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## The Unrealized Promise of College-in-prison: Financial Hurdles to Reenrollment and Completion in the Era of Pell Reinstatement

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# The Unrealized Promise of College-in-prison: Financial Hurdles to Reenrollment and Completion in the Era of Pell Reinstatement

By Julia Bowling, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, Pavithra Nagarajan, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, Kristen Parsons, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, & Neal Palmer, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance

*College-in-prison programs are positioned to expand substantially under the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for people in prison. While this change will enable more students who have been systemically excluded from higher education to attend college, degree completion is rare during incarceration and post-release. Student perspectives can shed light on both the value of college-in-prison and the financial barriers to realizing its value. This study analyzes data from 12 focus groups with 105 total college-in-prison student participants, 114 student survey responses, and 45 stakeholder interviews. The data were collected between 2018-2022 during a process evaluation of the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative, which provided funding to college-in-prison programs in New York State as part of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office Criminal Justice Investment Initiative. The findings demonstrate that students value college-in-prison, describing how it fostered self-reflection and personal growth and provided them with a skillset that may help them gain employment upon release. However, students also raised concerns about reenrolling and completing their degrees following release. Intentional, holistic reentry support could address the largely financial barriers to reenrollment. In so doing, students will be more likely to earn their college degrees after incarceration and experience the full value of a college education.*

Keywords: federal Pell Grant eligibility, prison education, retention, reentry

A college education is both a necessary qualification for employment in many settings as well as an academic pursuit through which students can grow intellectually and personally (Marcotte et al., 2005; Zell, 2010). A college degree signifies the achievement of that pursuit and is an essential credential that can boost future earnings, job prospects, and overall financial stability. These benefits are particularly salient for college students who are incarcerated, as their future employability is constrained and avenues for scholarly exploration are limited. In addition to increasing future employment prospects, college-in-prison programs are associated with a reduction in the likelihood of future incarceration (Davis et al., 2014; Oakford et al., 2019). College-in-prison also helps create a more highly qualified workforce—reducing the need for public expenditures on benefits programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—while simultaneously improving public safety and reducing costs to society in the form of crime, victimization, as well as the criminal legal system costs of prosecution and incarceration (Tewksbury et al., 2008). These impacts, however, are diluted as most students do not complete degrees while incarcerated and reenrolling and completing college post-release can be difficult while dealing with other reentry needs (Foster et al., 2005; Ositelu, 2019). Notably, students may require more time to complete degrees than suggested by the name of “two-” and “four-year” degrees—even for students in the community, 85% of associate’s degree earners took longer than two years to complete the two-year degree, while 62% of bachelor’s degree earners took longer than four years to complete the four-year degree (Shapiro et al., 2016). Nonetheless, college-in-prison programming has potentially lasting impacts beyond employment and reincarceration—it is positively associated with students’ self-perception and a reduction in self-stigma (Baranger et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018).

Historically, access to college education has been hard to come by in prison, but now is poised to expand dramatically after eligibility for federal Pell Grant funding and additional state support in many states (e.g., the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) in New York State (NYS)) for incarcerated students have been reinstated. Prior to 1994, federal financial aid supported college-in-prison programming and many states, including NYS, built robust college-in-prison programs (Tewksbury et al., 2008). Emerging from the 1980s and 90s “tough-on-crime” era, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 revoked Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students (Ryan, 1995; Tewksbury et al., 2008). Following this decision, many states made these students ineligible for equivalent state financial aid programs as well, including NYS’s TAP (Avey et al., 2015).

Without Pell and TAP funding, existing college-in-prison programs in NYS were able to accommodate just four percent of the college-eligible population (i.e., incarcerated people with high school credentials), mostly through private funding, leaving long wait lists of prospective students (Avey et al., 2015). Furthermore, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 had previously revoked access to federal financial aid, including Pell Grants, for formerly incarcerated people with felony drug convictions, and limited access to essential safety net programs such as SNAP, TANF, and public housing (McCarty et al., 2016). Later, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and the Quality Housing and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1998 called for further limiting access to federal benefits for people with drug felony convictions and sexual offense felony convictions, and states implemented full or partial bans on SNAP and TANF (McCarty et al., 2016; Sheely, 2021). Additionally, people with sex offense convictions face further restrictions. For example, NYS adopted the Sexual Assault Reform Act in 2001, which requires people with sex-related convictions who are on probation or under parole supervision to find housing at least 1,000 feet from schools, day care centers, and parks, eliminating much of the dense housing stock in New York City (NYC), including almost all of Manhattan (Roman & Travis, 2006; Fortune Society, 2019). These policies prevented people in prison from pursuing higher education and made their reentry processes more difficult by restricting access to the basic human needs of food and shelter.

In the past decade, both state and federal leaders have begun to move away from “tough-on-crime,” and shift toward “smart-on-crime” (i.e., evidence-based) policies. In 2015, the Obama Administration instituted Adult Reentry Education Grants, which aimed to increase access to high-quality pre- and post-release educational opportunities by funding programs in selected communities (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). In 2016, the Obama Administration created the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, a pilot program that provided grants to a maximum of 12,000 incarcerated students per year across 28 states, including NYS (Vera Institute of Justice, 2017). Its success contributed to the full reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Simplification Act in 2022, which went into effect on July 1, 2023 (Castro et al., 2022). In April 2022, the NYS Legislature followed suit and repealed the ban on TAP for incarcerated students (New York State Education Services Corporation, n.d.). The FAFSA Simplification Act also removed restrictions that prevented individuals with sex offense felony convictions from accessing federal student financial aid programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a). This followed a 2021 policy change, resulting from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid Simplification Act in 2020, that removed similar restrictions for people with drug-related felony convictions (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a). Unlike federal financial aid, TAP did not have these eligibility restrictions.

In the midst of this reform-minded landscape, the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP) was a \$7.3 million project launched by the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office (DANY) in 2017 which worked with education providers to expand access to postsecondary programs in prisons

across NYS. The City University of New York (CUNY) Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG) managed CIP, and other stakeholders included the Institute for Justice and Opportunity and the State University of New York (SUNY), which collectively served as the Education and Reentry Coordinator within CIP. The role of the Education and Reentry Coordinator was to strengthen the reentry support infrastructure, prepare students for academic reentry, improve credit transfer processes, and facilitate standard-setting and sharing of best practices between programs. Through CIP, seven colleges and universities in NYS (hereafter, “Providers”) received funding that facilitated larger enrollment capacity, increased course options, and expanded degree programs in NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) facilities, including in facilities that previously did not offer college-in-prison. CIP primarily served students from historically marginalized communities—51% of students were Black and 17% were Latine. The CIP population largely mirrors that of the NYS incarcerated population, with Black individuals overrepresented in prisons at 49% though they represent only 18% of the state population. While Latine people are slightly overrepresented in prison—making up 24% of the NYS incarcerated population compared to 20% of the state population—Latine people are slightly underrepresented in CIP at 17% of the student population (Carson, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a). Nonetheless, for both Black and Latine students, CIP provided an opportunity to combat disparities in educational attainment—across the state, only 25% of Black adults and 20.5% of Latine adults have a bachelor’s degree, compared to 44% of White adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b).

As an initiative focused on reentry, official program eligibility was restricted to students who were nearing their earliest release date (ERD), specifically 1.5 to 5.5 years from their ERD, which contributed to a significant proportion of students being released during the initiative (2017-2022). Thus, the focus of this study includes the expectation of benefits of college-in-prison to reentry and the expected challenges of reenrolling in, and completing, college following release, as well as expected reentry needs that impact reentry and reenrollment. Like many other students enrolled in college-in-prison, CIP students attended college free of charge during their incarceration but were, for the most part, responsible for financing the completion of their degrees or pursuit of additional education after release. Following release, in addition to being responsible for tuition expenses not covered by Pell Grants or private funding from education providers, formerly incarcerated students often encounter financial obligations that may take necessary precedence over college enrollment (La Vigne et al., 2008; Travis, 2005). These often include immediate needs for safe and stable housing and food security, and, in the longer term, employment and financial stability. While Pell reinstatement will create more opportunities to pursue education in prison, this reform may result in more students leaving prison without a degree and potentially unable to finish in the community in the absence of targeted attention to degree completion and reentry reenrollment support.

