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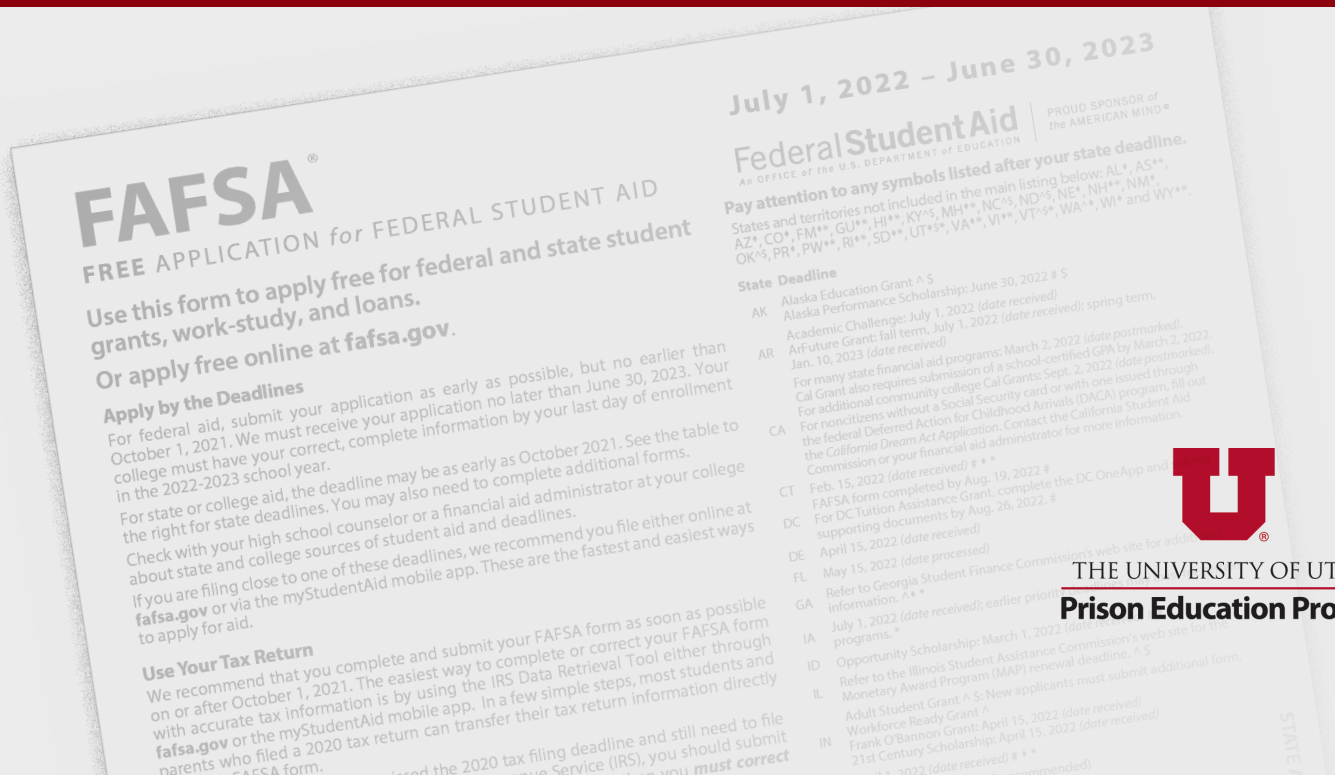
Pell is Not Enough

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS IN SECOND CHANCE PELL



THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
Prison Education Project

Briefs within the series: “Pell is Not Enough”:

1. Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell: Introduction and Executive Summary (this document)

2. “Who Can We Get Pell Approved?”: Administrator Perceptions and Practices Regarding Which Applicants Can Participate in Second Chance Pell

3. Second Chance Pell Recipients at Four Institutions: A Brief Descriptive Analysis

4. “Pell Doesn’t Cover the Whole Thing”: Administrators on the Costs of Providing Prison Higher Education

5. “Why Do I Have to Pay for That?”: Pell Recipients on the Costs of Participating in Prison Higher Education

6. “I Don’t Even Know What That Is”: Prison Higher Education Student and Alumni Understandings of the Pell Grant Among Four Institutions

7. “Where Is the Refund Going?”: Second Chance Pell Recipient Perceptions of Federal Student Aid

    a. Cost Breakdowns and Award Letters: Tuition Statements and Bills from Nine Institutions Participating in Second Chance Pell

    b. Most Frequently Asked Questions About Pell Grants from Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Students and Alumni

    c. What Does the FAFSA Simplification Act Address for Incarcerated Applicants?

