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## "I Don't Even Know What That Is": Deprivation, Censorship, and Responsibility in Administering the Pell Grant in Prison

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# ***“I Don’t Even Know What That Is”: Deprivation, Censorship, and Responsibility in Administering the Pell Grant in Prison***

**By Erin L. Castro, University of Utah, Cydney Caradonna, University of Utah, & Mary R. Gould, Sunshine Lady Foundation<sup>1</sup>**

*The violence of incarceration creates greater responsibility for higher education administrators in supporting students who are in prison. Using focus group data with incarcerated students and formerly incarcerated alumni who participated in or are actively participating in Second Chance Pell, we explore their perceptions and understandings of the Pell Grant and eligibility for the Pell Grant, including lifetime eligibility used limits. Through a lens of Witnessing, we argue that deprivation and censorship of information negatively influence students’ access to accurate and timely information about federal student aid and their ability to fully participate in the process. Accordingly, college and university staff have a fiduciary duty to incarcerated applicants and students who are subjected to the information deprivation and censorship that characterizes imprisonment in the U.S.*

**Keywords:** *Pell grant, prison, higher education, higher education in prison, financial aid, incarceration, censorship, deprivation*

**L**aunched in 2015, the Second Chance Pell Experiment allows a select number of institutions of higher education to provide Pell Grants to eligible incarcerated students. To date, 200 postsecondary education programs have participated in the initiative and over 40,000 incarcerated students have received Pell funds (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023). During the six-year Experiment, incarcerated students have earned 11,966 credentials using the Pell Grant, with most of those credentials (4,286) being short-term vocational and career and technical education certificates (Chesnut & Taber, 2022).

Research centering student experiences with the implementation of Second Chance Pell is scarce; and, in many ways, this makes sense. By design, prisons and the people held within them are difficult to access by the outside world. Indeed, the violence of incarceration hinges on forced isolation and flourishes in the absolute authority of departments of corrections. As closed institutions “holding an ever-growing disempowered population,” the general public has little knowledge about or desire to know what happens inside prisons and jails (Schlanger & Shay, 2008, p. 139). The combination of ignorance and apathy is a curious cultural phenomenon in a country that spends over \$30 billion a year on corrections and nearly \$100 billion on policing (Buchler, 2021).

As a system of violence, incarceration traps the most disadvantaged in the United States: minoritized communities, those surviving poverty, families without access to quality education, those with histories of trauma or abuse, and individuals with substance use histories (Redburn et al., 2014). The U.S. over-incarcerates people with intellectual and physical disabilities, the under-educated, and queer and trans\* communities (Jones, 2021; Meyer et al., 2017). Those most vulnerable to state violence fill our prisons or jails, and this context matters when discussing the provision of postsecondary education during incarceration. It is important to be clear that we are not talking

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Gould is the Founding Director of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and completed all data collection, analysis, and reporting while in that role. The Sunshine Lady Foundation did not fund any aspect of this research.

about an equal slice of the overall population in prison, but rather a group of people for whom postsecondary education remains largely out of reach (Cahalan et al., 2022).

It is within this context of structural inequality that we approach understanding the implementation of the Experiment on-the-ground, inside prisons. Using focus group data with incarcerated students and formerly incarcerated alumni who participated in or are actively participating in Second Chance Pell, we explore their perceptions and understandings of the Pell Grant and eligibility for the Pell Grant, including lifetime eligibility used (LEU) limits. We argue for a fiduciary responsibility on behalf of college and university staff to incarcerated applicants and students who are subjected to the information deprivation and censorship that characterizes imprisonment in the U.S.

### **Literature Review: Deprivation and Censorship During Incarceration**

The violence of incarceration creates an added level of responsibility for higher education administrators in supporting students who are in prison. There are at least two variables that postsecondary professionals, and specifically financial aid administrators, should know and understand about the context of attending college in prison: deprivation and censorship of information. Each of these variables has direct implications for students of prison higher education programs and the quality and equity of their experience. In what follows, we briefly describe each of these realities for the 2.2 million people who are under federal or state custody and the roughly 30,000 currently incarcerated learners (Chesnut & Taber, 2022).

Deprivation defines incarceration in the United States. Designed to impose punishment and suffering, incarcerated people are restricted in their ability to act independently or with a modicum of privacy. Incarcerated people are required to follow a strict daily schedule that functionally removes their autonomy and individual choice. For example, prison personnel regulate incarcerated people's access to personal care like bathing or using the restroom and dictate what and when they can eat. Incarcerated people have virtually no control over their day-to-day lives, including when they wake up, what their jobs are, and when (and if) they have access to recreation (Quandt & Jones, 2021). Consequently, incarcerated people can develop feelings of dependence and helplessness, and research shows that this loss of autonomy harms mental health (Edgemon & Clay-Warner, 2018; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). When one does not have any control over their surroundings, including an inability to prepare for the unpredictable, they can -- and do -- experience deep psychological trauma (Evans, 2003).

Similarly, incarceration includes boredom, monotony, and lack of stimulation (Quandt & Jones, 2021). Most incarcerated people have limited access to meaningful educational opportunities or job training, and such a lack of activity and mental stimulation can lead "to extreme stress, anger, and frustration" (Quandt & Jones, 2021, para 8). In most states, there are fewer than 10 prison higher education programs (Gaskill et al., 2023). Yet, there are at least 1,566 state prisons, 98 federal prisons, 3,116 local jails, 1,323 juvenile custody facilities, 80 Indian country jails, 181 immigration detention facilities across the country, as well as military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in U.S. territories (Sawyer & Wagner, para 2). In other words, "college choice" is a myth for aspiring college students who are incarcerated. Decades of research indicate that this combination of boredom and lack of purpose during incarceration can also cause depression, general feelings of helplessness, and hopelessness, as well as a diminished sense of self-worth and value (Barry et al., 2017; Haney, 2021; Kastos et al, 2022; Shuford et al., 2018).

