

## “It’s Useless, to Put it Politely”: Experiences with Technology Among Incarcerated Students Receiving Second Chance Pell at Four Institutions

The Second Chance Pell Experiment allows a select number of institutions of higher education to provide Pell Grants to eligible incarcerated students, circumventing the 1994 ban. To date, and because of prison constraints, much of what is known about the implementation and impact of the Experiment is drawn from the perspectives of non-incarcerated people. This research brief draws on focus groups conducted by the Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison at the University of Utah with incarcerated students, alumni, and formerly incarcerated alumni of prison higher education programs. The larger project from which these data are drawn, *Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell*, is a mixed methods research study examining the implementation and facilitation of the Second Chance Pell Experiment.<sup>1</sup>

In this research brief, we share findings from incarcerated students and alumni regarding their experiences with technology during enrollment in postsecondary education and participation in Second Chance Pell. Specifically, we find the following:

- » Technology available to incarcerated students is severely limited or unavailable.
- » Technology available to incarcerated students is outdated and routinely dysfunctional.
- » Students do not have adequate access to computers and resources to successfully complete independent research for their classes.
- » Accordingly, students wonder why they are spending their Pell dollars on inadequate technology.

Note that all student and alumni names in this brief are pseudonyms. Table 1 provides information on the 9 sites included in this research by institutional type, mode of instruction, and described access to technology. For all sites, students must be actively enrolled in the prison higher education program and in good standing with both the program and the prison. Accessing technology is considered a privilege and the prison can revoke this privilege at any time, for any reason.

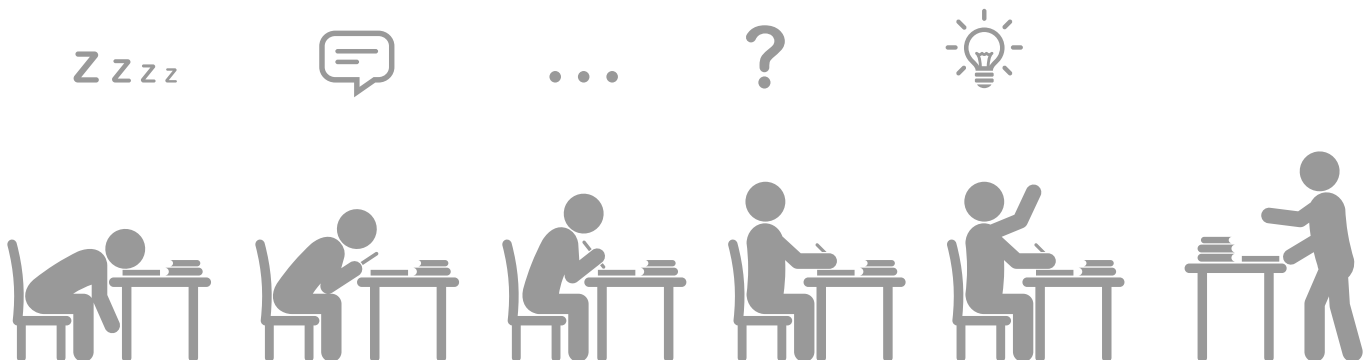


Table 1

**INSTITUTIONAL TYPE, INSTRUCTIONAL MODE, AND TECHNOLOGY ACCESS BY SITE**

Site	Institutional Type	Instructional Mode	Technology Access
A	2-year, Public	Distance-based	The college distributes Microsoft Surface tablets with keyboards. Students can use the tablets in their housing unit and must dock them at stations located in a computer lab at the prison. Once the tablets are connected to the docking station, students can upload and download assignments and message instructors through a learning management system (Canvas). Students report that devices are functional, but that college and corrections IT departments need to better coordinate a list of allowable websites that students need to access for course purposes. Students indicated that access to the computer lab is insufficient to support their success.
B	4-year, Public	In-person	Students can type, save, and print papers on desktops in a computer lab but have no learning management system or internet access. Students do not have personal devices they can use in their living areas, cannot upload and download assignments or communicate with instructors, and report that they had insufficient access to the computer lab.
C	2-year, Public	Distance-based	The college issues select students PC laptops equipped with a modified Chrome operating system through a CloudReady USB installer. Docking stations are located in a computer lab at the prison. Once the tablets are connected to the docking station, students can upload and download assignments and message instructors through Moodle. Students report that devices are highly dysfunctional; they use a limited off-line version of Google Docs (which lacks basic formatting capabilities) and they have insufficient access to the computer lab.
D	2-year, Public	In-person	Only 100 of 400 students have laptops and there is no computer lab open to all. These laptops only have word processing and printing capabilities but no learning management system or internet access. Program administrators attempted to enable network capabilities on student devices, but students say the results have been highly unreliable at best. When distributing laptops, practitioners prioritize students with greater seniority, more writing intensive classes, and/or medical issues or disabilities. One student got the impression that program administrators did not consider him a student of the caliber that would be worthy of receiving a laptop.

