

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

The Second Chance Pell Experiment allows a select number of higher education institutions 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 practitioners. 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 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 Second Chance Pell among select sites.¹

In this research brief, we share findings from incarcerated students, alumni, and formerly incarcerated participants regarding their academic experiences during enrollment in postsecondary education and participation in Second Chance Pell. Specifically, we find that:

- » Student experiences of rigor in coursework are site-specific and mediated by modes of instruction; some students question the academic integrity of their courses and believe that courses are “dumbed down.”
- » Regardless of the mode of instruction, incarcerated students want more direct, consistent, and meaningful interaction with instructors.
- » Incarcerated students desire more meaningful interaction with peers; they often rely on one another for guidance and tutoring to be successful in coursework but face considerable barriers to peer interaction.
- » Students do not have access to academic advising services. For students at the three sites that do, advisors help them follow credential pathways offered in the prison rather than creating plans to pursue their individualized career goals upon.²
- » Incarcerated students sometimes reference the Pell Grant when discussing program quality, questioning why their Pell funding does not cover standard features that would improve their college experience.

Note that all student and alumni names in this brief are pseudonyms. 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.

STUDENT AND ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE QUALITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANINGFUL INSTRUCTOR INTERACTION

In general, students across all sites characterized classes as more effective and meaningful when they had direct interaction with instructors. Some students at Site D (2-year, public) with in-person onsite instruction, questioned the academic quality of course offerings in the prison despite having the presence of instructors in the facility. Charles and Wesley described their classes as “elementary” and a “dumbed down version” of what they would take on campus. TJ said the courses did not seem “completely legitimate,” and Alex felt like they were “just another group” in the prison, like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Regardless of instructional mode, students desired more time with instructors and closely associated program rigor and quality with instructor interaction. Students in face-to-face courses appreciated the quality of their interactions with instructors but wanted more frequent meetings, several times per week rather than one three-hour class. At sites with distance-based models, however, some students suggested that they would be satisfied if their instructors would answer their electronic messages in a timely fashion. Students’ inability to pose questions directly to their instructors and receive time sensitive feedback made it difficult to learn from mistakes and improve their skills in the timeframe of the course. Students requested face-to-face meetings with their professors, but shared that they would settle for virtual synchronous meetings to facilitate interaction.

At the same time, students at Site A (2-year, public) frame courses as challenging. Terrance admitted that he found some of his early classes to be relatively simple but struggled with his biology course. “That’s the aha moment,” he said, “is that it’s not going to always be as easy as I think it’s going to be. It’s gonna require a little more dedication, a little more I need to focus on this.” Others at this site imply distance learning lends itself to academic dishonesty. Edward questioned the level of “legitimate honesty among staff and teachers,” suggesting that failing students who did not meet expectations would “throw their numbers off for their boss.” He felt that online learning without direct oversight from instructors on-site allowed students to complete work for one another. He said, “I just don’t feel like there’s much academic integrity without in-person learning.” For Edward, the presence of instructors on site ensures that students are doing their own work and earning the grades they receive.

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Even when course content is rigorous, the lack of direct interaction with instructors, especially face-to-face teaching, detracts from students’ perceptions of course quality. Conversely, even when classes seem “dumbed down,” the presence of instructors on-site contributes to students’ sense that they have access to a meaningful college experience. In both cases, students desire more frequent and sustained interactions with instructors to understand basic course content, build relationships, and to reap the intellectual and emotional benefits of instructors’ real-time presence in the classroom.

“THERE’S ALMOST NO TEACHER INTERACTION”: STUDENT INTERACTIONS WITH INSTRUCTORS

However, students at Site D (2-year, public) expressed almost universal appreciation for the efforts of their instructors. Semisi characterized instructors as “genuine and caring” for “taking time out of their day to teach us at night.” Their “dedication” makes their courses “seem like a college experience” because they treat incarcerated students like they would any others but also make them feel particularly “valued.” Others agreed that the professors are “rockstars” for coming to the prison weekly and in turn making the program “a college experience” with their presence. One student even described how a professor went above and beyond to set up a three-way call with a college financial aid administrator when he could not obtain answers from program staff.

