

National Conference on Higher Education in Prison

NCHEP

IMPACT

Report from the

NCHEP 15 Exit Survey



Hosted by the

ALLIANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON



Introduction

On Friday, October 8th, 2010, attendees gathered at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's Program for Research in the Humanities for the opening event of the first National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP). That afternoon, many of those attendees traveled 40 minutes to Danville Correctional Center to observe college classes inside the prison and meet students. The group then returned to the hotel for two more days of discussion, reflection, and strategizing.

What began with approximately 75 people in 2010 has now become the largest regular conference focused on higher education in prison in the country. From April 8 to 10, 2026, NCHEP 15 was held in Cleveland, Ohio, drawing over 1,200 attendees, the largest in-person audience in the conference's history. Since its inception, NCHEP has grown in every conceivable dimension. The days when conference attendees could fit into a few cars are long past, but the conference's foundational character remains unchanged: NCHEP continues to center community and to convene individuals from every walk of life who share a commitment to the transformative power of education.

In NCHEP's early years, many higher education in prison programs operated with limited institutional support and few opportunities to connect with peers doing similar work. Part of what made those early gatherings important was the chance to

engage collectively around questions facing the field. Many years later, that need for shared reflection remains central. The theme of NCHEP 15, "Beyond Access," reflects a fundamental question facing the field: How can higher education translate into lasting opportunity, equitable outcomes, and systemic change? Feedback from exit survey respondents strongly affirmed this framing. Eighty-nine percent of respondents reported being inspired to take new action or pursue a different approach in their work as a result of NCHEP 15, and respondents described the conference as a space not only for professional development but for sharpening a shared understanding of what meaningful, equitable higher education in prison requires and makes possible.

This report documents the impact of NCHEP 15 using data from the exit survey (n=256), the conference registration process, and observations gathered by staff and volunteers throughout the convening. The report is intended as a resource for reflection and as a guide for future conference planning and field development. In many ways, the findings here reinforce the Alliance's mission: to build and support the field-wide infrastructure necessary to advance access and excellence in higher education in prison. 

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings

NCHEP 15 attendance numbers demonstrated continued growth across every measure tracked. Conference registration increased by 44% from NCHEP 14, making NCHEP 15 the largest in-person convening in the conference's history. Even with the jump in registration, attendee experience and engagement did not diminish, they improved. The majority of exit survey respondents (62%) attended all three days of the conference, and respondents reported attending an average of seven sessions or events.

The expanded conference structure and programming additions were widely welcomed by attendees. Registration and attendance patterns showed that conference participants embraced a longer conference with more options. Exit-survey feedback also indicated which session types and topics generated the strongest engagement. Programming that paired visionary, critical conversations about the future of the field with practical approaches to instruction, program implementation, and organizational change attracted particularly strong attendance and feedback.

Findings from the exit survey suggest that NCHEP's impact extends well beyond the conference itself. Three-quarters of returning attendees (76%) reported engaging in new activities, advocacy, collaborations, or initiatives as a result of previous NCHEP participation, up from 67% at NCHEP 14. In addition, 89% of NCHEP 15 respondents

reported that a session, speaker, or interaction at the conference inspired them to take new action or pursue a different approach in their work; a significant increase over the 63% reported at NCHEP 14. Multiple factors likely contributed to this increase. The expanded and more diverse programming at NCHEP 15 included longer sessions, dedicated site visits, the research symposium, a poster exhibit, a hall of memorabilia, expanded community tables and art gallery, and the film festival. These additions increased the likelihood that any given attendee encountered content directly relevant to their work or that they found personally motivating.

Many of the questions surfaced in this year's findings echo themes raised in past NCHEP evaluations, particularly around conference growth and the work of serving an expanding field. For instance, NCHEP 15 continued the conference's long-standing commitment to inclusivity: one in three registered participants (33%) identified as formerly incarcerated. This is a proportion NCHEP has now sustained across multiple years of rapid growth. This consistency is not incidental, it reflects the Alliance's deliberate commitment to centering lived experience and a field actively shaped by directly impacted leaders, practitioners, and scholars.