The conditions imposed by departments of corrections, at minimum, create a lack of choice for incarcerated people with direct implications for the provision of postsecondary education during incarceration. Incarcerated people lack access to knowledge and information that would assist them

in making informed and timely decisions about their lives, including those related to college and career. When people are deprived of opportunities to engage with others and ideas, and improve their circumstances, feelings of desperation can result. This means that incarcerated people may be participating in an activity, such as pursuit of a college credential in Automotive Repair, because it is the only option, not because it is their choice. If provided the choice, incarcerated people may (and many do, see: Castro et al., 2022), choose an entirely different curriculum pathway.

On a purely functional level, such deprivation poses challenges to professionals in higher education, including financial aid staff, regarding meeting minimum standards of practice in serving students (American College Personnel Association - College Student Educators International & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015). U.S. prisons are notorious for making print, digital, and various media materials inaccessible to incarcerated people. Information censorship is part and parcel of institutionalized confinement, and departments of corrections closely monitor what information is allowed within prison walls (Blakinger, 2022). Consequently, incarcerated people are subject to extreme circumstances of censorship and exist within what Brawn refers to as an “informational vacuum” (Castro & Brawn, 2017, p. 115).

Information restrictions during incarceration vary widely across states and facilities. While distinct in their specificity among facilities, the restrictions are consistently arbitrary and broad (Dholakia, 2022). Censorship practices are subject to little internal or external review, can (and do) change at any time, and are “overly dismissive of incarcerated people’s right to access literature behind bars” (Tager et al, 2019, p. 2). Such practices and policies can have chilling effects on speech and academic inquiry (Pokornowski et al., 2023), and raise serious concerns about incarcerated people’s First Amendment rights (see *Procunier v. Martinez*, 1974).

Even within the Bureau of Federal Prisons, there are widely different restrictions of print material across facilities. According to the National Institute of Corrections (n.d), such inconsistencies are by design:

Each prison governor has the discretion to ban access to any reading material if he or she [sic] considers that the content presents a threat to good order or discipline, or that possession of the material is likely to have an adverse effect on the prisoner’s physical or mental condition. (para 2)

The challenge, of course, is in the interpretation. Correctional staff routinely ban books, magazines, pamphlets, and greeting cards that they deem inappropriate. Some penal facility staff ban photocopies, materials downloaded from the internet, and miscellaneous print materials to be shared with incarcerated people (Blackwell, 2022). As the authors of this manuscript know too well, many, many cards and letters sent to incarcerated people are rejected by authorities in the prison mail room and simply returned to sender. The level of specificity regarding what can and cannot travel inside of a facility is often overly complicated and burdensome for non-incarcerated people to follow (Pokornowski et al., 2023). Such practices reduce the overall amount of information traveling into facilities. With the broad limitations (or absolute absence) of Internet access, print materials have an outsized value within jails and prisons as compared to the outside community. In many prisons, jails and detention centers print materials that are sent into the facility are one of the few access points for information from “the outside.”

Comprising what Tager (2019) calls the nation’s largest book ban, federal and state prison authorities “censor content with little oversight or public scrutiny” (p. 1). Examples of prison officials censoring books periodically make national headlines. In Texas, for example, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDOJ) bans nearly 10,000 books from entering facilities. Examples of banned texts for the TDOJ include several road atlases for having detailed maps of the state and

the book, *Why do rollercoasters make you puke?* (Price & Serpio, 2022), because it contains detailed instructions on how to hotwire a car. Many facility staff and state policies ban yoga books and anatomy texts over “explicit” illustrations (Blakinger, 2022).

While commonplace, not much is known about how prison authorities make decisions regarding censorship. Texts can be banned due to what prison officials label as obscene or aid in escape (Blakinger, 2023). In the same state, books rejected at one facility may be permitted at another, or a text that is banned one month could be allowed in the next (Blakinger, 2022). How-to books and print materials that may educate or empower incarcerated people are routinely prohibited by prison and jail authorities, and especially those that discuss race, civil rights, or incarceration (Dholakia, 2022; Jones, 2023). In fact, a disproportionate share of what is censored by prison officials deals with issues of race (PEN America, 2019). Louisiana, for example, bans texts by Black prison abolitionists, including George Jackson’s (1972) *Blood in my eye* and Mariame Kaba’s (2021) *We do this ‘til we free us*, for being “racially inflammatory.” However, as Blakinger (2022) points out, the state of Louisiana “allows ‘Mein Kampf,’ as well as every single book mentioned in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s round-up of racist literature” (para 17).

Departments of corrections also restrict from where information can be sent to incarcerated people. In their recent policy analysis, Pokornowski et al. (2023) found that content-neutral prohibitions are prevalent across all states and involve limitations on where and how people who are incarcerated may purchase books. The overwhelming majority of the 52 departments of corrections’ policies they reviewed contained a clause that limits “the purchase or receipt of publications to some combination of publishers or verified distributors” (p. 8). Restrictions on book vendors pose significant, and at times insurmountable, challenges to many college-in-prison program leaders in their attempts to provide affordable, timely, and high-quality books for students.

Information restrictions are not limited to books, letters, or mail. Prison administrators are notorious for limiting a range of information that incarcerated people can receive and/or access. For facilities with internet access, websites are limited to those that are “whitelisted,” and these decisions are made on a facility-by-facility basis. Phone access is also limited, and numbers must be approved before they can be accessed by an incarcerated individual. For example, the phone number that the U.S. Department of Education established for incarcerated borrowers attempting to rehabilitate loans in default, was banned by many prisons (West, 2023). It is also common for prison staff to prevent standard education program and/or course materials from entering facilities for reasons as simple as pages being stapled together or a website URL being printed at the footer of a printed page. The broad brushstroke of “safety and security” is the only reason needed to limit access to information.

The information deprivation and censorship that is a defining characteristic of incarceration exacerbates general misunderstandings of student financial aid and affordability among college students (Shaulskiy et al., 2015). Non-incarcerated college students already hold low levels of financial aid literacy (Ogle, 2022) even with multiple points of access to information. In fact, most non-incarcerated students enter postsecondary education with vastly different levels of understanding and awareness of financial aid and the true cost of attendance (Horn et al., 2003; Ogle, 2022). Understanding the complex terrain of tuition and fees can be confusing, and consequently, many non-incarcerated students do not know basic details of their aid package, interest rates on loans, or requirements for repayments post-enrollment (Barreto &, 2020). For incarcerated college students, information deprivation and censorship lead to a general lack of understanding of student financial aid and creates the context where incarcerated borrowers are making uninformed financial decisions (to no fault of their own) that can have detrimental impacts for their college experience and financial futures. In what follows, we describe our conceptual framework and methodological approach, followed by analysis and discussion.

