

Bridging the Gap: Integrating Academic Engagement and Reentry Support in Correctional Higher Education

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Abstract

Correctional higher education programming remains one of the most effective strategies for reducing recidivism and promoting long-term public safety. Despite this, many associate and bachelor's degree programs offered within correctional facilities focus heavily on academic content while failing to integrate structured reentry preparation. This article, written from the perspective of a professor who teaches within the prison system, argues for the intentional embedding of reentry education into existing degree programs to better prepare incarcerated students for life after release. Drawing on extensive experience teaching thousands of incarcerated individuals, this article examines the challenges and opportunities involved in curriculum development within the technological and institutional limitations of prison settings. It also highlights the value of engaging incarcerated learners in the co-creation of reentry-focused content to ensure relevance and impact. Additionally, it outlines practical strategies for supporting students during the critical post-release transition, including case management, mentorship, and academic continuity. The article concludes with actionable recommendations for educators, correctional administrators, policymakers, and academic institutions seeking to improve reentry outcomes. By integrating academic and reentry preparation, correctional education programs can empower justice-impacted learners to achieve personal success while contributing to safer, more equitable communities.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Reentry, Corrections, Incarceration, Recidivism, Public Safety

Background

Throughout my time teaching classes within the prison system, I have encountered numerous incarcerated students whose academic accomplishments are both inspiring and sobering. Two moments encapsulate the central dilemma this paper aims to address. In one instance, I met a man in a halfway house, whom I will refer to here as John, who had previously earned an associate's degree in business while serving a ten-year sentence. When I congratulated him, his response was revealing: "I have a piece of paper that says I have a degree, but I will be forever labeled a convicted felon." His comment captured the reality that even a college education, while empowering, may not be enough to overcome the systemic barriers awaiting individuals upon release. In another moment, after a graduation ceremony in prison, an incarcerated student of mine who had just completed his associate's degree approached me and asked, "Do you think I'll make it out there now that I have my degree?" His question was not about his academic knowledge, but about his ability to navigate a world that still views him as a criminal, rather than a graduate.

These moments illustrate the fundamental tension at the heart of higher education programming in correctional institutions today: while prison-based college programs provide valuable academic instruction, they often fall short in equipping students with the practical tools and psychosocial support necessary for successful reentry. The reinstatement of Pell Grants has catalyzed a significant expansion in higher education access for incarcerated students within prison settings, opening doors that were previously closed due to cost barriers. These programs offer more than just credentials; they foster critical thinking, build communication and research skills, and allow students to engage with professors and peers in intellectually challenging environments, benefits that standard prison programming often lacks (Cantora, 2020; Tahamont et al, 2020).

Indeed, research consistently affirms the rehabilitative value of education in correctional settings as participation in college-level prison programs has been associated with decreased recidivism, improved psychological well-being, and greater post-release employment opportunities (Taxay, 2025). Other qualities, such as leadership development, community service, and social reintegration, were closely tied to participants' relationships with peers and instructors, who were frequently cited as central to their transformation and as key sources of social capital gained through academic engagement (LaBarbera, 2023). However, academic gains alone do not guarantee reentry success. As my former student John discussed, the stigma of a criminal record continues to impede access to important items such as housing, employment, and government benefits. Despite these educational milestones, formerly incarcerated individuals often find themselves ill-equipped to manage the bureaucratic and cultural demands of reentry. Navigating digital systems for job applications, healthcare, or government identification can be daunting after years of incarceration. This disjuncture between educational advancement and real-world reintegration exposes a critical gap in current prison-based college curricula.

While correctional institutions often offer reentry-specific programming, such as life skills, cognitive behavioral therapy, and substance abuse treatment, these are frequently siloed from

academic coursework. Similarly, faculty-led college courses, especially those facilitated by universities, may lack meaningful integration with reentry-focused content. This disconnect limits the holistic development of incarcerated learners, who need both academic knowledge and reentry strategies to succeed. As a result, higher education in prison must not only focus on academic attainment but also address criminogenic needs, prosocial skill development, and mental well-being, factors closely linked with long-term desistance from crime (Wooditch, 2014). Moreover, the push for evaluating the impact of prison education programming should not rest solely on recidivism metrics, as scholars argue that we must also consider proximal outcomes such as psychological well-being, motivation, and prosocial behavior (Li et al, 2023). These are essential components of human flourishing that serve as more responsive indicators of reentry readiness, along with collaboration with other prison and reentry programming. In this context, the goal of correctional education should be redefined not just to confer degrees, but to support meaningful personal and social transformation.

