

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

Launched in 2015, the Second Chance Pell Experiment allows a select number of institutions of higher education to provide Pell Grants to incarcerated students. To date, much of what is known about the implementation and impact of Second Chance Pell comes from the perspective of non-incarcerated practitioners. In this research brief, we draw on focus groups conducted with incarcerated students and formerly incarcerated alumni of prison higher education programs who participated in or are actively participating in the Second Chance Pell Experiment. Data were collected as part of the mixed methods study, *Exploring the Experience of Participants in Second Chance Pell*, conducted by the Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison at the University of Utah.¹ Our research team conducted focus groups with over 100 currently and formerly incarcerated students and alumni who enrolled at one of the four institutions of higher education and received the Pell Grant.

In this brief we examine student and alumni understandings of federal student aid. Specifically, we explore their perceptions and understandings of the Pell Grant, eligibility for the Pell Grant - including lifetime eligibility used (LEU) limits - and how these perceptions might influence students’ postsecondary educational journeys. Overall, our findings demonstrate that:

- » Approximately half of focus group participants did not know about need-based financial aid until they were incarcerated. Many of these students expressed that they would have attended college earlier if they had known about such assistance and how to access it.
- » A vocal minority of students stated that they were eligible for the Pell Grant based on financial need. However, most students had only a partial understanding of why they could access the Pell Grant in prison, and others offered completely inaccurate explanations.
- » Very few students knew about lifetime eligibility used and how many semesters they have remaining to access Pell Grants. Even students who have considerable levels of familiarity with the Pell Grant do not understand these limits.
- » Students with college experience prior to incarceration or with parents or guardians who attended college had greater understanding about federal student aid than first-generation and first-time students. However, all students lacked key knowledge about federal student aid.

“VERY FEW STUDENTS KNEW ABOUT LIFETIME ELIGIBILITY USED AND HOW MANY SEMESTERS THEY HAVE REMAINING FOR THE PELL GRANT.”

For ease of identification, the below table provides information regarding institutional-type and instructional mode for all sites included in the research. Sites with an asterisk indicate those where our research team interviewed students and alumni and are included in this analysis:

Table 1

INSTITUTIONAL TYPE AND INSTRUCTIONAL MODE BY SITE

Site	Institutional Type	Instructional Mode
A*	2-year, Public	Distance-based
B*	4-year, Public	In-person
C*	2-year, Public	Distance-based
D*	2-year, Public	In-person
E	4-year, Private	In-person
F	4-year, Private	In-person
G	2-year, Public	In-person
H	2-year, Public	In-person
I	2-year, Public	In-person

*Sites with student and alumni data.

In what follows, we describe each of these findings in detail, drawing from focus group data with incarcerated students and alumni and formerly incarcerated alumni of prison higher education programs. All students and alumni names are pseudonyms.

STUDENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE PELL GRANT PRIOR TO INCARCERATION

Of the approximately 40 students across all sites who directly addressed their knowledge of financial aid prior to enrolling in a Second Chance Pell Program, about ten students knew about need-based financial aid based on their own college experiences before incarceration. Five students had some general ideas about the costs of college from friends and family members; one of these students knew the general dollar amount of the Pell Grant based on conversations with his ex-partner. Four students knew about need-based grants prior to incarceration but could not access them, either because their family income was too high or because they could not navigate the financial aid process. Sofia at Site A (2-year, public) said: "I've always been aware that there's grants out there for people, but I never even knew how to find those avenues." Twelve students only found out about need-based financial aid during incarceration; two among this group were prepared to pay out of pocket for correspondence courses in prison until they learned about the Second Chance Pell Experiment. Eight students initially thought that they needed to enlist in

the military, win a scholarship, or find a high-paying job to cover the costs of college. Several students stated that they would have pursued higher education before incarceration if they had known more about available financial aid.

Other students indicated that they understood Pell eligibility based on their experiences applying for financial aid while incarcerated. Brandon and Jeremiah at Site C (2-year, public) explained that they were initially ineligible to receive the Pell Grant during incarceration because their parents' income was too high, as did Elliot and Jeremy at Site A (2-year, public). Jeremy was surprised to learn that the Pell Grant is "so dependent on your parents' money" and that the income threshold for eligibility is relatively low. Cody and Sofia recounted their challenges documenting for the FAFSA that, because they are incarcerated, they do not have access to the entirety of their military salary and work release wages, respectively, suggesting some knowledge that their eligibility depended on their financial need. A few students at Sites A, C, and D (all 2-year, publics), however, remembered that the Pell Grant did not entail automatic financial obligations and did not acknowledge the grant is based on demonstrated need. Manuel, who was recruited into the program by Royce (a fellow student), also described the Pell Grant as a grant rather than a loan and shared that he assures prospective students that the cost of their classes will be covered. "All you need to know is that you filled out your FAFSA and they're going to pay for your school," he says. "If you're over 24 and you're in prison, then you're going to get it paid for."