8. “Why Am I Paying for This?”: Academic Experiences of Incarcerated Students Receiving Second Chance Pell at Four Institutions

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

10. Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell: Methodology, Appendix A

11. Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell: Student and Alumni Focus Group Characteristics Summary, Appendix B

12. Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell: Participating Institutional Profiles, Appendix C

Introduction and Executive Summary

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 Experimental Sites Initiative, originally launched in 2015. Conducted over three years, the research commenced in 2019 and includes data collected from staff, students, and alumni affiliated with 9 higher education institutions. This brief provides an introduction and executive summary for all reports included in the series titled, *Pell is Not Enough*.

A total of 12 research briefs comprise the series, each listed below by title. The series title represents a general theme that runs strongly throughout the research, pointing to a reality that practitioners of prison higher education must address: that is, the Pell Grant, in and of itself, is insufficient to address inequity issues in participation or provide high quality postsecondary education and student services during incarceration. Whether it is incarcerated students sharing experiences of using personal funds to purchase necessary supplies, or practitioners making the difficult decision to prioritize Pell-eligible students to cover tuition costs, or higher education administrators needing additional staff to facilitate federal student aid at penal facilities, *Pell is Not Enough* captures the sentiment of participants affiliated with 9 colleges and universities thus far involved in the federal Experiment. We provide empirical evidence gathered from over 100 incarcerated students and alumni and formerly incarcerated alumni, 20 practitioners of prison higher education, and 12 higher education administrators in the offices of financial aid, admissions or enrollment management, and registrar or related unit. With a reduced sample, we draw from disaggregated student-level information to calculate the total number of Pell recipients during a truncated timeframe and estimate their total share of overall enrollment. Using these data, we examine Second Chance Pell recipients by sex, race, and age, and whether participants in the first cohort ultimately earned a credential. Finally, we examine which, if any, credential(s) incarcerated participants earned using the Pell Grant.

We strongly encourage non-incarcerated practitioners to disseminate these reports to incarcerated people.[1]

Executive Summary

Key findings and recommendations of the research include the following, with great emphasis on the role of the staff at the Department of Education in providing immediate guidance for college and university staff. Below each recommendation are the titles and links to research reports that directly connect to these findings.

In general, incarcerated students have low levels of financial aid literacy and widespread misinformation about the Pell Grant, including suspicion about how college and university staff spend Pell funds. These misunderstandings are exacerbated by first-generation and first-time student status. Program staff's attempts to streamline federal student aid processes (e.g., re-routing mail to the college instead of the prison) often removes incarcerated students from the process, further detaching them from federal student aid information, expectations, and literacies. Corrections officials' restriction on internet access makes the federal student aid application and dissemination process

much more labor-intensive than it needs to be for all involved.

- *Recommendation:* Staff at the Department of Education should develop clear and consistent communication materials to be mailed directly to incarcerated Pell recipients. These materials should include basic information about federal student aid, the Pell Grant in particular, students' lifetime eligibility status, and their Student Aid Report (SAR).
- *Recommendation*: Prison higher education program staff should hold consistent, small group sessions to explain the rationale behind FAFSA questions and answers, emphasizing the importance of financial aid literacy for students' future academic endeavors. These staff members should be proactively transparent about the costs of tuition, including charges for fees, books, supplies, and equipment, and consistently provide students with billing information that clearly shows how Pell funds are applied to their accounts.
- *Recommendation:* The Department of Education should include in its "best interest of students" provision limited internet access for purposes of FAFSA completion and periodic review for status updates (especially in keeping with the FAFSA Simplification Act amendments' requirements for the Secretary of Education to make the FAFSA available through prevailing technology).

For more information, see the following research briefs in this series:

- ✓ **"I Don't Even Know What That Is": Prison Higher Education Student and Alumni Understandings of the Pell Grant Among Four Institutions**
- ✓ **"Where Is the Refund Going?": Second Chance Pell Recipient Perceptions of Federal Student Aid**
- ✓ **Cost Breakdowns and Award Letters: Tuition Statements and Bills from Nine Institutions Participating in Second Chance Pell**

Among the four institutions that provided student-level data, Pell recipients comprised almost one hundred percent (94%) of all incarcerated students enrolled at 2-year institutions compared to just over half (54%) among four-year institutions. These data suggest that the 2-year institutions in our sample have programs that are heavily dependent upon Pell monies to function. While the two 4-year institutions are less dependent upon Pell, the share of Pell recipients compared to total enrollment is significant at just over fifty percent. Despite these descriptive data demonstrating a significant reliance upon Pell, administrators expressed during interviews that applicants for the program do not need to be eligible to receive the Pell Grant to participate. Yet, program staff also reported that they lack resources to enroll interested individuals and applicants who are ineligible to receive Pell.

- *Recommendation:* Prison higher education staff should pursue multiple funding streams beyond the Pell Grant to adequately support the infrastructure necessary to operate high quality programs and account for students who are ineligible for Pell. Staff at the Department of Education should encourage such action by reviewing and maintaining current law and Second Chance Pell guidance requiring that Pell Grants "supplement not supplant" funding for higher education in prison.

