

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

Launched in 2015, the Second Chance Pell Experiment allowed a select number of institutions of higher education to provide Pell Grants to eligible incarcerated students. Seven years later, and on the cusp of Pell expansion, incarcerated people express hope that Pell will remove financial barriers to their pursuit of higher education. Data from existing Second Chance Pell sites, however, suggests that even Pell eligible incarcerated students bear a significant amount of the cost of their education.

This research brief draws upon three years of data collection through a national mixed-methods project, *Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell*.¹ Here we highlight the perspectives of Pell recipients enrolled at four institutions of higher education participating in the federal Experiment. Specifically, we focus on students' perceptions of the costs of postsecondary education and the Pell Grant. Overall, students report that they incur many expenses to participate in postsecondary education that are not covered by Pell. These costs include academic supplies, unexpected damage to equipment and devices, postsecondary transcript and associated postage fees, and previous balances owed to colleges and universities. Additionally, reduction in wages for loss of employment due to enrollment in education poses significant hurdles to student success. Finally, students shared numerous stories about how physical transfers that remove them from the prison saddle them with debt owed to the institution of higher education. In what follows, we expand upon each of these costs that the Pell Grant alone is insufficient to address. Note that all student and alumni names are pseudonyms.

“WE DON'T EVEN GET ALL OF THE THINGS THAT WE NEED”: STUDENT COSTS FOR SUPPLIES AND TEXTBOOKS

Though administrators suggest that their programs often “absorb” what Pell does not cover, students do have out-of-pocket costs. Students at Site D receive textbooks but rely on family support and institutional wages to purchase supplies from the commissary, which often does not have the items they need in stock. “It should fit into the cost,” said one student. “They won't give us paper.” Students at Sites A, B, and C receive a set amount of supplies per semester in addition to their textbooks. Some students indicated that the supplies allocated are sufficient. “They provide everything we need,” said one student at Site A. One student at Site C was pleasantly surprised to receive supplies - he thought he would have to buy them himself from the commissary. Still, students must pay out-of-pocket if their needs exceed the supplies provided. One alum from Site B suggested that there were “ancillary costs” but that he and other students were “too focused” on seizing the opportunity to obtain a college degree to worry about them. “We had tried for years to have a program like this,” he said. “If I had to buy paper, pens, whatever, who cares?” However, several students at Site C expressed frustration that they were offered only “the bare minimum” and had to buy essential supplies (e.g. a protractor for math) themselves.

Students across all sites voiced disappointment that they could not keep their textbooks and indicated that they end up purchasing books on their own for later use. Alums from Site B suggested they would have liked to keep their books but that they understood they needed to return them to keep down

program costs. However, students at Sites C and D resented the practice of charging students for books, reusing them, but still charging the next set of students for those same books. “There’s cost saving that is taking place,” said one Site C student, “but the student’s not reaping any benefit from the cost-saving.” “We’ve been granted a certain amount of money to supply all of these different things,” said another Site C student. “And we’re not getting some of those things, and we’re not keeping some of those things. So, where is this extra funding that’s coming in semester to semester actually going?” Students are paying for books they have to return and then buying those books again with their own money. Charles at Site D described similar circumstances. For some classes, students receive a bound, printed version of an open source textbook but then have to return the bindings at the end of the semester. “Why do I have to pay for that?” he asked.

Alums from Site B had access to a computer lab while incarcerated, but each student at Site A and C is assigned a device for downloading and completing assignments in living areas within the prison. Students at Site D were aware that the program received a sizeable donation to purchase laptops but insisted that only a small portion (100 out of 400) students have access to them. “They get this donation,” said Wesley, “but [have] nothing to show for it.” Those who do are expected to pay for damage to the devices, as are students at Site A. One Site A focus group explained this kind of charge is compounded by the fact that the state attaches a six percent fee for every monetary transaction an incarcerated person engages in. A \$400 laptop replacement charge would actually cost \$424. Given low prison wages and possible lack of support from family and friends, this extra \$24 is not inconsequential.

“THIS IS SOMETHING YOU WILL HAVE TO PAY FOR”: STUDENT COSTS FOR TRANSCRIPTS AND PAST DUE BALANCES

Many educational institutions charge fees to send official transcripts, and programs often do not have designated resources for such purposes. A program coordinator at Site A described the predicament of students who have dozens of credits from other colleges but do not have the money to obtain their transcripts and transfer those credits. “I think they just think someone’s gonna pay for it,” the program coordinator said. “In reality, this is something you will have to pay for, because...I can’t pull it out of my pocket and pay for it for you, and there’s not a fund that pays for that.” A student at Site A recalled that she had the ability to pay for her own transcript but that another woman could not afford to do so. The program coordinators were ultimately able to procure the transcript (though the student did not explain how). “But it was harder if you don’t have that money to cover it,” she concluded.

