AIR®

SYSTEMS ALIGNMENT

Supporting Practitioners in Scaling Higher Education in Prison (HEP)

Insights From Research and Practice

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Introduction

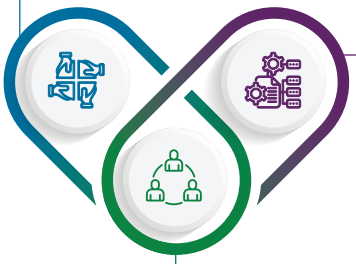
This brief is part of a series sharing key findings from landscaping activities conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®). Our findings aim to build on historical and ongoing efforts across the higher education in prison (HEP) field to define high-quality programming and guide effective 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.

Systems Alignment

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 aligning systems:

1. **Foster relationships and secure buy-in among key systems partners** to support long-term student and program success.
2. **Collect, share, and leverage data across systems** to inform program implementation, student tracking, and supports.
3. **Align systems to provide access to academic technology and devices** to help students reach their educational goals and promoting successful reentry into the free world.

FINDING 1

Foster relationships and secure buy-in among key systems partners

Building relationships and securing buy-in across key partners—such as corrections agencies, individual corrections facilities, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and higher education system agencies—are critical for achieving the level of coordination and collaboration needed to support both long-term student success and the successful implementation and sustainability of HEP programs.

To build these relationships and secure buy-in across partners, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Improve cross-system coordination** between HEP programs, institutions of higher education, departments of corrections (DOCs), and other system partners to better align policies, requirements, and processes in support of students in HEP programs both before and after release from incarceration.
- **Develop relationships with state leaders and policymakers**, as well as others who can support the HEP program in navigating or removing state or federal policy barriers.
- **Establish a shared understanding and vision** for a well-coordinated HEP ecosystem that supports effective collaboration and partnership between HEP programs and their home institutions, state departments of corrections and community supervision, and other stakeholder groups.
- **Embed HEP and reentry services into institutional and state system operations** and ensure that students who are currently or were formerly incarcerated are served through standard campus structures rather than separate programs.

> *"My big wish list would be to have a consistent, sustainable MOU with the DOC."*
>
> — Focus group participant

- **Identify strategies for building institutional buy-in** and commitment to HEP programming, such as inviting institutional leaders to program events or to visit facilities to interact directly with students in HEP programs or participate in celebrations of their academic achievements.
- **Formalize and sustain cross-system partnerships**, such as through MOUs between DOCs and IHEs or articulation agreements that enable the transfer of credits earned by HEP students to other IHEs.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at the Possibility Lab at UC Berkeley and Mount Tamalpais College is refining a participatory action research guide and alumni outreach toolkit that helps HEP programs maintain connections with released students and evaluate the long-term impact of their programming. The resource equips HEP program administrators and outreach specialists with vetted tools, including a longitudinal survey for students, interview and focus group protocols for alumni, and administrative data collection processes. Together, these tools help programs systematize alumni engagement and conduct participatory research that centers students and alumni as integral partners in the research process.

FINDING 2

Collect, share, and leverage data across systems

Strategically collect, share, and use data across key systems to allow for easier information sharing, data-informed decision-making, and reliable recognition and transfer of students' academic records, credits, and credentials across systems.

To build these capacities for cross-systems data sharing and decision-making, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Build plans for data collection, analysis, and utilization** into program design and implementation from the earliest planning stages.
- **Design and maintain data systems** to support the identification of individuals who are eligible for HEP enrollment.

"They have to take all those enrollment sheets of what classes the students are going to be taking out to the campus [from the prison] to actually enroll them in the class in our database system. There's no shared communication between our database and the prison's database... I'd say that if you have to identify a sticking point, that's probably the biggest redundancy and time waster for our coordinators is trying to input all this information in two different systems at two different locations."

— Focus group participant

- **Systematically measure student participation and outcomes** and leverage these data to work collaboratively across system partners to address barriers to participation and student success. (See Resource Spotlight: Possibility Lab at UC Berkeley and Mount Tamalpais College.)
- **Develop processes for meeting data reporting requirements** by collecting and sharing necessary data across the correctional institution, the postsecondary institution, and the HEP program. (See Grantee Spotlight: Loyola University of New Orleans.)