The urgency of addressing recidivism is underscored by national data indicating that nearly 75% of individuals released from prison are rearrested within five years (La Vigne & Lopez, 2021). While this does not imply that all instances of reincarceration stem from a lack of education, nor that education is the sole determinant of post-release success, substantial research highlights the positive correlation between educational attainment and reduced recidivism (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). Addressing this challenge will require a pedagogical shift, one that blends the strengths of academic instruction with the practical demands of reentry preparation. This article advocates for bridging the current divide between academic engagement and reentry integration within prison education. It argues that faculty, correctional staff, and reentry professionals must collaborate to develop curricula that not only educate but also prepare students for the structural and social realities they will face post-release. In doing so, correctional education programs can move from being merely symbolic achievements to becoming instrumental tools for individual and community transformation.

Literature Review

Decades of research affirm the positive impact of postsecondary education in reducing recidivism among incarcerated individuals, which can generate a ripple effect that extends beyond the individual, fostering benefits for families, communities, and society at large (Taxay, 2025; Ortiz et al., 2022). Established under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA; P.L. 89-329), the federal Pell Grant program is the largest source of federal grant funding for postsecondary students. Initially introduced in 1973 as Basic Education Opportunity Grants, Pell Grants provide need-based financial assistance to undergraduates and do not require repayment, distinguishing them from student loans (Dortch, 2024). For a time, individuals who were incarcerated were also eligible to receive Pell Grant funding. However, access to education was severely curtailed following the enactment of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, under the Clinton Administration, which led to the elimination of Pell Grant eligibility, effectively stripping thousands of incarcerated students of the opportunity to pursue a formal education (Burke, 2021). This policy change, among others included in the crime bill, had significant implications for individuals reentering their communities, as the lack of

education, skills, and workforce development opportunities often led to a return to the same criminal behaviors that resulted in their initial incarceration.

In July 2023, significant policy changes were implemented when the FSA began authorizing Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals enrolled in Prison Education Programs (PEPs), thereby reopening access to higher education for justice-impacted learners across the United States (Dortch, 2024; Edic, 2024). To qualify for this funding, students must be enrolled in a PEP that adheres to specific standards established by the Higher Education Act and corresponding regulations. The program must be offered by an eligible public or nonprofit institution of higher education (IHE), explicitly excluding proprietary (for-profit) institutions. Moreover, the participating IHE must not have faced specific adverse actions from the U.S. Department of Education, its accrediting agency, or the relevant state authority within the past five years (Dortch, 2024). The oversight entity of the correctional facility must also approve the PEP, confirming it serves the best interests of students. This evaluation includes examining faculty qualifications and consistency, the transferability of credits within the institution and to other academic programs and ensuring that academic and career advising is comparable to that provided in the institution's general offerings. Additionally, credits earned through the PEP must be transferable to at least one other qualifying IHE within the same state or, in federal facilities, the state where most students are expected to return post-release. Programs designed to lead to professional licensure or certification must also meet state-level standards, and individuals who are legally barred from licensure due to their convictions are not eligible to enroll (Dortch, 2024).

Since Pell Grant funding has been reinstated, numerous colleges and universities have expanded their correctional education offerings, which include the development of credit-bearing courses and degree programs in prisons. While implementation challenges remain, this policy shift has created unprecedented educational opportunities for thousands of incarcerated students. This pivotal moment now presents a critical opportunity to integrate academic curriculum with reentry preparedness, ensuring that correctional education equips students not only with knowledge but also with the practical tools necessary for successful reintegration into society.

Educational Attainment and Recidivism Reduction in Corrections

Many incarcerated individuals have faced significant educational challenges prior to their involvement with the justice system, often due to a range of socioeconomic and structural barriers (Ogunbajo, 2023). In my experience working within correctional education, it is common to encounter students who lack access to consistent, high-quality schooling during childhood. A substantial number also endured traumatic experiences in their youth, which negatively influenced their educational trajectories. Research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) supports this observation. For instance, findings from the Well-Being and Experiences (WE) Study, which surveyed 1,002 adolescents in Manitoba, Canada, revealed that those with ACEs had a markedly higher likelihood of school suspension than peers without such histories, even when accounting for sociodemographic differences (Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). These findings underscore the public health implications of ACEs and suggest that education policies and school-based interventions must consider trauma-informed approaches.