Most college-in-prison students nationally and most CIP students in NYS are released from prison before completing a degree (Ositelu, 2019). In NYS, release dates are not set in stone; rather, students may be released earlier than expected due to a favorable parole hearing outcome, medical release, or may be transferred to a lower-level facility or released to a halfway house towards the end of their prison sentence. For instance, New Yorkers approaching their release date may be transferred to the minimum security Queensboro correctional facility, a reentry center intended to prepare incarcerated men for release. Nationally, many college-in-prison programs are not degree-granting and they often suffer from political opposition and a lack of funding that limits course options (Foster et al., 2005; Key, 2021). While all college-in-prison programs are degree-granting in NYS, only 11% of the 2,024 students enrolled in college in NYS prisons in 2022 earned degrees in 2022, even though 69% were enrolled in two-year associate’s degree programs (New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, 2023).

Given these barriers to completing a credential prior to release, many students are unlikely to have the employment opportunities and increased financial stability that come with a college degree. Relatedly these students will also face the difficulty of financing reenrollment and completion of degrees given the limited employment options that stem from their conviction records (Ositelu, 2019; Pager, 2003). While federal Pell Grant funding, recently reinstated for incarcerated individuals as of July 2023, can cover tuition as well as some other costs (e.g., room and board, student fees, transportation), it is capped at \$7,395 per student for the 2023-24 academic year, and thus students must seek out other ways to support themselves financially before seeking reenrollment in the community (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). Therefore, Pell reinstatement does not necessarily solve post-release access to education issues facing former college-in-prison students. While it may particularly help more students access education on the inside, Pell reinstatement may result in more students with incomplete degrees and frustrated with their lack of access to higher education upon release.

The reinstatement of federal Pell Grant funding eligibility to incarcerated students creates the conditions for an anticipated scaling-up of college-in-prison programs across the nation, so it is essential to learn from current college-in-prison students' educational experiences and anticipated reentry concerns to ensure that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students experience the full benefits and value of a college education. To that end, the current study presents CIP students' reflections on the value of college-in-prison and, in juxtaposition, their reservations about the costs of reenrolling in college post-release despite its value. *Value* provides a means to categorize and measure the economic and personal benefits of an intervention. In the current study, the value of college programming in prison includes benefits that impact students during incarceration such as quality of life improvements and a more positive outlook on life, as well as post-release outcomes such as reduced criminal legal system involvement (i.e., desistance) and increased employment prospects. This study uses data from surveys and focus groups with CIP students in NYS prisons that highlight student perspectives, interviews with CIP stakeholders, and CIP student administrative data. The study identifies multiple financial reentry barriers that need to be addressed so that students can complete their degrees and access the full range of benefits and value that a college degree can provide. These findings can inform policymakers, financial aid administrators, and funders as they enter this post-Pell reinstatement era of college-in-prison. This study explores the following research questions:

1. What do students perceive to be the value, both financial and otherwise, of attending college while in prison?
2. What are the financial barriers to reenrolling in, and completing, college after release from prison, thereby constraining the potential value of college for formerly incarcerated students?

First, we situate the current study within the context of systemic exclusion in education, the existing literature on the value of college-in-prison, and the financial context of reentry and reenrollment. After outlining the research methods, we present findings that emerged from interviews, focus groups, and surveys, including themes related to the financial and intangible benefits of a college education (e.g., employment opportunities, personal growth), and the financial obstacles to reenrollment after release from prison. We conclude with a discussion which summarizes the findings, comments on the policy implications, and identifies areas for future research.

## Literature Review

We first contextualize CIP by providing an overview of the racialized context of education and incarceration. We then offer a background on the value of college-in-prison programming, financial reentry challenges that may serve as barriers to reenrollment, and efforts to remove these barriers to completing college.

### **Systemic Exclusion in Education**

For many people who end up incarcerated, the opportunity to participate in college-in-prison can help address a legacy of systemic exclusion from educational opportunities. Due to a combination of exclusion, over-policing, and biases within the criminal legal system, the incarcerated population is disproportionately comprised of individuals from historically marginalized BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities and/or lower-income populations (Alexander, 2010; Carson, 2020; Rabuya & Kopf, 2015). The composition of the incarcerated population is driven by racialized structures of power and oppression, which are embedded into public policy (Gilmore, 2002; Gilmore, 2007). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, for example, incentivized rural prison growth, bringing jobs to largely white rural communities (Gilmore, 2007). At the same time, mass incarceration created “million-dollar blocks” as millions were spent incarcerating individuals from BIPOC, urban communities, draining public resources that could have otherwise been used to invest in community health and economic wellbeing (Cadora & Kurgan, 2006; Gilmore, 2007). Relatedly, these very same communities have experienced long-standing, systemic underinvestment in the public K-12 school districts that serve them. This underinvestment results in lower student achievement outcomes, overall, for students in these districts (Reardon et al., 2022; The Century Foundation, 2020). Furthermore, schools in these under-resourced districts are more likely to use exclusionary disciplinary practices, which have been found to lead to disengagement with school and an increased likelihood of criminal legal system involvement (Nolan, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014). As a result of these converging and compounding phenomena, when compared to the general population, formerly incarcerated individuals are nearly twice as likely to have no high school credentials and eight times less likely to have completed college (Couloute, 2018).

Even for academically prepared students in historically marginalized communities who do not enter the criminal legal system, competing immediate financial priorities such as food security and housing may mean that they are not able to afford college, diminishing their future earning potential (Craigie et al., 2020). While not a wholesale solution, college-in-prison programming can serve to mitigate longstanding barriers to opportunity for at least a subset of individuals from historically marginalized communities who end up in prison. For these individuals, prison may be the first time that they are able to pursue a college degree in earnest without the financial burdens of life outside.

### **Benefits of Participating in College Programming While in Prison**

Decades of research demonstrate the value of college-in-prison programming with regard to: 1) reduced criminal legal system involvement and increased employment prospects; 2) improved quality of life in prison; 3) personal growth; and 4) interest in pursuing further education (i.e., completing a college degree or starting another, higher-level degree program).

Of interest to many criminal legal reformers who advocate for “smart-on-crime” approaches, research has consistently demonstrated that college-in-prison programs are associated with increased employment prospects. People with prior convictions, especially those who are Black and Latine, are at a disadvantage in the labor market, facing employer biases and lower lifetime

earnings (Craigie et al., 2020; Pager, 2003). Black applicants face hiring discrimination regardless of their criminal legal history, so much so that white applicants with a felony conviction fare better than Black applicants without any criminal legal history (Pager, 2003). Many cities, states, and eventually the federal government, enacted “ban the box” policies to combat employment biases against the formerly incarcerated (Raphael, 2021). These policies remove the “box” on employment applications that asks individuals to disclose their criminal legal history. Instead, employers must wait until a later point to inquire about legal history. While “banning the box” has the potential to increase post-release employment in the public sector, the policy may have unintended racially biased consequences, as research suggests that employers may use applicant race as a proxy for conviction history in the absence of that information (Raphael, 2021). Furthermore, the need to secure employment is often urgent, as it is a requirement for those on parole in NYS (New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, n.d.). College-in-prison works toward repairing the unequal conditions that can prevent people from historically marginalized communities from accessing higher education and higher lifetime earnings—particularly Black and Latine people who are overrepresented in prison (Carson, 2020; Davis et al., 2014; Ellison et al., 2017).

