TRANSFER, DEGREE COMPLETION, AND WORKFORCE SUCCESS

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

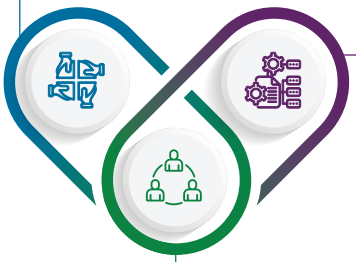
This brief is part of a series sharing key findings from landscaping activities conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®). Our findings aim to build on historical and ongoing efforts across the higher education in prison (HEP) field to define high-quality programming and guide effective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

Transfer, Degree Completion, and Workforce Success

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 related to transfer, degree completion, and workforce success:

1. **Formalize credit transfer pathways and embed degree planning** to ensure academic continuity and minimize credit loss as students transition from incarceration to free-world campuses.
2. **Structure reentry planning through centralized support hubs and tailored advising services** to equip students for success in both academic and professional environments post-release.
3. **Integrate peer and alumni mentorship** into HEP programs to strengthen student confidence, persistence, and long-term success in education and the workforce.
4. **Invest in partnerships with workforce entities and employers that support pathways to quality jobs** to expand stable, sustainable career opportunities for students who were formerly incarcerated.
5. **Cultivate cross-sector collaboration and policy alignment** to address systemic barriers and promote continuous educational and workforce success for individuals with a record.

FINDING 1

Formalize credit transfer pathways and embed planning for degree completion

Establishing formal agreements between institutions to streamline credit transfers alongside clear degree completion pathways and coordinated advising is critical to preventing credit loss and educational disruption during points of transition. Robust transfer systems empower students who are transitioning from prison education programs so that they can maintain momentum and progress toward timely degree completion.

To streamline degree pathways and the credit transfer processes, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help to:

- **Establish and institutionalize articulation agreements** between HEP programs and postsecondary institutions—including statewide transfer compacts and regional consortia that set course equivalencies and credit transfer pathways. This will help to ensure that students can continue their education seamlessly post-release without any loss of credits.
- **Develop transparent degree completion road maps and academic pathways** to support students in navigating the transfer process.
- **Integrate degree completion and graduation planning into academic advising** from pre-release through each student's transition to a free-world campus.

FINDING 2

Provide structured and centralized academic and nonacademic reentry planning and support

Successful reintegration into the community and continuation of educational momentum for students who were formerly incarcerated requires comprehensive reentry planning. Such planning should leverage dedicated advising, structured road maps, and centralized support services to address students' academic and professional needs post-release.

To provide comprehensive reentry planning and support services, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Develop and deliver structured academic reentry planning with clear milestones** leading up to release. This will help to equip students with actionable steps to transition successfully.
- **Establish dedicated and tailored transfer support services and liaisons** to guide students through enrollment, credit transfers, and degree completion at receiving institutions.
- **Establish centralized "one-stop" support hubs** that streamline access to services—including admissions, financial aid, academic planning, housing assistance, and mental health supports—and eliminate barriers for students who are transitioning to a free-world, postsecondary campus. These hubs should include specific resources for students who relocate to new regions after release and who may not attend the same institution that operates their HEP program.
- **Equip students with the technology skills** required to complete the coursework and navigate the digital platforms that are vital for academic and career success post-release.
- **Create structured bridge and peer-led onboarding programs** that ease the transition from incarceration to campus life and help students build community, navigate new environments, and maintain academic progress during the critical period surrounding their release. (See Resource Spotlight: University System of Maryland).



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grantee team at the University System of Maryland is refining their Reentry Services Roadmap, a resource designed to strengthen HEP student preparation for reentry and support successful degree or certificate completion via free-world college campuses. The Roadmap formalizes the role of Reentry Peer Navigators—who provide pre- and post-release support including reentry planning, daily check-ins, transportation, resource navigation, and study groups—offering a replicable model for structured reentry planning and sustained post-release guidance. It is designed as a scalable framework for HEP programs across the University System of Maryland and beyond seeking to increase graduation outcomes and strengthen approaches to student success after incarceration.

FINDING 3

Integrate peer and alumni mentorship that is grounded in lived experience

Integrating peer and alumni support as a core component of HEP programming requires the establishment of both formal and informal mentorship opportunities and peer networks. These opportunities provide guidance that is grounded in lived experience by fostering a sense of belonging and building students' confidence as they transition out of a carceral environment and toward degree completion and career success.

To integrate peer and alumni support and mentorship, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Provide post-release coaching and mentoring support from staff and alumni with lived experience** to build self-efficacy and foster persistence among program graduates who are navigating the transition to continued education or employment.
- **Foster robust alumni networks** that serve as ongoing career development and professional support systems and reinforce long-term success beyond the attainment of a degree.
- **Establish formal and informal peer communities** that connect current and former students through co-curricular events, shared coursework, and collaborative learning experiences.

"I think prison education programs and on-campus programs need to be more intentional in building those relationships and those bridges and meeting halfway as they hand students off. I think that a lot of students get lost in their transition on the way out and other things just take their attention and their time. So, I think I want to see more partnership between these institutions from prison to campus."

— Focus group participant

FINDING 4

Invest in building partnerships with workforce entities and fair chance employers that support pathways to quality jobs

Facilitating pathways to meaningful employment opportunities through partnerships with fair chance employers, individualized career counseling, and services to support workforce readiness is critical for helping students who were formerly incarcerated to secure a stable career, foster long-term success, and achieve full reintegration into the community.

