

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/pell-grants-offer-pathways-to-success-for-people-in-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

"Justice is not only the absence of oppression; it is the presence of opportunity." These words were eloquently delivered by President Obama two weeks ago in a major speech on criminal justice reform. What better way to provide transformative opportunities, all while increasing public safety, than through expanding access to postsecondary education in prison?

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Attorney General Loretta Lynch today [announced](#) the launch of the Second Chance Pell Pilot initiative to allow eligible people incarcerated in state and federal prisons to pursue postsecondary education via Pell Grants federal financial aid to which they had been denied access via the 1994 Crime Bill. As AG Lynch mentioned in her remarks today, Vera will provide technical assistance to correctional facilities that partner with colleges and universities to provide postsecondary education opportunities as part of the experiment.

This is a watershed moment in the growing efforts and momentum to both end mass incarceration and implement a human dignity approach to correctional operations in America.

The evidence is clear. Education in prison transforms lives, strengthens families, and renews communities. The Rand Corporation's 2013 seminal [study](#) found those who participate in prison education programs were 43 percent less likely to return to prison within three years of release than those who did not participate, and their odds of finding employment were anywhere from 13 to 28 percent higher. Furthermore, that same study found that every \$1 invested in prison-based education produces a \$4 to \$5 savings in reduced incarceration costs.

Beyond those numbers, however, are real human beings mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, parents, children, and neighbors who are directly impacted by incarceration and its negative impact on a person's ability to positively and productively move forward after completing his or her prison sentence. Let's face it: social and economic mobility in our rapidly evolving economy increasingly requires a college education. A 2013 [study](#) by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce reveals that, by 2020, 65 percent of job vacancies will require some postsecondary education and training. More specifically, 13 million jobs will require a baccalaureate degree, 7 million jobs will require an associate's degree, and 10 million jobs will require some college credit.

Prisons from which nearly 700,000 people return to the community each year are well placed to strengthen our nation's commitment to improving college access and success. While ban the box efforts regarding employers asking about criminal justice system involvement on initial job applications have had significant success recently, we must also ensure that job candidates with justice system involvement have the necessary skills and credentials to succeed.

The launch of the Second Chance Pell initiative will likely ignite age-old debates about liberal arts versus career technical education in terms of what type of college education should be provided to incarcerated adults. This debate, however, should not distract from the need to focus on the quality of the courses provided. Colleges and universities authorized to participate in this Pell pilot must be held accountable for maintaining quality standards in all areas, including curriculum content, course offerings, articulation agreements, and faculty credentials, to name a few. The quality of in-prison education courses and faculty should be equal to that on college campuses in the community. In addition, the success of these efforts will require true collaboration and regular communication between the higher education institutions and their corrections partners in areas such as faculty access, transfer of students from one facility to another, and classroom space planning.

Vera is pleased that our [Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project](#) helped pave the path to expand access to postsecondary education for incarcerated people. Currently operating in Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina, Pathways has more than 1,000 students enrolled and succeeding in credit-bearing courses delivered by 15 colleges in 14 state prisons. Pathways also features robust pre-release and reentry supports, academic and otherwise, to help students continue their postsecondary education post-release.

Vera's [Expanding Access to Postsecondary Education Project](#), launched last year, builds on Pathways success by providing an online resource center and other assistance to state departments of corrections, policymakers, and higher education institutions interested in developing or expanding access to high-quality postsecondary education in prisons. And Vera was one of the organizations that submitted a proposal in early 2014 specifically encouraging the Department of Education to implement an experimental site pilot involving Pell Grants for incarcerated people in state and federal prison.

Today's launch of the Second Chance Pell initiative is a real cause for celebration for those of us who care deeply about opportunity, equity, human dignity, redemption, and public safety and have worked hard to bring this to fruition. So let's celebrate today's announcement, but then quickly focus our attention on the boundary-spanning hard work involved in successfully implementing high-quality postsecondary educational opportunities in prisons. Let's go!

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.