Students also have to pay balances from their previous attendance at the institution that is offering postsecondary programming in prison before they can enroll. A financial aid representative at Site D cited student debt to the college itself as a significant challenge in administering Second Chance Pell. She and other administrators are aware that students generally make well under a dollar per hour at their prison jobs, “so there’s no way they can pay the school what it’s owed.” Only recently have administrators at Site D begun discussing ways to allow students to

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begin taking classes even when they have a past due balance at the college. Pell dollars cannot cover this cost, and institutions do not “absorb” it - it falls on the student.

Some sites successfully navigate these hurdles to eliminate such costs for students. A Site B alum accumulated almost an associate degree worth of credits prior to incarceration but could not obtain his transcripts because he had a student loan in default and owed a fine for an overdue library book from one college he attended. He was unable to transfer existing credits and had to begin his degree progress over again in prison. It was only when he was released that he was able to begin making loan payments, obtain his transcripts, access Pell funding to finish his bachelor’s degree, and ultimately graduate with a master’s degree. He was not even a fully matriculated student until he began attending college on the outside. Site B does not designate funds to pay past fees or defaulted loans, but if it required students to be Pell eligible, this student’s inability to pay his library fee and make loan payments would have prevented him from pursuing higher education in prison.

Other costs to students are more indirect. Students in vocational programs at Site A earn an institutional wage while completing their certifications, but students pursuing academic degrees are not allowed to hold a prison job or receive financial compensation while they are in school. Many students have to choose between school and survival in prison. “I definitely want to be able to take care of myself,” said one student. “But the college classes are important, too.”²

“WE END UP PAYING”: STUDENT COSTS FOR DISCIPLINARY TRANSFERS

Students can also be charged if they are transferred mid-semester for disciplinary reasons. An administrator at Site G, a two-year institution, suggests that staff initiate “returns of funds” for students who must suddenly drop classes for disciplinary reasons in order to “preserve their Pell eligibility” and ensure they do not owe any money. However, staff at Site E, a four-year institution indicate that they expend students’ Pell funds if they are transferred for disciplinary reasons because, “we still paid for the professor to come in, etc., etc.” During her orientation, the head program coordinator at Site A explicitly warns students about the consequences of disciplinary transfers. She explains to students that if they stop classes mid-semester for any reason, their Pell funds will be returned to the Department of Education and they will have to pay a bill to the college to return to class. Several students cited this scenario as the main reason they might owe any money for their education. “If we were to be pulled from the classes,” said one student, “I know that we could potentially have to owe that money back.” “We have to stay in it or end up paying later on,” said another. “And stay out of trouble.” One student who has recruited others to the program tells prospective students that they will have to pay the college back if they drop their classes. “You’re rewarded in the end,” he says, “but it’s going to hurt you financially if you just quit.” The program coordinator told one focus group of students that she is “stern” because she never wants to “leave [them] in debt.” Site B, however, accounts for the possibility of disciplinary transfers by waiting until the end of the semester to bill out for students who receive Pell. The program director can easily reinstate students without billing them because she does not draw down their Pell funds if they are transferred in the middle of the term.

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Conclusion

The Department of Education limits incarcerated students' cost of attendance to tuition, fees, books, and supplies.³ Yet as demonstrated by student focus group data, students incur a broad range of expenses while participating in postsecondary education, including supplementing inadequate supplies; procuring transcripts and postage; paying past due balances; losing institutional wages to attend school; and forfeiting Pell funding due to disciplinary transfers. The Department must consider these factors when considering the cost of attendance inside of a prison. Moreover, the Department should hold schools accountable in how they calculate fees and charges for books and supplies to ensure students get what they pay for. Schools, in turn, must take on the challenge of providing postsecondary educational opportunities to incarcerated students by pursuing multiple sources of funding and leveraging their own institutional policies to adequately staff programs, cancel past due balances, and eliminate the practice of charging balances to students in the case of correctional transfers, disciplinary or otherwise.

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Endnotes

¹ For more, see: 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.

² See Jarrod Wall's extensive work on the topic of cost of attendance. For example, Wall, J. (2021, July 28). *Living in Prison is Not Free: Cost of Attendance and HEP*. [Conference session]. Racial Equity Professional Institute: Advocacy, Access, and Accountability. <https://edtrust.org/event/racial-equity-professional-institute-advocacy-access-and-accountability/>.

³ Federal Student Aid (2021). Chapter 2: Cost of Attendance (Budget). *2020-2021 Federal Student Aid Handbook*. <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/fsa-handbook/2021-2022/vol3/ch2-cost-attendance-budget>.