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Higher Education Systems in Prison Education and Campus Reentry:

A National Landscape Analysis

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NASH
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HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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List of Abbreviations

CBO: Community-Based Organizations

CTE: Career and Technical Education

DOC: Department of Corrections

HEP: Higher Education in Prison

NASH: National Association of Higher Education Systems

SUNY OHEP: State University of New York's Office of Higher Education in Prison

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About NASH

Founded in 1979, the **National Association of Higher Education Systems (NASH)** works to advance the role of multi-campus systems and the concept of systemness to create a more vibrant and sustainable higher education sector. NASH represents over 100 public higher education systems in the U.S., which include more than 1,400 institutions and serve more than 16.2 million students nationwide. Learn more at www.nash.edu.

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Executive Summary

This national landscape analysis represents the first comprehensive examination of public higher education systems' role in prison education and reentry programs across the United States. Through 45 interviews spanning **18** states with higher education in prison (HEP) administrators, reentry program administrators, and justice-impacted students, this study reveals how systems support incarcerated and justice-impacted students from enrollment through their post-release campus transition. As a result of the analysis, we have identified common attributes, models, and themes across programs that are summarized within this report.

Public higher education systems engaged in HEP programming share common attributes: statewide scope with dedicated system-level coordination, multi-institutional participation across community colleges and universities, formal Department of Corrections (DOC) partnerships, and sustained funding commitments. Five distinct operational models emerged, ranging from centralized state university coordination to nonprofit-facilitated partnerships. Key challenges include funding sustainability, system coordination and governance, DOC relationships, faculty recruitment and retention, stakeholder engagement, data collection, program access, reentry support, curriculum design, and technology infrastructure.

As students transition from incarceration back into their communities, reentry services function as the connective tissue between higher education in prison and students' ability to enroll, persist, and succeed on campus. Across systems included in this study, reentry services are most often embedded within existing HEP offices at the system or campus level rather than operating as standalone units. These services typically focus on supporting students' transition to campus through application and financial aid assistance, academic planning, career preparation, and referrals to community-based organizations, with more established programs offering additional material supports. Both administrators and students identified persistent barriers to successful reentry, most notably inadequate and unstable funding, employment and supervision requirements that delay enrollment, uneven access to services across campuses, limited technology access, and inconsistent institutional and DOC coordination.

These findings inform eight recommendations for public higher education systems seeking to develop or strengthen HEP and reentry programming:

1. **Create strong system-level coordination and governance.**
2. **Develop sustainable and diversified funding streams.**
3. **Cultivate collaborative partnerships with DOC.**
4. **Establish comprehensive student support from enrollment through reentry.**
5. **Maintain robust data collection and assessment systems.**
6. **Invest in faculty and staff development.**
7. **Cultivate strategic stakeholder engagement.**
8. **Commit to continuous improvement and innovation.**

This research demonstrates that system-level coordination, support, and leadership are essential for building comprehensive and sustainable HEP programming throughout the state. HEP programs must be recognized as integral system components rather than siloed programs, and reentry services must be embedded within the system with adequate resources to address students' educational and basic needs throughout their college careers.

Introduction

Public higher education systems[1] enroll more than 16.2 million students across the United States (Khan, 2026). They operate on a statewide scale that mirrors state correctional institutions. This structural alignment uniquely positions public higher education systems to address the educational needs of incarcerated and justice-impacted[2] students who face barriers related to prison transfers, cross-campus coordination, and reentry support. Yet despite this potential, the landscape of how public higher education systems organize, fund, and sustain higher education in prison (HEP) and reentry programming has not been systematically examined. This report addresses that gap. Drawing on 45 interviews across 18 states with HEP administrators, reentry staff, and justice-impacted students, NASH and SUNY's Office of Higher Education in Prison presents the first national landscape analysis of public higher education systems' HEP and reentry programs.

This research project aims to deepen the understanding of how public higher education systems engage with incarcerated and justice-impacted students. Specifically, it asks (1) how systems can be leveraged to improve access, retention, and completion rates of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, (2) how systems support justice-impacted students' transition to campus post-release, and (3) what experiences justice-impacted students have with higher education systems.

Millions of justice-impacted people are in our communities, and thousands are returning home each day. There are almost 2 million people within institutional correctional facilities (i.e., jails and prisons) and over 3.7 million people under community supervision in the United States (i.e., halfway houses, probation, and parole) (Kaeble, 2025; Sawyer & Wagner, 2025). More than 650,000 people are released from state and federal prisons, and over 7 million from jails, each year (Wang, 2024; DOJ, 2025). Around 95% of those incarcerated will eventually be released (Martin & Garcia, 2022). For those incarcerated and returning home, continuing or starting their college education is a common aspiration.

HEP and reentry programs align with the mission and vision of many public colleges and universities because they aim to increase access and serve the community. Community colleges often have open-access policies to serve underrepresented populations, and state colleges express a sense of duty to serve the entire citizenry of their state. Public institutions prioritize affordability and accessibility by addressing economic barriers to education. Therefore, justice-impacted students can benefit from the system's dedication to attainable education.

[1] Public higher education systems, as defined by NASH, are groups of two or more colleges or universities, each with substantial autonomy and headed by a chief executive. They operate under a single governing board that is served by a system president or chancellor and may include community and technical colleges, liberal arts institutions, and flagship research universities. For the remainder of the report, unless otherwise modified, "systems" should be assumed to mean public higher education systems.

[2] Justice-Impacted refers to a person that has been impacted by the criminal justice system. This includes those that were formerly incarcerated or detained.

Background

HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

HEP has a long but uneven history in the United States. HEP was dominated by public institutions and community colleges until the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act eliminated Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners, shifting the landscape. Three years after passage, two-thirds of correctional institutions indicated that this shift eliminated most or all college course opportunities (Norweg, 2021). In the early 1990s, over 750 HEP programs operated across nearly 1,300 prisons, which dropped to single digits by the late 1990s after Pell Grant eligibility was eliminated for incarcerated individuals (Bond Hill, 2019). Programs that survived relied on private philanthropy, volunteer efforts, increased university support, and higher tuition costs for incarcerated students.

In 2016, the Obama administration launched the Second Chance Pell pilot program that began reintroducing Pell funding in HEP for a select number of colleges on a trial basis. In 2020, full restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners was enacted. Today, Second Chance Pell supports approximately 12,000 students. Since Pell eligibility has been restored, there has been a surge in public institutions reentering and expanding their work in prisons. Pell reinstatement is already leading to a sharp increase in the number of HEP programs, with the National Directory recording a 9% rise in programs between the 2019–20 and 2020–21 academic years. (Gaskill et al., 2023).

Despite this recent growth, HEP programs are often launched at individual institutions, which creates challenges for degree completion and reentry. As the Education Commission of States found, "students face disruptions due to frequent facility transfers especially when comparable programs are not available at the receiving facility," resulting in "lost credits, delayed enrollment and disengagement" as well as "lost study materials and inconsistent support at new facilities" (Thomsen & Wren, 2025). Similarly, research from the State University of New York's Office of Higher Education in Prison found that while "students who are incarcerated often perform well academically," they nonetheless "face substantial barriers to degree completion due to facility transfers or release dates that interrupt their educational trajectory" (Gais et al., 2023). These disruptions point to a mismatch between the mobility inherent in correctional institutions and the institutional isolation of individual college programs.

CAMPUS REENTRY

Campus reentry refers to the process by which formerly incarcerated individuals enroll in, return to, and participate in higher education on college campuses following release. While HEP focuses on access to education during incarceration, campus reentry addresses the distinct institutional, academic, and life transitions students must navigate after release. This makes it a separate but closely connected area of focus for systems seeking to support educational access and degree completion for justice-impacted learners.

Formerly incarcerated people are 8 times less likely to complete college than the general public (Couloute, 2018). While it is estimated that 23% of formerly incarcerated people have taken at least one college course, fewer than 4% hold a degree (Couloute, 2018). Participation in HEP programs can increase access to higher education, but these experiences do not automatically translate into successful campus matriculation or degree completion.

Research has shown that the availability of reentry services on campus has a significant impact on matriculation (Anderson et al., 2024; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Campus reentry can provide academic, legal, career, technological, and financial support, as well as a human connection (Anderson et al., 2024). Campus housing, mental health services, and health clinics, often provide services that justice-impacted individuals could not access on their own due to the collateral consequences of incarceration (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Access to campus reentry services can have a significant impact on higher education enrollment and persistence while also supporting justice-impacted students' overall well-being during a critical reentry period.

STUDY DESIGN

This project consists of two studies: (1) a national HEP landscape of public higher education systems and their engagement in HEP programming and (2) a national landscape of public higher education systems' reentry services and supports. It involved in-depth interviews with administrators at the institution and at system level, and with students who transitioned to campus after incarceration. A total of 45 interviews were completed, including 28 administrators and 17 students (see Table 1). This study spanned 18 states, as seen in Figure 1. The interviewees that were outside of a public higher education system consisted of one justice-impacted student at university unaffiliated with a system, one former HEP student considering coursework, and a justice-impacted HEP consultant.

