

Journal of Student Financial Aid

Volume 53
Issue 1 *Finance and Financial Aid for
Postsecondary Education in Prison*

Article 5

March 2024

Filling Potholes in Pell's Road to Reentry Success

James Monogan
jmonogan@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/jsfa>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Monogan, James (2024) "Filling Potholes in Pell's Road to Reentry Success," *Journal of Student Financial Aid*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1845>

Available at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/jsfa/vol53/iss1/5>

This Reflections in Practice Brief is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Student Financial Aid by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact thinkir@louisville.edu.

Filling Potholes in Pell's Road to Reentry Success

By Jamie Monogan, Independent Researcher

Pell eligibility for incarcerated people is a great rehabilitative opportunity, but several challenges remain. This article recaps five of the issues identified by the original research articles in this special issue. It also considers how solutions proposed in these studies may be beneficial across a variety of these issues and gathers recommendations together by which actor could implement them. Problems and solutions are corroborated by the author's personal experience with incarceration.

Keywords: Pell grants, higher education in prison, state policy, research ethics

The reinstatement of Pell eligibility has brought opportunities for college education closer to reaching distance for many imprisoned people.¹ Yet, Pell funding alone does not completely pave the path to college degrees for those who are incarcerated. It falls to other actors to fill in these holes in the road to degree and certificate completion.

The four original research articles in this special issue identify many of these gaps and present recommendations to fill them. The potential value of this counsel is highlighted because many of these recommendations are based on observed practices that have worked in certain settings. V.O. Key (1984) once called the 50 U.S. states “laboratories of democracy” because each state can experiment with new policies. Other states and the federal government can mimic successful programs while avoiding observed fiascos. These four studies examine information from prisons throughout New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and two unnamed states. Following the laboratory logic, successes can be imitated by other state legislatures or the U.S. Congress, by leadership in other prisons, and by administrators of other higher education in prison (HEP) programs.

This article highlights some of the biggest remaining gaps to HEP success as identified across the four original articles. While not an exhaustive list, I focus on common findings and those that seem most prevalent in my own personal experience. For each problem, proposed policies from the articles offer potential solutions, with one article's policy proposal often offering an answer for another article's problem. To that end, the article next proceeds by offering a statement of my own positionality as someone who is currently incarcerated. In turn, I then consider five gaps HEP programs face as identified by the authors in this special issue. The respective sections focus on the lack of information incarcerated people have regarding programs and funding, funding gaps, needs for reenrollment support, technology hurdles, and program threats that can emerge from prison operations. The article concludes with a statement on how various actors might pursue some of this special issue's recommendations.

The Role of an Incarcerated Person's Positionality

To position myself with regard to this topic of study, I first will state that I am currently incarcerated at the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Federal Satellite Low facility in Jesup, GA. To be clear, I do regret my actions which led me here, and I have said so publicly. Prior to my arrest, I worked as a

¹ In my initial draft of this article, I used the terms ‘prisoner’ and ‘inmate’ to refer to myself and those who are incarcerated with me because they reflect the reality of my current context. However, after reflection, I have decided to use terms that humanize both myself and those incarcerated with me in the published version of this manuscript.

professor who studied public policy in the 50 U.S. state governments. Here in Jesup, my work detail is as a tutor for English as a Second Language (ESL). My crime was an online sex offense, which will impose considerable restrictions on where I can live, work, or visit, which makes the reentry process more difficult than for many other offenses. Nevertheless, as a white man with a Ph.D. and significant work experience, I overall am unlikely to face as steep of a challenge when reentering broader society as will some of my peers, including some of those I tutor. My hope is that, beyond my general knowledge of state-level policymaking, my own experiences as an incarcerated individual and my observations from working with those pursuing education in prison will add additional insight to the problems and prospective solutions raised in this special issue.

So, what can an incarcerated person's view add to this research? As Castro et al. observe in their article, "prisons and the people held within them are difficult to access by the outside world," the public knows little about what happens in prisons (p. 1). For this reason, all of the researchers in this special issue should be applauded for seeking to reveal more about how prison education functions. They also have done this in a manner which respects those incarcerated, prison staff, and educators.