To facilitate employment opportunities for long-term success and reintegration, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Partner with state and local workforce entities to facilitate** career fairs, networking opportunities, and job placement support for those with a history of incarceration.
- **Offer individualized career counseling** that takes into account the fair chance landscape and the specific barriers that individuals who were formerly incarcerated face.
- **Establish partnerships with fair chance employers** to create work-based learning opportunities that provide students who were formerly incarcerated with real-world work experience and help them to build needed technology skills—putting them on a pathway to stable, well-paying careers. (See Resource Spotlight: Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison.)

"I think more networking opportunities would be great. Figuring out how to get people to be more open-minded with offering career opportunities or being more pro second chance … because for instance, if somebody is applying for a job or meeting somebody, all it takes is a Google search [to learn that they have a record]. That can completely change somebody's idea or vision of who this person was. They write their own narrative of what occurred or how this person carries about their life, even if that was when they were 16 years old or 17 years old, and now they're grown adults. So, I definitely think that being able to network a bit more and getting more companies to be pro second chance would be great."

— Focus group participant



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grant team at Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison Inc. is refining their HEP Employer Toolkit, a resource designed to support employers, reentry organizations, colleges, universities, and HEP programs in adopting fair chance hiring practices and creating sustainable employment pathways for formerly incarcerated graduates. The toolkit offers practical strategies including outreach templates, pitch decks, a site visit model, employer training modules, and evaluation tools to address hiring barriers and prepare workplaces to successfully integrate justice-impacted graduates. It addresses a critical gap in the field by recognizing that workforce success requires not only preparing students for employment but also equipping employers to support their hiring and advancement.

FINDING 5

Cultivate cross-sector partnerships focused on addressing barriers to student success post-release

Maintaining and strengthening cross-sector collaboration through partnerships with community organizations, corrections agencies, and policymakers is critical to dismantling systemic barriers to student success and ensuring continuous support for HEP students to continue their academic and career pathways post-release.

To cultivate cross-sector partnerships for greater positive impact, HEP programs are seeking resources that can help:

- **Cultivate and leverage partnerships with community-based organizations, corrections and community supervision agencies, and state policymakers** to identify, navigate, and ultimately address systemic barriers (e.g., housing insecurity, employment restrictions) that affect student success post-release. (See Resource Spotlight: Pennsylvania State University.)
- **Foster continuous coordination between the reentry divisions of various departments of corrections, departments of community supervision, and postsecondary institutions** to help students navigate systemic barriers and ensure a seamless transition to a free-world campus.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT | The grantee team at the Restorative Justice Initiative (RJI) at Pennsylvania State University is refining their Reentry Simulation Toolkit, a resource designed to raise awareness of the systemic barriers formerly incarcerated students face during reentry and to foster cultural change among HEP programs, reentry providers, and community partners. The toolkit includes updated simulation materials, facilitator guides, training videos and modules, and debrief resources that enable HEP programs to independently deliver the Reimagined Reentry Simulation, build empathy across institutions, and dismantle systemic barriers to support justice-impacted student success.

Call to Action

To ensure successful student transfer and degree completion, and to strengthen the capacity of students to complete their education and thrive in the workforce after their release, it is essential to (1) establish durable credit transfer pathways that prevent disruptions to education; (2) expand reentry supports; (3) integrate peer mentorship; and (4) foster cross-sector collaboration specific to post-release supports.

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 HEP design and implementation dimensions—systems alignment, student preparation, and program implementation—and highlight the grantees across the Identifying and Scaling Higher Education in Prison Programmatic Resources Initiative who are refining resources that address high-leverage needs specific to these areas.

You may also find these additional resources on the Resource Community for Higher Education in Prison (RCHEP) website useful for supporting transfer, degree completion, and workforce success:

- Developed by the Prison to Employment Collaborative (P2EC) and implemented at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, the Prison to Employment Connection program is a 14-week job-readiness training program for individuals who are nearing their release date. The program integrates workforce development into HEP programs and offers assessments, skills workshops, and résumé support to help students who are incarcerated contextualize their experiences for employers.
- Developed by the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Back to School: A Guide to Continuing Your Education after Prison is a comprehensive resource for formerly incarcerated individuals who are navigating post-release education. The guide offers practical guidance on accessing adult basic education, GED programs, vocational training, and higher education; and helps address barriers and leverage community support.
- Developed by Jobs for the Future, the Reentry Services Assessment is an interactive tool designed to assist colleges in evaluating and enhancing their support systems for students with a history of incarceration. The assessment provides a structured framework for practitioners to identify strengths, pinpoint gaps, and inform strategic planning for comprehensive reentry services.
- Developed by the National Reentry Workforce Collaborative (NRWC), the Fair Chance Employer Engagement Toolkit is a training guide designed to equip job developers and organizational leaders with strategies for building sustainable Fair Chance Hiring relationships with employers. The guide is informed by practitioners' expertise and employer and reentry workforce staff data.
- Developed by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, Education in Action: Exploring Remote Employment & Work-Based Learning During Incarceration is an implementation guide designed to assist corrections officials, higher education administrators, employers, and students who are incarcerated in establishing meaningful work-based learning opportunities. The guide enables students to apply their education through remote or in-person professional experiences.
- Developed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Mapping Your Future: A Guide to Successful Reentry (2025 Edition) supports individuals who are preparing for and navigating life after incarceration by providing practical guidance on housing, employment, health care, financial management, substance use recovery, and mental wellness. It also offers extensive directories of Illinois-specific services to facilitate successful community reintegration.

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

Ascendium Elevating opportunity | **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., and 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). *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). 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). *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, January). (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-I v14_11'26