the sheets or never called to be escorted to the prison classroom, causing a delay for the entire class to begin. One instructor expressed extreme frustration over such delays, lamenting the fact that they were not announced to the faculty members prior to arrival,

“Delays were so frequent and the fact that the prison was just so terrible about communication,” the interviewee explained, continuing, “there was never anyone who would call me in the morning when I'm driving out there and tell me that there was fog so your class is [going to] be delayed. You just have to get there and find out.”

Count times were consistently highlighted by interviews as especially problematic, often stalling classes or getting into class on time. These count times consist of correctional facility staff going through the entire facility and counting every single incarcerated individual in order to ensure that no one had escaped. This occurs several times throughout the day. As one interviewee explained, in one facility within which they taught, every single incarcerated individual was required to return to their bunk in order to be counted in person and accurately. Another interviewee described what would ensue if the incarcerated individuals were miscounted,

You might be in class and basically a guard would come and tell you that the count was wrong and so when the count is wrong, literally every inmate has to go back to their dorm to be counted in person by the guards there.

This would cause the entire class to shut down while these counts occurred. Because the students had been removed from the classroom, this would cut chunks of teaching time away from that day or suspend it completely. Again, because students are only permitted specific meeting times with instructors, they must then wait until the next class period to catch up on the disrupted class and ask any questions that they had from the last class period. These occurrences, as one professor noted, caused frustration from the faculty, with one professor alluding to this being the reason as to why they did not return to teach in subsequent semesters. Beyond the delays mentioned, there were a number of instances that set apart incarcerated and traditional students when considering how in-person class time was spent. One professor spoke on the arbitrary demands from the correctional officers: “[The correctional officers] would come into the classroom and tell the students that they had to take off their hats or not take off their hats or stand up.” Little instances like this would cause tension within the entire classroom, creating an atmosphere of anxiety, counterproductive to an adequate learning experience.

Another interviewee highlighted the distrust that was apparent between the incarcerated students and correctional officers, alluding towards the animosity of the ability to receive an education at no cost:

I’m sure that some of them might be a little resentful thinking that here are these people who committed crimes are getting a free education and they’re not getting that, and I think it’d be great if courses could be offered to them too.

This displeasure could have detrimental effects on the learning environment at hand or could result in frivolous delays maliciously enacted to hinder the learning process. Another professor talked about the lack of trust between two groups: “[The incarcerated students] did not trust the [correctional] staff and hinted to me that they had not been treated well.” This treatment could stem from the irritation of students receiving free education or from a general hostile

prison environment. This mistrust was acknowledged in another interviewee describing how tense the environment would become once a correctional officer entered the classroom: “Literally the second the officer walked into the door to the second they left, the students would just get quiet.” This adversarial style relationship amongst correctional officers and incarcerated students caused tense disruptions such as the one mentioned above in order to maintain the status quo.

Overall, institutional barriers seemed to be the more defining frustrations of interviewees, accounting for a large chunk of disruptions and delays to teaching. These disruptions took on a number of forms, and often times, they were required to just deal with the bureaucracy of prison standards. These rules and regulations were set in place by the prison facility, allowing little room in terms of negotiations or changes. The faculty and administrators worked around the parameters of the correctional facility they would teach inside of, or remotely, and attempt to administer the most impactful education they could given the barriers they were presented with.

### **Barriers in the Classroom**

Barriers in the classroom can be displayed in a manner of ways. Barriers are any setbacks that will halt or dramatically stall the course content or course itself from being executed. Highlighted barriers include the inability to complete coursework in a timely fashion, the intellectual restrictions, academic expectations, and limited instruction times. Barriers such as these prove increased difficulty while in a correctional setting that removes the student’s abilities to ask for assistance or find guidance as those in the free world would.

When considering course content, two universities confirmed that their course expectations were similar, if not identical to those of traditional on-campus students. However, it was generally the case that, at a minimum, some minor tweaks had to be made in consideration

of correctional facility rules. One instructor noted that group work was not permitted within their correctional facility, but the expectations of these incarcerated students was just the same as those on campus students. When discussing the ability of group work, one administrator noted: “The students don’t have peer to peer interaction because that would violate security issues.” Students are not able to meet with their peers as traditional students are, removing the ability to overcome academic challenges together or to work collaboratively to understand material. What these students would do instead was utilize tablets to contact their professor to ask the question they needed assistance with and then be made to wait until the next time they are able to sync their tablets to the available kiosks in order to see if the professor had the opportunity to view their question and respond. For face to face classes, students would have to wait until the next time the professor was permitted into the facility in order to seek answers or better comprehend the material. This could require the professor to stop the new lectures in order to bring those students to the same speed as everyone else.

Because many of these face-to-face classes met once or twice a week, this could slow the process of completing these types of assignments by the appropriate due date. What would take days within a traditional campus, could easily amount to months in carceral spaces were a disaster or other institutional delay to occur. In one university, this would result in numerous incompletes being accepted for students to complete their coursework. In the case of incompletes, students are then required to continue the semester beyond the end date in order to complete their coursework. One professor described incompletes and the resulting actions as such:

[At the] end of the semester, they can request an incomplete which just gives them extra time to finish the course material. I’ve denied a lot of [incompletes], but I’ve also approved a lot of those. Because [incarcerated students] just do encounter more problems than I think a traditional face-to-face student

encounters. If they're on lockdown and they're not allowed to have their tablet, they can't work. That's not necessarily their fault. Even if they get [placed] in solitary, sometimes that's not their fault either.

Solitary confinement consists of a student being placed into a single room for a period of time, excluding them from any prison activities or programs until they are released back into the general population. If an incarcerated student is placed into solitary, they cannot attend classes nor complete their coursework in the permitted time frame.

Beyond adapting and adjusting to the prison environment, faculty must also be cognizant of students' potential intellectual handicaps. Incarcerated students, distinct from traditional students, are in need of vastly different teaching pedagogy. It is necessary to mention, again, that, although some students had obtained previous college credits, many had only a high school diploma or GED. Most interviewees described the incarcerated student's abilities to adapt and understand complex materials, while many others made sure to mention the process it took to reach that point. After all, these students were adult learners, with little to no formal education to recall when describing material. As one professor summed the experience, "... Because you can have a high school diploma... doesn't mean you can read at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade level." This instructor illustrates the discrepancy between formal, k-12, education and its measured abilities. High school diplomas, in this case, did not fully capture the competencies, or limitations, of these incarcerated students. Due to the fact that these incarcerated learners had been removed from formal education for some time, they had lagged in their comprehension. One professor claims, "Being functionally literate is not the same as reading fifty pages of a novel." Although someone can read the material that professors assign to them, this does not mean that they can actually comprehend the points made or that they can easily familiarize themselves as traditional students can.

However, a nontraditional path to college courses does not necessarily mean that these students are handicapped in their abilities. As one professor reflected, “From the very first time I [taught inside the prison] I was struck at the level of untapped talent there was among these men and, in many cases, highly undereducated men.” Alternately, these students often require additional opportunities to advance their intellectual capacities in preparation for and during college courses. One professor remarked that there were “study hall” type meetings held every day within the correctional facility for students to take part in, while other universities had a network of volunteers, whether it be other incarcerated persons who were certified as tutors or from the university (i.e., graduate students or the professors, themselves) that came in and assisted the incarcerated students with their coursework. Two universities discussed implementing a tutoring program run by the incarcerated students’ peers. This would consist of students who had successfully completed the courses providing academic support to those students now struggling with the material.