Incarcerated students frequently come from backgrounds marked by poverty, rural isolation, and unstable family environments. In many cases, no one in their household held a high school diploma or GED, which deprived them of educational role models. Structural issues such as under-resourced schools, chronic truancy, and inadequate transportation further contributed to early academic disengagement (Kearney et al., 2023). Consequently, many justice-involved individuals drop out of school and turn to informal economies for survival, increasing their risk of criminal justice involvement. Even for those who completed school, educational quality was often substandard. Some were advanced through grades despite failing to meet academic standards, while others earned their credentials decades ago and must now restart their education. The absence of continuous academic engagement, especially during key developmental years, presents substantial obstacles for incarcerated learners seeking to rebuild their educational paths.

Post-secondary education has emerged as a pivotal strategy in correctional settings, offering both rehabilitative and transformative outcomes for incarcerated individuals while simultaneously advancing public safety. Increasingly viewed as a strategic investment rather than solely a rehabilitative measure, correctional education has been linked to significant reductions in recidivism and improved reentry outcomes (Taxay, 2025). Beyond skill development, educational engagement cultivates critical thinking, self-worth, and civic responsibility, thereby fostering holistic transformation. A seminal meta-analysis by Davis et al. (2013) revealed that participation in prison education reduces recidivism by 43% and increases employment post-release by 13%, with a cost-benefit return of \$4–\$5 for every dollar invested. Further evidence from Stickle & Schuster (2023) and Denney & Tynes (2021) supports these findings, demonstrating reductions in recidivism by up to 48% and improved employment outcomes. Collectively, these studies affirm correctional education as an essential component of reentry policy, economic prosperity and public safety reform.

Restoration of Pell Grant Eligibility and Policy Implications

The restoration of Pell Grant eligibility represents a significant shift in correctional education policy, offering renewed opportunities for incarcerated individuals to pursue postsecondary education. This policy change emphasizes the importance of providing credentials that align with labor market demands and reinforcing the dual purpose of correctional education as both rehabilitative and economically sound. As Stickle and Schuster (2023) contend, prison education is not merely an intervention for individual growth; it is a strategic investment that reduces crime, promotes reintegration, and generates measurable public savings.

One illustrative example of effective implementation is the University of Baltimore's participation in the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative. This program enables incarcerated students to pursue a bachelor's degree in human services administration, supported by structured mentoring, financial aid navigation, and transition planning for continued education post-release (Cantora, Miller, & White, 2020). The university's experience demonstrates the extensive institutional coordination required to deliver quality education in prison settings. By adopting admissions policies, aligning academic support, and engaging in

deliberate program planning, the University of Baltimore established a model that not only meets policy requirements but also prioritizes student success (Cantora et al., 2020).

Understanding the broader significance of Pell Grant restoration also requires revisiting the impact of its removal in 1994, which effectively halted postsecondary opportunities for most incarcerated individuals. As programs reemerge under the reinstated policy, the evidence base supporting correctional education has grown considerably. Research shows that prison-based postsecondary education reduces recidivism, enhances employment outcomes, and contributes to more stable reintegration into society. Moreover, the University of Baltimore's collaborative approach illustrates how institutional commitment can lead to inclusive, sustainable educational models that reflect both historical lessons and forward-looking policy adaptation (Cantora, Miller, & White, 2020). Ultimately, the evidence affirms that correctional education is a cost-effective and transformative pathway to reducing recidivism and enhancing public safety. By equipping incarcerated individuals with the knowledge, skills, and confidence, postsecondary programs support not only individual success but also stronger communities and more efficient use of public resources. Continued investment in correctional education, grounded in thoughtful implementation, policy alignment, and institutional accountability, is therefore essential to maximizing the full promise of Pell Grant restoration.

Integrating Reentry as a Core Function of Higher Education in Prison

In tandem with access to Pell Grants, there is now a need to move beyond traditional correctional education models to integrating academic instruction with comprehensive reentry planning. The National College Attainment Network (2024) outlines best practices for supporting justice-impacted students during their transition from incarceration to campus environments, which include continuity in advising, targeted support services, and long-term degree completion strategies. Such approaches ensure that higher education access does not just end at the prison gate, but extends into community reintegration and academic achievement.

