

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Ecosystems of Support for Justice-Impacted Students



College Promise and Educational Testing Service (ETS) partnered to lead five design teams - Promise experts from the research, practitioner, and finance communities - to coauthor reports under the theme, "Ecosystems of Support for Five College Promise Populations." Julie Ajinkya of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, Sheila Meiman of Raritan Valley Community College, and Stephen Rose of George Washington University led the Justice-Impacted Student team, whose report has been excerpted for this brief.

Higher education is a critical pathway to social and economic mobility. Research readily shows tangible economic and social benefits for college graduates: they earn more, pay more in taxes, are healthier, and are more civically engaged [1]. However, data also

show that postsecondary attainment is not equitable for too many of our nation's most in-need students: low-income and working students, students of color, returning adults, individuals with dependents, and other underserved populations who, together, redefine the typical 21st century student in postsecondary education today.

Justice-impacted students include those who are incarcerated and released [2]. This population overwhelmingly consists of African American men due to drug policies developed in the 1980s [3]. Attempts by this population to obtain postsecondary credentials are stymied by Pell Grants and state aid ineligibility and the greater risk of FAFSA verification requests. Incarcerated students face additional challenges related to the location of their education: the prison. The understandable need to preserve security and safety results in logistical hurdles for student transfer and tracking, communication, and volunteer safety. Prisons' limited classroom space and work requirements restrict the number of students that can participate. Networking issues and computer technology barriers, along with many incarcerated students' lack of digital literacy, make completing assignments difficult. In addition, the resources needed for prison education programs—administration, staffing, instructor training, and transportation—make such programs quite expensive.

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DATA PROFILE FOR JUSTICE-IMPACTED STUDENTS

Population: There are over 2 million incarcerated individuals in the United States, and an additional 4.5 million are on parole or probation. In 2016, there were about 463,000 incarcerated students potentially eligible for Pell, compared to the 7.2 million nonincarcerated students who received it.

School Choice: There are more than 250 credit-bearing postsecondary programs in corrections facilities around the country, with each state reporting at least one facility offering a higher education program.

Demographics: Compared to US households, the prison population is young; nearly half (48% vs. 35%) of incarcerated individuals are between the ages of 16–34. Over 80% of the prison population is male. African American and Hispanic individuals represent 12% and 14% of US households, respectively. However, the prison population is 37% African American and 22% Hispanic.

Educational Attainment: Approximately 6% of the prison population has an associate degree or higher, compared to 37% of US households. Moreover, 30% of the prison population has less than a high school degree, compared to 14% of US households.

Impact of Education: Recent estimates project that if 50% of the eligible prison population participated in postsecondary programs, employment rates among individuals upon release would increase by 10%.

The first step to alleviating these obstacles is lifting the eligibility barriers to financial aid for incarcerated and released students. The second is adapting the College Promise model to develop an Ecosystem of Supports (personal, academic, financial, and career) tailored to the incarcerated and released student population. Lastly, Department of Corrections (DOC) investment and stakeholder involvement is needed.

To propose program adaptations and cooperative solutions to promote and increase access and success for incarcerated and released students, this brief proposes a supports ecosystem that must be developed at the state level for higher education programs in prison to serve their students well and to transform outcomes for these students and the broader society.

College Promise Framework for Supporting Justice-Impacted Students

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that postsecondary opportunities in prison increase the likelihood of successful reentry upon release. Recent estimates project that if 50% of the eligible prison population participated in postsecondary programs, employment rates among individuals upon release would increase by 10% [4]. Greater access to postsecondary programs in prison is also expected to reduce

Student Insight: Tia Ryans

Tia Ryans was in and out of trouble at a young age, running away “rather than deal[ing] with problems head on.” However, she could not run when in jail, and it was there that Ryans began her academic career.

The obstacles she faced while taking courses in prison included the security around the classrooms and the lack of compensation for the middlemen in the educational and justice systems and for the professors. After her reentry to society, she transferred into Rutgers University.

