

# Partnerships for Progress in New England:

## A Student-Centered Approach to Higher Education in Prison

Report of the New England Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Prison

June 2023

## Executive Summary

The New England Commission on the Future of Higher Education (“the Commission”) was a regional endeavor comprised of 83 leaders from corrections, higher education, re-entry, workforce development and government; approximately 20% of its membership were system-involved advocates and leaders. The Commission engaged in a series of discussions from October 2022 to June 2023 about expanding access to high-quality postsecondary and career pathways for the region’s incarcerated learners.

### Background

The growing evidence of the myriad benefits of prison education programs helps to explain why Congress took historic, bipartisan legislative action to reverse a ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated learners. Effective July 1, 2023, eligible incarcerated people can access federal Pell Grant funding for the first time in almost 30 years.

Student participation in career and educational programming in prison has far-reaching positive implications for society, including:

- **Facility safety:** The presence of educational programs in carceral settings has a demonstrable impact on overall prison culture, reducing violent incidents and promoting positive behaviors among both participants and non-participants (Vera Institute of Justice, 2017).
- **Public safety:** The vast majority (95%) of incarcerated people will eventually return to their communities. Recipients of education programming during incarceration are up to 43% less likely to recidivate than their peers (Davis et al., 2013).
- **Self-efficacy:** Studies have documented a widespread and profound effect on program participants’ sense of purpose, dignity and self-efficacy. For example, participants in prison education programs demonstrated increased self-esteem and reduced feelings of loneliness and depression compared

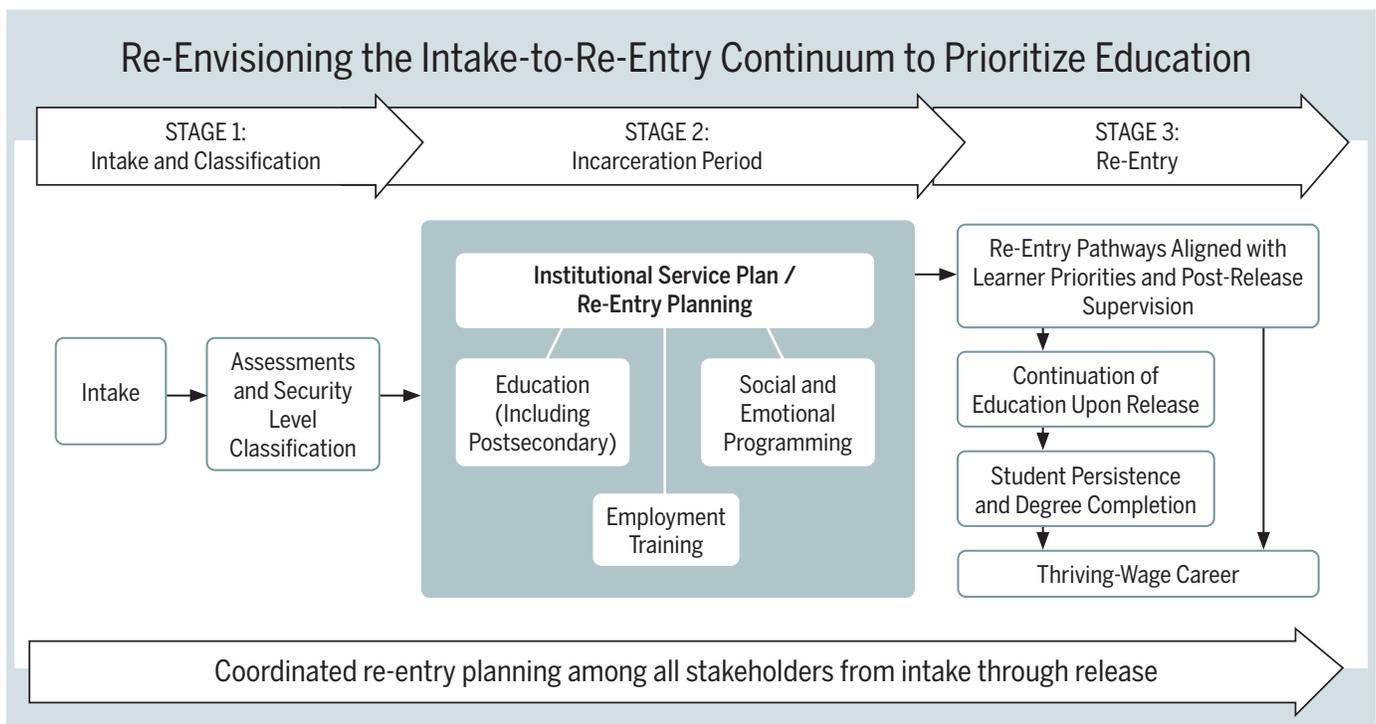
to similarly situated peers who did not participate (Coticchia and Putnam, 2021).

- **Intergenerational impacts:** Evidence suggests that post-secondary education participation may help to disrupt intergenerational cycles related to incarceration and educational attainment (Lim, 2020).
- **Employability:** While formerly incarcerated people continue to face stigma throughout the hiring process, early research suggests that participation in correctional education boosts students’ odds of attaining employment post-release (Davis et al., 2013).

