PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Supporting Practitioners in Scaling Higher Education in Prison (HEP)

Insights From Research and Practice

Nathan Navejas, Ellen Cushing, and Carolyn Corea, *American Institutes for Research®*
Jenna Dreier, *Jobs for the Future*

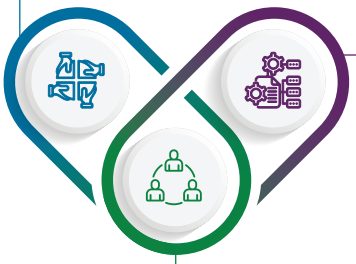
Introduction

This brief is part of a series sharing key findings from landscaping activities conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®). Our findings aim to build on historical and ongoing efforts across the higher education in prison (HEP) field to define high-quality programming and guide effective program implementation. We combine research and practitioner insights to highlight the shared challenges, priorities, and resource needs that practitioners face when implementing HEP programs. Our landscaping activities included:

- a **literature scan** to identify critical challenges in designing and implementing effective HEP programs and supporting HEP and similarly situated students in postsecondary transitions, degree completion, and workforce success;
- **virtual focus groups** with HEP program leaders and HEP alumni to identify their most urgent priorities and the programmatic and technical assistance resources to support practitioners' efforts to design, deliver, scale, and continuously improve HEP programs; and
- **reviews and consultations** with HEP subject matter experts to contextualize our findings to resonate with the field.

Each brief in this series presents the findings from these activities, which surfaced four critical priority areas: (1) systems alignment; (2) student preparation; (3) program implementation; and (4) transfer, degree completion, and workforce success. These areas informed the design of the Identifying and Scaling Higher Education in Prison Programmatic Resources Initiative, which currently supports 11 HEP program grantees in refining and scaling field-tested resources aligned to one of these four areas of need. (See Graphic: Supports for Initiative Grantees.)

Supports for Initiative Grantees



Grantee Community of Practice
Virtual and in-person meetings to calibrate on technical assistance 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.

Program Implementation

This brief summarizes AIR's key findings on what practitioners in the HEP field are asking for to implement high-quality programs. We anticipate that these findings may also be helpful to oversight entities as they prepare to conduct Best Interest Determinations to ensure that the HEP programs that receive Pell Grant funding meet federal standards.

This brief highlights the following practitioner priorities for implementing high-quality HEP programs:

1. **Build a team of faculty and staff, including individuals with lived experience,** who can effectively navigate carceral settings and teach and support students in a carceral environment.
2. **Develop solutions to common programmatic disruptions** in partnership with corrections agencies to limit the impact of disruptions on students and promote consistency in program delivery long-term.
3. **Foster an inclusive learning environment that meets the unique needs of students who are incarcerated** through inclusive practices, appropriate class sizes, relatable content, and opportunities to connect with their peers.
4. **Provide comprehensive student support services** to facilitate academic success and progress toward credential and degree completion.

FINDING 1

Build a team of faculty and staff, including individuals with lived experience

Employing committed faculty and staff, including individuals with lived experience, and providing comprehensive training to counter biases, navigate carceral settings, and foster effective engagement with students is crucial for promoting student success, engagement, and self-efficacy.

To build and support a prepared and committed team, HEP programs are seeking resources that do the following:

- **Support the hiring of faculty and staff with a demonstrated understanding of and commitment** to the program's mission and to serving students who are incarcerated.
- **Employ individuals with lived experiences of incarceration and HEP alumni** as teaching assistants, advisers, and tutors who can provide authentic guidance to current students and serve as role models.
- **Offer comprehensive trauma-informed and culturally responsive training for faculty, staff, and HEP administrators** to better understand and navigate the unique culture, dynamics, and challenges of carceral environments and address potential biases that may affect how they perceive, interact with, and teach students. (See Resource Spotlight: Resilience Education.)
- **Address the challenges and extra workload placed on faculty and staff,** alleviate capacity constraints (including course load), provide pedagogical support, and facilitate community.
- **Leverage and support partnerships with teaching and learning centers** to support continuous faculty learning.

> *"Some of the professional development for faculty has been...about trauma-informed pedagogy... we get together physically in a retreat and have formerly incarcerated students who are on our advisory board come and explain what it's like to be a student in a prison... And I do think that's an important part of faculty development."*
>
> — Focus group participant

FINDING 2

Develop solutions to common programmatic disruptions in partnership with corrections agencies

Implementing on-site coordination, advocating for safety-compatible program solutions, and maintaining alignment with facility schedules can help minimize conflicts and interruptions and ensure consistent access to educational programming for students.

