

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

Launched in 2015, the Second Chance Pell Experiment allowed a select number of institutions of higher education to provide Pell grants to incarcerated students. Seven years later, and on the cusp of Pell expansion, there are a few noteworthy impacts of the Federal Experiment:

- » As of 2022, up to 200 institutions of higher education can participate in the federal Experiment.¹
- » Over 28,000 unduplicated students enrolled in postsecondary education through the Second Chance Pell Experiment from 2016-2021.²
- » Across the pilot’s first 2 years, institutions awarded approximately \$35.6 million in Pell Grants to about 8,800 incarcerated students.³

A lesser known yet critical area of knowledge and understanding is how, specifically, some incarcerated students are able to participate in the Experiment and others are not. At the heart of this inquiry is certainly a question about college admissions, but one that is uniquely rooted in the context of equity and opportunity during incarceration. Until recently, the ways that incarcerated people became part of the Experiment were largely unknown beyond anecdotal information from practitioners and participants. Consequently, serious questions about the Pell Grant in prison and issues of equity and access persist.

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*.⁴ Here, we include data from administrators working at nine institutions of higher education in the areas of financial aid, admissions, and registrar or related unit. In this brief, we address the following questions:

- » How do prison higher education program staff recruit incarcerated people for participation in the Second Chance Pell Experiment?
- » What do prison higher education program staff consider when determining eligibility for admission to the program?
- » How, if at all, do prison higher education programs address incarcerated applicants who are ineligible for the Pell Grant?

Overall, we find that the majority of prison higher education program practitioners in collaboration with departments of corrections staff participate in pre-screening processes in determining college admissions. Consequently, these practices significantly thwart the equity potential of Pell Grants in prison by prioritizing enrollment for those who are Pell-eligible or who can pay out-of-pocket tuition or who meet the eligibility standards of the penal facility. We conclude with recommendations for practitioners to use early FAFSA processes that can educate applicants and identify any eligibility hurdles. Additionally, program staff must commit to enrolling applicants who are ineligible for Pell, which will require financial responsibilities on the part of colleges and universities.

HOW DO PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS RECRUIT INCARCERATED PEOPLE FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE SECOND CHANCE PELL EXPERIMENT?

As the title of this brief indicates, prison higher education program staff are engaging in various pre-screening processes to assess either likelihood of or actual Pell eligibility for incarcerated applicants. Seven out of the nine sites (77%) included in this research actively recruited and/or selected individuals for admission who would be or were already eligible to receive the Pell Grant during incarceration. There are a number of ways that program staff engaged FAFSA completion and pre-screening processes for applicants and potential applicants (see Table 1).

Most institutional staff required incarcerated individuals to complete the FAFSA prior to facilitating enrollment to program and the institution of higher education. While some institutional staff did not require Pell eligibility for admission, the majority of program staff stated during interviews that they favored applicants who were eligible to receive the Pell Grant.⁵ Pell Grant eligibility guidelines already restrict access for large groups of incarcerated people. To be eligible for the Pell Grant, applicants must demonstrate exceptional financial need, be pursuing an approved undergraduate degree or certification program, and not have earned a bachelor’s, graduate, or professional degree. Pell Grant applicants must be U.S. citizens or “eligible non-citizens,”⁶ further restricting who can access postsecondary education during incarceration with Pell funding. Undocumented individuals are routinely excluded from prison programming, including prison higher education.⁷

“SEVEN OUT OF THE NINE SITES (77%) INCLUDED IN THIS RESEARCH ACTIVELY RECRUITED AND/OR SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FOR ADMISSION WHO WOULD BE OR WERE ALREADY ELIGIBLE TO RECEIVE THE PELL GRANT DURING INCARCERATION.”

Table 1

PRACTITIONER FAFSA COMPLETION AND PRE-SCREENING PROCESSES

Site	Institution Type	FAFSA before admission?	Pell eligibility prioritized for admission?	Samples of Process
A	2-year, Public	Yes	Yes	“Preference is given to Pell-eligible applicants, unless they can pay out of pocket.”
B	4-year, Public	Yes	No	“Because we don’t have internet access, the students complete a paper application and then we work with the student to collect their transcripts and we send it to our admissions department, which evaluates it and determines whether or not they are admissible. They are admissible regardless of their Second Chance Pell eligibility [...] and that continues to be true, even now, when our Pell eligibility rates are higher.”