This year's evaluation also surfaced something distinctive. Respondents repeatedly described NCHEP as more than a professional convening; they described it as critical



NCHEP 15 AT A GLANCE

1,254

people registered; 1,153
were counted onsite

33%

self-identified as
formerly incarcerated

44%

growth from 2025; largest
conference in history

4.53

/5 overall satisfaction
(n=256)

47

U.S. states and Puerto
Rico were represented

73

sessions across 11
blocks over three days

89%

of attendees were
inspired to take new
actions

76%

of returning attendees
engaged in new
collaborations or
initiatives as a result
of NCHEP



infrastructure, or a sustaining space for a community whose work is often emotionally, politically, and financially demanding. The data also reflect a field actively wrestling with the productive tensions of a maturing movement: between expanding access and deepening quality, between centering lived experience and welcoming dissenting viewpoints, and between NCHEP's role as a professional convening and its emerging function as field-wide infrastructure. These are not problems to resolve; they are signals of a maturing field, and of a conference

increasingly asked to hold more than it was originally designed to. As the Alliance looks ahead to NCHEP 16, these findings suggest that the conference's continuing strength will depend on its ability to remain a site of community building and connection while allowing for expanded numbers and more diverse perspectives.

Impact



CONFERENCE GROWTH

NCHEP 15 registered 1,254 attendees, with 1,153 checking in onsite; a 44% increase in registration over NCHEP 14 and the largest convening in the conference's history.

Over the course of three days, 73 sessions were delivered across 11 blocks, organized around five conference topic tracks (The Reentry Continuum; Student Voice as Leadership; Aligning Systems, Centering Students; Justice by Design; and Inclusive and Adaptive Learning), as well as two foundational tracks (HEP Foundations; Funding and Pell Implementation). Sessions addressed topics including:

- ▶ student-centered systems and supports,
- ▶ reentry and workforce development,
- ▶ Pell implementation and policy,
- ▶ teaching and pedagogy in carceral settings,
- ▶ technology access and digital equity,
- ▶ research and evaluation,
- ▶ accreditation and institutional partnerships,
- ▶ arts, storytelling, and creative expression,
- ▶ mental health and wellness,
- ▶ work-based learning and employer partnerships, and
- ▶ leadership by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated scholars.

The vast majority of exit-survey respondents (96%) attended two or more days of the conference, and 62% attended all three. Survey respondents reported attending an average of 7.18 conference events. The high rate of attendance for all three days suggests that NCHEP attendees are engaged and receptive to multiple days of programming and opportunities to connect with one another.

NCHEP 15 served as both an entry point and a long-term home for the field: 51% of survey respondents were attending NCHEP for the first time, 49% were returning, and 15% of returning attendees had been to three or more prior NCHEPs. This balance of a steady stream of new participants alongside a deep core of returning practitioners is one of the conference's most durable strengths.

Geographic reach remained broad and NCHEP 15 also benefited from regional funding partnerships that allowed the Alliance to incentivize participation from specific states and regions. Participants represented 47 states and Puerto Rico; only Wyoming, New Mexico, and South Dakota were not represented. NCHEP 15 received its largest pool of financial aid applicants to date (315 individuals), and the Alliance awarded some amount of financial support to 130 applicants, 84 of which received full support (all travel, lodging, and registration costs covered). Of those who received any financial aid, 44% identified as formerly incarcerated at registration and of those who received full financial aid, 68% identified as formerly incarcerated at registration. NCHEP 15 introduced tiered registration with the inclusion of a lower student rate. Ninety-three attendees registered using the student rate, with 67% of that number identifying as formerly incarcerated at registration.

“NCHEP is the boost I need every year because this work can be hard. Thanks for a well-considered agenda.”



ATTENDEE SATISFACTION AND RETURN

Attendees rated their overall satisfaction with NCHEP 15 at 4.53 out of 5 (n=256), between “very satisfied” and “extremely satisfied.” Topic relevance averaged 4.4 out of 5, conference formats (workshops, meetings, and open conversations) averaged 4.46 out of 5, and overall communications averaged 4.73 out of 5, a notably high rating that reflects the strength of the Alliance team’s logistical and communications operations at conference scale. With 1,153 attendees onsite and 86% of survey respondents (n=256) reporting that they made professional connections, this suggests that relationship building continues to be one of the conference’s most important functions.