Another standout theme found among many interviewees was the fact that many incarcerated students were “self-taught,” meaning that they had not followed a traditional k-12 trajectory. Some had completed traditional high school, while others eventually earned GEDS. A great deal of these students were identified as having spent over a decade incarcerated, and many had developed their academic skills through their own exploration along the way. One professor attributed this to the fact that “All these [incarcerated students] were learning with almost no background and would be able to pick things up through their raw intelligence.” Incarcerated students, although not provided with the same opportunities as traditional students, were able to recall life lessons and skills they had taught themselves in order to experience material in a new and profound way. When speaking on the experiences of both students and their ability to

intertwine life experiences with education, one professor admits “[The] experiences that these [incarcerated] students have had compared to our students on campus are miles apart and how they’re able to integrate those experiences into their learning has become pretty phenomenal.” The students are able to weave their own narratives into complex material that they were previously not exposed to in order to gain a better understanding and find a way to make the material make sense to them.

Compare this to the path of most “traditional” college students, who have had continuous exposure to coursework, learning expectations, and academic socialization. As many explained, traditional students can often recall basic curricula because, in most cases, they recently learned it. This allows them the opportunity to initially better grasp material more quickly than their incarcerated counterparts, who many have not taken a high school or college class in years. As one interviewee explained, “Students that we teach [on campus] in physics or chemistry or whatever... they have at least seen calculus, even if they’re not experts,” He continued, “Many of these [incarcerated] students stopped somewhere around algebra one.” In situations like this, instructors must then begin with what would be considered “entry-level” material in order to bring these students “up to speed,” impacting the efficiency of the semester. As one administrator described the setbacks, “Some of our students need a bit more remedial help at the beginning and we have kind of have to, I don’t want to say we throw them into it, but we don’t provide any pre-college prep.” Although some of these students trailed intellectually, professors did indicate that student’s comprehension of the material grew exponentially.

### **Academic Preparation and Expectations**

Moving past the admissions process, considerations towards the formation of these courses diverges from traditional on-campus approaches. Incarcerated students, distinct from



traditional students, are in need of vastly different teaching procedures. Deliberation must be made with respect to the incarcerated student's environment as well as their incoming intellectual handicaps. Beyond this, as one administrator notes, is the presumed barrier that these students face due to their incarcerated status. This administrator simply states: "Our students are not dumb. They got caught." Although the incarcerated students often cannot function at the same literacy level as traditional students, professors like the one above mention how they are far from ignorant.

There is an additional layer of support that must be provided to these incarcerated students. One professor interviewed noted that many incoming professors were not cognizant of the fact that a large number of these incarcerated students had not taken previous college courses, had barely obtained their high school diploma or its equivalent, or had never been a part of any prerequisite courses that would allow them to better understand the material at hand. Because of this, many of these students began at a disadvantage when it came to understanding the material. What some universities chose to do to combat this, however, was place students in remedial style math and English courses to adjust their knowledge of the subject matter prior to the beginning of their actual college courses. One professor explained how these courses were only set up as an opportunity to allow the incarcerated students to grasp more complex material down the line:

"The fact that we really bring their math up and they have to bring their writing up. and so... the remedial math doesn't count towards the college degree. Because it's really, to be honest, high school level math. But it is what they need before they can really get into, you know, we teach for example, physics there and umm... they need that math if they're gonna be able to succeed in the physics course."

Most interviewees agreed that incarcerated students were often able to grasp concepts relatively quickly given their minimal relationship with formal education. One interviewee

attributed this to the fact that incarcerated students spent a great deal longer studying material and consuming the readings than they expected traditional students did. As another participant explained:

“[Incarcerated students] take their studies much more seriously. I tend to give the example as a professor, at a standard class on main campus, I would give out the assignment for the next week to read the first 50 pages of this novel and [at main campus], I’d be happy if the majority of students had actually bought the novel, and then I’d be happy if even half of those students actually read the 50 pages. At [the correctional institution], I’d come back and almost all of the women would have read the entire novel.”

This accentuates the determination of these students who are eager for these classes. These students were able to read this material with the immense distractions surrounding them in a far from hospitable environment. These students, as one professor explained, “I had a couple of students who were appealing their cases and so they were in and out of court a lot.” These life altering distractions did not deter students from their motivation to achieve higher marks in class and arrive prepared to discuss materials.

In fact, incarcerated student’s drive for education and thirst to understand complex materials not only facilitates their successes, but, as one professor described, “keeps the professors on their toes.” One professor stated, when describing the difference between incarcerated and traditional students mentioned how incarcerated students would be more forthcoming with questions about the material presented:

“They’re much more involved in class because they don’t just believe things without you really convincing them and they don’t have the formal background of verbal language or mathematical language to kind of pick up on formalisms immediately so they were more willing to interrupt the class and say hey why is that true?”

Interviewees also described being surprised by the resilience and determination of these students in these correctional facilities. In one setting, students would sit through the entire three-hour course without a break. Some students had even opted to transfer to a prison known for deteriorating conditions in order to enroll in and take classes. When speaking of the facility that the students would be required to be transferred to, one professor explained:

“What [is] remarkable to me is the prison we're doing this in is the worst of the [state prisons] in terms of physical shape. I mean, it's not a very new prison. [It was] actually a mental institution in like 1930's and 1940's and then became a prison. All of the inmates in the system know that where we're doing this is sort of a dump, yet they're willing to leave much nicer quarters to come to this program and I think that says something good about the students who we have in it.”

Students had chosen to overlook their own comfortability, and possibly safety, when making the choice to sign up for courses.

Another looming contrast between the traditional and incarcerated students are the societal roles prescribed to them. For the incarcerated population, the general view is one of loose morality, a staunch lack of empathy, and mindless ignorance. What was described by many faculty members was the fact that these students were not feeble-minded, nor were they unaware of their life choices that lead to their subsequent incarceration. Moreover, the incarcerated students linked their previous lives with their education, fusing a unique perspective on the material presented to them. One administrator focused on this when illuminating the shock of faculty members when asked to characterize the pool of incarcerated students:

There was a surprise to a lot of our faculty, too, when they started teaching and they're going ‘Whoa, the experiences that these students have had compared to our students on campus are miles apart and how they're able to integrate those experiences into their learning has become pretty phenomenal. [These students have a different] of understanding even a different life or a culture than what we have.

As another faculty member notes, the life experiences, not the correctional institution itself, were the predominant influence when it came to the style of responses that incarcerated students tailored for their coursework:

I think if I got to teach an older nontraditional face to face class, of people with the life experience that these corrections students have, we'd probably see lots of similarities. So, I don't think it's the corrections piece. I think it's the life experience piece, and I think it's the motivation piece.

Another administrator countered this idea when claiming that the two were not mutually exclusive. This administrator noted,

I would put the two of them in conversation with each other. Yes, they're adult learners but they're adult learners who have had a very different lived experience than the standard 18 or 19-year-old I'm working with on campus. So, yes, I think it's a matter of age, but I almost think its age plus lived experience that combine to make them take their studies more seriously.

As this faculty member explained, there is a difference in the age gap between traditional and incarcerated students. Many of the administrators and instructors described their average incarcerated students beginning around 30 years old yet noted that they can be even older. For one interviewee who taught "online" style courses, they were shocked at the ages of some of the incarcerated students, stating: "I met one of the graduates and he was a grandfather['s] age," continuing "we're getting the whole [age] spectrum of people." Another administrator estimated the students in their previous cohort ranges from "mid 40's [or] early 50's. Our second cohort is more in their 30's and 40's." Both age ranges discussed still display individuals who have spent, at a minimum, 12 years removed from high school, if they ever received their diplomas at all. As discussed in chapter three, incarcerated learners require a more hands-on and immersed approach to teaching (Wilson & Reuss, 2008), posing additional challenges in correctional learning environments.

Despite lack of preparation and demographic barriers to learning, instructors and administrators continuously described the way incarcerated students digested the material presented to them. One professor noted exceptional amounts of appreciation from those incarcerated students in applying the lessons to their life, possibly resulting from their inability to connect to previous schooling. What ensued, was an amazement to one professor who notes, “Students on the inside who might be taking the same class as the students on the outside with that same instructor are actually getting higher grades.”

