NEW ENGLAND BOARD of HIGHER EDUCATION

The Current State of Academic Reentry in New England: A Landscape Analysis

New England Prison Education Collaborative

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PREFACE

Acknowledgements

The New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC) team at the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) wishes to express our gratitude to the numerous individuals who helped to shape this white paper. Firstly, we would like to thank the members of the Higher Education Working Group (HEWG), who—through their expertise and knowledge—informed the topic and direction of this paper. We would also like to thank every individual who participated in any stage of the research for this publication (see **Appendix 2.2** for a full list of focus group and interview participants).

Several NEBHE team members made contributions at various points. Thanks go to NEPEC Project Manager Zeia Fawaz, for her primary authorship of this white paper; NEPEC Director Sarah Kuczynski, for her executive leadership; NEBHE Tuition Break Director Lyndsay Parks, for her creative design contributions; and NEBHE Communications Director Peggy Hayes and NEBHE President and CEO Michael Thomas, for their support in reviewing this publication

Additionally, the NEPEC team thanks Natalie Pangaro for her intentional and professional design contributions, which helped bring this paper to life. Thanks also go to the early reviewers of this publication: HEWG members, NEPEC's Regional Advisory Council, and research participants. Their feedback on draft content proved invaluable to the final version. Lastly, NEPEC thanks Ascendium Education Group whose grant has made this work possible and, in particular, Senior Strategy Officer Molly Lasagna for her continued support.

About NEPEC

The New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC) is a regional initiative directed by the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). In February 2024, NEBHE was awarded five years of grant funding from Ascendium Education Group to establish NEPEC in an effort to build upon the recommendations of the 2023 New England Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Prison, a nine-month regional convening of leaders from across multiple sectors aimed at preparing the region for the reinstatement of federal Pell Grant eligibility for all currently incarcerated learners.

Through NEPEC, NEBHE seeks to accelerate, support, and collaborate to realize a future in which every incarcerated person in New England has access to high-quality, workforce-aligned postsecondary opportunities with a diverse range of educational pathways.

About NEBHE

Higher education is New England's most critical sustainable resource. The region's governors knew that over 70 years ago when they founded the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). Today, NEBHE promotes greater education opportunities and services for the residents of New England and its more than 250 colleges and universities. Its mission is to advance postsecondary outcomes through convening, research and programs for students, institution leaders and policymakers. NEBHE's vision is that everyone in New England will have lifelong access to affordable, high-value postsecondary education.

About Ascendium Education Group

Ascendium Education Group® is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization driven by the belief that learning after high school gives people the power to build better futures. Our national philanthropy focuses on increasing opportunities for learners from low-income backgrounds to achieve upward mobility through postsecondary education and workforce training. We partner with organizations whose objectives align with our core strategies to expand opportunity, support learner success, and connect and align systems. Our grantees include postsecondary education and workforce training providers, intermediaries, researchers, and media organizations from across the U.S. To learn more, visit **ascendiumphilanthropy.org**.

A Note Regarding the White Paper

As was referenced in the acknowledgements, this white paper would not have been possible without the insights and contributions of NEPEC's Higher Education Working Group (HEWG). The HEWG is charged with providing direct subject matter expertise to shape a number of deliverables geared towards stakeholders at postsecondary institutions.

The north star for NEPEC is supporting expanded opportunities for incarcerated and reentering students across all six New England states. Elevating the innovative work that higher education in prison programs are doing across the New England region and finding ways to support program providers, including by creating opportunities for cross-state knowledge sharing, are central parts of NEPEC's work. This white paper exemplifies these core commitments.

Inspired by conversations with HEWG members and stakeholders across the region, this inaugural white paper focuses on the role of postsecondary education programs in supporting returning students during reentry. Thus, the primary audience for this white paper will be both higher education in prison program providers – looking to learn from peers within and beyond their state – and postsecondary institution leaders whose institutions have or are planning to build out a higher education in prison program. NEPEC anticipates that this publication will also prove useful for other stakeholders, including Departments of Correction, reentry-focused community-based organizations, and state legislators.

It is NEPEC's goal for this research paper to serve as a resource to individuals doing the crucial work of providing postsecondary education to currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. We hope that this publication will facilitate cross-state dialogue and learning among postsecondary and reentry program providers and serve as a tool that providers can leverage in their work to expand or reimagine reentry supports.

