

Identifying and Scaling Higher Education in Prison Programmatic Resources



Identifying and Scaling Higher Education in Prison Programmatic Resources is a 3-year initiative managed by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) in partnership with the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and Jobs for the Future. The goal of the initiative is to identify resources developed and used by experienced higher education in prison (HEP) programs or intermediary organizations and facilitate a resource refinement process that maximizes the usability and transferability of the resources for the broader field.

Why This Initiative Matters

In the United States, more than 85% of the incarcerated population will return to their communities once they complete their sentences (Nellis & Barry, 2025). Meaningful employment, aligned with an individual's interests and skills and connected to economic mobility and financial security, is crucial for reentry success. Today, 68% of well-paying jobs require some postsecondary education, and that percentage is only increasing. By 2031, 72% of all jobs will require postsecondary education or training (Carnevale et al., 2023). Despite these facts, fewer than 5% of people who are currently incarcerated are enrolled in a HEP program today (Nam, 2023). With the reinstatement of Pell Grants for incarcerated students, there is an opportunity to expand HEP access to more students. This initiative aims to provide intensive technical assistance to a cohort of grantees to support the refinement and scaling of effective resources for program leaders to design and implement robust HEP programming.

What the Initiative Offers

Eleven grantees were selected through a rigorous proposal process, focusing on resources that address the most pressing needs in the HEP field and have the potential for broader application. The initiative offers technical assistance support to grantees, centered around a dynamic community of practice and tailored coaching. Through this customized support, grantees will be empowered to leverage evidence in the ongoing refinement and scaling of their resources to the broader HEP field. Grantee resources are organized across four topic areas identified by the field as critical for supporting quality HEP programs. Their resources reflect a shared commitment to collaboration, continuous improvement, and strengthening the field.

Grantee Supports

Grantee Community of Practice

Virtual and in-person meetings to calibrate on TA best practices, collectively problem solve, and solicit input on resource refinements

Generate and Use Evidence

Supporting grantees in generating and using evidence for continuous improvement of grantee resources

Intensive Coaching Support

Customized coaching and technical assistance support to refine resources



Systems Alignment

Resources supporting Prison Education Program leadership (HEP program, academic institution, and corrections agency) in making strategic decisions and streamlining processes



Student Preparation

Preprogram enrollment resources that ensure students are fully aware, informed, and prepared to succeed in their postsecondary education, within the carceral environment



Program Implementation

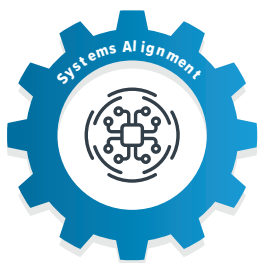
Resources that facilitate efficient program delivery, support educators to deliver higher education that reflects the specific needs of students, and intentionally integrate career exploration and planning opportunities into the program



Transfer, Degree Completion, and Workforce Success

Resources that facilitate successful student transfer and degree completion, connect students to on-campus and community-based academic and professional supports and networks, and aid successful workforce transitions

Selected Grantees and Resources for Scaling



SYSTEMS ALIGNMENT

- **Loyola University New Orleans** | Refining a toolkit to help HEP and PEP administrators identify reporting requirements and coordinate data collection practices across colleges, corrections partners, and state consortia
- **Unlocked Labs** | Developing a digital toolkit to guide the assessment of technology needs, navigate Department of Corrections processes, and integrate secure technology into educational programs
- **Possibility Lab at UC Berkeley and Mount Tamalpais College** | Refining a participatory research model and supporting data collection tools for program evaluation and alumni tracking



STUDENT PREPARATION

- **St. Louis University Prison Education Program (SLU PEP)** | Enhancing a 1-year college preparation program curriculum that prepares students to make informed decisions about postsecondary education and develop essential study, research, and writing skills
- **University of St. Mary (USM) Prison Education Program (PEP)** | Refining a student success survey and implementation guide to help HEP program administrators assess the unique challenges students who are incarcerated face related to their physical needs, safety, sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization



PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

- **Emerson Prison Initiative (EPI) at Emerson College** | Refining a five-part program implementation toolkit — including student and faculty handbooks, orientation guides, a trauma-informed teaching module, and tutor training materials — to support consistent HEP program delivery
- **Resilience Education** | Enhancing instructor training materials to support the integration of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices in the prison classroom
- **Restorative Justice Lab (RJ Lab) at the University of North Alabama** | Enhancing a toolkit that fosters student engagement and retention through a restorative justice approach, with strategies for conflict prevention, relationship-building, and collaborative learning



TRANSFER, DEGREE COMPLETION, AND WORKFORCE SUCCESS

- **Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, Inc.** | Refining a toolkit that offers guidance on Fair Chance hiring policies and practices, supporting employers, reentry organizations, career services, and HEP programs in promoting workforce success for HEP students and alumni
- **University System of Maryland** | Refining a reentry services roadmap and peer navigator model to provide HEP students with in-prison support, structured reentry planning, and formalized post-release peer assistance
- **Restorative Justice Initiative (RJI) at Pennsylvania State University** | Refining a reentry simulation toolkit designed to raise awareness of the systemic barriers faced by formerly incarcerated students and foster cultural change among HEP programs, reentry providers, and community partners

Join Us in Making a Difference | Ascendium and AIR are working collaboratively to advance educational opportunities within HEP programs. Through this partnership, we aim to support personal growth, reduce recidivism, and contribute to stronger, more resilient communities.

Learn More and Get Involved | AIR.ORG/HEPResourceCohort

Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., & Quinn, M. C. (2023). *After everything: Projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-National-Report.pdf>

Nam, J. (2023, July 11). *Prison education statistics: Facts and statistics*. BestColleges. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/prison-education-statistics/>

Nellis, A., & Barry, C. (2025, January 8). *A matter of life: The scope and impact of life and long term imprisonment in the United States*. The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/a-matter-of-life-the-scope-and-impact-of-life-and-long-term-imprisonment-in-the-united-states/>



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