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STUDENT DESCRIPTIONS OF PELL GRANT ELIGIBILITY

One of the first questions our research team asked focus group participants was to describe the Pell Grant and why they are eligible for it. At each site, there were always a few students who accurately stated that they were eligible to receive Pell because of their financial need. At Site C (2-year, public), for example, eight students out of the 48 who participated in focus groups used language that indicated that they knew Pell Grants were a form of need-based aid. Tyler at Site C succinctly described Pell as, "a federally funded program that helps you to go to school when you're financially strapped or can't provide the funds yourself." Others knew that they were eligible, "based on income" or "making under a certain amount each year." At Site A (2-year, public), Edward and Thomas similarly defined the Pell Grant as government funding for college based on "need" and "income," as did Tim, Nicholas, and JT at Site D (2-year, public), and Paul, Hoc, and Reid at Site B (4-year, public). Some students' definitions were more accurate and precise than others. Hoc, from Site B for example, "knew that the average Joe wouldn't be able to pursue education without a Pell Grant," indicating some knowledge that Pell is need-based financial aid but not necessarily that it comes from the federal government.

Other students did not have this level of clarity about why they could access the Pell Grant during incarceration. One student at Site D (2-year, public) thought that he was eligible for the Pell Grant because of his military service; another student thought that he was offered a Pell Grant as a "second chance" during incarceration. A Site C (2-year, public) student, Roy, offered a concise history of the Pell Grant and how the 1994 ban, "took pretty much all college away from prisoners for a long time." Yet he did not understand why he in particular was eligible for Pell. Several other Site C students answered "not a whole lot" or "not much" when asked what they knew about the Pell Grant or why they were eligible.

As part of our protocol, our team asked students if they had any questions about the Pell Grant that we could address during our time together. Overall, the most frequently asked question among focus group participants was if and how students could continue to access Pell Grants upon release, with considerable focus on incarceration status. These questions indicate that students are not being provided accurate information regarding Pell Grant eligibility criteria specifically related to incarcerated status.



STUDENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF LIFETIME ELIGIBILITY USAGE (LEU)

Students were less likely to accurately describe lifetime eligibility usage (LEU) restrictions than they were to correctly explain why they were able to access the Pell Grant during incarceration. At Site C (2-year, public) for every student who understood they could only access Pell for a limited number of semesters, there was another student who knew nothing about the lifetime eligibility cap. “I don’t even know what that is,” said one student. Among students who shared that they knew about lifetime eligibility with Pell, many thought that they were restricted to ten rather than twelve semesters. One student knew about Pell Grant limits from previous experience and another student learned about lifetime eligibility in prison from a college administrator. Other students had calculated their available semesters themselves and shared that “nothing formal” from the prison higher education program, the prison, or the Department of Education had informed their calculation or understanding.

Only one student at Site A (2-year, public) knew the term lifetime eligibility. “I’m pretty sure it’s about six years of guaranteed education if you so choose to use it,” said Edward. Several students at Sites A and B (4-year, public) initially interpreted the term “lifetime eligibility” to mean that they had access to unlimited Pell such that they could pursue graduate degrees. Some students at Site A joked that they could become “rocket scientists” using Pell. A few more discussed limitations on Pell use upon hearing the definition. Albert recalled learning from the program coordinator that, “what I’ve got left on my Pell Grant now should carry over” for a two-year program he wants to enroll in once he is released. Jeremy and Elliot remembered receiving a notice (likely their SAR) in the mail regarding their remaining eligibility but did not remember how many semesters of eligibility they had remaining. Most other students were unaware of lifetime eligibility usage at all.

It is important to clarify that the Pell Grant can only be used to fund undergraduate education. Paul at Site B did not give much thought to the nature of Pell funding until he discovered that he could not access it for a graduate degree. “I was told that it was going to cost me money,” he said. “So, because of that, I was kind of discouraged.” As a result, many students at Site A (2-year, public) who completed their associate degree shared that they continued to enroll in whatever programming was available without regard to how doing so might impact their ability to pursue specific career goals in the future. However, upon learning about lifetime eligibility usage, some students began to reconsider their plans. “If we’re only eligible for twelve semesters or six years, and you do something besides that first,” Jack realized, “it automatically basically takes you out of the running for a bachelor’s degree.” It is important to note that prior to this discussion, Jack did have some understanding of how to access Pell Grants upon release. “If

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we leave,” he explained, “we can continue with the year that we were approved, but after that, then you have to try to go through a more traditional route of whatever you do out in the streets.” Even relatively informed students have significant gaps in their knowledge about Pell Grants and lifetime eligibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

These data indicate that the Department of Education and prison higher education program staff do not provide participants in and alumni of Second Chance Pell programs with adequate information regarding federal student aid and Pell Grant eligibility. Inaccurate information and general misunderstandings of how the Pell Grant works leaves incarcerated students and alumni with many questions regarding federal student aid and how to finance college pathways. Additionally, this lack of knowledge can lead students to expend their Pell monies on multiple programs during incarceration without realizing that doing so can limit their access to Pell Grants for future postsecondary education and career goals. Such misunderstandings can have detrimental impacts on postsecondary and career pathways as well as the success of Pell availability during incarceration.

Recommendations:

- » Incarcerated applicants and students deserve to make informed choices about how to use their limited amount of Pell eligibility with their specific academic and career goals.
- » 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, and students’ lifetime eligibility status.
- » Prison higher education staff should offer clear guidance and pathways for students who are released mid-term and mid-award year to continue receiving Pell. The complicated nature of this task (e.g. helping a student complete a semester when they have been released) may make offering such guidance and pathways difficult for students with a high student to staff ratio.

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Endnotes

¹ All names published here are pseudonyms. To learn more about focus group participants, see: Aguilar Padilla, E., Gaskill, S., & Castro, E. L. (2022, October 1). *Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell: Student and Alumni Focus Group Characteristics Summary, Appendix B*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison. For more on the larger research project, 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.