Figure 1: Map of States Included in Study

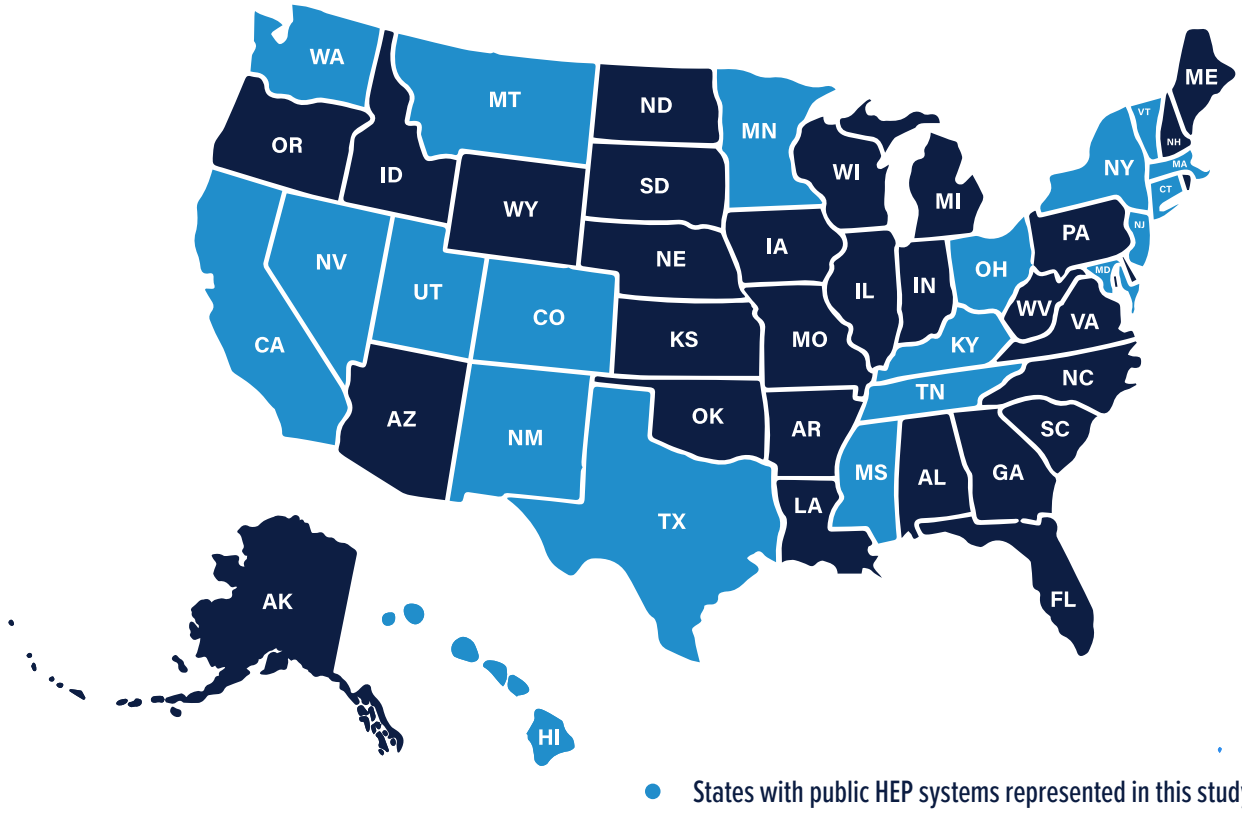


Table 1: Interviews by Type and Region

Region	Systems Interviewed	HEP Administrator Interviews Completed	Reentry Administrator Interviews Completed	Student Interviews Completed[2]
Northeast	5	5	4	9
West	4	3	1	0
Pacific	2	2	1	4
Midwest	2	3	1	1
South	5	6	1	2
Other[1]	3	0	1	2
Total	21	19	9	17

[1] Interviewees were outside of a public higher education system
[2] One interviewee was a student within two systems

HEP STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

Like the broader public higher education systems in which they are situated, system-wide HEP programs vary in governance structure, institutional composition, funding models, and system size and scale, reflecting each state's unique political culture, economic conditions, and educational philosophy.

The study examines system approaches ranging from single-facility programs serving fewer than 100 students to comprehensive statewide systems serving thousands of students annually in over 100 correctional facilities. Figure 2 illustrates the varied types of public higher education systems reflected in this study.

System maturity within HEP varies considerably: while one systems' HEP program has operated for over 40 years, 72% launched or significantly expanded since Second Chance Pell began in 2016, 22% underwent major reconfiguration in 2019-20 following gubernatorial initiatives, and two interviewees were in early stages of developing a system-level approach to HEP. The HEP programs operate across several types of correctional facilities as Figure 3 illustrates. Within their HEP programs, most systems (89%) offer associate degrees, with a growing number (44%) providing bachelor's degree pathways, and the majority (72%) combining liberal arts education with career and technical education (CTE).

Figure 2: Types of Public Higher Education Systems Represented

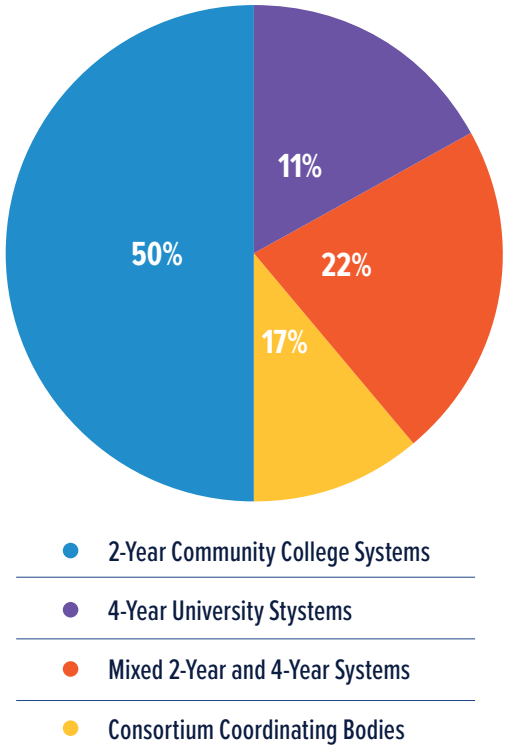
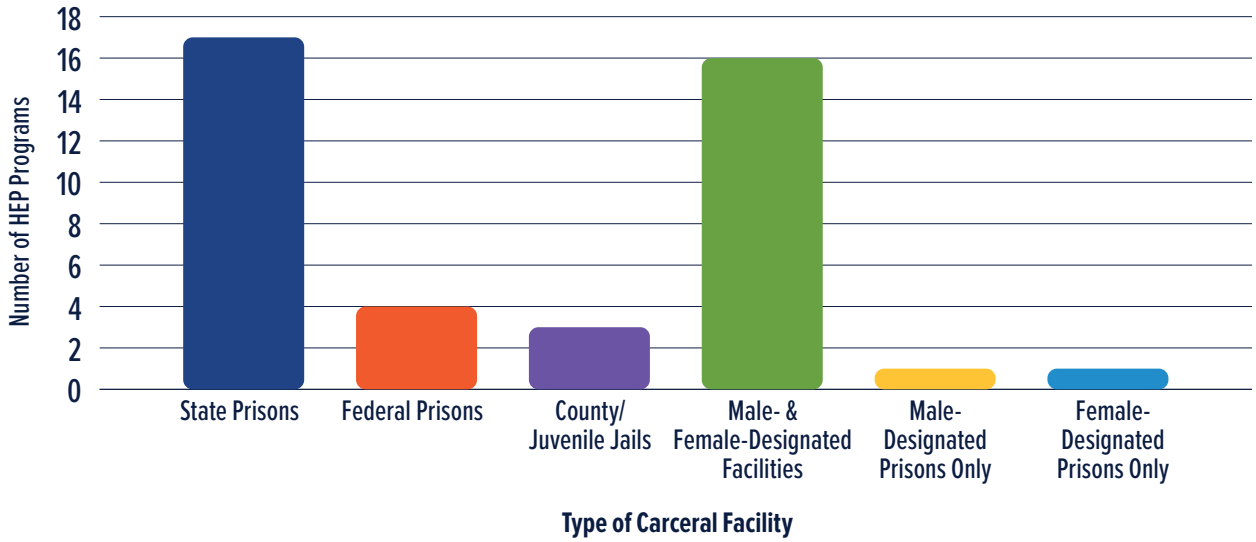


Figure 3: Types of Correctional Facilities Served by Systems



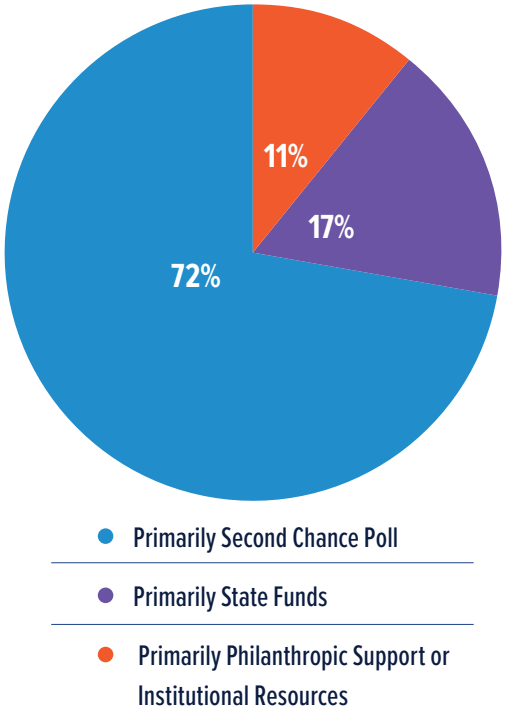
Funding models also reflect considerable variation: 72% rely heavily on Second Chance Pell, only 17% operate primarily with state funding, and 11% are too small to justify the infrastructure requirements for Pell eligibility and depend on philanthropic support or institutional resources (see Figure 4).

REENTRY STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 26 interviews were completed, including 9 administrators and 17 HEP students or alumni. The administrators interviewed were from 7 different systems. Four held a senior leadership position at the system level, three held a senior leadership position at the institution level, one held a staff position at the system level, and one was a HEP consultant. Five of the systems have been providing reentry services for 5 years or less, and two systems have been providing reentry services for 10 or more years.

The students interviewed spanned 8 systems, including 13 current students and 4 alumni or former students. The majority of students (82%) interviewed participated in a HEP program while incarcerated.