The benefits of correctional education in reducing recidivism are well established, but many programs remain insufficient by failing to embed reentry preparation within their academic curricula. This disconnection undermines the broader rehabilitative potential of prison education, as academic credentials alone do not equip individuals to navigate the complex barriers of reintegration. Addressing these limitations, several states have implemented policy reforms to integrate education with comprehensive reentry support. In Washington State, *Executive Order 24-03* mandates wraparound services, such as housing and medical assistance, both during incarceration and post-release, recognizing that educational progress must be complemented by reintegration infrastructure to be truly effective (Washington State Governor, 2024). Further advancing this model, *RCW 28B.50.815* formally authorizes partnerships between correctional facilities and community or technical colleges, enabling access to associate degree programs within prison settings (Washington State Legislature, 2025a). These policies institutionalize the alignment between education and reentry, embedding supportive frameworks within academic programming. By encouraging the inclusion of reentry-focused components in curricula, they redefine correctional education as a vehicle for both intellectual development and post-release stability. Moving forward, the success of correctional education depends not only on expanding

access to academic credentials but also on intentionally integrating reentry planning to foster meaningful, long-term outcomes.

Discussion: From Access to Transformation: Advancing Student-Centered Models

Incarcerated students pursuing postsecondary education encounter structural and institutional barriers that require innovative, student-centered approaches. According to Rodriguez et al. (2024), these challenges include restricted access to classrooms and technology, administrative obstacles, and racial disparities in program enrollment. In correctional institutions, the primary objective is to keep all incarcerated individuals and prison staff safe, so it is understandable why there are numerous restrictions that exist. That said, addressing these educational and logistical barriers demands a pedagogy informed by an understanding of prison environments and the complex needs of justice-impacted learners, rooted in flexibility, empathy, and sustained advocacy. Effective retention strategies include cohort-based learning, individualized mentoring, and wraparound services that integrate academic and personal support. Programs such as College Now Greater Cleveland and California State University–Los Angeles illustrate the impact of structured support systems, faculty consistency, and holistic resources, including emergency funding and study labs, on student persistence and completion (Rodriguez et al., 2024). Ultimately, successful correctional education must evolve beyond mere access to intentionally cultivate ecosystems of care that foster student agency, resilience, and equitable outcomes.

Supporting Academic Continuity and Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Learners

Successful reentry back into society not only extends beyond academic instruction; it also requires a coordinated approach that integrates education with support systems such as housing, healthcare, employment, and identification support. These immediate needs often take precedence over educational goals, making it essential for institutions to implement dedicated case managers both within the prison system and in academic departments. These liaisons can help bridge corrections and campus, monitor student progress, and ensure access to critical wraparound services during the transition period. There are a few core strategies that support academic continuity post-release: (1) partnerships between college access programs and reentry agencies to provide advising and resources; (2) awareness of release conditions, including probation and institutional restrictions; and (3) consistent engagement through communication and referrals to support services (National College Attainment Network, 2024). These types of strategies are one of many that should be a part of a reentry ecosystem that can serve the specific needs of justice-impacted students leaving prison.

Some states have begun to implement policy reforms that align with these practices. In Washington State, Executive Order 24-03 mandates reentry support, including access to housing and healthcare, through a cross-sector framework (Washington State Governor, 2024). Complementary legislation, RCW 28B.50.815, establishes partnerships between prisons and community colleges, embedding degree programs within correctional settings and reinforcing reentry preparation (Washington State Legislature, 2025a). In discussing best practices for

leading college-in-prison programs, Mowreader (2024) emphasizes strategies such as individualized, trauma-informed case management tailored to each student's needs. This also includes comprehensive assessments, peer mentorship, and flexible planning responsive to challenges such as digital illiteracy or psychosocial barriers. For colleges to succeed, they must align with community partners, avoid service duplication, and cultivate student-centered systems rooted in feedback and flexibility. These intentional, coordinated efforts not only improve graduation outcomes for justice-impacted students but also position education as both a practical and moral cornerstone of public safety (Mowreader, 2024; National College Attainment Network, 2024).