### Conceptual Framing: Witnessing

We ground this study in a recognition of incarceration as a form of structural violence. In what Sharpe (2016) calls the ‘afterlife of slavery,’ contemporary U.S. incarceration is the manifestation of intense and enduring investments in racial domination and death. It is within this context that we use the concept of *witnessing* as an interpretive framework for research.

Defined as a profound ethical engagement within research, witnessing as a framework helps to elevate notions of researcher responsibility in the production of knowledge (Fine, 2006; Pillow, 2019). So much of education research focuses on identifying the problem (Duncan-Andrade, 2006) and invariably, implications and best practices are derived from such identifications. Certainly, we must understand problems to correct them, but we also need to imagine radical futures of possibility where the conditions that feed such problems do not exist. It is within this spirit that we move from simply identifying ‘what is?’ toward using our research findings to inform ‘what if?’ (Boda et al., 2022). We use witnessing to elevate the structural, political, and sociohistorical forces that create the conditions for (not) knowing during incarceration, with the goal of drawing attention toward the broader contours of domination and suffering that create the need for college-in-prison in the first place.

Incarcerated college students are placed in a uniquely vulnerable position by state and federal authority, bound by archaic and inhumane conditions, and subject to extreme deprivation and censorship. We want practitioners to bear witness to their experiences with and understandings of federal student aid so that we may ultimately change the structural conditions that cause and sustain harm. It makes little sense to simply document the extent to which incarcerated students know or do not know something without thoughtfully identifying and interrogating the reasons for such not-knowing and helping to challenge these structural conditions. We want practitioners to gain increased awareness of the violence of incarceration so that they can view the bigger picture of incarceration as oppression, and then ask how things could and should be otherwise (Fine, 2006). We want practitioners to ask questions about incarceration, such as who is incarcerated and why, but also questions about those not harmed by the machinery of targeted punishment, such as: why are so many people able to live lives outside of the prison? Why is there such distance between those targeted for incarceration and those left to live freely? What can I do? Witnessing provides us with the framing to “awaken” a sense of injustice in those with material and cultural power” (Fine, 2006 p. 102), such as administrators and leaders in postsecondary education so that we may “dream new patterns of knowing” (Pillow, 2019, p. 131) that may lead to more just and equitable futures.

### Methodology

Data for this analysis were collected as part of the mixed methods study, *Exploring the Experience of Participants in Second Chance Pell*, conducted by the Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison at the University of Utah from 2019-2022. For the broader project, our research team conducted qualitative and descriptive analysis with students, staff, and administrators working among nine participating institutions of higher education. We analyzed de-identified student academic and financial aid data and evaluated student tuition documents. For the present analysis, we use data collected during focus groups conducted with 98 incarcerated students participating in the Second Chance Pell Experimental Site Initiative across two states and seven formerly incarcerated alumni of the Experiment in one state, representing nine prison higher education programs. We also draw from individual student tuition and billing documents, which were provided by research offices at respective institutions.

The larger research project centered multiple questions concerning the experiences of participants in Second Chance Pell (Castro et al., 2022). In total, our team conducted 32 interviews and 21 focus groups with 138 participants of prison higher education. In this manuscript, we use a subset of data to address the following question:

How do current and former students participating in the Second Chance Pell Experiment describe their experiences with and understandings of the Pell Grant, and applying for and accessing federal student aid?

Our team held focus groups from October 2021 to March 2022. In total, we met with 98 currently incarcerated students across four penal facilities in-person and with seven formerly incarcerated alumni via Zoom. Focus group participants were diverse in terms of age, race, and education experience. Table 1 provides demographic information about focus group participants for the following variables: race/ethnicity, first generation student status, and first-time student status. Representation among racial and ethnic groups varied by site. On average, white students comprised the greatest percentage of focus group participants (61.32%) across all sites. Black students accounted for a quarter (25.47%) of all participants. Across sites, American Indian students were significantly underrepresented in focus groups and Hispanic/Latinx students were significantly underrepresented at Sites A and B.

Many focus group participants also addressed questions regarding whether they were the first in their family to attend college or whether their first experience with postsecondary education was in prison. The majority of participants were first-generation (66%) and first-time (52%) college students. It is important to note that not all focus group participants addressed this question; percentages reflect the number of students who provided this information. At Site C, for example, of the 56 focus group participants, 16 revealed whether or not they were first generation college students. Among those 16, three-quarters (75%) were the first in their family to attend college.

**Table 1**

*Participant information*

Variable	Site A (N=22)	Site B (N=7)	Site C (N=56)	Site D (N= 21)	Overall (N = 106)
Race/Ethnicity					
American Indian	0%	1.79%	4.76%	1.89%	0%
Asian	0%	28.57%	0%	0%	1.89%
Black	22.73%	28.57%	33.9%	4.76%	25.74%
White	68.18%	42.86	55.36%	76.19%	61.32%
Hispanic	18.18%	0%	7.14%	47.6%	6.6%
Other/not listed	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Unknown	0%	0%	9.52%	0%	1.86%
First Generation Student	83%	28.57%	75%	66.67%	66.96%
First-time College Student	35.29%	42.86%	41.18%	40%	51.67%

Table 2 provides information about the prison higher education program, including its affiliated institutional type of higher education, modes of instruction, credential pathways offered, number of facilities served, and type of facilities served. The present analysis includes data from a total of four participating Second Chance Pell programs; three affiliated with 2-year public

institutions and one affiliated with a 4-year public institution. Together, they provide certificates, applied associate degrees, and associate and bachelor degrees and do so through in-person (n=1) and distance-based (n=3) modalities. Distance based, for this sample, means a combination of hybrid modalities excluding paper correspondence. Three programs serve incarcerated people in men- and women-designated facilities, and one serves students in a women-designated facility. It is important to note that while we can identify the binary (i.e., female or male) sex-designation of the penal facility, we cannot make assumptions regarding the gender identities of the participants in this study.