Site	Institution Type	FAFSA before admission?	Pell eligibility prioritized for admission?	Samples of Process
C	2-year, Public	Yes	Yes	“When we started they all had to be Second Chance Pell students, but then we asked, why are we doing this? You know, if a student wanted to pay out of pocket, why shouldn’t we allow them to do that? So, we have students whose parents or spouses, whatever, on the outside, are paying for their education. But the majority of the students are Second Chance Pell students.”
D	2-year, Public	Yes	Yes	“I provide an orientation and I talk about the program and the importance of higher education to the students. We help them fill out the admission form; it’s a large group meeting, so it’s not one-on-one. Then, once we were accepted as a college to participate in Second Chance Pell, that made the admissions and orientation meeting a little bit more labor intensive because we also then began filling out FAFSAs with our students. I then take that paperwork back to the office [...]. If a student doesn’t qualify for Pell for whatever reason, we ask students is to sign a promissory note in those instances when state funding is used to cover the classes.”
E	4-year, Private	Yes	No	“We work really hard with students...we would not turn away a student for not being eligible for Pell for whatever reason. So, there are some reasons, like if somebody already has a bachelor’s degree, they’re not eligible for Pell. And we do have, not a large number, but we do have a couple students who already have a bachelors. We’re happy to have them continue their education with us, even if they can’t access their Pell.”
F	4-year, Private	Yes	No	“Well, only a few [students are receiving Pell]. Some of them aren’t eligible. And some of them are only taking one course and they don’t get Pell. We probably get \$18,000 a year from Pell. It’s small and obviously we’re thrilled to have it, but we are not a program that is primarily funded by Pell. [...] Our financial aid person, very quickly put together a cover letter with a checklist and on it, it says, if you check any of these boxes or if you can’t check any of these boxes, you’re not eligible. So, don’t waste your or my time. Only it doesn’t say that of course.”
G	2-year, Public	Yes	Yes	“Almost all of our students are Second Chance Pell.”

Site	Institution Type	FAFSA before admission?	Pell eligibility prioritized for admission?	Samples of Process
H	2-year, Public	Yes	Yes	<p>“So what we do is me and the representative from financial aid go in and create a roster and we send it to the [penal] facility. And then we usually have two to four guys that we meet with at a time and we walk them through the financial aid, through the FAFSA and at that time we get their information if they obtained a GED or a high school diploma. And then once we’ve done all that [financial aid representative] will take them back to financial aid and someone in the office inputs the information. So we do another set of pass rosters and then we go in and if they need an independent verification worksheet or if they need any forms we take those in with us and then we sit down and explain them. They fill out the forms, we take it back. [Financial aid representative] submits them and then once they’re packaged, then we let them know and then they’re eligible to use Pell.”</p>
I	2-year, Public	Yes	Yes	<p>“So basically, I’ll take them all in and screen every single application. I’ll create a spreadsheet and grade every single application. Then I’ll look to see if they meet the minimum criteria and if they could possibly be Pell eligible. If they’re in default is the main thing that we probably look at...where they’re at on previous student loans. If they are in default, I’ll send them materials and say hey maybe it’s not the right time for you to join because our main source of funding is the Second Chance Pell Grant. [...] but that’s kind of how we narrow the list down. And then we’ll schedule a meeting with the counselors and the correctional rehabilitation manager at each facility to go through the top applicants, one by one, and they can look up things that I can’t.”</p>



WHAT DO PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM STAFF CONSIDER WHEN DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY FOR ADMISSION TO THE PROGRAM?

At the start of the Experiment, the Department of Education provided eligibility guidelines for participating institutions.⁸ In addition to standing eligibility requirements regarding the Pell Grant, the Department of Education asked Second Chance Pell practitioners to prioritize enrollment for incarcerated people who had five years or less on their sentence and not to use Pell funds for individuals with life sentences. Among institutions in our sample, the majority of staff (88%) are following at least part of this guidance from the Department of Education’s original 2015 guidelines (see Table 2).