To avoid disruptions in programming, HEP programs are seeking resources that do the following:

- **Foster collaboration with the Department of Corrections (DOC) to operate HEP programs** in compliance with the prison's safety and security requirements while maintaining educational continuity (e.g., providing students with access to technology in a manner that aligns with security policies) and creating a student experience that is comparable to that of an on-campus experience.
- **Support course delivery with an on-site HEP program coordinator** who can build relationships with DOC staff to streamline communication and resolve matters efficiently and comprehensively.
- **Offer adaptive strategies to systematic program operation disruptions that interrupt students' reliable access to class** (e.g., lockdowns and scheduling conflicts, such as work and meals).

"All of a sudden, they're on lockdown for something...now they can't access their tablets or their docking stations and they can't continue...they've lost 6 weeks of potential time spent in their course. So those are just the things that we're always just dealing with and trying to navigate that make things really difficult programmatically."

— Focus group participant



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at Resilience Education is refining a set of instructor training modules designed to help HEP programs equip their instructors with the tools and knowledge necessary to provide high-quality education within carceral settings. The training covers the complexities of the prison environment, the impact of trauma on learning, and the cultural considerations essential for building meaningful connections with students. It is designed for HEP programs seeking to strengthen instructor preparation, improve retention, and support student success.

FINDING 3

Foster an inclusive learning environment that meets the unique needs of students who are incarcerated

Emphasizing inclusive instructional practices, thoughtful classroom sizes, relatable content, and peer collaboration enhances academic alignment, reduces student anxiety, and creates a community where diverse learning needs, perspectives, and experiences drive deeper learning and meaningful connections.

To foster learning environments characterized by these factors, HEP programs are seeking resources that do the following:

- **Support engagement with postsecondary institutions and leaders to be more intentional about coursework scaffolding and eliminate unnecessary prerequisites** that create barriers to student progression, thereby fostering a more inclusive program structure;
- **Foster peer collaboration** by providing opportunities for students to connect with one another in and outside of the classroom, such as through peer support networks, extracurricular activities, or even student-based housing units;
- **Connect course content and activities to the unique experiences of HEP students** to encourage greater student engagement and deeper understanding of course concepts; and
- **Implement best practices in instructional design for carceral settings** (e.g., inclusive teaching, universal design, working with adult learners) while still maintaining alignment to institutional standards and academic programs. (See Resource Spotlight: Restorative Justice Lab.)

> *"Inside there are students who are trained, meaning they take a pedagogy course, and they become what are known as writing and math fellows. There's peer tutoring that goes on amongst the students and they're a very strong resource for the students."*
>
> — Focus group participant



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at the Restorative Justice Lab at the University of North Alabama is refining a community-building toolkit designed to help HEP programs develop and operationalize strategies for conflict prevention and resolution, relationship building, and collaborative learning. The toolkit is organized around six modules: building a diverse cohort, strengthening relationships, managing conflict, modeling accountability, creating opportunities for continuous student engagement, and developing and sustaining programmatic and institutional relationships. It includes ready-to-use materials such as rubrics, protocols, structured exercises, and facilitation guides for programs seeking to implement intentional community-building practices in correctional environments.

FINDING 4

Provide comprehensive student support services

Providing comprehensive support services, including academic advising, tutoring, digital literacy training, and transition planning, is essential for helping students navigate challenges and successfully continue their education and employment pathway post-release.

To establish comprehensive student support systems, HEP programs are seeking resources that do the following:

- **Provide sustained, strategic, and personalized advising throughout the program** that addresses barriers to continuing enrollment and academic success, uses degree-mapping tools to assess and document student progress, and builds momentum by pairing required courses with areas of interest.
- **Offer ongoing support to students that builds on foundational college readiness topics** introduced during orientation—such as goal setting, study habits, degree requirements, and available student supports.
- **Offer ample tutoring opportunities** with faculty, staff, and peers (e.g., informal peer tutoring helps students navigate challenging assignments) as well as the time and space to study (see Resource Spotlight: Emerson Prison Initiative).
- **Help students develop digital literacy skills** throughout their education to support their academic success and prepare them for future education and employment pathways.
- **Establish foundational transition planning activities,** including a course focused on assessing education and employment pathways, and help students understand the requirements of and begin to prepare for a successful transfer to a free-world campus, completing their degrees, or entering the workforce.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at Emerson Prison Initiative is refining their HEP Program Implementation Toolkit, a set of five resources to support consistent HEP program delivery: a student handbook template, a faculty handbook template, a facilitator guide for faculty and teaching assistant orientation, a trauma-informed teaching module, and peer tutor program training materials. These standardized templates and training resources address critical operational needs, from onboarding personnel to establishing clear expectations and implementing trauma-informed pedagogical approaches. They are designed as practical, adaptable tools for HEP programs seeking to strengthen their infrastructure and support systems.