**Table 2**

*Institutional profiles*

Site	Institution Type	Modes of Instruction	Credential Pathways	Number of Facilities Served	Facility Sex Designation
A	2-year, Public	Distance-based	Certificates, Associate of Arts, Associate of General Studies, Associate of Applied Science, Associate of Professional Studies	2	Female, Male
B	4-year, Public	In-person	Bachelor of Arts	1	Male
C	2-year, Public	Distance-based	Certificates, Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Associate of Applied Science	12	Female, Male
D	2-year, Public	Distance-based	Associate of General Studies	1	Female, Male

The research team used a semi-structured interview protocol and each focus group lasted approximately one hour. For each focus group, two members of the research team were present; one member led the discussion while the other took notes. Our team asked whether incarcerated students could be monetarily compensated at each site for their participation in the research, and each department of corrections denied our request. Following data collection, our team designed and mailed follow-up communications for incarcerated students and alumni that included a thank you letter and a financial aid fact sheet with contact information and answers to common questions that arose during focus groups (see Gaskill et al., 2022c). Non-incarcerated alumni participants received a \$250 Amazon gift card as compensation for their participation.

As with any research endeavor that aims to include the perspectives of incarcerated people, this project has limitations. The first is that this research occurs under correctional surveillance. Second, our research team did not choose the incarcerated participants for focus groups. We relied on program directors and their correctional counterparts to ensure that focus group participants were identified ahead of time and provided with necessary clearance to participate. We asked program directors to invite all their current and former students to participate and that we would hold as many focus groups as the facility would allow. While our attempts at inclusivity were steadfast, we ultimately had no control over who the prison and program allowed to meet with us.



## Student Financial Aid Literacy in a Context of Deprivation and Censorship

Our analysis of the experiences of Second Chance Pell participants and alumni indicate that the forces of deprivation and censorship negatively influence their access to accurate and timely information about federal student aid, and as a result, their ability to fully participate in the process. Specifically, students are provided insufficient information regarding their cost of attendance, eligibility for and usage of the Pell Grant, including lifetime eligibility, by the institution in which they are enrolled and the U.S. Department of Education. In what follows, we describe and analyze students' experiences and then follow with a discussion and implications.

### ***“I Don’t Even Know What That Is”: Perceptions of the Pell Grant and Lifetime Eligibility***

Because of widening social inequality and who is targeted for imprisonment in the U.S., many incarcerated people’s first experience with postsecondary education is during incarceration (Castro et al., 2022). At each site, we asked students what the Pell Grant was and why they were eligible. In response, there were consistently a few students who demonstrated an understanding of federal student aid and were able to accurately describe their eligibility status based on financial need. At site C (2-year public), for example, Tyler described the Pell Grant as a “federally funded program that helps you go to school when you’re financially strapped or can’t provide the funds yourself.” However, most students only had a partial understanding of why Pell Grants were made available to them in prison and held inaccurate information about both financial aid and eligibility criteria.

When asked why they were eligible, many students offered mistaken explanations or simply said, “I don’t know.” One student at Site D (2-year public), for example, shared that they thought they were given access to Pell based on their military service. Another student at the same site thought that he received the Pell Grant because it was a “second chance” offered during incarceration and because he was incarcerated, he was eligible. While some students were able to articulate Pell as based on “need” or “income,” other students shared that they had been recruiting friends based on the premise that “All you need to know is that you filled out your FAFSA and they’re going to pay for your school, if you’re 24 and you’re in prison, then you’re going to get it paid for.”

Roughly half of focus group participants across all sites (N=48) had no awareness of need-based financial aid until they were incarcerated; that is, prior to incarceration they were unaware of opportunities to finance postsecondary education. There were clear differences in understandings between students and alumni with experience in postsecondary education prior to incarceration and those without such experiences. Participants who had attended college before incarceration displayed a deeper understanding of postsecondary education in general, and available student aid in particular, than their first-time attendee peers. Before learning of Pell’s potential for supporting their postsecondary education during incarceration, many students were preparing to pay out of pocket. Sofia, a student participating in the Experiment through a two-year public institution, shared: “I’ve always been aware that there’s grants out there for people, but I never even knew how to find those avenues.”

What the Pell Grant could be used for was also a point of misunderstanding for students and alumni. Several students at sites A (2-year public) and B (4-year public) initially understood lifetime eligibility to mean that they had infinite access to Pell monies to fund their education. Some students and alumni spoke specifically of wanting to pursue graduate degrees using the Pell Grant. For example, Paul at site B (4-year public) had only recently discovered that he could not use Pell to fund a graduate degree: “I was told that it [graduate school] was going to cost me money, so, because of that, I was kind of discouraged.”

When we asked students and alumni about lifetime eligibility for the Pell Grant, almost all the participants were unclear both about what the eligibility criteria are and how much eligibility they had used during the Experiment. Only one student at Site A (2-year, public), Edward, knew the term ‘lifetime eligibility.’ He said, “I’m pretty sure it’s about six years of guaranteed education if you so choose to use it.” The majority of responses across sites can accurately be captured in one student’s response, at site C (2-year public), to our question about lifetime eligibility: “I don’t even know what that is.”

Our team also asked participants if they knew how much Pell they had used and how much eligibility they had remaining. Students shared examples of self-calculations and estimations, but no concrete knowledge of what, exactly, they have remaining nor how to find out. When we inquired how they could find this information, incarcerated students and alumni almost all said that they would ask their education coordinator who works for the department of corrections. None of our participants shared that they received any formal correspondence from the Department of Education indicating their lifetime eligibility calculation. In theory, one site allowed for incarcerated students to log-in to the Federal Student Aid portal online, but students expressed frustration in that they were rarely allowed the opportunity to log-in and still had questions about the specific eligibility thresholds.

