

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/america-is-ready-to-reinstate-pell-grants-for-students-in-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This country is ready for college in prison.

In a divisive political season, voters agreed on at least one thing: college in prison is a good idea and there should be more of it. In the [November 2020 American Election Eve Poll](#) conducted by Latino Decisions, the African American Research Collaborative, Asian American Decisions, and the National Congress of American Indians in partnership with Vera and others, researchers found that voters across different demographic groups overwhelmingly agreed that people in prison should be allowed to access Pell Grants for college courses or skills training in things like plumbing and welding. This poll, which surveyed 15,200 people in 12 states and intentionally oversampled people of color, found support for Pell reinstatement reaching 81 percent among Black voters, 75 percent among Latinx voters, and 67 percent among white voters.

Indeed, offering college in prison is a strategy to [advance race equity](#) and one that a majority of Americans agree on. People of color are disproportionately incarcerated in prisons. College is a primary avenue for upward mobility, especially among people of color. Those who enroll in college programs during or after prison share their knowledge, skills, and connections with their social capital with their children and families, multiplying the impact of a single college degree. This is particularly important for people of color, who have been largely excluded from wealth-building policies in the past, resulting in a reality in which white Americans have 20 times the net worth of Black Americans.

The [Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative](#), launched by the U.S. Department of Education in 2015 to provide Pell Grants to people in state and federal prisons on a pilot basis, has broad bipartisan support. During the Obama administration, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Attorney General Loretta Lynch announced the initiative during their visit to [Jessup Correctional Center](#) in Maryland. In 2018, Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas gave the [keynote address](#) at the graduation inside a state prison of 25 Shorter College students earning AA degrees. In 2019, U.S. Secretary of Education [Betsy DeVos](#) cheered on 70 incarcerated students who earned AA degrees and certificates from Tulsa Community College in Oklahoma. In 2020, the Trump administration [doubled the number of colleges](#) in the experiment from 65 to 130.

Members of Congress, too, have shown their support. In late 2019, the House Education and Labor Committee passed the College Affordability Act (H.R. 4674) with a provision to reinstate access to Pell Grants for all eligible incarcerated students. This summer, the House passed the Fiscal Year 2021 Labor HHS appropriations bill in late July 2020 with a similar provision. We are eager for the Senate to take action and remove this ban.

Students, for their part, are ready and waiting. To date, [more than 16,000 students](#) have enrolled in a college program in prison with the help of a Pell Grant. With Pell reinstated, this number could grow to [more than 450,000](#). Those who leave prison with this education will [secure jobs, earn higher wages, and stop the cycle of incarceration](#). The odds that someone who enrolls in a college program in prison will return to prison drop by [48 percent](#) as compared to those who do not have such access. This means fewer lives interrupted, more families intact, and more people pursuing their American dreams.

At Vera, we are ready for this expansion. Vera's [new guide on launching a college program in prison](#) walks planners through the decisions they'll need to make from the time they choose to build a program to the first day of class. The guidance is drawn from Vera's eight years of experience learning from and assisting college programs working in prison. Included are practical explanations of the tasks to be completed as well as tips on who should be at the table for key decisions. Attached to the report are a series of checklists planners can use as they complete the steps to develop their programs from idea to reality.

We applaud the House's commitment to lifting the federal ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students, and we urge the Senate to finish this important work this year. These students and their families cannot afford to wait any longer.

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