Reentry into society following incarceration is a complex and multifaceted process that poses significant challenges for returning citizens. From securing stable housing and employment to navigating stigma and rebuilding family relationships, the path to successful reintegration is rarely straightforward. When higher education is added to this equation, the need for sustained and intentional support becomes even more urgent. Continuing one's education post-release requires more than personal motivation; it demands a coordinated network of assistance that addresses both academic and non-academic barriers. Maintaining educational momentum after incarceration is not merely a matter of enrollment; it involves navigating bureaucratic systems, accessing financial aid, managing transportation, and balancing the competing demands of reentry with academic expectations. For justice-impacted individuals, these challenges can be overwhelming without a strong support system. Thus, ensuring continuity in education during and after incarceration necessitates a village approach, where institutions of higher learning, community organizations, correctional staff, mentors, and family members collaborate to provide the holistic, wraparound support needed for long-term success. Ultimately, the pursuit of education during reentry should not be viewed as an isolated endeavor, but rather as a vital component of a larger reintegration ecosystem strategy. Sustained academic engagement offers not only personal transformation but also the potential for broader community impact. To realize this potential, we must embrace an integrated model of care, one that bridges correctional education with community-based support, ensuring that returning citizens have the tools, resources, and relationships necessary to persist in their education and thrive beyond prison walls.

Collaborative Case Management Between Academic Institutions and Corrections

Although ideal outcomes would see incarcerated students completing degrees before release, the realities of prison life, such as facility transfers, abrupt release dates, and limited interagency coordination, frequently disrupt academic progress. While incarceration may offer a structured environment for study, reentry introduces urgent competing demands, including securing housing, employment, identification, and family reintegration, especially for those unfamiliar with modern technology. Bridging this gap requires dedicated case managers embedded within both correctional facilities and academic institutions. These professionals serve as essential liaisons, ensuring continuity between carceral education and community-based systems. When a release date is known, coordinated planning should begin at least six months in advance. Regular biweekly meetings with a university-affiliated case manager can address critical areas such as

housing, digital access, transportation, employment readiness, and communication with supervision officers. Though resource-intensive upfront, this model yields long-term benefits, higher post-release degree completion, improved employment outcomes, reduced recidivism, better public safety, and enhanced institutional graduation rates (White, 2023).

Recommendations: Reentry Curriculum Design and the Role of Prison Libraries

In correctional settings where instructional resources are limited, innovative curriculum design is essential. Prison libraries, however, serve as a critical yet underutilized component of correctional education, offering centralized access to educational and technological tools. Based on a comprehensive study of 1,029 incarcerated individuals and 286 prison library staff across 36 states, Boyington, Bryne, and Durkin (2025) found that 79% of incarcerated respondents believed library resources enhanced their educational experiences through access to reentry guides, vocational training materials, and career planning resources. Qualitative findings also revealed a shared call among staff and patrons for modernized services, including updated materials, expanded programming, and improved staff training to address the evolving needs of incarcerated learners (Boyington et al., 2025). As such, prison libraries have the potential to function as vital educational hubs that enrich academic instruction and equip justice-involved individuals with essential tools for reentry and long-term success.

Beyond their educational function, prison libraries also offer a sense of community quality that is often missing from the otherwise isolating environment of incarceration. In broader society, libraries are central to community life, providing a neutral, inclusive space where individuals can gather, learn, and engage. Similarly, prison libraries mimic this dynamic by creating environments that foster connection, intellectual stimulation, and emotional safety. This communal aspect is particularly valuable for incarcerated individuals who are frequently cut off from meaningful social interaction. Libraries allow them to reengage in social norms and structured environments, gradually preparing them for reintegration. For those who have served long sentences, reentering society can be overwhelming. Public spaces like sports events or social gatherings may be too stimulating or intimidating. In contrast, libraries provide a quieter, more controlled atmosphere that encourages personal development at a manageable pace. These quiet spaces can serve as therapeutic environments, easing the emotional transition from incarceration to community reentry.

Additionally, prison libraries act as a preparatory stage for post-release engagement with public library systems. Individuals who learn to navigate prison library services, such as locating materials, using catalogs, or seeking assistance from librarians, gain practical skills that are transferable upon release. When formerly incarcerated individuals return to their communities, they are more likely to engage with local libraries as resources for education, employment, and support, if they are already familiar with the structure and services. This familiarity enhances their ability to access community resources, increases their self-efficacy, and reduces the barriers often associated with reintegration. Today, prison libraries contribute significantly to the reintegration process by reducing isolation, modeling positive community interaction, and equipping incarcerated individuals with the skills and confidence to navigate supportive

institutions upon release. In this way, prison libraries serve not only as educational hubs but also as vital bridges to successful reentry and long-term community engagement.