For students at Site B (4-year, public) in-person instruction is more closely tied to course quality. Before enrolling in Site B’s program, Reid took correspondence courses in prison through local community colleges. He expressed that the courses he took at the community college were “not really college classes” compared to the courses he took through Site B. For him, the “big difference” was that Site B “had a professor in the room.” Reid’s fellow peers, Louis and Kosal, elaborated on the nature of this difference. For Louis, in-person instructors at Site B were “extremely humanizing” such that he and other students developed more “empathy” for others - a development that he doubted would have occurred. He appreciated that instructors offered “not just...intellectual growth, but a humanizing expansion of who we are.” Kosal from Site B agreed and further suggested that he felt like he was “more of a student” while incarcerated because of the stark “juxtaposition” between his experiences in the classroom and the prison environment he had to return to after each class. He said of his time in class: “You’re transporting to a realm of humanity where you’re addressed as a person. Your full agency as a human being is allowed to flourish.”

In fact, Kosal described a deeper connection to his instructors in prison than on-campus post-release, partly because instructors had to travel great distances to teach in the prison. “That has such a profound impact on all of us,” he said. “We all...understand they have sacrificed a lot to come [to the prison].” In contrast, he didn’t feel his instructors on campus demonstrated the same level of commitment to his success; instead, they treated him “like any other student,” not recognizing that he might need extra assistance with topics that would be unfamiliar to him given his experiences with incarceration. “I couldn’t help but to compare,” he said; his instructors in prison were willing to go the extra mile, literally and figuratively. “It was so enriching,” he said. “We got so much out of that interaction with our professors... For [program staff] to fight...to implant our professors in here so that our students could receive the best education possible, that was such an awesome thing for them to do. And I’m so grateful that they’re continuing to do that because that really does help students elevate themselves to a higher level.”

Students enrolled in programs with in-person instruction still desired more frequent contact with instructors; once-a-week classes are insufficient, and two to three meetings per week would be more comparable to what they would experience on campus. Yet it is clear that students who experience face-to-face interaction with instructors express a greater degree of satisfaction with their experience in the prison classroom, especially when compared to students completing coursework remotely. At Site C (2-year, public) using a distance-based model, students do consider their classes to be relatively rigorous. Lorenzo, Gregory, and Brandon believed the course content and workload to be at the college level. Brandon insisted, “I feel like all the materials are strong enough that anyone, even if you think you know everything on that topic, you’re gonna still learn something.”

Yet, for most classes, interaction with instructors is “minimal, if any,” as Mario, a student at Site C (2-year, public), put it. Students must submit questions via the learning management system and hope that instructors respond. Few instructors answer in a timely manner, and others are silent for weeks or even the entire course. “It almost feels like they put us last,” said Louis, a participant enrolled at Site C (2-year, public). Halfway through the term, Lorenzo reported that he was “flying blind through the semester” because the instructor had not answered his questions about an outdated syllabus. Elijah and Noah described the prolonged process of seeking help with complicated math and science problems: there with days of lag time between submitting a question and receiving an answer about how to proceed with the next step. Other students had not received grades on assignments for weeks, leaving them uncertain about how and whether they needed to improve. “You don’t actually know what you did wrong,” Peter said. Even when instructors provided feedback, it was a little more than a numerical score; Leah said “rubberstamped” comments on her essays were the only form of interaction she had with her instructor. Course materials themselves are also lacking. Tyler described pre-recorded math videos in which the instructor made many mistakes, indicating to him that, “they had to throw something together last-minute.”

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Students at Site C (2-year, public) using a distance-based model, are desperate for more direct interaction with their instructors. Virtual office hours would be acceptable, but in-person meetings are preferable among all participants. “It’d be great if we could just once a week talk to our professor, be like, ‘Hey, I’m having this problem,’ Jordan shared. Another student, Jeremiah, said: “I would definitely like to be in the presence of the professor, because there’s a lot of questions I would like to ask him.” For Lorenzo,

the lack of “human interaction...takes away from the experience” of being a college student. “It’d be great if we could just once a week talk to our professor,” said Marcus. Scott compared his remote college classes in prison unfavorably to his in-person courses on the outside. He said, “It’s very hard to get real education outside of just downloading a video and watching it and doing the homework assignments.” He remarked that “there’s almost no teacher interaction,” and then asked, “why am I paying for this?”

Students at Site A (2-year, public) participate in classes remotely and asynchronously but were more pleased with their level of interaction with instructors. They generally described instructors as “nice” and responsive. One student participating through Site A (2-year, public) appreciated that her sociology instructor offered regular positive written feedback via a learning management system (Canvas). To her, this “acknowledgement” both “feels good and...keeps you motivated.” Referring back to her research assignment, Linda said, “The instructors understand that we have limitations, and that we don’t have access to things like the internet.” Linda felt that her instructor graded her on her effort more than the strength of her academic sources.