One of the somber observations Ryans shared was that being incarcerated was like living in a world where time stood still. She had to confront her lack of knowledge about technology, housing, scholarships, and clubs while also dealing with emotional barriers and trauma around her teenage conviction as she adjusted to society.

Ryans became the first formerly incarcerated student to intern with a member of Congress, Congressman Donald Payne, Jr. (NJ-10). Recently, she graduated from Rutgers and founded FORTE House, a nonprofit dedicated to housing. She stated that it was important for organizations to partner with local politicians to ensure accommodation for different populations. Ryans also brought up the issue of the felony conviction question on applications and how it can hinder formerly incarcerated students.

state prison spending by increasing the likelihood that individuals will stay out of prison upon release.

Justice-Impacted students face both federal and state barriers to postsecondary education. The 1994 Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act significantly constrained incarcerated students’ postsecondary access by banning their Pell Grant eligibility, the cornerstone of federal student financial aid. In the aftermath of the federal ban on Pell eligibility, some states followed suit and enacted legislation prohibiting state aid from being spent on postsecondary programs in correctional facilities. Recent research documents that 37% of active state-funded grant programs for students across 26 states explicitly deny aid eligibility to incarcerated students or individuals with criminal convictions [5].

While there is broad bipartisan acknowledgment of the benefits of postsecondary programming in prisons for individuals and communities, arguments against providing incarcerated students with financial aid persist and mainly focus on finite state funds and the zero-sum paradigm that conflicts with expanding eligibility criteria for more student populations. Removing eligibility barriers to federal and state aid is a critical factor in making funding available to confined learners to pursue higher education. Yet, the debates over eligibility do not sufficiently address the challenge of affordability for institutions to administer these programs and for justice-impacted students to take full advantage of them.

Student Supports for Justice-Impacted Promise Students

The ecosystem of supports needed for incarcerated and released students to truly gain from a college access and completion program like the College Promise is not drastically different from the supports needed on campuses. These include:

- Personal supports, often understood as learning communities and comprehensive first-year experiences in campus-based programs, could build a sense of community among students inside a facility, who are disproportionately first-generation students, and could even encourage other individuals to consider college a possibility.
- Academic supports, such as advising and tutoring, can help incarcerated and released students who need remediation to ensure their success in subsequent coursework instead of dropping or stopping out of their program.
- Financial supports could include financial aid counseling to prepare for release and supports to offset the sacrifices that many incarcerated students must make in terms of choosing between the meager wages from prison employment and the opportunity to complete postsecondary courses for higher wage jobs.
- Career supports, such as career counseling, mentoring, and work experience, can help articulate how coursework translates into meaningful employment upon release. Such advising should also caution students against exhausting their financial aid eligibility pursuing dead-end coursework that would lead to an industry with occupational licensing restrictions against individuals with criminal records.

This policy brief is part of a five-part series by College Promise and ETS on "Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Promise Populations."

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Read the full report:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ets2.12299>

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Promise programs must also ensure that institutional eligibility requirements provide some baseline protections for student interests, given that incarcerated and released students ultimately have less choice in selecting quality postsecondary programming. At a minimum, institutions that qualify to enroll incarcerated and released learners should maintain good standing with their accreditors, as well as state or federal enforcement entities, and should not raise any Title IV compliance concerns with the U.S. Department of Education. These requirements will establish an important precedent for this programming, in that it will be monitored and accredited to demonstrate its equity with campus-based programming.

Conclusion

Postsecondary education in the United States has an affordability problem, driving both access and completion crises that are felt acutely by underserved populations. To help advance postsecondary equity, the Promise model has emerged nationwide as a potential financial aid strategy to help more students get into and succeed in college and career. Yet, by barring eligibility for some of the nation’s most systemically disenfranchised populations such as incarcerated and released individuals, these financial aid programs further exacerbate postsecondary inequities between incarcerated populations and their peers. While lifting barriers to federal and state financial aid for this population is necessary to close significant postsecondary equity gaps, it is critical that these policy changes are pursued in tandem with building an ecosystem of supports that enables quality postsecondary programs and justice-impacted student success.

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Learn more at: collegepromise.org or email info@collegepromise.org

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