Site	Institutional Type	Instructional Mode	Technology Access
E	4-year, Private	In-person	Administrators indicate that all students had access to computer labs before the pandemic; students in men's facilities regained access, but students in women's facilities did not. Students do not have access to the internet, but professors can present materials on web-enabled televisions during class time.
F	4-year, Private	In-person	Classes are in-person and students do not have access to livestreaming classes or tablets. "Most of the time, the students have no real technology. When we have a group meeting with corrections, the head of education there, we're all on the telephone. They don't have Zoom or anything like that. I mean, obviously in the prison, you know, all the electronic stuff is at an absolute minimum." "Our students have access to a computer lab if they are in a computer class or are working on their theses. However, at present, because of problems at the prison and severe understaffing, the computer room is temporarily closed."
G	2-year, Public	In-person	Students have access to what an administrator refers to as "stripped down" Chromebooks in a computer lab. Devices are equipped with the Microsoft Office suite but have limited access to the internet. Corrections IT staff can "allow list" websites, but this practice is not generally used for educational purposes, and there is no virtual platform for students to communicate with instructors.
H	2-year, Public	In-person	Students do not have access to technology.
I	2-year, Public	In-person	Students have access to a computer lab with what an administrator describes as "very strict security parameters"; college staff indicate the lab is not of sufficient size for their student body. Students do not have access to word processing but can search for articles using an offline research database.

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## **"IT'S NEVER OPEN": LIMITED OR UNAVAILABLE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AND PRISON COMPUTER LABS**

Across sites, students have limited access to technology and computer labs. At site H, students do not have access to any technology. Program staff at Site E (4-year, public) indicated that all students had access to computer labs prior to the pandemic, however what exactly this access entailed is unknown. "Computer lab access can be a challenge," said the program coordinator at Site I (2-year, public) "because we have to have an employee in that area when the students are accessing it." At Sites A and C (2-year, public) and Site B (4-year, public) hours of operation of the computer lab coincided with students' prison workday.

Lockdowns or other prison-specific disruptions could make the lab off-limits at any time. Staff and officers are inconsistent in their efforts to open and facilitate movement to the lab. "It's never open," said Robert at Site A. "Or it's open about three days a week." Incarcerated individuals who work in the lab at Site B denied particular students entry because of interpersonal conflicts. Students shared during focus groups that there is competition for the lab equipment; students from other programs inside the prison competed for the use of the computers. Consequently, students learn to make-do without access to technology. As Leonard explained, "I hand wrote most of my assignments and turned them in that way just because of the barriers that needed to be overcome to be able to access the computers and be able to get in [the computer lab]."

Only a quarter of students at Site D (2-year, public) had access to a laptop to complete their work. One student shared that he could not understand why his Pell funds did not cover a personal device. "It should be part of the cost," he insisted. "We should get laptops." At Sites A and C (2-year, public) students have access to tablets and laptops, respectively, that they can use in their living areas. Still, they are only able to download and upload course materials and assignments through docking stations in the computer lab. The slow prison network at Site C makes it nearly impossible to download course materials and assignments during the short intervals students can be in the lab. According to Mario, "A video that should take virtually seconds to download can sometimes take up to thirty minutes."

Jack at Site A (2-year, public) suggested that this lack of lab access impacts program quality. He said, "It makes it very hard to put my best effort forward." Similarly, students at Site A described unique issues with computer labs in different parts of the same prison. One lab is only open during hours when students are working; the other lab is open "24/7" but doubles as a recreational area where people play cards and exercise. Thus, while this lab is open it is a distracting space for students attempting to focus on their schoolwork.

**“ A VIDEO THAT SHOULD TAKE VIRTUALLY SECONDS TO DOWNLOAD CAN SOMETIMES TAKE UP TO THIRTY MINUTES.”**

### **“I HAD TO HANDWRITE MY LAST ESSAY”: OUTDATED AND DYSFUNCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY**

Administrators at site H (2-year, public), where technology is unavailable, emphasized the detrimental impact on students. "We're really doing a disservice to guys...when they go out to apply at McDonald's... [and] they don't know how to run that laptop," said the corrections liaison. Even when technology is available to students, administrators and students alike suggest that it can be highly dysfunctional. One administrator at Site G (2-year, public) characterized student laptops as "basically useless." The corrections liaison for Site G agreed. "Our clear preference is [for] face-to-face classes," he said in reference to the limited capabilities of the devices. An administrator at Site I (2-year, public) suggested that the computer lab available to students was limited in size and capability. Students do not have access to e-books or even word processing, though the "digital literacy" they would gain by using such applications is "really important."