LETTER *from the Higher Education Working Group Co-Chairs*

Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to share with you The Current State of Academic Reentry in New England: A Landscape Analysis, the inaugural white paper from the New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC). NEPEC was established to implement the recommendations of the 2023 New England Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Prison, which aimed to prepare the region for the reinstatement of federal Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners.

It has been a privilege to co-chair the NEPEC Higher Education Working Group during its inaugural year. The cumulative subject matter expertise of this group's members is powerful to behold; it imbues the pages of this white paper. We wish to express our gratitude to the numerous individuals who participated in the focus groups and interviews that were conducted for this publication—they gave not only their time but also their thoughtful feedback, which helped shape the findings presented herein.

This white paper serves as a resource for the individuals doing this crucial work as well as New England higher education leaders with less robust understanding of the intricacies of postsecondary programming in correctional facilities. By highlighting the innovative strategies programs are employing to support students as they navigate the complex reentry process, this white paper providers readers with the opportunity to learn from their peers and deepen their understanding of the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated students.

We sincerely thank Ascendum Education Group, whose generous grant support makes this work possible, and specifically Senior Strategy Officer Molly Lasagna for her continued support of our vision.

Our hope is that this white paper will serve as a catalyst for cross-state dialogue well beyond the work's February 2026 publication date. We also look forward to the future projects and opportunities for collaborations that we expect will emerge from sharing this work.

Respectfully,

Bryan O'Connor
Working Group Co-Chair
Director, Corrections Education Community College of Vermont

Omar Reyes
Working Group Co-Chair
Director of Adult Program and Student Success Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Individuals who are released from prison find themselves navigating a complex reentry process in which they must manage multiple, interconnected and sometimes competing priorities. Understanding that supporting returning students' educational attainment is a key consideration during reentry, the New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC) team at the New England Board of Higher Education undertook a landscape analysis of common struggles and strategies amongst program providers across New England.

Background

Returning students face the same challenges many other individuals do post-release, including, but not limited to: (1) securing employment, (2) access to housing, (3) access to food, clothing, and transportation, (4) access to healthcare, (5) navigating potential conditions of release, including parole or probation, (6) community and family reunification, and (7) accessing and navigating potentially unfamiliar technologies (Donaldson and Viera, 2021; Reentry Coordination Council, 2022; Colbert, 2025). Furthermore, continuing one's education may bring its own set of challenges, such as financial concerns, stigmatization on campus, transportation barriers, and navigating collateral consequences, which can limit financial aid eligibility (Bowling et al., 2021; Quach et al., 2022). These challenges compound to create an environment where college completion rates for formerly incarcerated students are one-eighth that of the general population (Couloute, 2018).

With so many interconnected challenges shaping the reentry process, returning students can feel overwhelmed and unsure of where to go to access basic services. Postsecondary education professionals can act as intermediaries connecting reentering students with relevant resources both on and off campus. However, this is not an easy task. Programs may struggle to develop comprehensive reentry supports due to funding constraints, staffing constraints, or lack of experience. Returning students may struggle to find the resources and time to continue or begin their postsecondary education journeys. With this in mind, we conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with postsecondary education and reentry program providers to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated students and the strategies these programs are employing to overcome them.

Findings

Through conversations held in four focus groups and nine semi-structured interviews, four primary themes emerged: (1) the scope of postsecondary programs during reentry; (2) the hidden curriculum of college, campus culture, and program design impact reentering students' educational continuity; (3) building digital skills through access and programming; and (4) addressing financial barriers through financial aid and direct assistance.

1. The Scope of Postsecondary Programs During Reentry

An overwhelming majority of our participants emphasized that their programs function primarily in areas pertaining to academic reentry despite the fact that they know students experience academic concerns and basic needs as simultaneous, intertwined priorities. Programs may rely on a network of referrals for basic needs support due to multiple reasons, including financial constraints and large distances from campus to student release locations.