Integrating Incarcerated Learners and Reentry Staff in Curriculum Design

Centering the voices of incarcerated individuals in the development of reentry-focused curricula offers a powerful, inclusive model for correctional education. Rather than creating content in isolation, I, as the instructor, deliberately collaborated with two key groups within the correctional facility: a lifers' group composed of men who are serving life sentences in prison, and a reentry dorm housing more than 200 men who are nearing their release on writing a reentry course for college credit. Both groups are consistently engaged in peer-led discussions and programming, positioning them as credible and informed contributors to the design process. After reviewing the draft curriculum, participants offered candid feedback that led to meaningful revisions, ultimately enhancing the course's relevance and impact. The first benefit of this collaborative approach lies in the increased sense of agency and ownership it fosters among students. Involving incarcerated individuals in the curriculum design process transforms them from passive recipients into active participants in their own educational development. This inclusive model affirms their lived expertise, builds trust, and increases their motivation to engage with the material. As a result, the course becomes more reflective of the challenges and needs experienced by returning citizens, making it more responsive and applicable to their lives beyond incarceration.

Second, the collaborative process cultivated teamwork and prosocial behavior within a setting where such dynamics are often underdeveloped. Working together toward a shared educational goal strengthened communication skills and fostered mutual respect among participants. In correctional environments, opportunities for constructive collaboration are rare. By bridging the roles of educator and student in the design process, the effort introduced a collective framework that emphasized cooperation and solidarity, essential traits for successful reentry and reintegration.

Finally, the process instilled a renewed sense of purpose in the participants. Many incarcerated individuals carry the emotional weight of their past actions and often feel disconnected from broader societal contributions. Contributing to a curriculum that will serve others facing similar reentry challenges enabled them to shift from a mindset of self-blame to one of social impact. Participating in something that gives back to their community, especially in the educational realm, restored a sense of dignity and allowed them to be viewed not just as justice-involved individuals, but as educators, mentors, and changemakers. Overall, the inclusion of incarcerated voices in curriculum development not only strengthens the content but also supports the emotional, interpersonal, and civic development of the participants. This collaborative model that I chose in constructing a reentry course exemplifies how reentry education can become a transformative process when co-constructed with those it is designed to serve.

Faculty Development and Institutional Commitment to Reentry-Focused Education

Effective education in prisons requires intentional collaboration between academic institutions and correctional facilities, grounded in shared values, mutual understanding, and operational alignment. This will also depend on faculty preparedness, institutional commitment, and the implementation of a culturally responsive, trauma-informed pedagogy that is tailored to the distinct structure of prison environments. Foundational collaboration will always begin with aligning missions and public identities. Like a recognizable brand, such as Nike's mantra "*Just Do It*" institutions must articulate core values, such as education access, public service, and community safety, to establish common ground (Jobs for the Future & Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network, 2024; Nike, 2025). Strategic practices that reinforce this alignment within the prison system could include offering tuition benefits to correctional staff, while creating internship pathways in justice fields for campus students, opportunities to conduct research, and facilitating faculty visits to correctional sites would be created by academic staff. Incorporating prison visits to correctional facilities by professors deepens trust between academic and institutional staff, including incarcerated individuals, familiarizes academic leaders with prison operations, and informs curriculum design through firsthand engagement with institutional culture.

Faculty development and prison pedagogy are also critical for preparing instructors to teach in high- and no-tech settings while also being able to navigate the emotional and logistical challenges of incarcerated learners. Research by Ferguson (2023) and Jobs for the Future & Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (2024) identifies three pillars of effective prison pedagogy: trauma-informed and relational instruction, peer mentorship among faculty, and non-hierarchical co-creation of knowledge. These practices promote empathy, equity, and student agency. Similarly, Weaver et al. (2020) found that while faculty in Boston University's Prison Education Program expressed strong motivation, they faced barriers including limited classroom access and institutional inconsistencies. Their findings highlighted the need for mentorship programs, pre-semester training, and robust faculty resources, particularly for newer instructors. To address logistical challenges within the prison, Weaver et al. (2020) recommended improved collaboration with correction agencies, increased access to academic materials, and institutionalized faculty training. While correctional policies may remain rigid, academic institutions can mitigate these challenges by developing strong support systems for faculty and ensuring consistent program implementation.

