



THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

**PRISON EDUCATION
ACTION RESEARCH LAB**

The 2025 Higher Education in Prison Census

This report offers a descriptive snapshot of the number of higher education institutions formally affiliated with postsecondary in-prison education or campus-based reentry programs during the 2023-2024 academic year (July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024). In April 2025, researchers with the Prison Education Action Research Lab (PEARL) distributed the 2025 Higher Education in Prison Census (*2025 Census*) to all known institutional representatives of prison higher education programs.¹ Data and information for this update are drawn from two primary sources: 1) unique program responses to the *2025 Census* (n=147) and 2) unique manual entries to the *2025 Census* with institution and program information gathered by the research team using the internet, email communication, news publications, and collaboration with state and regional liaisons (n=401).

To support transparency, accuracy, and continued information-sharing, additional information about data, method, and limitations are at the end of this report, including data-related documents available for download.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND REASONS FOR A CENSUS

Title IV colleges and universities mandatorily report aggregate student data to the federal government each year. These data include overall enrollment and student trends and are disaggregated by a number of key variables, including demographic characteristics. At present, the federal government does not require colleges and universities to report unique data on incarcerated students enrolled in postsecondary education and therefore, we know little about incarcerated students, including their enrollment and course-taking patterns, programs of study, time-to-credential, and completion rates.

¹ The intended respondents to the *2025 Census* were directors and staff of postsecondary education in prison and campus-based reentry programs that were formally affiliated with an accredited college or university in the 2024-25 academic year. For the purposes of the *2025 Census*, formal institutional affiliation included programs in which a college or university enrolled incarcerated students, provided non-transcribed supplemental programming to incarcerated people, and/or provided student support services for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people. Formal affiliation also includes institutions that did not directly enroll students but contributed substantial program support, such as faculty, staff, facilities, material resources, or other core components of programming. The *2025 Census* asked respondents to self-report all institutional affiliations for their respective programs. Postsecondary education in prison programs with no formal affiliation with an institution of higher education were excluded from the *2025 Census*.

As the field continues to expand, it is important to ground current and future efforts of tracking postsecondary education in prison in historical context. Researchers have long been interested in learning what educational opportunities occur inside prisons, with a specific focus on postsecondary education emerging in the 1960s. Between 1968 and 2005, nearly two dozen national surveys attempted to document the nature and scope of educational offerings inside adult prisons. A focus on postsecondary education notably emerged in the 1970s, with multiple publications in the *Journal of Correctional Education* and proceedings from the Adult Education Association annual conference citing offerings across states. In their research, Adams and Connolly (1971) identified 121 community and junior colleges “... offering an educational program in conjunction with a correctional institution” (p. 94) and in 1976, Emmert described a list of 139 colleges and universities with “program offerings for offenders” (p. 8). A comprehensive view of this research reveals both a deep desire among researchers and practitioners to better understand the provision of educational opportunity inside prisons as well as awareness that such attempts are stubbornly elusive.

Prior to 1994, research in this area was becoming more developed and sophisticated, a trajectory interrupted by the removal of federal funding. Varying units of analysis, definitions, data sources, and methods make longitudinal comparisons of this research difficult; some instruments ask questions about enrollments and others about program offerings; some inquire about completion rates and others about eligibility. Definitional criteria of what constitutes postsecondary education (e.g., adult education, college preparation, or competency-

based assessment) also make precise calculations difficult. Most historical surveys targeted state-level corrections education directors and the Federal Bureau of Prisons to inquire about all education offerings. With few exceptions, what we know about postsecondary educational opportunities inside prisons pre-1994 is drawn from the knowledge of corrections leaders.²

The Utah research team first began tracking colleges and universities providing higher education inside prisons in 2015. At that time, fewer than 100 institutions of higher education could be verified as enrolling incarcerated learners. There has been tremendous growth in the last decade, but it is important to bear in mind that most currently incarcerated people still do not have access to postsecondary education of any kind. Even when colleges or universities make a program available within facilities, access is conditional - often constrained by eligibility requirements, timing, costs, accommodations, language barriers, security classifications, and other structural factors that limit participation.³ In these ways, providing an overall count of colleges and universities is just one part of a larger matrix of opportunity that must be socially, culturally, and politically contextualized.

