

NCHEP IMPACT

Report from the
NCHEP 14 Exit Survey



ALLIANCE
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON



In 2025, NCHEP 14 took place in New Orleans, Louisiana, drawing one of the largest in-person audiences in its history and placing unprecedented focus on the insights and leadership of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated scholars.



Introduction

Since 2017, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance) has hosted the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP), a convening that has become a cornerstone of community, dialogue, and strategy development for the higher education in prison (HEP) field. While the Alliance began stewarding the conference in 2017, NCHEP itself traces its origins to 2010 and has continued to evolve, adapting its format to include both in-person and virtual components.

The theme of NCHEP 14, “A New Era? Pell Reinstatement and the Future of Prison Education,” aligned with a broader strategic shift. Since mid-2024, the Alliance has engaged in an externally facilitated strategic planning process to redefine direction amid rapid field-wide growth and change. Central to this process is a commitment to listening closely and consistently to educators, currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, program directors, policymakers, corrections partners, and funders. The insights that surfaced reflect long-standing feedback from previous NCHEP exit reports: the need to strengthen reentry pathways, elevate system-impacted leadership, and create spaces of meaningful exchange across all corners of the field.

This report seeks to document and assess the impact of NCHEP 14, informed by both the exit survey and data gathered through the conference registration process. This report draws upon a range of materials and sources that provide a multi-dimensional view of the conference’s reach, influence, and areas for improvement. Through quantitative and qualitative data gathered this year, this report expands on the analysis presented in prior reports to provide a more complete understanding of NCHEP’s effectiveness as well as direction for strengthening future convenings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings



ENGAGEMENT

The data gathered about NCHEP 14 conference attendees speaks to an extraordinarily active and participatory attendee base. Conference attendees used Whova at high levels (88%), intentionally connecting and relationship building through private messages, community posts, electronic business card exchanges, and pouring over other conference attendees' profiles.



REACH

A near-total national reach (46 states and Puerto Rico were represented at the conference) confirms NCHEP as a field-wide convening. NCHEP 14 had the second-highest participation rate of formerly incarcerated attendees to date, and for the second consecutive year, over a third of conference participants were formerly incarcerated. NCHEP is leading the field in inclusive convening design and continues to demonstrate itself as a model for equitable power sharing and paradigm shifting, underscored by the high number of sessions led by formerly incarcerated individuals (37 presenters identified themselves as formerly incarcerated at registration).

The 14th National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) is much more than an event; it is a call to action, galvanizing policy, practice, and people amongst exponential growth and change currently taking place across the field.



RELEVANCE

NCHEP 14 had a dense schedule, with 55 sessions across eight blocks over two days. Conference participants attended an average of seven sessions per person, a rate that potentially points to the high relevance of session content to conference attendees. Additionally, 92% of conference attendees reported that they made new professional connections and 67% were inspired to take new action as a result of the conference, highlighting not only the relevance of the content but also the conference's ability to foster meaningful connection and momentum..



FEEDBACK

Exit survey participation increased significantly this year, with 25% of attendees (221 out of 874) responding, up from just 10% last year (93 out of 942). Among those who completed the survey this year, many highlighted opportunities for improvement. Participants suggested adjusting the schedule pacing to reduce session overload and allow more time for reflection and connection. With 59% of attendees attending for the first time, it's evident that there is a need for more structured experiences for newcomers. Finally, to address excess demand and broaden participation, attendees suggested exploring more hybrid participation models and implementing tiered pricing structures.



Building on years of growth, NCHEP 14 showcased what a justice-aligned, data-informed, community-centered convening can look like. It was a nexus for policy, practice, and power sharing. This year's intentional evaluation of NCHEP confirmed what many have long believed: NCHEP is a catalyst for tangible change. As the conference approaches its 15th year, the Alliance remains focused on evolving NCHEP to meet the field's needs: uplifting directly impacted voices, broadening access, and fostering visionary conversations about the path ahead.