Ultimately, incarcerated learners benefit most from adaptive, student-centered instruction that considers their educational history, digital access limitations, and reentry trajectory. Faculty must be equipped to meet these learners where they are academically, emotionally, and socially, using methods that empower learning and foster long-term success. Sustained faculty development and institutional commitment are essential to the success and longevity of correctional education programs. Through intentional partnerships, immersive training, and trauma-informed pedagogy, institutions can expand educational equity, improve reentry outcomes, and strengthen public safety, advancing both academic and societal transformation.

Cross-Sector Collaboration: Aligning Education, Corrections, and Workforce Systems

Facilitating successful reentry for justice-impacted individuals also requires intentional alignment among education, corrections, and workforce development sectors. Obtaining employment is a key component of reentering society as it provides financial stability, fosters a sense of purpose, and reduces the likelihood of recidivism by offering structured opportunities for personal and professional growth (Hinton, 2021). Those who complete college coursework while incarcerated often report increased preparedness for post-release life, citing the academic structure, social support, and focus on reentry within their programs (Fullilove et al., 2020; University of Washington, 2025). Initiatives such as Hudson Link, the Prison-to-College Pipeline at John Jay College, and the Bard Prison Initiative have demonstrated strong outcomes, including low recidivism and high employment rates, underscoring the effectiveness of integrated academic and reentry support (Fullilove, 2020).

To sustain these outcomes, institutions must connect education to workforce readiness through reentry-informed approaches. This includes specialized career advising, mentorship, resume and application support, and interview preparation. Platforms like the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (FICGN), Indeed's Fair Chance Hiring board, and CareerOne Stop offer justice-impacted students access to employment opportunities and guidance on navigating disclosure and legal barriers (FICGN, 2024; Indeed FCHB, 2025; CareerOne Stop, 2025). Academic institutions and advisors must also address broader obstacles to employment, such as access to transportation, identification, professional attire, workplace cultural norms, and overall confidence. According to the National College Attainment Network (2024), comprehensive support grounded in empathy and practicality is essential to ensuring students not only find jobs but succeed in them. Ultimately, successful workforce reintegration for justice-impacted learners depends on coordinated, cross-sector strategies that link education, reentry, and employment services. When academic institutions align with community resources and employer networks, they extend the reach of prison education beyond graduation, creating pathways to economic stability and long-term public safety.

Community Academic Engagement as a Tool for Reentry Transformation

Meaningful academic engagement in prison education extends beyond traditional instruction; it requires a pedagogy that is relational, community-centered, and intentionally transformative. Central to this approach is fostering faculty-student relationships grounded in trust, mutual respect, and social-emotional learning. Such engagement nurtures intellectual curiosity, identity development, and a renewed sense of purpose, providing a critical pathway to agency and reintegration in a restrictive environment. The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program exemplifies this model by bringing incarcerated ("inside") and university ("outside") students together for joint college courses held within correctional settings. Rooted in social justice and transformative learning, these courses foster dialogue, critical thinking, and empathy across social divides. Incarcerated students report increased confidence, civic engagement, and identity transformation, while outside students gain deeper understanding of the justice system and a lasting commitment to equity (Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, 2024).

Beyond the classroom, the Inside-Out Think Tanks offer sustained engagement through peer-led alumni groups that co-create curriculum and maintain academic community post-course. A

participatory evaluation of nine focus groups across eight prisons highlighted themes of empowerment, personal growth, and collective learning. Inside participants described gaining solace and direction, while outside participants reported enhanced civic awareness and commitment to justice (Allred et al., 2019). These Think Tanks function as engines of community building, leadership development, and collaborative problem-solving. They promote restorative practices and shift educational dynamics from top-down instruction to mutual exchange, reinforcing reentry readiness and civic participation. Integrating models like Inside-Out into reentry curriculum design humanizes the educational process, strengthens motivation, and builds supportive peer networks that endure beyond incarceration. Ultimately, transformative academic engagement empowers justice-impacted learners to reclaim their narratives, pursue personal growth, connect with others through community education, and contribute meaningfully to society.