First time attendees frequently described making transformative initial connections, while returning attendees emphasized reinforcement of existing relationships and the strategic value of sustained engagement with colleagues over multiple years. Both groups expressed a strong desire for more structured and intentional networking opportunities.

Across every comparable exit-survey measure, attendee feedback either held steady or improved from NCHEP 14 to NCHEP 15. The two notable increases were in satisfaction with the registration process (4.54 to 4.78) and satisfaction with conference formats (from 4.19 to 4.46). The absence of declines across any survey measure alongside a 44% increase in registration indicates that the conference’s operations, communications, and programming all scaled effectively with growth.

Respondents reported a strong likelihood of attending a future NCHEP, with an average rating of 4.69 out of 5. In fact, several respondents noted that the return on investment for NCHEP attendance increases each year, as the relational groundwork laid at prior convenings continues to generate concrete collaborative results. Three-quarters of returning attendees (76%) reported engaging in new activities, advocacy, or collaborative initiatives as a direct result of previous NCHEP participation, up from 67% at NCHEP 14. Respondents named outcomes including external grants secured through NCHEP connections, the formation of statewide coalitions, collaborative program models developed across institutions, co-authored research and publications, sustained advocacy partnerships, and multi-year mentorship relationships.

“Relationships that started in hallways, between sessions, or over informal conversations have evolved into real collaborations across research, policy, and practice.”

“I will always attend NCHEP. It is the most important learning and networking opportunity in our field.”



CHANGE AND IMPACT

NCHEP 15 functioned as a meaningful learning environment for the field. Respondents reported gaining new knowledge or skills through conference participation, with an average rating of 4.17 out of 5. When asked whether attending the conference shifted their perspective on issues facing the field, 65% of respondents said yes. Qualitative responses suggest that the perspective shifts experienced by participants are likely to influence work well beyond the conference itself.

Among the 65% whose perspectives shifted, many described increased understanding of the barriers experienced by incarcerated students. One survey respondent shared:

“After attending the session on supporting students with disabilities, I learned that in some states, students who disclose their disabilities to Department of Corrections staff may be transferred to institutions designated for individuals with disabilities—institutions that often lack sufficient educational resources. This insight shifted my perspective.”

Additional respondents described learning more about the realities of reentry and engaging in reflection around racial representation and lived-experience leadership in the field.

For attendees with lived history in the criminal legal system, the conference offered a widened view of what is being accomplished nationally, reinforcing commitment to the work and providing a clearer sense of where to direct advocacy. A smaller but notable subset of respondents reported a perspective shift around the racial dimensions of the field. Several observed a structural mismatch between the demographics of who teaches in HEP programs and who is incarcerated and expressed a desire for the conference and the field to address this imbalance more intentionally.

When asked whether any session, speaker, or interaction inspired them to take new action or pursue a different approach in their work or advocacy efforts, 89% of respondents said yes. This figure increased from NCHEP 14, in which 63% of exit survey participants responded to this question. Survey responses revealed that NCHEP’s catalytic effect varied by role:

- ▶ Faculty/professors described returning to their programs with renewed commitment to connecting coursework to community advocacy and centering student agency in curriculum design.
- ▶ Program administrators identified new approaches to fundraising, sustainability planning, and cross institutional collaboration.
- ▶ Attendees with a history of criminal legal system involvement described NCHEP as a validating space that deepened their sense of belonging and purpose in the field.

Taken together, these responses suggest that NCHEP is shaping not only how participants understand the field but also how they locate themselves within it, including how they approach advocacy, teaching, leadership, collaboration, and long-term program development.



Several respondents described NCHEP as reinvigorating, noting that the conference provides perspective and community for practitioners who find the work isolating or difficult to sustain. A recurring theme among exit survey participants was NCHEP's role in mitigating professional burnout and providing a space where the weight of the work is shared and the motivation to continue is renewed. Considered together, survey responses suggest that NCHEP shapes participants beyond information sharing or professional development; it provides a sense of community, validation, and shared sense of purpose.