As part of our methodological approach, we explained that Pell dollars are finite. We shared that lifetime eligibility was the total amount of Pell Grant dollars that a student could use toward their undergraduate education and that the calculation is tracked by the U.S. Department of Education. During focus groups inside prisons, we explained that undergraduate students can receive the Pell Grant for up to 12 terms or roughly six years and that once they have earned a bachelors or professional degree, they can no longer access Pell, regardless if they reached the usage limit (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). After the conclusion of focus groups, our team mailed correspondence to each incarcerated participant explaining the above and providing additional details on how students could contact the Department of Education. At the one site where students were allowed to send emails for a fee, our team also shared this information with a handful of students who contacted us via email.

### ***“The Nature of Being Incarcerated Entails a Huge Lack of Trust”: Transparency, FAFSA, and Tuition Statements***

Students’ trust in college and university staff regarding financial aid was typically site-dependent. However, in general, students held low levels of confidence and trust in college and university staff regarding financial aid. Students described a lack of transparency regarding how financial aid works, including how things like cost of attendance and books and supplies were calculated. Philip at site A (2-year, public), for example, urged for the necessity of program staff to understand that “the nature of being incarcerated entails a huge lack of trust sometimes...So, knowing exactly what you’re getting into before you jump into it, especially financially, should be pretty upfront.” Students at this site described lack of transparency as having a negative impact on their overall experience in the Experiment because it breeds suspicion.

Student responses to questions about tuition, fees, and general cost of attendance fell into two main categories: 1) feeling relief that staff shield them from the stress of having to make sense of the financial aid process and 2) feeling dissatisfied with the rote directions they received for completing the FAFSA and suspicions about Pell Grant money overages. Some students implicitly trust program staff and require limited transparency, which can inadvertently contribute to financial aid confusion and illiteracy among students. Manuel at site A (2-year, public), for example, described how students defer to both prison staff and prison education program coordinators to complete the

FAFSA: “All I do is sit down and let [the program coordinator] fill out the forms.” Nicholas at site D (2-year, public) described the prison program’s orientation as “a really fast process” and Cody said it lasted “two minutes.” In this orientation session, students were directed to “sign here, put zeroes here, and [use] this code” with little individual attention or explanation of the underlying rationale for prescribed answers. Both TJ and Cody wished for more clarity regarding the “reasoning” behind the directions given to them by program staff.

Concepts such as cost of attendance and why students did not receive refunds were a consistent point of confusion and frustration. While not law, U.S. Department of Education (2023) guidance stipulates that incarcerated people should not receive any Pell Grant overages in excess of cost of attendance, commonly referred to as ‘refunds.’<sup>2</sup> At site C (2-year, public), a few students said they had “no clue” about the cost of tuition and had never seen a tuition bill from the college in which they were enrolled. At this site, students were provided with a general breakdown handout that depicted the price per credit hour and instructed to self-calculate (see Figure 1). With this generalized handout, institutional staff place the burden of calculating the specific costs of attendance on incarcerated students. Moreover, it appears that this document was drafted for non-incarcerated students as it instructs students to “see your academic advisor” if they have questions. Focus group data from this site indicate that students do not have readily access to an academic advisor.

While the handout may have provided students with a general sense of the cost of attendance, they explained that they would have appreciated having a personalized statement that clearly identifies the specific costs charged to their student account, the credits posted, and any balances remaining. Nine of the 48 students at this site mentioned that it was possible to gain mediated access to a tuition bill by requesting that the prison education director log-in to their online account and bring them a printed copy to the prison. These nine students were sure to stipulate that they had to remain persistent in their requests for the documentation, routinely reminding staff of their requests. A few of these students shared that the information in the statement that they finally received was “superficial” or “general,” and they were left with questions regarding the specific costs of credit hours, fees, books and supplies, and equipment. They explained that prison education staff were unable to offer any additional insight or guidance beyond what appeared on the printout, and they were restricted in their ability to reach out to college staff via phone or correspondence to get their questions answered.

### ***“Where is the Refund Going?”: Suspicion Among Students***

Participants who accessed the Pell Grant before incarceration knew that they would typically receive a refund of any monies in excess of tuition and fees. Many students in this study were aware that if they were not incarcerated, they would be awarded their excess Pell funds in the form of a refund. Students shared that prison education program staff do not adequately explain what happens to Pell refunds. Students at Site D (2-year, public), for example, were especially suspicious about the lack of refunds and almost a quarter of the focus group participants mentioned refunds. Noting that students cannot keep books or laptops purchased using their Pell funds, Wesley was especially

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<sup>2</sup> For more, see U.S. Department of Education (2023). Prison Education Program Questions and Answers, PEP-Q9: “To avoid situations where allowable costs are not included in the cost of the attendance, schools must include books, course materials, equipment, and supplies as part of institutional charges and either provide those materials directly to the individual or include the costs of books and supplies in the individual’s tuition and fees. If for some reason a credit balance is created, the school must return the Pell Grant funds associated with the credit balance to the Department and it will be credited to the student’s remaining Pell eligibility.” [Guidance issued 12/14/2022].

incensed that the college does not send them refund checks. He said, “They don’t reimburse what they don’t use to you; I want an understanding of where the money is going.” Similarly, Cody expressed some understanding that the college “supposedly” calculates the cost of attendance for incarcerated students so precisely that there is no remainder to refund. However, in the absence of any documentation, he is skeptical that this is the case. He asked, “Where is the refund going? Is there a refund?... Ideally you would be able to see that on a tuition statement.” TJ wanted transparency about the cost of books, supplies, and tuition and whether the college was making a profit: “We just want to know if it is happening,” he said.

