

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/incarcerated-students-will-have-access-to-pell-grants-again-what-happens-now>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When [Congress reinstated access to Pell Grants](#) for incarcerated students this past December, it lifted a 26-year ban that put postsecondary education out of reach for millions of people incarcerated in the United States.

Incarcerated people [earn pennies per hour for the work they do in prison](#), so Pell Grants, their primary source of need-based financial aid, had made it possible for students to access higher education. The 1994 crime bill stripped incarcerated students of Pell Grant eligibility, making a college education practically unattainable. In the following years, the [number of prison education programs quickly shrank](#), from 772 programs in the early 1990s to only eight in 1997.

But now, the passage of the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Simplification Act offers renewed hope and an opportunity for hundreds of thousands of incarcerated people to develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed once released. Having a college degree increases their chances to secure well-paying jobs, find stable housing, and provide for their families. People who participate in college-in-prison programs are 48 percent [less likely to return to prison](#), and reduced recidivism rates could [cut state prison spending across the country by as much as \\$365.8 million](#) annually.

The FAFSA Simplification Act is sentence-blind meaning all incarcerated people, regardless of sentence length or conviction, can qualify and includes people with certain drug-related convictions who could not previously apply for Pell Grants. It covers people in jails, prisons, and juvenile and civil commitment settings. When the Act takes effect no later than July 1, 2023 up to [463,000 people who are currently incarcerated will be eligible for this financial aid](#).

The Act also outlines a number of provisions that will make it easier for all prospective students to apply for financial aid, including reducing the number of questions on the FAFSA form and allowing financial aid administrators to make adjustments on a case-by-case basis for students with special circumstances.

With the reversal of the ban, the focus now shifts to ensuring the quality of the academic programs available to students in prison and that access to college education is equitable that all students have the opportunity to access quality higher education, the support they need to complete their programs, and the ability to secure well-paying jobs when they leave prison. The FAFSA Simplification Act mandates that relevant state agencies or the Federal Bureau of Prisons select and authorize college programs based on whether they are operating in the best interest of students and provides suggested criteria for making this determination. The Act also mandates new reporting requirements, including the demographics of incarcerated students receiving Pell Grants, which will make it easier to monitor the success of prison education programs.

But many questions remain: How will departments of corrections determine the quality of a college-in-prison program, and how will these programs be evaluated? How will states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons ensure that all incarcerated people have access to education? How will they close racial equity gaps that disadvantage Black and brown communities? [Research shows](#) that, on college campuses, students of color are less likely to earn bachelor's degrees and more likely to earn certificates than white students, and there are stark differences in earning potential for the fields they pursue. For example, white students are more than twice as likely to pursue degrees in engineering, among the highest paid majors, than Black students.

[To provide guidance on these fronts](#), Vera is launching a [Corrections Education Leadership Academy](#) this spring to support departments of corrections and education leaders in creating statewide education systems for incarcerated people. Institutions state, federal, and educational alike must ensure that the programs they provide are well-suited for the students they serve. We all stand to benefit.

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