

Importance Of Giving Free College Education To Prisoners

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Introduction

Providing college education to incarcerated people is often framed as a competition between prisoners and law-abiding students, as though every classroom seat or public dollar awarded inside a prison must be taken from someone outside it. That framing is too narrow. Correctional education is a public-safety, workforce, fiscal, and human-development policy. Most incarcerated people will eventually return to their communities. The relevant question is not whether imprisonment should have consequences, but whether correctional systems should release people with stronger or weaker abilities to work, think critically, support families, and live without committing another offense. (Davis et al., 2013)

College programs do not guarantee that every participant will avoid future crime, and education should not be presented as a cure for all the structural and personal causes of offending. Nevertheless, the evidence supports well-designed postsecondary education as a constructive component of rehabilitation. The federal government restored Pell Grant eligibility for otherwise eligible incarcerated students enrolled in approved Prison Education Programs for payment periods beginning on or after July 1, 2023. That policy change makes the original argument more relevant: college access is no longer confined to a small experimental program, but quality, oversight, equity, transferability, and support after release now determine whether expanded access will produce durable benefits. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026; U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid, 2025)

Education as Part of the Purpose of Corrections

Correctional systems pursue several goals: punishment, incapacitation, deterrence, rehabilitation, and public safety. These goals need not be mutually exclusive. A person can serve a lawful sentence while also participating in education that reduces future risk. The loss of liberty is the central punishment imposed by incarceration. Preventing a person from learning does not automatically add justice; it may instead increase the difficulty of successful reentry. (Davis et al., 2013)

College education develops reading, writing, quantitative reasoning, research, communication, and occupational knowledge. It can also create a daily structure and a legitimate identity as a student. In prison environments where people may be defined primarily by convictions, educational participation can support responsibility and future orientation. This does not erase harm caused to victims, nor

should educational achievement be used to minimize an offense. Rehabilitation concerns what a person is prepared to do next. (Davis et al., 2013)

Recidivism and Public Safety

The strongest public argument for prison education is its association with reduced recidivism. Research reviews, including RAND's major evaluation of correctional education, have found that participants are less likely to return to prison than comparable nonparticipants. The exact effect varies because programs, populations, follow-up periods, and research designs differ. Selection also matters: people who enroll may already possess motivation or stability that predicts better outcomes. The evidence should therefore be described as a substantial association supported by multiple studies rather than as a guarantee that a degree prevents crime. (Davis et al., 2013)

Education may reduce recidivism through several mechanisms. Credentials can improve legal employment prospects; classroom participation can strengthen self-regulation and problem solving; exposure to new ideas may change social identity; faculty and peers can build prosocial networks; and academic success can increase confidence in long-term planning. These benefits are most likely to persist when release planning connects education to housing, employment, identification documents, health care, technology access, and continued enrollment. (Davis et al., 2013)

Employment and Economic Reintegration

Formerly incarcerated people commonly face employer discrimination, occupational licensing restrictions, gaps in work history, transportation barriers, and limited access to professional networks. A college credential cannot remove all of these barriers, but it can improve qualifications and demonstrate sustained work. Programs that teach only narrow skills tied to prison industries may leave students vulnerable when technology or labor demand changes. A broad college education can combine transferable skills with occupational preparation. (Davis et al., 2013)

Employment should not be measured only by whether a graduate obtains any job. Job quality, wages, stability, benefits, and alignment with the field of study matter. Programs should publish honest information about available occupations, including legal restrictions affecting certain convictions. Colleges can build partnerships with employers willing to use fair-chance hiring, but students should not be directed into low-wage sectors merely because they have criminal records.

Effects Inside Correctional Facilities

Educational programs may improve the institutional climate by creating structured activity, academic norms, and incentives for constructive behavior. Students often tutor one another, organize study groups, and model alternatives to conflict. Staff may benefit when units experience fewer disruptions,

although education should not be offered only as a behavior-management tool. The classroom must remain an academic environment rather than a reward that can be withdrawn arbitrarily for minor infractions. (Davis et al., 2013)

Security procedures are necessary, but inconsistent lockdowns, movement restrictions, staff shortages, confiscation of materials, and limited library access can undermine academic quality. A college that accepts tuition or Pell funds must ensure that incarcerated students receive a program reasonably comparable to the education promised to other students. That includes qualified instructors, current materials, meaningful feedback, accessible advising, and a pathway to completion. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

Restoration of Pell Grant Eligibility

For nearly three decades, federal policy sharply limited Pell Grant access for people incarcerated in federal or state prisons. The Second Chance Pell experiment began in 2015 and tested expanded aid at selected institutions. Congress later changed the law through the FAFSA Simplification Act. The U.S. Department of Education states that confined or incarcerated individuals became eligible for Pell Grants for payment periods beginning on or after July 1, 2023 when enrolled in an eligible Prison Education Program. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026; U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid, 2025)

Eligibility is not automatic for every class offered in a prison. The program must satisfy federal requirements, receive approval, operate through an eligible public or nonprofit institution or postsecondary vocational institution, and undergo oversight and reporting. These protections matter because incarcerated students are a captive market. They may have limited ability to compare colleges, withdraw, complain, or transfer. Expansion without quality control could invite institutions to collect aid for weak programs. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

What “Free College” Means

The phrase “free college education” can create confusion. Pell Grants are need-based federal aid, not an unlimited promise that every cost will be covered. Tuition, fees, books, supplies, and technology may be financed through Pell, state appropriations, philanthropy, or institutional support. Incarcerated students generally have very limited income, so charging substantial uncovered costs would make enrollment unrealistic. A responsible program should disclose the full cost, prevent hidden fees, and explain what happens to aid if a student is transferred, released, or unable to complete a term. (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid, 2025)