**Figure 1**

*Self-calculation cost of attendance bandout*

*Data is based on the 2020-2021 Academic Year*

	2-credit	3-credit	4-credit	5-credit
Cost Per Credit	\$ 205.65	\$ 411.30	\$ 616.95	\$ 1,028.25
Material Fee Per Course	\$ 4.50	\$ 4.50	\$ 4.50	\$ 4.50
Online Fee Per Credit	\$ 10.00	\$ 20.00	\$ 30.00	\$ 50.00
\$70 Per Course      Resource Fee - (Material Fee + Online Fee)	amt varies	\$ 45.50	\$ 35.50	\$ 25.50
	\$ 45.50	\$ 35.50	\$ 25.50	\$ 15.50
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 481.30</b>	<b>\$ 686.95</b>	<b>\$ 892.60</b>	<b>\$ 1,098.25</b>

  

Add up the total due for each course you choose	\$	
Add the DOC Technology and Support Fee Charge Per Semester	\$ 180.00	
Grand Total Due	\$	
Award range for Pell Funds based on total credits taken this semester	\$	
Subtract estimated Pell Funds from the Grand Total Due	\$	

If the amount here is zero \$ you owe no money, if there is a positive balance you owe money and if there is a negative balance, it will be returned to the Federal Government. Students in the Second Chance Pell pilot program are not entitled to refunds by federal Financial Aid guidelines.

*Note: excess funds are refunded to the Department of Education*

Credits Taken Range	6-8 Credits	9-11 Credits	12-15 Credits
Second Chance Pell Funding Awarded	\$ 1,586.00	\$ 2,380.00	\$ 3,173.00

  

	EXAMPLE Person A takes a 2-credit & a 4-credit class	EXAMPLE Person B takes two 3-credit & one 4-credit class	EXAMPLE student C takes one 3-credit, one 4-credit & one 5 credit class	EXAMPLE Person C takes four 3-credit classes
# of credits	6	10	12	12
Class #1	\$ 481.30	\$ 686.95	\$ 686.95	\$ 686.95
Class #2	\$ 892.60	\$ 686.95	\$ 892.60	\$ 686.95
Class #3		\$ 892.60	\$ 1,028.25	\$ 686.95
Class #4				\$ 686.95
Total Course Fees	\$ 1,373.90	\$ 2,266.50	\$ 2,607.80	\$ 2,747.80
DOC Tech/Support Fee	\$ 180.00	\$ 180.00	\$ 180.00	\$ 180.00
Grand Total Due	\$ 1,553.90	\$ 2,446.50	\$ 2,787.80	\$ 2,927.80
2nd Chance Pell Award	\$ 1,586.00	\$ 2,380.00	\$ 3,173.00	\$ 3,173.00
	\$ 32.10 Refund DoFE	\$ (66.50) Amt Due	\$385.20 Refund DoFE	\$245.20 Refund DoFE

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Students had drastically different perceptions of where the excess funds went. Isaac and Shane at site C (2-year, public) suggested that the funds were returned to the federal government, while another student, Peter, was insistent that the college kept the funds. Louis, at the same site, speculated that a “slush fund” meant to pay for books and supplies was where these funds went, dictated by the college. Greg at site D (2-year, public) thought it was likely “more lucrative for the

school” to use Pell monies, as other students wondered “Are they going to pocket the rest of the money?” Wesley and another student, Charles at site D (2-year, public), even imagined program staff buying new cars and homes with their Pell funds. Wesley was particularly suspicious about the funneling of students into applying for federal student aid, “Why are they so adamant that we will fill it out [the FAFSA]?” and did not understand why state funding could not be used for his tuition so that he could save his Pell eligibility.

Noticing that the student computer fee was listed as exactly \$500, Javier at site C (2-year public) questioned how administrators calculate and present student costs. “I mean, that’s a really round number,” he said. “You don’t go to Dell and just [say], ‘I want a \$500.00 computer.’” For Javier, he was suspicious that a computer, to which he only has seldom opportunity to access, costs exactly \$500. Administrators, he implied, are adding but not explaining fees beyond the actual price of the device. He pointed out that if the charge was a rental fee, then he should have full access to the computer for the duration of the class. Additionally, students remarked that the equipment they pay for should work, and instead is routinely dysfunctional and outdated (Gaskill et al., 2022b). At Site C (2-year, public), students described word processing and spreadsheet applications as “dumbed down” versions of Google Docs and Sheets that do not allow students to format their assignments as directed. “In some cases, it’s useless to put it politely,” said Mario. Rogelio, also at Site C, recalled being stuck with a broken device for the first month of the semester: “I should’ve caused...more fuss over it if I knew I was paying for it,” he said. With regard to the substandard software, he lamented, “I’m wasting my money every time I get a B when I know I should get an A because of format[ting].”

### **Resisting Not Knowing During Incarceration: A Discussion and Implications**

What might it mean to witness the experiences of incarcerated college students participating in Second Chance Pell? At minimum, we believe that it requires college and university administrators to examine their current institutional practices for serving incarcerated students and asking whether the degree of access to information afforded via these practices meets minimum standards of practice. We want the cruel and arbitrary nature of U.S. imprisonment at the forefront for college and university administrators when serving incarcerated students because without such recognition, the forces of deprivation and censorship will consume good intentions.

Part of witnessing means educating oneself about the inhumane conditions of incarceration in the U.S. and recognizing that incarcerated college students are deprived of choice because choice, as Desmond (2023) states, makes exploitation difficult. Prison administrators tyrannically regulate and restrict the range of options afforded to incarcerated people for all aspects of their daily life. The wide scale implementation of the Second Chance Pell Experiment and expanded Pell Grant access for eligible incarcerated people is occurring in a context of severe and normalized penal repression (Sered, 2019). Restricted in their ability to make choices about their postsecondary and career pathways, students in this study are spending down their Pell Grant lifetime eligibility on credential pathways that, if afforded other options, they may choose differently. Without access to accurate information from their college or university about why they are eligible for the grant, how the funding is being expensed, and other critical information, incarcerated college students can become further exploited.

Not knowing key information about financial aid and the Pell Grant during incarceration is a function of the systemic forces of information deprivation and censorship, tightly curated and maintained by prison administrators and perhaps unknowingly or unintentionally upheld by college and university administrators and prison education program staff. Incarcerated students should not be blamed or punished for holding general misunderstandings about financial aid, how the Pell

Grant works, or why they are eligible. Nor should they be blamed or punished for the many questions they have regarding federal student aid and costs of attendance. Their skepticism regarding how colleges and universities spend their Pell dollars is justified, as are their calls for greater transparency and information regarding FAFSA completion, tuition and fees, equipment charges, and cost of attendance. A framework of witnessing can help practitioners see this broader environmental context.