These studies also rightly respect the anonymity of individual study participants. Beyond the authors' own commitment to ethical research, academic researchers must proceed with a plan approved by their local Institutional Review Board (IRB), which seeks to ensure that no study participants face unnecessary harm. Yet, while IRBs are correct to protect the privacy of those incarcerated, potential risks are supposed to be weighed against the potential benefits. Incarcerated people potentially can benefit when the public knows more about how programs operate and can make more informed decisions when voting or expressing themselves on the issue of incarceration. Incarcerated people also may benefit if policymakers know more details about which programs worked and where. For example, Castro et al. apparently were not permitted to reveal in which two states the four HEP programs they studied were. Also, when Zukowski et al. discussed a non-credit-bearing program, they apparently were not permitted by the IRB to describe what kind of teaching or training the program offered.

How much more valuable it would be if state legislators could look up the details of policy in the unnamed states, or if other educators could mimic the nature of a successful non-credit-bearing program. Incarcerated individuals' status is public information, so presumably the most important reason for confidentiality is to prevent retribution from prison staff or vigilante private citizens over what they report. This is a reasonable concern, especially in a study of how staff treat those who are incarcerated, for example. Yet imprisoned people's experiences with higher education are unlikely to generate significant controversy.

Further, it is problematic if incarcerated individuals cannot be paid for study participation under the reasoning that this is coercion. In fact, Castro et al. sought to compensate study participants, but they were denied by each state's Department of Corrections (DOC). Yet, payments to incarcerated research participants show that their time is valued and helps the cost-benefit balance of participation to raise response rates and data quality. Payment is not coercion; it is an incentive that people can decline. If anything, unpaid participation might feel more compulsory, as we are often told what we have to do without compensation. For example, if we are marched to wait in our recreation yard while our cells are shaken down (e.g. searched and inspected), we have no option and no incentive in the matter. Payment proves precisely that the individual does have agency over whether they choose to accept a contractual offer.

Yet, while IRBs have tough ethical decisions to weigh, and while state DOCs and the U.S. BOP implement their own decisions, each individual retains the right to their own data. As an incarcerated person with the right to my own data, therefore, I will speak about some of my own

experiences and how they relate to problems that this special issue's articles have identified. Perhaps this one additional data point can thereby enhance these findings.

The Dearth of Information for Imprisoned People

Turning to issues raised by the articles, the first of five major problems to consider stems from information's scarcity in prison yards. Access to the internet is limited at best and often completely absent, as is my experience. This raises the reliance on print material, so information is only as good as the printed information inside of the fence. This produces the related problems of student financial aid illiteracy due to "forces of deprivation and censorship" (Castro et al., p. 8) as well as whether incarcerated individuals are sufficiently well informed to determine if a program is right for their limited Pell dollars (Zukowski et al.). To be clear, the scarcity of programs makes "college choice" a myth for aspiring students who are incarcerated" (Castro et al., p. 2). Yet, whether an available program is right for the student is another question. This special issue makes it clear how the lack of information for incarcerated students poses problems.

Alpert et al. observe that incarcerated students' reliance on information from a local HEP program may reduce their ability to make informed choices. This lack of financial aid literacy may mean that they are unaware of the impact of using Pell dollars or that they may unwittingly incur debt. Castro et al. found that incarcerated students were provided insufficient information on program costs and Pell grant rules. Notably, many students were unaware that there are lifetime limits on Pell eligibility, such that once the lifetime cap on grant funds is exhausted, the student is no longer eligible. Relatedly, many students were distrustful after HEP administrators rushed them through FAFSA forms and paperwork. Zukowski et al. cited a representative from a HEP program who worried that there are programs that can be "exploitative" of incarcerated students by enrolling them in programs that allow the college to collect the Pell dollars without providing a complete education (p. 9).

Across these articles, we see that the absence of information is often a problem. While Pell funding can help, and while the presence of a HEP program potentially can allow an incarcerated student to make good use of their time while incarcerated, the choice to participate must be an informed one. Since each individual's Pell dollars are finite, they need to know that enrolling in a HEP program today will reduce or drain that resource. Incarcerated students also need to have a sense of why the available HEP program could be valuable, what the curriculum is, and what alternatives might await outside. The costs of the program, and perhaps even costs relative to outside programs also could be relevant. This would help prevent regrets about lost opportunities (in or out of prison) later on and reduce the odds of treating incarcerated students as a source of cash from Pell funds.

Bowling et al., Alpert et al., and Zukowski et al. all observe in this volume how racial and economic disparities persist in prison education programs. These disparities certainly are present in the broader population, and Bowling et al. even are optimistic to argue that HEP programs may provide "an opportunity to combat disparities in educational attainment" (p. 3). Existing disparities may be, in part, a consequence of a lack of information of what opportunities exist. Thus, providing more information not only can help avoid exploitation by certain HEP programs and uninformed use of funds, but also may lead to good uses of funds for helpful programs by incarcerated students who otherwise may be unaware of these opportunities.