Public funding is justified when the social return exceeds the cost. The comparison should include the cost of reincarceration, lost earnings, reduced tax contributions, family instability, and victimization—not merely the price of tuition. Even when education has an upfront cost, avoiding a

portion of future incarceration can generate fiscal savings. (Davis et al., 2013)

Equity and Racial Disparities

Incarceration and educational exclusion are not distributed evenly. Black, Latino, Indigenous, low-income, disabled, and formerly foster-involved populations are disproportionately represented in correctional systems and often attended under-resourced schools before incarceration. Prison college programs can address part of this accumulated disadvantage, but they should not be used as evidence that incarceration is a reasonable route to education. Communities should not have to send people to prison before they receive rigorous teaching, safe schools, or affordable college.

Equity also concerns who gains admission inside the facility. Programs should not select only people with short sentences, perfect disciplinary histories, or the easiest academic profiles if those criteria unnecessarily exclude others. Students with learning disabilities, limited prior schooling, non-English language needs, or long sentences may require preparatory education and accommodations. Academic standards should be maintained, but access should not be restricted through irrelevant barriers. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

Benefits to Families and Communities

Education can influence more than the individual student. Incarcerated parents may help children with schoolwork, model persistence, and develop healthier communication. Graduates can return as mentors, advocates, employees, or community leaders. These effects should not be romanticized: reentry can remain difficult, and family relationships may have been damaged. Still, educational achievement can provide a concrete basis for rebuilding trust and responsibility.

Communities benefit when returning residents possess skills and recognized credentials. College programs can partner with community colleges, universities, reentry organizations, libraries, and workforce agencies so that learning continues after release. A student who completes half a degree in prison should be able to transfer credits and finish outside without restarting. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

Counterarguments

“Students Outside Prison Cannot Afford College”

It is understandable that families burdened by tuition may view funded prison education as unfair. The solution, however, is not to deny education to incarcerated students but to expand affordable access generally. Pell Grants already serve eligible low-income students outside prison, and prison

programs do not justify high tuition elsewhere. Public policy can support both groups. Removing one disadvantaged group from aid does not make college affordable for another. (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid, 2025)

“Education Rewards Crime”

College participation is not a reward for committing an offense; it is an intervention during a sentence. Students must complete demanding academic work under restrictive conditions. The sentence remains in effect. Society routinely provides health care, addiction treatment, religious services, and vocational training in correctional institutions because withholding every beneficial service would be self-defeating.

“Graduates May Still Reoffend”

Some participants will reoffend. No rehabilitation program has a perfect success rate, and education cannot resolve untreated mental illness, addiction, homelessness, violent networks, or unemployment by itself. Policy should compare outcomes with realistic alternatives, not with perfection. Programs should identify which supports improve completion and postrelease outcomes and should be revised when evidence is weak. (Davis et al., 2013)

“Skills Could Be Misused”

The claim that education gives people tools for more sophisticated crime is speculative and can be used against any form of knowledge. Colleges already teach ethics, law, technology, finance, and communication to the general population without assuming students will misuse them. Security concerns can be addressed through ordinary rules, but fear of hypothetical misuse should not justify intellectual deprivation.

Program Quality and Accountability

A credible Prison Education Program should be accredited through the participating institution, use qualified faculty, provide transferable credits, and offer credentials with labor-market and academic value. Students should receive advising, tutoring, disability accommodations, library resources, and clear grievance procedures. Programs should report enrollment, persistence, completion, transfer, employment, and recidivism outcomes while protecting privacy. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

Evaluation must avoid manipulating data by excluding students who are transferred or released. Transfers are common in correctional systems and can interrupt a semester without reflecting academic failure. Agreements among facilities and colleges can improve continuity. Technology can expand access, but secure platforms should not reduce education to prerecorded content without

interaction.

Victims and Restorative Responsibility

Supporting prison education does not require ignoring victims. Public safety includes preventing future victimization. Some academic programs incorporate restorative justice, ethics, communication, or community responsibility, but participation should not pressure victims to forgive or engage with the person who harmed them. Education can support accountability by helping students understand consequences, develop empathy, and prepare to meet lawful obligations.

A Balanced Policy Position

College education should be available at little or no cost to eligible incarcerated students when programs meet rigorous standards. Priority should not be determined by a simplistic belief that some people are “deserving” and others are not. Admission can consider academic readiness, safety, capacity, and program fit, while preparatory courses create pathways for students who are not yet college ready. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

Public investment should be paired with transparent oversight. Institutions should not use incarcerated enrollment to expand revenue without delivering equivalent value. Correctional agencies should protect class time and academic freedom, and colleges should remain accountable to students after release. The goal is not merely to enroll people, but to enable completion and meaningful use of education. (U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

Conclusion

Free or publicly supported college education in prison is defensible because it advances rehabilitation, employment, institutional stability, family development, and public safety. It does not guarantee successful reentry and should not substitute for housing, health care, fair hiring, or broader educational reform. The restoration of Pell Grant eligibility beginning July 1, 2023 created a major opportunity to move prison education from a limited experiment toward a regulated national system. (Davis et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

The quality of implementation will determine whether that opportunity succeeds. Programs must offer real credentials, transferable credits, competent instruction, student protections, and continuity after release. Denying education may satisfy an impulse for additional punishment, but it leaves communities to absorb the consequences of release without preparation. A correctional system concerned with future safety should make rigorous college education part of its rehabilitation strategy. (Davis et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2026)

Works Cited

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