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LOIS M. DAVIS

Higher Education Programs in Prison

What We Know Now and What We Should Focus on Going Forward

Each year, more than 700,000 incarcerated individuals leave federal and state prisons and return to local communities where they will have to compete with individuals in those communities for jobs. In today's economy, having a college education is necessary to compete for many jobs; according to Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevel, Smith, and Strohl, 2013), two-thirds of job postings will require some level of college education by 2020.[1] The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists 174 occupations as having a typical entry-level education requirement of a bachelor's degree, and it projects that employment in these occupations will grow by 10 percent over the next decade (Torpey, 2018). Those who have been in prison are often at a disadvantage in this competition because they typically return to communities without college education or, for that matter, any higher education plans. The stakes for ex-offenders are higher than they are for others; being able to land a job can mean the difference between successfully transitioning back into a community and returning to prison.

For incarcerated students, a key obstacle to obtaining a college education is cost. Prior to 1994, those who were incarcerated were eligible to receive Pell Grants to help cover the costs of participating in these programs. However, the 1994 amendment to the Higher Education Act (HEA) eliminated Pell Grant eligibility for students incarcerated in federal and state prisons (Crayton and Neusteter, 2008).

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This led to a dramatic reduction in the number of inmates participating in these programs and a drop in the number of programs being offered.[2] For example, participation by incarcerated individuals in college courses nationwide fell from 14 percent in 1991 to 7 percent in 2004 (New York State Bar Association, 2016). In terms of the number of states that offered college courses, an analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics data showed that 59 percent of states offered college programs in prison in 1990; following the 1994 amendment to the HEA, this dropped to 31 percent of states in 1995. By 2005, only 36 percent of states reported offering such programs (Turner, 2018).

There has been a resurgence of interest in recent years in expanding higher education in prison at the federal and state levels, particularly expansions that offer a path to degrees or industry-recognized credentials. In this regard, an important initiative that has helped to propel the creation of college programs for incarcerated individuals was the U.S. Department of Education (ED) three-year Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative in 2015 that temporarily lifted the federal ban on Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals who otherwise met Title IV eligibility requirements (ED, 2015).[3] Under the initiative, Pell Grants can be used to help pay for incarcerated individuals' PSE and training, as long as an individual is eligible to be released from prison.[4] Sixty-four colleges and universities in 26 states participated in this experiment, which allowed up to 12,000 students to receive Pell Grants to pursue a degree or credential (ED, 2019). Recently, the ED announced that it will expand the Second Chance Pell program to add new colleges to the experimental sites (Schwartz, 2019). Many educators, policymakers, and researchers view the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative as an important opportunity to expand access to PSE programs and to test out the feasibility of making Pell Grants available to those who would otherwise meet the Title IV eligibility requirements.

In addition, several pieces of legislation have been introduced that could help to build on these efforts. For example, the bipartisan Restoring Education and Learning Act of 2019 would amend section 401(b) of the Higher Education Act of 1965 to restore Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated individuals in federal and state correctional institutions (U.S. House of Representatives, 2019a; U.S. Senate, 2019a). The Promoting Reentry Through Education in Prisons Act of 2019 would establish an Office of Correctional Education within the Bureau of Prisons to improve correctional education programming, with the goal of ensuring access to quality programs across federal

Abbreviations

ABE	adult basic education
CTE	career and technical education
ED	U.S. Department of Education
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
GED	General Educational Development
HEA	Higher Education Act
NCCCS	NCDPS Community Corrections and the North Carolina Community College System
NCDPS	North Carolina Department of Public Safety
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PFS	pay for success
PSE	postsecondary education

correctional institutions (U.S. House of Representatives, 2019b; U.S. Senate, 2019b).

The next HEA reauthorization could provide an opportunity to restore Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students. House Education and Labor Committee Chairman Robert C. Scott's 2018 bill to reauthorize the HEA, the Aim Higher Act (U.S. House of Representatives, 2018), would have removed the existing ban. One of the principles for reforming the HEA identified by the White House was that Congress should provide targeted federal financial aid to prisoners eligible for release as a way to improve employment outcomes and reduce recidivism (White House, 2019).

