Federal Policies Should Emphasize Quality and Equitable Outcomes for Incarcerated Learners

Lumina Foundation believes high-quality education and training after high school should be available, affordable, and accessible to all — and that it should lead to further education and to good-paying jobs. Our commitment is motivated by a desire to use education to empower people who face longstanding, structural barriers, and we emphasize that commitment for people who have been affected by the nation's justice system.

Education and training opportunities for people who are incarcerated yield personal, economic, and community benefits. However, such opportunities vary significantly in terms of equitable access, quality, and learning that occurs. In some instances, people are earning credits from colleges that won't accept those credits or admit students upon their release; in others, people are being trained for licensed professions they are prohibited from joining because of their convictions. Federal funding and oversight policies can play an influential role in assuring program quality and fair outcomes.

There's also an urgent moral and equity imperative that undergirds these principles. Racial disparities in the criminal justice system are entrenched, widespread, and reflect many of the same structural barriers that create unequal outcomes for adult learners of color overall. Black and Latino communities are particularly overrepresented in prison populations and almost equally underrepresented among people with college degrees, certificates, industry certifications, and other credentials of value. This context also drives Lumina's commitment and priorities.

Our federal policy priorities offer a set of principles for the ways in which federal policy can help create an accessible, affordable, racially just, and high-quality system of postsecondary learning.[1] These priorities center on meeting people's needs. To extend these principles in support of incarcerated learners,[2] we offer several additional options for federal policymakers to consider.

Foremost, Lumina believes higher learning programs in prison should ensure that students demonstrate effective learning outcomes, should put the priority on meeting students' needs, and should reject predatory intentions or practices. The federal government should:

■ Offer eligibility to colleges, universities, and other providers based on the extent to which they:
  - Provide the same quality of programming and instruction, as well as credit transferability, to all students, regardless of whether they learn in prison or on campus.
  - Provide comprehensive advising and other support services to help ensure the success of adults who might require academic and other assistance.
  - Deliver high-quality learning opportunities taught by professional instructors who have been trained and understand how to support learning in prison.
  - Offer credit-bearing, transferable courses that lead to completion of further education and employment potential.

■ Ensure that students do not bear program costs.

■ Follow the same federal regulatory and compliance standards for access to public funds as do entities that offer programs to non-incarcerated adults.

■ Collect and report programmatic data on student and program outcomes in line with all institutional eligibility standards for receiving federal support.

■ Be clear with students about program outcomes, federal aid policies, and the provider's federal compliance standing and history. Also inform students of any possible admissions, occupational, or legal barriers related to programs they might choose to pursue upon release.

1 Lumina Foundation. Federal Policy Priorities. March 2019.

2 Ezran, T, Gould, M.R., & Lewen, J. (2019). Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison. Retrieved from http://www.higheredinprison.org/uploads/1/0/8/0/108008195/equity_excellence_in_practice.pdf

August 2019