Across the articles, a few solutions are offered for bringing information to incarcerated students. Castro et al. recommend that higher education administrators and financial aid officers visit facilities and directly interact with incarcerated students. In this way, educators can observe firsthand the bureaucracy and constraints these students face, build a culture of trust, and take the

time to offer more information to prospective students before they may choices. The need to convey Pell's limits is echoed by Sultana Shabazz of Tacoma Community College: Absent providers' ability to offer a wide array of programs in a prison setting, incarcerated students must think about "career goals post release" to determine if a program aligns "with their long-term aspirations" (quoted in Palmer, 2024, n.p.).

Alpert et al. focus on the manner in which Community Based Organizations (CBOs) can smooth out many of the gaps which remain in implementing prison-based education. They report on the work by Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison in New York and the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative (THEI), both of which employ an on-site academic coordinator who, among other tasks, provides ongoing support for students in the prison. With continual support, prospective students are less likely to be rushed when filling in FAFSA forms, are less likely to enroll in a predatory program, are more likely to understand the long-term costs and benefits of using Pell grants and other funds, and thereby are more likely to make the right decision about program enrollment. Alpert et al. also observe that it is easier for CBOs to hire employees with a felony record than it is for either higher education institutions or DOCs. For a CBO's local academic coordinator to have been incarcerated, especially someone who was a student in prison, can make for a great "in-person role model and guide" for students (p. 5). Stanley Adrisse from Prison Cells to PhD shares the view that CBOs can serve a useful role and can do so with the work of formerly and currently incarcerated people (cited in Palmer, 2024). Beyond the role CBOs can play in more easily hiring the formerly incarcerated, state DOCs and the U.S. BOP require advance clearance for outside volunteers and visitors to enter prisons. To fully benefit from the role people with a criminal record can offer for education, these government entities ought to adopt a policy guidance that qualified educational professionals should be considered for exceptions to normal security clearance rules for the sake of serving such roles in a prison compound. Bowling et al. similarly argue that former college-in-prison students should serve as mentors, potentially hired by HEP providers, who can be a resource not only for prospective students, but for professors and funders, too.

Hudson Link and THEI also have implemented college preparatory programs in prisons in their respective states (Alpert et al.). Speaking from experience, in General Equivalency Degree (GED) and ESL instruction, the levels of education and study skills are so diverse that some students even need individual tutoring in how to read. Those enrolling in a HEP program are likely to have their GED or high school diploma, but their aptitude with classroom settings still will be varied. Thus, these college preparatory programs serve to help students prepare for what is expected of them in a college program, which not only will raise their chances of success upon enrollment, but also can serve to help incarcerated students make informed decisions about whether and when to sign up for an available program, as they get a better sense of what college programming is about.

Remaining Funding Gaps

A second issue is funding gaps. The reinstatement of Pell eligibility for incarcerated students greatly helps the cause of higher education because these grants can cover a significant portion of tuition and fees. Yet, Zukowski et al. dedicate their attention to the issue of continued funding gaps. In all programs studied in these articles, some portion of costs (often quite large) had to be covered by students, their families, state funding, private support, the education provider itself, or some combination of these. Since incarcerated people generally have low to no income and disproportionately come from a lower socioeconomic background, shrinking these funding gaps serves to make educational attainment less of a leap.

Zukowski et al. call for the state of Pennsylvania to reinstate supplemental state funding for the incarcerated, which is available for Pennsylvanians who have not been convicted of a felony.

Bowling et al. report that the state legislature of New York reinstated the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) as supplementary funds for incarcerated students. This narrows the tuition gap considerably further, though it does not close it completely. A natural recommendation when comparing students' potential experiences in New York and Pennsylvania then, would be that states offer supplemental support for currently and formerly incarcerated people. While this will help attain the goal of rehabilitating incarcerated students and helping them prepare for reentry, increased funding for programs in prisons can be politically difficult, as Zukowski et al. duly note. Converse (1964) determined that a significant portion of U.S. residents thinks about politics in terms of how various social groups are affected. Thus, policies which are perceived to benefit well-liked social groups such as children or veterans will be more popular, while policies perceived to benefit groups thought to be undeserving will be less popular. If opponents of supplemental tuition aid can chain the program to individuals perceived as dangerous and undeserving of such an entitlement, legislators may fear for their electoral lives before voting in favor. Therefore, other options for funding are important, too.