When asked why program staff restrict eligibility based on length of sentence, crime of conviction, or related criteria, many responded in ways that are consistent with the original guidelines of the Experiment. For example, one administrator at Site A (2-year, public) explained that their program does not serve individuals with life sentences because, “Lifers are not eligible for Pell at this time.” However, the eligibility criteria provided by the Department of Education is only guidance, not law. Yet, many of the practitioners in this study expressed adhering to these guidelines. One exception to this practice is Site F (4-year, private). Administrators at Site F admit and enroll individuals into the program regardless of their length of sentence. One program administrator at Site F explicitly acknowledged the nebulous nature of the Department of Education’s guidance by remarking that, “the Department doesn’t actually hold us to that criteria.”

Our student focus group data revealed that while administrators state that they follow the Department of Education’s guidelines regarding length of sentence and participation in the Experiment, individuals with life sentences may be able to participate. During one of our focus groups, a student at Site C (2-year, public), remarked that his life sentence put him at the bottom of the list for access to postsecondary education. However, he said that, “I kept putting my name in the hat and contacting them [education staff].” Eventually, he said, that he was able to enroll in the pilot program by using the Pell Grant. The other reason administrators expressed using sentence parameters in determining eligibility for admission was to allow students adequate time to complete a curriculum pathway or credential. If an applicant does not have the requisite time left on their sentence to complete the curriculum, some program staff shared that they do not consider the applicant for admission.

Table 2

PRACTITIONER ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA AND RATIONALE FOR ADMISSIONS

Site	Institution Type	Eligibility Restrictions?	Eligibility Criteria	Why?
A	2-year, Public	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential • No life sentences 	“Lifers are not eligible for Pell at this time.”
B	4-year, Public	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential 	“At first, we were really concerned about Pell’s – and I’ll be honest with you, I don’t even know if this is still a requirement – but that they were really looking at students who would be getting out within five years. And students without life sentences were not permitted. [...]”
C	2-year, Public	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential • No more than 5 years on sentence • No life sentences • No sex offense with civil commitment 	“Per Department of Education.”

Site	Institution Type	Eligibility Restrictions?	Eligibility Criteria	Why?
D	2-year, Public	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential • Must have highest level of privilege with the Department of Corrections 	<p>"[...] [T]he only students that can attend [our] courses are those who are at the highest level of privilege with the Department of Corrections [...] They will screen students to determine their eligibility. The only exception to this would be where we have members of rival violent gangs, okay? So, up to this point, we have not offered courses to those students and in those facilities."</p>
E	4-year, Private	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential • Must have at least two semesters left on sentence 	<p>"The only thing we tend to look at for admissions is expected release dates; if they don't anticipate being incarcerated for at least two semesters, that's a cut off for us because it's a lot of time and investment for someone who may not even complete a semester of college."</p>
F	4-year, Private	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential 	<p>"I don't think the Department of Education actually holds us to that [eligibility criteria]."</p>
G	2-year, Public	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential • No life sentences • Time from release • Number of total misconducts • No class misconducts in the last six months 	<p>"So, [the Department of Corrections] have requirements about how far out you are from release, about the number of misconducts, you can't have any misconducts in the last six months. [...] So, they screen those first, and then we get lists of students who meet their minimum requirements."</p>
H	2-year, Public	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential • No behavioral issues or concerns • Prioritize applicants with less than 5 years left on sentence • Limit number of lifers 	<p>"There must have not been a behavioral issue or a concern for the facility and we screen that through the security staff at each facility. [...] We tried to limit how many lifers we have, just because of funding concerns that we want to make sure that we're helping those that are going to get out within the next five years as a priority."</p>
I	2-year, Public	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary credential • Eighteen months of clear conduct or six months if recently incarcerated • No individuals with more than 5 years on sentence 	<p>"[Students] have to have at least 18 months of clear conduct or six months of clear conduct if they're recently incarcerated. [...] So as part of being a part of the Second Chance Pell Grant, we are supposed to prioritize people who are closer to the gate. So we definitely try to do that. We're not supposed to give the Second Chance Pell Grant to anybody who is serving a life sentence. So there needs to be a release date."</p>



HOW, IF AT ALL, DO PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM STAFF ADDRESS INCARCERATED APPLICANTS WHO ARE INELIGIBLE FOR THE PELL GRANT?

