

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

*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, originally launched in 2015.<sup>1</sup> The Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison at the University of Utah conducted the study over the course of three years, collecting data from staff, students, and alumni affiliated with 11 participating institutions of higher education.<sup>2</sup> This Appendix provides a methodological description of the study.

### RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS

With the expansion of Pell, there will be more colleges and universities entering the prison space. Despite increased visibility and celebration, there is much yet to learn about the facilitation of federal student aid in the form of Pell Grants to incarcerated people. Specifically, our team was interested in the perspectives of three main groups: students and alumni, practitioners of the prison higher education program, and administrators in higher education in the key offices of financial aid, admissions or enrollment management, and the registrar or related unit. We wanted to investigate what participants did regarding Pell, how they did it, and what they needed to do their work better. Additionally, we were invested in learning the academic progress of incarcerated Pell recipients and worked with college and university administrators to collect de-identified student-level data.

The following questions guided the research:

- » How do key administrators and practitioners of prison higher education describe their experience with the implementation and process of the federal Second Chance Pell Experiment?
- » How do students enrolled in prison higher education describe their experiences with the engagement of higher education, and applying for and accessing federal student aid?
- » How can de-identified student-level data (e.g., admissions, enrollment, grades, GPA, retention, completion, and demographics) inform questions regarding the experiences of key administrators, practitioners, and students in prison higher education?
- » What do practitioners wish they would have known about Pell Grants in prison prior to participation, and what recommendations do they have regarding Pell expansion?

## **ANALYTIC APPROACH**

The research team held weekly meetings for the duration of the project. We used these meetings as an opportunity to check-in, plan, and discuss the research. We conducted qualitative and descriptive analysis and drew from four main sources of data:

1. de-identified, disaggregated student-level information from institutions of higher education
2. individual and small group interviews with college-in-prison program staff and campus administrators at the affiliated institution of higher education in Admissions or Enrollment Management, Financial Aid, and Registrar or related unit
3. focus groups with currently and formerly incarcerated Pell recipients and program alumni who are currently receiving or did receive the Pell Grant in prison and
4. incarcerated student tuition statements

## **QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

The qualitative portion of this project was designed to understand the perspectives and experiences of Second Chance Pell participants, including students, alumni, program staff, and higher education administrators. The research was considerably impacted by COVID-19, notably restrictions on travel and higher education program staffs' inability to remain active in prison facilities. Consequently, in 2020 the research team amended the original research design and scope to accommodate COVID-related restrictions and a truncated timeline. In total, the qualitative analysis draws from interviews conducted with participants at 11 institutions of higher education.

The research team conducted the majority of interviews via Zoom, with the exception of three in-person site visits conducted in 2021 and 2022. We used different interview protocols for each participant group; the protocol for campus administrators consisted of questions about their general experiences administering Pell funds as part of the Experiment, suggestions for improving the process, and what resources they need to do their jobs better. The incarcerated student and alumni protocol included questions about students' prior college experiences, knowledge about federal student aid and Pell Grants, experiences in and with the Experiment, and experiences with prison higher education more broadly. Protocol for prison higher education staff inquired about their general experiences of participation in and with the Experiment, what challenges they have encountered and how they have responded, and what suggestions they have for improvement. We asked all participant groups to comment on what incarcerated people need to be stronger college students and how the Department of Education could improve the process of facilitating Pell Grants in prison. Across all participant groups, we also focused on what additional things (e.g., resources, labor, funding) might be needed to improve their experiences in and with the Experiment in particular, and with supporting the facilitation of Pell Grants in prison more broadly.

For site visits, program staff on-site assisted researchers in gaining access to eight different prisons in three different states and recruiting over 100 currently incarcerated students and program alumni to participate in focus groups. Ahead of the visits, our team provided a research description to program staff to assist in recruitment; we did not offer interview questions in advance. Two researchers from our team were present for each focus group and small group interview; one team member led the discussion and the other member took notes. Research pairs debriefed after each interview or focus group, recording and transcribing immediate reflections for later analysis. At each site, our team inquired whether we could

monetarily compensate incarcerated participants. Each department of corrections denied our request to financially compensate participants for their time and expertise. After on-site data collection, our team designed follow up communication for incarcerated students and alumni. This communication included a thank you letter and a financial aid fact sheet that provided contact information for researchers and addressed many questions raised in focus groups.

Our research team interviewed seven non-incarcerated alumni of the Experiment, meaning that they received the Pell Grant previously during incarceration while enrolled at a participating institution of higher education. For recruitment, we relied upon prison higher education program staff to provide us with names of potential interviewees. We then emailed the list of contacts and scheduled interviews with anyone who expressed interest. Alumni participants received a \$250 Amazon gift card for their time and expertise.

Interview analysis was ongoing throughout the duration of the project. All researchers carefully reviewed interview transcripts and associated researcher notes written during the interview or debrief session. We separately conducted initial open coding across these materials. Then, we shared preliminary interpretations and discussed findings during weekly team meetings. In total, our team conducted 32 interviews and 21 focus groups with 138 participants of prison higher education.

## **DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS**

Our research team worked with a subset of four institutions to gather de-identified student-level data. Working with institutional research offices at each institution, our team collected information on student background and demographics, enrollment, academic progress, financial aid, and completion. We designed an Excel template with pre-populated fields and worked closely with staff at participating institutions to complete the template with their institutional data, often holding multiple meetings to talk through questions, problem solve, and provide clarity. Using data software, we analyzed information to conduct descriptive analyses.