The overall growth of the number of colleges and universities providing prison-based higher education is in many ways remarkable. The expansion is promising insofar as it is accompanied by measures of outcomes, impact, and institutional accountability. Yet, we must be careful to infer what greater numbers of postsecondary institutions mean. Considerable barriers to enrollment and completion exist for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. There remain serious concerns regarding predatory practices and misuse of

2 Brief examples of exceptions include Adams and Connolly (1971) and Emmert (1976), who both surveyed administrators of colleges and universities with prison-based programs.

3 See, for example: Conway, P. F. (2025). Education under constraint: The challenges of participation within a college-in-prison program. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 62(1), 82–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2024.2420126>; Royer, C. E., Castro, E. L., & Aguilar Padilla, E. (2023). Harassment, discouragement, and intimidation of college students in prison: A qualitative study on the prevalence of disciplinary power in prison higher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 93(2), 241–266. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-93.2.241>

federal Pell Grant dollars.⁴ Moreover, expansion has occurred unevenly across geographic regions, leaving access to postsecondary education unequal. Thus, increases in the number of participating institutions should be understood as an important development, but not as evidence of greater access for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people or altered political sentiment among college and university administrators.

2025 CENSUS INCLUSION CRITERIA

Data used in this report were drawn from the most generous inclusion criteria since the post-1994 data collection efforts, including the launch of the *Annual Survey of Higher Education in Prison Programs* in 2018. This means that colleges, universities, and programs that were not previously included in annual counts may be included here. The decision to cast a wide net resulted from the low response rate to the 2025 *Census* that muddled our ability to determine with a great degree of confidence whether an accredited college or university was enrolling incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people for credit-bearing instruction. Thus, we removed the baseline criterion of enrollment and replaced it with a baseline requirement that an institution must meaningfully partner with at least one college or university that provides credit-bearing pathways for currently incarcerated students. Under these revised inclusion criteria, institutions with verifiably active Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programs that do not enroll incarcerated students for credit became eligible.

Historically, most Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programs were excluded from survey counts of institutions and programs because researchers could not determine if incarcerated learners were enrolled as credit-earning students. These programs often operate independently from campus-based higher education in prison programs

and there isn't yet accurate tracking of when they are offered, by whom, where, under what conditions, if incarcerated learners are earning credits, and what types of credits they earn. The inclusion of Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programs is likely an undercount and may elevate the representation of private four-year institutions within the institutional type distribution.

Previous program criteria may not be as useful to a growing field moving forward and definitions of higher education in prison must evolve. In the past, for example, campus-based reentry programs like Project Rebound were not included in institutional or program counts because of the research focus on prison-based postsecondary education. Yet, given their critical importance in supporting student success for justice-impacted people, these efforts should be tracked and better defined.

Additionally, the types and numbers of colleges and universities alone do not tell the entire story. Distance-based programs at accredited institutions like Adams State University, Rio Salado College, or Colorado State University-Pueblo enroll incarcerated students across the U.S. Similarly, there is a growing presence of institutions providing online synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, and/or self-paced instruction, like Ashland University, Ensign College, or Western Governors University. While there are only two proprietary institutions in this count, practitioners know that they have a significant footprint in prisons and jails. Greater knowledge about the nature and reach of these kinds of institutions is critical to understand and benchmark the postsecondary landscape during incarceration.

4 Castro, E. L., Royer, C. E., Aguilar Padilla, E., & Gaskill, S. (2022). *Pell is not enough: Exploring the experience of participants in Second Chance Pell*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison. https://cherp.utah.edu/publications/exploring_experiences_of_second_chance_pell.php

WHAT DO WE KNOW WITH CONFIDENCE?

Despite a low response rate to the *2025 Census* and considerable limitations accessing reliable information, there are a few data points that we can share with confidence. For the 2023-24 academic year:

- There were at least 548 unique colleges and universities engaged in postsecondary education in prison and/or formal campus-based reentry.⁵ This number is inclusive of:
 - Institutions with known active Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programs (n=23)⁶
 - Institutions with known Rising Scholars Network programs (n=93)⁷
 - Institutions with known College Rebound programs (n=20)⁸
 - Institutions with known Underground Scholars Initiatives (n=9)
- Public two-year institutions (n=273) represent nearly 50% of all colleges and universities formally affiliated with prison higher education and campus-based reentry. The institutional type distribution is as follows:
 - Private, non-profit four-year institutions account for approximately 25% (n=136)
 - Public four-year institutions represent 24% (n=134)
 - Private non-profit two-year 1% (n=3)
 - Two proprietary institutions, California Coast and Blackstone Career Institute, together comprise less than .05%

WHAT COULD WE KNOW WITH BETTER DATA?