For those students who were struggling academically, some universities provided support, while others took a lengthier process in the form of tutoring. Because there was a need for tutoring beyond the course lectures and materials, some students required assistance that they could not immediately utilize like traditional students are able to. One professor spoke on the need for additional assistance needed for research papers:

“We have a writing center on campus that is run by our English students and so if the student is inside struggling with a research paper, we'll kind of ferry that paper back and forth so that [the incarcerated student] can work with our graduate students and get some extra assistance.”

Administrators and professors also reflected on the emotional and psychological barriers incarcerated students face, which can pose additional challenges for course instruction. For example, professors and administrators explained that many incarcerated students held self-conscious attitudes towards their own intellectual abilities prior to entering the classroom, something that continued throughout their time as students. as one administrator stated, “[These individuals] have been told their entire lives that they were stupid, and so there’s a lot of resilience that they have to [develop]. That have to transform themselves and the image of themselves as students,” meaning that these students are facing the task of acknowledging

themselves as students. As another professor described, incarcerated students often must “work to develop themselves as thinkers and writers.”

Moreover, incarcerated students often lack the wraparound services found on traditional campuses that could help alleviate the emotional and psychological barriers they confront. These students are not afforded counseling services or comprehensive care to cope with the discomfort and anxiety associated with taking college courses. One professor related, “We try to provide the same type of services that we do on campus, although it’s not exactly the same. We can’t really provide any mental health counseling or any kind of services.”

Lacking formal mechanisms of support, it is up to students and professors to learn how to overcome these issues together. However, faculty are often at a loss as to how best to support their incarcerated students. One professor recalls:

One time there was a member of my class that just wasn’t there because something was going on with his significant other... or there was a crisis... I think maybe there was something going on with one of their kids. It was just painful, they’re separated from their families, there are misunderstandings, [a] lot of emotions. There was a general attitude of suspicion towards authorities, which seems to be related to deep seeded emotional tendencies that I had to get past.

Not only are students frequently unable to be physically present for class, but they are often psychologically removed, as in the case described above. Such instances and patterns can have a detrimental impact on the quality of students’ work and lead to further detachment from coursework.

Overall, there are a slew of setbacks that faculty must prepare for in terms of teaching students inside of a correctional facility. Instructors are continuously rearranging course loads, adhering to new facility standards, and taking extra steps to support incarcerated students during their academic careers. These are continuous barriers, often times only realized at the moment of

setback. These professors and administrators are then forced to sometimes completely alter their teaching styles and overhaul their required curricula to appease the needs of these students and the correctional facility all while maintaining the educational standards of the university.

Professors are placed under tremendous pressure to complete these tasks at hand, sometimes at a moment's notice.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, student barriers were found in just about every corner of their academic life. Whether it was found from the beginning when eliminating students that would otherwise be deemed qualified, or it occurred during their academic career, both the correctional institution and educational facility had to ultimately create a new academic itinerary to accommodate the needs of these students, while also maintaining their academic standards and ensuring the safety of the correctional facility. The logistical process to accomplish this type of teaching continues to be a work in progress. Faculty and administrators alike are constantly reshaping and readdressing newfound needs of incarcerated students.

In correctional settings, professors and administrators face new obstacles unlike any found within traditional college settings. Obstacles such as obeying policies formulated by the correctional facility, furnishing students with background knowledge to understand important course material, and taking into account the barriers students face in fulfilling their academic obligations were discussed in almost every interview. These professors and faculty members were cognizant of the fact that they were required to wear many hats during these times to create a successful atmosphere that fostered intellectual development.

## **Chapter Five: Implications and Improvements for the Future of Prison Postsecondary Programs**

Although postsecondary programs present unprecedented struggles and shortcomings in the quest to provide a productive and equitable learning experience, as explained by administrators and faculty alike, the key to ensuring success within these programs is versatility. Versatility facilitates uninhibited learning experiences not only for the incarcerated students, but for those who administer and teach in such programs. Through these experiences, faculty and administrators describe the need for a number of improvements, including enhanced access to materials, continuous and more extensive support for students prior to the semester and post release, better accommodations from the correctional facility, and stronger appreciation for faculty members. These suggestions were celebrated as critiques to enrich the experience of every member affiliated with postsecondary education within carceral spaces.

Interviewees determined what success would look like not only for the college or university, but for the students and prison education programs as a whole. Interviewees held similar views towards what a successful program would ideally be for all of the above-mentioned parties. Some regarded the fact that students obtained their degree as a monumental indicator of success, while others viewed the evolution of the student's academic comprehension and character as the most pronounced factor. Many of these interviewees framed their feedback in connection with the uncertainty about the future of postsecondary programs in prison, especially given that the most recent iteration of the Second Chance Act has only been approved as a pilot study. Ultimately, they emphasized institutional changes—both from the educational institution



and correctional facility—and incentives needed to successfully advance and expand existing Second Chance programs.

### **Faculty Motivation**

“We’re not activists; we’re educators.”

One key takeaway from college in prison programs is understanding to what it takes to sustain administrator and faculty participation. Motivation is one of the most poignant factors compelling professors and administrators to continue working with postsecondary programs in carceral settings. Professor and administrator motivation for a successful program influences course content, flexibility, and assurance that the programs will continue for the foreseeable future. Motivation affects different areas of different participants’ lives. Each participant described taking away personal satisfaction from their experiences in their respective programs. Both faculty and administrators described how these encounters with incarcerated students had given them a different perspective on education and appreciation for their students. Student improvement, personal religious missions, and the desire to provoke structural and generational change were just a few of the motivating factors that interviewees described.

When asked about how this type of teaching affects their personal life, a number of faculty and administrators interviewed remarked how it had transformed their abilities and provided a humbling experience. One administrator discussed leaving the correctional facility after an event, recalling:

I often think about what it’s like when I leave the classroom versus what it’s like when [the incarcerated students] leave the classroom. We all get back on the bus but, because [the incarcerated students] spent the entire day with people from the outside, all of the inmates are strip searched before they go back into the facility. It’s hard not to sit on the bus at the end of the day and on the one hand be incredibly moved by what has happened and feel really good about it, but then on the other hand to reflect on the [incarcerated students that are] inside. It can be a challenge; it can be difficult.

Both attendees and incarcerated students returned to vastly different worlds after the ceremony completed. Attendees were able to retire to their everyday lives, while the incarcerated students were subject to security protocols and placed back into routine prison procedures.

Reflections like that detailed above were not uncommon. Some interviewees discussed how they believed prison life to be an emotionally and intellectually stunting environment. One professor remarked on the gloomy atmosphere noting that, “What you realize very quickly is how monotonous prison life is, and this two-hour class is pretty much the highlight of their week and they get to speak to somebody from the outside.” Another professor expanded on this thought by claiming, “We’re the only thing they have.” The blaring morose feeling was highlighted by one administrator, who recounted having to mentally prepare for each class, claiming, “I had to pray and meditate and prepare myself to go there every day and when I got there I’d be just instantly sad.” They continued, “[It was] extremely hard for me emotionally because it was the saddest environment to have spent time.” Although this professor sought influence and guidance from a higher power, they still struggled with the perceived demeaning and bleak atmosphere created within prison walls.

Religious and spiritual motivations were mentioned by a small number of interviewees. Such motivations were seen as factors for both inspiring universities and colleges to participate in these programs per their mission statements and for faculty to join. These motivations go beyond and are distinct from the ambition to impact student lives. One administrator disclosed gathering in circles with other members of the university and praying for students. Another mentioned that, while speaking with faculty members, it became clear that there was a need to help. This administrator explained; “Many [potential faculty members] see this as ‘I’ve been

looking for some way to give in a different way of what I have [and] what I know. It's almost like mission work for some of them." There is a greater, religious need to assist these individuals who are not in advantageous situations due to their current circumstances.