For more information, see the following research briefs in this series:

- ✓ **Second Chance Pell Recipients at Four Institutions: A Brief Descriptive Analysis**
- ✓ **"Who Can We Get Pell Approved?": Administrator Perceptions and Practices Regarding Which Applicants Can Participate in Second Chance Pell**

#3

Students and practitioners expressed that the Pell Grant is insufficient to account for the costs of attendance. Students expressed that they lose prison wages when they enroll in college and end up paying for supplies and fees related to obtaining academic records like transcripts. Past due balances that colleges and universities require students to pay before admission or fulfilling transcript requests or charge to students when they are transferred to other prisons also saddle students with debt. Practitioners remarked that the Pell Grant is inadequate to compensate for the labor-intensive processes of recruiting, enrolling, advising, and supporting the success of incarcerated students, consequently threatening the quality and equity potential of programming efforts.

- *Recommendation:* College and university administrators should develop or streamline processes to grant in-district and in-state tuition, cancel past due balances, and waive transcript fees for currently incarcerated people. These processes should be standard for any institution that applies to become a prison education program through the Department of Education.
- *Recommendation:* Prison administrators should place transfer holds on students enrolled in prison higher education and practitioners should have plans in place for successful course completion when students are transferred. These plans should provide alternative and realistic ways for removed students to successfully complete courses in a timely manner consistent with the academic term (e.g., preventing students from receiving failing or incomplete grades because of attrition). Knowing that transfer holds will not prevent transfers entirely, college administrators should delay the distribution of Pell funds to prevent students from losing lifetime eligibility due to decisions made by prison officials.

For more information, see the following research briefs in this series:

- ✓ **"Who Can We Get Pell Approved?": Administrator Perceptions and Practices Regarding Which Applicants Can Participate in Second Chance Pell**
- ✓ **"Pell Doesn't Cover the Whole Thing": Administrators on the Costs of Providing Prison Higher Education**
- ✓ **"Why Do I Have to Pay for That?": Pell Recipients on the Costs of Participating in Prison Higher Education**
- ✓ **Second Chance Pell Recipients at Four Institutions: A Brief Descriptive Analysis**

#4

Among our sample of four institutions, there were 953 Pell recipients recorded during the academic years of 2017 to 2021. Recipients were primarily male, white, and of independent age under federal student aid guidelines. From fall 2017 to fall 2021, a total of 146 students across these four institutions earned 176 credentials. Slightly more than half of the credentials earned using Pell funds (51%) were certificates of completion in vocational and career and technical education pathways. Associate degrees comprised the second-largest share of credentials earned by students using Pell funds at 37%, distantly followed by bachelor's degrees at 10% and applied associate's and professional studies degrees at just 2%. Pell recipients at these institutions expressed suspicion regarding how their Pell funds were being spent by the college and desired more information and clarity about federal student aid and the costs of attendance.

- *Recommendation:* Programs and colleges and universities should find ways to track student progress while incarcerated and should be able to differentiate progress during and post-incarceration.
- *Recommendation:* Programs should continuously reflect on their admissions and recruiting practices to ensure they are targeting and admitting students that reflect the demographics of the incarcerated population at facilities in which they engage programming.

» *Recommendation:* More reliable information is needed regarding who receives federal student aid and who does not, and what specifically they have access to during incarceration.

For more information, see the following research briefs in this series:

✓ **Second Chance Pell Recipients at Four Institutions: A Brief Descriptive Analysis**

#5 The racial equity potential of providing Pell Grants during incarceration is thwarted by processes of pre-screening and prioritizing applicants who are Pell-eligible. Staff with the prison higher education program, the affiliated institution of higher education, and departments of corrections play critical roles in determining which incarcerated people have the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education. Among the 9 institutions in our sample, the majority of programming staff participate in processes of pre-screening for Pell eligibility and use eligibility status as a determining factor in admissions. The majority of institutions in our sample do not have the financial and staff resources necessary to assist applicants who are ineligible for Pell.

» *Recommendation:* Prison higher education program staff must secure ways to financially support the enrollment of applicants who are ineligible for Pell, including those who are unable to participate in loan rehabilitation.

» *Recommendation:* Much more robust and integrated data collection and evaluation processes should be in place and financially supported: data on who is denied for Pell, for what reasons, who they are (demographics), etc.