Students in this study either expressed dissatisfaction with rote directions they received to complete the FAFSA or relief that program staff shielded them from the stress of deciphering the financial aid process themselves. Across all sites, students shared that program staff do not sufficiently explain what happens to Pell overages and why they do not receive refunds. Lack of transparency from higher education program administrators breeds distrust among students and deprives them of the opportunity to gain financial aid literacy. In their attempts to make the FAFSA process as simple as possible for incarcerated students, prison education program and college/university staff can unintentionally create further misunderstanding. Of course, individual staff shouldn't be blamed for rushing students through a FAFSA completion session as they are faced with the impossible constraints of the prison. Yet, as our data demonstrate, the level of trust that incarcerated students are placing in college and university staff is profound. When college and university staff ask incarcerated applicants to complete FAFSA forms in a context of such deprivation they can, and should, do more to provide students with education regarding financial aid, the Pell Grant, and what the Office of Federal Student Aid does. It is critical to keep in mind that many applicants in this space desperately want to attend college and have been denied the information about college and career pathways; many students in this study expressed they would have attended college sooner had they known about potential aid and how to access it. Equally important to understand is that most incarcerated students lack any avenue to gain financial aid information other than from the prison program staff and/or college or university financial aid administrators. The responsibility of the higher education institution hosting a prison higher education program is significant and must be treated as such.

This lack of knowledge can lead students to expend their Pell monies on multiple programs during incarceration without realizing that doing so can limit their access to Pell Grants for future postsecondary education and career goals. Such misunderstandings can have detrimental impacts on students' postsecondary and career pathways. More broadly, this lack of access to information and federal aid literacy strengthens the deprivation and censorship core to incarceration in the U.S. It further reduces individual agency and personal autonomy for people who are incarcerated and heightens suspicion. Some students suspect colleges are unduly profiting from their Pell monies, but fear repercussions if they raise too many questions. Their fears are not unwarranted. Longtime prison education practitioner, Gehring (1997), pointed out the misuse of Pell monies by colleges and universities over two decades ago, stating that these institutions had a well-known reputation for acting as "cash cows" (Gehring, 1997, p. 50).

Inadequate exchanges of timely, accurate and robust information create the context where a population of students, a majority from underserved communities, are traversing the complex terrain of federal student aid by themselves. The lack of financial aid literacy can have lifelong effects on a community of people who are already denied viable opportunities for upward mobility. The overwhelming rate of incarcerated borrowers in default, for example, only exacerbates a growing crisis for these students (Loonin et al., 2023), many of whom, at least in this study, were unaware of the finite nature of Pell Grants when they agreed to participate in the Experiment.

## Recommendations

Pursuing higher education during incarceration poses many challenges (Royer et al., 2023), including the fact of isolation and censorship as governing forces. In this section, we draw on a framework of witnessing to provide brief recommendations for practitioners to improve the experiences of college students receiving financial aid during incarceration. We are especially interested in assisting college and university administrators in recognizing and embracing their agency and expertise in the space of federal student aid and empowering them to use their authority to ensure incarcerated students are equitably served. We focus here on what equitable might mean in the prison higher education space given structural constraints.

### Advocating for What Students Need

One of the structural forces that contribute to students' not-knowing during incarceration is a general deference on behalf of higher education administrators to departments of corrections. The deference makes sense in a culture where incarcerated people are portrayed as dangerous, violent, and manipulative; prisons enjoy commonsensical space in the social imagination because they are supposed to keep 'us,' that is, white, middle-class life, safe (Davis, 2003). But, it is important to remember that prisons themselves are, as Kaba (2021) calls them, "death-making institutions" (para. 9). The most important recommendation that we can make is for administrators to reject the normalization of prison authority and instead be resolutely curious about deprivation. Ask questions about why incarcerated applicants cannot access the internet to complete FAFSA or why they are unable to log-in to their Department of Education, Office of Student Financial Aid account and view their record. Ensure that incarcerated students receive a tuition statement each semester and that it is received along with an accurate explanation of benefits and expenses. Insist that incarcerated students have permissible phone, email, and/or mail communication with the U.S. Department of Education. When prison administrators respond negatively, citing reasons of general safety and security for the facility, stay firm in your advocacy for student autonomy and enrolled students' rights to access information. Explain that it is your professional responsibility to ensure that incarcerated students are able to routinely access this information and have their questions answered, and that anything short of this standard places your institutional accreditation at risk. Finally, advocate within your own institution of higher education to ensure that mechanisms exist for incarcerated students to access the office of financial aid. For example, this may include establishing an email account (if internet access is available) or phone number specific for incarcerated students to use or making sure that time is allocated each semester for college/university staff to travel to each facility that is being served and developing materials that are specific to the needs and interests of incarcerated borrowers at your specific institution.

The conditions of not knowing present in this study are made possible because non-incarcerated people do not advocate for the kinds of access that incarcerated college students need and deserve to, at minimum, be academically successful. From accessing contemporary and functional technology, to being able to access the latest research to write final papers, to being able to access the range of resources afforded to non-incarcerated students enrolled at the institution of higher education, such as health and wellness services, career counseling, academic advising, and related student supports. There is no good reason why, for example, in 2023, an incarcerated student should receive a substandard grade on an assignment because they did not have access to Microsoft Word to appropriately format a paper (recall Rogelio at site C). Administrators should continually question the barriers imposed by departments of corrections in making the provision of postsecondary education in general, and the facilitation of financial aid in particular, unnecessary

burdensome. A framework of witnessing can be helpful in creating a disposition of curiosity: Why can't the Director of Financial Aid at the college or university Zoom into an orientation so that students can ask questions and receive answers from a professional in real time? Why can't applicants electronically complete and submit the FAFSA from prison? Why can't a student receive a copy of their tuition bill each semester? Be creative in problem-solving; for example, if prison administrators won't allow electronic FAFSA completion and submission on computers already in the prison because of perceived threats to the safety and security of the institution, offer to bring in laptops or tablets from your institution to facilitate the submission. Involve your Instructional Technology team and your colleagues in Student and Academic Affairs to help brainstorm how to provide incarcerated students with the best possible access to institutional resources and implement procedures to continually ensure that such access is happening.