“NCHEP isn’t just a conference—
it’s the connective tissue of a
growing movement.”



874

individuals registered for
the conference (through
the Whova app)

34%

of attendees were formerly
incarcerated, up from all
prior years to NCHEP 13.

7 sessions, on average,
were attended by each
conference participant.

Impact

NCHEP 14 drew an estimated 874–1,000 attendees, with 874 individuals registered through Whova and over 1,000 participating in the opening session. An additional 221 individuals joined the waitlist after tickets sold out, highlighting significant demand beyond capacity. Over the course of two days, 55 sessions were delivered across four blocks, addressing key areas such as:

- ▶ Navigating Pell Grant reinstatement
- ▶ Integrating technology in prison education
- ▶ Centering student voice in program design
- ▶ Expanding remote work-based learning and fair wage pathways
- ▶ Strengthening relationships among programs, students, and corrections
- ▶ Leveraging data for program development
- ▶ Supporting reentry through campus transitions
- ▶ Building statewide partnerships
- ▶ Balancing academic success and holistic student success

CONFERENCE GROWTH

Formerly incarcerated attendees made up 34% of participants, up from all years prior to NCHEP 13 in 2023. Attendees, on average, participated in 7 sessions.

Geographic reach expanded significantly: attendees represented 46 states and Puerto Rico. Only four states—Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, and South Dakota—were not represented, marking the broadest national participation in NCHEP’s history.

This year, 309 applicants requested financial support to participate in NCHEP 14; this was the highest number of financial aid requests in the history of the conference. Of the 309 applicants, 53 individuals received financial aid to attend, and 96% of those recipients were formerly incarcerated. Of those awarded financial aid, 91% received full support, which included registration, three nights of hotel accommodations, transportation, and a \$100 Visa card for incidentals. While the number of financial aid applicants peaked in 2025 (309), the number of awards declined to the lowest point on record (70 packages were awarded total, 53 to the 309 that applied), suggesting a growing gap between demand and available financial resources. Despite this decrease, 2025 also saw a historic high in allocating available resources to the most directly impacted community (51 out of 53 of the awardees that applied were formerly incarcerated).



“The amount of collaboration sparked by two days of sessions is unparalleled in this field.”

92%

of conference attendees indicated that they made professional connections at the conference.

59%

of exit survey respondents indicated that NCHEP 14 was their first NCHEP experience.

60%

agreed that attending NCHEP changed their perspective on issues or challenges within the field of higher education in prison

83%

reported that attending NCHEP 14 equipped them with new knowledge or skills.

ATTENDEE SATISFACTION

Attendees rated their overall satisfaction with NCHEP 14 at 4.46 out of 5, falling between “very satisfied” and “extremely satisfied.” Attendees highlighted the relevance, applicability, and diversity of the sessions in their feedback. On a 5-point scale, the overall relevance of conference content received an average rating of 4.3, pointing to a high level of satisfaction among conference attendees regarding the focus of conference sessions.

Attendees on average reported that they were extremely likely to attend NCHEP in the future (average rating of 4.6 on a 5-point scale). This is consistent with feedback received at prior conferences. Historically, attendees who fill out exit surveys have reported, almost unanimously, a high likelihood of returning for future conferences.

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

Networking is a vital part of NCHEP for attendees. Over a third of exit survey respondents (34%) explicitly mentioned networking or connection with other professionals in the field as a reason for attending NCHEP 14. The majority of NCHEP attendees (88%) downloaded and used the Whova application, intentionally forming connections and building relationships by sending over 3,500 direct messages to other attendees through the app. Conference attendees also used that platform to exchange professional information 176 times and made 2176 community posts, sharing photos and videos. 92% of conference attendees indicated that they made professional connections at the conference. Over half of exit survey respondents (54%) described collaborative work that emerged from connections made at NCHEP conferences, demonstrating the role NCHEP is playing in connecting professionals to each other.