### Results

Commission members crafted 15 recommendations to advance the field of higher education in New England. The product of the largest and most diverse Commission of its kind, their recommendations serve as a roadmap for the region and a model for the nation. Recommendations fall into two primary categories:

- **“Prison-based”** recommendations that focus on improving the learner experience during incarceration, from intake through release and re-entry; and
- **“Community-based”** recommendations that necessitate sustained and regular collaboration among key stakeholders on both the statewide and regional levels.



The Intake-to Re-Entry continuum depicted re-imagines the learner experience to prioritize educational and career planning that begins upon reception into a carceral facility.

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## Prison-Based Recommendations

**Primary Stakeholders Involved:** *Departments of Correction (DOCs), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), employers, state policymakers*

- A. Prioritize postsecondary and career pathways in the intake and classification processes.
- B. Employ “Education and Career Navigators” to advise and assist students on their educational and career pathways, both during incarceration and after release.
- C. Conduct inventories of DOC facilities to promote more effective utilization of physical space, infrastructure, staff time and resources for educational programming.
- D. While remaining mindful of security concerns, expand and integrate technology usage and connectivity to foster a 21st century learner experience in DOC facilities.
- E. Review DOC procedures to ensure that postsecondary programming remains available to all learners and limit disruptions due to location, sentence or disciplinary action.
- F. Strengthen opportunities for work-based learning (e.g., internships and apprenticeships) to support skills development and employability upon release.
- G. Identify and remove barriers which impact students’ academic persistence, support and campus access upon release.

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## Community-Based Recommendations

**Primary Stakeholders Involved:** *DOCs, HEIs, state policymakers, state departments of education and higher education systems, researchers/research organizations, employers, state labor departments, parole/probation, re-entry specialists, interested system-involved people, community-based and nonprofit organizations*

### State-level:

- H. (Part 1): Develop and execute multi-year “state prison education strategic plans” addressing challenges and opportunities unique to each state’s multifaceted local landscape. (Part 2): Undertake legislative engagement strategies to advocate for sustained state investments, in conjunction with the strategic plan (Part 1) and in support of actions outlined in the Commission’s recommendations.
- I. Establish state-specific and voluntary “credit transfer compacts” that signal HEIs’ acceptance of credits earned before and during incarceration.
- J. Enhance college readiness, access and affordability by strengthening developmental education and bridge programs as well as leveraging state and federal programs that lower costs for system-involved people.

### Regional:

- K. Coordinate a voluntary cross-state, cross-facility collaborative to expand student choice and the range of educational offerings.
- L. Conduct a regional landscape assessment of existing course offerings in conjunction with DOCs, HEIs, employers and state labor departments to develop a plan for aligning post-secondary programming with labor market needs and in-demand skills/credentials.
- M. Launch a comprehensive, equity-focused research effort to better document the number of students participating in postsecondary education in prison, their experiences and their post-release education and employment outcomes.
- N. Form a long-term regional collaborative to support regular communication, resource- and idea-sharing among DOCs, state departments of education, HEIs and systems, employers, policymakers, researchers, system-involved experts and other stakeholders within the six New England states.

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## Next Steps

The Commission’s recommendations represent an action plan to expand and strengthen prison education programs in the region, increase the number of students who can access high-quality postsecondary programs while in prison, and support students’ successful transitions back into society—including pursuit of further postsecondary education and thriving-wage careers.

This report also represents a commitment to building a formal, sustained partnership across the region whereby states and institutions can share information and resources, collaborate

on programs and services and build awareness among key stakeholders to ensure adequate investment in prison education programs.

We invite your efforts in supporting the six states to ensure that the Commission’s stated aims are achieved.

To learn more about the Commission’s work, read the full report and see a list of Commissioners, please visit <https://www.nebhe.org/commission>.

## About TEJI

The Educational Justice Institute at MIT (TEJI) is a program within the Massachusetts Institute of Technology dedicated to providing transformative learning experiences for system-involved students and MIT students. A primary goal is to build educational pathways, while simultaneously raising the social consciousness of MIT students. Since its inception in 2018, TEJI has grown significantly and offers both humanities and computer science courses, for which transferable credits are earned through partnerships with regional academic institutions. TEJI also leads the progressive and dynamic Massachusetts Prison Education Consortium (MPEC). TEJI has championed remote synchronous classrooms and thus far has provided educational opportunities for system-involved students in the District of Columbia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

For more information, visit <https://www.teji.mit.edu>.

## About NEBHE

Higher education is New England's most critical sustainable resource. The region's governors knew that over 65 years ago when they founded the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). Today, NEBHE promotes greater education opportunities and services for the residents of New England and its more than 250 colleges and universities. Its mission is to advance equitable postsecondary outcomes through convening, research and programs for students, institution leaders and policymakers. NEBHE's vision is that everyone in New England will have lifelong access to affordable, high-value postsecondary education.

For more information, visit <https://www.nebhe.org>.

## About Ascendium Education Group

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all.

For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org>.

***TEJI and NEBHE thank Ascendium for its commitment to expanding educational opportunities for system-involved people. Ascendium's support made the Commission's work possible.***



**“As someone who was previously incarcerated and benefited from participating [in higher education] in prison, I can attest to the life-changing impact of higher education programs. Not only did they equip me with valuable knowledge and skills, but they also helped me to see myself in a new light and motivated me to turn my life around.”**

**Abraham Santiago, *Student Advocate,***  
Second Chance Educational Alliance

➔ To read the Commission's full report, please visit <https://www.nebhe.org/commission>