### **Go Inside the Facilities and Meet with Students**

Part of the power that prisons hold is that they are virtually inaccessible to the outside world. Such segregation and isolation are by design. Every state requires that anyone entering the facility, including family/loved ones participating in visitation or instructors or university staff, seek advance approval from the facility before an in-person visit or meeting, a process that typically includes a background check and waiting period, and sometimes fees (Boudin et al., 2013). Many states limit how many visitors may be approved for each incarcerated person and limit how frequently the approved visitor list may change or how many times and individual from the community or college/university can enter the facility.<sup>3</sup>

It is critical that higher education administrators travel to the facilities and meet with students, regardless of the modes of instruction for their respective prison education program (e.g., in-person, hybrid, correspondence, online). Certainly, this is a lift for administrators at institutions that serve hundreds of students through correspondence or hybrid formats; but, we think it is possible and worth the investment.<sup>4</sup> When administrators travel to and into facilities, they experience first-hand the layers of bureaucracy for entrance and the capricious nature of prison staff who hold exorbitant authority in the provision of postsecondary education inside (Royer et al., 2023). The effort to meet with students is also part of witnessing that is required to become an advocate and agent of change in the process of how incarcerated learners are supported.

Higher education administrators, specifically those in offices of financial aid, must do a better job of reaching them with accurate and timely information as they would any other student population in need of critical information to make informed decisions about their college and career.

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<sup>3</sup> Gaining clearance for entry is just one hurdle as most prisons are located in remote or rural areas, placing incarcerated people hundreds if not thousands of miles away from family, community or the college/university. More than 63 percent of people in state prisons are locked up over 100 miles from their families (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). The cost to visit a loved one in prison is steep as the trek to visit incarcerated family members is routinely long and demanding. When asked, family members of incarcerated people indicated that the cost and effort to visit their loved ones are taxing. Many family members, including children, do not have the time, money, or transportation to make the journey to facilities as often as they would like. Parents do not have childcare or time off work to visit the prison, and others simply cannot afford to visit the facility at all (Lockwood & Lewis, 2019). Phone calls and video visitations (if available) are often prohibitively expensive for many and sometimes revoked as punishment. Taken together, this means that many incarcerated people do not receive visitors nor see their family or have the opportunity to have sustained contact with college/university administrators and staff, despite the overwhelming evidence demonstrating the benefits of allowing in-person visitation during incarceration (De Claire & Dixon, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> We know that such a call is not feasible for correspondence programs that serve incarcerated students throughout the nation. However, we strongly encourage these institutional administrators to travel to their local prisons or those in the state where they have the most enrolled students.



Departments of corrections, prison education program staff, and higher education administrators must do a better job helping to facilitate these interactions. This proactiveness includes being transparent about how the funds are being spent by the institution of higher education and the conditions under which students are agreeing to receive aid.

### **Directly Interact with Incarcerated Students**

Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) professional competencies denote the Social Justice competency as aimed toward "[creating] learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups" (American College Personnel Association - College Student Educators International & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015, p. 30). Because incarcerated college students' participation in postsecondary education is riddled with contexts of misinformation and distrust, meeting this minimum professional threshold requires additional labor on behalf of college and university administration. Financial aid staff should directly interact with incarcerated people to ensure that they are receiving accurate information. We adopt specialized practices for other populations in higher education and in many ways, this call is no different. Because of social inequality and bias, for example, college and university staff must abide by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to better ensure neurodiverse students are able to equitably participate in higher education. Abiding by ADA or traveling to a prison to meet face-to-face with incarcerated students is required because our social structures of inequality require it.

Students who were the first in their families to graduate from college or who had never enrolled in college before participating in the Second Chance Pell Experiment were less likely to have knowledge about federal student aid when they enrolled in the prison higher education program. It is therefore critical for program staff to provide students with clear and consistent information about federal student aid and why they are eligible or not for Pell Grants during incarceration. Program staff must foster trust among students, which might require additional efforts when working with students who have continually been betrayed by systems and institutions. College and university administrators can start by being transparent about how Pell Grants work in prison and by encouraging critical feedback. Students should not have to fear being perceived as ungrateful simply for asking questions about how their Pell funds are being used. Program staff must also ensure that trust does not inhibit financial aid literacy and autonomy among students.

While we need more data to fully understand the student population participating in prison higher education programs, we do know that the people incarcerated in jails and prisons across the U.S. continue to be underserved by normative education systems (Couloute, 2018). Prisons and jails are full of people who have not benefited from educational systems of support, which is one of the primary reasons why we argue that college and university financial aid staff must make additional efforts to ensure that incarcerated learners are provided resources and information that support their agency as students.

### **Possible Futures**

The challenges laid out here are not insurmountable; but they cannot solely be addressed by developing more effective strategies at delivering financial aid information to incarcerated people. Indeed, developing better strategies for working with departments of corrections is not the kind of future we envision as such efforts will not challenge the dynamics of oppression to which incarcerated students are subject. To be certain, depriving people of choice and then dangling a 'free' opportunity in front of them to attend college, for many the first in their family to do so, is

unethical. We want all who work toward possible futures to hold onto this reality and stay curious in the spirit of ‘what is’ toward ‘what if’ (Boda et al., 2022). We must do so in our pedagogy, scholarship, and practices.

Higher education leaders have access to tools and resources to support the success of chronically underserved students, and incarcerated college students are worthy of this same investment. We want college and university administrators to feel empowered to draw upon their professional expertise and professional mandates to work on behalf of a student population consistently denied the opportunity to do so for themselves. Simply sending information sheets through the mail or delivering packets once per semester could, potentially, increase the financial aid literacy of incarcerated learners, but these efforts will not contribute to challenging the deprivation and censorship upon which departments of corrections depend. As practitioners, educators, and administrators ourselves, we are advocating for a present context where incarcerated learners are empowered with the knowledge, agency, and autonomy to make financial decisions that are, like all students, ultimately in their best interests. Until the ultimate goal of prison abolition is realized, we are advocating for a future where one’s proximity to carceral systems is no longer a determinant of their educational access and equity.

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