When asked why incarcerated FAFSA applicants would be ineligible to receive Pell, program practitioners and students remarked that student loan default was the largest reason. This finding aligns with research documenting significant numbers of interested incarcerated people are ineligible to receive Pell because of student loan default status.⁹ The FASFA Simplification Act (P.L. 116-260) makes many changes to federal student aid eligibility calculations, but it will not directly address the problem of incarcerated individuals who are in student loan default.¹⁰

Some administrators expressed frustration that they were not able to do more to assist applicants who are ineligible to receive the Pell Grant. One program director (2-year, public) said that when an applicant is denied the Pell Grant, that there is “nothing that we can really do” to assist the person. Another administrator (2-year, public) said that they tell applicants who are ineligible to receive Pell that they can self-pay to participate: “It doesn’t happen very often, but we always tell them, ‘You can absolutely self-pay. You know, if you have a parent out there that wants to make payment plans or whatever, they can certainly do that.’” This same administrator shared that they do not have other funding sources available to support incarcerated students who are ineligible to receive Pell. So, if applicants are ineligible for a Pell Grant, “then they’re kind of a little bit out of luck on our end.”

We asked program directors if other institutional aid or state funding were available to assist incarcerated applicants who were ineligible for Pell. The overwhelming majority of directors said no, that there were no other funds available. Some directors remarked that state aid in the form of grants were available but that the school would need to apply on students’ behalf. One director shared that there were state funds available to cover tuition for applicants who were ineligible for Pell but applicants would need to sign a promissory note to repay those funds post-incarceration.

Discussion

One of the main purposes of this line of inquiry was to determine the degree to which Pell eligibility was a determining factor in postsecondary admissions among Second Chance Pell sites. Understanding how incarcerated people may gain access to postsecondary education is a critical area of inquiry, particularly regarding equity in access and opportunity. Among practitioners in our sample, most staff working for prison higher education programs and departments of corrections prioritized admission for incarcerated applicants who are eligible to receive the Pell Grant.

Despite their inability to assist those who are ineligible to receive Pell Grants during incarceration, program staff repeatedly shared that applicants do not have to be Pell-eligible to participate in the program. For example, one director of a program at a 2-year public institution remarked that they do not automatically disqualify someone from participating in the program if they are ineligible for Pell, especially if they can pay out of pocket. Yet, student-level data may paint a different picture.

Our descriptive analysis of student-level data provided by four institutions participating in the Experiment challenges the sentiment expressed here by practitioners that they enroll all qualified applicants regardless of Pell-eligibility.¹¹ Instead, our analysis shows that almost 100% of all enrolled incarcerated students at two separate 2-year institutions participating in the Experiment are Pell recipients. Thus, when program directors say that applicants do not have to be Pell-eligible to participate, but almost 100% of their enrolled students are Pell recipients, this raises serious questions about the genuine degree of access that non-Pell-eligible applicants have to the program.