The need to impact and alter student lives and beliefs was a second, distinct motivating factor for faculty members and administrators. Many interviewees described wanting to enhance the intellectual capacities of these incarcerated students, as well as affect larger scale correctional environment changes. Some participants discussed being hopeful that their teaching would prompt students to think more critically about the world. As one professor recalled:

[I] still pray for the last guy in my class that was... I could tell what group, what gang he probably was a part of just by his answers to the questions in the class. He may never change, but I'm hoping as he progresses through his college experience that some of his thoughts will grow and mature, but you just never know the seed you plant [or] what will happen.

These aspirations for student growth went beyond academic capabilities as this professor described a desire to inspire openness and acceptance in a student who was part of a white supremacist prison gang.

As many professors hoped to impact students on a holistic level, they often looked for avenues outside of traditional teaching techniques to encourage students. For one professor, it was the attempt to psychologically remove these incarcerated students from their current settings that they believed had altered students' minds the most. As they described:

[I think it is] successful to take someone who [is] in these environments where they're not pleasant and they're stressful—there [are] countless chances to get involved in mischief; so many ways that you can be idle and learn how to be a better criminal, rather than doing something constructive. I think if you take people from that environment and you give them something constructive to do with their time... In our case, it's exposing them [to] ideas, to learning, to teaching them how to write, to giving them the critical thinking skills that are necessary for an education population. If you do all of those things, even if that person doesn't finish their degree, even if that person unfortunately gets in trouble and gets removed from the program, even if that person ultimately still has a lot of years

left to serve.... I think you are creating a kind of person who now sees themselves differently and hopefully acts differently.

As this professor highlights, success is not only in the form of a degree; success can be calculated in a number of ways. For most interviewees, success was not evaluated based on the number of students who complete a course or graduate, but instead based upon incarcerated students' self-reflection and growth.

Still, many interviewees highlighted their students' graduations as one of the most affirming and motivational experiences for them, as educators. As one administrator shared:

I see a guy holding up his program. He's like 28, 29 [and] he's crying the whole time [while] getting his associates. His mom pulls me over afterwards and said "I'm finally proud of my son. He's ruined his whole life. He's never made a good choice. I'm finally proud of him because he got his associates." she drove all the way up from [state] to see her son do that, and, that's life changing, that's transformation.

The satisfaction derived from witnessing the successes of these students was prevalent among many professors. They discussed success stories from the lens of teaching. One professor explained the emotional responses they personally went through when teaching to the incarcerated students and witnessed their ultimate completion of the postsecondary program.

They commented:

For me, it's about helping or making a difference to these folks and giving them an opportunity to be a part of something like [these postsecondary programs]. It's an enriching part of my life. I really enjoy it thoroughly. [These experiences] gave me a whole different perspective from the world but it's a very gratifying and rewarding one for the most part. You deal with obstacles like anything else, probably more than you should, but, when you see the end result and when you see these [incarcerated students] walk across the stage and they graduate and hear the things they have to say. It's priceless.

In this case, not only did the incarcerated student take away an education and degree, but the professor recognized accomplishments within themselves in teaching with these postsecondary programs. This recognition, as this interviewee notes, is an impactful driving factor in motivating these faculty members to continue this type of work.

Although, as one interviewee stressed, “We’re not activists; we’re administrators,” several interviewees explicitly noted the satisfaction they felt in knowing that the culture of the prison began to change with each educated student. As another interviewee clarified, “The role of advocacy or activism isn’t bad, but we are not an activist organization. We are educators and [what] we do [is] bring change to this environment, but we do it through a heart and mind of life of changing the students.” This same administrator recounted a time where the entire prison make-up was transformed because of these dedicated students:

Two years ago, at [an event], [a warden] comes up to me and say, ‘[Are] you guys with [university]? I’m Warden So-and-so.’ I asked him how the program was going. He says, ‘Well it took a semester or two, it went well. We just had to figure out how this worked in our culture. I love it now. It’s great. I walk across the yard and guys are talking about philosophy and history instead of talking trash about who’s gonna make a shank. It has changed the culture of prison; I love it.’ So, he said his mind changed, the correctional officers’ mind’s changed, the culture in the prison changed. But we made that change from the inside. And then the person who was the head of correctional education in [that state] at the time goes, ‘I can’t believe he said that. He was the one warden who said over my dead body will we ever have college in prison. I hate it. It wasn’t until he was forced by the higher ups in the Department of Corrections, and so they pushed him and then he saw the results.’ So, we saw transformation, but we did that through education not activism.

These holistic changes within the prison system marked significant results that trickled down to other areas of the facilities, inspiring these professors and administrators to recognize that education held results that reached further than traditional measures.

For some participants, the journeys and transformation of the incarcerated students helped them understand how different the incarcerated students were from their on-campus ones. They were able to recall an appreciation towards teaching the students inside of the correctional facility. As one interviewee mentioned when discussing the two populations: "I'm not saying my traditional undergrads don't appreciate it, but they don't have the vision of this the way somebody who's been out in the world does." As this interviewee described, unlike most traditional students, incarcerated students seemed especially capable of connecting their real-world experiences with their classroom learning. One administrator discussed the impacts this has within the prison community, as well as the reach it can have outside the prison walls. They clarified:

[It is] also interesting [because] some of these [incarcerated students] aren't getting out so recidivism isn't an issue, but it's the personal satisfaction, the personal sense of achievement, the impact it has on individual [students] and their sense of themselves. Whether that's something they take outside with them or whether [it is] something they pass along. The main thing about graduation is when the [incarcerated students] go up on stage, they typically, bring their families with them so whether they have their parents with them or they're carrying their children in their arms or they've got their grandchildren, so it's not just about that individual but it's also the impact that [incarcerated student] is having on the rest of their family outside. So, it's the community inside, and it think it's important to talk about [how] this is a way of improving the in-facility experience, and I think that's why administrations like it in that regard. The [incarcerated students] in the program happen to be some of their best inmates. The example that they pose for their families and their own children and friends on the outside. I think it resonates out from there as well.

This professor elaborated on the idea that these incarcerated students took away far more than just degrees. In fact, like other interviewees, this professor remarked on the ripple effect these postsecondary programs had on the students' family and friends in the free world. To professors, this was more than just following a traditional educational model. For some, it was the triumphs of guiding these incarcerated students to a higher and morally sound path in life.

For another professor, seeing the complete transformation of a student proved to be the biggest success story and a pivotal point motivating continued participation as a postsecondary instructor. As they recalled:

[One student] was the lead gangbanger in this facility. [One day,] somebody drug him to class and said, 'You really need to think about doing this.' He was absolutely brilliant and had finished up everything and [was] getting ready to leave the facility. I went up and did a little ceremony for him. He had applied for [a different university] and the reason he was going to [this university] is that he had to leave [the city he was in] because he knew he couldn't live there and not get pulled back into the gang. [He] worked with [local organizations and] got all [of] his tattoos removed, and while he was incarcerated, he was the one going around and telling everyone to go to school, go to college. I still see this guy's face every day. I know the first day of class, he was in there and he was like, 'I am not doing this.' He was sitting very defiantly, and then as things were going on around him and he was listening, and he was getting it. Then, all of a sudden, he wrote his first paper and I went oh my gosh, this guy is brilliant. So, we pushed him and his whole life changed. He [now] has a wife and daughter and he graduated from the university [he attended]. He changed the makeup of the facility by basically getting rid of the gangs in there.

