

New England Prison Education Collaborative NEPEC Newsletter

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Welcome to the Inaugural NEPEC Newsletter!

Welcome to the first issue of the New England Prison Education Collaborative newsletter. As we work together to expand access to high-quality post-secondary education in prisons across New England, this newsletter will keep you updated on significant developments, regional events, and opportunities to engage with us in advancing our shared mission. Going forward, you can expect to receive the NEPEC newsletter every other month.

Launching the New England Prison Education Collaborative NEPEC

The [New England Prison Education Collaborative \(NEPEC\)](#), directed by the [New England Board of Higher Education \(NEBHE\)](#), was established with five years of grant funding from Ascendium Education Group to build on the 2023 [report](#) by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Prison. The Commission brought together leaders from various sectors to prepare the region for the reinstatement of Pell Grants for incarcerated learners.

NEPEC's work will focus on state strategic planning, engaging higher education institutions, and increasing data transparency across New England to expand access to high-quality, workforce-aligned postsecondary education for incarcerated individuals.

With the launch of NEPEC, we are transitioning from the Commission to the

Collaborative. On October 1, 2024, we officially announced this shift to members of the Commission. We have activated our new email address nepec@nebhe.org and posted a [LinkedIn page](#). We are eager about this next phase and look forward to working with stakeholders across the region to support equitable educational opportunities for incarcerated learners throughout New England.

Meet the NEPEC Team



Sarah Kuczynski, Ph.D., is the Director of the New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC) and Transfer Initiatives at the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). In this role, Sarah is leading the roll-out of NEBHE's new five-year, Ascendium-funded project to expand access to higher education in prison across the six New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont). Beyond this, Sarah facilitates the New England Transfer Guarantee--NEBHE's state-specific community college transfer initiative which is now fully operationalized in all six states in the region.

Sarah was the primary author of the June 2023 report of the New England Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Prison, which communicated the 83-member commission's recommendations for expanding access to higher education in prison in the wake of Pell reinstatement for incarcerated learners.

Prior to joining NEBHE, Sarah worked in student success at the collegiate and high school level. Born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, Sarah holds a B.A. in English from The George Washington University, a Ph.D. in English from University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and an Ed.M. in Education Policy and Analysis from Harvard Graduate School of Education.



Nicole O'Neal, M.Ed., serves as a Project Manager for the New England Prison Education Collaborative. In this role, Nicole is co-managing the roll-out of NEPEC, an Ascendium-funded project that will expand access to higher education in prison across the six New England states over the next five years. Nicole is passionate about advancing social justice through postsecondary educational initiatives for system-impacted learners. With extensive experience in higher education, student affairs, and advocacy, Nicole has a strong background in building and nurturing inclusive, diverse spaces. Prior to joining the NEBHE team, she simultaneously held roles at Tufts University School of

Medicine (TUSM) and RIA, Inc., where she developed her project management and leadership skills.

At TUSM, Nicole managed student affairs and registrar responsibilities, ensuring compliance with institutional policies, and streamlining operations to improve efficiency. She also facilitated restorative practices groups, creating supportive environments for open dialogue and conflict resolution. As a founding member of the TUSM Anti-Racism Committee's staff working group, Nicole demonstrated her commitment to creating equitable spaces where all voices are valued. At the same time, through her roles as advocate, intake coordinator and mentor at RIA, Inc., Nicole facilitated groups for survivors of human trafficking and

individuals impacted by the legal system.

Nicole is from Massachusetts and earned her M.Ed. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies with a focus on Higher Education Administration from Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development and a B.L.S in Interdisciplinary Studies from Boston University.



Zeia Fawaz, currently serves as a Project Manager for the New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC) a grant-funded initiative of the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). In this role, Zeia co-manages the rollout of NEPEC, facilitates key stakeholder engagements, advances initiatives aimed at expanding higher education in prison and serves as the primary 'Content and Learning Officer' for NEPEC, developing data-driven content and resources for grant deliverables, policy reports, and best practice tools.

Zeia is a dedicated project manager who specializes in equity-focused projects and possesses a diverse professional background in the social justice and nonprofit sectors. Prior to joining the NEBHE team, Zeia worked as an Equity and Learning Specialist at Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, where she developed and facilitated diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) trainings and contributed to the organization's race equity initiatives. She also served as the Community Engagement Lead at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Massachusetts, fostering partnerships and managing recruitment pipelines.

Zeia's commitment to social justice was nurtured through a research internship at the Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, where she aided in producing impactful reports addressing unjust disciplinary practices and barriers to justice access.

A graduate of American University, Zeia has a B.A. in International Studies with a focus on Justice, Ethics, and Human Rights, and is fluent in English and proficient in French and Arabic.

Policy Impact: Expanding Access to Higher Education in Prison

The work of the New England Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Prison (the Commission) has influenced some exciting policy developments in the region. After the June 2023 release of the Commission's [report](#), NEBHE shared its recommendations with stakeholders at multiple levels. In May 2024, legislators in Connecticut and New Hampshire passed two significant pieces of legislation aimed at expanding educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals.

New Hampshire's [Senate Bill 376](#), established a cross-agency group, Corrections Education and Vocational Planning Group (CEVPG), to develop strategic plans for postsecondary and vocational education within the state's prisons. NEBHE's executive leadership is proud to be part of this collaborative

effort. We were delighted to participate in the first CEVPG meeting and are looking forward to continued involvement.

Section 18 of Connecticut's [House Bill No. 5523](#), mandates a formal study on higher education access within the state's prisons, focusing on identifying barriers and opportunities for incarcerated learners. This bill aims to assess the effectiveness of current educational offerings and explore ways to expand access to postsecondary programs.

These legislative actions reflect the growing momentum across New England, where states are prioritizing education as a pathway to rehabilitation and looking to put the new federal dollars that are available to support this work to productive use. These legislative efforts underscore a growing commitment across the region to provide meaningful educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals, and increased attention to fostering collaboration between state agencies, higher education institutions, and corrections departments.



Growing the NEPEC Team

In September 2024, the entire NEBHE staff participated in an all-day inclusive hiring training, facilitated by the [Center for Employment Opportunities \(CEO\)](#), to learn about Fair Chance Hiring practices. The team is currently managing two separate recruitment processes: one for a Spring 2025 Intern and another for a Project Coordinator.

In October, we launched the search for a full-time Project Coordinator to assist in coordinating various projects related to NEPEC's development, with an expected start date in January 2025.

In September, the team also initiated the search for a paid intern to assist with event planning and administrative tasks, with an anticipated start in January 2025. The position is now closed, and we are eager to welcome this new team member, who will provide valuable support.

These roles, along with NEBHE's commitment to inclusive hiring practices are essential to driving our mission forward. NEPEC is committed to leading by example through implementing practices that support equitable opportunities for all, particularly those impacted by the legal system.



Upcoming Events & Opportunities

Two-Day Event in CT

NEPEC will be heading to Connecticut for two days of the Criminal Justice Policy and Planning Division (CJPPD) *Expanding Access: Second Chance Pell Education in Connecticut*, 4-day event. *October 21st-24th.*

[Registration Link](#) See you there!

NEPEC Quarterly Workshop

March 19, 2025 | Topic: To be determined by stakeholder questions & feedback

[14th National Conference](#) on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP)

April 10-11, 2025 | New Orleans, LA

Stay Connected

Thank you for your continued support and partnership as we work to make higher education accessible to all learners who are incarcerated. We look forward to keeping you informed and engaged in our shared mission.

Best regards,
NEPEC Team

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make sure you don't miss a thing!

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