Over half of exit survey respondents (59%) indicated that NCHEP 14 was their first NCHEP experience, potentially pointing to growth in the field which is supported by the increased geographical representation among conference attendees this year. This high percentage of first-time NCHEP attendees may also signal an increasing awareness of NCHEP as a significant platform for the HEP field.

63% of exit survey respondents reported being inspired by a session, speaker, or interaction while at the conference to take new action or pursue a different approach in their work. A similar percentage (60%) of exit survey respondents agreed that attending NCHEP changed their perspective on issues or challenges within the field of higher education in prison. These data suggest that NCHEP is a site for important transformation and innovation. Reinforcing the conference as a productive environment for learning and connection, a majority of exit survey respondents (83%) reported that attending NCHEP 14 equipped them with new knowledge or skills.

Evolution

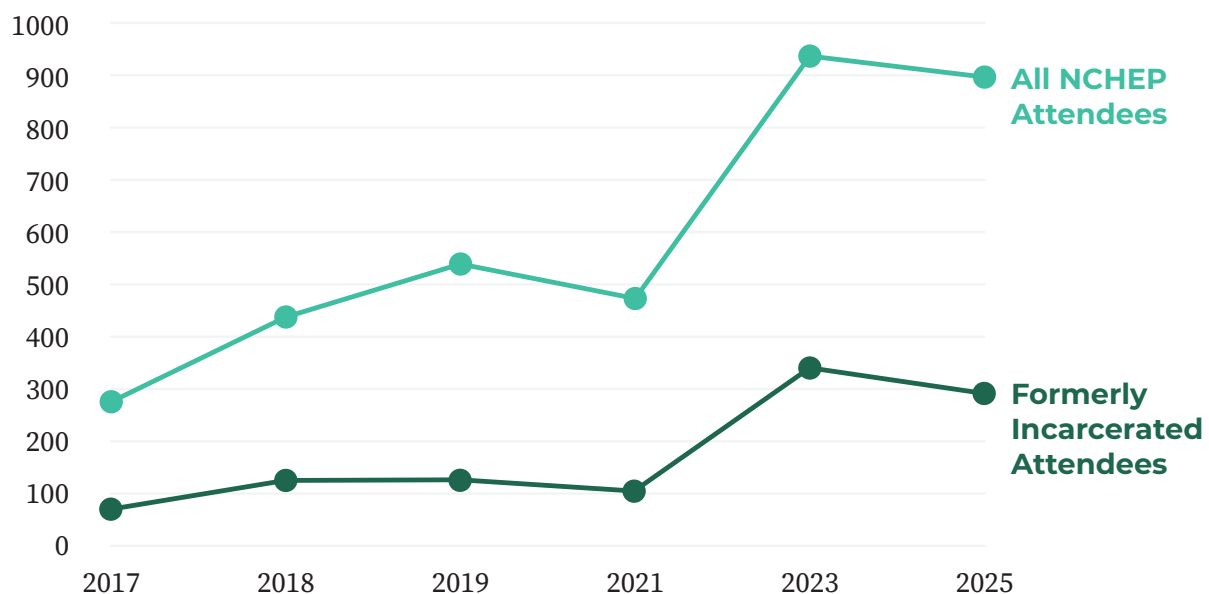
A photograph of two women in the foreground, smiling and engaged in conversation. The woman on the left is wearing a blue t-shirt with a white fleur-de-lis and the number '174'. The woman on the right has long, dark, curly hair and is wearing a white top. They are both looking towards each other. In the background, other people are visible, including a man with sunglasses on his head. The entire image has a teal/cyan color overlay.

“A model for
what inclusive,
justice-centered
convening can and
should look like.”

Historically, overall perceptions of NCHEP quality have been consistent throughout the history of the conference. With each NCHEP, attendees frequently describe the conference as “the best one yet,” indicating a consistent trend of participant satisfaction.