The faculty and administrators also shared anecdotes on the noticeable impact the students displayed on their family members. One university administrator described the story of a student who, by obtaining their bachelor's degree, inspired their daughter to attend the same university; a thought she had never contemplated prior to her parent's graduation. Thus, graduation not only provides a sense of hope for incarcerated students, their friends and family, but for professors and administrators, too.

Overall, faculty and administrators concluded that postsecondary education made significant contributions to the long-term trajectory of incarcerated students' lives. Although initially driven by a desire to provide students with conventional lessons building towards the successful completion of college degrees, most derived enjoyment and fulfillment in learning the ways in which participation in postsecondary programs facilitated incarcerated student's self-

improvement and enhanced sense of self-worth, their eagerness to desist from criminal activities and behaviors, and the strengthening of their familial ties.

## **Improvements**

Despite the advances made so far in the realm of postsecondary education in prisons, administrators and faculty members still reasoned that adjustments would need to be made. These adjustments would not only benefit the incarcerated students' academic progress but could mature the programs toward a somewhat level playing field with traditional students. Improvements were suggested both to entice future universities and faculty members to participate.

Administrators and professors suggested a number of improvements involving postsecondary education programs for incarcerated students, such as more institutional involvement, wraparound services, reentry tools, and expanding both the facilities and the student pool. One professor simply discussed the logistics of class times, explaining that:

Some people want to teach for us but, unfortunately, their schedules and their lives are such that they can never [be able to]. They would only be able to teach at night so if there were an expansion in the program of possible class times not limited to strict day time hours for school. If classes could be offered at night, I really think that would be a game changer because it would open up the possibility that we could offer more classes and then more faculty could teach. So, just expanded classroom hours I think would really help.

This professor claimed that the narrow window of designated class times had prevented a long list of prospective professors from teaching due to their other obligations. Another professor held similar sentiments on the allotted class times, stating their hope for more meeting times, “[It] would be better if we could meet twice a week for half as long each time,” as compared to their current once a week, 2 ½ hour time block.



Other professors wished to expand the eligibility requirements. Currently, under Pell Grant restrictions, only persons who are five or less years from their earliest release date are eligible for these programs. Individuals, like those mentioned, who have been sentenced to serve their natural lives are restricted from access to these programs as well as others who still have to serve a considerable amount of time before they can be released. As one administrator proclaimed:

One of my life goals is that I would love to see every incarcerated individual in America have the [opportunity] if they're ready and they're qualified, to have the opportunity to take college inside with no out of pocket expense.

Because there are restrictions on whom can be a part of these postsecondary programs, this administrator hoped that one day, eligibility requirements would be relaxed and more inclusive of all of those who wished to seek higher education. Another administrator touched on the same yearns for expansion in terms of eligibility. They expressed a desire for more involvement across different stakeholders, including the state government, stating:

What restricts the lifers is the Pell Grant itself. The Pell says they have to have an out date in order to receive funding. that doesn't mean the states locally may not help fund the students that are lifers, or [they could be] self-paying. We would not turn them away, but they would have to have a high school diploma or a GED. There [are] a lot of studies that say it would be important for lifers to have some kind educational program or purpose in the [correctional] institutions and if we could train them to be tutors, that's kind of one of the things were looking at. But, frankly, I wish that would be repealed and that lifers could receive [a college] education, but right now it says they have to have an out date. So, there has to be another source of funding for me if they were going to [participate].

Individuals sentenced to life, as this administrator argued, must rely on themselves or systematic changes in order to obtain postsecondary college credits. Often, this cannot be easily accomplished, even though, as stated, it could benefit both incarcerated individuals and correctional facilities.

One administrator conveyed dissatisfaction from a potential faculty member upon realizing that there were restrictions in place on who could partake in these courses. They recounted:

One time I had a faculty member [that I was speaking with to] interview [as] an adjunct. She was very disappointed to hear that she wanted to teach people who were life sentenced that those are the people we need to be reaching and I said that's not what this grant funds.

This exemplifies the need to broaden the eligibility requirements to recruit interested faculty members from various disciplines. As one administrator exclaimed, "I want to go where the need is greatest," when discussing the possibility of opening Second Chance Pell Grant funding to individuals serving life without the possibility of parole sentences.

Another administrator highlighted the same ambitions towards those lifers by stating,

There [are] a lot of studies that say it would be important for lifers to have some kind educational program or purpose in the institutions and if we could train them to be tutors, that's kind of one of the things we're looking at.

In this same sense, another professor hoped to eliminate some of the barriers to accessing Second Chance Pell Grants, noting, "[I] really do believe that as much as we can expand things like the 2nd chance Pell and just expand prison education in general we absolutely should."

For current students who will be released, a significant number of interviewees hoped for more comprehensive services to assist these incarcerated students with their transition back into society. In order to be able to participate in the Second Chance Pell Grant Pilot Program, prospective colleges and universities must make meaningful offers to students to continue their education should they be released. The restrictions do not clarify on any other types of services, but to allow students the opportunity to complete their education at the university or college. In understanding this, some interviewees mentioned the desire to push for more extensive services

for those coming home. One administrator expressed the desire by stating, “We really wanted to be a reentry program so they would do maybe 2 or 3 years of coursework at the prison, and then they would come to our campus and finish up [their degrees].” Later they returned to the topic, adding that, “helping students once they’re out of prison continue education and get real meaningful work is so important to these programs and that’s a big focus for us.” From speaking to these interviewees, the logistics are still being considered and worked out in order to ensure the student’s success post release.

While considering the future of these programs, one professor argued for more involvement on a reactive stance. They argued, “We should be focusing on education rehabilitation much more than we do in prisons.” Although speaking on the prison industry as a whole, the professor’s remarks signify a need to understand that current criminal justice system models are falling short of their intended purpose. Open access for more students could, as an administrator mentioned, “Give us so much more than just lowering the recidivism rate.” The interviewees looked beyond traditional measures of recidivism to understand the overall need for these programs on a more qualitative understanding. As one professor mentions:

I mean I realize for political reasons it’s easier to sell something to the taxpayers or to the general public if you say look this is going to make these people commit fewer crimes and that’s good for you because you don’t have to pay to lock them up and that means there are going to be fewer victims and all that is well and good but to me...I think it’s more about the fact that we are bringing education to this mass population of untapped resources.

To put it frankly reaching these “untapped resources,” as this professor stated, would allow for greater effects than just lowering recidivism. Neglected persons like this are all across state and federal prisons, waiting to be engaged by enthusiastic college and university faculty. Beyond the unwillingness to participate in criminal lifestyles post release, educating these students would

introduce groups of individuals with new and fresh perspectives that could assist and contribute in a plethora of ways.

In other situations, it was the fact that these incarcerated students were so far removed from traditional campus activities that begged a change. Since students were not able to partake in certain traditional student lifestyles and correctional facilities often shield the view of these prisoners from the general public, the students exist in their own bubble, detached from mainstream society. One administrator mentioned that this is a current work in progress, saying, “What we’re working on right now, and what were [going to] continue focus on is making these programs less invisible, less removed, less [isolated], and more an inherent part of our community.”

One frustration expressed by a select few interviewees was with the reality that prison education programs, like much of higher education, often rely upon adjunct lecturers. Adjunct positions, generally, are marked by very low wages, few—if any—benefits, and job insecurity, often involving per-class or per-semester contracts (Trolley, 2018). Given the amount of effort and work involved in teaching within a carceral setting, some professors found this dynamic to border on the exploitative. As one professor urged, “Try as much as possible not to build your castle on the backs of labor that isn’t compensated very well, which is what adjunct labor is.” They continued, “I just wish it could be funded more fairly.” They subsequently suggested that one way to tip the scales to a fairer approach would be to “compensate [the faculty] for professional development,” such as attending conferences, workshops, and the like. Such activities can prove beneficial not only to the faculty, but to their on-campus and incarcerated students, as well as the colleges and universities at which they work.