Figure 4: Funding Models



Attributes, Models, and Critical Themes

Analysis reveals common attributes that characterize systems' engagement in HEP programs, identifies distinct governance and coordination models emerging across states, and highlights the top ten themes that public higher education system leaders consistently identified as critical to program sustainability and student success. Through systematic qualitative coding of interview transcripts, themes are presented in order of prevalence, from funding and sustainability (addressed by all 18 interviewees) to technology and infrastructure (addressed by 9 interviewees), providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted landscape of public higher education in prison. Together, these findings illuminate both the shared challenges that transcend state contexts and the innovative solutions that systems have developed in response to their unique operational environments.

COMMON ATTRIBUTES

Statewide scope

- State-level governing bodies
- Open access mission as core identity
- Goal to scale to every carceral facility in the state

Coordination Infrastructure

Dedicated System-Level Staff

- System-level coordination of multi-campus efforts
- Dedicated office of higher education in prison with multiple staff
- Senior staff reporting to the chancellor
- Consortium director employed by nonprofit host organization

Formal Coordination Mechanisms

- Regular stakeholder meetings
- Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) or interagency agreements
- Communities of practice for campus practitioners
- Advisory boards with multiple institutional representatives
- Data sharing protocols and centralized tracking of students

System Office Functions

- Convene campuses and stakeholders
- Provide technical assistance to individual campuses
- Serve as an intermediary with the DOC
- Coordinate professional development and training
- Distribute funding and resources
- Track system-wide metrics and data
- Advocate for policy changes at the state level

Multi-institutional participation

Multiple public institutions involved: community colleges, technical colleges, and universities

- Associates-to-Bachelors pathways across institutional types
- Transfer and articulation agreements between system institutions
- Avoiding competition through coordination
- Fundraising for all campuses
- Coordinated class offerings and scheduling

Collaboration with carceral facilities

Formal Agreements at the State Level

- Statewide MOUs or interagency agreements between the system and DOC
- Single point of contact rather than institution-by-institution negotiations
- Built-in mechanisms for regular communication and conflict resolution
- DOC participation in consortium/advisory structures

Coordinated Operations

- System-led negotiation of operational procedures applicable across all participating institutions
- Standardized processes for faculty clearances, facility access, and student enrollment

Sustained Funding Commitments

- State appropriations as core funding to ensure long-term program sustainability beyond project-based grants and uncertain federal resources
- Diversified funding models combining state, Pell, institutional, and philanthropic resources
- Strategic system-level resource resource allocation to address disparities across campuses

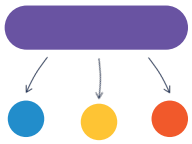
Strategic Alignment with System Mission

- HEP is not treated as a peripheral program but a manifestation of the core mission and central to the institutional identity
- Equity and access focus is consistent with state and community college missions
- Responsibility to the state citizenry, including incarcerated residents

MODELS FOR SYSTEM ENGAGEMENT IN HEP

Public higher education systems across the United States, and the HEP programs they facilitate, operate under diverse organizational and administrative structures, each shaped by state contexts, institutional capacities, and evolving partnerships between institutions, correctional agencies, and community organizations. Figure 5 identifies five distinct models that illustrate how systems approach governance, coordination, and program delivery.

Figure 5: Models for System Engagement in HEP



Model 1

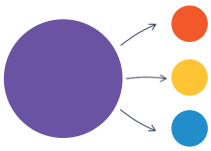
System Office Coordination

- A single system governs all HEP campus programs
- The system office provides coordination, technical assistance, and oversight, while campuses retain limited autonomy.
- Centralization varies from light-touch coordination to robust support, balancing standardization with individual campus needs.

Model 2

Multi-Institutional Consortium

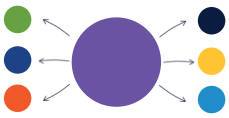
- A formal consortium unites multiple institutional partners and the DOC through a binding MOU that establishes coordinated rather than competitive collaboration.
- Partners contribute complementary expertise while sharing costs and rewards.
- MOUs evolve from basic commitments into robust documents, covering articulation agreements, data sharing, and governance protocols.



Model 3

Single-Institution Dominant with System Support

- One institution provides the majority of statewide prison education programming and maintains a direct operational relationship with the DOC
- The system office provides light coordination.
- The lead institution is typically mission-driven with extensive operational infrastructure and a long history in prison education.



Model 4

Nonprofit-Facilitated Partnership Model

- A nonprofit organization serves as the central coordinating hub, facilitating partnerships among public colleges, state agencies, and community resources.
- The nonprofit coordinates regular stakeholder meetings to maintain clear boundaries, shared goals, and collective problem-solving, providing comprehensive support beyond academics.
- The nonprofit provides all wraparound student support services while orchestrating collaboration across partners.

Model 5

Emerging/Decentralized System

- Multiple institutions operate independently with minimal system coordination.
- Each college provider negotiates separately with the DOC in states with early-stage or limited system-level infrastructure.
- Often results in competition rather than collaboration, creating challenges including duplicated efforts, inconsistent student experiences, transfer barriers, and difficulty achieving scale.

CRITICAL THEMES FOR SYSTEM ENGAGEMENT IN HEP

The following section presents the themes that emerged across interviews with system leaders nationwide. Semi-structured interviews addressed topics of system role, coordination, and infrastructure; funding and performance metrics; student experience and pathways; policy, systems landscape, and challenges; and stakeholder relationships. The themes are ordered according to their prevalence score, a measure of how frequently and extensively each topic was addressed during interviews. Together, these ten themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted landscape of system-wide HEP programs and the interconnected challenges and opportunities they navigate.

Funding and Sustainability

Funding emerged as the most discussed theme, with all 19 interviews addressing financial challenges and sustainability.

Key Points

1. Pell restoration has been transformative for program access.
2. State funding varies widely by system, creating inequities.
3. Philanthropic support fills critical gaps but creates sustainability concerns.
4. Long-term financial planning is essential for program stability.

One system in the South reported that their tuition is fully funded by the state: "And so therefore, we have not pursued Second Chance Pell. Yeah, in fact, we basically have said to our colleges, 'Look, leave that so that when the students come back in the free world, they've got full pay' ...Plus, I think that also was the governor's intent. I mean, he made it a priority to fund this with state dollars and state investment."

In contrast, a program in the Northeast receives little to no state funding: "I think when it comes down to the state budget, there's not a lot of money behind the program. I think there's very minimal investment overall...I really think that higher ed in prison should be a statewide initiative because these are individuals who are coming back to our communities."

Challenges

1. Sustainability beyond grant funding cycles is uncertain.
2. There is competition for limited state resources.
3. Funding distribution is inequitable across facilities.
4. The rising costs of program delivery threaten growth and sustainability.

One program in the West was able to build a HEP program in the women-designated facility, complete with laptops and tablets, due to a private grant. "That's how we can fund 26 classes. The majority of them are female classes. And then it also frees up the money on the state side, which then we can use to grow the men's prisons." The private grant positioned women's programming for rapid expansion but raises questions about sustainability beyond grant funding cycles.

System Coordination and Governance

System-level coordination structures vary from centralized offices to decentralized consortia.

Key points

1. Centralized system offices provide consistency and support.
2. Consortia enable resource sharing across institutions.
3. Regular convenings build a community of practice.
4. System leadership is critical for advocacy and resource allocation.

> According to one HEP interviewee in the South, "The advantage of the systems-level approach is the ability to bring people together. I think it works at its best because those who are partnering realize that we are not advocating on behalf of one specific institution… I think people can be more certain that a system is working for the greater good."

Challenges

1. Student mobility and transfer between facilities and campuses create challenges.
2. Poorly coordinated credit transfer can impede students' degree progress.
3. Coordinating across multiple colleges can prove difficult.
4. Limited communication about transfers creates tension between DOC and campuses.

Innovations

1. Centralized reentry services coordination streamlines operations.
2. System-wide faculty training programs prepare faculty to meet challenges.
3. Research and data-collection efforts can better track student mobility and transfers.
4. Advocacy and policy development at a systems level can address common challenges.

> For example, one system in the Northeast coordinates reentry from the system office: "Our office has taken on reentry from a system-wide perspective. So we have academic reentry services that our campuses essentially can refer a student to us who's getting ready to go home. So six months prior to release, the campus can tell us, 'Hey, the students are getting ready to go home,' and we'll meet with a student before they leave and create this plan and then support them in reentry."

DOC Relationships

Partnership quality with DOC directly impacts program access, operations, and student success.

Key points

1. MOUs and formal agreements with DOCs establish clear expectations.
2. Security protocols must balance safety with educational access.
3. Facility staff buy-in significantly affects program quality.
4. Regular communication prevents operational disruptions.

They can serve as a baseline for all HEP programs within a system and be customized, as a HEP interviewee in the South describes, "We work together to build an MOU so that when any [campus] wants to go into a prison, they use the MOU starting point for all the steps they have to follow, and then they customize it for their university where they're going."

Challenges

1. Security protocols can limit educational access.
2. Facility lockdowns are disrupting instruction.
3. Staff turnover is affecting program continuity.
4. Inconsistent policies exist across facilities.

Limited space access in prisons designated for women results in gender disparities in educational opportunity. In two systems, interviewees referenced women being required to undergo strip searches to access the area where college was offered. As one HEP interviewee in an emerging program in the West reported, "It's a big barrier...Like, who wants to go through a strip search and all of that in order to go to college? And then it's another barrier to access that is gender discrimination." Despite the interviewee having high-level political connections and professional lobbying, their state legislation request to reduce strip search barriers failed to pass.

Faculty and Staff Support

Faculty recruitment, training, and retention present ongoing challenges for HEP programs.

Key points

1. Specialized training is needed for teaching in carceral settings.
2. Compensation structures are often inadequate for recruiting quality faculty.
3. Professional development builds community and improves practice.
4. Faculty turnover disrupts program continuity.

Many HEP interviewees commented on the additional labor faculty who teach inside are expected to perform: "The way we've heard it from faculty is it's almost like being punished for caring about the student population and just being willing to not work less hours because you're passionate about this work," said a HEP system leader in the West.

