



ALLIANCE
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

Strategic Plan 2025 – 2028



Overview



The Alliance plays a critical role as a convener and resource hub within the higher education in prison field. The strategic plan that follows represents the culmination of extensive stakeholder engagement throughout the planning process and is intended as our organizational roadmap for the next three years.

The plan is divided into the following sections:

Planning Process

Mission & Values

Strategic Direction

GOAL 1 Resourcing the Field

GOAL 2 Advancing Advocacy

GOAL 3 Fueling Innovation

GOAL 4 Strengthening Internal Infrastructure

Outcomes & Impacts

Acknowledgments

Prepared by Jasmine Nielsen and Maya Meredith of Julep Consulting, Submitted on July 28, 2025, Adopted by the Board of Directors on July 30, 2025

Planning Process

Between September 2024 and July 2025, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison engaged in a comprehensive strategic planning process.

This strategic planning process was designed as a multi-phase, participatory effort spanning from early discovery to implementation. Led by Jasmine Nielsen and Maya Meredith of Julep Consulting, it prioritized listening, reflection, and synthesis across a diverse array of internal and external stakeholders and was guided by a Strategic Planning Working Group composed of Alliance staff and board members. The process was intentionally iterative and collaborative, with regular biweekly check-ins between senior leadership and facilitators. Meetings with the full staff and the Board of Directors were held at key decision points to ensure alignment and accountability.

This comprehensive planning process sought to ensure that the Alliance remains responsive to the evolving landscape of higher education in prison and reentry work by developing a clear, actionable strategy grounded in stakeholder insight, organizational self-awareness, and a strong understanding of the field's future needs.



The process was divided into three interconnected phases:

PHASE 1: ESTABLISHING CONTEXT

Activities in Phase 1, which ran from September through November of 2024, included a comprehensive review of existing materials, deep-dive interviews with staff and board members, and structured stakeholder interviews with funders, academics, and practitioners. Staff and board also completed a survey to surface internal perspectives on the Alliance’s work, challenges, and potential directions. Findings were synthesized into a Key Findings Report, which identified tensions, trends, organizational identity, and early strategic considerations. This phase culminated in a strategic planning retreat with the full staff and key board members to engage with these findings and envision a way forward.

PHASE 2: DEEPER DIVE

Activities in Phase 2, which ran from December 2024 through April 2025, included a network-wide survey that sought to gather quantitative and qualitative insights from a broader group of field stakeholders. Listening sessions with higher education in prison (HEP) practitioners, consortia leaders, and intermediaries explored key issues such as reentry, policy, mentorship, and field coordination.

PHASE 3: PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

The final phase of the plan, which ran from April through July of 2025, focused on developing the strategic plan itself, including articulating goals and strategies, developing a tactical framework and guideposts, and building out a suite of supplementary materials to support plan implementation.

“The Alliance is about building community in a field where community is hard to build.”



By the Numbers

12

months of research, conversations, strategy development, and implementation planning

4

deep-dive interviews with key staff and board members

17

one-on-one, structured interviews with external stakeholders representing key constituencies within the HEP field, including academics, practitioners, and funders

19

staff and board members engaged through a survey, retreat, and regular meetings throughout the process

322

educators, funders, policymakers, researchers, practitioners, formerly incarcerated individuals, and corrections officials completed a network survey

27

HEP practitioners, coalition and consortia leaders, and intermediaries participated in 3 listening sessions

Drawing from staff and board surveys, external stakeholder interviews, and a review of organizational materials, the research surfaced critical tensions, clarified current perceptions of the Alliance, and identified capacity needs and potential priorities. In broad strokes, constituents called for the Alliance to align its efforts around its core strengths—convening, amplifying, resourcing, and listening—while making intentional choices about where not to invest its limited capacity.

Mission & Values

As part of the planning process, we revisited our mission statement in light of our accomplishments to date, the evolving context in which we operate, and new organizational priorities.

We also established new organizational values, which represent The Alliance's collective core beliefs and guide us in how we approach our work, including how we engage with our diverse constituencies, how we show up for one another, and how we make decisions, with an emphasis on prioritizing our efforts.

MISSION

The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison builds and supports the field-wide infrastructure to advance access and excellence in higher education in prison and through reentry. We do this by convening the field, amplifying system-impacted voices, and mobilizing knowledge and resources.

VALUES

Education as Catalyst

We believe that knowledge opens our minds to what is possible and equips us with the tools to reimagine justice and our collective future.

Access to Opportunity

We believe everyone—including those who are currently or formerly incarcerated—should have access to high-quality education.

Centering Impacted Voices

Acknowledging the foundational expertise that comes with lived experience, we work to ensure that currently and formerly incarcerated people play an integral role in shaping the future of higher education in prison.