Notwithstanding the lists of suggested improvements, many came with limitations. In correctional settings, even the smallest changes require tremendous effort. Considerations must be given to facility and security demands, college or university needs and requirements, and the realities of implementing changes within these constraints. For some interviewees, they acknowledged that the requests were unreasonable in these types of teaching environments: “Ideally, access to the internet would be great but I don’t think that’s ever gonna happen.” For other interviewees, it was a matter of logistics with student access. As one interviewee mentioned:

We would like in every one of our facilities is if they could house our students together because then they can interact with each other, study together, create these study groups and things like that.

These dorm-style settings would permit easier access to gather students, lessening the wait times for collecting students for class time, and generate an academic climate within the secluded area, fostering intellectual developments.

For some, improving postsecondary education programs seemed unrealistic. As one administrator who also teaches classes explained, “Sometimes it feels our reach has been a little farther than our grasp.” As another administrator mentioned, there would need to be willingness to work alongside other colleges or universities to build these postsecondary education programs in prison. They admitted, “We know [that] they’re not all going to be [our university] students. That would be arrogant to think that. So, we work with other colleges and states.” This administrator accepted that their university could not reach every incarcerated student, so they expressed a desire for universities and colleges to collaborate on the development and maintenance of such programs.

Despite significant challenges—including a colossal amount of leg-work from all stakeholders—most interviewees were still optimistic about the prospects of advancing postsecondary education. One administrator, when speaking on ambitions explained;

From an imaginary world, I would love to have [correctional postsecondary] programs all over the state. Now that I'm in an administrative role, even the challenge of moving across the street, which seems like it should [be] very simple has been an incredible challenge. You're dealing with a different institution [and] a different administration. Also, the difference in being in a maximum-security prison versus being in a medium [security provides challenges as well].

Opening access to the programs in place or simple alterations can prove to be logistical nightmares. These are not changes that can be simply made, nor will they always prove successful. There is excitement and ambition within these programs, but interviewees expressed caution.

Other professors and administrators did not shy away from recognizing the strides already made during their quest to improve their college or university's postsecondary programs. Though they admitted that the path towards enhancing these programs was littered with scuffles, both internally and externally, they acknowledged the progress made thus far. One administrator noted:

It's prison. Prisons are bureaucracies. The prison administration is encouraged to make a commonsense decision based on what's in front of them. So, yes everything takes a long time to get done. Any request takes a long time. I mean, it took a couple of years for us to get computers approved, but we did.

Although there was pushback at first, the program was able to negotiate certain terms that would prove beneficial to the long-term needs that advance the curricula. These seemingly small victories are a welcoming sign of compromise found from both the university or college and the correctional institution in order to provide a more rounded education. In heeding this type of

rapport, another administrator explained, “We’re a guest in the [correctional] facility.” In being a guest in someone’s home, there are certain expectations and behaviors that must be followed; the same would then apply to these types of programs. This was not lost on the interviewees. One administrator illustrated the acceptance of these rules rather plainly, “Our number one rule with the [Department of Corrections] is [that] we’re guests in your house. [On] any given day, they can say ‘Everybody, you’re gone. You [can] never come back.’” By being cognizant of these fragile relationships, administrators and faculty are able to continue these programs inside of prisons.

## **Conclusion**

Postsecondary education programs do not function similar to traditional college courses. Aside from the logistics of managing courses for on-campus students, faculty and administrators must maneuver around systematic barriers found in correctional facilities. For this, it takes dedicated staff that is willing to both inspire students and remain flexible in times of uncertainty. though these professors and administrators expressed enthusiasm and willingness to continue these programs, they did discuss possible changes and improvements that would assist in running these programs more efficiently and smoothly. Administrators and faculty both commented on the changes postsecondary prison education programs brought in a plethora of ways. All interviewees expressed the ways in which these programs had affected their daily lives and comprehension of the world. They had disclosed the ways in which working with incarcerated students had changed their outlooks on life, even providing reassurance and affirmations that their jobs held meaning.

Some interviewees portrayed how these programs had changed the climate of the entire correctional facility in which they operated. Beyond recidivism rates, interviewees highlighted

the positive effects postsecondary programs had on their students and remarked upon finding this motivating and fulfilling. Still, many interviewees believed that their postsecondary programs, and postsecondary education at large, could stand to be improved. Calls for improvement ranged from the need to expand access to postsecondary prison programs for more incarcerated individuals to desires to create a more cohesive and collegiate atmosphere for incarcerated students. Some even suggested ways in which program logistics could be changed in order provide more course offerings, hire more diverse faculty, and treat program faculty more equitably. From some of the interviewees, they had described the process as needing ongoing improvements for continuation. Mentions of the uncertainty of being inside of prisons loomed over the need for general program developments because these professors and administrators were virtually at the whim of the correctional department they were affiliated with. Even beyond these needed changes, administrators and faculty members all recognized that these programs are only in a pilot phase and that the future of them is still unclear.

In general, success can be calculated in various ways. As these participants suggest, success becomes more than just looking through the lens of recidivism and graduation rates. They admit their ideals of successful programs involve student and facility transformation as well as environmental changes within the correctional facility, as emphasized by one administrator. In order to continue, programs must meet the needs of the incarcerated students while committing to the overall goals of the correctional facility and college or university. This becomes complex when attempting to gratify the wishes of the different stakeholders involved, but participants mentioned eagerness to accept the challenges in order to continue these programs. These programs are complex in their own and require dedication from each member involved.





### **Chapter Six: Discussion and Policy Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the postsecondary programs within correctional facilities. In 2015, the Department of Education approved 67 colleges and universities to participate in the Second Chance Pell pilot program. Although a pilot study based upon fifteen in-depth interviews with administrators and faculty of six of those colleges and universities, this research lays the foundation for future research. What was found through these open-ended interviews was that there is still a need for improvement. Should these programs continue, interviewees argued, there is room for enhancing them in terms of more accessibility in educational material, corresponding with students, and tightening relationships with the correctional facilities they teach inside of. More importantly, there is substantial work that needs to be done in the sphere of prison reform in order to continue these programs, but also to garner true success for these incarcerated students upon their release back into society.

These programs cannot stand alone; they must be connected with institutional and legal changes that will allow for these incarcerated individuals to become successful. Success reaches well beyond receiving an education. Students must be well equipped with the tools necessary to smoothly transition back into society. Unwavering dedication to reentry efforts and the eradication of outdated felony disenfranchisement laws are steppingstones to assist and assure these individuals can confidently reenter society. Systematic changes must span a timeline beginning while students are incarcerated by refining postsecondary programs with more flexible admission requirements and follow with restructuring or removing barriers to reentry upon release. In addition to the changes, there are risks associated with teaching inside of correctional

facilities that must be considered. For example, some risks involved breaching rules of conduct by becoming too familiar with incarcerated students, faculty turnover, or expulsion of these postsecondary programs considering the Second Chance Pell grants are only a pilot study. Other risks are more personal unintended consequences like exhaustion or depression.

**“We Should be Focusing on Education Rehabilitation Much More Than We Do in Prisons.”**

Several key findings from this study merit further discussion. To begin with, the realm of postsecondary prison education programs holds extreme limitations. Some of these are due to the environment itself—the correctional facility and security issues—while some deals with the students’ eligibility and their abilities. Incarcerated students, as mentioned earlier in the chapter three, are often adult style learners. Adult learners are recognized as those who have not been exposed to traditional learning methods for an extensive period of time. What this means is that there is added support that must precede these college courses in order for students to remain successful throughout their academic careers. If there are no remedial style courses at the forefront of the admissions process, only a small batch of students will then be able to participate. This leaves out a considerable number of students who could show potential but are unable to partake in these postsecondary courses due to grammatical, or limited comprehension, shortcomings. As one interviewee mentions, the admissions bar is “arbitrary,” meaning that there may not be a clearly defined threshold for admitting or rejecting students. Therefore, by accepting students who fall just under the acceptance criteria, they may very well be able to persevere through these courses. Additionally, students are restricted access because of correctional facility or Department of Education restrictions.