There is a limited pool of qualified instructors who want to teach inside. Location can be a barrier to recruitment and retention, as one HEP interviewee in the Pacific noted, "Because prisons tend to be more remote, it can be really complicated in some of the most remote geographic areas. And there's quite a few prisons like that. Just geographically, it can be really hard to find faculty members for campus, much less people that sign up to go inside of a prison facility."

Innovations

1. System-level recruitment according to geographic region reduces the burden on campuses to recruit faculty and creates quality control across programs.
2. Multi-tiered training pipelines that combine DOC orientation, system-level resources, and campus-specific preparation better equip faculty for the demands of teaching inside.
3. Communities of practice and structured professional development build faculty connection, improve instructional practice, and serve as a meaningful retention strategy.
4. Dedicated system-level staff who manage logistics, DOC relationships, and bureaucratic troubleshooting allow faculty to focus on teaching rather than institutional navigation.

One interviewee on the East Coast runs a tiered professional development model through its system office, offering separate training courses for faculty who are new to teaching inside and for those with more than two years of experience. This approach treats faculty development as an ongoing practice rather than a one-time orientation, sustaining engagement and improving the quality of instruction over time.

Stakeholder Engagement

Systems with robust HEP programs actively engage in multiple stakeholder groups.

Key points

1. Community colleges and universities collaborate on pathways.
2. Employer partnerships support reentry employment.
3. Advocacy organizations provide critical support and resources.
4. Legislative relationships are essential for policy support.

Innovations

1. Employer engagement for job placement increases the impact of career and technical education (CTE) offerings.
2. Advocacy organization collaboration can provide essential support that increases student success inside and during reentry.

One system in the South said that building a relationship with an equitable justice commission to provide legislative advocacy and engaging with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as partners, centers racial justice in system design rather than treating it as secondary consideration.

Data Collection and Assessment

Data infrastructure varies widely, affecting the ability to demonstrate outcomes.

Key points

1. Completion and persistence rates were tracked most consistently.
2. Post-release outcomes were difficult to track systematically.
3. Data sharing between systems and DOC remains challenging.
4. Standardized metrics are needed for cross-system comparison.

Challenges

1. Resource constraints are standing in the way of a robust data infrastructure.
2. The HEP field lacks standardized national metrics.

Standardized data collection is a challenge that confounds many systems. As one HEP interviewee in the Midwest describes, "[The college] keeps its data. Then there's workforce data; and then there's National Student Clearinghouse data; and then there's the data that the Department of Higher Ed collects and the Department of Corrections. And people don't share it freely." The ability to report metrics affects funding, particularly from state legislators, but without agreement on who tracks what, meeting those data requests is difficult.

Common Metrics

1. Course completion rates
2. Credential/degree completion rates
3. Enrollment and headcount
4. Student persistence rates
5. Post-release enrollment continuation
6. Employment outcomes
7. Recidivism reduction

Program Access and Enrollment

Expanding access while maintaining quality presents ongoing tension.

Key points

1. Waitlists for prospective students are common in many HEP programs despite increased funding.
2. Facility capacity and classroom space limit expansion.
3. Eligibility criteria vary by facility and security level.
4. Geographic disparities in program availability persist.

One HEP interviewee in the West is expanding to online teaching to address space limitations: "There's only so many rooms and so many time slots in a day. So right now, everything we're doing is physically what we bring in there. So there is going to be a capacity limit based on physical [space]. So we need that online component."

Innovations

1. Academic advising inside and post-release better supports student retention and completion, especially when students are released prior to degree completion.
2. Career counseling and employment connections improve student outcomes and provide more equitable services for incarcerated and on-campus students.
3. Peer mentor programs provide support services that improve performance.
4. Student support centers in facilities close the gap between services offered to on-campus students and their incarcerated counterparts.

One system in the West started a learning center at a facility designated for women, where incarcerated students who have obtained their associate's degrees train for 6 months as Education Advocates. The services they provide not only mirror on-campus tutoring and disability support, but also address needs specific to incarcerated learners, such as having a history of educational trauma.

Reentry and Post-release Support

Programs increasingly recognize reentry as integral to comprehensive and system-wide HEP offerings and services.

Key points

1. Students are frequently released with little notice, making pre-release planning difficult to execute but critical for successful reentry.
2. Transfers between facilities routinely disrupt enrollment, and no consistent system-wide solution exists.
3. Employment pathways are a legislative priority but remain largely disconnected from HEP program structures.
4. Continued academic advising is needed post-release but often falls through the cracks.

Most public higher education systems are still developing a systems approach to reentry. As one Midwest interviewee shared, "We don't, I don't think, have enough people at the system office thinking about that. You know, it would be great to be able to sit down and think about, at the system level, what advising looks like. What does reentry look like? What do campuses want to see? What do students need?"

Curriculum and Program Design

Program offerings balance liberal arts, career technical education, and student demand.

Key points

1. Liberal arts programs develop critical thinking and civic engagement but are increasingly difficult to defend in a workforce-focused policy environment.
2. CTE respond to student and legislative demand for employment.
3. Stackable credentials provide multiple exit points that support incarcerated students completing programs.
4. Transfer pathways from credentials and associate's degrees to bachelor's degrees are increasingly important.

One interviewee in the Pacific described being forced to choose between vocational education and Native Studies when budgets contracted with vocational programs winning out.

Innovations

1. Stackable credential pathways accommodate incarcerated students who transfer facilities and may be released before earning a degree.
2. 2+2 transfer agreements between community colleges and 4-year universities support bachelor's completion.
3. Industry-recognized certifications support students who are most interested in CTE.
4. Liberal arts and CTE integration within program offerings increases students' choices and opportunities.

Traditionally, prison programming reflects gender stereotypes, offering parenting classes only in women-designated facilities, for example, while offering skilled trades only in men's-designated prisons. Notably, one system in the South with an emerging HEP program is correcting that by offering the same CTEs in women's-designated facilities as in men's, including HVAC, culinary, and welding, challenging traditional gender segregation in vocational education.

Technology and Infrastructure

Access to technology remains a critical barrier despite increasing digital education needs.

Key points

1. Internet restrictions limit online and hybrid learning.
2. Access to tablets and secure devices is expanding in some systems.
3. Digital literacy is essential for successful reentry.
4. Infrastructure investments are needed for educational technology.

Having a college degree but lacking digital literacy creates a gap in preparedness for successful reentry, including job readiness. A Northeast interviewee describes the stark contrast in learning levels: "They can hit all these learning outcomes, but they can't use a cell phone. They can't send an email. Like information literacy is a huge gap."

Innovations

1. Secure tablet programs for coursework.
2. Create digital libraries and educational resources.
3. Build computer labs in facilities.
4. Offer technology training for digital literacy.

Computer labs open many opportunities for incarcerated learners, as one HEP interviewee in the West shared about the recent computer lab installed in the women's-designated facility, "That's then going to enable them to take more programs, more offerings, more classes. They're going to have much more choice. They'll be able to speak with the campus directly–whether it's advising financial aid, disability resource center–they can do so much more on their own."

Reentry Services, Resources, and Program Findings

REENTRY SERVICES OVERVIEW

Campus reentry services are a critical component of higher education systems' role in serving justice-impacted students as they focus on the transition from incarceration to enrollment and participation in campus-based higher education following release. While closely connected to higher education programs offered within the correctional facilities, reentry involves a different set of challenges for students and institutions that warrant focused attention alongside system-level HEP offerings.

Across the systems included in this study, reentry services are most commonly situated within the HEP program at either the system or campus level, rather than operating as separate departments or standalone units. In many cases, reentry support emerged as an extension of existing HEP programming, particularly as Pell Grant reinstatement for incarcerated individuals increased the number of students transitioning from a HEP program to campus. This organizational alignment is reinforced by federal requirements for participation in the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites initiative, which requires institutions to provide "services to support successful reentry" as part of their HEP programming (National Archives, 2023).

In practice, campus reentry services are typically initiated when HEP students approach or reach release and express interest in continuing their education. Interviewees described reentry work as embedded within HEP operations, often beginning when a student is identified as nearing release through informal communication or established notification processes with correctional facilities. Students may initiate contact with HEP administrators or staff while still incarcerated or after release, triggering reentry support that is generally coordinated by designated staff within HEP offices.

In addition to direct support, effective reentry services often rely on coordination across institutions and external partners. Interviewees described the need for collaboration among the system and institutions, Departments of Corrections, community-based organizations, and community supervision entities such as parole, probation, and halfway houses. Common coordination efforts include articulation and transfer pathways across institutions, shared agreements with carceral facilities and community organizations, and system-level memoranda of understanding that streamline operations and reduce the need for campus-by-campus negotiation. Where present, these coordinated approaches can support more consistent referrals, clearer communication, and smoother transitions for students navigating reentry.

Campus Reentry Services

Reentry resources and programming vary by institution due to community-specific needs. Interviewees described a consistent set of reentry services offered across campuses, including assistance with college applications and FAFSA completion, academic planning and course enrollment, career preparation, campus orientation or tours, referrals to community-based organizations, and access to support groups or a designated support person. Many of these services build on resources already available to the broader student population, with reentry services helping students navigate institutional processes that may otherwise be difficult to access.

In addition to these foundational services, some campuses provide more specialized reentry supports, such as access to laptops, emergency funds, transportation assistance, tuition scholarships, and campus housing. Interviewees emphasized that these resources are unevenly available and often dependent on funding stability or grant support.

Figure 6 provides a high-level overview of the resources reported by the programs included in this study. This visual is intended to illustrate overall patterns rather than comprehensive coverage, as the presence of a service at the system level does not necessarily indicate that it is available at all campuses within that system. Table 5 describes the resources provided as reported by interviewees.