Collaborative Leadership

Rooted in our understanding that transformative and lasting change emerges through shared leadership, we actively cultivate relationships across differences, facilitate open dialogue, and forge intentional partnerships.

Human Dignity

We recognize the inherent worth of all people. We strive to challenge systems that limit human potential and to remain accountable to the communities we serve.

Strategic Direction

The field of higher education in prison and reentry is at a pivotal moment. With the reinstatement of Pell Grants, expanded leadership from formerly incarcerated individuals, and growing national recognition of HEP as a legitimate and vital field, the landscape is rapidly evolving. At the same time, uncertainty in the political climate, increased pressure on higher education more broadly, and the complex realities of operating across academic, nonprofit, correctional, and governmental sectors present new challenges and demands. As more intermediary organizations emerge, the need for coordination, coherence, and shared leadership has become increasingly clear.

The Alliance is uniquely positioned within this evolving ecosystem as the “big tent” for the field of higher education in prison and reentry. We bridge diverse communities and perspectives—amplifying system-impacted voices, supporting practitioners, partnering with researchers, and advancing policy and practice.

CORE COMPETENCIES

Our strategic direction is grounded in a set of core competencies that the field affirmed through the planning process:

- ▶ We listen deeply and synthesize across contexts.
- ▶ We convene and build community.
- ▶ We curate, amplify, and disseminate knowledge aligned with our values.
- ▶ We identify, incubate, and resource emergent needs within the field.

The following goals and strategies build on these competencies and respond to the opportunities and pressures facing the field. They are intended to ensure that we lead with clarity, focus, and purpose in the coming years while remaining nimble and agile in service to the field as a whole.



Goal 1: Resourcing the Field

As the field expands and matures, bolster our capacity to onboard programs and practitioners, build community and networks, deepen engagement, foster peer-to-peer learning, and further our collective knowledge.

Strategy 1.1 Field Navigation

Dedicate staff capacity to actively listening to programs and practitioners, fielding incoming requests and inquiries, identifying gaps and emergent needs, and connecting programs with appropriate resources.

Strategy 1.2 Training & Technical Assistance

Design and implement ongoing trainings (including onboarding individuals and organizations into the field), support leadership development within the field, make recommendations for new resources to be produced by partners in the field, and explore the feasibility of serving as a hub for technical assistance.

Strategy 1.3 Convenings

Evolve convening offerings to meet the growth of the field and support relationship and network building, including hosting both NCHEP and ISC annually, expanding and implementing a framework for NCHEP that allows for increasing specialization (e.g., adding on tracks and/or days for those focused primarily on research or reentry), and supporting additional opportunities for individuals from across the field to come together around specific issues, approaches, and geographies.

Strategy 1.4 Supporting Regional Consortia

Invest in a national learning community of regional consortia to scale the support that the Alliance can offer to the field and establish best practices for regional coordination and resource sharing.

Strategy 1.5 Bringing Financial Resources to the Field

Elevate the needs of the field to philanthropy, attract new supporters, and, where appropriate, serve as a regranting intermediary to build capacity within individual programs toward advancing field-wide knowledge.



“The Alliance facilitates collaborations and responds to pressing issues in the field.”

Goal 2: Advancing Advocacy

Leverage our deep relationships and unique vantage point on the field to identify emergent needs, advance governmental and institutional policies that materially improve conditions for currently and formerly incarcerated learners and HEP and reentry practitioners, and communicate the impacts of policy shifts to the field as a whole.

Strategy 2.1 Federal Policy

Coordinate national-level stakeholders within HEP and adjacent fields to develop and work toward a shared federal policy agenda, with the Alliance taking a leadership role and activating its membership in advocacy for targeted issues.

Strategy 2.2 State & Local Policy

Monitor state- and local-level advocacy efforts and promote effective campaign strategies and impactful policies with the aim of building stakeholders' capacity to replicate others' successes.

Strategy 2.3 Institution-Level Policy

Maintain relationships across the field in order to surface and elevate innovative policies and strategies at individual schools and prisons, university and correctional systems, and other key institutions.



“The sky’s the limit...continue to be a careful steward of the field and help the field grow in constructive ways at this particular juncture where more and more programs are coming online.”

Goal 3: Fueling Innovation

Through ongoing dialogue with the field, identify innovative strategies that advance quality education and reentry experiences for currently and formerly incarcerated students and create pathways to refine and propagate these strategies.

Strategy 3.1 Knowledge Sharing

Use our network knowledge and convening power to bring stakeholders working on specific issues or methodologies together and/or relay information across the field.

Strategy 3.2 Best Practices

Create spaces for and support the development and dissemination of best practices on emergent topics.