Strategies employed by participants include:

- **Leveraging available resources in their local environment.** In Connecticut, there are six reentry welcome centers around the state, where staff are trained to connect reentering individuals to potential accommodation like transitional housing.
- **Asset mapping.** In Rhode Island, the Department of Corrections hosts monthly Reentry Alliance meetings, which are attended by both service providers and recently released individuals. These meetings allow providers to create networks of support services and formerly incarcerated individuals to connect directly with local resources.
- **Bringing partners to campus.** Tufts University Prison Initiative of Tisch College (TUPIT)'s reentry program, MyTERN, brings a diverse array of guests to connect their students with existing resources and helps them navigate the many unfamiliar processes that are part of holistic reentry. Prior guests have included the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens; MassHire, for employment support; Justice for Housing, which helps students identify housing vouchers and other affordable lodging opportunities; as well as financial credit counselors, who provide financial literacy support.

2. The Hidden Curriculum of College, Campus Culture, and Program Design Impact Reentering Students' Educational Continuity

There are many potential barriers to educational continuity that fall within the scope of direct services that the programs we engaged identified that they provide, including (1) the hidden curriculum of college; (2) creating cultures of support; and (3) intentional program design.

- **(2.1) Navigating the Hidden Curriculum of College Through Coursework and One-on-One Support.** To help students navigate the potentially unfamiliar and often confusing aspects of academic reentry, participants generally took one of two paths: either offering student success-related coursework for credit or providing one-on-one support services.
  - » **Reentry or pre-entry coursework.** Four New England programs describe reentry or pre-entry coursework, which they use as a vehicle to tackle the barrier of hidden curriculum, which includes "navigating financial aid, registration, academic expectations, and professional development opportunities" (Gutiérrez et al., 2025, p. 5). For example, the Community College of Vermont's Prison Education Program is working to launch a transition resilience course that was designed by their academic council, which includes student representation. The course is available during and post-incarceration and is open to other contemporary learner populations, such as veterans to avoid inadvertently identifying folks who enrolled in the class as having a lived experience of incarceration.
  - » **One-on-one support services.** Some providers noted having staff or senior leadership go with prospective students to admissions offices, walking them through the enrollment process, and connecting students in-person with contacts at other postsecondary institutions to which the student is interested in transferring.

- **(2.2) Creating Cultures of Support Through Dedicated Physical Spaces and Community Building.** Providing students with a supportive community through building positive campus culture and robust peer networks is a key element of programs' work to bolster educational continuity post-release. The programs we engaged for the white paper tended to adopt one of two main models.
  - » **Creating a dedicated physical space on campus for reentering students.** By way of example, two community colleges created dedicated student lounges for their formerly incarcerated students, in response to student feedback they received. In each instance, students were then able to affirmatively choose to enter these spaces.
  - » **Involving 'veteran' students.** By involving students who are farther along in their post-release coursework, programs worked to create a sense of belonging and help newly released students navigate their academic reentry journey.
- **(2.3) Designing Programs and Coursework to Maximize Flexibility.** Providers emphasized how their programs were intentionally designed to maximize flexibility—from the structure of the coursework to the faculty who they choose to engage as instructors. Examples include encouraging students to reduce coursework during reentry, ensuring credit mobility and robust transfer pathways, flexible and supportive faculty and campus staff, and mirroring academic calendars for both in-facility and on- campus students.

3. Building Digital Skills Through Access and Programming

Digital skills are a crucial component of academic reentry for both distance and in-person education. Depending on funding and the resources available, some programs offer free laptops to their students—either to facilitate their in-person learning or to enable their participation in distance education.

More common ways that programs further digital skill building include: (1) incorporating technology use into their in-facility programming and (2) providing formal digital skills programming to their students post-release. In the case of the former method, the focus is on creating familiarity with using laptops, a learning management system (LMS), and (when accessible in-facility) any relevant software. In terms of formal programming to build digital skills post-release, this can occur through the onboarding or reentry coursework. For example, one provider at Boston College Prison Education Program utilizes these classes as an opportunity to walk students through the intricacies of navigating commonly used software used within their academic institution, such as Google Suite.

4. Addressing Financial Barriers Through Financial Aid and Direct Assistance

Perhaps unsurprisingly, financial barriers, including the cost of tuition, can be one of the biggest barriers to educational continuity. Of course, federal financial aid can play a significant role in reentering students surmounting financial barriers to educational continuity. In fact, multiple program providers noted the various ways their institution's financial aid package or Pell eligibility supports students through large refunds or direct disbursement.