The *2025 Census* asked for information regarding the following areas: location of programming: in-prison, on-campus, both; types of programming: credit-bearing, non-credit-bearing, reentry, supplemental instruction, student support services, and others; facilities served and sex-designation of facilities served; credentials and licensure per pathway; program modalities per facility and program/credential; and institution of higher education partnerships and contributions. At minimum, these elements of prison higher education can be systematically gathered and verified from self-reported information. However, the lift is enormous and requires a collaborative community approach.

The growth and emerging complexity of the prison higher education landscape should not deter efforts to accurately capture what (if any) postsecondary opportunities are ultimately made available to incarcerated people. The overwhelming majority of adult prisons in the U.S. do not yet provide access to consistent postsecondary education of value. Or, put another way: most incarcerated people in the U.S. do not yet have viable options to pursue a postsecondary credential of value. Combined with myriad obstacles to access inside facilities for all types of programming, it is likely the case that those closest to programming on-the-ground are the greatest source of accurate and timely knowledge and information about higher education in prison.

5 This estimate is based on both direct *2025 Census* responses and research-team verification of nonresponding or newly identified programs. In addition to the 147 responses to the *2025 Census*, the team manually verified 401 records using public information, prior survey data, email correspondence, news publications, state and regional liaisons, and related sources. Because the team only included programs and institutional affiliations that could be verified, this number should be interpreted as a conservative minimum rather than a complete count of all institutions engaged in prison higher education.

6 The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program website does not have a publicly-available active list of institutionally-sponsored programs but a list of institutions that have ever sponsored an official program. See: <https://www.insideoutcenter.org/>

7 These data were pulled from the Rising Scholars Network website in June, 2026: <https://risingscholarsnetwork.org/>

8 These data were pulled from the Project Rebound website in June, 2026: <https://www2.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/project-rebound>

HOW YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE

For those who wish to assist in the broader effort to build and better understand the postsecondary education in prison data landscape, here are a few things you can do:

- Join (or start) a statewide or regional consortia. These coalitions have helped to elevate awareness and effective practices of higher education in prison in their respective regions. Consortia also provide critical communication, networking, political alliances, and student support inside and upon release. Several models already exist for replication (e.g., the Michigan Consortium for Higher Education in Prison, the New York Consortium for Higher Education in Prison, or the Texas Higher Education in Prison Consortium, to name a few) and members of these existing consortia continue to be helpful in attempts to begin new efforts.
- If you lead or work for a program or affiliated institution of higher education, begin to document what the program is offering each academic term. While this task may sound burdensome, drafting quick points of information and activities can be helpful in the future. These points may include key events like recruitment, admission, and student orientations; specific courses and credentials offered; supplemental programming and non-transcripted supports; faculty and staff trainings; and related areas of importance.
- If the program enrolls incarcerated people at a college or university, begin or continue conversations with institutional research staff to understand if and how incarcerated students are flagged within Student Information Systems. Learn what information about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students can be seen across campus and by whom. Consider joining a campus-wide data use working group to discuss effective practices for vulnerable student populations and share your expertise. In our research, we found that administrators and staff across campuses with prison-based programs desired greater information about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated student populations.⁹
- If incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students are enrolled at a college or university, help them access official institutional administrative, academic, and bursar records. Incarcerated students rarely see individualized billing or tuition statements nor are they provided consistent opportunities to learn how financial aid, scholarships, and other funding is applied to their accounts. Emergent effective practices in the field include providing currently and formerly incarcerated students with meaningful opportunities to review and ask questions about their financial aid award letters, billing statements, administrative records, and academic transcripts.¹⁰

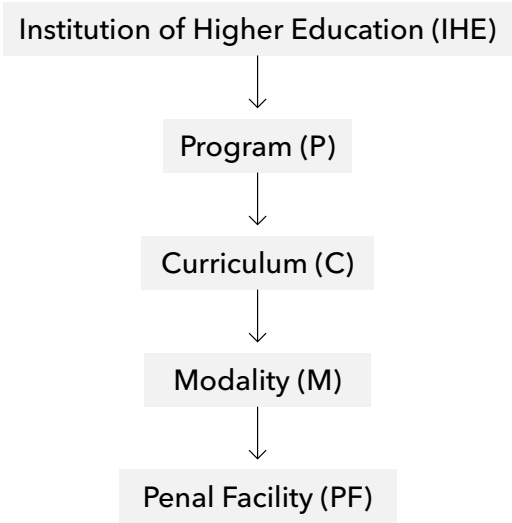
9 Castro, E. L., Knaff, C., Kersten, E., & Taylor, J. (2025). Data collection and reporting of incarcerated college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000661>