Consistent with prior years, participant satisfaction with NCHEP remains high. Notably, 41% of respondents had attended a previous NCHEP, and among them, 19% had participated in four or more past conferences. Of these returning attendees, 75% reported engaging in collaborative work stemming from NCHEP connections, while 78% reported involvement in new advocacy, programming, or institutional change initiatives inspired by the conference.

That 83% of exit survey respondents reported gaining new knowledge or skills from NCHEP 14 suggests a long term-impact. While 2025 was the first year to include structured questions about knowledge and skill-building, anecdotal evidence from earlier years (2017–2023) points to similar impacts. Participants in past conferences described gaining practical tools, new insights, and strengthened partnerships. Taken together, this body of feedback affirms that NCHEP has served not only as a convening space but also as a driver of concrete, field-building outcomes.



Feedback



Conference attendees expressed widespread appreciation for the wide array of sessions and focus areas, and emphasized the value of sessions that included interactive elements and practical takeaways.

While the overall tone of participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive, several recurring themes emerged around areas for improvement. Conference participants recommended fewer lecture-style sessions in favor of workshops, small group discussions, and other formats that encourage peer-learning. A primary area of feedback concerned the density of the schedule. Several attendees expressed that the number of concurrent sessions made it difficult to attend all relevant content or fully absorb what was offered. Several attendees also recommended moving away from paired sessions in the future. Future NCHEPs may consider extending session blocks or offering staggered formats to alleviate decision fatigue and increase engagement. Additionally, attendees suggested enhanced support for first-time participants, particularly those who are formerly incarcerated or new to the field, through orientation sessions or designated onboarding spaces. Attendees also requested more detailed descriptions of sessions in the future including descriptions of session goals, presenter backgrounds, and intended audiences to better support successful alignment of expectations and increased participation overall.

Participants who completed the exit survey requested more coverage of reentry strategies, funding options, accreditation processes, and program evaluation in the future, as well as indicated a desire to learn more about policy and legislative advocacy. Attendees also expressed interest in more networking opportunities, suggesting creating spaces for affinity groups based on role or region or themed events. There was overwhelming encouragement of continuing to increase the number of sessions led by or co-designed with formerly incarcerated educators and students.

Accessibility and inclusivity also surfaced as areas for continued attention. While many praised the financial aid program, there were clear limitations: only 53 out of 309 applicants were able to receive aid. As interest in the conference continues to grow, sustainable funding models will be necessary to expand access. Several participants also called for greater linguistic and neurodiversity accommodations, suggesting the inclusion of real-time captioning, translation services, and sensory-friendly environments in future planning.

Finally, some respondents encouraged the Alliance to continue creating space for critical conversations and dissenting perspectives, especially as the field navigates questions around scale, institutional partnerships, and long-term movement integrity. This feedback underscores the importance of NCHEP not only as a professional convening but as a space where tension, transformation, and possibility can co-exist.

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Challenges

The growth seen year over year in NCHEP attendance presents many complex tensions that the Alliance must navigate.

There are many competing needs expressed by the field, such as the call for more sessions and perspectives versus requests to schedule shorter and more digestible programming; the demand for more sessions and perspectives versus entreaties for greater intimacy and time for reflection in the conference design; the imperative to center lived experience while also creating space for a broader range of experiences and even dissenting viewpoints; and the need to support the organizational infrastructure of the field while also elevating the voices and pedagogical needs of those engaged in direct teaching within prison classrooms. These needs are not choices to be resolved but rather pieces of a larger puzzle to be carefully considered as the conference continues to grow and evolve.

While NCHEP has more than doubled in size, Alliance staff numbers have remained the same. This has led to the difficult decision for the last two conferences to cap the amount of people who can register, with increasing numbers of people joining a waitlist in the hopes of being able to attend. As the Alliance moves forward with planning NCHEP 15, we contend with realities of funding, space, and logistical complexities of organizing the “when, where, and how” of NCHEP with a small team. While these challenges are difficult, they are also a testament to the importance of this convening and the critical need to provide a space for this community.