Recommendations

- » The extraordinary labor and resources required to facilitate FAFSA applications inside prisons, submit those applications on behalf of incarcerated applicants, and manage the eligibility results from the Department of Education is substantial. The process is made significantly more difficult by prison restrictions on internet access for incarcerated applicants. Accordingly, we recommend that prison staff allow for limited internet access for FAFSA applications. Additionally, program staff and university administrators seek ways to streamline the work of applying for federal student aid and admission to the college or university.
- » It is critical that prison higher education program and departments of corrections staff do not simply enroll those applicants who are eligible to receive the Pell Grant during incarceration. Such practices intensify racial and class inequities inherent in the prison system and throughout higher education. There is a student loan debt crisis for Black borrowers that nearly triples after graduation.¹² Because Black communities are disproportionately targeted for incarceration and hold substantial student loan debts in the aggregate, these applicants as a population are positioned to be ineligible for Pell at disproportionate rates. Programs must advocate for Pell-ineligible students (with departments of corrections) and the college/university.
- » Practices like those shared here threaten equity of access to postsecondary education during incarceration by systematically privileging applicants who are or who can independently become eligible to receive the Pell Grant or can pay “out of pocket”. Programs, colleges/universities and funders must not become comfortable with this model and should continue to create and/or advocate for other funding streams for Pell-ineligible students.
- » Funders in the prison higher education community must become more comfortable supporting tuition expenses for non-Pell eligible students and must understand this funding as part of any racial justice imperatives within their work.
- » Staff with the Department of Education should be clearer in the guidelines regarding FAFSA applications; specifically, in addition to the absence of eligibility requirements, there should not be any barriers to the number of applicants from a program or restrictions to who may or may not request to apply.

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Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education (2022, April 26). *U.S. Department of Education Announces Expansion of Second Chance Pell Experiment and Actions to Help Incarcerated Individuals Resume Educational Journeys and Reduce Recidivism*. <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-expansion-second-chance-pell-program-and-actions-help-incarcerated-individuals-resume-educational-journeys-and-reduce-recidivism>

² Chesnut, Taber, & Quintana, (2022, May). *Second Chance Pell: Five years of expanding higher education programs in prisons, 2016–2021*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice.

³ Goodwin, G. L. (2019). Federal student aid: Actions needed to evaluate Pell Grant pilot for incarcerated students (GAO Report No. GAO-19-130). <https://perma.cc/7UN9-3LTW>

- ⁴ 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 methodology*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison.
- ⁵ For more on the percentage of Pell recipients among all enrolled incarcerated students, see: Aguilar Padilla, E., Castro, E. L., & Gaskill, S. (2022, October 1). *Second Chance Pell recipients at four institutions: A brief descriptive analysis*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison.
- ⁶ See: Federal Student Aid. *Eligible NonCitizen*. Retrieved from <https://studentaid.gov/help/eligible-noncitizen>
- ⁷ Castro, E. L., Fierros, C., & Montero, E. (2022). *Xenophobia in prison higher education: Towards recruiting and supporting undocumented incarcerated people*. Unpublished manuscript.
- ⁸ See: Second Chance Pell Fact Sheet (para 2). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pell-secondchance.doc>
- ⁹ In April 2022, the Department of Education announced that it would extend the pause of student loan repayment, interest, and collections through August 31, 2022. This extension would allow people who have defaulted loans to resume repayment in good standing and the opportunity applies to incarcerated individuals. Staff also indicated that the intent is to make students eligible for federal financial aid without having to repay the entirety of their defaulted loans. How the Department will implement this policy is unclear; incarcerated students already technically have the ability to reenter repayment but lack resources to remain in good standing. For more, see: Press Office, U.S. Department of Education (April 6, 2022). *Biden-Harris Administration Extends Student Loan Pause Through August 31*. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/biden-harris-administration-extends-student-loan-pause-through-august-31> and U.S. Department of Education (2022, May 26). Pell Reinstatement Eligibility for Incarcerated Students. Retrieved from <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2022-05-10/live-internet-webinar-pell-grant-eligibility-incarcerated-students>
- ¹⁰ For more, see: Collins, B. & Dortch, C. (2022, January 19). *The FAFSA Simplification Act*, Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46909#:~:text=The%20FSA%20amends%20the%20indicator's,a%20federal%20income%20tax%20return>
- ¹¹ See: Aguilar Padilla, E., Castro, E. L., & Gaskill, S. (2022, October 1). *Second Chance Pell recipients at four institutions: A brief descriptive analysis*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison.
- ¹² See: National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *College Enrollment Rates*. Retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cpb.pdf and Scott-Clayton, J. & Li, J. (2016, October 20). Black-white disparity in student loan debt more than triples after graduation. *Evidence Speaks Reports 2*(3). Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/es_20161020_scottclayton_evidence_speaks.pdf