For more information, see the following research briefs in this series:

✓ **"Who Can We Get Pell Approved?": Administrator Perceptions and Practices Regarding Which Applicants Can Participate in Second Chance Pell**

#6 In general, students participating in Second Chance Pell desire higher quality programming. Students in our sample questioned the rigor of the classes in which they were enrolled and sought more direct interaction with their instructors, peers, and co-curricular staff such as academic advisors, career counselors, and tutors. Students expressed frustration with the level of technology access they currently have and described that access as inadequate, dysfunctional, and archaic. Many students referenced the Pell Grant when discussing program quality, questioning why their Pell funding does not cover features that would improve their student experience.

» *Recommendation:* The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) will serve a critical role in upcoming legislative requirements for prison higher education programs.[2] CHEA should develop guidance on accreditation requirements for high quality prison higher education programs in consultation with students, experts, and practitioners. This guidance should be publicly reported and accessible to all prison higher education participants and consider extant research on student engagement and academic quality.[3]

» *Recommendation:* The Department of Education should include in its "best interest of students" provision that prison higher education programs provide experiences commensurate with those that non-incarcerated students have at the institution. Particular attention should be paid toward curricular and co-curricular resources, expectations, and outcomes. Examples may include that programs provide evidence of the requirement that incarcerated students frequently and meaningfully interact with instructors, peers, and support staff like academic advisors and tutors. Further examples may include ensuring incarcerated students have access to quiet study areas in the prison outside of class, are

able to access student support services like financial counseling and mental health programming and participate in requisite research and internship opportunities for courses and programs of study.[4]

- *Recommendation:* Technology available to students in approved prison education programs should allow them both access to information for coursework and the opportunity to "develop the digital and information literacies they will need post release."[5] Technology access and experiences should mirror those of non-incarcerated students on campus.[6]

For more information, see the following research briefs in this series:

- ✓ "Why Am I Paying for This?": Academic Experiences of Incarcerated Students and Alumni Receiving Second Chance Pell at Four Institutions
- ✓ "It's Useless, to Put it Politely": Experiences with Technology Among Incarcerated Students Receiving Second Chance Pell at Four Institutions

Finally, issues of data quality and infrastructure must be urgently addressed. Administrators in our sample are presently ill-equipped to respond to data requests regarding incarcerated students and they desire guidance and support toward best practices. They face multiple challenges in identifying, collecting, storing, and reporting accurate student-level academic and financial aid information. Fulfilling our data requests required staff at multiple units on campus to communicate and strategize, often meeting for the first time, and working to integrate various data platforms.

- *Recommendation:* The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System should update its survey instrument and provide clear guidance to institutions regarding the reporting of incarcerated student information.
- *Recommendation:* The Department of Education should provide clear guidance on best practices and definitions regarding the collection of incarcerated student academic and financial aid information for prison higher education programs administering federal student aid.
- *Recommendation:* Additional research should examine how administrators flag or indicate incarceration status for enrolled students across program and institutional types. Institutions that apply to provide prison higher education programming through the Department of Education should be prepared to facilitate ethical data collection and reporting on incarcerated students.

For more information, see the following research briefs in this series:

- ✓ Second Chance Pell Recipients at Four Institutions: A Brief Descriptive Analysis
- ✓ Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell: Methodology, Appendix A

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

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Endnotes

[1] Our research team will gladly mail copies of the research to incarcerated participants. Contact us by email with the name, ID, and mailing address of recipients. Please be sure to confirm that intended recipients can indeed receive mailed research materials: researchcollaborativeHEP@utah.edu.

[2] For more, see: Custer, B. (April 13, 2022). *How Colleges and Universities Can Bring Pell Grant-Funded Programs Back to Prisons,* Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-colleges-and-universities-can-bring-pell-grant-funded-programs-back-to-prisons/.

[3] For Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) specifically related to higher education in prison, see Brick, M. S. & Ajinkya, J. (2020, September). *Supporting Success: The Higher Education in Prison Key Performance Indicator Framework.* https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ihep_kpi_report_rd5_web_3.pdf.

[4] The Institution for Higher Education Policy's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework for higher education in prison has four categories: 1) Student Success Outcomes 2) Academic Quality 3) Civic Engagement; and 4) Soft Skills [sic] (Brick & Ajinkya, 2021). Several of these KPIs are reflected in the factors to be considered under the FSA amendments "best interest determination" (job placement, earnings, rates of recidivism, and instructor experience and credentials). However, student engagement and access to support services and professional development opportunities do not appear in the amendments. Shared definitions of student engagement increasingly include, " interaction with peers, instructor, counselors, coaches, and the like." For more, see: Mainstay (2021). *Defining Student Engagement: The Search for Higher Education's Most Elusive Success Metric,* p. 13. Retrieved from https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/2016543/001-DefiningStudent%20Engagement-WP-vf.pdf.

[5] Tanaka, K. & Cooper, D. (2020, May). *Advancing Technological Equity for Incarcerated College Students: Examining the Opportunities and Risks.* Ithaka S+R, p. 32.

[6] 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,* p. 12.