There are different perspectives about whether PSE programs in prison should lead to academic degrees or industry-recognized credentials. In general, many educators and criminal justice experts feel that PSE programs in prison should result in some type of credential (be it an education certificate or PSE degree) that is recognized by employers, colleges, and universities. Such experts also argue that the credentials earned should be "stackable" and that the programs and earned class credits be transferrable to other postsecondary institutions;[5] the goal is to ensure that coursework in prison can contribute to individuals' post-release efforts, thus furthering their education and advancing their careers (Davis et al., 2014).

Providing access to college education is one path that can help reduce the nation's substantial recidivism rates. This Perspective offers a summary of what is known about the educational attainment and deficits of those incarcerated in state and federal prisons, about the effectiveness of educational programs in helping to reduce recidivism, and our assessment of what key issues remain to be addressed. This summary is largely drawn from the RAND Corporation's body of research in this area.

What We Know

For Successful Reentry, We Need to Address Educational and Skills Deficits

Many individuals incarcerated in U.S. prisons are disadvantaged in terms of low educational attainment, which, when they get released, makes it challenging for them to find employment that provides a living wage. The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is the most recent survey of the literacy and numeracy skills of individuals incarcerated in U.S. state and federal prisons. As such, it represents an important data point in our understanding of the education needs of this population.

According to the November 2016 PIAAC report, 30 percent of individuals incarcerated in U.S. state and federal prisons lack a high-school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) equivalency. In addition, one-third of U.S. incarcerated adults performed at low levels of literacy and about one-half of them had low levels of numeracy skills compared with the general U.S. population (Rampey et al., 2016).

At the same time, the PIAAC results suggest that interest in education programs among incarcerated adults is high, with 42 percent having completed some level of education during their current prison term (particularly GED completion). Yet only one out of five (approximately 21 percent) were currently studying for a formal degree or credential,

and of those not currently enrolled in an educational program, 79 percent reported an interest in doing so.[6]

The PIAAC study also highlighted the fact that literacy and numeracy skills are not often used in the prison jobs available to incarcerated individuals. Although 61 percent reported having a prison job, many never had the opportunity to use their literacy or numeracy skills in that job. For example, 47 percent of incarcerated adults with prison jobs reported never reading directions or instructions as part of their current prison job, and 82 percent reported never using or calculating fractions, decimals, or percentages (Rampey et al., 2016).[7] Furthermore, only 10 percent reported using a computer in their prison job assignments.

Correctional Education and PSE Programs, Including College Coursework, Are Effective in Reducing Recidivism

The PIAAC study shows that the prison population is primed for correctional education programs that can help them when they are released, but the real question is whether such programs, when available, actually work—are they effective in reducing the rampant recidivism that has resulted in so many ex-offenders ending up back in prison? In 2013, RAND published the results of a comprehensive literature review of 30 years of studies of correctional education programs and a meta-analysis to assess what is known about how effective correctional education programs are in helping to reduce recidivism for incarcerated adults in state prisons (Davis et al., 2013).

The results indicated that individuals who participated in a correctional education program while incarcerated (e.g., whether adult basic education [ABE], GED preparation, PSE or college education, or vocational training; i.e., career and technical education [CTE]) had *43-percent lower odds of recidivating than individuals who did not* (Davis et al., 2013). This represents a *13-percentage point reduction in their risk of recidivating* three years after being released from prison.

Furthermore, we found that participation in college or PSE programs reduced an individual's risk of recidivating by 16 percentage points compared with those who did not participate in correctional education programs (Davis et al., 2013). Put another way, *individuals who participate in PSE programs, including college coursework, while incarcerated are roughly half as likely to recidivate* as those who did not participate in any type of correctional education program.

In 2018, RAND updated its literature review to include 37 years of studies of correctional education programs and the meta-analysis to assess the effectiveness of these programs. Our 2018 meta-analytic results indicated that individuals who participated in a correctional education program while incarcerated had 28-percent lower odds of recidivating than individuals who did not (Bozick et al., 2018). This represents a 9-percentage point reduction in their risk of being reincarcerated three years after being released from prison. The fact that our original estimates were somewhat attenuated is the result of adding in more-recent studies with strong research designs. Still, the 2018 results continue to indicate that providing incarcerated individuals with opportunities for education reduces their risk of being reincarcerated upon release from prison.

Our estimates were based on studies with higher-quality research designs—that is, those studies that did a reasonable job of controlling for systematic differences between the treatment and control groups. Therefore, these results are not the product of selection bias (i.e.,

the result of more-motivated individuals participating in correctional education).

