

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/for-many-second-chance-pell-offers-a-first-chance-opportunity>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

April marks the start of [Community College Month](#) and [Second Chance Month](#).

Yet, for many who are incarcerated, access to education has been fraught with obstacles for too long. That may be changing. On April 4 and 5, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) hosted a series of meetings on Capitol Hill and a listening session in Washington, DC for corrections officials, college faculty, and formerly incarcerated students from 14 postsecondary education prison program sites.

Eleven of these sites are participants in the U.S. Department of Education's [Second Chance Pell \(SCP\) Experimental Sites Initiative](#). Through [65 colleges in 27 states](#), the initiative provides need-based Pell grants to a limited number of people in prison at the state and federal level so they can attend college or other postsecondary programs while they are incarcerated. Vera provides technical assistance to the participating colleges and corrections departments.

SCP was launched as a pilot initiative in 2015 to explore the restoration of Pell grant eligibility to incarcerated people. Under the [1994 Crime Bill](#), incarcerated people were banned from accessing Pell grants—a policy change that has since denied thousands of people access to education. But attitudes may be shifting. With the continued success of SCP and growing, bipartisan support for criminal justice reform, lawmakers and advocates are increasingly calling for a full repeal of the Pell grant ban.

The participants spent the April 4 meeting with Members of Congress and congressional staffers, discussing the postsecondary education programs in their states and the role those programs play in creating employment opportunities, reducing recidivism, and improving safety within correctional facilities. In total, almost three dozen meetings took place, six of which occurred with Members of Congress (Democrats and Republicans alike).

Although these meetings pulled together a diverse group of stakeholders, formerly incarcerated students really drove the conversation with their own stories of how postsecondary education in prison changed their lives as well as their families' lives and the overall prison culture for the better.

Vera also co-hosted a Second Chance Pell listening session on April 5 with the U.S. Department of Education, gathering representatives from SCP sites to discuss what's working well and what could be improved if postsecondary education in prison programs are expanded. Secretary Betsy DeVos provided the opening remarks and even [took to Twitter afterwards to reaffirm her support for postsecondary education in prison](#).

Overwhelmingly, site participants at the meeting said that increased access to education in prison was necessary, impactful, and transformative. One important point that emerged and was expressed by several attendees is the fact that for many incarcerated people, access to education in prison was not a second chance: it was a first chance.

Despite the positives shared, there are many challenges in implementation that students and administrators of these programs face. One of the biggest complaints mentioned was regarding difficulties around FAFSA. Other suggestions included expansion of SCP to those serving extended or life sentences, reduction of security barriers created by state Department of Corrections, more intentionality on who is encouraged to participate in the programs (particularly more racial diversity), and funding that goes beyond Pell grants.

Fred Patrick, Director of Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, offered this message of hope for the future of college programs in prison at the end of the Listening Session: The people in this room can enact and influence so much change; our brains and hearts together give us no excuse to not overcome the challenges addressed today.

These conversations represent what many hope is a new beginning for Second Chance Pell and for the possibility of expanding access to Pell grants for people in state and federal prisons. With the introduction of the [Restoring Education and Learning \(REAL\) Act](#) on April 9, which has [bipartisan support](#), these discussions on implementing high-quality postsecondary education in prison are particularly profound and timely.

PUBLICATION

NEWS

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