Pell Grants restrictions prohibiting those serving life sentences from participating should be lifted. There are swaths of individuals who are not able to participate in these programs. At least a handful of interviewees expressed their frustration of the inability to reach that population. Again, this removes eligible scholars and possible mentors to the general prison population by denying access due to length of incarceration. By enlarging the body of acceptable candidates, this could develop agents of change within the prison system. Empowering these individuals with a quality postsecondary education could change the conditions of these correctional facilities. As one administrator mentioned, a warden from a particular facility overheard incarcerated individuals exchanging philosophical and historical perceptions “instead of talking trash about who was going to make a shank.”

Ultimately, postsecondary education programs wield power in fostering intellectual growth and planting seeds of change. Change within these settings has the power to affect communities in ways never imagined before. Though ambitious, if the majority of incarcerated individuals were to receive some sort of advanced education, the benefits could reach beyond prison walls. In placing focus on constructive outlets like education, the “knock down effects,” as one participant mentioned, could encourage the individual’s family members and contacts in the free world to pursue a degree. This was seen with one participant describing an incarcerated student inspiring their daughter to attend a university after learning of his dedication and graduation. In other words, prison education does not stop at the prison gates, but could facilitate change in communities where incarceration is prevalent and spans generations.

Beyond molding intellectuals on the outside, expanding eligibility could bring far more meaning to those individuals who would be restricted from enrolling due to their sentences. Again, individuals serving long and indeterminate sentences, or even life sentences must pay for

these courses out of pocket, drastically reducing the possibility of ever being admitted into these postsecondary programs. If granted the opportunity, these lifers would hold immense power in reconstructing narratives and entire thought processes for countless individuals within the prison system. Because they will not be afforded the opportunity at release, these individuals are of significance in persuading the atmosphere of prisons. Furthermore, they can tutor other incarcerated students on the same materials, continuing the cycle of education. One interviewee discussed the possibility of training lifers to become tutors in order to mentor those currently enrolled incarcerated students. Benefits such as this hold influence in not only the students' lives but can also assist on the burden of the faculty members that participate in postsecondary programs. Having students who have learned the material, but are also a constant in the prison environment can decrease the already frustrating burden that faculty members face due to teaching inside of a correctional facility. More than this, it brings a positive change to the atmosphere in the prisons by creating pockets of intellect throughout the facility. Contrary to popular belief, those serving lengthy or lifelong sentences rarely misbehave because they have "nothing to lose" (Cunningham & Sorensen, 2006). Alternatively, data suggests that these groups' cognitive structures mature and advance throughout their lives in keeping their "in-prison network" (Dawes, 2009). Relationships built within a mentoring program could bring about those ideal prison environments that were discussed in chapter five regarding prison yard conversations. Accessing postsecondary education could intensify their journey and arouse entire correctional facilities in the direction of improvements in conduct and rehabilitation.

**“Try as Much as You Can Not to Build Your Castle on the Backs of Labor That Isn’t Compensated Very Well.”**

Faculty and administrators are the driving force behind the quality of these postsecondary programs. If there is no real commitment and enthusiasm by those individuals, education becomes ineffective and irrelevant. These gatekeepers of influence and knowledge hold immeasurable power in creating literary and scientific geniuses within these programs. Their motivation to participate in these programs comes in different forms. Some interviewees discussed theological influence to give back in a sense, while others found that by offering an education to those who would normally be unable to as a therapeutic and life changing process. In order to secure dedicated professors and administrators, changes must occur.

To begin with, as some interviewees mentioned, a disproportionate number of graduate students and lecturers are the ones teaching within these programs. Lecturers and graduate students are notoriously underpaid and overworked, which forces the question of the importance of these programs to these teaching institutions. Adjunct faculty and graduate students produce similar content in the form of curriculum, however, are compensated far lower than those more established professors. Despite the fact that administrators of these programs insisted that these postsecondary programs mirrored those traditional courses as much as they could, differences could be found in who is actually teaching these courses. It can be argued that these postsecondary programs take a larger toll on the well-being of faculty members in keeping up with the educational, emotional, and mental demands unique to teaching within correctional settings. These settings are not similar to those found on campus. Mental disturbances and delayed access to courses and students strains the abilities of these faculty members. In extreme cases, this also discourages faculty from returning to these settings. If colleges and universities are not willing to provide incentives for teaching these postsecondary programs, valuable faculty members who hold potential for changing lives and reaching students would be excluded from

this. Exploitation of adjunct faculty and graduate students in the name of altruism tarnishes the true value and intended purpose of these postsecondary programs. Participants of this study seldom mentioned associate professors or those on a tenure track teaching, sometimes because of no fault of their own.

If these postsecondary are able to find interested professors, those ones are often bogged down with the demands of their own schedules. As mentioned by one administrator in chapter five, for some faculty members in the sciences, they are “running their own business.” This “business” must keep up with the commands of research grants, courses, and research students, leaving little to no time to take on any other duties. If professors in these types of departments were permitted to exchange one of their on-campus courses for one inside of the correctional facility, they would be able to partake in these programs that they have shown excitement for.

Both faculty and students are deprived of meaningful experiences with one another by limiting the amount of tenure and established professors who are able to participate in these postsecondary prison education programs. Students are shortchanged in the incapability to master subjects under tenured professors who are known for having ample research and publication expertise. Established professors are experts in their teaching fields, which allows them to more efficiently convey course material, granting incarcerated students the advantage of understanding material through perspectives they are unable to with graduate teaching students and adjunct faculty. Inversely, prominent faculty are disadvantaged in the sense that they are unable to work alongside individuals who possess unique understandings of life, which would ultimately diversify the experiences of these professors.

**“We’re a Guest in a Correctional Facility.”**

As mentioned in chapter five concerning the futures and successes of these programs, and administrator remarked on the idea that these postsecondary education programs were not permanent fixtures within the correctional facilities. These programs are subject to removal at any time for any reasons deemed necessary to maintain the functioning of these facilities. At the time of this research, none of the sites included herein had been removed from the correctional facilities they taught in. For the majority of the administrators interviewed, their relationships with the state's Department of Corrections was cordial and receiving. Those in higher positions of power within that department were generally welcoming of postsecondary education programs in their prisons. However, moving closer to the facility, the correctional staff were not always receptive of these programs. As chapter four suggests, correctional officers and those closer in contact with incarcerated students did not always greet these programs with enthusiasm. Instances of carelessness and resentment run rampant through correctional facilities in connection with postsecondary programs, furthering the frustrations found while teaching within these settings.

Again, several interviewees mentioned correctional facility occurrences that would cause dramatic delays in providing an education to these incarcerated students. One interviewee insinuated the correctional officers "purposely [will not] release the [incarcerated students] to go to class." If there is no cooperation for these programs within the correctional facility, it will become increasingly difficult, near impossible, to accomplish the goals set forth by the university to equip incarcerated students with postsecondary education. If correctional staff are hindering or, often times, stalling the incarcerated student's path towards collegiate success, then these programs will not take flight. Students within these programs are already burdened with inadequate access to research databases and supplementary material. They are not able to



intellectually profit from the vast databases of research that are at the disposal of traditional students, placing them further behind in their academic journeys. Instilling sensitivity training and more compassionate correctional officers in direct contact with these programs could completely change the students' capabilities, the prison atmosphere, and the experiences of these faculty members.