“WE DON’T HAVE ANYONE ELSE THAT WE CAN REALLY TURN TO”: STUDENT INTERACTIONS WITH PEERS

To compensate for the lack of interaction with instructors, students at Sites A and C (2-year, publics) and Site B (4-year, public) rely on one another for support. Site B alums spoke highly of their professors but insisted that students’ relationships with each other have always been key to both their and the program’s success. Students in the initial cohorts engaged in educational pursuits together long before colleges introduced formal courses inside the prison, a fact also raised by formerly incarcerated scholar Orlando Mayorga in 2015.³ “It was just a community,” recalled John, indicating that students themselves laid the foundation upon which Site B was built. Leonard suggested that students continued to play a central role in each other’s academic progress in the program, describing how he and others discussed course materials outside of class. “We found little pockets of support within our own community inside to make sure we were on the right path,” he said.

Students at Site C (2-year, public) also described establishing an educational community. “We’ve been kinda helping each other out,” said Mario. “We’re beginning to rely on each other,” said Gabriella. Peter characterized his collaboration with fellow students as “powerful.” Benjamin and Lucas both indicated that living with fellow students and discussing course materials together makes them feel like college students. However, Terrell and Isaac framed this peer support structure as a response to deprivation: “We have to be each other’s outlet,” explained Terrell. “We don’t have anyone else that we can really turn to.” Isaac said: “If you don’t rely on somebody else who is around you and collectively work together, there’s no way that you’ll be able to meet your passing standard, let alone be able to achieve your best.”

“WE HAVE TO BE EACH OTHER’S OUTLET,” EXPLAINED TERRELL. “WE DON’T HAVE ANYONE ELSE THAT WE CAN REALLY TURN TO.”

Despite the need for peer support, students at Site C (2-year, public) found it difficult to assist each other when they were not always in the same classes or living areas. Jonathan explained that students’ ability to study with fellow students in different parts of the prison is dependent upon penal officers’ highly variable willingness to facilitate such movement. Another student suggested, “it would be beneficial...if they [prison officials] were to

designate certain housing units to students.” Other students proposed that they be allowed to interact with one another on a virtual platform. Rita and Gabriella described being assigned to listen to recordings of classroom discussions among students on campus. Gabriella said, “I wish I was actually participating” in the course discussion instead of listening to it afterward. Even if they could not interact with students outside of the prison, Katherine suggested that prison officials could allow incarcerated students throughout the state to “communicate with each other about the topic at hand.” Without this kind of peer interaction, students at this site described feeling isolated and adrift. Gregory shared that he calls his parents to talk about his classes: “Socially, I don’t feel like a college student,” he concluded.

“ I KNOW WHAT [INCARCERATED PEOPLE] THINK,” HE SAID. “I WOULD BE MORE INTERESTED IN, WHAT DOES SOMEONE WHO DOESN’T SHARE MY EXPERIENCE THINK ABOUT MORALITY AND JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCRATES?”

Students at Site A (2-year, public) using a distance-based model, have the kind of interactions Katherine at Site C (2-year, public) described; they can communicate with other incarcerated students enrolled at Site A (even those at prisons other than their own) once a week on virtual discussion boards via Canvas. “The experience is nice,” said one student, “knowing that the people you’re doing your discussions with are [also incarcerated].” Manuel, however, wanted to interact with students on campus as well. “I know what [incarcerated people] think,” he said. “I would be more interested in, what does someone who doesn’t share my experience think about morality and justice and fairness through the lens of Socrates?” Students shared that they value the educational communities they create in prison. Terrance described how the prison computer lab is “packed” when the students take challenging courses together; they share their struggles and seek help from one another. “That’s the college experience that maybe other people don’t have,” said Terrance, “but we have that advantage” of having access to a computer lab with other enrolled students. Students on the outside might not have access to a built-in peer support network.

At the same time, this kind of solidarity is a necessary response to a generally unsupportive environment. Yet, students at the women’s prison explain the pitfalls of peer support: the noise of other students helping one another can be distracting.

“THE COUNSELING IS VERY INSUFFICIENT”: INDIVIDUALIZED ACADEMIC ADVISING

Beyond the support they need to complete their courses, all students expressed a desire for more in-depth and individualized academic advising. Recent research suggests that most students participating in Second Chance Pell can access academic advising upon request, however student experience in this study challenge such findings.⁴ Some students at Site D (2-year, public) have prior college credits but reported that program staff never informed them if college administrators applied these hours toward their current degree program. The students had never seen nor been provided the opportunity to request a transcript audit by the institution. In fact, across all sites, few students had ever received an academic transcript, let alone an update on their status within the program. Most wanted a basic explanation of the pathway toward the associate degree; many sought individualized advice regarding their specific career goals. Students at Site D (2-year, public) indicated that check-ins about their academic progress toward completion are infrequent at best, quick, and not individualized if offered at all.

