

Importance Of Giving Free College Education To Prisoners

Posted on September 30, 2019

View this essay online:

<https://academic-master.com/importance-of-giving-free-college-education-to-prisoners/>

Introduction

College education in prisons is best evaluated as a correctional, public-safety, workforce, and reentry policy rather than as a competition between incarcerated students and people studying outside prison. The loss of liberty is the principal punishment imposed by incarceration; preventing learning does not necessarily add justice and may make successful reentry more difficult. Most incarcerated people eventually return to communities where they need employment, housing, family relationships, and the capacity to make lawful decisions. RAND's major review of correctional education found that participants had lower odds of recidivism than comparable nonparticipants and that correctional education could produce economic benefits when reduced reincarceration is considered, although outcomes vary by program and research design (Davis et al., 2013). The policy environment has also changed substantially. Since July 1, 2023, otherwise eligible confined or incarcerated students may receive Pell Grants when enrolled in an eligible Prison Education Program that meets federal requirements. The question is therefore no longer whether postsecondary prison education exists, but whether expansion delivers rigorous, transferable education with appropriate oversight and continuity after release.

Education, Rehabilitation, and Public Safety

Correctional systems pursue punishment, incapacitation, deterrence, rehabilitation, and public safety, and these purposes do not have to be mutually exclusive. A person can serve a lawful sentence while developing reading, writing, quantitative reasoning, research, communication, or occupational knowledge that improves prospects after release. Postsecondary study can also create daily structure and a legitimate student identity in an environment where people may otherwise be defined primarily by their convictions. The evidence does not justify claiming that a degree guarantees desistance, because offending is influenced by housing, employment, substance use, mental health, family relationships, neighborhood conditions, and individual choices. Education is better understood as one protective component within a wider reentry system. RAND's review found consistent evidence that correctional education is associated with reduced recidivism, while also noting variation in program quality and methodology (Davis et al., 2013). Public policy should therefore compare prison education with realistic alternatives, not with a standard of perfection. The relevant question is whether well-

designed education improves outcomes enough to justify its cost and institutional effort.

Pell Grants and the Current Prison Education Framework

The restoration of Pell Grant access created a regulated pathway for postsecondary prison education rather than an automatic entitlement to any course offered inside a correctional facility. Federal Student Aid guidance for the 2026–27 award year states that a confined or incarcerated person may receive a Pell Grant if otherwise eligible and enrolled in an eligible Prison Education Program. Such programs must be offered by an eligible institution and satisfy approval, oversight, transfer, and program-quality requirements established under federal law and regulation (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). This distinction matters because incarcerated students are a captive population with limited ability to compare institutions, transfer easily, or withdraw from a poor provider. Public financing therefore creates a corresponding obligation to protect educational quality. The phrase [free college](#) can also be misleading because Pell is need-based aid and may not cover every educational or reentry expense. Transparent programs should explain tuition, books, technology, transfer arrangements, what happens after release or transfer, and how students can complete credentials without losing accumulated academic progress.

Employment, Reentry, and Family Effects

Formerly incarcerated people often face employment discrimination, licensing restrictions, gaps in work history, weak professional networks, and transportation or technology barriers. A college credential cannot remove all of these obstacles, but it can increase qualifications, demonstrate sustained academic work, and provide transferable skills that remain useful when one occupation changes. Programs should therefore avoid steering students only toward narrow prison-industry skills and should give honest information about licensing limits that may apply to particular convictions. Education can also affect family relationships. Incarcerated parents may model persistence, help children value schooling, or develop stronger communication, although academic achievement does not automatically repair relationships damaged by incarceration. Reentry partnerships with colleges, libraries, workforce agencies, employers, and community organizations can help convert credits into continued enrollment and employment after release. The strongest programs treat release as a transition rather than an endpoint. Students who complete part of a degree inside prison should be able to transfer credits, receive records promptly, access advising, and continue study without unnecessary repetition once they return to the community.

Equity, Access, and Academic Quality

Prison education also raises questions of fairness because incarceration and prior educational disadvantage are unequally distributed. Black, Latino, Indigenous, low-income, disabled, and formerly foster-involved populations are disproportionately represented in many correctional systems, and some entered prison after attending under-resourced schools. Postsecondary access can address part of that accumulated disadvantage, but it should never become an argument that incarceration is a reasonable route to educational opportunity. Affordable college outside prison and rigorous education inside prison can be supported simultaneously. Equity within facilities also matters. Programs should not admit only students with the easiest academic profiles when preparatory education or disability accommodations could create a pathway for others. Academic standards should remain real, but barriers unrelated to learning should be minimized. Pell-funded institutions should provide qualified instructors, current materials, advising, library access, disability support, meaningful feedback, and transferable credits. Enrollment numbers alone are not evidence of success; persistence, completion, transfer, employment, and postrelease continuity provide a more useful picture of whether public funding produces educational value.

Common Objections and Policy Trade-offs

Several objections deserve serious consideration. Families struggling with tuition may view publicly supported prison education as unfair, yet denying one disadvantaged group aid does not make college more affordable for another; Pell Grants already serve eligible low-income students outside prison as well. Some critics describe education as a reward for crime, but the sentence remains in force while the program functions as a rehabilitation intervention, much like healthcare, addiction treatment, or vocational training. Others note that some graduates will reoffend. That is true, but no credible public-safety intervention succeeds in every case, and policy should compare average outcomes and costs rather than demand certainty. Security procedures can also interrupt education through transfers, lockdowns, or restricted technology, so colleges and correctional agencies must coordinate continuity. Oversight is essential because prison students cannot function as ordinary consumers in a competitive market. Institutions should not use Pell eligibility primarily to expand revenue. Public support is strongest when programs demonstrate real academic rigor, transparent costs, student protections, transferable credit, and outcomes that justify continued investment.

Conclusion

Publicly supported college education for incarcerated people can be justified as part of a broader strategy for rehabilitation, employment, reentry, and public safety. Research does not show that education eliminates recidivism, but it does support a meaningful association between correctional education and improved postrelease outcomes, making denial of learning a weak substitute for

evidence-based correctional policy (Davis et al., 2013). Current federal rules allow otherwise eligible incarcerated students to receive Pell Grants through approved Prison Education Programs, increasing both opportunity and the need for quality control (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). Effective programs should provide real credentials, transferable credits, qualified instruction, disability access, academic advising, and continuity after transfer or release. They should also be integrated with housing, employment, healthcare, technology access, and other reentry supports. Supporting prison education does not minimize victims' experiences or erase accountability for crime. It recognizes that communities have a legitimate interest in what people are capable of doing when they leave custody. A correctional system concerned with future safety has reason to value rigorous education alongside lawful punishment.

References

Davis, L. M., Bozick, R., Steele, J. L., Saunders, J., & Miles, J. N. V. (2013). *Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid. (2026). *Federal Student Aid Handbook, 2026-2027: Student eligibility for Pell Grants and Prison Education Programs*.