Policy and Practice Recommendations: Legislative Pathways to Postsecondary Access

Correctional education exists at the nexus of personal transformation and systemic reform, yet the perspectives of prison educators are often excluded from broader justice, equity, and reentry discourse. This call-to-action urges institutions, policymakers, and practitioners to center the lived experiences of correctional educators in shaping equitable postsecondary systems for justice-impacted learners. Expanding postsecondary access for incarcerated learners requires coordinated policy implementation across federal, state, and institutional systems. At the federal level, the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility has created new opportunities, but meaningful outcomes depend on aligning education, corrections, and workforce strategies to ensure equitable access and reentry success. A critical area of focus is granting incarcerated students, particularly those within 2–3 years of release, access to reentry technologies, job placement services, academic platforms, and nonprofit organizations. Policies should mandate early access to essential documents such as Social Security cards, birth certificates, state IDs, and Medicaid enrollment at least 3–6 months before release. These measures eliminate bureaucratic delays and reduce recidivism risks. Continued academic accommodation and support are also necessary for students transitioning to community supervision or transitional housing to ensure degree completion and workforce readiness. Denney and Tynes (2021) identified a number of policy recommendations that included restoring Pell access, expanding academic programs, streamlining enrollment, and building cross-sector partnerships to deliver student services inside and outside prison. These recommendations would ensure that justice-impacted learners receive continuous academic support that could reduce barriers to reentry and foster long-term educational and employment outcomes through coordinated, equity-focused efforts.

At the state level, Stickle et al. (2024) propose establishing centralized correctional education offices, improving data infrastructure to track education and recidivism outcomes, and ensuring quality through accredited partnerships and reentry-aligned curricula. They also stressed that prison education must be treated as a central component of both public safety and higher education systems. Stickle and Schuster (2024) further highlight successful state models, naming Ohio as a national leader due to its comprehensive educational offerings and policies such as automatic enrollment, centralized leadership, and sentence reduction incentives. States like

California and Wyoming also continue to demonstrate best practices, while others struggle due to fragmented efforts and underinvestment. The authors advocate for national adoption of these proven policies from other states to drive scalable reform.

Recent scholarship highlights the need for policy reforms that address both structural and procedural barriers to higher education for justice-impacted individuals who apply to college after they leave prison. These efforts emphasize equity, inclusion, and support across the admissions process and postsecondary landscape. Complementing these structural changes, Stewart and Uggen (2020) examined how college admissions policies that require disclosure of criminal history create disproportionate barriers for justice-impacted individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. They advocate for ban-the-box policies, reduced reliance on background checks, implicit bias training for admissions staff, and reentry-informed support services to foster inclusive access. Collectively, these studies offer a unified policy framework to advance postsecondary access and success for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated learners.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the journeys of my former students, who have successfully earned college degrees while incarcerated and are now approaching release, reinforces the reality that while educational achievement marks a significant milestone, it is only the beginning of the complex challenges they will encounter as they transition back into society. Successful reentry requires a collective effort, and postsecondary correctional education plays a vital role in that process. It promotes personal transformation and systemic equity, particularly when grounded in a justice-centered, community-based approach. Shared learning environments between incarcerated individuals and traditional college students foster empathy, civic engagement, and mutual understanding, critical components of social reintegration. Improving correctional education necessitates a coordinated strategy that aligns academic instruction with comprehensive reentry preparation. Key investments include strengthening prison libraries, expanding secure digital access, and enhancing collaboration among correctional institutions, academic stakeholders, and incarcerated students. Faculty development in trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy is essential, as is the integration of reentry-focused content, such as employment, housing, and civic literacy, into academic curricula. Moreover, seamless transitions from incarceration to community-based education must be prioritized. Universities should provide tailored reentry support through flexible admissions, case management, and proactive advising to reduce barriers to continued learning. Beyond individual benefits, correctional education reduces recidivism, strengthens families, and enhances public safety. It affirms the role of higher education as a tool for reintegration and collective well-being. Realizing its full potential demands sustained collaboration, institutional investment, and a shared commitment to inclusion and equity, ultimately advancing both personal opportunity and societal transformation. When achieved, this progress represents a collective victory for justice-impacted individuals, their families, educational institutions, communities, and the broader goal of public safety.

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