Figure 6: Overview of Reentry Program Services

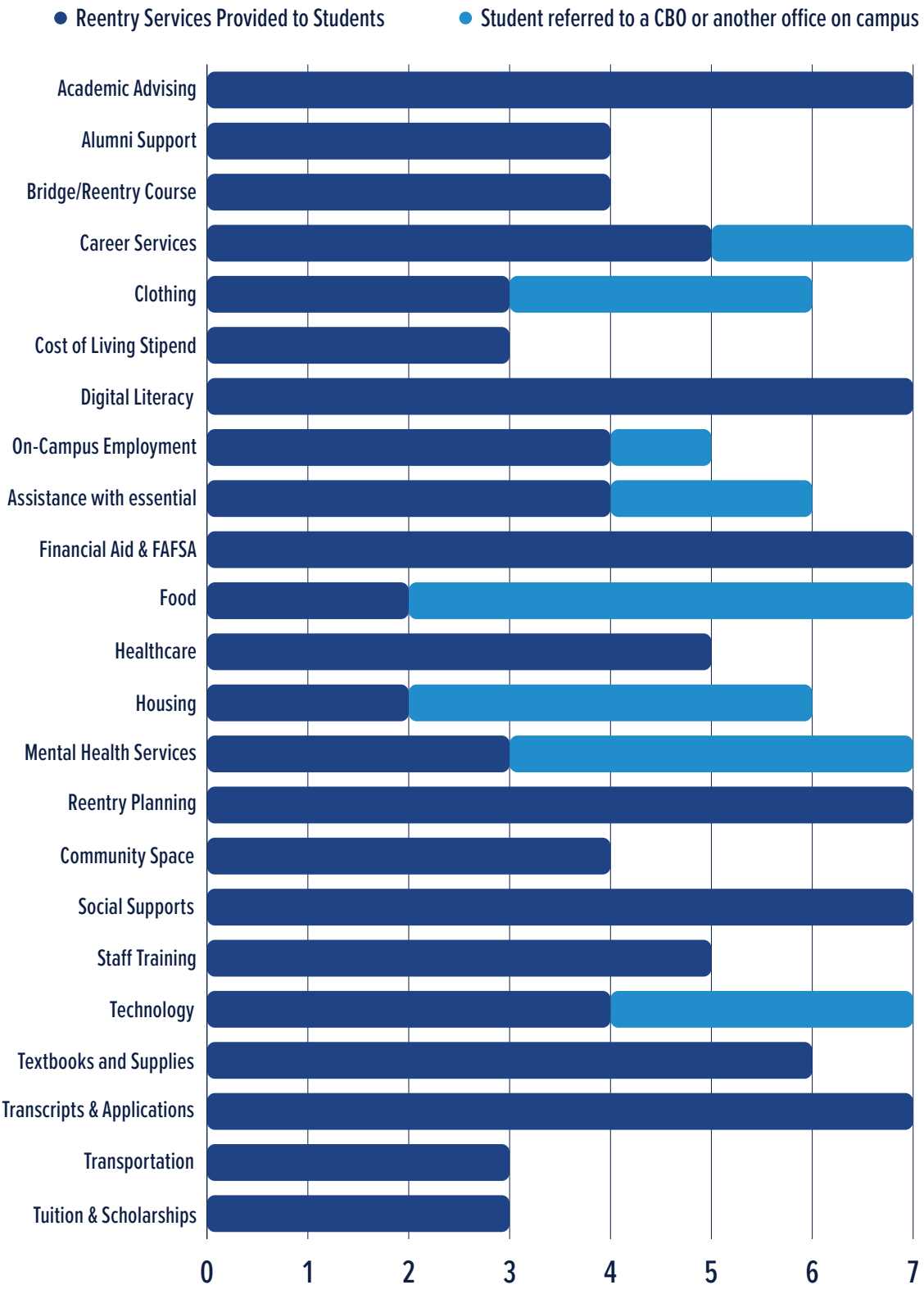


Table 2: Campus Reentry Resources

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
Academic Advising	Advising students on courses selection and enrollment
Alumni Support	Offering resources for alumni including listservs, support groups, and job fairs
Bridge/ Reentry Course	A course or program to prepare students for reentry or being on campus
Career Services	Career preparation and advising, including job fairs and resume workshops
Clothing	Providing campus swag
Cost of Living Stipend	Providing gift cards or stipends to pay for living expenses
Digital Literacy	Providing education on how to use computers, software, or cell phones
Employment	Providing employment opportunities for students, such as work study or fellowships
Essential Documents	Providing help or a stipend to obtain documents such as a driver's license, birth certificates, or health records
Financial Aid & FASFA	Support with filling out financial aid documents or finding scholarships for funding
Food	Providing food to students
Healthcare	Providing health care, such as a primary care doctor
Housing	Providing on-campus housing for students
Mental Health Services	Providing therapeutic services, such as therapy or substance use groups
Reentry Plan	Preparing a reentry plan that includes student needs, academic plan, and career trajectory
Space	Having a physical space on campus dedicated to the program where students can gather or visit
Social Supports	Providing a formal or informal support group with peers, mentors, and/or alumni
Staff Training	Training staff across campuses on working with justice-impacted students
Technology	Providing tools such as laptops, hotspots, and cell phones.
Textbooks and Supplies	Providing textbooks and school supplies
Transcripts, Application & Registration	Helping students obtain transcripts, apply to institutions, and register for classes
Transportation	Providing transportation stipends or physically transporting students
Tuition & Scholarships	Providing tuition or scholarships specifically for justice-impacted student**S**

Dedicated Staff

Dedicated reentry staffing plays a critical role in coordinating and supporting reentry efforts within higher education systems. Where system-level reentry staff exist, their purpose is to (1) coordinate multi-campus efforts and (2) to supervise and scale reentry efforts at every institution. Due to the informal nature of reentry work and limited funding, staffing is often constrained. In some systems or campuses, reentry responsibilities may be limited to a single person who assumes the duties and workload that would typically be handled by multiple staff members. HEP staff may also assume reentry responsibilities when no dedicated reentry positions exist.

Within these constraints, interviewees described common reentry roles that support system- and campus-level coordination. Although not every system or campus includes all of the roles described below, interviewees described similar duties and functions across sites:

1. **System Reentry Supervisor:** Oversees the campus reentry coordinators on each campus and reports to the director of the HEP System office. They coordinate efforts between stakeholders, institutions, DOC, and CBOs. They supervise the development and gathering of student tracking and metrics, system-wide policies, and document templates. This role was also called "Director of Transitions" or "Executive Director." They can also have a caseload of students.

2. **Campus Reentry Supervisor:** The supervisor on campus for reentry and manages the staff and coordinators. Responsible for campus partnerships and coordination. They typically provide data for metrics and research. This role can also have the same responsibilities as a campus reentry coordinator. In the absence of a system reentry supervisor, the coordinators report directly to the Director of the HEP system office. They can also have a caseload of students.

3. **Campus Reentry Coordinator:** Has a caseload of students that they meet with on a regular basis. They are typically the students' first point of contact when they come to campus. They provide referrals, academic advising, campus tours, and support for students. This role is also called "Recruitment Counselor," "Reentry Social Worker," or "Peer Navigator" (typically a former student and a certified peer recovery specialist).

4. **Specialized Campus Staff:** Based on the student needs, additional staff may provide mental health services, workforce development, office space administration, housing coordinator, data and research, etc. These duties vary on each campus and within each system. These staff members tend to be justice-impacted individuals. Examples include:
    - Community Relations Specialist or Community Engagement Manager: Responsible for all resource accrual, partnerships, apprenticeships, internships, and employment partners
    - Completion Counselor: Responsible for obtaining transcripts, transfer credits, registration, and academic advising for degree completion
    - Clinical Social Worker: Providing therapeutic work and support groups inside the facility and mental health around reentry
    - Technical Assistance Team: A team of experts that provides technical assistance to the campus

INSIGHTS FROM ADMINISTRATORS ON CAMPUS REENTRY

The following section presents nine themes that emerged across interviews with leaders and staff providing reentry services at the system and campus level. Together, these themes provide a framework for understanding the multifaceted landscape of reentry and the interconnected challenges and opportunities they navigate.

Reentry Funding and Sustainability

Funding emerged as the most discussed theme, with all interviewees addressing financial challenges and sustainability. According to interviewees, the majority of funding comes from grants; therefore, there are limitations on how the funds can be spent. The challenge involves not only funding for operations and staffing, but also ensuring students have the financial resources needed to attend college. A lack of employment or underemployment can hinder student matriculation, and most programs do not provide scholarships for justice-impacted students. Only a few programs offer employment opportunities, such as work-study or fellowships, and these are limited due to the small number of available positions.

> "In Covid relief from the federal government they had to spend those dollars…We lobbied for these funds, but once that funding stream dried up it was much harder to get the kinds of financial support that we needed to run the program….so I think the initial rhetoric and response is supportive, but then when asked to carve out a specific line in the budget, it becomes tougher from the campus administration" (Northeast System)

Key points

- Sustainable reentry services depend on dedicated budget lines, rather than relying on shared or temporary funding.
- Reentry services are frequently launched through grant funding, and continue to rely on grants for core functions

Challenges

- Pell Grant funding is insufficient for many students to matriculate on campus.
- Students identify high cost of living and basic needs as a primary concern, but programs lack the resources to provide this level of support.
- Staff shortages persist because programs lack stable or adequate funding to hire additional personnel.

Innovations

- Pre-tax payroll deduction systems provide an opportunity for faculty and staff to donate to reentry services.
- Collaboration with centralized grants offices and CBOs opens additional funding streams for reentry services.
- Reentry programs may be fiscally sponsored via a non-profit partner, a specific institution within the system, or the system's foundation.
- Staff can assist students in leveraging scholarships linked to other identities (i.e., disability, first generation, underrepresented, etc.).