While state assistance is a valuable recommendation, Zukowski et al. point to other useful methods for closing the tuition gap. Notably, one program reviewed the fee schedule and eliminated fees that do not apply to incarcerated students. In this case, fee reductions completely covered the gap left by Pell. However, even if other programs can merely cut the deficit with fee eliminations, it can help. Several of the participants in Castro et al.'s study expressed frustration with the lack of equipment they had access to after paying technology fees. Thus, for providers to eliminate irrelevant fees would be fairer, cut the costs, and reduce suspicion among students.

Zukowski et al. also observed programs in Pennsylvania that covered tuition gaps, respectively, with university funding, outside grant funding from organizations like the Bureau of Justice Assistance or Mellon Foundation, and through an NGO. To the degree that such funds are sustainable, they serve as another source. At the least, they may extend a program's life in the short term while other long-term solutions are sought. The use of NGO funding also reiterates Alpert et al.'s argument that private, non-profit entities like CBOs can serve a role. While many CBOs may not be able to inject cash into a program, support like advising and technology also might ease costs for colleges. In this way, providers could pass on savings to students, for example, by eliminating fees for services that the college normally provides, but a CBO instead offers philanthropically.

As an example close to home, the Jesup FSL, where I am imprisoned, currently is offering an HVAC certificate program. It is taught by faculty from the nearby Coastal Pines Technical College. The BOP contracts this program out to Coastal Pines and pays out of its own budget the full bill for this valuable vocational training credential. This serves as another funding option for higher education: Any state DOC or the U.S. BOP can contract out to providers, covering financial gaps left by Pell per student or even the full price of the program if that fits within its goals of rehabilitating those imprisoned and making them ready for lawful success upon reentry.

Needs in Reentry and Reenrollment Support

As a third issue, Bowling et al. focused on reenrollment in higher education upon release from prison. They note that eligibility in New York's College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP) is restricted to individuals within 1.5 to 5.5 years from their earliest release date (ERD), and they cite that most college-in-prison students, both nationally and in New York, are released before completing a degree. From experience, I am not surprised that many incarcerated students are released before finishing their degree. I have lost count of how many ESL and GED students were abruptly released – or deported in the case of those with immigration detainees – before they had a chance to take final certification exams that they were on schedule to complete.

It may seem odd to many that release dates are so hard to predict. However, laws and regulations on sentencing change and can apply retroactively, detainers from other jurisdictions can be dropped, medical and compassionate releases can be granted, halfway house time can come along, legal motions and appeals can succeed, First Step Act time credits can deduct time from sentences (for some crimes at the federal level), and parole can be granted (in many states). To that end, I would recommend that education programs eliminate any rule that would force a student to delay beginning study. If CIP, for example, does not allow students to enroll earlier than 5.5 years from their ERD, eliminating that boundary so that students can begin earlier ought to increase the likelihood of degree completion before release, given that so many factors can advance that date.

Yet, while that recommendation would reduce the need for reenrollment, Bowling et al. focus on the important problem of low reenrollment rates for those who do not complete their degree while incarcerated. They find that CIP students in focus groups and in surveys, as well as interviewed providers, all perceived substantial benefits for incarcerated students. Yet, they also anticipated substantial financial obstacles to reenrollment upon reentry, which included the individual's need to support themselves financially, the direct costs of reenrolling, and the lack of holistic reentry support that would help individuals find where an education program can fit in their new life.

Indeed, finding gainful employment and covering costs of living, most notably housing, poses a major challenge to newly released individuals. In fact, beyond the need to establish a good financial situation, often formerly incarcerated individuals are legally obligated to work. My own probation rules will require me to work at least 30 hours per week, though exceptions potentially can be granted by the probation officer. While the pursuit of a degree is a good candidate for an exception, there is legal pressure beyond any financial pressure to invest time into employment.

To facilitate reenrollment, Bowling et al. first recommend that stakeholders develop holistic support plans for students' reentry. Since individuals with a felon history have to solve questions of housing, employment, and health, the odds that a student will reenroll after release likely will rise if stakeholders can help students plan how to balance education with other essential tasks. Alpert et al. observe that CBOs can help in this goal, citing that THEI published the *Moving Forward Guide* that covers reentry needs and resources.

