AIR®

STUDENT PREPARATION

Supporting Practitioners in Scaling Higher Education in Prison (HEP)

Insights From Research and Practice

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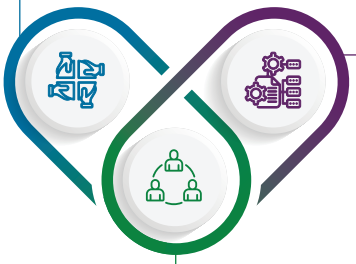
Introduction

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.

Student Preparation

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 preparing students for HEP programs:

1. **Implement intentional recruitment strategies that actively identify and engage prospective students** through outreach efforts that share information about how the program aligns with their specific interests, needs, and goals.
2. **Provide structured orientations and integrated support systems** to enhance student understanding of postsecondary education opportunities and readiness to succeed.
3. **Understand where students are entering their programming and offer supports for success** throughout their academic journey.

FINDING 1

Implement intentional recruitment strategies

Establishing intentional recruitment strategies for prospective students not only expands program reach but also can counter institutional participation barriers (e.g., custody priorities, favoritism, power hierarchies). Intentional recruitment can cultivate a student body that represents varied backgrounds and experiences.

To implement intentional recruitment strategies, HEP programs are seeking the following:

- **Strategies that extend beyond word-of-mouth**—such as posters, flyers, information sessions—to reach a wider range of prospective students, as well as strategies that help students assess how well a program aligns with their specific interests and needs, including individual meetings with facility staff, current students, or program alumni.
- **Methods for distributing general program** information clearly, such as program career pathway options, eligibility guidelines, enrollment information, financial aid, and program staff contact information.
- **Content that proactively addresses and dispels misconceptions about higher education in prison** by communicating the value, quality, and opportunities for student success.
- **Guidance for customizing admissions and application processes** to eliminate in-prison barriers such as lack of internet, lack of access to identification, or inability to pay administrative fees.

> *"I think…students just don't have the confidence coming in. Almost every single one is first generation. They're going to be a first-generation college student. So the idea of an education [to them] is so unattainable in a lot of ways."*
>
> — Focus group participant

FINDING 2

Provide structured orientations and integrated support systems

Implementing structured orientations that cover key topics such as program expectations, financial aid process and commitments, and available supports helps students build a greater understanding to confidently navigate postsecondary education and achieve academic success.

To help students understand and successfully navigate programs, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Deliver orientation sessions that clarify program expectations, financial aid processes, and available academic and reentry supports,** ensuring access to information within the constraints of carceral settings.
- **Eliminate common barriers in the enrollment process** by offering flexible scheduling, documentation assistance, financial literacy education, information on alternative funding opportunities, and other support systems.
- **Center the voices and leadership of students with lived experience** by establishing student advisory councils to identify gaps between program and policy intention and lived reality, engaging alumni as peer mentors for current students, or engaging alumni as credible messengers and facilitators during orientation activities or classroom visits to foster academic confidence and reinforce the value of the program.

> *"I think the most important thing to have is an alum who's a continuing education advisor who has really built expertise.... [T]he expertise is not just in navigating things like applications and FAFSAs,... [but] having someone who's formerly incarcerated doing that work and also having professional relationships with various admissions offices is really important."*
>
> — Focus group participant

- **Design and offer personalized academic advising** that supports students in enrolling in a major or certificate program that aligns with their goals, ensures students stay on track, provides information on credit transferability and continuing education, and works with facility leaders to address barriers.
- **Leveraging partnerships with community-based organizations** to support the retrieval of student records, assist with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, and provide ongoing financial aid literacy tailored to students' needs.
- **Developing student pathway maps** that outline the student experience from enrollment to graduation—including processes, requirements, and available supports—to share during advising sessions as a tool to provide transparency and guidance through every step.

FINDING 3

Understand where students are entering their programming and offer the necessary support for success

Supporting student readiness at the start of or return to an academic program means equipping them with foundational knowledge and essential college skills. It requires understanding each student's strengths, goals, interests, and support systems, as well as the structural factors that affect learning—such as class scheduling conflicts, lockdowns, or staffing shortages. Thoroughly assessing individual needs, barriers, and motivations is critical to fostering student success in higher education.

To build student readiness along their academic journey, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Develop a holistic understanding of each student based on data from a range of sources** to inform course placement and identify academic and nonacademic supports needed. Consider academic transcripts, readiness and learning assessments, career inventories, educational and employment histories, interviews, and holistic evaluations for tailored support. Avoid relying solely on standardized placement tests, which can create barriers to entry (see Resource Spotlight: University of Saint Mary).
- **Provide precollege preparatory courses in writing, math, and English**—including learning accelerator courses and bridge programs—to build core academic competencies and foster a strong student identity (see Resource Spotlight: Saint Louis University).
- **Embed an HEP-specific student success course** that addresses essential college habits, academic expectations, and strategies for navigating the unique logistical challenges of higher education during incarceration.
- **Monitor student progress over time in preparation for HEP and beyond using individualized learning assessments.** Use assessment data to identify barriers to academic success and adjust student supports to build academic skills and self-efficacy.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at the University of Saint Mary (USM) is refining a student success survey and accompanying implementation guide designed to help HEP programs assess student needs across areas such as physical well-being, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The survey helps program administrators identify where targeted interventions can improve enrollment, retention, and graduation outcomes. The implementation guide walks practitioners through the full process of adopting the survey, from securing IRB approval to administering the instrument and interpreting results. Its standardized format is designed for broader application across the field, supporting data-driven support strategies for incarcerated learners.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at Saint Louis University (SLU) is refining their College Prep Program, which includes a curriculum framework and implementation toolkit designed to prepare incarcerated students for college-level coursework through foundational courses in areas such as academic writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and public presentation. The program helps students build readiness and make informed decisions about their educational path, while also equipping faculty with trauma-informed teaching methods aligned with Department of Corrections guidelines. It is designed for HEP programs seeking to implement college preparatory curricula and strengthen pathways from student interest to program enrollment.

Call to Action

Expanding access through targeted recruitment strategies as well as equipping students with foundational skills and delivering sustained and personalized guidance are essential steps in preparing students for success.

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; program implementation; 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 student preparation efforts:

- Developed by the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative (THEI), Navigating Forward is a comprehensive collection of college navigation materials designed specifically for students who are incarcerated. This resource includes Navigating the College Landscape, which provides clear, accessible "College Navigation 101" information to help students understand how college works and how to navigate it confidently. This collection also includes Navigating Financial Aid, which offers practical guidance on financial aid rights, responsibilities, and opportunities to help students make informed decisions about paying for college. These easy-to-use materials address the unique challenges and needs of HEP students while empowering them with essential knowledge to succeed in their academic journey.
- Developed by the SUNY Research Foundation, Participation and Outcomes in SUNY College-in-Prison Programs examines enrollment patterns, academic achievement metrics, and demographic participation across New York state prison education initiatives, providing a replicable model for HEP programs nationwide to implement evidence-based readiness assessments, design effective precollege preparatory courses, and develop equitable recruitment strategies that address the specific needs and barriers facing diverse incarcerated student populations.
- Developed by Jobs for the Future, Getting Ready for FAFSA Administration supports colleges in implementing effective financial aid processes for incarcerated students, offering step-by-step guidance on internal coordination, staff training, and student communication to ensure smooth and equitable FAFSA administration.

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

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