Call to Action

Building committed teams, developing solutions to programmatic disruptions, creating empowering learning environments, and providing comprehensive student support services are essential steps in fostering student engagement and strengthening the quality and rigor of HEP programs.

To explore additional practices and strategies for strengthening HEP programming, check out the three accompanying briefs in this series. They provide early insights into the remaining areas of need for HEP practitioners—systems alignment; student preparation; and transfer, degree completion, and workforce success—and highlight the grantees across the Identifying and Scaling Higher Education in Prison Programmatic Resources Initiative who are refining the resources that address practitioner needs in these areas.

You may also find these additional resources on the Resource Community for Higher Education in Prison (RCHEP) website useful for supporting program implementation efforts:

- Developed by the University of Puget Sound research team led by Tanya Erzen, PhD, Bridging the Divide explores how universities can better integrate their teaching and learning center resources with HEP programs. It also examines the barriers that prevent incarcerated students from accessing academic support and identifies promising practices for connecting these critical services to transform educational outcomes for students in more than 370 HEP programs nationwide.
- Developed by Jobs for the Future (JFF), the Prison Education Programs Lead the Way in Fair Chance Hiring article profiles six trailblazing HEP programs that are leading the way in fair chance hiring practices by hiring individuals with records of incarceration for meaningful roles that range from adjunct instructors to program directors. The article explores how these organizations are transforming their recruitment and human resources policies to create employment opportunities for individuals with records of incarceration while demonstrating the valuable expertise and leadership they bring to prison education programming.
- Developed by the State University of New York (SUNY) Higher Education for the Justice-Involved (HEJI) program, this Prison Education Faculty Recruitment Toolkit and Resource Guide was designed to help guide programs through the development, recruitment, and training practices that can support quality programming inside the correctional facility. The guide also discusses how recruiting, training, and supporting faculty contribute to the overall goals of building and maintaining quality HEP programming
- Developed by the Vera Institute of Justice, this webinar on Recruiting and Training Faculty and Staff: How To Effectively Enroll/Register Students and Recruit and Hire System-Impacted People explores how organizations and educational programming can effectively recruit and train leaders and staff. It offers insights on important hiring techniques to ensure that formerly incarcerated people have significant roles in the work that affects them and their communities.
- Developed by the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network, in partnership with Jobs for the Future's Center for Justice & Economic Advancement, Preparing Instructors to Support Students in Prison: Recommendations From the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network was created to provide professionals who are new to the HEP field with a better understanding of the realities of delivering college programs in correctional environments.
- Developed by Ithaka S+R, Terrain Leveling: Design Strategies for Improving Higher Education in Prisons examines how spatial, architectural, and design features affect learning inside prisons. This document also highlights a series of actionable strategies for integrating educational best practices into the redesign of correctional learning spaces.

To learn more about the broader initiative and the 11 grantees, please visit this one-pager or scan the QR code.

Acknowledgments

This series of briefs was made possible by the Ascendium Education Group. We extend our deepest gratitude to Ved Price at the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison whose subject matter expertise and collaboration were essential to this work. Special thanks to Courtney Tanenbaum, Abigail Jeffreys, and the AIR research team for their contributions to the literature review and synthesis that informed this series.

We are grateful to the many HEP program leaders who participated in our focus groups, sharing their invaluable perspectives on the field's most pressing needs. Thank you to the many students, faculty, and staff of higher education in prison programs whose experiences and voices are reflected in the findings presented throughout this series of briefs.

References

Alpert, S., Zolensky, R., & Holman-Wheatley, S. (2024). Filling critical gaps for college in prison programs: Strategies from two community based organizations. *Journal of Student Financial Aid, 53*(1), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1844

Boldon, N. Y., Maury, R. V., & Tihic, M. (2016). *Advancing veteran success in higher education: Case highlights of veteran-friendly programs at professional schools at Syracuse University.* Institute for Veterans and Military Families. https://surface.syr.edu/ivmf/143

Bowling, J., Nagarajan, P., Parsons, K., & Palmer, N. A. (2024). The unrealized promise of college-in-prison: Financial hurdles to reenrollment and completion in the era of Pell reinstatement. *Journal of Student Financial Aid, 53*(1), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1842

Brazzell, D., Crayton, A., Mukamal, D. A., Solomon, A. L., & Lindahl, N. (2009). *From the classroom to the community: Exploring the role of education during incarceration and reentry*. The Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/30671/411963-From-the-Classroom-to-the-Community.PDF