PROGRAMMING EXPANSION

NCHEP 15 introduced and expanded several elements of the conference experience. New and expanded programming included:

- ▶ longer-form, immersive, and highly interactive special sessions
- ▶ site visits to two corrections facilities, a hospitality-focused reentry organization, and a workforce training program
- ▶ a dedicated research symposium
- ▶ a film festival
- ▶ a wellness room
- ▶ an expanded Incarcerated Scholars Conference (ISC) Gallery
- ▶ a poster exhibit showcasing research, programs, partnerships, and emerging work across the higher education in prison field
- ▶ an interactive 'memorabilia hall' inviting attendees to share memories from past NCHEPs.

This expanded programming was broadly welcomed by attendees. The film festival received consistently positive feedback, with respondents highlighting its role in surfacing the human dimensions of the work and creating moments of collective reflection. The Wellness Room was recognized as a meaningful addition, particularly by attendees navigating the emotional weight of conference content or managing sensory load in a large convention center environment. Site visits to two correctional facilities, a hospitality-focused reentry organization, and a workforce training program offered on-the-ground exposure to HEP and reentry spaces in Ohio.

The 60-minute session format and built-in coffee breaks received consistent praise. Many attendees noted that this structure created meaningful space for informal conversations and connection. Both the opening and closing plenaries were among the most celebrated elements of the conference; many attendees described them as deeply inspiring.

The expanded special-session day drew exceptional turnout: 688 attendees checked in onsite, and more than 60% of survey respondents reported full three-day attendance. Many respondents shared that they would have built additional travel and time off into their plans had they known the full scope of special sessions earlier, a strong signal of enthusiasm to continue and deepen the format.

Challenges



“The conference reinforced my belief that education is one of the strongest tools for reentry and long-term change.”

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

Attendees were enthusiastic about session content and asked for more interactive, workshop-based sessions. Faculty across experience levels also signaled strong demand for programming focused on classroom practice, curriculum design, andragogy, and teaching in carceral settings. Respondents also recommended expanded coverage of reentry strategies, funding options, policy and legislative advocacy, and program evaluation. Many exit survey respondents encouraged increasing the number of sessions led by or co-designed with formerly incarcerated educators and students. Volunteer feedback echoed these themes, with the strongest audience response going to sessions that emphasized active engagement, practical implementation strategies, and lived-experience perspectives.

Session attendance data reinforced the qualitative feedback. The highest-attended sessions consistently focused on practical implementation topics, including Pell restoration, program sustainability, statewide systems-building, workforce and reentry pathways, and academic continuity after release. Sessions that centered on leadership and perspectives from formerly incarcerated students and practitioners also drew strong audiences. In contrast, more narrowly specialized, discipline-specific, or theoretical sessions drew smaller numbers of attendees. Across both qualitative feedback and session attendance patterns, respondents demonstrated strong interest in programming that is practical, applicable, and informed by lived experience.

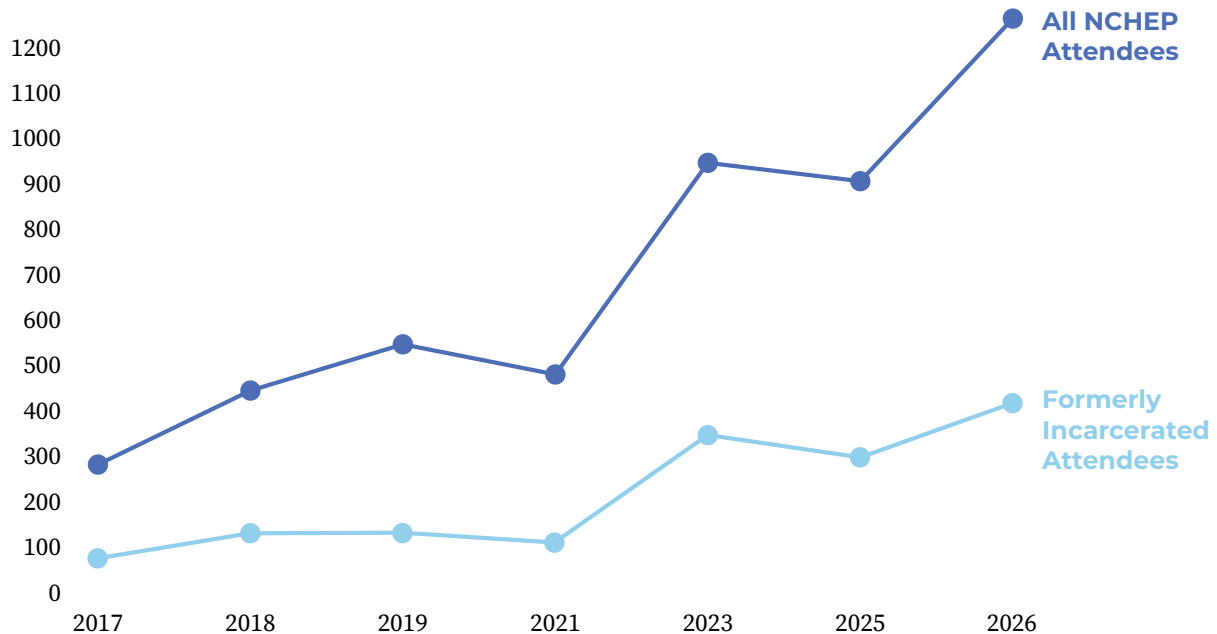
A subset of respondents, particularly those working in states with limited HEP capacity, identified a tension inherent in the “Beyond Access” theme. This feedback is itself a marker of NCHEP’s reach: the conference is now serving programs at every stage of development simultaneously, from those still building toward course delivery to those refining mature, multi-institutional models.