At Site C (2-year, public), word processing and spreadsheet applications were described as "dumbed down" versions of Google Docs and Sheets that do not allow students to format their assignments as directed. "In some cases it's useless to put it politely," said Mario. One semester, the software stopped functioning

entirely. Javier recalled writing “a whole APA format of a paper on the comments section of what would be the equivalent of your Facebook comment.” Students have had to develop elaborate workarounds involving the transfer of files among multiple devices to achieve proper formatting. Some simply decide to bypass technology altogether. Marcus described spending hours drawing a table by hand “because it was easier than using the [spreadsheet] application.” “I had to handwrite my last essay,” said Jeremiah - the education director at the prison had to help him convert the paper into a PDF and submit it.

Some students framed this “improvising” and “hustling” as part of prison life, but others resented spending their Pell funding for such subpar technology. Chandler at Site C cited that he and other students pay almost \$200 per semester to use laptops. “Where’s the tech support that goes with that?” he asked. Rogelio, also at Site C, recalled being stuck with a broken device for the first month of the semester. “I should’ve caused...more fuss over it if I knew I was paying for it,” he said. With regard to the substandard software, he lamented, “I’m wasting my money every time I get a B when I know I should get an A because of format[ting].”

Lack of coordination between college and corrections IT departments has led to frustration for students at Site A (2-year, public). Site A (2-year, public) uses electronic textbooks that include embedded links students must follow to fully engage with course materials. Students often find links that do not work because they have not been allow-listed by prison IT staff. “They need to coordinate their IT guys,” said Jack. “They haven’t went through and took the time to approve it. So, it’s a blocked site...They need to work together, and they need to just go through it to make sure that it’s streamlined.”

Higher education program staff agree. One college administrator attributed significant lag time in responding to student reports about broken links to competing priorities among corrections IT staff. He understood students’ frustration when this delay causes them to miss weekly class deadlines. He also shared his perception that online classes are not as “dynamic” as those outside of prison environments because of restrictions on websites like YouTube. One program coordinator recalled how a biology instructor had to verbally describe diagrams of cells to students because the links to the actual images were broken. “It’s literally minute by minute, day by day,” she lamented, referring to the constant monitoring and communication among prison and college IT staff to ensure students can access all of the links they need to complete their readings and assignments.



### **“WHERE DO I FIND THAT INFORMATION?”: LACK OF INTERNET ACCESS FOR RESEARCH AND INDEPENDENT STUDY**

Students also described lack of access to the internet for research purposes as a major barrier to being a successful college student. Alumni from Site B (4-year, public) described the labor- and time-intensive process of submitting research requests to professors. Non-incarcerated professors who traveled to the prison would receive these research requests from students and then take these requests with them outside of the prison, search the internet for and print materials related to the topic. Then, the professors would return the materials to students at the facility. Paul would have appreciated “the ability to go on the computer and look things up for myself.”

Administrators at Site E (4-year, private) and Site G (2-year, public) indicated that staff in their programs facilitated student research requests in a similar fashion. At Site E (4-year, private), volunteer research assistants collected resources “of varying caliber” from which students could choose to “simulate the research process” of determining which materials are relevant and of sufficient quality. The idea is for

students to experience the process of judging source quality. At Site G, professors provided students with research materials.

Seth exemplified a common problem for students at Site D (2-year, public) when he described the difficulty in trying to conduct research for a course requirement: a sixteen to eighteen-page paper on ethnic diversity. “Where do I find that information?” he asked. At the time she participated in a focus group, Linda at Site A (2-year, public) had just finished a research paper on forensic science. Her paper was based solely on a decade-old Encyclopedia Britannica volume she found in the prison library, a forensics show she watched on TV, and her own “little knowledge.” She described stitching together sparse and outdated sources as highly stressful. “We need some ability to be able to research stuff up in here,” she said, “because the struggle was real. I’m serious...We have nothing.” Terrance at Site A was similarly frustrated. “I’m really halving it,” he said, “because it’s not as in-depth as it could be if I had access to more information in a wider variety of topics.” Among all sites, only Site I (2-year, public) offered students access to an offline research database, though at Site G (2-year, public), administrators encouraged instructors to build assignments around topics that students could research through legal databases already at the prison.<sup>2</sup>

**“WE NEED SOME ABILITY TO BE ABLE TO RESEARCH STUFF UP IN HERE,” SHE SAID, “BECAUSE THE STRUGGLE WAS REAL. I’M SERIOUS...WE HAVE NOTHING.”**