10 See: Castro, E. L., Caradonna, C., & Gould, M. R. (2024). "I don't even know what that is": Deprivation, censorship, and responsibility in administering the Pell Grant in prison. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 53(1), 1-22. <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1841&context=jsfa>

MOVING FORWARD, WITH RELIABLE DATA

In the past (2019-2022), the University of Utah research team partnered with the Possibility Lab at UC-Berkeley and the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison to design and distribute the *Annual Survey of Higher Education in Prison Programs* to capture information about prison higher education programs. We distributed the annual surveys to program directors and those data were used to populate the National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs, hosted by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison. From 2019-2022, it made sense to use the program as a unit of analysis and disseminate a survey to program directors because the field was relatively small and homogeneous: the most common affiliation was one prison program, one institution of higher education, and one penal facility, and directors knew the most about their respective programs. The model looked something like Figure 1.

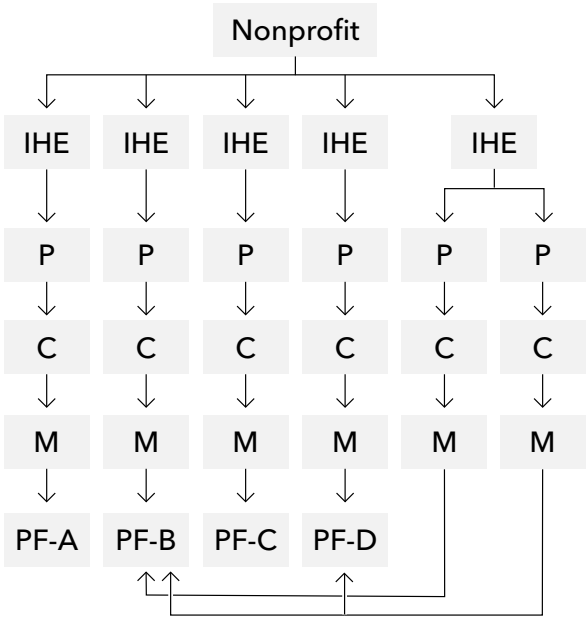
Figure 1: Basic Prison Higher Education Model



Now, in 2026, a survey of program directors is an insufficient approach to researching the evolving and diverse field of higher education in prison and campus-based reentry, where it is now more common to have multi-institution collaborations, statewide coalitions, and other types of networked approaches to prison higher education.

The growing complexity is insufficiently captured in a self-reported survey completed by individual program directors. An example of a more complex model looks something like Figure 2.

Figure 2: Complex Prison Higher Education Model



Additionally, because more incarcerated students are formally enrolled by the college or university, there are more efficient and accurate ways to collect these data. PEARL’s National Dataset Project tackles this challenge by working directly with institutions of higher education, program directors, and state agencies to better understand the types of postsecondary education opportunities being afforded to currently and formerly incarcerated people. PEARL will also continue to partner with statewide coalitions and regional organizations as strong mechanisms for accessing and reporting reliable and timely program information. Statewide consortia are well-represented among the number of programs that completed the 2025 *Census*, and we expect their presence and capacity to grow over time.

METHOD, DATA, AND INFORMATION

The data and information included in this update are complex and involved ongoing collection and verification. The landscape of higher education in prison has changed even within the last year. Below is a concise snapshot of the workflow for data and information used in this update.

2025 Census Distribution, Response, and Additions

- Institutions that received the *2025 Census* with pre-populated historical information: 406
- Institutions that responded to the *2025 Census*: 147 (36% response rate)
 - Incomplete responses: 36 (~24%)
 - Complete responses: 111 (~76%)
 - Excluded responses for not meeting inclusion criteria: 11 (no meaningful partnership with a college or university that provides credit-bearing pathways for currently incarcerated students)
- Institutions that did not respond to the *2025 Census*: 259
- Institutions and programs manually entered by researchers: 401

To download data and information used in this report, go to the [public-facing folder](#).