Byrum, A., Viera, C., Symns, M., & Paul, V. (2018, April). *An evaluation of CUNY Freedom Prep's "Reading the Biography." Exploring the experiences of exalt alumni in a specially designed college now class.* Office of Research, Evaluation, & Program Support at CUNY Office of the Senior University Dean for Academic Affairs. https://bmcfiles.com/ahep/documents/ND_2021/Program%20Evaluations/CUNY%20Freedom%20Prep_PE_2019-2020.pdf

Castro, E. L., Caradonna, C., & Gould, M. R. (2024). "I don't even know what that is": Deprivation, censorship, and responsibility in administering the Pell grant in prison. *Journal of Student Financial Aid, 53*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1841

Erzen, T., Goble, C., Moseman, L., & Shatswell, L. E. (2025). *Bridging the divide: Connecting university teaching & learning resources to higher education in prison (HEP) programs.* University of Puget Sound. https://www.pugetsound.edu/bridging-divide

George W. Bush Institute Military Service Initiative Veteran Higher Education Task Force. (2022, July). *Veterans in higher education state and national policy recommendations.* https://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Publications/Reports/gwbi_Veteran_Higher_Education.pdf

Karp, M., Ackerson, S., Cheng, I., Cocatre-Zilgien, E., Costelloe, S., Freeman, B., Lemire, S., Linderman, D., McFarlane, B., Moulton, S., O'Shea, J., Porowski, A., & Richburg-Hayes, L. (2021). *Effective advising for postsecondary students: A practice guide for educators* (WWC 2022003). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/WWC-practice-guide-advising-full-text-revised.pdf

Kastle, S. D., Fox, B., & McRay, J. (2021). Supporting the student service member and veteran population as learners: An exploratory study of academic motivation and best practices in student services at a state comprehensive university. *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University, 10*(2) Article 2. https://doi.org/10.58809/VRUX2540

Long, M. S. (2022). *Advising student veterans: The role of advisors in fostering success.* NACADA. https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Advising-Student-Veterans-The-Role-of-Advisors-in-Fostering-Success.aspx

McBain, L., Kim, Y., Cook, B. J., & Snead, K. M. (2012). *From soldier to student II: Assessing campus programs for veterans and service members.* American Council on Education. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED505982

Monogan, J. (2024). Filling potholes in Pell's road to reentry success. *Journal of Student Financial Aid, 53*(1), Article 5. https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1845

Murillo, D. (2021, February). *The possibility report: From prison to college degrees in California.* The Campaign for College Opportunity. https://collegecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/imported-files/Possibility-Report.pdf

Myers, K., Lalonde, T., Tsai, C., Clemens, E. V., Sheesley, A. P., & Tolliver, L. (2020). *Postsecondary education participation and persistence of Colorado students who have experienced foster care* (Report No. 107A). Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver. https://coloradolab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Postsecondary-Foster-Care-Report.pdf

Rankin, B. E. (2021). Advising student veterans in higher education. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations.* https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/4359

Reyes, C., & Lollar, J. (2022). Implementing a specialized student success course for veterans and military-connected students. *Journal of College Academic Support Programs, 5*(1), 52–57. https://doi.org/10.36896/5.1pp2

Richardson, T. M., Ruckert, J. M., & Marion, J. W., Jr. (2015). Planning for veterans' success: The degree map as an advising solution. *Online Learning, 19*(1). https://commons.erau.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=publication

SchoolHouse Connection. (2025). *Helping homeless youth succeed in College: Strategies for accessing financial aid* (Tip Sheet). https://docs.google.com/document/d/12Xt61d4JzeDgUta-kK7emEX0_T9lF64h_nCinSbfNxQ/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.1gi6ydumwyx3

Smith, L., & Digard, L. (2020). *From corrections to college in California: An evaluation of student support during and after incarceration.* Vera Institute of Justice. https://vera-institute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/from-corrections-to-college-california.pdf

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. (2020). *The dual enrollment playbook: A guide to equitable acceleration for students.* https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/ASP-2020-Dual-Enrollment-Playbook.pdf

Wachendorfer, A., James, K., Kiki, E., & Taber, N. (2024). *Beyond access: Advancing racial equity and inclusion in prison education programs.* Vera Institute of Justice. https://vera-institute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/Beyond-Access-Advancing-Racial-Equity-and-Inclusion-in-Prison-Education-Programs.pdf?dm=1706742082

AIR®
Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

AIR® Headquarters
1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | **AIR.ORG**

Copyright © 2026 American Institutes for Research® All rights reserved.

2879-1 v12_11/26