Reentry Coordination

System-level coordination structures and support vary, with dedicated system-level reentry staff more common where system-level engagement in HEP and reentry has been established for 5 years or more. Having dedicated staff at the system level has helped institutions manage administrative functions such as developing MOUs, working with government officials, and standardizing processes across programs. In some systems, these roles have created established processes for transfer, transcript requests, credit evaluation, and applications that justice-impacted students can leverage. System-level staff may also provide necessary oversight and policy guidance for campus-level staff. When campus practices depart from shared expectations, system-level staff and leadership may intervene and resolve issues that would otherwise create barriers for students.

Interviewees have expressed that system leadership's general perception of justice-impacted people influenced the support of reentry programming. As chancellors, presidents, and other senior leaders change, priorities and support for reentry efforts can also shift. Even where system-level support exists, interviewees stated that institutional politics and perceptions of this work may vary across individual campuses.

> "We were requesting some documents that should not have been requested… Ex-offender paperwork. They wanted to know the charges and all of that stuff. And just asking questions that they should not have asked. So we did a lot of push back, and actually the Chancellor and all of them got in touch with the president, and they squashed that really quickly." (Northeast System)

Key points

- Reentry efforts typically begin with the faculty member who founded or directs the HEP program, which means system-wide or institutional policies and practices are often developed later, after reentry services are already underway
- Campus-level challenges and concerns can often be addressed through system-level leadership, creating consistency and support across institutions.
- Most systems included in the study are actively working to collaborate and streamline processes across institutions, including the development of shared forms and procedures.
- As an example of system-level policy change, the majority of systems interviewed have removed a requirement to disclose criminal history on all applications for admission. However, for students transferring from a HEP program, their status is typically already known within the system.

Challenges

- HEP system offices that do not have reentry staff are not able to provide guidance to reentry staff on campuses.
- There may be outward support at the system level, but it does not come in the form of funding or a budget line item.
- Depending on their location, institutions have varying resources available to them (i.e., urban vs rural locations).

Innovations

- A single recruitment, application, and academic advising process is used to standardize work across all institutions within a system.
- An advisory board with HEP students, justice-impacted students on campus, DOC staff, and system leads helps to guide the program.

Reentry DOC Relationships

Partnerships with the DOC directly impact program access, operations, and student matriculation post-release. When HEP programs maintain established relationships with correctional facility reentry staff or with community corrections entities such as halfway houses, parole, probation, referrals to campus are reported to be more seamless. Reentry-focused relationships varied depending on facility-level or broader DOC leadership and the scope of current HEP programming. Interviewees described relationships ranging from reentry staff having an office within the facility and collaborating on a dashboard that flags release dates to having no reentry-specific relationship at all. Due to system lags and the absence of reliable database systems, including student tracking or management systems, many reentry staff learn about an individual's release or interest in higher education through word of mouth.

> "We usually know they're getting out well in advance because they tell us and because we also monitor the PED (Parole Eligibility Date) and Max (Maximum time) dates of all of our students. We have a student forecast that we use for every upcoming semester." (Northeast System)

Key points

- The system office can play a crucial coordination role between institutions and the DOC.
- Parole and probation requirements for students focus on employment rather than education.

Challenges

- Each institution and correctional facility operates differently, and policies can change with leadership transitions.
- Information about student release is typically shared informally by word of mouth rather than through a standardized, established process.
- Reentry staff work with parole and probation officers in addition to their other duties, which can be time-consuming.

Innovations

- Staff are working with a halfway house to establish an agreement allowing students to count attending classes on campus as part of their work-release requirements.
- A reentry staff member regularly enters the correctional facility to meet with students and prospective students before their release.
- The system is partnering with juvenile facilities to introduce college-level coursework to younger students and to expand access to dual-enrollment opportunities.

Faculty and Staff Support

Similar to system leadership's views, perceptions of justice-impacted students will affect reentry efforts on campuses. The majority of interviewees stated that they have training or information for campus staff to introduce their program and resources. Interviewees stated that when departments have dedicated or trained staff, such as in financial aid or advising, it helps students transition to campus more effectively. Interviewees felt that although there were people on campus willing and wanting to help the program or students, they did not always know how to serve or did not have the training to aid this specialized population.

> "In the early years, it was a big secret that we were working with students who came out of prison… I spent a lot of time in that period justifying the work that we were doing, explaining the work that we were doing, dealing with some scrutiny…This campus was a lot more receptive to the work that we were doing than the previous campus." (Northeast System)

Key Points

- There are mixed feelings on campuses about how staff and faculty feel about reentry efforts.
- Culture shifts that are more inclusive of justice-impacted students have typically originated with system leadership and trickled down to the campus level.
- A point person in different campus departments trained to work with justice-impacted people has been helpful, as reentry staff can refer justice-impacted students directly to that individual for support.

Challenges

- The majority of training for faculty and staff on campus focuses on teaching within carceral facilities rather than supporting justice-impacted students on campus.
- Systems and campus leaders need justification before allocating additional resources to support justice-impacted students.

Innovations

- Campuses incorporate breakout sessions on reentry and working with justice-impacted students into their campus-wide professional development days.
- Campuses provide dedicated modules within the learning management system that offer faculty and staff information and training related to HEP and reentry.
- Additional pay or a stipend is provided to trained financial aid and academic advising staff who are designated to support justice-impacted students.

CBO Engagement

Typically, staff first refer students to college campus resources. When those services are exhausted or unavailable, an outside referral is made. All interviewees were candid that their programs could not address all students' needs, particularly non-educational needs (i.e., housing, court fees, or specialized health care). All interviewees stated they refer students to community-based organizations (CBOs) because there are no specialized services on college campuses for this population. Relationships can range from a CBO co-partnership with an MOU to a word-of-mouth suggestion. For campuses without robust reentry support, referrals to CBOs are automatically made upon arrival on campus.

> "In the early years, it was a big secret that we were working with students who came out of prison… I spent a lot of time in that period justifying the work that we were doing, explaining the work that we were doing, dealing with some scrutiny…This campus was a lot more receptive to the work that we were doing than the previous campus." (Northeast System)

Key points

- Reentry staff refer students to on-campus services before directing them to CBOs.
- Mental health services, substance-use counseling, housing assistance, health care, food access, and clothing resources were the most common community referrals.
- Reentry-based organizations provided wrap-around services that addressed student needs beyond what the campus could offer.

Challenges

- Staff must vet CBOs to ensure that they are an appropriate match for students and can provide the resources students need.
- Reentry staff maintain ongoing contact with CBOs to monitor students' progress after a referral has been made.

Innovations

- Staff may take students directly to a reentry-focused CBO upon release so they can begin receiving services immediately.
- Some campuses employ a dedicated reentry staff member whose role includes collaborating with and recruiting CBOs as formal partners in supporting justice-impacted students.

Reentry Data Collection and Assessment

Data infrastructure varies widely, with all interviewees stating that this is an area that needs further development. Programs operating for 5 or more years collected more data and assessments; however, all programs maintained at least a spreadsheet with basic student information (e.g., name, DOB, student ID, GPA). Due to the lack of systematic and uniform forms, processes, and documents, a system can have a variety of metrics being tracked across the individual campuses. Meaning, each campus can have different spreadsheets, processes, and forms. This is particularly true when there is a lack of a system-level reentry manager.

Interviewees stated that the HEP office typically reports certain metrics to the university or the system, focusing on retention and graduation. If they have to report information to the correctional facility or DOC, the metrics center on recidivism, employment, and attendance. Multiple interviewees stated that the required metrics are not strong indicators of successful matriculation and emphasized the need for updated terminology and outcome categories that better reflect the experiences of justice-impacted people. For example, employment requirements associated with parole can delay campus enrollment for years following release, resulting in educational pathways that are not reflected in traditional retention metrics despite eventual reenrollment.

The majority of interviewees stated that student assessment and feedback were typically informal. HEP programs had more built-in feedback than reentry, and course feedback is already built into the institution. Interviewees noted that students often share feedback on reentry services during meetings with staff or within support groups, though many suggestions fall outside the scope of the higher education system or institution, such as cost-of-living challenges or needs related to the criminal legal system. Programs that are 5 years or older often elicit feedback via surveys sent via listservs.

Interviews overwhelmingly indicated that student progress is tracked through direct engagements between staff and students during matriculation and after graduation. Once a reentry plan is completed, staff work with students to track their progress and document interactions within internal databases or tracking tools.

Key points

- There is a clear need for metrics of success that move beyond carceral categories such as recidivism and employment outcomes.
- Systems identified the need for upgraded or newly created reentry databases, dashboards, tracking systems, and standardized forms to support consistent data collection.
- Feedback on reentry programming is often gathered informally or through surveys distributed to the program's listserv.
- Alumni who remain engaged with the program may provide feedback and suggestions that help guide reentry efforts.

Challenges

- Students do not always arrive on campus immediately after release; it may take months or years before they return to pursue their education.
- There is a lack of centralized databases that track when students leave correctional facilities and when they arrive on campuses.
- Programs often lack systems for tracking students after their first year, when they transfer to another institution, and after they graduate.

Innovation

- Staff work directly with students to help them define what successful matriculation means from the students' own perspectives.
- Student Advisory Boards are established to provide feedback and help guide reentry efforts.
- Justice-impacted students are given opportunities to practice data collection skills by gathering feedback from their peers.

Reentry Program Access and Enrollment

Most students take advantage of reentry resources because of their past involvement in the institution's HEP program. Some reentry programs have partnerships with correctional facilities to facilitate a smoother transition to campus. When asked about students who did not participate in HEP while incarcerated, interviewees explained that these students most often became connected to reentry services through word of mouth. Interviewees also reported that programs operating for a decade or more tend to be more embedded within their institutions and are therefore more likely to receive internal referrals when students disclose justice involvement to campus offices. However, not all students choose to disclose this information. As a result, systems and campuses lack reliable ways to identify how many justice-impacted students are enrolled, limiting proactive outreach and coordination of support.