- [Download the list of institutions that responded to the 2025 Census.](#)
- [Download the entire de-identified 2025 Census dataset \(inclusive of responders and all known information entered by researchers\).](#)
- [Download a copy of the 2025 Census instrument.](#)

DATA AND INFORMATION VERIFICATION

Data and information included in this report went through at least three rounds of verification. Members of the research team reviewed individual responses to the *2025 Census*. This process was to check for errors in entry like spelling and consistency with previous information (if applicable). Following this review, internal institutional, state, and regional tracking sheets were updated accordingly.

The second round of data and information verification occurred through state liaisons and/or regional consortia members. PEARL reached out to 102 individuals across the U.S. in summer 2025 to ask if they could (and would) provide verification that programs existed in their respective states and/or regions (yes or no). A total of 49 people responded affirmatively and liaisons were provided a \$50 gift card for their time and expertise. Fewer than half of the 49 liaisons completed verification, leaving the following 19 states and territories without a liaison to confirm the existence of programs: American Samoa, Delaware, Georgia, Guam, Hawaii, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Northern Mariana Islands, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, District of Columbia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

The third round of data and information verification occurred in partnership with Blue Marble Creative, the technical architects of the National Directory. This semi-automated process checked to ensure institutional types were correct and that spellings of colleges, universities, and penal facilities were consistent with previous years for future possible data linking in the National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs. Most of this work involved correcting inconsistent spellings and/or program name changes between 2022 and 2025 and confirming the location of distinct institutions with the same or similar names in different states (e.g., Widener University in DE and PA) that would have prohibited efficient data linking. The research team only manually entered information into the

2025 Census that could be verified and deleted institutions where there was no credible evidence of operation. Manual entry included program name, affiliated institution of higher education, institution type and state; program website; and program director name, title, and email. When information could not be found or verified, we entered Unknown.

When necessary or requested, the research team followed up via email or Zoom with program staff to address clarifying questions. Throughout this process, the research team sent waves of personalized emails to non-responders. We then shifted our attention and sent emails to individuals in the field who hold great knowledge about the happenings in their state. While many individuals responded to our team in a timely manner, a critical mass of our emails went unanswered. Unfortunately, these emails went to people in states where we know little empirically about postsecondary education in prison. When we received responses to these queries, our team updated the dataset accordingly.

Additionally, our team pulled accredited college and university names for the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, Guam, and Puerto Rico. We then assigned team members to regions and they went state-by-state using the search terms “[college or university name]” and multiple versions of “prison education,” such as “correctional education,” “inside-out,” “prison graduation,” and “Second Chance Pell.” We used terms that could identify web information describing a potential higher education in prison program. We noted changes in institutional names, and closures of universities or programs.

For institutions that did not respond to the 2025 Census, the research team made substantial efforts to gather information to construct basic program profiles and manually enter this information into the 2025 Census. Information retrieval included correspondence with state liaisons and state/regional consortia members who provided

confirmation of the programs operating in their respective states, including the New England Prison Education Collaborative, the Southern Higher Education in Prison Collective, the Ohio Penal Education Consortium, and the Rising Scholars Network. The remaining information was collected through email communications, news publications, and website scraping.

LIMITATIONS

There are considerable limitations to this update and efforts to accurately “count” the field, not the least of which is a rapidly changing landscape of postsecondary education in prison. We know there are existing colleges, universities, and programs formally involved in this work that are not represented here. While our team made extraordinary efforts to communicate with people familiar with prison education programming in their state, non-responses limit our ability to make institutional counts with certainty. PEARL’s 2025 Census data was shared with the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison to be used to update the National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs.

Moving forward, PEARL will continue to research postsecondary education in prison with the college or university as the unit of analysis and will make the lists of institutions and affiliated programs publicly available. PEARL will continue to partner with program leadership and statewide and regional consortia, as well as college and university offices of the registrar and institutional research. The next census update will be in 2027 for the 2025-2026 academic year.

To update institutional and program contact information before the next census, email PEARL@utah.edu.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the program directors and staff who responded to the *2025 Census*. A special thank you to state and regional consortia members for their assistance in verification and to the state liaisons for their prompt responses to queries from our team. As with any multi-year project, many people contributed to this research. Dr. Kehaulani Fagatele-Folau provided leadership during her post-doctoral fellowship and Syla Olive assisted with information verification as a masters student in higher education. Dr. Paméla Cappas-Toro lent her expertise throughout the project.

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Suggested Citation: Prison Education Action Research Lab. (2026, July). *The 2025 Higher Education in Prison Census*. University of Utah. https://pearl.utah.edu/_resources/documents/pearl-2025-census.pdf

This research was supported by a grant from Ascendium Education Group.