Some exit survey 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.

“Being in a space where so many people are committed to learning, growing, and healing individually and in our communities has inspired me to reimagine what is possible.”

NCHEP as Field Infrastructure

NCHEP ATTENDANCE



NCHEP 15 confirmed what returning attendees have long understood: the conference extends beyond functioning as an annual gathering. NCHEP is the connective infrastructure of a national movement. Across the exit survey, attendees described specific, durable outcomes traceable to NCHEP relationships: external grants secured, statewide coalitions formed, co-authored research published, university positions created, and new program models launched. As one respondent shared: “A relationship formed at a previous NCHEP led to a full-time university position being created,” and went on to state: “Another friendship developed at NCHEP helped me to establish a potential funding source more recently that will ensure sustainability and growth for several years.”

What the exit survey data reveal is that NCHEP operates as foundational infrastructure for the HEP field. Respondents described NCHEP as the mechanism through which relationships are formed, trust is established, and collaborative work becomes possible over time. For newer entrants to the field, NCHEP served as an orienting experience: an introduction to the field’s breadth, its key actors, and its shared values. For more experienced practitioners, it served as a recalibrating space, or a place to assess the state of the field, identify emerging challenges, and recommit to the work. These patterns suggest that NCHEP’s value to the field is structural and cumulative, not merely motivational, and that its impact cannot be fully captured by the metrics of any single year.

Increasingly, NCHEP appears to function as more than a traditional academic conference. Across session observations and attendee feedback, the conference is characterized as a collaborative working space, a relationship-building environment, and a professional learning community in which participants actively exchange strategies, test ideas, build partnerships, and understand their own role within the field of higher education in prison. It is clear that NCHEP serves as a site of active field formation, rather than just a venue for presenting work. The conference is the forum in which the field of higher education in prison can be observed across time, bringing together disparate voices and perspectives from across the HEP landscape in ways that make the past, present, and future visible.

LOOKING AHEAD

The findings in this report point to several priorities that will guide NCHEP 16 planning:

- ▶ Sustain the expanded conference schedule, special sessions, and additional supportive programming
- ▶ Increase the interactivity of conference sessions
- ▶ Include more sessions focused on pedagogy and classroom practice
- ▶ Continue to support and potentially expand opportunities for directly impacted/lived experience leadership
- ▶ Consider targeted programming or conference guidance for first-time attendees
- ▶ Continue featuring programming for participants across different stages of program development, from emerging initiatives to mature and established models



Sponsors

The Alliance is grateful for the generous support of the sponsors of NCHEP 15, 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 Trellis Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the Sunshine Lady Foundation, the Ichigo Foundation, and the Michelson 20MM Foundation for their invaluable contributions to making NCHEP 15 possible.

Special Thanks

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A special acknowledgment to the following individuals and organizations for expanding opportunities for participation at NCHEP 15:

- ▶ The Community
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- ▶ Anonymous Donor in Memory of Ellen Pullen



“Seeing the successes of other programs helped open me back up to the wide range of possibilities after the slow closing of my mind that can happen in the prison environment.”