Interpreting and cleaning the student data required significant resources from our team and multiple follow-up communications with staff. In some instances, the credit hours reported did not include situations where a student was removed, withdrew, or failed a course, even though the Pell Grant could have been used to pay for these courses. Because the quality of some student-level information was questionable, we were unable to provide essential information regarding credit hours, GPA, and completion.

One of the greatest implications of working with institutional leaders and practitioners for this descriptive analysis was learning how challenging it was for staff to gather accurate student-level academic and financial aid information for participants in Second Chance Pell. Across all sites, institutional staff needed to collect student-level data housed among various platforms - if indeed such data were readily available. In at least one case, staff needed to create multiple new queries and infrastructure for the collection of data. Additionally, it was challenging for staff with programs that began prior to the Experiment and will continue to be an issue moving forward. Thus, fulfilling our data requests routinely required staff at multiple units on campus to communicate and strategize about how best to gather accurate academic and financial aid data about incarcerated students. We calculated an adjusted completion rate to examine how many students in each program's first cohort ultimately earned a credential. To capture all the student progress

reported to our team, we had to consider data from outside the timeframe of Second Chance Pell. We calculated our adjusted completion rate based on the first year each program existed versus the first year they participated in the Experiment. Even for the two programs that existed post-Pell, one did not begin offering courses immediately, which resulted in start dates to differ for each Site. Disregarding data prior to Pell would have neglected a significant loss of progress from students at 4-year institutions.

In addition to the present analysis, our team attempted to calculate the following across each site: total credits earned by participants in Second Chance Pell by term, GPA by term, and Pell monies awarded per term. We chose not to include these calculations here because of issues with data credibility and ultimately, the ways staff at institutions of higher education reported some data. For example, we attempted to work with sites to determine what Pell monies students were awarded by term and year as this would have provided important insight into students' overall lifetime eligibility status (since we could not access their individual federal student aid accounts). Our request required significant labor on behalf of staff at participating institutions and so we chose not to require it. Additionally, because staff do not have robust mechanisms in place to distinguish among currently incarcerated students, currently incarcerated alumni, and non-incarcerated alumni, calculating total credits earned per student proved difficult and messy given our inclusion criteria. Finally, and this area requires much more additional research, is the difficulty in calculating overall GPA. There is evidence in our research and others that prison higher education suffers from grade inflation, meaning that instructors assign incarcerated students higher grades than what their work honestly represents. Because of longstanding and stubborn issues with attrition, course grades and overall GPA for prison higher education should be calculated and interpreted with caution. We chose not to include those analyses here.

Challenges around data collection for incarcerated students and adequate infrastructure could be at least partially mediated by federal reporting requirements. However, at present, the Department of Education does not require Title IV eligible institutions of higher education to report incarceration status of student enrollees. Thus, administrators at colleges and universities used various mechanisms to identify incarcerated students because our data request was the first time they had been asked to provide such detailed data. Institutional leaders in our sample identified incarcerated Pell recipients through the application of site codes to academic transcripts or flagging students in management systems like Banner. Financial aid data was housed separately and therefore needed to be pulled and integrated into one excel file. These data integrating processes required much time and effort on behalf of staff.

Below, Table 1 provides an inventory of all data collection methods engaged and number of participants per site.

Table 1

**METHODS INVENTORY PER SITE**

	Site								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
<b>Institutional Type</b>	2-year, Public	4-year, Public	2-year, Public	2-year, Public	4-year, Private not-for-profit	4-year, Private not-for-profit	2-year, Public	2-year, Public	2-year, Public
<b>Mode of Instruction</b>	Distance-based	In-person	Distance-based	Distance-based	In-person	In-person	In-person	In-person	On-site
<b>Financial Aid</b>	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N
<b>Registrar</b>	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N
<b>Admissions</b>	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N
<b>HEP Program Staff</b>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
<b>Other Administrators</b>	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
<b>Total Administrative Interviewees</b>	6	3	3	6	3	1	3	4	3
<b>Student &amp; Alumni Focus Groups/ Interviews</b>	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N
<b>Total Number of Student Interviewees</b>	22	7	47	23	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Interview Debrief Sessions</b>	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y
<b>De-Identified Student Data</b>	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N
<b>On-Site Visit</b>	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N

Administrator Interviews

Student Interviews/Focus Groups

## RESEARCH TEAM

The Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison at the University of Utah is a multidisciplinary group committed to issues of equity and quality in the field of prison higher education. The following individuals comprised the research team at various points during the study:

Erin L. Castro, PhD, Principal Investigator

Caixa E. Royer, JD, PhD, Co-Principal Investigator

Estefanie Aguilar Padilla, MStat, Graduate Researcher

Stephanie Gaskill, PhD, Research Associate

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Questions regarding the project are welcome and can be directed to: Erin L. Castro, PhD, [erin.castro@utah.edu](mailto:erin.castro@utah.edu).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Notice Inviting Postsecondary Institutions to Participate in Experiments under the Experimental Site Initiative; Federal Student Financial Assistance Programs Under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, As Amended. 80 Fed.Reg. 148 (August 3, 2015). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2015-08-03/html/2015-18994.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> This study is approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Utah, (IRB 00124607).