Also, Bowling et al. call for the hiring of reentry and reenrollment coordinators who can help students "devise individual-level reenrollment plans, and help them achieve their reentry goals that may enable reenrollment down the line, as well as secure stable housing and employment" (p. 22). As with the question of financial aid literacy, ultimately, we want to help incarcerated students find goals for a productive life without recidivism. So where does higher education fit in that goal? If it is to help a student establish themselves in a field, how might training in the short term fit with a transitional job that finances tuition and cost of living expenses? Absent a plan, long-term goals might be lost among attention to immediate needs. Again, Alpert et al. observe that CBOs can help in this regard, too. Hudson Link's Finish Line program has focused on reenrollment after entry. In addition to financial aid, a coordinator assists the student through the planning process.

The Absence of Technology

A fourth problem is lack of technology. Higher education today uses technology extensively. Computers (including tablets and smartphones), as well as internet access, have become integral to the teaching process. Yet, prisons are technological deserts, as the articles in this special issue rightly observe. To illustrate how ridiculous the restrictions can be, I tutor courses as part of my work detail on Microsoft Office software. These courses are entirely book-based, and students do not even have offline computers with which they could practice using these programs. Reading about the function

of various buttons and menus in Word, Excel, Access, and PowerPoint is of little use without seeing these features in action. Further, many incarcerated people have email through a pay-per-minute account, though this is not available for sex offenders. Otherwise, internet access is prohibited. There is not even a basic word processing program available, so anyone enrolled in a correspondence course must purchase a typewriter ribbon from the commissary to type their work. All of this substantially limits what can be done within our Education Department.

All nine of the HEP providers in Pennsylvania that Zukowski et al. interviewed said that technology limitations made it hard for them to offer courses similar to those on campus. They report the need for word processing, library database access, and learning management system access. Castro et al. also observe how limited or absent internet access is a problem; therefore “print materials have an outsized value within jails and prisons as compared to the outside community” (p. 3). They go on to note that printed material is often difficult to get in. They are correct that censorship levels vary considerably. Also, the drug K-2 (also known as “deuce,” “tucci,” or “spice”) is created by applying roach spray to paper, including pages of books and magazines, which is then smoked. Many mail restrictions are in place to prevent this drug from entering prison yards. This is why books mailed directly from a known vendor like Amazon are typically permitted, while books from a home address are not. Education providers, thus, likely would need to be whitelisted in advance to send material.

So, what are the solutions to this? Castro et al. propose that providers “reject the normalization of prison authority and instead be resolutely curious about deprivation” (p. 14). They make this valuable recommendation for a variety of facets of providing education. On this issue, they argue that administrators should insist that incarcerated students ought to have permissible e-mail and internet access to fulfill essential tasks. Similarly, Zukowski et al. conclude with a broad recommendation that HEP administrators establish “respectful dialogue with the Department of Corrections to work on policy and resolve technical issues quickly” (p. 13). Certainly, finding methods to meet technological needs could fit in such a respectful dialogue.

There is some movement to make technology more available. The Michigan state legislature allocated \$15 million to its DOC to install secure Wi-Fi networks (Palmer, 2024). Such direct policy changes by state and federal government most easily alleviate the problems of information deprivation. Additionally, Alpert et al. report that CBOs can help, as Hudson Link established a computer lab that met security standards while THEI worked with the DOC to reconcile essential course websites with Tennessee’s firewall and security systems, even developing offline alternative when needed. Thus, in the absence of direct government movement, efforts by providers and CBOs can ameliorate students’ information access.

Interruptions Due to Prison Operations

A fifth problem is that prison programming is routinely cancelled. A friend of mine once noted that everything here is secondary to the safety of the prison. When there is a security threat, a pandemic, facility renovation, or a disciplinary action, a lockdown is a common part of the response. When the prison is locked down, typically we cannot participate in programming activities like education or recreation. In fact, at the time of this writing, my ESL class has been cancelled for nine straight working days while outside contractors have been working, with more cancellations appearing likely. Further, the U.S. BOP routinely uses a process called ‘augmentation,’ in which teachers, recreation officers, and medical staff may be moved to a custody post for an uncovered shift because custody officers are essential to prison security. When augmentation leaves a department vacant, such as Education, it must close for that shift due to lack of supervision, eliminating any of the day’s

scheduled programs. The loss of programming due to security threatens how well HEP programs could run, as they would operate through the Education Department.

Castro et al. note, in the context of pushing for better communication access for incarcerated students, that prison administrators likely will “respond negatively, citing reasons of general safety and security for the facility” (p. 14). They therefore rightly observe how so much is lost in the name of security. Their advice “to reject the normalization of prison authority” (p. 14) can extend into questions of program operability, too. It can benefit incarcerated students if free citizens advocate for finding a way to run programs that fit within the prison’s safety and security needs.