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at Loyola University New Orleans is refining a data convening toolkit that helps HEP and PEP administrators identify their reporting requirements and collaborate with their home institutions to build sustainable data collection processes. The toolkit provides presentation materials, facilitation guides, and implementation guidance that state-level HEP consortium leaders can use to convene administrators around data practices, along with templates that individual program administrators can bring back to their institutions to align data collection with required metrics. Additional materials support engagement with corrections and workforce partners.

FINDING 3

Align systems to provide access to academic technology and devices

Ensuring that incarcerated students can access academic technology (e.g., learning management systems, digital libraries, research databases) and secure devices (e.g., laptops, tablets, computer labs) by aligning policies, infrastructure, and practices across corrections agencies, higher education institutions, and HEP programs. Access to these technologies and devices builds students' digital literacy, strengthens their academic identity, and prepares them to navigate technology in their education and careers after release.

To achieve this systems-level integration in technology practices, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Establish and coordinate approval processes and security protocols across correctional facilities and postsecondary systems** to ensure that students have access to essential technology (e.g., secure laptops, internal servers, academic databases such as JSTOR or EBSCOhost) for full engagement in coursework and skill development. (See Resource Spotlight: Unlocked Labs.)

"Having access to the [university] Digital Library for instance, and just being able to get on JSTOR or accessing other academic databases, I think would go a long way for a lot of our classes and would be helpful and give more agency to the students."

— Focus group participant

- **Develop shared data infrastructure to track student progress and needs**—such as digital gradebooks or portable academic records that remain accessible despite facility transfers, faculty/staff turnover, or changes in program leadership.
- **Provide coordinated digital literacy training and supports for students** who have not had exposure to the technology needed for full engagement and participation in HEP programming and coursework.
- **Pilot and evaluate technology deployments** to identify scalable solutions that expand equitable access across the field.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at Unlocked Labs is refining a web-based toolkit that guides HEP programs and corrections partners through the process of integrating educational technology into correctional settings. The toolkit provides practical, step-by-step guidance on topics including making the case for technology in prison education, building cross-agency partnerships, choosing hardware and software, addressing security requirements, and leveraging technology for teaching and learning. It is designed for both corrections leaders and higher education providers navigating the unique challenges of deploying technology in secure environments.

Call to Action

Fostering relationships among key system partners, sharing and leveraging data, and aligning systems to provide access to technology are essential steps in developing systems that sustain high-quality, impactful HEP programming.

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—program implementation; 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 systems alignment efforts:

- Developed by the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity, Reflections on Building a Partnership with Corrections outlines the necessary tools for developing programs that are responsive to the unique environment of correctional facilities. It includes sections on key facility staff positions and roles that are integral to operating a successful college program and on the importance of and guidance for establishing and maintaining strong partnerships with DOCs.
- Developed by Jobs for the Future (JFF), this resource on Data Use Agreements (DUAs) provides essential guidelines and best practices for DUAs in postsecondary education in prison programs and breaks down the basics of DUAs.
- Developed by Ithaka S+R, Technology Implementation for Higher Education in Prison: A Student-Centered-Playbook for Planning, Preparing, and Assessing Implementation Readiness supports correctional education leaders in centering student learning on the education technology landscape. It includes decision-making tools and frameworks to assist these leaders as they consider how to implement new educational technology in prison.
- Developed by the Vera Institute of Justice, the Best Interest Determination (BID) Toolkit supports corrections agencies in establishing comprehensive BID systems to evaluate postsecondary institutions that offer prison education programs (PEPs) according to federal requirements under 34 CFR 668.241. This includes conducting mandatory program reviews within 2 years of PEP approval and at each Program Participation Agreement renewal, while recommending four key implementation tools: a BID conduct policy, an institutional reporting template, a stakeholder feedback form, and an outcome documentation letter.
- Developed by Jobs for the Future's (JFF) Center for Justice & Economic Advancement, the Fair Chance to Advance State Action Networks: Aligning Systems and Building Clear Pathways From Incarceration to Careers State Readiness Framework supports state leaders in building aligned systems that eliminate barriers to economic success for people with histories of incarceration. The framework includes readiness criteria and assessment tools to assist these leaders as they work to establish statewide fair chance ecosystems that expand opportunity and advance systemic change.

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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