> "We have a dedicated space because we have dedicated staff. Ten years ago we faced much more of an obstacle, like letting people know that we're there and that we exist. Now it's become just much more integrated into the broader campus communities." (Pacific System)

Key points

- Reentry staff are often unable to determine whether a student is justice-impacted if that student did not participate in the institution's HEP programming.
- Students often trust the faculty involved in the HEP program; therefore, those faculty members are students' first point of contact when they arrive on campus.

Challenges

- There is a lack of clear pathways for justice-impacted students who were not previously involved in an HEP program.
- Reentry services are often not widely advertised on campus, in part because the program may not yet be fully developed or robust.
- Depending on the nature of a student's sentence, they may not be permitted to enter a college campus.

Innovations

- Staff members advocate with DOC to transition students into higher education opportunities as an alternative to incarceration.
- Having reentry staff present within correctional facilities prior to release helps support a smoother transition to campus.

Reentry Program Design

Program design and resources varied. Reentry programs operating for 5 or more years are typically more robust. All of the programs provided some level of (1) academic advising, (2) a bridge or reentry course/program, (3) help with financial aid/FAFSA documents, (4) social support, and (5) help with applying to college.

Most interviewees reported that when students arrive on campus, they receive a campus tour and are introduced to key campus departments. While the range of available resources varies by program, staff described making efforts to ensure that students are at least provided with institutional or community-based organization referral lists to address additional needs.

When students first interact with reentry staff, they complete a reentry plan. Typically, this plan includes their degree trajectory, their basic needs, including housing and transportation, career aspirations, and any additional wraparound services needed. Although the services provided may not meet all their needs, they provide a blueprint for referrals and timelines.

Key points

- Many HEP programs offer reentry courses or programming prior to release to prepare students for the transition to campus.
- Establishing a reentry, education, and career assessment plan prior to release is important for identifying needed referrals and resources.
- Support groups or advisory committees made up of justice-impacted individuals and alumni help students build a sense of belonging on campus.

Challenges

- Campuses often do not have a dedicated physical space where justice-impacted students can seek help or support.
- There is a shortage of comprehensive, wrap-around reentry services needed to support students' academic and personal needs.
- Many programs have limited or no access to student housing or employment opportunities for justice-impacted students.

Innovations

- Some programs have created credit-bearing courses focused on reentry, allowing students to earn academic credit while developing transition skills.
- Programs partner with the institution's law school to offer low-cost legal services to justice-impacted students.
- Programs provide housing or collaborate with halfway houses to ensure students have stable living arrangements.
- Programs offer transportation vouchers and emergency funds to help students meet essential basic needs.

Reentry Technology and Infrastructure

Most correctional facilities lack computer or technology access, leaving many students underprepared for the technological demands of campus-based learning. Many interviewees recounted helping students learn to use learning management systems, email, or basic applications. Not all campuses provided digital literacy programming or courses. Some programs provided laptops to students through existing institutional resources, grant funding, or a partnership with a community-based organization.

> "Because our program was created in the midst of COVID, the college had this huge grant. And they had all these computers so we connected students immediately to the free laptop that they could check out of the library and use for the whole semester. And then we offer digital literacy courses. Some of them were peer led, these would just be workshops that we ran on campus. The library also had free hotspots, so they had wireless access, and that was all free. I just spoke to them like a few months ago, and that's gone." (Northeast System)

Key points

- When available, students are able to rent laptops from the college once they begin their on-campus courses.
- Providing digital literacy programming both before and after release helps students learn how to navigate an increasingly digital world.

Challenges

- There is little to no dedicated funding to purchase laptops or hotspots for justice-impacted students.
- Depending on the length of their incarceration, some students have never used a laptop or a computer prior to coming to campus, which creates an additional learning barrier.

Innovations

- HEP programs use a learning management system inside facilities to introduce students to a platform they will encounter in their future college courses.
- Programs load informational videos and reentry-related resources onto provided laptops to help students prepare for the transition from incarceration to campus life.

THE CAMPUS REENTRY EXPERIENCE FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

For individuals returning home, continuing or starting their college education is a common aspiration. Educational attainment reduces recidivism and increases opportunities, particularly among Black and Brown people. While some prisons offer HEP courses, these courses may lack sufficient resources or not be credit-bearing, making the transition to on-campus education a steep learning curve. When released, individuals must also navigate immediate concerns about employment, housing, health, and compliance with any legal conditions of their release. Despite these challenges, few systems and institutions have established robust reentry services, and even fewer holistically address the basic needs and educational goals of justice-impacted students.

Justice-impacted students described several overlapping pathways for transitioning to campus that were shaped by three key factors: prior participation in HEP, institutional choice, and engagement with reentry services. Students may or may not have been enrolled in a HEP program while incarcerated; among those who were, some matriculated at the same institution or system offering their HEP coursework, while others enrolled at a different institution or system after release. Similarly, participation in campus reentry programming was not universal, with some students receiving structured reentry support and others navigating enrollment and campus life without dedicated services. Across these pathways, students emphasized that access to supportive faculty or staff played a critical role in helping them matriculate and persist.

For students who participated in HEP while incarcerated, institutional continuity played a significant role in shaping their campus transition. Because incarcerated students typically have limited choice among HEP providers within a given facility, many students enrolled at the same institution where they completed their HEP coursework after release, creating a natural pipeline from specific facilities to specific campuses. Student interviewees described smoother transitions when reentry services were embedded in long-standing HEP programs, particularly those operating for five years or more, where enrollment processes, academic planning, and access to resources such as housing, scholarships, employment opportunities, and basic-needs support were already established. However, not all students matriculated at the same institution or system as their HEP program.

Student interviewees identified several common reasons for choosing a different institution or system, including:

- stronger resources, supports, or funding opportunities.
- geographic proximity to where they live after release.
- existing reentry agreements between the correctional facility and a different college or system.
- availability of the degree program, major, or credential they wish to pursue.
- court stipulations or legal restrictions that prohibit students' access to certain campuses or geographic areas.
- significant time gaps between release and enrollment that weaken their connection to the original campus.

The majority of students in this study described campus resources and reentry concerns that closely aligned with what administrators reported in their interviews. Students interacted far more frequently with campus-level staff than with system-level staff, reflecting how reentry support is typically encountered in practice. Although most students were unfamiliar with the concept of a higher education system, they recognized that multiple colleges were connected to the institution they attended.

The following six themes emerged across interviews with students, offering a framework for understanding the multifaceted experience of justice-impacted students.

Funding

Employment and funding are major barriers for students continuing their education after incarceration. All student interviewees spoke about employment, and most students on parole or probation reported that they were subject to job requirements. For many, these requirements delayed enrollment as students prioritized securing employment or addressing basic needs such as housing, food, and clothing. Some students were required to live in a group home with strict regulations, and others spoke of experiencing periods of homelessness.

The overwhelming majority of students reported having little or no income after release. As a result, fees and expenses for transcripts, applications, and essential documents were difficult to manage. Several interviewees noted that these costs delayed their return to higher education for years. All interviewees emphasized the need for financial support to cover both tuition and basic living expenses. Students described particularly complex funding situations when they were released unexpectedly in the middle of a semester or enrolled at a different institution than their original HEP provider.

Key points

- Inability to meet basic living expenses delayed students' return to campus.
- When students were aware of available campus resources, they sought assistance with completing financial aid forms and admissions-related applications.
- In some states, students took advantage of tuition-free associate degree programs at community colleges.
- Campus-based employment opportunities or fellowships provided to some students helped offset educational costs and supported continued enrollment.
- Program staff played a critical role in helping students access scholarships connected to other identities (e.g., disability status, first-generation status, or underrepresented backgrounds).

Challenges

- Limited access to tuition assistance and scholarships led some students to postpone reenrollment or decide not to reenroll.
- Some students were released near institutions different from their original HEP provider and needed to pay out-of-pocket for application fees and transcript requests.
- Students opted for certificate programs or non-credit-bearing coursework rather than degree pathways because these options were a better fit.

Student Interactions with the Higher Education System

Because systems tend to be governing bodies, students had little experience with their staff. While unfamiliar with the formal concept of a public higher education system, students understood that institutions were related to each other. For those who were involved in HEP, the overwhelming majority continued at the institutions where they took classes when incarcerated. This was because they felt supported by and trusted the faculty.

Another factor in a student's choice of institution is the resources available on the campus. Students stated that even campuses within the same system provided different resources. From rural to urban campuses, they cater to different student needs, have varying funding for programming, and have different perceptions of justice-impacted people. For reentry programs that regularly sent staff to facilities, monitored release dates, or had a bridge/reentry program within facilities, students were referred to specific schools or contacted by staff. This enabled them to be referred to the campus closest to where they would be released or to a campus that would be a better fit.

The administrative interviews highlighted the same concern of students around the process of moving between institutions within a system. One difference between administrators' and students' sentiments was that women students reported receiving different treatment from male students in both HEP programs and reentry services.

Key points

- Students were unaware of what a "system" was, but they understood that they could attend different institutions within the state and recognized that those institutions were linked.
- When available, reentry staff supported students in enrolling at the institution of their choice within the system.
- Some students reported that they were not assisted by reentry staff and needed to navigate transcript requests, transfer processes, and applications to other institutions on their own.

Challenges

- Different institutions within the same system offered different on-campus services, so students have inconsistent experiences across the system.
- Because incarcerated individuals are frequently moved between facilities, they often encounter different HEP programming and reentry services, resulting in uneven preparation for transitioning to campus.
- Women interviewed did not have access to the same level of reentry services within HEP as those available in male facilities.
- Students described needing greater flexibility in course requirements and greater clarity about where courses could be completed, including online options, as well as an easier process for transferring credits.
- Students were sometimes released in locations far from the institution where they took their HEP courses or previously attended school, leaving them without an existing campus connection or support network.

Faculty and Staff Support

A sense of belonging and support has been documented as factors that aid in student matriculation. Faculty and staff support is a crucial element of campus transition, according to interviewees. The interviewees who were a part of HEP programs tended to continue at the same institution where they took courses while incarcerated. Students described a sense of community, camaraderie, and support that made them feel comfortable on campus.