In addition to employment benefits, research shows that college-in-prison is associated with reduced recidivism (Tewksbury et al., 2008). A 2014 meta-analysis by RAND finds that people who participate in educational programs while in prison have 43% lower odds of recidivating (defined differently across studies as rearrest, reconviction, but most often as reincarceration), when compared to those who do not participate (Davis et al., 2014). With respect to participation in CIP specifically, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) finds that participation in CIP is associated with 66% lower recidivism for college students in NYS prisons (Taber et al., 2023). In a separate analysis, Vera projects that under Pell reinstatement, if 50% of the Pell-eligible population participate in college-in-prison programs, incarceration costs across the United States would decrease by \$365.8 million per year (Oakford et al., 2019). College-in prison programs can foster personal growth, foster a sense of community, and improve the quality of life for participating students while in prison, even for those with long-term or life sentences (Hobby et al., 2019). Attending college can help to foster positive self-perception and combat a sense of self-stigma, through instilling pride in oneself for succeeding in the college classroom and developing a sense of purpose that extends beyond the individual student to their family and community rooting for their success (Baranger et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018; Evans, 2018; Zell, 2010). College programming may also produce a safer prison environment, in part because continued participation in the college program is often contingent on maintaining good behavior (Pompoco et al., 2017). Researchers also note that personal development stemming from involvement in educational programs in prison can coincide with a decline in criminogenic attitudes (Baranger et al., 2018).

Finally, college-in-prison can motivate students to pursue additional education after their incarceration, which can establish a new identity and intellectual pursuits as a student. Students who have participated in college-in-prison often express an interest in completing or furthering their education upon release (Halkovic, 2014). However, competing financial obligations in reentry may delay or prevent reenrollment in college despite students’ interest and intention to reenroll. This study aims to add to the conversation on the value of college-in-prison by hearing directly from students about the various benefits of education alongside the realities of expected post-release financial challenges that can prevent reenrollment and constrain these benefits.

### **Costs of College and Financial Barriers to Reenrollment**

Although college-in-prison has been shown to provide valuable benefits to students, and Pell reinstatement will increase opportunities to enroll in college while incarcerated, financial burdens

persist in reentry and can prevent reenrollment in college in the community. Pell Grants can be used to cover tuition as well as other school fees, textbooks, transportation, room and board, but are often insufficient to cover full-time tuition and living expenses in the community (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). For example, the annual cost of tuition for a full-time student (excluding room and board) at NYC's public colleges and universities (i.e., CUNY) is \$6,930 for undergraduate students at four-year colleges (\$915 for a three-credit course) and \$4,800 at two-year colleges (\$630 for a three-credit course); by comparison, annual tuition for a full-time student at the private New York University is \$60,438 while a three-credit course runs \$5,532 (The City University of New York, 2023a; New York University, 2023a; New York University, 2023b). Even for students in public institutions, though, Pell funds are insufficient to cover living expenses, and therefore require loans or personal contributions to make up the difference. In NYS, TAP funding can be used to help cover tuition, although again there is a maximum annual award of \$5,665 and TAP funds can only be used to cover tuition, not room and board (The City University of New York, 2023b). Thus, to reenroll in college, students must either secure employment, obtain additional grant support from education institutions, seek out student loans, or some combination of the above, all of which can feel daunting as they attempt to reestablish their lives post-release.

Existing research documents the financial challenges that people face upon release from prisons (Petersilia, 2003; Roman & Travis, 2004; Travis, 2005). Immediately upon release from prison, people need money to meet immediate needs such as housing, food, transportation, and identification (La Vigne et al., 2008; Wilson, 2009). In the long-term, people need financial security, often in the form of stable employment, to support themselves and their families, and to avoid future arrest or imprisonment (Travis, 2005). Unfortunately, on top of legal barriers that prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from living in certain places or pursuing certain careers and employer biases that prevent them from obtaining the income that might provide financial stability, individuals can face criminal legal debt (e.g., fines and fees associated with a conviction) and child support debt which can compound these financial difficulties and prevent college reenrollment (Horowitz et al., 2022; Pager, 2003; Pogrebin et al., 2014; Roman & Travis, 2004).

Interventions that address financial barriers for students can make a difference in college completion, helping students to realize the full financial benefits of a college degree. For NYS students who receive Pell and/or TAP funding, easing financial burdens through tuition waivers and assisting with the cost of textbooks along with providing comprehensive advisement and support services (e.g., tutoring) has been shown to greatly increase graduation rates (Scrivener et al., 2015). In turn, the higher reenrollment rates and degree completion contribute to increased employment opportunities and financial stability in the long-term (Kolenovic et al., 2013). Therefore, financial assistance for students can help realize the intended return on investment of college-in-prison programming. While prior studies document reentry challenges generally, this study aims to report reentry concerns that relate to reenrollment to identify ways to efficiently target financial assistance to support returning students.

## Research Methods

This study draws from a larger mixed methods process evaluation of CIP conducted between the 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 academic years. While the process evaluation aimed to understand a wider range of topics including the perceived goals of CIP and fidelity of implementation, the current study findings are drawn from components of the data collection that dealt with the benefits of participating in CIP and the anticipated financial realities of reentry and reenrollment. Through an emphasis on first-person accounts, this study brings learnings about the inherent worth of college

education for personal transformation, as well as the specific challenge of being a college student while in prison but lacking the means to complete a degree once released.

## Data Collection

Data used in this manuscript are drawn from interviews with stakeholders, focus groups with students, a student survey, and administrative data. The interviews and focus groups were conducted during two data collection periods, the 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 academic years. The first round of interviews was intended to understand how faculty, administrators, and the Education and Reentry Coordinator understood the initiative and its goals to provide higher education in prison and facilitate connections between Providers. The second round was focused on reflections on implementation, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CIP and education provision, the implications of Pell and TAP reinstatement, and the continuation of programming beyond the initiative, which concluded in June 2022. The aim with both rounds of focus groups was to hear student perspectives on the college-in-prison experience, successes of the program, recommendations for improvement, plans for reenrollment post-release, and expectations of the benefits of college upon their reentry. The second round of focus groups also included questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the CIP experience. The student survey, administered in Spring and Summer 2022, complemented the student perspectives shared in the focus groups by offering an opportunity for students to share their perspectives anonymously, and acquire greater detail on the perceived benefits of college-in-prison and anticipated barriers to reenrollment. Student perspectives were the main source of data for this study. Stakeholder perspectives complemented these findings and provided detail on the limitations of what the Providers could offer given budget constraints, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the specific context of college-in-prison. Finally, Providers shared administrative data on enrolled students with CUNY ISLG semesterly throughout the initiative, and these data were used to contextualize qualitative findings.

**Interviews.** We conducted 45 interviews with 45 different CIP stakeholders during two rounds of qualitative data collection, including Provider administrators and faculty, as well as staff of the Education and Reentry Coordinator. Five stakeholders were interviewed in both rounds of data collection and four interviews were conducted in small groups consisting of members of the same team. Multiple interviews were conducted with staff from each Education and Reentry Coordinator institution (i.e., SUNY and the Institute for Justice and Opportunity) and Provider in both rounds of data collection. Provider experience with college-in-prison programming ranged from just a few semesters of teaching among some faculty to multiple decades of experience, especially among administrators. Some administrators also had experience teaching in prison, either in the past or currently. Table 1 shows key characteristics of interviewees and interviews.

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and took place in person or via phone call or Zoom (i.e., video conference). After obtaining verbal consent, the interviewer(s) asked about the successes and challenges of operating the college program and reentry planning supports and services made available to students. Most interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder to verify notes, but otherwise were not transcribed.

**Focus Groups with Students.** Seven of the 17 CIP facilities were selected (one from each of the seven Providers) for focus groups with students and student surveys (the latter of which are discussed in the “Student Surveys” section below). The facilities were selected to ensure geographic diversity across the state and include both medium and maximum-security facilities in the study. Table 2 shows key characteristics of the seven CIP Providers and facilities studied.