One of the providers that Zukowski et al. interviewed lamented that two programs had to be stopped at the developmental stage because renovations precluded student access. This is a common story because incarcerated people generally cannot be near outside contractors or heavy equipment, especially if work makes an area less secure than usual. Again, Zukowski et al. generally call for “respectful dialogue” to resolve issues of program provision (p. 13). With a more even dialogue, perhaps providers can nudge prison authorities to recognize HEP programs as priority and find a way to make necessary space.

Conclusion: Implications for Practice

Is the purpose of incarceration rehabilitation, retribution, or deterrence? If rehabilitation is of any importance, then the reinstitution of Pell eligibility for incarcerated students is a positive development. What better way can individuals with a felon record show society and prospective employers that they have moved on from their past crime than by investing the time and effort of attaining a new credential. Be that a GED, a training certificate, or a two- or four-year college degree, the improved skillset and proof of dedication are valuable signals? With higher education, Pell covers a major portion of the financial cost, and this paves a clear road to rehabilitation.

Yet, this special issue shows that Pell’s road to opportunity still has many potholes to be filled so that people more effectively can take this path. While not an exhaustive list of these four articles’ valuable findings, five prominent concerns are lack of student information, funding gaps, reentry and reenrollment support, lack of technology, and interruptions due to prison operations.

So, who can do what? Across the articles, it is suggested that *education providers* advocate for their programs by respectfully working with correctional staff to resolve emergent problems, particularly regarding technology and program operability. Providers also are urged to visit sites and students firsthand to understand better the setting and complexities, as well as to build a culture of trust. For tackling funding gaps, providers can search for fees that they can fairly eliminate for incarcerated students and explore outside finds to cover tuition and fees. They can offer holistic reentry support for incarcerated students that focuses on how a program would fit (if it fits) with career goals and other reentry needs, including any necessary reenrollment planning. Formerly incarcerated people, particularly HEP graduates, can serve as inspiring mentors.

Community based organizations can work with education providers and prisons, often bridging gaps when other actors cannot. It may be easier for CBOs to employ ex-felons who can serve in mentoring roles. To the degree that providers are unable to counsel students on paperwork, college preparation, or holistic reentry support, CBOs often can fill these gaps. If prisons and providers are limited in providing technology, CBOs potentially can help as much as prisons will allow them to.

Governments at the state and federal level, including their prison systems, can take a number of steps to raise the sustainability of HEP programs. To start, states like Pennsylvania that maintain bans on supplemental state funding for incarcerated people should look to states like New York, where the TAP program considerably narrows the remaining tuition gap. Regarding technology, state and federal government can take steps like Michigan with the installation of secure Wi-Fi

networks. Further, internet monitoring software has gotten so sophisticated that some form of secure internet access should be feasible. DOCs and the BOP should advise security exceptions for qualified educational professionals who would serve such a role on site. Prisons also ought to seek ways to maintain security that allows programming to continue, notably by finding new meeting spaces when needed and finding alternatives to augmentation. If rehabilitation is important, states can follow suit from the federal BOP and contract to education providers for useful programs – either paying in whole or covering tuition gaps not covered by Pell or other funds.

Finally, *incarcerated people* should do all they can to better themselves while incarcerated. It can be difficult with limited information and resources to program, but I urge my peers to try. Not every opportunity is the right one, and anyone who has the luxury of supportive friends and family may want to call on them to learn more about financial aid, to develop a reentry plan, and to determine whether and how a specific program fits into that plan. In the absence of the right credit-bearing program, even internal or external non-credit-bearing programs, which are typically free, can expand one's skillset. With any luck, the path to reentry will get less bumpy in the coming years, but goal-oriented behavior is valuable no matter how rough the road. In the meantime, to those who successfully graduate, consider how you might invite other incarcerated individuals to follow the same path.

Acknowledgements

I thank the editors, Dr. David Pitts and Dr. Melissa Whatley, for their ongoing support and invitation to contribute to this special issue. I especially appreciate Dr. Whatley's added help of fact-checking and working with handwritten material due to the limits I face in prison.

References

- Converse, P. (1964). The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In D. E. Apter (Ed.) *Ideology and discontent* (pp. 206-261). Free Press.
- Key, V.O. (1984). *Southern politics in state and nation*. University of Tennessee Press.
- Palmer, K. (2024, February 5). Advocates want equitable prison education post-Pell restoration. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2024/02/05/advocates-want-equitable-prison-education-post-pell>