Recent research highlights similar limitations. A 2022 Vera Institute report based on surveys of program administrators indicates that only eleven percent of Second Chance Pell students have access to a searchable research database. An ongoing Ithaka S+R study cites inadequate software, difficulty allow-listing sites and accessing computer labs, and constraints on independent library research as primary challenges in providing incarcerated students access to technology. Published in 2020, the first phase of Ithaka’s study focused on “higher level” stakeholders, like correctional education directors and technology providers. The second phase, yet to be released, will emphasize “on the ground” perspectives of program staff and formerly incarcerated students.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Across all sites, students indicated that while they theoretically have access to technology, but the technology itself is often extremely limited, as is their ability to access the physical spaces necessary to use that technology effectively. This research suggests that such firsthand accounts are vital, revealing nuances in the user experience that system-level players cannot fully illuminate. Moreover, students quoted in this report question why they are using their limited financial aid for software that does not allow them to format their papers properly. They do not understand why their Pell monies do not cover what is necessary to improve their experiences as students, such as personal laptops and contemporary software.

These concerns add a new dimension to the current discourse regarding technology in prison higher education: because colleges and universities are receiving Pell dollars on their behalf, students invoke their right to demand more reliable, versatile, and contemporary technology. As students gain understanding about Pell, they become aware that it is THEIR money. That is, schools cannot draw down Pell without students. Students are aware that schools are benefitting from enrolling them, and they have reciprocal expectations based on that fact (i.e. the student who said he would have made more of a fuss about his broken computer if he had realized he was, in effect, paying for it). Students aren’t just grateful for anything that comes their way, and that includes technology. Neither should schools be satisfied with the technology

that is “good enough” for students in prison. This is a critical issue for the Department of Education to address in the “best interest of students determination.” If students are expending their limited Pell monies, they should have access to contemporary technology that works.

Ithaka researchers accurately note that corrections officials’ resistance to up-to-date technology practices “is more a question of culture than technology.”<sup>4</sup> The Department of Education should therefore use the FAFSA Simplification Act amendments’ “best interest of students” provision to encourage or require the adoption of functional technology for incarcerated students.<sup>5</sup> The Department’s own recommendations about “building the technological ecosystem of correctional education” provide a solid roadmap. In an August 2022 report,<sup>6</sup> the Department’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education called on states to:

- » Develop strategies to ensure equitable access to high-quality educational technology within facilities and across education levels, including no-cost access to devices and the internet in both housing units and classroom spaces
- » Support ongoing and expanded access to high-quality educational technology in correctional education
- » Provide dedicated IT staff for correctional education
- » Increase technical assistance for staff (especially the means to adopt standardized security practices similar to the Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP) model)
- » Evaluate what works in educational technology through further research

Our team echoes these recommendations and encourages the Department to codify them in its rulemaking.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Castro, E. L., Royer, C., Aguilar Padilla, E., & Gaskill, S. (2022, October 1). *Exploring the Experiences of Second Chance Pell Stakeholders: Introduction and Executive Summary*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison.

<sup>2</sup> See ITHAKA's efforts to develop a variety of offline and online options for access to resources from JSTOR's research databases, Humphreys, A., Hillegas, L., Pokharel, J., & Snyder, R. (2022). *Supporting the Academic Research Needs of Incarcerated Students: Building JSTOR's Offline Solution for Incarcerated Students*.

<sup>3</sup> See also Humphreys, et al, 2022, p. 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Tanaka & Cooper, 2022, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> In its public comment responding to the Department of Education's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking regarding Pell expansion, the Coalition for Carceral Access to Literature and Learning also calls on the Department to include student access to “library resources and services” as a measure of whether prison education programs are acting in “the best interest of students.” See Coalition for Carceral Access to Literature and Learning. (2022, August 26). *Public Comment: ED-2022-OPE-0062-0072*. Institutional Eligibility, Student Assistance General Provisions, and Federal Pell Grant Program: Docket ID ED-2021-OPE-0062, <https://www.regulations.gov/comment/ED-2022-OPE-0062-0072>. For similar statements regarding incarcerated students’ access to technology, see American Library Association Council. (2019, January 29). *Prisoners’ Right to Read: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*. American Library Council. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/prisonersrightoread>; Coalition for Carceral Access to Literature and Learning (C.A.L.L.). (2022, February 8). *Best Practices for E-Reader Tablets in Carceral Institutions*. PEN America. <https://pen.org/best-practices-for-e-reader-tablets-in-carceral-institutions/>. The American Library Council's recommendations include: “Correctional libraries should provide access to computers and internet content, permitted by the correctional facility's library policies.” C.A.L.L.'s best practices include prohibiting predatory pricing and providing reliable technology infrastructure for students (e.g. regular access to kiosks, reasonable upload and download speeds, and regular equipment maintenance and replacement).

<sup>6</sup> Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (2022, August). *Building the Technology Ecosystem for Correctional Education: Brief and Discussion Guide*. <https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/tech-ecosystem-correctional-ed.pdf>.