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Cost

In 2017, the total conference cost was approximately \$200,000 for 278 attendees. This amount included 91 travel scholarships. In 2019, the total conference cost was approximately \$300,000, and in 2021 the total conference cost was approximately \$350,000. This year, that amount was spent on food and meeting space alone, with other expenses like audiovisual equipment, staff travel and lodging, financial aid, and more pushing the total cost of the event to more than triple 2017 levels. Inflation has also played a role, contributing to higher prices for food, labor, and vendor services associated with the conference. Despite significant fundraising efforts, the conference is now operating at the limits of what can be offered in terms of financial aid for attendees. Each year, more people request aid than the organization is able to support, forcing difficult decisions and leaving many unable to attend.

An important aspect of cost is the economic impact to host communities. Over \$34,000 was spent by the Alliance with local vendors for NCHPEP 14, and the majority of these businesses were minority-owned. This kind of values-based spending is significant, but also adds to the complexity and, of course, cost of organizing the conference.


As attendance has grown, so too have the logistical and financial demands of hosting the conference, yet staffing capacity at the Alliance has not kept pace. Planning and executing a national convening of this scale now requires year-round coordination, all of which places a significant burden on a small team. Without additional staffing or dedicated infrastructure for conference planning and fundraising, the model is at risk of becoming unsustainable. To ensure that the NCHPEP convening remains inclusive, accessible, and mission-aligned, the structure and resourcing of the event must evolve alongside its growth.

Looking Ahead

The value of NCHEP is overwhelmingly confirmed by the field through the feedback received from participants who completed the exit survey. With an estimated 874 to 1,000 participants and representation from 46 states and Puerto Rico, NCHEP 14 achieved one of the broadest reaches in the history of the conference. The influx of new attendees at this event was also significant: 59% of attendees reported that they were participating in NCHEP for the first time. This number points not only to the field's expansion but also to NCHEP's increasing visibility and relevance. The convening is a hub for engagement and learning as well as an incubator for collaboration and innovation for the HEP field.

For years, the Alliance has known anecdotally that NCHEP has a special kind of magic for participants, and has heard from attendees who describe NCHEP as an important and rare space for inspiration and even transformation. This year, we made a deliberate effort to measure that 'magic' in more concrete ways. The results of this year's data collection validate what so many have expressed over the years: that NCHEP is more than a conference; it is a catalyst. The majority of participants report leaving the conference with new knowledge and skills, as well as being inspired to take new action or shift their approach as a result of the conference.

Looking ahead, the Alliance remains committed to ensuring that NCHEP continues to reflect and respond to the field it serves. This includes continuing investment in system-impacted leadership, expanding access for underrepresented communities, and holding space for bold dialogue about the future of higher education in prison. As NCHEP enters its 15th year, the conference remains not only relevant, but essential.

A photograph of three people at a conference. On the left, a man in a camouflage baseball cap and a dark jacket is seen from the back. In the center, a woman with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a purple t-shirt and a lanyard, is smiling broadly. On the right, a woman with long brown hair and glasses, also in a purple t-shirt, is looking towards the man. She has a large, colorful tattoo on her left arm and is holding a black folder. The background is a blurred wall with octagonal patterns.

“Every time I attend
NCHEP, I walk away
not only informed,
but transformed.”

Sponsors

The Alliance is grateful for the generous support of the sponsors of NCHEP 14, whose investment enables the continued growth of the HEP community. The Alliance extends sincere appreciation to Ascendium Education Group, the Austin E. Knowlton Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the Michelson 20MM Foundation, the Ichigo Foundation, the Trellis Foundation, and the Woodward Hines Education Foundation for their invaluable contributions to making NCHEP 14 possible.

The Alliance also extends gratitude to A Revolutionary Press for their generous donation of time, materials, and coordination efforts in making the NCHEP 14 art gallery possible.