We conducted 12 focus groups in total (one to two per facility, with four to 14 participants in each focus group) during academic years 2018-2019 and 2021-2022, for a total of 105 participants. To recruit students, DOCCS facility staff and Provider faculty jointly announced the opportunity to participate in a voluntary focus group and provided a sign-up sheet two to three weeks prior to the site visit. On the day of focus group, students who had expressed interest convened for the focus group, which was scheduled to take place immediately before or after regularly scheduled classes. We administered a written consent, and then two members of our research team facilitated each focus group, with one or more DOCCS facility staff persons and/or DOCCS Central Office staff persons present as well, as governed by DOCCS security protocol. Each focus group lasted 60-90 minutes and centered on student experiences in and overall perceptions of CIP, their educational needs and goals, their experiences during COVID-19, their plans for reentry, and any unmet needs.

Before each focus group, students completed a short, anonymous questionnaire to collect basic information about participants and to better understand the overall representativeness of focus group participants with respect to the broader CIP student population and overall incarcerated population in DOCCS. The questionnaire included items about demographic characteristics, education background, and criminal legal system history. Nearly all focus group participants (101 of 105) completed these questionnaires.

**Table 1***Characteristics of stakeholder interviewees and interviews*

<b>Interviewees (N=45)</b>		
<b>Interviewee Role</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Education and Reentry Coordinators	8	18%
Provider Administrators	17	38%
Provider Faculty	20	44%
<b>Interviewee Affiliation</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Education and Reentry Coordinators	8	18%
SUNY	4	9%
Institute for Justice and Opportunity	4	9%
Education Providers (Combined Faculty & Administrators)	37	82%
Bard College	6	13%
Cornell University	4	9%
Medaille College	5	11%
Mercy College <sup>a</sup>	7	16%
Mohawk Valley Community College	5	11%
New York University	6	13%
SUNY Jefferson	4	9%
<b>Interview Round</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Interviewed Round 1 Only	20	44%
Interviewed Round 2 Only	20	44%
Interviewed Rounds 1 & 2	5	11%
<b>Interviews (N=45)</b>		
<b>Interviews</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Interviewed Individually	41	91%
Interviewed with Colleagues	4	9%

<sup>a</sup> One of the Mercy College administrator interviewees was an administrator affiliated with Hudson Link, a non-profit organization which operates Mercy College's CIP program at Sing Sing correctional facility.

**Table 2***Key characteristics of CIP Programs*

Provider	DOCCS Facility	Public or Private	New Program through CIP Funding	Facility Security Level	Facility Region	Facility Sex
Bard College	Eastern	Private	No	Maximum	Hudson Valley	Men
Cornell University	Cayuga	Private	No	Medium	Central New York	Men
Medaille College	Albion	Public	No	Medium	Western New York	Women
Mercy College <sup>a</sup>	Sing Sing	Public	No	Maximum	Hudson Valley	Men
Mohawk Valley Community College	Marcy	Public	Yes	Medium	Central New York	Men
New York University	Wallkill	Private	No	Medium	Hudson Valley	Men
SUNY Jefferson	Cape Vincent	Public	Yes	Medium	Central New York	Men

<sup>a</sup> Mercy College's CIP program at Sing Sing is operated in partnership with Hudson Link, a non-profit organization that provides college education, reentry support, and life skills to currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Students in Mercy College's program, as with the other Providers, received instruction solely through the Provider's faculty. Mercy College students experienced programs that were not fundamentally different from other Provider programs within the Initiative.

**Student Surveys.** In addition to focus group activities, we coordinated with Education Supervisors (i.e., DOCCS facility staff) to administer an anonymous student survey to learn about students' experiences in CIP and about their plans and preparation for release and reentry. Surveys were distributed and completed in Spring and early Summer 2022. In total, 295 surveys were sent out across the seven selected facilities, distributed in numbers proportional to enrollment in those facilities, with a surplus sent to each facility to account for the possibility of discarded surveys. Consent forms were included with each survey with instructions for students to read, but not sign, the form and keep the consent form for their records. Considering that there were 156 enrolled students in the Spring 2022 semester when the surveys were administered and 114 completed surveys were returned, the survey take-up rate among CIP students is estimated at 73%, and returned surveys were spread relatively evenly across the colleges (see Table 3 in the Administrative Data section below). The survey took about 15-20 minutes to complete and asked students about perceived benefits of engaging with CIP, plans to complete and/or further their education after release, and perceived obstacles to reenrollment in college after release from prison. Students completed the survey and placed them in sealed envelopes, which were then mailed to us by DOCCS facility staff.

**Administrative Data.** Finally, Providers shared student administrative data with CUNY ISLG, including the classes in which they were enrolled, progress towards degree completion, release status, and demographic characteristics. The data for all CIP students reflect the total number of students supported by CIP for each Provider as of Spring 2022. These data were used to compare demographic characteristics of students in focus groups and survey participants with CIP students overall (see Table 3). The students who participated in focus groups and student surveys were demographically similar to CIP students overall; therefore, the findings can be considered representative of the CIP student population.

**Table 3**

*Demographic characteristics of student survey respondents (self-reported), focus group participants (self-reported), and CIP students overall (using administrative data)*

	<b>Student Survey Respondents (N=114)</b>		<b>Focus Group Participants (N=101)</b>		<b>All CIP Students (N=931)</b>	
	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total
Race <sup>a</sup>						
Black/African American	53	47%	41	44%	468	51%
White	20	18%	22	24%	243	26%
Asian	2	2%	2	2%	10	1%
Native American	5	4%	-	-	-	-
Multi-racial	15	13%	7	8%	43	5%
Other	17	15%	21	23%	161	17%
Not reported	2	-	8	-	6	-
Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total
Latine or Hispanic	23	23%	14	15%	161	17%
Not Latine or Hispanic	78	77%	79	85%	764	83%
<i>Not reported</i>	13	-	8	-	6	-
Age	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total
18-29	12	11%	27	28%	108	12%
30-39	36	32%	38	40%	388	42%
40-49	52	46%	23	24%	270	29%
50-59	11	10%	5	5%	130	14%
60 +	2	2%	2	2%	35	4%
Not reported	1	-	6	-	-	-
Gender	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total
Male	99	88%	87	86%	759	82%
Female	12	11%	14	14%	171	18%
Another Gender	1	1%	-	-	1	0.1%
Not reported	2	-	-	-	-	-
Education Provider	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total	<i>n</i>	% of Total
Bard College	30	26%	18	18%	213	23%
Cornell University	11	10%	11	11%	108	12%
Medaille College	12	11%	14	14%	139	15%
Mercy College	22	19%	10	10%	89	10%
Mohawk Valley Community College	14	12%	14	14%	59	6%
New York University	15	13%	17	17%	186	20%
SUNY Jefferson	10	9%	17	17%	137	15%

<sup>a</sup> In the case level data, the race/ethnicity categories are as follows: White, Black, Latine/Hispanic, Asian, and Other, while survey respondents and focus group participants were asked their race separately from ethnicity. Focus group participants and all CIP students who indicated their race as "Latine/Hispanic" are noted as "Other" for the purposes of the Race category in this table. In the case-level data, "Other" typically includes those who identify as two or more races. Therefore, in this

*table, “Multi-racial” reflects the 43 students labeled as “Other” in the case-level data. If a student indicated that they are Latine/Hispanic and another race, they were included in the Latine/Hispanic category per the data specification guide given to Providers. Because Latine/Hispanic ethnicity is reported separately in this table, the 161 CIP students to date in the “Other” race category represent the 161 Latine/Hispanic students.*

## Data Analysis

We used NVivo to code and analyze the qualitative data (i.e., interviews and focus group notes). The coding scheme reflects the goals of the process evaluation’s research questions and was developed iteratively based on emergent themes within the data; therefore, within the overall coding structure, we identified subthemes using a grounded coding approach. To ensure reliability of codes and consistency across coders, two researchers coded several of the same interviews and focus group notes and compared each coded segment, discussing coding decision processes to achieve agreement among coders via dialogic engagement (Guba, 1981). Subthemes emerged that are pertinent to the research questions presented in this study, including benefits of CIP involvement, reentry, and reenrollment. We also analyzed the quantitative data (i.e., student surveys, focus group questionnaires, and administrative data) descriptively using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. The findings that follow are informed by both the qualitative and quantitative methods and are structured to respond to the research questions of the current study.

## Limitations

This study examines college-in-prison operating under the CIP Initiative in NYS and may not be generalizable to all college-in-prison programs in NYS, other states, or facilities operated by the federal Bureau of Prisons. However, the prison environment and circumstances facing students when they are released from prison (e.g., finding housing and employment, seeking financial stability) are not unique to NYS, but rather common experiences across the country, and therefore we expect the emergent themes to be generalizable. Additionally, the study period (2018-2022) included the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted the overall prison experience, the CIP experience, and the reentry experience in innumerable ways. Nonetheless, we saw similar findings before and after the pandemic with regard to the value of the CIP experience and the expected barriers to reenrollment (i.e., comparing interview and focus groups conducted in 2018-2019 to those conducted in 2021-2022). Therefore, we expect the findings presented here to be representative of college-in-prison experiences within and outside of a pandemic.

## Findings

The findings collectively shed light on the value of a college education as articulated by CIP students. There are clear benefits of participation for students’ personal growth, pride in their accomplishments, and ability to see themselves and their futures in a new light. Additionally, nearly all students reported motivation to pursue college in the community to finish their college degrees and were excited to seek out new careers that made use of their degrees. The findings also demonstrate that students anticipated several financial challenges that would compete with financing and finishing the remainder of their degree coursework upon reentry. These sentiments were echoed in our administrative data: most released CIP students did not complete a degree while enrolled in CIP (84%). One possible reason for the low graduation rate may be the eligibility criteria for the CIP Initiative, which aimed to provide a meaningful level of dosage while also targeting students who would be released within a reasonable timeline (eligible students were 1.5-5.5 years away from their ERD at the time of enrollment). Regardless, release prior to degree completion is a nationwide

challenge, suggesting that the eligibility requirement is not the sole reason for the low graduation rate (Ositelu, 2019). Furthermore, relatively few of the released students are known to have reenrolled after release (13%) as of Spring 2022, despite almost all (96%) surveyed students indicating that they wanted to reenroll post-release. Taken together, these findings illustrate that college-in-prison provides immense value to students but that obstacles to degree completion in the community impede their ability to capitalize on the full benefit of a college credential.

We jointly discuss the themes and subthemes that emerged from qualitative coding and analysis of the stakeholder interviews, student focus groups, and the student survey. Themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Perceived benefits of college-in-prison and anticipated obstacles to reenrollment*

Perceived value and benefits of college-in-prison	Anticipated financial obstacles and expected costs of reentry and reenrollment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source of pride</li> <li>• Transformative experience of personal growth</li> <li>• Increased employment opportunities, earnings, and financial stability</li> <li>• Reduced likelihood of reincarceration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to support oneself financially</li> <li>• Financial costs of reenrollment</li> <li>• Costs of common reentry issues</li> <li>• Limited provider capacity to support students holistically during reentry</li> </ul>

### The Financial Benefits and Value of College-in-Prison

Findings from student focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and the student survey on the value of college-in-prison are organized into three discrete components: inherent worth, transformative capacity, and utility. Each of our methods spoke to these themes in various ways. Specifically, the student survey asked students to agree or disagree with statements about potential benefits of college-in-prison (Table 5). We also created a composite index to get an overall sense of robustness of the survey measures.

The survey responses and focus groups illustrated that students recognized their pursuit of college has:

- 1) **inherent worth** as an academic opportunity that students were excited and grateful to participate in while incarcerated, and as an achievement of which they (91% agreed or strongly agreed) and their families are proud (94%),
- 2) **transformative capacity** as an experience of self-reflection that has changed their way of thinking and being in the world, fundamentally shaping the student's outlook on life and contributing to personal growth; and
- 3) **utility** as an asset that will help them secure employment (81%), support themselves financially (83%), and avoid future incarceration (90%).

***College is Inherently Worthwhile as an Accomplishment that Serves as a Source of Pride.*** Students stated that they were grateful for the opportunity to attend college, given a lack of educational opportunity in their past, and described how CIP motivated them to succeed academically. One student who said that he “never saw myself as going to college” and shared that

CIP “has push[ed] me beyond my expectation in the classroom...now that I am in college, I want to push myself further and reach higher.”

**Table 5**

*Students' perceptions of benefits of college-in-prison<sup>a</sup>*

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>Being in college...</b>					
Has given me a sense of pride in myself	2%	0%	7%	25%	66%
Has made my family proud of me (N=112)	2%	0%	4%	21%	73%
Will help me find a job more easily (N=113)	1%	1%	18%	26%	55%
Will help me better support myself financially	1%	2%	15%	29%	54%
Will help keep me from going back to prison	1%	1%	9%	18%	72%
Weighted Benefits Composite Index <sup>b</sup>	1%	1%	10%	24%	64%

<sup>a</sup> N=114 unless otherwise noted. Some items have an N of less than 114 because a few survey respondents omitted responses to those items.

<sup>b</sup> To demonstrate robustness of perceived benefits, a composite index shows the percentages of each of the response options across all questions in the section divided by the total number of responses multiplied by five, the number of questions. Cronbach's alpha is 0.88.

Students made references to prior systemic exclusion from higher education, with one survey respondent stating that “I didn't have the opportunity to go [to college] when I finished school when I was younger,” and a second saying “it's the first time I had the chance to go to college and do something right with my life.” This self-reflection was bittersweet, because students were grateful for the opportunity and proud of themselves for committing to their education, but at the same time wished that educational opportunities had been available to them prior to their incarceration. As one student put it: “I wish it didn't take me to come to prison to enroll in college.” Another student reiterated this point, stating with certainty: “if I did not come to prison, I wouldn't have been to college.”

Students described how their participation in college brought both them and their families a sense of pride. Nearly all (91%) surveyed students reported that participating in CIP had given them a sense of pride in themselves. One student survey respondent felt that CIP showed them what they are capable of academically, saying “without the college experience I would not know I could do it or complete it.” Providers agreed, with one stating that graduation day in prison “was one of the most joyous events I've ever been to in terms of enthusiasm and tears in people's eyes.” Among the potential benefits of CIP that the survey questions posed, survey respondents felt most strongly that attending college has made their families proud (93% agreed or strongly agreed). One student in a focus group shared that “we put our families through a lot,” and, referring to his family, stated that “they are happy I am in college.” Students in focus groups similarly expressed that family was a motivating factor for their academic commitment: “I wanted to make a change. I have kids at home I want to show to them that their father can make it... I share my grades with my kids and they share their grades with me [to see] whoever does better.” Students shared that this friendly competition is motivation and a way to connect with their children to mutual benefit, which is a point of pride. In one focus group, a student proudly shared that she had written a book for her son about what she has learned in life, something she could never have imagined doing before her

participation in CIP and stated that she felt CIP is “not just about having goals but following through with them.”

***College is Transformative and has Life-Changing Impacts on Self-Reflection, Outlook on Life, and Personal Growth.*** Students overwhelmingly characterized the education they received through CIP as a “life-changing process” and described how their minds and goals were forever changed due to the college experience. One student summed up the value of college-in-prison, noting its specific value for incarcerated students because of its potential to spur personal growth. The student described that CIP “is a way to learn from our weaknesses and potential and become somebody through education and chang[ing] bad habits,” and ultimately concluding that “education is priceless...especially in prison where society thinks the worst of us.”

Several students detailed how CIP led to greater reflection and introspection. One student said, “every semester I have grown both as a student and a person” and that “I owe my current abilities and mindset to this program.” Another student said that she hadn’t “ever really thought critically about anything before, until that [English] course; [it] helped me understand what I have done and why I am here.” CIP students additionally described that participation led to a change in what spaces they felt like they could now take part in. As one student described, “I feel a change being around people who hold degrees. Having these professional conversations is something I strive for” and described a sense of belonging in an academic setting, saying “I feel like I belong in the room, too.” Providers also saw this growth, with one noting that while some may see the benefit of college programming as “saving taxpayer money, for me it is about personal change and growth... [and how CIP changes] the culture in the prison, [as] students become looked up to and leaders in the prison.”

However, this profound personal development was not without bittersweet self-reflection about the systemic factors that impacted eventual incarceration, with another student reflecting: “I always assumed I would end up in prison. In some ways, CIP has been hard because it made me realize it wasn’t my destiny and I could have avoided it.” Another student reflected on how his experience in CIP “has allowed me to alter the trajectory of my life through education,” as well as serving as “a gateway back into society” and away from future criminal legal system involvement. The student continued by sharing that CIP had provided a useful skillset for reentry “because it teaches you to be a critical thinker and pushes you to achieve personal goals.”

Students also described how college fundamentally changed their outlook and their experience of being in prison, for the better. Students appreciated engaging with professors and being in the classroom as it offered a respite from the prison setting. The majority of students in focus groups described college as “a break from what’s going on in prison [which] takes us away from prison mentally.” In response to an open-ended question on student satisfaction, one student survey respondent wrote: “Being in the college program has improved my way of thinking.” Another student who had spent over 25 years in prison stated that while his prison time has been “extremely taxing on the mind” he felt that “experiencing college offsets a negative mindset and fill your mind with hope and possibility.” One student said that CIP “has helped me to stay out of trouble throughout my incarceration,” and another agreed that the program “helped me stay focused on my future as well as kept me out of trouble.” Students also expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be part of an intellectual community within the prison. One student survey respondent stated that “most importantly, [being a part of] a group of like-minded people discussing topics of classes is fulfilling.” Another student put it plainly, saying “in prison there are a lot of miserable guys, [and] college made me better not bitter.”

***College is a Useful Asset that Will Help Students Secure Financial and Life Stability and Avoid Future Criminal Legal System Involvement.*** Students are acutely aware of the disadvantages that they expect to face upon release and described how they expect that their new

outlook on life, as well as the potential value of a college credential on the job market, would help them obtain and maintain employment and avoid future interaction with the criminal legal system. Students described the anticipated benefits of material gains from participating in CIP and benefits CIP could have on helping them achieve success in reentry in the traditional sense (i.e., by securing employment and avoiding future arrest and incarceration). Students shared that “the program gives you a running start instead of walking” towards financial stability. Specifically, a large majority of student survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participating in college-in-prison will help them to support themselves financially (83%) or find a job more easily (81%) after release. One student said that he felt “well-equipped to take on the responsibilities of life because of [CIP].” Multiple students in one focus group discussed how they believed the college credential “increases employability” and the courses themselves helped develop critical thinking skills that will serve them on the job market. Another student, noting his age and that he previously worked in construction, stated that “I’m getting older, and I need to rely on intellect rather than physical abilities.”

Students felt that they were learning valuable skills that would help them in the job market and were establishing a foundation from which to pursue more specialized programs in the future—leading to more economic and educational opportunity and, ultimately, financial stability. Some students who were interested in a specialized profession (e.g., business, healthcare) explained that they would need to seek out further education after release, since many Providers offered only an associate’s degree in a general field such as liberal arts. Students still found value in the academic credits they were earning and expected to be able to transfer the credits towards the majors and fields they ultimately wanted to pursue. One student survey respondent said that “though the coursework was limited in scope to liberal arts, I found the English programs very engaging,” noting that the courses “have helped broaden my knowledge as well as become a much better writer.” Other students also praised the program for helping them build their writing skillset and learn to think critically, both of which are valuable assets that can help students succeed in future college courses, in the job market, and in life in general.

Students overwhelmingly communicated that they believed their participation in CIP would help them avoid returning to prison (96%). One Provider noted that students in their program were motivated by the knowledge that incarcerated people who engage in CIP have a better chance of success upon reentry than those who do not. One student in a focus group noted financial responsibilities of life outside of prison and explained that participating in CIP has helped create a new vision for his life post-release. This student stated that “on the streets, you can get money ‘like that’ [i.e., quickly but through illegal means], but I want to stay focused,” and avoid getting involved in situations that could lead to future incarceration. Another student who said he had “three or four felonies” and multiple prior incarcerations had shared that although he expects that his criminal legal system history will make successful reentry difficult, he wants to avoid returning to prison, saying “I never tried it [reentry] the right way,” suggesting that this time, now in possession of a college education, he will seek out legal employment. Another student stated simply, “I don’t want to come back to prison,” and shared that students “need that help [from Providers] to get on that ladder” to get a job and avoid negative interactions with the criminal legal system.

Overwhelmingly, students credited CIP with giving them something to be proud of, fundamentally shifting the way that they think and their overall approach to life, and positively shaping their hopes for their futures. Students’ descriptions of how CIP has changed their lives for the better offer some of the most persuasive evidence that colleges are providing a meaningful service in their efforts to deliver high-quality education to students incarcerated in prison facilities.

### **Financial Obstacles to Reenrollment in College Post-Release**

While college-in-prison may broaden incarcerated students' hopes for their future, the financial realities of reentry remain burdensome and may prevent them from reenrolling in college to complete their degrees after release. Almost all students surveyed (96%) expressed a desire to reenroll in college after release from prison, either to complete their current degree or to pursue further education, such as a bachelor's degree. However, despite students' articulated intentions to reenroll in college, the financial barriers they will likely face upon reentry may prevent them from doing so. As of the Spring 2022 semester, 84% of released students formerly supported by CIP funding had not completed their degrees while in prison, and only 13% of these students are known to have reenrolled in the community. Nearly half of released students (47%) were known to have not reenrolled, and the enrollment status for the remaining 40% of students was unknown because Providers were unable to reach them following release. Therefore, while 13% may be an undercount of actual reenrollment, it is striking that the known reenrollment rate is dwarfed by the known non-reenrollment rate.

To better understand the reasons students may not reenroll in college after release, student survey respondents were presented with a list of potential obstacles to reenrollment and were asked to identify whether each item posed a major obstacle, somewhat of an obstacle, a minor obstacle, or not at all an obstacle to reenrollment (Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Students' perceptions of obstacles to reenrollment in college<sup>a</sup>*

	Not at all an obstacle	A minor obstacle	Somewhat of an obstacle	A major obstacle
Possible obstacles to reenrolling include...				
Needing to work to support myself or my family financially (N=111)	17%	13%	24%	46%
Cost of tuition/credits (N=112)	9%	10%	29%	52%
Cost of books/supplies (N=113)	13%	17%	36%	34%
Family responsibilities (for example, childcare) (N=110)	48%	23%	16%	13%
Finding housing (N=113)	42%	14%	20%	23%
Access to transportation (N=112)	37%	24%	24%	15%
Substance or alcohol use (N=112)	95%	1%	1%	4%

<sup>a</sup> N=114 unless otherwise noted. Some items have an N of less than 114 because a few survey respondents omitted responses to those items.

As explored in greater depth below, the findings from student surveys, student focus groups, and stakeholder interviews on barriers to reenrollment in college post-release fall into three categories: 1) the competing need to support themselves financially; 2) the cost of reenrollment, and 3) the financial burden of common reentry challenges.

***Students Expect to Face a Competing Need to Financially Support Themselves in Reentry.*** Broadly, students indicated a need to first “financially situate” themselves before making a commitment to school. Students, especially those returning to the NYC metropolitan area, described an awareness of the high cost of living and the urgency of finding employment quickly to meet parole requirements (for those on parole), and of financially supporting themselves and, in some cases, their families. More than two-thirds of survey respondents (70%) identified “needing to work to support myself and my family financially” as somewhat of an obstacle or a major obstacle to

reenrollment. Students elaborated in an open-ended question asking about obstacles to reenrollment, with multiple students saying that they would need to first focus on situating themselves financially prior to considering reenrollment; one student said: “I am concerned about [getting] a good paying job.” Another person went as far as to say “I believe [finding] work would be the only obstacle” to reenrolling in college. Finally, one other student survey respondent noted that “the main obstacles I will face [are] cost of tuition and finding work to support myself and family financially with such a high cost of living.”

Students expressed concern about their ability to secure a job and felt that the delay in securing employment would also delay their reenrollment. One student stated that they “would like to pursue education upon release but it depends on my employability.” Additionally, one Provider shared that “students don’t feel prepared to jump right into the job market [upon release]” and require additional support to feel confident to do so. Many Providers expressed concern about employer biases that may create barriers to employment for students upon release, with one explaining the concern that “students coming out [may] not have the opportunity to apply what they’ve learned” because “it’s tough to find employment when you have a record.” Students also anticipated these difficulties, citing biases in hiring that may make it difficult for them to obtain and maintain employment, with one student survey respondent acknowledging that “being formerly incarcerated may lead to obstacles like employment.”

Even in situations where students are able to find and maintain employment, several students described concerns about the competing priorities of work and school. One student wondered about “being able to support myself while attending school.” Another student noted that balancing work and school may mean that school is de-prioritized, stating that one of the “main obstacles is being able to fully focus on my studies when I re-enter society mainly because the fact of having to find and keep employment.” Several students said that time itself would be an obstacle because they feel that they will not have time for both work and school. Another said: “I feel like I would be too consumed by work to focus on getting a degree.”

***Students Foresee Financial Costs of Reenrollment.*** Students in one focus group acknowledged that “college-in-prison is different” because the prison and the Providers “take care of everything for you” (i.e., pay tuition and associated costs such as textbooks) meaning that there is no financial obligation on the student for either enrollment costs or other costs of living. One student described the difference in the financial burden of college in and out of prison, stating that he is “currently being privately funded,” and that “this may change if I reenroll in society” given that they would need to personally incur any educational expenses. According to one Provider, one student resisted being released as early as they were eligible because they were close to completing their degree in prison, and it was unclear how they would pay for tuition if they were released before completing their degree.

After release, the transition to becoming a college student in the community and finding the means to finance their education “comes as a bit of a shock,” as one Provider noted. When surveyed about barriers to reenrollment, one student described their lack of knowledge on the topic, saying “[I] do not know anything about enrolling in college or applying to graduate level programs, nor do I know how I’ll afford it.” Another student put it plainly, “I plan to enroll upon release, but this is not the priority and is dependent on things like cost and availability.” To that end, more than four out of five student survey respondents (81%) identified the cost of tuition as a major obstacle or somewhat of an obstacle to reenrollment, while over two-thirds (70%) expressed concern about the cost of textbooks and supplies that would be required as part of their education. Several Providers also noted that finances are a main obstacle to enrollment, with one Provider saying, “I know there are often students... that maybe if they did have the funds, [then financial limitations] wouldn’t get in the way of their ability to take college classes; [they] need help with that kind of thing.” However,

most Providers reported that they were not able to fund CIP students' coursework at their institutions after release.

***Students Expect Common Reentry Challenges to be Financially Burdensome.***

Reentry after release from prison comes with several financially burdensome reentry challenges (e.g., housing, transportation, identification) which can prevent CIP students from reenrolling in college because of both the cost and the higher priority of these issues that need to be resolved first.

Perhaps the foundation of successful reentry is finding safe, stable, and affordable housing, and 58% of student survey respondents described securing housing as a major obstacle or somewhat of an obstacle to their reenrollment (see Table 6). Living with family members is an affordable option, but it is not always available or sustainable (Naser & La Vigne, 2006). As one Provider put it, "Many of our students expect to go home to a family home. Sometimes when students arrive into that situation, it's not sustainable, [and] students may become unstably housed." This Provider described a common situation in which students expect to have little to no housing costs, at least at first, and come to realize that they must pay for housing costs if living with family is no longer feasible. In one focus group, a student indicated that he and others would prefer to have other housing options post-release, saying "nobody is trying to live with their mom [but] the tristate area is so expensive." Parole requirements and public housing restrictions might also restrict free or low-cost housing options offered by family or friends; for example, some students cannot live with loved ones due to those individuals' criminal legal histories, and for others, parole requirements may include housing restrictions based on orders of protection and other matters of separation (Roman & Travis, 2004). At least one Provider attributed a student's decision not to re-enroll in college to the difficulty of finding housing, noting that, "due to challenges of his parole and [his having] a hard time securing housing...[he] has had to put enrollment on hold."

To a lesser extent, students perceived transportation to be a financial obstacle as they approach reentry and consider reenrolling in college. Several students wrote that they expected "access to transportation to and from college" to be a barrier to reenrollment. However, only about two in five (39%) of student survey respondents identified access to transportation as a major obstacle or somewhat of an obstacle to reenrolling. Students may have ranked this as less of an issue than other potential obstacles because most CIP students (63%) planned to return to the NYC metropolitan area, which has many colleges and universities and is well connected via public transit, and therefore students would not necessarily need to secure a driver's license and a vehicle, both costly endeavors, to travel to work or class. Nonetheless, the financial cost of public transit may still delay or prevent students' goal to pursue an education post-release.

Reentry challenges that may be present regardless of one's college pursuit—including family responsibilities, finding housing, accessing transportation, and substance or alcohol use—were viewed by most student survey respondents as a minor obstacle or not at all an obstacle to reenrollment, though when present, can carry additional financial burdens. While almost half of students said that family responsibilities such as childcare were not at all an obstacle (48%), the survey did not ask if the students were parents of minor children, and this may have been more of an expected financial burden for those students. Additionally, while most survey respondents (95%) perceived substance or alcohol use as not at all an obstacle to reenrollment, 4% of respondents identified it as a major obstacle. While the survey did not explicitly ask students about identification, the pressing need to secure proper identification, often requiring payment of fees, complicates reentry and can interfere with students' ability to reenroll in college. Obtaining a driver's license might require paying off criminal legal debts (i.e., fines and fees associated with a conviction) and making child support payments (Horowitz et al., 2022). Lack of valid identification can also exacerbate other reentry issues. Providers noted that lack of identification can lead to issues of transportation access—legally, people cannot drive without a valid driver's license—as well as issues

applying and qualifying for social services, securing housing and employment. These repercussions can place additional financial strain on students upon release, all of which may further delay reenrollment in college in the community.

***Programs Have Limited Financial Capacity to Support Students with Educational Reentry Support.*** Providers' financial resources limit their ability to support students holistically in reentry, which may prevent students from progressing through and completing their degree programs. DOCCS policy dictates that correctional staff provide reentry planning and resources to all incarcerated individuals in advance of their release. Providers, however, can provide individualized support to assist specifically with academic reentry. Therefore, in addition to teaching and administrative tasks, as part of the CIP funding expectations, all Providers offered academic reentry supports ranging from career counseling to academic advising and assistance with enrollment in campus programming post-release. Providers described a range of strategies they use and resources they provide to prepare students for reentry, both prior to and following release, including advising, workshops, and access to alumni networks. Some well-funded Providers had established reentry support practices prior to involvement in CIP and, as a result, had the capacity and foundation to engage students in reentry planning upon enrollment. However, newer Providers developed reentry support practices during CIP and most Providers, new and existing, described not having sufficient funds to allocate to reentry support.

Notably, students, Providers, and the Education and Reentry Coordinator reported a lack of uniformity in reentry planning supports among Providers based on their capacity. Some Providers had dedicated reentry coordinators, provided one-on-one academic reentry advising, and facilitated workshops on housing and other needs related to reentry, while others lacked the capacity to provide meaningful assistance to prepare students for their return home. Students were grateful for the supports provided, with one student survey respondent writing that he was confident that “the resources and network that comes with this education will also open doors for me when I am finally set free.” For Providers with limited capacity, the Education and Reentry Coordinator provided additional reentry support but reported difficulty doing so without offering additional funding. One Provider reflected on this difference, noting that better resourced Providers “are adapting to provide academic reentry whereas [for] the more strapped programs...there is only one person, and they don't have the capacity to do both [teaching and reentry preparation].” To that end, multiple, less well-resourced Providers described a need for additional funding for a reentry-focused staff person able to dedicate time and resources to support students before, during, and after release from prison.

Providers described their efforts to help students overcome obstacles to reenrollment identified by student survey respondents, including employment, the costs of reenrollment, and financial hurdles to transportation. To help students secure employment, Providers held job fairs and career-centered workshops in prison (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), which provided CIP students the opportunity to practice for entering the job market. Workshops included mock interviews, which helped students develop strategies for how to address questions about gaps in employment due to incarceration. One Provider noted that while these workshops were useful, the Provider lacked capacity to provide more formalized workshops or one-on-one career advising, remarking “I wish I had more time to do more of it.” Additionally, to help students with the costs of reenrollment, one Provider arranged presentations on financial aid to help make students aware of what options were at their disposal to pay for their education. Two Providers allocated funds to partially cover students' tuition costs, though one noted, “there was still a balance for the student to pay.” Additionally, one Provider reported being able to counter some of the logistical strain stemming from financial needs post-release by paying students' old Department of Motor Vehicles fines, purchasing metro cards for students, and paying for parking passes for students upon release. However, not all Providers have the financial resources to provide such services. A Provider with

less to offer financially shared that “loans can be a source of stress, [and I am] sad to tell them I don’t have a fund that would help them with a scholarship, that they have to somehow work out the finances [on their own].”

Overall, students described a need for meaningful reentry support to reenroll in college after release. One student stated that “one of the main reasons I signed up [for CIP] was the reentry pamphlet,” and that he was hopeful that “these reentry supports will help me finish my education in society.” However, as described above, the amount of logistical and financial support made available for students before and during reentry depended heavily on the Provider capacity. Ultimately, the findings indicate a need for more holistic reentry support, specifically through targeted funding to support students financially in reentry. Furthermore, increasing Provider capacity with staff dedicated to guiding students may serve to ease the transition from CIP to college in the community.

## Discussion

The findings illustrate that providing college education in prison holds immense value. The first research question asked what students perceive to be the value, both financial and otherwise, of attending college while in prison. Students reported feeling that college-in-prison has inherent worth as an accomplishment in which they take pride, transformative capacity as an experience that has fundamentally changed their way of thinking and being in the world, and utility as an asset that will help them secure gainful employment and avoid future incarceration, consistent with prior research (Baranger et al., 2018). Building on prior literature that identified college-in-prison programming as a means to combat self-stigma, CIP students spoke of how being in the college classroom gave them a new identity, “college student,” which transported them outside of the “prisoner” mentality, improving their mental state, and changing their way of thinking to a more positive, forward-looking outlook on life (Evans et al., 2018). These benefits may have also extended to students’ children and families, of whom many students spoke as both inspiration and motivation to pursue their college education and improve their lives after release. Furthermore, while college-in-prison programming cannot mitigate all the systemic inequalities that may have led individuals to be incarcerated and to have less educational opportunity, students reported feeling that college-in-prison puts them on a path towards greater opportunity (Carson 2020; Rabuya & Kopf, 2015; Reardon et al., 2022; The Century Foundation, 2020). However, this promise cannot be fully realized without providing a path to degree completion.

To achieve the full benefits of an investment in college-in-prison—in the form of improved employment prospects and a lower likelihood of recidivism—students must finish the college credential while incarcerated or following release. Most (84%) CIP students who have been released were not able to do so while incarcerated and few of these students (13%) are known to have reenrolled after release, despite almost all (96%) student survey respondents indicating that they were interested in reenrolling. While college-in-prison programming has benefits during incarceration, a gap remains in ensuring that students are able to finish their credentials after incarceration and experience the full benefit of the investment.

The second research question asked about the financial barriers to reenrolling in, and completing, college after release from prison, in order to better understand whether the potential value of college for formerly incarcerated students is constrained by an inability to complete it. The findings illustrate that the financial burdens of life after release established in the literature act as barriers to pursuing and finishing college (Roman & Travis, 2004; Travis, 2004). Students described an eagerness to situate themselves financially and feel stable before returning to school, which, while understandable, may delay or even completely preclude their reenrollment. Reenrollment may be unattainable without holistic support to help students balance the completion of a college degree

with the fundamental needs facing them upon release. The current lack of support undermines the mission of college-in-prison programs to improve educational and employment outcomes post-release and reduce future criminal legal system involvement. However, Providers are routinely unable to allocate the necessary attention and funding to reentry preparation and financial support for students after release due to limited capacity and expertise.

Providers expressed a need to holistically support students so that they may reenroll successfully and further their education in the community. To do so, Providers said that they would require funding well beyond what was made available through CIP to hire dedicated reentry service coordinators and provide financial support for students after release, thereby promoting greater financial stability such that reenrollment would become more attainable. Therefore, targeted funding is necessary to promote and support successful reenrollment in the community and degree completion, ultimately making it possible to achieve both individual-level benefits of college and fully realize the benefits of college-in-prison to society.

### **Implications for Practice**

With momentum behind the recent reinstatement of TAP and Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals, along with the support of college-in-prison provider networks (e.g., the New York Consortium for Higher Education in Prison), NYS and other states across the country as well as the federal government have the potential to provide high-quality postsecondary education to systematically excluded students across the entire correctional system. Specifically, this expansion may support initiating new programming in regions where there is unmet demand and making current programming more robust, with additional types of degree programs and courses offered to reach more potential students in prison. At the same time, financial support directed at the reentry period should be a priority. Pell reinstatement, while an important step to reinstate educational opportunities in prisons, does not fully ensure that incarcerated students can complete their degrees due to the low likelihood of finishing their degrees while incarcerated and the financial burdens of reentry that may preclude reenrollment. Achieving the full value of college-in-prison and fulfilling the unrealized promise of college-in-prison will require broader, holistic assistance with fundamental reentry needs as well as reenrollment, beginning during incarceration and ending well after release.

Thus, the study findings are a call to action for policymakers, college-in-prison providers, and financial aid administrators, especially those at institutions that provide college-in-prison programming as well as on-campus programming, to direct funding streams toward addressing common, financially burdensome reentry challenges and facilitate reenrollment. Drawing from the findings, these stakeholders should:

- 1) Develop and implement a strategic plan to holistically support students in reentry with the goal to mitigate the financial obstacles preventing students from reenrolling in college after release from prison.
- 2) Hire reentry and reenrollment coordinators whose role is to connect with reentering students, work with them to 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.
- 3) Provide affordable, reduced-rate on-campus housing options and work opportunities to released individuals. “Banning the box” is insufficient. Instead, jobs must be truly open to or even geared toward people with incarceration histories. Meeting these basic living needs will help students see reenrollment as a possibility as well.

- 4) Direct reentry-focused funding to address specific financial barriers to reenrollment, such as by providing funds for textbooks, transit passes, and childcare.
- 5) Hire former college-in-prison students who have reenrolled successfully as mentors, and connect returning students to these mentors to help guide them through reentry and reenrollment. Establishing a robust network of college-in-prison alumni can serve as a resource for future students and help to show prospective students, professors, and funders the impact of college-in-prison programs.

Ultimately, financial support will help students avoid future interaction with the criminal legal system and instead lead revitalized and fulfilling lives post-release, made possible in part by students' self-reflective and transformative educational experiences while incarcerated. Therefore, a fruitful avenue for future research would be to examine the impact of providing comprehensive financial support during reentry to former college-in-prison students on reentry success, including reenrollment, degree completion, employment, and reconviction.

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