

# Postsecondary Education Programs for Incarcerated or Previously Incarcerated Individuals

## Background

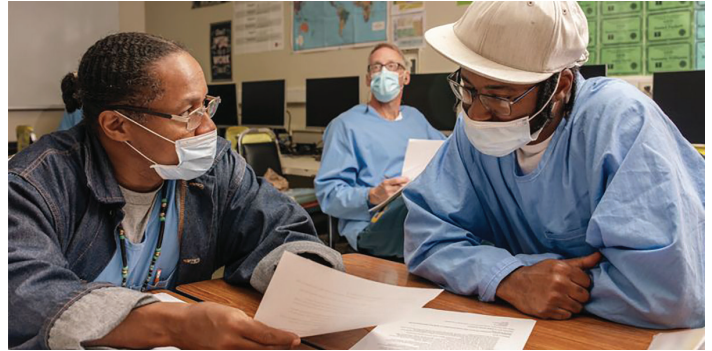
In 2021, nearly [2 million](#) Americans were incarcerated nationwide, and the majority of this population will be released back into communities. Yet more than [half](#) of formerly incarcerated individuals hold only a high school diploma or GED and formerly incarcerated individuals are [eight times](#) less likely to complete college than the general public.

Adults without a postsecondary degree or credential face significantly lower earning potentials and worse employment outcomes over their careers. Workers with bachelor's degrees are half as likely to be unemployed and earn an average of [\\$30,000](#) more each year than a high school graduate. Additionally, state and local economies benefit from an educated workforce. The Brookings Institution found the average bachelor's degree holder contributes [\\$278,000](#) more to the local economy than the average high school graduate over a lifetime.

The costs of incarceration also impose burdens on state budgets. According to [data from the Vera Institute of Justice](#), states spend an average of between \$25,000 and \$30,000 annually per incarcerated individual. However, [numerous studies](#) have found postsecondary education programs for incarcerated adults are highly cost-effective and substantially reduce recidivism. [Estimates](#) suggest that expanding access to postsecondary education in prison could decrease incarceration costs across the country by more than \$365 million.

## State and Local Program Examples

In 2018, just 4% of higher education institutions offered credit courses for students in prison and only 35% of state prisons provide access



MOUNT TAMALPAIS COLLEGE/MTTAMCOLLEGE.ORG

**Mount Tamalpais College received accreditation by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges in January 2020.**

to college courses. In areas where education programs are offered, limited educational resources, staffing difficulties and challenges related to credit transfer and articulation remain [common hurdles](#).

However, some institutions and programs across the country are working to offer postsecondary education to students who are currently incarcerated or serve students who were previously incarcerated. Stakeholders are working to develop partnerships between colleges and correctional institutions, create comprehensive supports and advising for students, and ensure degree and credential programs provide quality learning outcomes for students.

### ■ MOUNT TAMALPAIS COLLEGE

Formerly known as the Prison University Project at San Quentin, this is the [first independent liberal arts institution](#) dedicated to serving incarcerated students. Since the college launched in 1996, it has enrolled nearly 4,000 students and received accreditation by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges in Janu-

ary 2020. The college offers an education associate degree program and college preparatory courses in writing and mathematics. Most of the [teaching faculty](#) are volunteers from nearby colleges and universities.

### ■ MASSACHUSETTS PRISON EDUCATION CONSORTIUM

Managed by the Educational Justice Institute at MIT, the [Massachusetts Prison Education Consortium](#) creates and sustains an education pipeline to serve currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. The consortium also works to develop academic and career advising programs to meet the needs of currently or formerly incarcerated students. MPEC members include nearly 50 educational institutions across the state as well as the Massachusetts Department of Correction and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. The consortium expanded in 2020 to include partners in Maine and New Hampshire.

### ■ REENTRY CAMPUS PROGRAM

The [Reentry Campus Program](#) is based in Rhode Island and helps currently or formerly incarcerated individuals receive postsecondary education through credit programs, comprehensive wrap-around supports, and prior learning assessment testing. The program has helped close to 400 students and partners with higher education institutions such as University College at Roger Williams University to help students attain higher education degrees and credentials.

### ■ BARTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

[Barton Community College](#) has partnered with the Ellsworth Correctional Facility in Ellsworth, Kan., to create the Building Academic Skills in Correctional Settings (BASICS) Program. The program offers eight certificate programs in areas such as welding, manufacturing, carpentry, and digital literacy, as well as adult basic education and advising for more than 200 students per year. Barton Community College was one of nine recipients of the [Improved Reentry Education Grant Program](#) in 2015 from the U.S. Department of Education.

### ■ TENNESSEE PRISON COLLEGE COALITION

The [Tennessee Prison College Coalition](#) is a coalition of stakeholder groups including higher education institutions, corrections entities, and community partners that work together and collaborate to support prison higher education practices across the state. These efforts [include](#) working with community and technical colleges and creating a culture of education within the prison system.

## Federal Action

### ■ RESTORATION OF PELL GRANT ELIGIBILITY

In 2020, Congress [restored](#) financial aid eligibility for incarcerated students and students who have been convicted of drug-related of-



TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION INITIATIVE/THEI.ORG

### Graduates from the Northwest Correctional Complex, part of the Tennessee Prison College Coalition.

fenses. Incarcerated students were previously prohibited from applying for federal aid in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. Pell eligibility will be restored in July 2023.

### ■ EXPANSION OF SECOND CHANCE PELL

In 2022, the Department of Education [announced](#) plans to invite 73 colleges and universities to participate in the third round of Second Chance Pell. This expansion will bring the total number of Second Chance Pell schools to 200 and expand the program's geographic coverage area. Additionally, 24 of the new institutions are Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Minority Serving Institutions.

### ■ STUDENT LOAN “FRESH START”

Additionally, the Department of Education [announced](#) that incarcerated individuals would qualify for the “fresh start” policy that will bring all defaulted student loans into good standing when the student loan payment pause expires, which is expected at the end of 2022. The Student Borrower Protection Center and National Consumer Law Center have published a report detailing the challenges associated with incarcerated borrowers, especially those who are in default on a student loan and would therefore be ineligible for Pell grant restoration.

## Additional Resources

- [NCSL Postsecondary Bill Tracking Database](#)
- [Second Chance Pell Expansion](#), U.S. Department of Education, 2022