### **“We Still Have ‘Check the Box’”**

Postsecondary education offers second chances on broadening an incarcerated student's education but fall short in ensuring these individuals will be successful upon release. As one administrator mentions, even degrees are not enough to assist these individuals who will one day see freedom. They criticize the need for structural change to actually prove that these students can become successful. They state, “We still have check the box, so when they are applying for a job, they're [going to] have to check the box because that legislation has not changed.” Many states still require individuals who fill out rental, employment, or other types of applications to disclose their previously felonies, ultimately “checking the box” which annihilates their abilities to be seriously considered. Still, an associate or bachelor's degree often times isn't enough to convince likely employers or landlords of their reformed status. Some states even restrict voting access, public housing, public assistance, and the ability to adopt children (Legal Action Center, 2004). When these incarcerated students return to society, their character is questioned in sectors of employment, occupational and recreational licensing, voter access, housing, among a multitude of other restrictions (National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, 2020). Education becomes just one piece of a larger societal issue.

These educational feats do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are part of a shared ecosystem requiring widespread dismantling of systematic barriers that seek to disenfranchise

formerly incarcerated individuals. College degrees are seemingly meaningless if formerly incarcerated individuals are restricted from housing, employment, and other necessities to survive. Dr. Leyla Acaroglu speaks of a type of “systems thinking” that is required to solve problems. With this type of thinking, Dr. Acaroglu claims that we must begin to look at the systemic issues in a linear fashion rather than singular, unrelated events to treat the causes of these problems at hand (Acaroglu, 2016). In stepping back and training the focus on the larger systemic issues of incarceration, only then can the impacts and the necessary changes needed be understood. Providing postsecondary education to incarcerated individuals is just one building block of a complex and, often hard to maneuver, system.

Although postsecondary education in carceral settings does provide some leverage to individuals returning to the free world, there is still groundwork that needs to be done in order to amplify their chances towards success. Policy makers and other legal actors must consider the ramifications of these punitive laws and restrictions placed on individuals returning home from prison. Alignment across various government and social institutions could provide meaningful change for these incarcerated students upon release. For postsecondary programs to accurately be labeled as successful, environmental and social actions must be driven further to ensure equality and access to education from the very start of a person’s academic career. Inner city schools, in particular, are known for insufficiently preparing students for postsecondary education. Public school systems like those in Detroit, Michigan, have come under fire for being poorly managed and denying k-12 students “access to literacy” (Gary v. Snyder, 2018). In cases like these, students are handicapped from childhood onward by being denied a quality education.

The United Nation’s “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” asserts that “everyone has the right to education.” However, the United States has not successfully put this right into

practice. Access to education is not a fundamental human right under the U.S. Constitution (San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, 1972). Due to the scapegoat of security issues, Department of Corrections across the country take this a step further and declare that they are not required to provide access to educational materials or adequate learning experiences. Removing these barriers and understanding that education promotes dignity and a base frame for human growth prompts human capital and, as research indicates, reduces crime substantially (Oakford, P. Brumfield, C. Goldvare, C. L. Tatum, DiZerega, M. & Patrick, F., 2019).

If this preemptive approaches in the form of remodeling public school systems to allow for meaningful access to education cannot take place, then reasonable measures like pre-college courses and administering supplementary materials during the incarcerated student's postsecondary career need to be enacted to assist incarcerated individuals who will one day be returning citizens. Blanket discrimination on housing access and government assistance diminishes the capability of successfully reintegrating back into society. Further, mandatory background checks on employment applications discredits the accomplishments of those otherwise qualified returning citizens and disables their ability to find profitable employment. For those whose crimes are not connected to the types of employment they seek, they are automatically excluded based on their past criminal history. If this is the case, then education cannot stand alone to enable these types of learners the opportunity to desist crime and live meaningful and law-abiding lives. If every metaphorical door is padlocked due to a person's past convictions, then rehabilitation in the form of education is virtually ineffective.

## **Conclusion**

As the literature on postsecondary education within carceral spaces demonstrates, these programs present peculiar challenges. Challenges arise throughout the entirety of these

programs, but also trail the lives of those who return to society. Meaningful changes and reform must begin before the person is incarcerated and continue after their subsequent release. Access to education ought to be a fundamental right that all persons can benefit from. Not only this, but those who are administering and teaching these programs require fair and equal compensation in order to effectively do so. Abuse and manipulation of adjunct professors and graduate teaching students that are willing to work within these stress inducing environments will ultimately drain these programs and become fruitless.

Legislative reform designed to annihilate any chances of success in the guise of consequences of conviction must be addressed as well. Education is one piece of a taxing puzzle that requires involvement from social agencies across the board. In order to penetrate these barriers, policymakers and legislative actors must be compelled to change the current narrative and climate on punishment and incarceration. Disassembling barriers to reentry like those found in housing, food and monetary assistance, employment, among many others is just the first step in reestablishing human dignity and safeguarding the future of returning citizens. Each individual has a fundamental right to an education, but education is just the tipping point in a larger discussion on prison reform.

**Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire**

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself and this institution.
2. Could you please describe your role in this program?
  - a. How long have you been a part of this program?
3. What inspired this institution to apply for a Second Chance Pell Grant?
  - a. Could you describe the initial steps taken to implement this program?
    - i. Were there any initial difficulties?
      1. If so, what were they, and how did you overcome these difficulties?
  - b. What was the rationale in the number of recipients chosen to participate in this program?
    - i. The type of degree/certificate awarded?
    - ii. Class size?
    - iii. Disciplinary consequences?
      1. Are students ever able to reapply if they are not accepted the first time they apply?
4. What inspired you to join this program?
  - a. Do you still hold these same beliefs?
    - i. Have they changed over time?
5. What type of courses do you teach?

- a. Are they similar to the degree requirement courses taught to the on-campus students?
6. Are there restrictions on whom you can allow in your course(s)?
  - a. How do you prepare for these delays?
  - b. How do you provide for textbooks and other materials brought into the classrooms?
7. What, if any, differences do you notice between traditional on-campus students and incarcerated students?
8. What has inspired these students the most?
  - a. The least?
9. What is the collective relationship among the students?
  - a. Is there competition between the students?
    - i. Does this lead to larger issues?
10. What is the level of involvement and commitment of these students?
  - a. How does this progress or regress throughout the course?
  - b. How, if at all, does the correctional setting impact the classroom environment/student learning?
  - c. Are there barriers/setbacks to teaching in these settings?
    - i. If so, what are they?
  - d. Are there any noticeable dispositions or preconceived notions in the way the program is taught?
    - i. In interactions between you and the incarcerated students?
    - ii. In the student's views of themselves?

11. What is the perceived opinion of correctional staff of these programs?
  - a. Are they able to participate in these programs?
12. How do you define student success?
  - a. What do you imagine the success rate to be?
  - b. What is the overall effect/change you have noticed with these cohorts?
  - c. What types of additional support must you provide for these inmates?
  - d. Are there study groups, forms of tutoring, etc.?
13. How do you define program success?
14. What have been some of the difficulties, if any, in maintaining the program?
  - a. What sorts of administrative issues has this program experienced?
  - b. Are there alternate routes this university would have taken given another opportunity to start from the beginning?
15. How, if at all, could this program be improved?
  - a. For the students?
  - b. For the administration and faculty?
  - c. For the correctional facilities?
16. What do you see as the future of your university's participation in this program?
  - a. Your participation?
17. How does this type of teaching affect your personal life?
  - a. What do you enjoy most about participating in this program? Least?
  - b. What struggles do you, personally, face with working with an incarcerated population?

- c. Have you had any personal difficulties with teaching inside of correctional institutions?
18. What, if any, suggestions do you have for future universities considering participation in the Pell Grant Program?
19. Is there anything else that we did not discuss that you would like to share?





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