Correctional Education Is Cost-Effective

Establishing that correctional education programs work is important; establishing whether they are cost-effective is also key because the funding of these programs is drawing from increasingly constrained state and federal budgets. The RAND study also showed that correctional education programs are highly cost-effective. Focusing on the outcome of recidivism, we used a hypothetical pool of 100 inmates, the direct costs of correctional education programs and of incarceration itself, and a three-year reincarceration rate to assess cost-effectiveness. The study estimated that the direct costs of providing education to the hypothetical pool of 100 inmates ranged from $140,000 to $174,400 (or $1,400 to $1,744 per inmate). The three-year reincarceration costs for those who did not receive correctional education were estimated to be between $2.94 million and $3.25 million, compared with $2.07 million and $2.28 million for those who did (Davis et al., 2013). We then compared the direct costs of providing correctional education with the direct costs of reincarceration.

As already noted, according to RAND's research, inmates who participate in correctional education programs have a 13-percentage-point reduction in their risk of returning to prison; this indicates that every $1 invested in education can reduce future incarceration costs in the near term. *More concretely, we estimated that every dollar invested in prison education programs saves taxpayers, on average, between $4 and $5 in three-year reincarceration costs.* This is a conservative estimate in that it compares only the direct costs of correctional education programs with the direct costs of incarceration.[8]

Lessons Learned from a Recent College In-Prison Program

Knowing that many incarcerated individuals are interested in participating in correctional education programs and that such programs are both effective and cost-effective is valuable, but this knowledge does not tell us how well such programs work when they are actually implemented.[9] The recent expansion of college programs in prison offers some insights about these implementation issues that could be helpful to state and federal policymakers interested in expanding these programs. Here, we focus on lessons learned from one recent initiative—the Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education initiative, which was designed to address the need for PSE in prison and the recognition that increased educational attainment plays a key role in helping formerly incarcerated individuals stay out of prison and become contributing members of families and communities (Vera Institute of Justice, 2012). Research about North Carolina, one of three states participating in the initiative, offers valuable insights into the successes and challenges of implementing a prison-based college program intended to help participants continue their education upon release.

North Carolina's Pathways Program

North Carolina was one of three pilot site states chosen in 2013 for the Pathways initiative (Davis and Tolbert, 2019).[10] Each state was given incentive funding to offer college and PSE programming and reentry support services to

incarcerated individuals. To help them obtain a PSE degree or credential, the pilot states provided participants with PSE during at least the two years prior to their release from prison.[11] Pilot states also were to provide participants with support and assistance for entering college and completing their PSE through the two years following their release from prison. The educational programs were provided in partnership with local colleges (both community colleges and universities).

In North Carolina, the Pathways program was led by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) Office of Reentry Programs and Services in collaboration with the NCDPS Community Corrections and the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS).[12] While incarcerated, North Carolina Pathways students had the option of earning a certificate (12–18 semester credit courses), a diploma in general education, or an associate of applied science degree.[13] Through Pathways, the NCDPS hoped that participants would achieve the following core outcomes: college enrollment, persistence, and completion; attainment of certificates, diplomas, and degrees; gainful employment, either part-time or full-time, and increased earnings; and reductions in recidivism (Davis and Tolbert, 2019).[14]

Key Lessons from North Carolina's Pathways Program

RAND evaluated the in-prison and community components of the North Carolina Pathways program using a multimethod approach (Davis and Tolbert, 2019). A series of key lessons emerged that help us understand the challenges of implementing such a program, which we discuss here.[15]

In Prison

Implementing a college program with an in-prison component and a community component, such as Pathways, requires commitment and sacrifices from all the stakeholders involved. Students had to agree to be moved to the prison facilities where the program was being implemented and to be released to one of three communities that might have been far away from their families. They also had to agree to remain in medium-custody facilities to complete the in-prison component of the program. For their part, correctional facilities had to commit staff time to coordinate the program with other in-prison programming, agree to allow students to live in separate housing units, and provide additional studying space. State administrations had to provide 25-percent match funding and staff time to plan, implement, and manage the program, as well as agree to such policy changes as inmate transfers to Pathway-designated facilities and to place education holds so that students stayed in the designated facilities until they completed the program. Thus, it takes time to set up these types of programs involving multiple partners.

Having the Pathways program embedded within the Department of Public Safety was an asset. Having department of corrections senior leadership support and a senior administrator who was effective within that organization was key to problem-solving and to getting and maintaining support for the Pathways program at all levels of the department. The administrator understood the concerns of both correctional and educational staff and how to address such concerns.

Pathways demonstrated the continued need for staff training and support. For many college instructors, teaching in a correctional environment was a new experience,

and some found the requirements and procedures to be onerous or confusing. A key lesson learned was that those involved in making Pathways work needed clear expectations and defined responsibilities. It also was important to reach out to and educate correctional facilities staff (such as superintendents, assistant superintendents, correctional officers, and facility-based education staff) on an ongoing basis to get them on board and continually reinforce the program's goals and structure.

It is important to structure an in-prison college program to allow enough time for students to build general credits and earn certifications prior to release. The experience of Pathways and other in-prison college programs has been that it can take incarcerated students longer to earn credentials and complete college coursework while incarcerated than it would take if they were out in the community. This can result from a variety of factors, such as the fact that students needed developmental coursework before being able to begin in-prison college courses; that fewer courses were offered per semester; or that students beginning a course in one facility had to transfer to another facility during their incarceration or to a minimum-security facility as they neared the end of their sentence, and the new facility did not offer the same coursework. Furthermore, in-prison college programs compete with other rehabilitative programs that are required (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, drug treatment, reentry programs) and must be given a higher priority.

In the Community

Reentry supports are critical for ensuring that students are able to continue their educational programs upon returning to the community. As is true for many incarcerated adults, reentry in general can be a very challenging time. Within a few weeks of being released, the

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Pathways students were expected to enroll in full-time college courses; secure part-time employment; find suitable housing arrangements; address transportation needs; reunite with family members; and, in some cases, resume parental and financial responsibilities for their families while managing and seeking treatment for any substance abuse, depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues. Housing, employment, and transportation were among the top referrals to services provided to Pathways students, followed by family services and substance abuse treatment services. A key recommendation from our evaluation was to allow students to initially attend college part-time in the community upon their release from prison to allow them to get acclimated and go through the reentry adjustment process; doing so can relieve the stress of trying to attend college full time while also needing to work full time.

Investing in the reentry infrastructure is key. In North Carolina, the NCDPS used some of its Pathways funding to help build up the reentry infrastructure in the three communities to which Pathways students would be returning. In addition, NCDPS used the funding to hire Pathways navigators. It was clearly critical to Pathways

students' success for them to have a navigator or a trusted person of authority who could help link them to reentry services and assist them both in applying for college and financial aid and in signing up for and beginning to take classes. Our study also underscored the importance of recruiting and training parole probation officers who were supportive of education and understand the program enough to work with the Pathways students.

As a result of Pathways, North Carolina changed how it approaches higher education in prison. The NCDPS established a PSE advisory committee. In recognition of the importance of technology in education, the department also developed its own intranet platform to support PSE in prison and provided limited internet access for these programs. Pathways also laid the groundwork for improved reentry planning, with education becoming a key tenet of reentry in North Carolina.

Restoring Access to Pell Grants Will Help Address Some, but Not All, of the Funding Support Needed for In-Prison College Programs

Many have viewed the Pell Experimental Initiative as an important opportunity to expand access to PSE programs and to test out the feasibility of making Pell Grants available to those who would otherwise meet the Title IV eligibility requirements. Although this is true, there remains a concern about what Pell Grants do and do not cover and, in a broader sense, the overall need for sustainable sources of funding going forward. Here are some things to consider.

Administrative costs of these programs still need to be addressed. The Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative covers some of the costs of college programs for incarcerated individuals—but not all of them. Incarcerated students who receive Pell Grants through this initiative are subject to cost-of-attendance restrictions, so Pell Grants can be used to pay only for tuition, fees, books, and supplies required by an individual's education program (ED, 2015).[16] Pell Grants cannot be used to cover the administrative costs of higher education institutions or of correctional facilities associated with implementing the initiative. In its recent assessment of the Pell Grant Pilot for Incarcerated Students, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted that officials from eight of the 12 schools interviewed reported hiring additional staff or allocating more staff hours to help manage the increased administrative workload. Furthermore, as the evaluation of the North Carolina Pathways program showed, the administrative effort required by corrections officials to implement this in-college program in six prison facilities was substantial (Davis and Tolbert, 2019).

Thus, although the Pell initiative represents an important infusion of funds to support PSE for incarcerated individuals, such support might be insufficient to sustain the funding needed for these programs over the long term. It is noteworthy that many of the initial grant applicants for the Pell initiative indicated that their states did not provide financial aid for these programs. Indeed, when the Incarcerated Youth Offender Grants ended in 2010,[17] many states lost an important source of federal funding for PSE.

The degree to which state funds are used to support college programs in prison varies. States also vary in the degree to which state funds can be used to support these programs, with most states funding only CTE programs

and apprenticeships. In many states, college programs are paid for by philanthropy or by the students themselves. In a 2013 survey of state correctional education directors that RAND conducted, 28 states reported that PSE courses in prison were paid for primarily by the individual inmate; 16 states reported that families also helped pay for PSE courses; and 20 states reported that private funding, such as foundations or individual donations, was also used to pay for PSE courses (Davis et al., 2014). State funding for these programs was used by 16 states; only 12 states reported using college or university funding to cover the costs of PSE, and very few states used inmate benefits or welfare funds. Furthermore, in recent years, there has been some pushback from the public about using state funds to support college programs for incarcerated individuals. Thus, there is a need to consider how the administrative costs of these programs might be funded over the long term at the state and federal levels.

What Should Be the Focus Going Forward?

Higher education in prison is clearly effective in reducing recidivism and improving the chances that an individual will be successful on the outside. In addition, the Pell initiative has had a dramatic effect in expanding access to college programs for incarcerated adults[18]—as seen in 26 states—and is considered an important source of funding for the tuition and other costs associated with these programs.[19] Reinstating access to Pell Grants would help to continue the trend of increasing access to college programs for incarcerated adults. The focus on providing PSE in prison is growing, and work within the area is continually adding to our knowledge base. Still, there a couple of things that policy and program decisionmakers might consider in moving the field forward. The following recommendations draw largely from RAND research on the effectiveness of correctional education, the implementation of in-prison college programs, and a landscape scan of the field.

Besides Pell Restoration, Consider Options for Ensuring Long-Term Funding of In-Prison College Programs

As noted, philanthropic support and the Pell initiative have been important sources of funding for PSE programs, but federal and state governments also need to consider long-term funding solutions if these programs are to be sustained. As noted earlier, states vary in the degree to which state funds are used to support these programs, with college programs in several states supported by philanthropy or by the students themselves. Furthermore, some states prohibit the use of state funds for these programs, and the public might not be supportive of using government funds for this purpose.

As a result, policymakers involved in supporting college programs for incarcerated individuals will likely need to consider additional options for sustaining the funding of these programs for the long term. There are some promising approaches at the state level for funding higher education in prison. For example, California has greatly expanded access to college programs for incarcerated individuals by using two funding sources for its PSE programs in prison: (1) a Board of Governors Fee Waiver, which covers enrollment fees for qualifying low-income students; and (2) state Senate Bill 1391, which allows community colleges to offer in-

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person courses in both prisons and jails and to be fully reimbursed (Mukamal, Silbert, and Taylor, 2015).

Minnesota uses prison industry funds to help pay for its associate degree programs, which are offered in eight of its ten adult correctional facilities. These programs use the Minnesota transfer curriculum, which transfers credits earned into any two- or four-year state public institution. After Pell Grant eligibility and the Incarcerated Youth Offenders grant were eliminated, Minnesota initially used phone commission funds (surcharges on offender phone calls) to fund the program. As these funds have decreased over time, Minnesota moved to using funding from its prison industry program (known as MINNCOR).

In addition, there is a growing movement among such states as California, Ohio, Indiana, and Maryland to implement or broaden policies and legislation that give individuals time off their sentences for attaining educational milestones, thus helping to make education a more integral part of rehabilitation.[20] Case studies of promising approaches by states to fund higher education programs would be valuable for capturing lessons learned and disseminating the information broadly among states.

PSE programs also might be good candidates for pay-for-success (PFS) demonstration projects that could be supported at the federal and state levels.[21] There are various PFS demonstration projects under way in such areas as juvenile and criminal justice, supportive housing, homelessness, and vocational training, among others. (For a list of PFS criminal justice–related projects, see Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2018.) For example, New York State has a social impact bond involving a partnership among the state, private investors, and the Center for Employment Opportunities that provides comprehensive employment services to formerly incarcerated individuals who are at risk of reoffending and helps prepare them for the workplace (Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2018).[22] The ED has also explored the feasibility of PFS models to improve outcomes for at-risk youth participating in career technical education programs (ED, 2016). To our knowledge, PFS models have not been undertaken for in-prison college programs for justice-involved populations. Policymakers might want to consider whether PFS is a promising strategy to help address the long-term funding needs of higher education programs in prison.

Finally, the Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPPRA) of 2018 is a possible avenue to fund PFS projects in this area. Congress appropriated $100 million for the SIPPRA program to implement "Social Impact Partnership Demonstration Projects and feasibility studies."[23] In February 2019, the U.S. Department of Treasury issued a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) that invited applications from state and local governments for awards under SIPPRA. Importantly, the NOFA identified 21 different outcomes that a social impact partnership

project could apply the funding to, including reducing recidivism among juvenile offenders, individuals released from prison, or other high-risk populations. It remains to be seen whether any of the proposed partnerships will address higher education projects for these populations.

An Outcomes Evaluation of the Programs Implemented Under the Pell Initiative Is Needed

The Pell initiative has played a key role in helping to expand access to college programs for those who are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, but it also could inform policymakers about which program models might be most effective for this population. RAND's 2013 and updated 2018 meta-analyses (Davis et al., 2013; Bozick et al., 2018) on the effectiveness of correctional education have been instrumental in helping the field of correctional education to move forward from a point at which policymakers believed that "nothing works" to where it is now, with clear evidence that correctional education does indeed work in helping to reduce recidivism and to increase post-release employment.

At the highest level, we know correctional education works, but it is now time to look inside the "black box" of in-prison college programs (and other education programs) to understand more about the drivers that make these programs work. In short, we still need to answer the following questions to help policymakers identify promising or evidence-based college programs for incarcerated individuals:

- What amount of intervention (or dosage) is associated with effective college programs, and how does that amount vary for different types of students?
- Who benefits most from in-prison college programs?
- What factors moderate or mediate the effects of in-prison college programs?
- What is the right balance between in-person instruction and self-study or computer-based learning?
- What principles from adult higher education and learning might be applicable to college programs for incarcerated individuals?

For example, colleges participating in the Pell initiative provide a variety of instruction models: in-person only, a combination of in-person and computer instruction, and computer-only. However, we lack data on how effective these different program models are and which are most effective for this population. In its recent assessment of the Pell Grant Pilot for Incarcerated Students, GAO noted that ED has not established how it would evaluate the pilot or measure performance and called for such an evaluation, beyond just collecting data from schools participating in the initiative (GAO, 2019). Critical to this is an outcomes evaluation that would enable us to examine the effectiveness of different program models being implemented and would greatly add to our understanding of how to provide effective education, as well as which program models most benefit this population.

In addition, policymakers might want to consider such issues as the right balance between programs that lead to college degrees and those that lead to industry-recognized credentials, and how to provide a continuum of education opportunities for individuals who are incarcerated.

Conclusions

There is a growing consensus about the need to address the multifaceted problem of mass incarceration in this nation. Policymakers on both sides of the aisle are finding common ground in both acknowledging the problem and in trying to address it through the various levers available to them at the front end of the criminal justice system (e.g., sentencing reform) and at the back end (e.g., providing more services to ex-offenders returning to communities).

With solid evidence showing that correctional education programs are effective—and cost-effective—at improving employment outcomes for participants and at helping to keep formerly incarcerated individuals from returning to prison, education is another lever that policymakers can use to help reduce recidivism rates.

Some argue that access to college education is challenging for their own families and question why their family members are not eligible for Pell Grants when incarcerated individuals are. That position tends to ignore the fact that Pell Grants are an entitlement program and that making such grants available to individuals in prison will not take funding away from eligible applicants in the general population. Furthermore, PSE is important in helping ex-offenders integrate back into the mainstream labor force and in ensuring that returning citizens are prepared for the challenges of the 21st-century workplace.

In summary, although we know that correctional education, including PSE programs, is effective, understanding more about which program models are most effective, what features of such programs work best, and how to ensure the long-term funding support needed for in-prison college programs can help policymakers and state providers make wise choices given limited budgets.

Notes

[1] In the United States, community colleges provide the majority of postsecondary education (PSE) programs in prison (68 percent), followed by public four-year institutions (16 percent) and private, nonprofit, four-year institutions (10 percent) (Erisman and Contardo, 2005).

[2] In New York state alone, the number of college programs offered to incarcerated individuals fell from 70 in the early 1990s to just four programs in 2004 (New York State Bar Association, 2016).

[3] Prior to the 1994 Crime Bill that President Bill Clinton signed into law, those who had been incarcerated in prison were eligible to receive Pell Grants to help cover the costs of participating in college programs. Pell Grants were a key source of funding for PSE for incarcerated individuals. However, in 1994, Congress amended the HEA to eliminate Pell Grant eligibility for students incarcerated in federal and state prisons (Crayton and Neusteter, 2008).

[4] Individuals with a death sentence or a life without parole sentence were not eligible to participate in the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative.

[5] By *stackable*, we mean credentials should be in a sequence that a student can accumulate over time and that those credentials should enable that student to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder.

[6] In general, in the past 20 years, there has been a downward trend in participation in academic and vocational education but not in work assignments (Turner, 2018). With respect to participation in college programs, 14 percent of state prisoners participated in 1991; only 7.2 percent of state prisoners reported participating in these programs in 2004 (Harlow, 2003). A number of factors influence the availability and capacity of these programs. In addition to the drop in the number of states that offered college programs following the 1994 Pell inmate exclusion, the recession of 2008 also had an impact on prisons' programming capacity. In a 2013 survey by RAND of state correctional education directors, 33 states reported offering adult PSE in their state prisons. The effect of the 2008 recession, however, was a reported contraction in the capacity of academic education programs, with an overall decrease of 4 percent, on average, in the number of adult students who participated in these programs between fiscal years 2009 and 2012 (Davis et al., 2013). During this same period, 20 states reduced the number of course offerings for academic programs, and 17 states reduced or eliminated contracts with community or technical colleges (Davis et al., 2013).

[7] The PIAAC reports five proficiency levels for literacy and numeracy (below Level 1, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and Level 4/5). Rampey et al., 2016, looked at the percentage of incarcerated adults below Level 2 on the PIAAC literacy and numeracy scales in terms of whether they currently had a prison job. Among those who had a prison job, 27 percent were reading below Level 2 on the literacy scale, compared with 32 percent of those who did not have a prison job. In terms of numeracy skills, 50 percent of those who had a prison job were below Level 2 on the PIAAC numeracy scale, compared with 57 percent of those who did not.

[8] That is, the RAND 2013 study did not look at the *indirect costs* that recidivism imposes, such as the financial and emotional toll on crime victims and the costs to the criminal justice system as a whole, including policing and court costs. If we had included such indirect costs, these cost savings would likely be higher.

[9] Another consideration is whether these programs contribute to safety within prisons. A review of the literature about the impact of educational programming on prison misconduct by Duwe, 2017, found mixed results. Several studies found that time spent in educational or vocational programming reduced nonviolent misconduct; a separate meta-analysis by French and Gendreau (2006) found that educational and vocational programming was not associated with a decrease in discipline infractions.

[10] The other states selected were Michigan and New Jersey. The five-year demonstration project led by the Vera Institute of Justice was funded by the Ford Foundation, the Sunshine Lady Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

[11] To increase educational persistence and completion rates among participants, the pilot states also provided extensive case planning in prison and remedial educational programming, college-readiness classes, and college counseling in the community.

[12] North Carolina received $1 million in incentive funding to implement Pathways and was required to provide an overall match of at least 25 percent. With 15 percent in the form of a cash match (from public or private sources) and 10 percent in-kind to be distributed over the four years of the demonstration project. In-kind resources included assistance from state-level staff at NCDPS and NCCCS and from staff in the participating correctional facilities and release communities (e.g., community college staff and local reentry councils' staff) (Davis and Tolbert, 2019).

[13] College courses were taught in person by local community college professors in six correctional facilities. Additional in-prison supports included remedial instruction in English and math, tutoring, study hall or study groups, dedicated case managers, and computer training and internet access. Prerelease supports included development of a transition plan, referral to services, and assistance with applying for financial aid and completing college applications.

[14] Participants in the Pathways pilot returned to one of three release communities—Charlotte, Asheville, or Greenville—which were selected because of the presence of local community colleges and reentry infrastructure.

[15] The lessons learned about the Pathways in-prison college program, such as the importance of staff training, are also relevant to correctional programming in general. See, for example, Ellickson et al., 1983.

[16] Incarcerated individuals are not eligible to receive other types of federal student aid under the pilot (ED, 2015).

[17] Grants to States for Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals, more commonly known as Incarcerated Youth Offender Grant, provided grants to state correctional education agencies to assist and encourage incarcerated youth in acquiring functional literacy, life, and job skills by pursuing PSE certificates, associate of arts degrees, and bachelor's degrees. The target population included individuals who (1) were incarcerated in a state prison, (2) were eligible to be released or paroled within seven years, (3) were 35 years old or younger, (4) were not convicted of some specific crimes, and (5) had obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent (Tolbert and Pearson, 2011). The grant program ended in 2010.

[18] A survey by Castro et al. (2018) found that 47 states had at least one PSE institution providing credit-bearing coursework to incarcerated people. Of the 202 degree-granting, postsecondary Title IV institutions in the United States that offered credit-bearing PSE in at least one prison, 67 were Pell recipients and 135 were non–Second Chance Pell institutions.

[19] For example, in the first two years of the Pell initiative, 40 institutions were awarded approximately $35.6 million in Pell Grants for about 8,800 incarcerated students. Institutions offered more than 1,000 different courses, with an average of 19 per site. To date, 954 credentials have been awarded, including credentials to 578 individuals while they were incarcerated and 34 to those who completed their program after returning to their community (ED, 2019).

[20] For example, under Indiana law (Indiana Code, Title 35, Article 50, Chapter 6), an individual can earn educational credits to reduce the length of his or her imprisonment by participating in educational,

vocational, rehabilitative, and other programs. This includes earning an associate's degree or bachelor's degree during incarceration.

[21] *PFS* is a financing mechanism that shifts financial risk from a traditional funder—usually the government—to a new investor, who provides upfront capital to scale an evidence-based program to improve outcomes for a vulnerable population. If an independent evaluation shows that the program achieved agreed-upon outcomes, then the investment is repaid by the traditional funder. If not, the investor takes the loss (Urban Institute, 2017).

[22] According to the Urban Institute (undated), the terms *PFS* and *social impact bonds* are often used interchangeably to describe innovative financing of social or environmental interventions. However, PFS is a broader term that encompasses other methods of paying for outcomes, such as performance-based contracting and results-based financing.

[23] The U.S. Department of the Treasury is generally the lead federal agency to administer the program (U.S. Department of Treasury, undated).

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About This Perspective

Each year, more than 700,000 incarcerated individuals leave federal and state prisons and return to local communities where they will have to compete with individuals in those communities for jobs. In today's economy, having a college education is necessary to compete for many jobs, and the stakes for ex-offenders are higher than they are for others: Being able to land a job can mean the difference between successfully transitioning back into a community and returning to prison. There has been a resurgence and of interest in recent years in expanding higher education in prison at the federal and state levels, particularly expansions that offer a path to degrees or industry-recognized credentials. The 2015 U.S. Department of Education three-year Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative temporarily lifted the federal ban on Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals who otherwise met Title IV eligibility requirements and recently announced that it will expand the Second Chance Pell program to add new colleges to the experimental sites. Focusing on the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative and the experience of the Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education initiative in North Carolina—this Perspective summarizes what is known about the educational attainment and deficits of those incarcerated in state and federal prisons and about the effectiveness of educational programs in helping to reduce recidivism. It also assesses key issues remaining to be addressed. It is intended to be of interest to state and federal policymakers interested in expanding these programs and builds on other RAND Corporation research in this area.

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of the RAND Corporation that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.

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About the Author

Lois M. Davis is a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation with expertise in correctional education, prisoner reentry, and public safety. She led the national evaluation funded under the Second Chance Act to assess the effectiveness of correctional education programs for incarcerated adults and juveniles and an evaluation of the three-state Pathways from Prison to Post-Secondary Education demonstration project that provided access to college programs to incarcerated adults. Davis currently is leading the process and outcomes evaluation of the Minnesota Department of Corrections' Career Navigators Program. She has a doctorate in public health from the University of California, Los Angeles.

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