Strategy 3.3 Seeding Strategies

Nurture innovative strategies by incubating projects and working groups, identifying potential organizations to take a lead role in supporting initiatives, and (if needed) piloting this work internally.



“There is no other national organization focused solely on higher education in prison.”

Goal 4: Strengthening Internal Infrastructure

Refine our staffing structure, implement internal systems, and bolster governance functions to ensure we can sustain our support for the field as it grows and evolves.

Strategy 4.1 Staffing & Structure

- ▶ Evolve our staffing structure and roles in recognition of the rapid expansion of the field and the attendant need to be in service to the field as a whole (rather than to individual programs).
- ▶ Effect measured staff expansion, bringing in external consultants as needed, with the goal of creating a sustainable structure to implement our strategic priorities.
- ▶ Invest in internal communications and decision-making structures that can accommodate these shifts.

Strategy 4.2 Governance

Deepen the board of directors' capacity to provide effective oversight of the organization and support a diversification of funding sources.

Strategy 4.3 Fundraising

Work toward fiscal sustainability by diversifying our funding streams—including bringing new foundations to the table, broadening our donor base, and establishing a major donor program.

Outcomes & Impacts

The following page offers an overview of how the goals and strategies are intended to translate into outcomes and impacts. As the landscape of higher education in prison and reentry continues to shift, the logic model is meant to guide implementation while remaining flexible—adaptable to new insights, emerging needs, and ongoing feedback from those we serve.

This plan is just one more step in an ongoing process that was set into motion when the Alliance decided to engage in this work. A system for revisiting the strategic plan on a quarterly and annual basis will be implemented in order to evaluate progress and make adjustments to work plans as needed, reporting progress on the strategic plan to the board on a regular basis. The needs of the field are only expanding, and the work that lies ahead is substantial.

GOALS	STRATEGIES	OUTCOMES	IMPACTS
Resourcing the Field	Field Navigation Training & Technical Assistance Convenings Supporting Regional Consortia Bringing Financial Resources to the Field	▶ HEP and reentry one-stop to develop and maintain successful programs ▶ clear on ramp for new programs and practitioners ▶ convenings and conversations aligned with Alliance values and goals ▶ programs and practitioners networked and in regular communication ▶ increase in funders and funding to meet the needs of field ▶ hub of vetted TA practitioners that are easily accessible by the field	Field is better equipped to deliver high-quality programming in a collaborative and sustainable manner.
Advancing Advocacy	Federal Policy State & Local Policy Institution-Level Policy	▶ organizations engaged in advocacy networked with shared policy agenda ▶ progressive institution-level policies replicated ▶ more state support for programs (funding and policies) ▶ field ready to be at table for federal conversations	Policies and practices support provision of high-quality services; field is better positioned to intervene in key issues at state and federal levels.
Fueling Innovation	Knowledge Sharing Best Practices Seeding Strategies	▶ learning cohorts enable development of best practices ▶ innovative practices disseminated for uptake across the field ▶ innovative strategies have home to be refined and prepared for replication	Field continuously innovates to improve HEP and reentry programs and outcomes for system-impacted individuals.
Strengthening Internal Infrastructure	Staffing Governance Fundraising	▶ shared leadership across staff and board ▶ internal culture and systems that allow team members to grow and thrive ▶ diversified and stable revenue streams ▶ shared ownership of budget across staff and board	Alliance has the internal capacity to meet the needs of the field, operate in a strategic and sustainable manner, and act nimbly in service to the field as a whole.

Acknowledgments

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS FACILITATORS

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Jonathan Stenger, Member, Board of Directors

Mara Sanchez, Programs Director

Sean Pica, Chair, Board of Directors

Ved Price, Executive Director

NETWORK SURVEY RESPONDENTS

A total of 322 HEP and reentry stakeholders completed the survey, with nearly a quarter of respondents identifying themselves as currently or formerly incarcerated.

STAKEHOLDER LISTENING SESSIONS

Listening sessions held with HEP practitioners, regional consortia, and intermediary organizations, offered critical insights into the field's current needs, persistent gaps, and opportunities for the Alliance to provide strategic support.

SPONSORS

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Ascendium Education Group is committed to making education and training after high school a reality for learners from low-income backgrounds. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, we fund initiatives across the U.S. that help learners from low-income backgrounds achieve upward mobility; provide student and employee success solutions to colleges and businesses; invest in education-focused innovations to improve learner outcomes; and provide information, tools, and counseling to help millions of borrowers successfully repay their federal student loans. While we have many roles, we have one goal — elevating opportunity by creating a world where everyone can rise to their highest potential. To learn more, visit ascendiumeducation.org.

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