Justice-impacted people are aware of the perceptions others have of them, and responses vary among interviewees regarding whether to divulge their past to staff and faculty. Although students may work with reentry campus staff, most staff and faculty on campus do not know who is justice-impacted. Some students openly disclose their charges; others do so only when necessary or useful.

Key points

- Students often worked with the same staff on campus who had worked with their HEP programs while incarcerated.
- Faculty and staff served as important advocates, including acting as character references and providing letters of recommendation to courts or other institutions.

Challenges

- Limited staffing capacity and the absence of a dedicated physical space for reentry support made it difficult for some students to identify appropriate points of contact.
- Students expressed concern about differential treatment if their justice-impacted status became known to faculty or staff across campus.

Program Access and Enrollment

Access to reentry resources varied. Students involved in HEP programs typically had an established point of contact or a reentry plan in place prior to release. Students who were not part of a HEP program while incarcerated had to navigate higher education independently until they became aware of resources for justice-impacted students. Although administrators reported that reentry services are available to all justice-impacted students, those who were not part of a HEP program found it hard to contact reentry staff, particularly if there was no physical space on campus.

As administrative interviews highlighted, many students did not arrive on campus immediately after release. Delays in enrollment were due to financial constraints, the cost of enrollment, adjustment to life after incarceration, or the campus location. Release timing also affected access, as students often had to wait for the start of a new academic term before enrolling. More established reentry programs were sometimes able to support students released mid-semester by allowing them to complete in-progress coursework.

> "Behind the wall I taken up some classes with culinary art. I didn't think they (the institution) would have that information because that was actually confidential behind the wall. So I signed up for [the class], and then they said they needed my transcripts. I didn't know nothing about transcripts. I didn't even know how to get this. So I started calling the schools that I went to, and I remember them telling me that it was going to cost me $6. And that grandson gave me $6 that year to get my transcripts." (Northeast System)

Key points

- Incarcerated students may be released earlier than expected or with little notice.
- While incarcerated, students may participate in certificate programs or non-credit-bearing courses that may not translate into transferable college credits.
- When students transition out of HEP programs in the middle of a semester, the ability to complete in-progress coursework supports a smoother academic transition.

Challenges

- Students who were not part of a HEP program were often unaware that reentry services existed and typically learned about them only by chance or through word of mouth.
- Students frequently completed admissions forms, initiated transfers, or requested transcripts without assistance and had to navigate these processes independently if they were unaware of reentry support services.
- Some students were released into a different city or state from the one in which the system operated, leaving them disconnected from their previous institutional support network.
- When campus reentry programs have a limited number of available slots, there is no guarantee that all justice-impacted students will be able to access those services.

Program Design

Program design and available resources varied based on how established the reentry program was, shaping how students experienced and accessed support on campus. Students reiterated the types of resources administrators described, specifically academic advising, social supports, and assistance with enrollment documents.

Non-academic aspects of reentry were of great concern to students. The majority of interviewees spoke about concerns related to housing, transportation, and employment. Students also identified needs related to food access, textbooks and supplies, identification documents, clothing, medical insurance, substance use counseling, and legal support, though these needs varied by individual circumstances. As with administrative interviews, students described leveraging campus resources where available looking to community-based organizations to address gaps beyond the institution's capacity.

> "I never received those resources specifically…[the program] has been like very, very resourceful. So if I had to guess, I would say was probably within their wheelhouse. If someone needed to be accommodated in that way, like I'm pretty sure they could help to at least refer them or provide resource." (Northeast System)

Key points

- Students agreed that having a designated point person on campus was helpful because that individual could direct students to the services and offices they needed.

- A physical office or lounge provided students with a "home base" where they could connect with one another and with staff.
- The email listserv served as a resource for sharing information about campus programming, events, and job opportunities.
- Students who participated in HEP had a reentry plan prior to release, and on-campus reentry programs provided them with an additional plan once they arrived on campus.
- Housing and transportation needs were among the most significant concerns students expressed.
- Being able to speak to justice-impacted staff or support groups with justice-impacted people was helpful and created a safe environment.
- Students found programs and events that allowed them to connect with other justice-impacted students on campus, alumni, or potential employers to be highly beneficial.
- Students expressed an eagerness to help others who were transitioning to campus.

Challenges

- Students who can no longer return to their previous careers after incarceration often lack the career preparation needed to pivot into new fields and need clearer guidance on employment options available to them with a conviction.
- Family unification, substance use help, and therapy needs for students are lacking on campuses, particularly when students previously had more therapeutic offerings while incarcerated.
- Difficulty obtaining essential documents and cost-of-living prices create barriers that hinder matriculation.
- The stigma of justice-impacted people on campus can make students feel that they are not welcome.
- Students often feel intimidated and anxious about asking for help and services on campus.

Technology and Infrastructure

According to interviewees, most correctional facilities had little to no access to computers or technology, leaving many students underprepared for the technological demands of campusbased learning. These challenges were particularly pronounced for older students and those who had been incarcerated for long periods. Students participating in a campus reentry program often received one-on-one help from staff or peers. While administrators reported offering digital literacy courses on campus, most students interviewed did not know about these courses.

Interviewees also noted that access to digital literacy instruction while incarcerated was typically limited to students enrolled in specific educational programs. Even when available, students described these courses as narrowly focused or insufficient. Interviewees with technology experience and computer knowledge were unable to learn new skills because the computer programs were either limited or focused on basic skills. Skills learned during incarceration did not consistently translate to campus needs such as completing online applications, using learning management systems, participating in virtual classes, or navigating required mobile applications. Once on campus, students reported an implicit expectation that they already possess these skills.

Key points

- Digital literacy is essential to success in most college courses.
- An individual's age and length of incarceration influence their comfort with technology.
- Many institutions provide or rent laptops or hotspots to students.
- Digital literacy courses within facilities typically center around Microsoft applications and do not cover other commonly used tools.

Challenges

- For students with limited experience with technology, keeping up with online coursework can be difficult.
- Students in transitional or unstable housing situations may lack access to phones, computers, or internet access, impacting their ability to complete work outside of class or participate in online courses.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on elements present in robust system approaches to HEP and advice that interviewees identified as key to their system functioning.

1. Create strong system-level coordination and governance.
   - Dedicated system office staff
   - Regular convenings and communication
   - Clear MOUs and agreements with corrections
   - Balanced system support and campus autonomy

2. Develop sustainable and diversified funding streams.
   - Maximization of Pell funding
   - Strategic philanthropic partnerships
   - Long-term financial planning beyond grant cycles
   - Dedicated budget lines for HEP and reentry with state appropriation

3. Cultivate collaborative partnerships with DOC.
   - Formal MOUs with clear expectations
   - Regular communication and joint problem-solving
   - Balance between security and educational access
   - DOC leadership buy-in and support

4. Establish comprehensive student support from enrollment through reentry.
   - Academic advising inside facilities
   - Pre-release transition planning
   - Post-release support services
   - Career counseling and employment connections
   - Accessible resources for justice-impacted students not in a HEP program

5. Maintain robust data collection and assessment systems.
   - Standardized metrics and data collection across institutions within a System
   - Investment in data infrastructure, including software, services, policies, and staff that enable data collection and analysis
   - Data sharing agreements with corrections
   - Use of both quantitative and qualitative measures

6. Invest in faculty and staff development.
   - Specialized training for carceral settings
   - Compensation that recognizes additional labor required in HEP
   - Professional development opportunities
   - Support for faculty retention
   - Hiring and training of justice-impacted people as staff
   - A reentry-trained point person in each major department on campus (i.e., registrar, financial aid, advising, housing, etc.)

7. Cultivate strategic stakeholder engagement.
   - Legislative relationships and advocacy
   - Employer partnerships
   - Collaboration with community-based organizations
   - Cross-institutional partnerships

8. Commit to continuous improvement and innovation.
   - Regular program evaluation
   - Adaptation to emerging challenges
   - Sharing of best practices
   - Learning from other systems

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that a systems approach is not only valuable to the HEP and reentry field; it is essential. State prisons and county jails already operate within statewide correctional institutions. By adopting a systems approach, HEP and reentry programs can improve student services and outcomes while expanding access to quality higher education for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals across entire states.

The alignment between public higher education systems and their mission to serve all residents makes them uniquely positioned to lead in this space. This report not only maps the current landscape of public HEP and reentry systems across the nation but also identifies critical challenges and innovative solutions their leaders have developed. These insights have value far beyond individual programs; they offer lessons for the broader HEP field. Most notably, because all prisons function within a correctional system, HEP practitioners can learn invaluable lessons from higher education leaders who are already navigating statewide systems. These leaders have developed creative solutions to persistent challenges such as transfer pathways, student retention across facilities, and re-enrollment following release.

Two imperatives emerge from this research. First, HEP and reentry programs must be recognized as integral components of the overall higher education system, not siloed within an institution. Second, systems must operate holistically, not only across state correctional facilities but also across students' entire involvement with their educational journey. This means reentry services must be embedded within the HEP program, and the needs of justice-impacted students must be acknowledged and addressed at multiple institutional levels.

This report demonstrates the urgent need for continued study and engagement with HEP and reentry through a systems lens. NASH is committed to advancing this work, fostering collaboration among public higher education systems, and supporting the field as it evolves to better serve one of the most underserved student populations in American higher education.

Call to action

This report marks NASH's inaugural work in higher education in prison, signaling our commitment to supporting systems in this critical area. Moving forward, NASH will provide convening opportunities and resources to support public higher education systems in this evolving area.

JOIN THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Connect with other system-level HEP leaders and discuss insights by joining the Higher Education in Prison Community of Practice.

Scan the QR code to complete the Community of Practice interest form.

STAY INFORMED

Be the first to learn about new resources, webinars, and support opportunities. Contact us and sign up for email notifications from NASH at www.nash.edu/contact.

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