A couple of students at Site C (2-year, public) confirmed that college advisors laid out the credential pathways they could follow inside the prison, including “an individualized custom-made program” combining a technical diploma and an associate degree. Several other students, however, found academic advising services to be inadequate. “I’m lost,” said one student. “The counseling is very insufficient,” said Isaac. “You have to have some personal insight or do your limited work on your own.” Peter said academic advisors encouraged students to complete a degree based on limited course offerings inside the prison rather than helping them plan how to pursue their specific career goals upon release. “In my eyes,” he said, “an advisor is supposed to function as an advisor and even a little bit of a social worker rather than a recruiter for a college.” Peter also recalled how an academic advisor offered him two degree pathway options that were not available inside the prison. To him, this experience suggested that advisors are not fully aware of what the college makes available inside the prison.

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Students at Site A (2-year, public) were also eager for opportunities to forge their own academic and career pathways. Thomas looked forward to the college offering students an opportunity to “go into a specific field or have specific education in an area that you want to get into.” “Each one of us has a particular field that we’re interested in going into,” said Terrance. “We’re just using the A.A. program as a stepping stone to get into that field. But that’s not offered.” He saw value in his associate degree but believed a bachelor’s degree would be an even more compelling means to overcome employers’ likely aversion to his criminal record. Similarly, Edward sought advising more specifically tailored to the experiences of incarcerated students. “I think it’s great to offer,” he said, “but I have questions about what exactly you’d qualify for on the outside [of prison].” Edward thought the college should help students with job placement and refer them to reentry resources upon release. Otherwise, he said, “I feel like maybe it’s just taking advantage of people in a certain needful position.”

Discussion and Recommendations

When Edward said that programs may be, “taking advantage of people in a certain needful position,” he suggested that encouraging incarcerated students to expend their Pell funds on postsecondary education that does not fully support their academic progress can feel predatory. To varying degrees, students across all sites questioned why they were using their limited federal student aid for courses where interaction with instructors was minimal at best.

Overall, students asked why their Pell Grant does not cover what is necessary to improve their collegiate experiences, such as academic advising specific to their particular interests and needs. Students do not want to be perceived as ungrateful for what is available, but ultimately, it is their money that is being spent, and they should have avenues to demand better.⁵

- » Schools must do everything within their power to facilitate direct interaction with instructors. At the very least, programs need staff to train and regularly oversee instructors, ensuring they answer students’ questions and provide meaningful feedback in distance-learning contexts in particular.
- » Students should be provided opportunities to interact with one another to enhance their academic experience and success, including the possibility of residing in the same living areas. Student interactions should be more than a coping response to deprivation (i.e., limited access to instructors and other support staff).
- » Students should have access to quiet areas for reading and studying.

- » Students should have regular access to academic advisors who can offer them guidance in pursuing their individualized career goals, not just their progress within the credential pathways offered inside the prison. Advisors should determine whether and how their offerings in prison can help students reach their career goals.
- » The Department of Education should actively encourage 2-year Second Chance Pell sites to seek partnerships with 4-year institutions to provide students pathways beyond certificates and associate degrees.
- » Create accountability mechanisms with regard to the fees colleges and universities charge, as well as charges for books and supplies, to ensure that these expenses are commensurate with the actual cost and quality of the items students receive.

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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 For a discussion of textbooks and supplies, see Gaskill, S., Castro, E. L., & Aguilar Padilla, E. (2022, October 1). "Pell Doesn't Cover the Whole Thing": *Administrators on the Costs of Providing Prison Higher Education*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison. Retrieved from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nPPEZVPq4x6o8PAfXodVeKePhXtQTYorPwP4W_KuCQ4/edit.

³ See: Castro, E. L., Brawn, M., Graves, D., Mayorga, O., Page, J. & Slater, A. (2015). Higher education in an era of mass incarceration: Possibility under constraint. *Journal of Critical Studies of Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 1(2), 13-33.

⁴ Chesnut, K., Taber, N., & Quintana, J. (2022, May). *Second Chance Pell: Five years of expanding higher education programs in prisons, 2016-2021*. Vera Institute of Justice. <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/second-chance-pell-five-years-of-expanding-access-to-education-in-prison-2016-2021.pdf>.

⁵ For more on students' fears of being perceived as ungrateful, see Gaskill, S., Castro, E. L., & Aguilar Padilla, E. (2022, October 1). "Where Is the Refund Going?": *Second Chance Pell Recipient Perceptions of Federal Student Aid*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison.