

# EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE

A Guide for Higher Education in Prison



**The Alliance**  
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

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## INTRODUCTION

In December 2017, Lumina Foundation provided support to the Prison University Project (PUP) and the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance) to reflect upon and document the key characteristics of high-quality prison higher education programs, and to inform other stakeholders in the field, including new and experienced practitioners seeking to achieve equity and excellence in their work, policy leaders, philanthropy, and others.

With this report, we deliberately frame the field of higher education in prison as an educational enterprise that is centrally concerned with promoting the flourishing of individuals, communities, and civil society, rather than as a “correctional” intervention in “criminality.” We also view this work as part of a larger movement that asserts both the value of equity, excellence, access and accountability in higher education (in prison and outside), and the central importance of creativity, critical inquiry, and independent thought—the essence of higher education at its best—in a high-functioning democratic society.

The Alliance, founded in 2017, is a national network dedicated to expanding quality higher education in prison programs, empowering students in prison and after release, and shaping public discussion about education and incarceration. The central purpose of its creation was to support practitioners in documenting and disseminating their expertise; educating the public about the field; and having a voice in the policy arena. This report has been prepared in that same spirit, and will serve as a blueprint for the Alliance’s future work as it evolves to provide more extensive support to new and existing programs, and to the field as a whole.

The main practical goal of this report is to provide a summary of what we (the authors) believe are the most essential components of a high quality in-prison higher education program, and to thereby achieve the following:

- Present a conceptual foundation for the eventual creation of norms of excellence, equity and access, guidelines for best practices, and systems for safeguarding the quality of in-prison higher education programs
- Cultivate a professional culture of trust, collaboration and transparency that encourages practitioners to reflect critically on their own practices and strive for continuous improvement.
- Inform and inspire a diverse range of stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty, DOC partners, students (whether incarcerated or not), funders, policy makers, and advocates.
- Increase public awareness of higher education in prison as a specialized field with positive effects for individuals, communities and the society as a whole.

- Expand the community of professionals in education, corrections, media, government and philanthropy who understand the field’s complex needs, risks and opportunities, so that they may more easily communicate and collaborate with practitioners, and do not harm programs, students, or the field as a whole.

The intended audience of this report is the network of stakeholders engaged in designing, implementing and sustaining quality higher education in prison programs. These include university and college faculty and administrators, funders, correctional staff, government officials, and advocates. Achieving the goals outlined in this report will require their thoughtful and collaborative engagement. To that end, we hope this report will be a resource that evolves over time and with input from this range of stakeholders.

### **EQUITY, EXCELLENCE and ACCESS**

The overarching vision that guides this project is of a society in which all people are afforded genuine opportunities to thrive, regardless of their location or circumstance. In keeping with this vision, we believe that the development of the field of higher education in prison must be guided by an unwavering commitment to equity, excellence and access. While the specific material and cultural context of the prison is unique, the values and practices for which we advocate in this report can be widely applied to the field of higher education generally.

In this context, we understand “equity” to mean: 1) upholding the same high standards and opportunities that exist in other quality higher education contexts, in spite of students’ incarceration status; and 2) maintaining sustained attention to how race, gender, ability, economic status and other dimensions of identity, status, and experience impact every dimension of the field, from teaching and learning to curriculum development to partnerships and program structure.

By “excellence” we mean programming that is: 1) intellectually rigorous; and 2) adequately individualized, comprehensive and sustained.

We understand a commitment to “access” as: 1) continually striving to understand and overcome any and all barriers to student engagement and success; and 2) upholding, as a matter of principle, a commitment to inclusivity in all its forms; and steadfastly challenging the notion that either current or prior incarceration status, or any particular commitment offense or type of sentence, disqualifies anyone from quality education.

The following commitments should guide programs’ pursuit of equity, excellence and access:

### **Academic Rigor:**

- The curriculum is challenging, responsive, and scaffolded.
- Critical and independent thought is encouraged.
- Programs and college/universities communicate and uphold high academic standards.
- Instructors are competent, qualified and well-trained.
- Programs integrate assessment of student learning into instruction and program design.

### **Student-centered Approach:**

- Student support is intensive and individualized.
- Program design is dynamic and responsive.
- Programs accommodate students’ different learning styles and other special needs.
- Programs articulate the course of study with long-term pathways to further education.
- Programs seek and integrate student input into the program.
- Students have opportunities to cultivate social, professional and civic leadership skills.

A critical caveat to this report is that not a single program in the country of which we are aware fulfills all the ideals that it articulates. Whether this is because of a lack of available resources, staffing, or relevant expertise, or other reasons, we believe that all programs have the potential to continually improve. We intend this report to serve that potential, and it should be read as dynamic and aspirational for programs of any type, rather than used as a static checklist.

These guidelines are also presented with the full understanding that not only do all in-prison programs face a daunting array of challenges but the field by its nature is also extraordinarily diverse. Culturally, intellectually and politically, programs reflect their own leadership, student bodies, facilities, geographic locations, and affiliated academic institutions. While that diversity may at times produce strong differences in opinion, we believe it is one of the field’s greatest strengths, and that any effort to establish ideological or intellectual uniformity would impoverish and even undermine its intellectual integrity. For this reason, this report does not “take sides” in matters where we do not believe that academic quality *per se* is at risk. However, we do note where we think certain kinds of practices have the potential to detract from student development and the quality of programs. We are particularly concerned with college/universities, whether for-profit or nonprofit, that prioritize maximizing their revenue over the quality of their education programs. As public and state funding become available, our concern about the treatment of students as commodities is critical and immediate.



# SEVEN CORE CONTENT AREAS TO PROMOTE EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

## 1. PROGRAM DESIGN

The central goals of program design (i.e., the structural and operational elements of a program) are to safeguard academic rigor and integrity, and to create an environment in which students, instructors and program staff feel valued and respected. Program structure should ensure that program planning and implementation are conducted with appropriate levels of expertise, as would be considered standard at any similar college or university. Program structure should also foster professionalism, collaboration, communication, and accountability.

## Organizational Structure and Boards

Whether a program is housed within a university or an independent 501(c)3, sound organizational structure is essential for stability and sustainability. Academically qualified leadership and key staff ensure the academic integrity of programs, while clear organizational systems and robust strategic planning ensure that the program has the resources it needs to operate at a consistently high level over time. Nonprofit organizations should have a board of directors or, if fiscally sponsored, an advisory board. Programs that are part of a university may have a board comprised of both faculty and external advisors. In either scenario, the contributions and qualifications of board members will both reflect and create the values and norms of the program.

Programs may also seek to cultivate student leadership skills, and maintain their own accountability to their key constituents, through the creation of a student advisory board or other practices that facilitate ongoing communication between program administrators and students. Students may participate in instructor training, provide input on key decisions related to programs and planning, mentor new students, and participate in program evaluation.

In different ways, each of these mechanisms may provide oversight and valuable thought-partnership for program leaders. They may also increase a program's capacity for fundraising and organizational development by creating an expanded network of program ambassadors.

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### IN PRACTICE

- Professionally qualified, full-time dedicated staff are funded by the organization or college/university to support the program on- and off-site.
- Programs dedicate significant time and attention to the recruitment, training and supervision of all program faculty and staff.
- Program staff and leadership have professional development opportunities, including in particular cultural sensitivity training. Their participation in these activities is expected and normalized, and these opportunities are incorporated into regular work hours.
- Advisory Boards or Boards of Directors are comprised of active and engaged stakeholders who have resources, time, and expertise; and their roles and responsibilities are clearly articulated. When possible, these may be former students who have been released.
- Faculty or Academic Advisory Council/Board supports the academic functioning of the program, including curriculum development and design, faculty recruitment and mentoring, training and support of new instructors.
- Student Advisory Board(s) or other mechanisms for gathering student input are active and engaged at each prison and the program proactively facilitates feedback and communication via dedicated staff/volunteer position(s).
- Programs provide current students and students who have completed the degree but are still in prison with opportunities to remain actively engaged with the program (e.g., student surveys, workshops, instructor orientation, lecture series, film series).

### CHALLENGES

- Programs lack financial resources to hire and retain qualified staff.
- Outside campuses are unwilling or unable to fund dedicated staff positions or staff time within the prison.
- Programs fail to provide adequate training, support and professional development for their leadership, staff and instructors.
- Programs lack a strong Board of Directors or Advisory Board to support and supervise program director, aid in fundraising and/or support the organization's strategic planning.
- Outside campuses provide insufficient financial and/or professional support or clear reporting structures for the program staff.
- Program leadership defers in key programmatic decision-making to stakeholders (e.g., students, volunteers, faculty, prison or college administrators) who lack relevant academic experience or expertise.

## Program Leadership

Program leadership should have close advisors with a wide range of knowledge and skills. These include experience in higher education, fundraising, and organizational development, and an extensive network of relationships across and among

diverse communities. Strong staff support, a quality pool of volunteers, and student and academic advisory boards all provide a counterbalance to the over-reliance on a single organizational leader and promote inclusion and accountability.

### IN PRACTICE

- A member of the program leadership team possesses the appropriate academic training and expertise (ideally Ph.D.) to oversee a higher education academic program.
- Program leadership possesses the interpersonal skills and mindset to successfully build networks and collaborate with culturally and politically diverse stakeholders, including prison administrators and DOC leadership.
- Program leaders are skilled in and/or provided with professional development opportunities, in the realms of fundraising, HR, staff management, board relations, cultural sensitivity and interpersonal communication.
- Depending on program design, program leaders receive mentoring, support and supervision from an Advisory Board, Faculty Board or Board of Directors, or other consultants or advisors.

### CHALLENGES

- Program leaders and key staff lack the time and/or resources for professional development and support activities.
- University faculty, staff or administrators or others who lack the professional skills, training or sensitivity for the work run programs or fulfill key administrative roles.
- Programs are overly dependent on an individual staff person and, generally due to limited resources, are unable to develop the leadership team as well as the organizational infrastructure to support more effective and efficient operations.
- Programs, especially on college/university campuses, are overly dependent on faculty “donating” their time and/or the college/university views faculty leadership of a higher education in prison program as service.

**Strong staff support, a quality pool of volunteers, and student and academic advisory boards all provide a counterbalance to the over-reliance on a single organizational leader and promote inclusion and accountability.**



## Funding Structure

Consistent funding allows programs to engage in long-term planning, develop robust infrastructure, adequately compensate staff and instructors, and ensure program sustainability. A financial structure that allows a program's leadership to control its resources ensures that policy and design decisions reflect the needs of students and the values of the program. Whether funding is private, state or federal,

the program should make every effort to minimize external interference in decisions related to admissions, curriculum development, faculty selection, and types of certificate or degree offered. In particular, programs should protect operations from pressure to exclude students based on time left to serve, age, length of sentence, commitment offense, or other non-academic criteria.

### IN PRACTICE

- Organizations have sufficient resources to engage in budgetary planning, and to ensure support for core administrative and operational program needs.
- Programs have dedicated staff or volunteers to develop a robust and diverse fundraising plan that includes foundation grants, individual donors, in-kind donations, corporate sponsors, events, and other locally appropriate fundraising activities.
- Funding structure supports the autonomy and integrity of academic program development and operations.
- Funding structure incentivizes high quality programming rather than the enrollment of as many students as possible, and/or constrains the unchecked enrollment of students purely for the purposes of revenue maximization.
- Students are not required to incur debt in order to participate in programs.
- Programs provide students with all basic school supplies (books, pens, notebooks, calculators, etc.) and arrange for fees and tuition to be offset by the college/university or other funding sources.

### CHALLENGES

- Colleges/universities seek to develop in-prison programs primarily as a source of revenue (rather than to serve students), and design programs accordingly.
- Funding sources require or incentivize the rapid enrollment of large numbers of students, rather than the prioritization of students' academic success.
- Funding systems or structures disqualify students based on non-academic criteria (e.g., age, length of sentence or commitment offense).
- Funding sources or other arrangements or agreements limit prospective instructors to a specific (frequently adjunct) faculty pool, or to full-time equivalents (FTEs) who teach only in prison, rather than allowing leadership to recruit based on qualification.
- "Pay for Success" or other funding programs tie resources to student recidivism rates or other outcomes that de-incentivize admission of high-need or "high-risk" students.
- Funding structures permit students to incur debt, whether based on set tuition or as a percentage of future earnings.
- State or federal tuition programs allow colleges/universities to generate revenue through in-prison programs, without regard to program quality.

## Accreditation, Credits and Degrees

To ensure equity, incarcerated students should have access to accredited and transferable courses and degrees. This is essential to ensure that the quality of their educational

opportunities is consistent with those that are available to their non-incarcerated peers. It also ensures they have pathways to education, employment and economic stability.

### IN PRACTICE

- Programs deliver courses and curriculum under the auspices of an accredited university or college.
- Program offerings include credit-bearing as well as quality college preparatory (pre-college) courses.
- Students have the opportunity to earn a transferable degree or certificate.
- Students are able to participate in recognized academic/career pathways that do not contain barriers to their participation upon returning to the community.

### CHALLENGES

- Non-credit bearing courses and/or non-degree-granting programs do not communicate clearly to students that they do not culminate in transferable credits and/or a recognized, transferable degree.
- Programs fail to inform students about the institutional differences between programs that are student-designed and peer-taught, and those taught by credentialed instructors within an accredited degree program.
- Programs offer blended (or “inside-out”) classes inside the prison for both incarcerated and outside campus students which primarily serve the academic or educational needs of the outside students rather than those of the incarcerated students.
- Programs confer college credits for participation in classes that are not part of a comprehensive degree program that holistically addresses their academic needs.
- Distance learning programs (whether online or correspondence) fail to facilitate meaningful, sustained contact between students and a fully qualified instructor; provide a rigorous, comprehensive curriculum; include opportunities for individualized feedback, tutoring, mentoring, and advising; or facilitate communication between students.

## Modes of Engagement

In the prison setting, real-time, face-to-face contact between instructors and students and among students creates a critically needed learning community that supports students' academic progress and psychological well-being. The classroom environment acclimates students to academic cultural norms and practices like dialogue, discussion, debate, and collaboration that are essential for success post-release, in or out of the classroom. A dedicated instructor who has the opportunity to get to know their students well over time can effectively track student progress, foster engagement and persistence, and respond to challenges in real time.

For incarcerated students, the classroom creates a space to form lasting interpersonal bonds, and to develop a sense of community across cultural and racial lines. The community of the classroom enables students to form new peer groups and identities, away from the pressures and labels that are endemic to prison. The classroom experience supports social and emotional learning. Apart from being a goal in itself, this improves the institutional social climate and, in turn, the physical safety of students and prison staff.

### IN PRACTICE

- Face-to-face instruction provides opportunities for direct, sustained student/instructor and student/student interaction.
- Students have consistent access to advisors, tutors, and teaching assistants, and/or regular instructor/student conferences.
- Programs have access to dedicated classroom and study space with minimal noise, distraction and interruption.

### CHALLENGES

- Programs (or prisons) seek lowest cost, highest enrollment, greatest "efficiency," and highest revenue instructional models, regardless of educational impact.
- Prison or college/university concerns about safety and security discourage or prohibit on-site instruction.
- Aggressively marketed online and/or correspondence programs (and related vendors) systematically exploit students and in some cases mislead and manipulate prison administrators charged with vetting programs and educational products.
- Programs, prisons, researchers or funders seek to limit students' access to programs based on their beliefs about the optimal "dosage" necessary to reduce recidivism, or to effect some other outcome.

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## Admission, Enrollment and Placement

Admission and enrollment processes are generally students' first point of contact with programs, and so offer opportunities to help them acclimate both logistically and socially. Communicating clear expectations, guidelines and policies, including a thoughtfully conceived and planned admissions

process, establishes a program's credibility and legitimacy, and prepares students to apply to school on the outside campus. A thoughtful orientation and placement process allows them to get to know, and begin to develop trust in, program staff and fellow students.

### IN PRACTICE

- Admissions policy and practices (including pre-screening requirements) are formalized and publicly available.
- Programs assess students for appropriate course placement, and for any social, psychological, intellectual, neurological or other special needs.
- A student handbook contains application instructions, admissions requirements, assessment methods, semester schedule, attendance policies, staff roles and other relevant information.
- Programs do not exclude students based on non-academic characteristics such as length of sentence or time left to serve, age, or type of crime committed.
- Student placement criteria—whether based on placement exams, review of transcripts, or past academic experience—are clearly articulated and transparent.
- Students attend new-student orientation with staff and more experienced students.

### CHALLENGES

- Policies (whether established by DOCs, schools or funding sources) exclude students from enrollment in programs based on age, length of sentence, commitment offense or time left to serve.
- Schools or prisons misinterpret or misapply policy to require (or permit) the exclusion of certain students (as above).

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## Data Collection and Management

Programs should maintain a data management system that tracks students' attendance and performance, their progress towards degree completion, and other information that supports ongoing program evaluation. Data collection, analysis and reporting are essential for programs' continuous improvement, as well as for compliance with accreditation requirements. Robust and coordinated data management and analysis also create opportunities for sharing and collaboration across programs, particularly related to reentry.

Qualitative and quantitative data empower practitioners to shape public discussion beyond recidivism or public safety and toward meaningful metrics to measure the impact of in-prison higher education and other in-prison programs. These include academic and professional attainment, social and psychological development, civic engagement, and health and wellness. With evaluation and data, practitioners are able to explore and demonstrate the impact of program participation to diverse stakeholders.

### IN PRACTICE

- Programs have a comprehensive data and evaluation plan, including collecting and tracking the following:
  - Student demographic data
  - Course, faculty, program evaluation (by students and instructors)
  - Student learning assessment (short- and long-term academic progress, as well as grades, course and degree completion, attendance)
  - Longitudinal outcomes beyond academic learning (e.g., subsequent degree completion, employment, civic engagement, mental and physical health)
- Systems are in place for collecting accurate and up-to-date data on faculty, staff and volunteer participation in programs.
- Standard professional protocols are in place for securely entering, storing, and analyzing data, and for publishing results.
- Staff receive adequate training to maintain all existing data management systems.
- Programs have established partnerships with evaluators, developers and/or researchers who provide technical and strategic planning support.
- Information about program data collection and analysis is accessible to program participants, staff, volunteers, alumni and other key partners.

### CHALLENGES

- Practitioners, researchers, evaluators, lawmakers and other stakeholders defer in their research or program assessment to the premise that the purposes of all in-prison programming are the reduction of recidivism, savings to taxpayers, and benefits to public safety—whether out of conviction, or in order to secure funding and/or garner public or institutional support for programs.
- Programs lack adequate funding for data collection, student assessment, evaluation and/or research.
- Programs lack staff with the necessary skills, knowledge and capacity to create or maintain data collection systems.
- Programs lack partnerships with campus community members or other external expert researchers who could support robust data collection and analysis.
- The DOC or prison (or other involved state or federal agency) does not provide the necessary authorization and support to collect data and/or conduct research inside the institution (or with students post-release).
- Programs or individual actors collect data for the purposes of research without institutional approval (IRB or other college/university review board), and/or other necessary approvals.



## 2. PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

Every in-prison higher education program constitutes a unique partnership between some combination of one or more academic institution, non-profit organization, corrections department, and/or other government agency. Funding sources also vary widely, comprising some combination of private funders, state or federal agencies, and/or student tuition and financial aid. Each unique configuration creates its own administrative systems, personal and institutional relationships, and power dynamics.

In order to ensure program stability, it is essential that the structure and systems that support all program operations be clear, consistent, collectively agreed upon and formalized. Thoughtfully planned coordination among all entities (academic institutions, community partners and corrections) may also ease the transition of students from prison through successful reentry and on to further education.

## With Colleges and Universities

Within each academic institution, support for in-prison programming may come from a different department, college, campus center, institute, administrative office, or individual administrator. Clear agreements between programs and their home universities or colleges support the operation of critical systems such as student registration and enrollment, advising, course planning, accreditation and the use of university resources. Such agreements may also establish the expectation that academic institutions will invest equally in the success of in-prison programs as in programs on the outside campus.

Programs developed by colleges/universities should be embedded in the academic structure of their institutions in

such a way that their students, faculty and staff have the same support and oversight as other academic programs. University resources (library services, advising, disability/accommodations, etc.) should be available to incarcerated students. Comprehensive degree programs that confer credit for courses identical to those on the outside campus aid in creating pathways to a university or college upon the student's release. Academic institutions can further strengthen programs by allowing faculty to negotiate in-prison courses as part of their teaching load; by permitting programs to "buy out" faculty time; and by recognizing faculty and program administrators' work with the program as academic and/or administrative work.

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### IN PRACTICE

- A written agreement between the program and the college/university outlines the roles and responsibilities of each party, and the function and expectations of the program within the existing university structure. This agreement is reviewed regularly.
- Topics addressed in the agreement may include:
  - Academic administrative matters such as enrollment, advising, curricular oversight, tuition, teaching allocations for faculty (in-prison teaching as part of teaching load), degrees and credits, and pathways for continuing education upon release.
  - In-kind support in the form of office space, use of equipment and supplies, administrative assistance, access to library and technology services, disability services, and fundraising support.
  - Financial arrangements, including administrative stipends, work-study, staff salaries, scholarships or tuition remission for in-prison student enrollment, and financial aid and scholarships to students post-release.
  - Student support programs (e.g., via centers for service learning) that may utilize undergraduates to support the program (e.g., book drives, study hall tutoring, or internships).

### CHALLENGES

- Administrators do not view the program as an integral part of the college/university but rather as a service project of a particular department, faculty member or community or non-profit organization.
- Service-learning and other initiatives design volunteer or academic opportunities within the program primarily to benefit students from the outside campus.
- Faculty initiatives (e.g., individual classes, reading groups) provide learning opportunities for outside students but are not aligned with the purpose and values of the program, or with the needs of the incarcerated students.

## With Departments of Corrections

All programs are dependent on their collaborative relationships with both the DOC and the specific prison where they work. These relationships are essential to programs' success, and must be constantly cultivated—both through direct interpersonal communication and through clear, formalized agreements. Strong institutional partnerships allow programs to withstand transitions (e.g., fluctuating prison rules, staff turnover), resolve prison-

or campus-based resistance, adapt to policy changes, and devise strategies for overcoming significant conflicts (e.g., concerning what course materials can be brought into the prison, or the use of technology). A strong Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), collaboratively written by the program and prison/DOC, also supports the sustainability of the program by establishing a sense of partnership.

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### IN PRACTICE

- A regularly reviewed MOU exists between the program (or college/university) and DOC that clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of both entities, including:
  - Identification of designated contacts for each
  - Responsibility for student admissions, faculty hiring, curriculum development, etc.
  - Use of space (classroom, storage, clerical) and times when space will be used
  - Procedures for obtaining clearance for people and materials
  - Provision of inside clerical and/or teaching assistant support
  - Students' institutional assignment status (including "transfer holds" for all enrolled students)
  - Access to institutional technology, equipment, and/or other supplies and materials
  - Provision for extra-curricular activities for enrolled students, alumni and the broader prison community
- Liaisons for each entity (DOC/prison and non-profit/college or university) are in regular contact.
- Programs open special events within the prison to DOC/administration/staff.

### CHALLENGES

- DOC (or other stakeholders) are reluctant to cede control over:
  - Program admissions (especially on the basis of factors such as time left to serve, commitment offense, age or type of sentence)
  - Development of curriculum and/or selection of degree or certificate programs
  - Faculty hiring
  - Allocation of funding (particularly when state or federal funds are awarded).



## With Community-Based Organizations

Highly functional coordination between the program and community partners can help support the transition of students from prison to the community—in particular, efforts to continue their education on campus upon release from prison. Community organizations, which may include faith-based groups, have access to extended social and

professional networks and can offer students a broad system of support. Engaging with community organizations can increase a program's capacity to provide public education and support advocacy efforts; and can heighten the visibility of the program, thus expanding its base of support.

### IN PRACTICE

- Well-coordinated partnerships with community-based organizations provide reentry resources related to employment, housing, legal services, family wellness, education and financial aid, and physical and mental health, including drug treatment.
- Reentry programs and organizations provide supplemental educational, informational and cultural programming and support (access to technology, lecture series, health, special events, forums, etc.)
- Community organizations provide professional development training or support, including resume writing, mock job fairs and interviewing practice, etc.

### CHALLENGES

- External organizations do not share the same student-centered priorities or values, or may be unfamiliar with the complexities of in-prison programming.
- Community and DOC reentry organizations don't have policies or experience with students who want to pursue educational pathways in addition to work, and do not accommodate students who need flexible schedules to continue going to school.
- Partnering community organizations do not consider academic and professional career paths a viable option for formerly incarcerated people, and implicitly or explicitly discourage students from continuing their education.

Partnerships with community-based organizations provide reentry resources related to employment, housing, legal services, family wellness, education and financial aid, and physical and mental health, including drug treatment.

## With Researchers

Research and evaluation are of tremendous benefit when driven by values and in pursuit of metrics that are in alignment with the program's mission and goals, and governed by strong ethical standards of accountability. The ability of programs to demonstrate evidence-based outcomes can strengthen partnerships and increase the buy-in of DOCs, academic institutions, government and community agencies, funders,

as well as the general public. Ongoing internal program assessment is also critical to fostering programs' capacity to continually improve. Research and evaluation activities can create educational opportunities for students by allowing them to learn more about the field, and to build related skills through their direct involvement.

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### IN PRACTICE

- Programs collect individual and aggregate student and program data through course records, surveys of students and faculty, course evaluations and other sources.
- Data on student learning outcomes (including course and degree completion, etc.) is continuously gathered and analyzed in order to foster the steady improvement of programs.
- Formal program evaluation is conducted in partnership with an independent party (i.e., one that does not fulfill an administrative or leadership role within the program, or receive financial compensation from the program).
- Research protocols include informed consent, and are approved by the college/university Internal Review Board (IRB), as well as the DOC.
- Research teams solicit student or alumni input/feedback on research and evaluation planning, design and implementation.
- Researchers are well-familiar with the social, psychological and logistical challenges of conducting research in a prison setting.

### CHALLENGES

- Research projects rely on metrics and/or research methods that are inconsistent with the values, mission and goals of the program—and specifically focus on the impact of student participation in programs on the general public, rather than on the well-being of students themselves.
- Research projects are designed based on the interests of faculty or departments, rather than the program, its students, or the field.
- Programs provide insufficient oversight and accountability necessary to ensure ethical research procedures (e.g., need for IRB, consent of students, and approval of the program and/or DOC).
- Research design is driven by the values/priorities of funding sources, rather than the program/organization.
- Researchers lack an understanding of the social and psychological complexities of conducting research in a prison setting, and specifically fail to recognize problems related to the issues of confidentiality or coercion.



Comprehensive degree programs that confer credit for courses identical to those on the outside campus aid in creating pathways to a university or college upon the student's release.



### 3. FACULTY RECRUITMENT, TRAINING & SUPERVISION

Instructors must be prepared to support the academic success of every student, even as they navigate the myriad logistical and psychological challenges of the prison environment. Instructor training and supervision are thus ongoing processes rather than one-time events. Ideally, throughout the term, instructors participate in program meetings and workshops, and communicate regularly with program staff. The training of instructors is greatly enhanced by the involvement of current and/or former students and instructors who have previously taught in the prison.

Effective recruitment ensures that instructors are fully qualified and, when possible, reflect the diversity of the student population in the prison classroom. Quality training and supervision ensure that the content and learning objectives of courses offered inside are consistent with those offered on the outside campus; that instructors teach within their areas of expertise; and that they uphold the same high expectations of their incarcerated students despite the radically different environment. Programs that thoroughly train and appropriately supervise instructors prepare them to support students with special needs, and to respond effectively to challenges that might otherwise cause students to detach from school, or which might activate the prison's disciplinary system.

## Faculty Recruitment and Screening

Instructors are key to maintaining high caliber academic programming. Aside from setting and upholding academic standards in the classroom, they represent the program on the outside campus, and play an important role in recruiting new faculty and generating support for the program. Thoughtful recruitment practices effectively communicate the various differences between outside and inside classrooms, for example, students' complex social and educational backgrounds, exposure to trauma, dynamics of race or class, or the culture of corrections, or lack of technology, lockdowns, limited time

with students, or prison restrictions on course materials. Programs should seek out instructors who are willing and able to be self-reflexive, and can adapt to the often formidable challenges of teaching in prison without lowering their academic standards. Instructors must also possess the professionalism, patience and sensitivity to navigate the significant differences between the much more guarded cultural norms of prison and those of a conventional college classroom, which encourage dissent, debate, discussion and collaboration.

### IN PRACTICE

- Programs employ a proper application process for all instructors, including submission of a cover letter and CV or resume, rather than allowing them to simply “sign up” to teach.
- Faculty are required to hold an M.A. or Ph.D. (ideally terminal degree) in the field in which they are teaching.
- A dedicated, qualified staff person (e.g., Academic Program Director/Coordinator) carefully screens each individual applicant for appropriate academic fit and overall compatibility with the philosophy of the program.
- Instructors have experience teaching on an outside campus, or are closely supervised and mentored by someone in the program (ideally a co-instructor) who does.
- Programs provide prospective instructors with clear, detailed information about the program's values, mission and goals; expectations of faculty (including training, supervision, and overall time commitment); compensation; the degree curriculum; and the specific course learning objectives.
- New and prospective instructors have the opportunity to speak directly with other program faculty and visit a class before they begin teaching.
- Programs have a clarity of purpose and strategy related to diversity and equity in hiring, and continuously strive to establish a diverse community of instructors for the program.
- In addition to ongoing training, programs provide new and continuing instructors with readings, research or other resources on an ongoing basis so they may continue to learn about relevant topics.

### CHALLENGES

- Particularly in less densely populated regions, highly qualified instructors are difficult to recruit due to competing teaching, research or service commitments, or because of low adjunct faculty wage.
- Programs lack the resources to compensate prospective instructors for excessive travel to remotely located prisons.
- Faculty of color, in particular, are often in great demand and already overextended on campus and not able to teach with in-prison programs (another reason why treating in-prison teaching as part of regular teaching load is so valuable).
- Programs are ill-equipped to support faculty and staff in reflecting on how race, class, gender, ability, sexuality and other identity or status markers might impact their interest in, or approach to, teaching in prison, as well as their experiences while doing so.
- Inadequately screened and/or supervised instructors use their access to the prison to pursue undisclosed research projects, or other unauthorized activities.
- Programs apply a “show must go on” mindset and run classes with unqualified instructors rather than cancelling the class.
- Schools are unwilling or unable to hire instructors outside of their own permanent faculty or adjunct teaching pools, whether due to contractual constraints or institutional politics.

## Faculty Training and Supervision

Training and supervision are ongoing processes rather than one-time events. Ideally, throughout the term, instructors participate in program meetings and workshops, and communicate regularly with program staff. Faculty must understand that their teaching is part of an established curriculum and program of study, and that qualified program administrators are supporting them. Program staff should provide time and space for instructors to reflect, ask questions, and explore their experiences, including their own biases and/or fears related to incarcerated students and prison

environment—starting well before they begin teaching inside. Such issues may otherwise surface, for example, when instructors encounter routine challenges in the classroom, whether related to academic honesty, inconsistent attendance, resistance to course material or expectations, academic struggles, or challenging interpersonal behavior. In all cases, instructors need to know they can communicate openly with program staff, and will receive non-judgmental support when difficult issues arise.

### IN PRACTICE

- All instructors attend an orientation and training session and receive ongoing training and supervision as needed throughout the time they are teaching with the program.
- Training and supervision practices allow ample opportunity for instructors to ask questions and engage with program staff, both in a group setting and individually.
- Instructors attend meetings and workshops and/or consult regularly with qualified program staff on issues of pedagogy.
- Topics covered in trainings include: program history, values and philosophy; institutional rules, regulations and culture; logistical information about the program; student backgrounds and perspectives; prison-specific pedagogical issues; and psychological dimensions of teaching in prison.
- Programs provide instructors and volunteers with written training and reference materials, including a handbook.
- Current and/or former students contribute to instructor orientation or training (either in-person or by contributing materials for distribution to instructors).
- Program training is separate and distinct from any training provided by the DOC.
- Programs provide and train instructors on systems for communicating with program staff about student progress and/or struggles.
- Program staff regularly observe classroom instruction and provide feedback to instructors.

### CHALLENGES

- Programs lack leadership and/or skilled, dedicated staff with the capacity to develop and sustain faculty training and support.
- Programs administered remotely by staff on the main campus have little if any exposure to the prison program.
- Program administrators are infrequently at the prison and there is no dedicated staff member who provides consistent on-site support and supervision for instructors.
- Instructors are inadequately compensated and thus unwilling or unable to invest sufficient time in teaching and related activities.
- College/university administration does not recognize the in-prison program as academic work but rather as “service,” and does not support professional development opportunities for instructors.
- Instructors lack the skills to identify and support students with learning differences or who need additional support, and instead either overlook or misinterpret their struggles.
- Instructors are resistant to being observed in the classroom and to receiving feedback and support.



Quality training and supervision ensure that the content and learning objectives of courses offered inside are consistent with those offered on the outside campus; that instructors teach within their areas of expertise; and that they uphold the same high expectations of their incarcerated students despite the radically different environment.



## 4. CURRICULUM

A program's curriculum, as well as the degree or certificate conferred, establish not only the educational goals of a program but the very framework of students' experience. They also determine what academic or professional pathways students will be prepared for upon completion. All of this concretely manifests the philosophy and values of the program, communicating to students not only what they need to accomplish, but also what the program community believes they are capable of. The design of a program's curriculum determines to what extent students learn to ask questions and engage in critical reflection about self and others—skills that will allow them to thrive as members of civil society, both inside and outside of prison.



## College Level Curriculum

Programs should design courses and degree programs based on the needs of the incarcerated students, not based on either political considerations or the academic, recreational, or research interests of outside students

or faculty. A rigorous academic curriculum ensures equity in access and achievement by preparing students to succeed along a broad array of subsequent academic and professional pathways.

### IN PRACTICE

- Programs offer courses in a pedagogically coherent sequence, including college preparatory coursework when needed.
- Academic program staff monitor the alignment of courses across the curriculum.
- Curriculum is at least commensurate with that offered on the main campus. If a new program or course (that does not exist on campus) is created, it is approved by the College/University Curriculum Committee (or equivalent).
- All credit courses are fully transferable, and degree programs prepare students to transfer to any other college or university.
- An experienced staff or faculty member who holds a Ph.D. supervises curriculum development.
- Comprehensive and sustained student advising clearly and consistently communicates the path to program completion, starting at admission/enrollment.

### CHALLENGES

- Programs are guided by negative and/or stereotypical assumptions about the intellectual potential of, or the “appropriate” career paths for, incarcerated people.
- Administrators/program leadership are unconcerned about the integrity of the process of curriculum development, fidelity to curriculum requirements, or adherence to general university standards and conventions.
- Individual faculty interests, funders’ priorities, or administrators’ convenience drive curriculum design rather than a commitment to providing students with a comprehensive, quality education.
- Academic institutions avoid providing any courses or degree programs to incarcerated students to which members of their outside community might object.
- The program designs course offerings to fulfill the needs and interests of non-incarcerated students or faculty on the traditional campus, and to allow the use of the prison and the incarcerated students primarily as a “learning opportunity” for non-incarcerated students.

**Programs should design courses and degree programs based on the needs of the incarcerated students, not based on either political considerations or the academic, recreational, or research interests of outside students or faculty.**

## College Preparatory Programs

Due to unequal access to high quality education on the outside, most incarcerated students arrive in higher education programs significantly underprepared for college-level work. There is no consensus in higher education regarding the best strategies for supporting underprepared students as they embark on their college careers. However, programs must devise strategies for addressing educational gaps, and ensuring that students develop the reading, writing, analytical thinking and communication skills, as well as the social and psychological capacity, to

achieve their goals and fulfill their own intellectual and professional potential.

In addition to providing basic academic skills, rigorous college preparatory programs introduce students to academic cultural norms, conventions and standards; allow them to build familiarity and trust with the program; and develop the social identity, confidence and personal relationships that will support their persistence and success throughout their academic careers.

### IN PRACTICE

- Programs provide college preparatory courses in both writing and mathematics.
- Writing courses are integrated and iterative (rather than, for example, teaching grammar or other narrow skills or concepts solely in isolation).
- College preparatory academic content is fully integrated with other study skills/student success content.
- Programs provide one-on-one academic advising for all students, starting at initial enrollment/admission.
- Organized and supervised peer tutoring and mentoring, as well as computer literacy training, are available to students in college preparatory programs.
- College preparatory courses are taught by instructors with expertise and experience in the course content area.

### CHALLENGES

- Programs lack the funding to support a robust curriculum of college preparatory courses, or to support the work of curriculum development and supervision.
- Programs are unwilling or unable to recruit qualified instructors for college preparatory classes.
- Institutions impose bureaucratic limitations on the provision of college preparatory courses (rather than solely “co-requisite” courses).
- When planning courses programs defer to instructors who prefer to teach more advanced classes.
- Inadequate staff time or program support undermines the provision of consistent, comprehensive student advising.
- DOCs and/or prisons are unwilling to allocate space, time and/or staff for courses that are not-for-credit, in some cases in order to avoid anticipated conflicts with adult basic education teachers, or their unions.

In addition to providing basic academic skills, rigorous college preparatory programs introduce students to academic cultural norms, conventions and standards; allow them to build familiarity and trust with the program; and develop the social identity, confidence and personal relationships that will support their persistence and success throughout their academic careers.

## Extracurricular Learning Opportunities

On outside campuses, students have an array of opportunities to participate in special events and other activities that broaden and supplement their academic work. While there are many obvious constraints within the prison, in-prison programs can sponsor activities such as lectures, film series, and student groups or clubs. Extracurricular activities demonstrate the relevance of course content to broader public issues, create more spaces for students to develop

intellectually, and engage the broader community of the prison. Such events also provide opportunities for inside students to connect to outside intellectual networks, and bring potential allies to programs in prison. In addition, programming open to the general population may allow new prospective students to learn about the program, and ultimately be encouraged to apply.

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### IN PRACTICE

- Programs design and implement speaker or film series in collaboration with students that address students' interests and supplement the curriculum.
- Programs host conferences inside the prison where students can present work and learn skills related to public presentation and conference organization.
- Programs facilitate journals of student writing and in-prison program newsletters that help build writing and editorial skills, create new forums for the exchange of ideas, and cultivate program culture.
- Students design and lead workshops that focus on topics of interest (e.g., community building, academic skills, gender identity, political advocacy, creative/cultural activities, etc.).

### CHALLENGES

- Programs bring outside community members into the prison to observe programs, but provide minimal opportunities for direct, substantive engagement by students.
- Logistical obstacles to outside programming such as showing films or having a speaker require extensive (sometimes insurmountable) planning and negotiation between the program and the DOC/prison.
- Programs lack the volunteers or staff required to coordinate and oversee extracurricular programming.
- Programs lack the funding to support transportation, honoraria or other costs associated with bringing high quality events into the prison.
- DOC/facilities view extracurricular activities as beyond the scope of what they are required to support and believe such events pose a threat to safety and security.



## 5. PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy includes the theory and practice of teaching, instructors' specific teaching style, their manner of interacting with students in the classroom, as well as how they conceptualize the enterprise of teaching and learning. Strong pedagogy is dynamic, interactive, varied, creative, and flexible. It is also adaptive to diverse student learning styles and creates an intellectually stimulating and supportive environment. Program administrators help ensure quality pedagogy by recruiting highly skilled and motivated faculty, and providing them with regular access to opportunities for professional development, and for collaboration and dialogue with colleagues.

## Teaching Practices

Teaching practice expresses instructors' technical skills as well as, at times, their personally held beliefs and attitudes toward students and the learning process. In the prison context, elements in an instructor's attitude or mindset (including variations on the themes of stereotype, idealization or objectification) can undermine teaching and learning, and, ultimately, student success. These may be manifest, for example, through sensationalistic curiosity,

voyeuristic behavior, paternalistic communication or course design, lowered standards, divergence from course learning objectives, excessive deference or intimidation, hyper-focus on select students, or other forms of professional failure. Because such issues may surface inside as well as outside of the classroom, it is critical that programs have systems in place to ensure constant communication between students, instructors, staff and program leadership.

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### IN PRACTICE

- Instructors design courses, utilize course materials and manage their classrooms in a manner that is intellectually challenging, respectful, and responsive to the academic, social and psychological needs of all students.
- Instructors appropriately address the learning objectives of the given course, as they would on their main campus.
- Instructors approach students with the same rigorous standards and expectations that they do non-incarcerated students.
- Instructors receive adequate training and continuous support to ensure that their in-prison teaching is responsive to their students' diverse learning styles, including universal design.
- Course and program design include systems for ensuring fluid communication between program staff and instructors in order to provide continuous support to students, including in particular those with special needs.

### CHALLENGES

- Instructors abandon basic conventions of academic practice/process or engage in "experimental" pedagogical practices without a legitimate pedagogical justification (e.g., no formal assessment practices, over-reliance on peer teaching or tutoring) simply to satisfy their own personal desires or intellectual interests at the expense of student learning.
- Instructors compel students' self-disclosure or otherwise make students' personal life experiences or backgrounds the focal point of their courses, or otherwise exploit or violate the boundaries of their students.
- Instructors take on courses or adopt course materials for which they lack either the training or expertise, and which an outside campus typically would not permit them to teach.
- Instructors delegate their leadership and authority in the classroom to their incarcerated students, on the grounds that their status (e.g., formal educational training, race, class, non-incarcerated status), renders their authority in the prison classroom illegitimate.

## Instructor Attitudes and Mindset

Qualified instructors in a prison classroom will approach their students as academically capable individuals who possess unique backgrounds and learning styles, and will seek to intellectually challenge rather than “indoctrinate” them into a particular political analysis or point of view. As in any other educational setting, the prison classroom requires instructors who are centrally committed both to the enterprises of teaching and learning, and to the individuality and dignity of their students.

Some measure of stereotype and misconception is, at least initially, virtually inevitable in this setting. However, programs must continuously work to cultivate self-awareness among instructors about unconscious biases and stereotypes that may objectify or pathologize their students; fantasies they may harbor about themselves as “savior,” “missionary,” or

“radicalizer”; or ways they might seek emotional dependency, social acceptance or political validation from their students. Because instructors often have little or no prior experience teaching in the prison setting, and because turnover is often high, programs must be prepared to invest significant time and resources to ensure that instructors’ motives and skill levels serve the best interests of students.

Instructors must be capable of grasping the unique political, social and cultural aspects of the prison environment, and of adhering to the rules and regulations of the prison. Above all, they must understand how their behavior may impact the well-being of their students, as well as the stability or viability of the program. Instructors who fail to maintain clear professional boundaries may not only place students and programs at risk but undermine student learning, and inflict psychological harm.

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### IN PRACTICE

- Instructors approach their incarcerated students in prison as capable, curious individuals and do not make assumptions about their abilities, interests, beliefs, backgrounds or goals based solely on the fact of their being incarcerated.
- Instructors are informed of and held accountable to the learning objectives of their courses and of their given degree program.
- Instructors approach the prison as the setting, rather than the presumed content or theme of their course.
- Instructors maintain clear professional boundaries with their students, and when necessary, communicate clearly, directly and respectfully with them about any challenges.
- Instructors have regular opportunities to “debrief” with fellow instructors and program staff, and to reflect on their experiences as part of a broader professional community.
- Programs cultivate a professional culture in which instructors feel comfortable being challenged by students, and challenging each other, in healthy and constructive ways.
- Programs continuously cultivate instructors’ pedagogical skills, awareness and reflection through initial trainings, continuing educational opportunities and regular supervision.

### CHALLENGES

- Instructors view themselves as morally superior to their students, and/or relate to them as pathological, or otherwise in need of being saved or reformed.
- Programs fail to invest in instructor screening, training, supervision or support.
- Programs lack core staff who are sufficiently present, attentive and available to respond to any concerns related to the conduct of program faculty.
- Instructors develop course content, assignments and activities that are ill-suited to the given course, or to students’ actual abilities.
- Programs fail to oversee course development and supervise instruction sufficiently to hold instructors accountable to the learning objectives of their courses.
- Instructors “act out” in the classroom, violating students’ personal boundaries, pursuing their own psychological gratification, research agenda, or voyeuristic curiosity.

## Academic Standards and Expectations

While each instructor’s individual approach to teaching and learning will be unique, the standards and expectations that they bring to the classroom must be consistent with the overall mission and purpose of the given program and affiliated college/university. The recruitment and vetting of faculty should ensure that potential faculty are skilled teachers, and that they do not use the opportunity to teach in prison to experiment pedagogically. They should be held to the same standards in the prison program as they are on the main campus.

Academic standards and expectations should be expressed to students from the outset, in writing (e.g., in syllabi and

assignment/activity descriptions) and verbally (e.g., in the first class overview and in subsequent class meetings). Students should always have ample opportunities to question, in appropriate ways, the standards and expectations established by instructors.

Program staff should regularly communicate individually with instructors about course assignments and student assessment practices (standards and expectations), as well as facilitating dialogue among instructors about their approaches to learning assessment and grading.

### IN PRACTICE

- Course syllabi contain course outcomes and learning objectives; all policies and practices required by the college/university or accrediting body; an overview of assignments, deadlines and expectations; grading and evaluation policy; and descriptions of in-class activities.
- Programs fully inform students of procedures for submitting course feedback or grievances, requests for accommodation, and other program policies and procedures.
- Instructors submit grades in accordance with college/university requirements. These are returned to students in a confidential format, in the event that the standard college/university delivery model (e.g., online) is not available, and follow all guidelines related to student confidentiality.
- Learning outcomes for each in-prison course are consistent with those of the given course/department on the main campus.

### CHALLENGES

- Instructors fail to assess and communicate with students about their progress and performance, and programs do not have a designated mechanism built-in for this type of student-faculty engagement.
- Instructors seek to use teaching in prison as a “reprieve” from the standards and responsibilities of traditional academic teaching, for example, by dispensing with assessment practices, grading, student conferencing, etc.
- Instructors lack adequate knowledge and skills related to cultural responsiveness, trauma-sensitivity, instructional design, and/or the needs and experiences of first generation college students, adult learners and other “nontraditional” students.

**The recruitment and vetting of faculty should ensure that potential faculty are skilled teachers, and that they do not use the opportunity to teach in prison to experiment pedagogically.**



## 6. INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES

Ensuring that incarcerated students have reliable access to the supplies, materials and resources (including technology) that they need to succeed academically is essential to upholding the quality of programs, and is also thus a matter of equity. Equity in resources also strengthens students' identity as "real" students, bolsters their sense of being respected and valued by their program/academic institution, and facilitates a smooth transition to outside campuses post release.



## Materials and Supplies

Programs must maintain a strong working relationship with the prison in order to have access to the resources they need to operate. Programs and prisons should communicate explicitly, and create detailed written agreements regarding the approval process, allowable materials, and other related

policies and practices. Programs should be prepared not only to explain the academic purpose of their materials, but also to conduct exploratory research on prison policy, and even to present their own interpretation of policy for the institution's review.

### IN PRACTICE

- Basic school supplies (i.e., notebooks, pens/pencils, calendar/planner), reference materials (i.e., dictionaries, thesauri, writing/style guides), and course materials (i.e., textbooks, articles, readers, workbooks) are provided to students free of charge.
- Students have direct access to academic journals, articles and books (see library services).
- Lab equipment, calculators, and tools/technology to support STEM and language courses, etc. are available for student use.
- Standard practices concerning the storage and distribution of program supplies and materials within the institution are established, documented and disseminated widely to all impacted prison staff and administrators.
- With the ongoing support of institutional leadership, program staff and prison staff and administrators work collaboratively to resolve potential problems or conflicts.

### CHALLENGES

- Prisons categorically prohibit programs from bringing necessary supplies and materials into the institution.
- Prison staff and/or administrators are unfamiliar with their DOC's rules and regulations regarding allowable materials; or these are not communicated clearly, or applied consistently.
- Individual prisons or DOCs are unwilling to train or confront prison staff or administrators who "overreach" in barring program supplies or materials.
- Individual prisons or DOCs lack adequately trained, responsible staff to vet program technology, or develop rules, technological practices and procedures that would allay institutional concerns about students' access to technology.
- Programs lack the institutional knowledge and relationships to navigate the process of obtaining permission to bring quality materials into the institution.
- Program staff lack the political footing to "push back against" institutional restrictions, or lack the will to assert themselves in relation to the institution.

## Library Services

Few if any prisons have anything resembling a conventional undergraduate-level research library, including access to databases for research. Yet access to library resources, training in how to conduct research, and familiarity with the norms and conventions of research—including peer review

and diverse methodological approaches—are all essential for long-term student success. Connecting students to academic communities and networks beyond their own classroom, as rigorous research facilities do, also strengthens their identity as scholars and increases their intellectual productivity.

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### IN PRACTICE

- Programs devise improvisational systems to create and maintain their own libraries with limited or no access to the Internet, whether on-site and/or through interlibrary loan.
- Students have access to individualized advising and support from library professionals.
- Programs provide formal instruction and advising related to conducting research.
- Programs build partnerships with outside volunteers and students who can compensate for institutional restrictions on access to information by functioning as research partners or assistants.
- Prisons dedicate adequate space, technology support and staffing for the above.

### CHALLENGES

- Programs lack adequate financial and material resources, technological strategies, and/or dedicated, qualified program staff to support access to library resources.
- Within the prison, programs lack institutional cooperation, dedicated space, or adequate prison staff to facilitate access to resources.
- Safety and security concerns of prison staff and administrators regarding inmate access to research and technology cause them to categorically oppose such resources.
- Main campus libraries lack the time, resources or manpower to support in-prison programs, and/or programs lack the funds to hire their own librarians.

## Technology Services

The lack of access to technology in most prisons places incarcerated students at a substantial disadvantage, both while incarcerated and upon release. Providing quality technology resources bridges the digital competency divide

between the prison and outside and ensures that formerly incarcerated people are not left at a disadvantage both educationally and professionally.

### IN PRACTICE

- Students have consistent access to computer labs with up-to-date equipment (personal computer units, external keyboards, mouse, printers, and all other equipment related to supporting computer literacy).
- Students have access to in-person computer/technology literacy training and ongoing support services from qualified faculty or staff that is integrated into the academic program.
- Students have computer access as well as access to tools such as Canvas and Open Access Resources that are used on outside campuses.
- Programs have a dedicated, qualified staff person/ liaison within the prison to support inside technology (hardware and software) and computer literacy training programs.

### CHALLENGES

- Programs lack adequate financial and material resources to acquire and maintain inside technology resources.
- Institutions do not support access to dedicated space, staff, and/or equipment.
- Prison staff or administrators oppose student access to technology due to safety and security concerns.
- DOCs, perhaps due to existing contracts, require the use of technology that is low quality or ill-suited to the academic needs of programs and students.

Providing quality technology resources bridges the digital competency divide between the prison and outside and ensures that formerly incarcerated people are not left at a disadvantage both educationally and professionally.



## 7. STUDENT ADVISING AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Academic support services promote student success by creating solid systems to monitor student progress and well-being, while also allowing students to develop the habits of seeking help, advocating for themselves, and planning their academic and professional paths. Such services are particularly critical in a prison setting, where many students have never had access to high quality educational instruction or support systems. Effective programs maintain a holistic approach that includes mentorship, tutoring, advising and ongoing support in acquiring the myriad “soft” skills that students need to succeed academically. These skills not only contribute to degree attainment, but bolster students’ sense of self-worth and confidence and empower them to become lifelong learners and advocates.

## Academic Planning and Advising

Academic planning and advising provide guidance on basic college requirements and opportunities for academic development, and support students' persistence toward degree completion. All students require regular, sustained contact with an advisor or program staff member who knows them personally and whom they trust, who tracks their progress and provides individualized support.

Comprehensive advising supports the social and emotional development of students, and cultivates a program-wide culture of academic rigor and supportive community. Individualized academic planning also alleviates stress, anxiety and confusion for students, which may otherwise undermine their well-being and success.

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### IN PRACTICE

- Academic advisors, who are either dedicated to the program or from the main campus, serve both current and former students of the prison program.
- Academic advisors work with students to assess their needs and interests, and develop an individualized academic plan.
- Academic advisors document plan of study and/or degree/curriculum audits; advising resources are catalogued/archived and available to students.
- Program graduates provide peer support for currently enrolled students.
- Academic planning and advising includes referral for assessment for learning disabilities and related accommodations (upon admission and/or as needed).

### CHALLENGES

- Programs lack access to students beyond designated class time.
- Program administration does not recognize student support, and specifically academic advising, as an integral part of the academic process.
- Academic advisors from the outside campus are not informed about the prison program and/or not are willing to travel to the prison to serve students.
- Academic advisors are inadequately trained or attuned to the psycho-social dimensions of incarcerated students' experiences and needs.

## Academic Reentry Planning

Thorough reentry planning that begins early and includes a strong focus on academic pathways is essential to smooth the transition to campus after release. This process also supports student success by inculcating the habit of long-term planning and goal-setting, and by inspiring students to envision more

ambitious academic and professional careers. Robust systems of academic and reentry support expand students' understanding of what is possible post-incarceration, and challenge conventional assumptions about what are appropriate pathways for formerly incarcerated men and women.

### IN PRACTICE

- Programs integrate reentry planning with academic advising systems from the start of students' enrollment in the program.
- Reentry planning focuses on continuing education upon release as well as career advising and exploration.
- Programs have, or collaborate with, an established reentry program that integrates other support services (e.g., housing, employment, professional development, social-psychological support, etc.)
- Programs collaborate with external/community partners to further supplement reentry services, and thereby widen the network of support for the individual student.
- Whenever possible and appropriate, campuses utilize existing services for nontraditional students (e.g., returning students and veterans) to support pathways from prison to college.
- Outside campuses create designated “navigators” to support formerly incarcerated students' successful integration into all aspects of campus life.

### CHALLENGES

- Outside campuses are resistant to formerly incarcerated students' matriculation on campus post-release.
- Programs have minimal or nonexistent relationships with reentry-related direct service providers in the community.
- Funding structures only support education programs on the inside but do not address their need for financial support (tuition, fees, school supplies, living expenses) post-release.
- Outside campus admissions policies require students to “check the box” or disclose or address their history of incarceration.
- Outside campuses lack student support services, groups, or dedicated staff for formerly incarcerated individuals.

**Robust systems of academic and reentry support expand students' understanding of what is possible post-incarceration, and challenge conventional assumptions about what are appropriate pathways for formerly incarcerated men and women.**

## Student Support Services

Student support services provide information and guidance on degree requirements, general academic development, and motivational support and advising towards successful degree completion. Effective support services aim to develop the whole student by equipping them with the array of competencies needed for academic success, as well as the confidence and sense of empowerment to become lifelong learners.

Courses and workshops designed to teach student support skills that address social/emotional issues encountered in a

prison college program are especially effective when combined with trauma-informed practices. They are also effective when they include opportunities for graduates and advanced students to provide guidance while also developing mentoring and leadership skills. A holistic approach to providing student support services can strengthen the identity and formation of community for the entire program, including strengthening connections among and between students.

### IN PRACTICE

- Student advising systems include integrated social-psychological support and motivational advising.
- Programs maintain internal systems for reporting, capturing and tracking specific concerns related to students' well-being (i.e., "care and concern" or early warning systems).
- Programs offer a student success class and/or series of workshops that address topics such as study skills, note-taking, time management, asking for help and self-advocacy, collaboration, managing test anxiety, research skills and resources, and computer literacy.
- Programs provide, and/or collaborate with existing college/university or community-based organizations, to provide programming in areas including mental health services, gender issues, racial equity training, disability services, and supplemental academic support.
- Current students and alumni are engaged to support new cohorts, for example:
  - Students with AA or BA degrees serve as teaching assistants in college preparatory and general coursework.
  - Alumni or advanced students provide peer mentoring and/or facilitate workshops to promote student success.
  - Programs provide alumni mentors and tutors with training and opportunities for professional development.

### CHALLENGES

- Programs do not recognize or acknowledge the complex challenges (institutional, academic, professional, or personal) faced by their incarcerated students.
- Admission practices actively discourage or exclude students who might need additional support/resources (which may include academic remediation, social-psychological support or learning differences accommodation).
- Institutional rules and policies prevent students from accessing support and services outside of or beyond the classroom.
- Programs lack staff with the understanding, capacity, inclination or qualifications to support students with special needs, or those needing accommodations.
- Programs are unfamiliar with or lack collaborative relationships with existing main campus resources and systems that are designed to support students outside of or beyond the classroom.



## CONCLUSION

The formidable challenges that this report addresses must ultimately be understood within the context of the contemporary crisis of higher education. Specifically, the greatest risks to excellence and equity presented here directly reflect both the chronic—and increasingly dire—underfunding of most public and private higher education institutions, and the lack of either widely accepted definitions of quality in higher education or of systems for holding institutions accountable to them.

At the same time, this crisis is further intensified by the cultural and political trend towards applying market standards to higher education. This includes the reliance on metrics such as graduate employment rates, debt load, and loan default rates as the primary measures of success; expanding pre-professional programs while steadily reducing or eliminating programming in the humanities; and an overuse of low-paid adjunct faculty. The unchecked predatory practices of both for-profit and nonprofit institutions that market low quality programs specifically to vulnerable populations are an

ongoing challenge. The archaic structure of student financial aid, which incentivizes such practices by rewarding enrollment numbers rather than quality, exacerbates these predatory practices. In order for higher education in prison to flourish, we must address all of these challenges among the many others that persist in higher education.

At its best, higher education in prison is part of a larger movement that both asserts the central importance of equity, excellence and accountability in higher education generally,



and defends the value of creativity, critical inquiry, and independent thought as the bedrock of any high-functioning democratic society. We believe that the field of higher education in prison stands not only to benefit from such a movement but to lead it. To that end, achieving the goals outlined in this report will require thoughtful, collaborative and sustained engagement.

- Funders and policy-makers will need to center their strategies on the experience and expertise of higher education in prison practitioners, as well as of current and formerly incarcerated students.
- Those designing policy and funding structures need to be vigilant about ensuring that their work does not either undermine the quality of programming, or impede students' access to it.
- Higher education in prison practitioners must work together to share resources, learn collaboratively, and hold each other accountable for the quality of their work.
- Colleges and universities must embrace their own critical role in creating a continuum of care that supports students from prison to college by facilitating reentry support such as access to work-study jobs, housing, and services related to learning, health and wellness, disability accommodation and counseling.
- Higher education in prison stakeholders must hold candid, critical discussions regarding current efforts to reinstate Pell Grants, and the pressing need to address the lack of quality standards and other serious challenges of the current Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative.
- Program evaluators and researchers must focus attention and resources on the impact of programs on the social, intellectual, psychological, economic and professional development of students, their families and communities, as well as the society as a whole, rather than solely on recidivism, public safety, and savings to taxpayers.

The diverse programs, states, prison systems, and colleges/universities engaged in this work require flexible and dynamic funding sources to support the creation of innovative academic models that actively pursue equity, quality and collaboration. Private funders and foundations in particular have an extraordinary opportunity to lead the way through:

- Promoting the development of a robust professional culture within the field by supporting in-person trainings, convenings and networking opportunities that foster collaboration among practitioners.

- Supporting the creation of web-based resources and guides, as well as tools for evaluation, training, etc., for new and existing programs.
- Exploring alternatives to traditional models of federal financial aid, including grants that link funding to adherence to specific quality standards, rather than to the number of students enrolled.
- Supporting research that is oriented towards best practices and grounded in holistic evaluation metrics that assess outcomes beyond recidivism. These might include self-efficacy, civic engagement, family stability, economic and career development and discernment, mental health and wellness, both for students in prison as well as those returning to the community.

Colleges and universities can lead by:

- Building and sustaining quality prison education programs by investing resources, allowing faculty to treat in-prison courses as part of their teaching load, and offering fully accredited, transferable courses and degrees.
- Providing continuous academic pathways and eliminating obstacles for students post-release—for example, through in-prison academic advising, financial aid, on-campus support, and the elimination of discriminatory admissions practices (e.g., removing questions about past convictions or other admissions barriers).
- Supporting all faculty—adjunct and full-time, tenured and tenure track—through competitive, livable wages. This improves educational quality by allowing adequate time for instruction, student support, and professional development.

The enormous challenges facing the field of higher education in prison—the lack of oversight and accountability within the prison setting; the complex needs of students; and the material scarcity that pervades the field—are all microcosms of the most broken and vulnerable edges of the society as a whole. Yet while expanding access to excellent educational programs in prisons presents formidable challenges, it also provides an extraordinary opportunity to overcome inequity at a massive scale and to set an example – both for our own professional communities and for society as a whole.



Higher education in prison is part of a larger movement that both asserts the central importance of equity, excellence and accountability in higher education generally, and defends the value of creativity, critical inquiry, and independent thought as the bedrock of any high-functioning democratic society.

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## CREDITS

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