Importantly, while the reinstatement of incarcerated learners' eligibility for Pell Grants will likely lead to an increase in the number of Pell-eligible programs, Pell alone often does not cover the full cost of attendance. To support educational continuity, the programs we engaged employ a range of financial

supports beyond federal financial aid including scholarships, institutional aid, completion grants, and tuition-free programming.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from both the desk and qualitative research outlined above, it seems that despite a desire to support reentering students to meet basic needs, postsecondary programs expressed limitations in doing so due to policy, program scope, and insufficient funding and staffing. Thus, a common strategy programs employ is mapping and utilizing networks of support, so that institutions do not need to meet every reentry need themselves but can work to ensure that the network of collaboration is easily navigable and accessible for their students.

Regardless of the ways in which the field develops, it is imperative that programs employ a student-centered lens, approach curriculum and program design with a level of intentionality and ensure that their campuses—both digital and in-person—do not perpetuate environments of further stigmatization for their students with lived experience of incarceration.

INTRODUCTION

Every year over 400,000 individuals are released from prison and find themselves navigating a complex reentry process in which they must manage multiple, interconnected and sometimes competing priorities (Cantora and Zander, 2025). Supporting returning students'[1] educational attainment is a key consideration during reentry because most incarcerated students do not complete their degrees on the inside ("Higher Education in Reentry Reimagined," n.d.; Bowling et al., 2024). Continuing coursework in a program post-release is not a simple task, but it is one that many in the field of higher education in prison (HEP) are increasingly focused on supporting given the demonstrated positive effects of educational attainment—both short and long-term: from disrupting "intergenerational cycles of trauma and poverty" to "cultivating holistic well-being and expanding opportunities for employment and healthcare" (Contreras-García, 2025, p. 72).

Historically, college completion rates for formerly incarcerated students are about one-eighth that of the general population, so there is considerable work to be done to realize the positive benefits of educational attainment post-release (Couloute, 2018). Students seeking to continue college post-release face regular reentry challenges that are compounded by a more specific set of challenges related to their educational participation. Before returning students can continue their education, they must address their basic needs, including: (1) securing employment, (2) access to housing, (3) access to food, clothing, and transportation, (4) access to healthcare, (5) navigating potential conditions of release, including parole or probation, (6) community and family reunification, and (7) accessing and navigating potentially unfamiliar technologies (Donaldson and Viera, 2021; Reentry Coordination Council, 2022; Colbert, 2025). These challenges are interconnected and can make education feel like a competing priority ("Higher Education in Reentry Reimagined," n.d.).

The goal of this white paper is to help postsecondary education leaders across the New England region understand what institutions wrestle with when supporting their students post-release. The following section shares, in broad but evidence-based strokes, the various basic needs-related challenges that those who are reentering community post-release face to help postsecondary education leaders better understand what these reentering students are contending with.

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1 This paper uses the terms returning and reentering student interchangeably to refer to students who are continuing their academic journeys as they are released from incarceration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Introduction to Reentry

Homelessness is 10 times more prevalent among the formerly incarcerated community than the general population due to housing barriers, such as (1) background checks, (2) cost of housing, (3) limited capacity in "halfway houses," and (4) collateral consequences[2], which may limit housing options (Donohue, 2024; Leverentz, 2010). For example, landlords may refuse to rent to individuals with a criminal record (Leverentz, 2010) and if cost is a prohibitive factor in finding housing, individuals may not be able to access public subsidized housing due to a federal ban (Pokornowski, 2023). For example, in Massachusetts, the Emerson Prison Initiative works with the City of Boston Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens and a community-based organization, Justice 4 Housing, to help formerly incarcerated students "access federal public subsidized housing on appeal" (Pokornowski, 2023, p. 17).

Much like housing, challenges in securing employment disproportionately impact the formerly incarcerated community as is exemplified by the 27% unemployment rate among this population—a phenomenon that is even more pronounced among those with lower levels of "formal education" (Couloute, 2018). Barriers to employment include: (1) collateral consequences, (2) implicit bias, and (3) workplace environments that do not adequately support those exiting incarceration (Leverentz, 2010). Research has shown that requiring an individual to disclose their conviction history during the job application process is harmful for the formerly incarcerated community as it opens the door for employers to make biased decisions in hiring (Donaldson and Viera, 2021). Furthermore, individuals with a conviction history and another marginalized identity experience this bias on multiple fronts, harming them at disproportional rates (Donaldson and Viera, 2021).

Formerly incarcerated individuals also have fewer employment options than the general population due to collateral consequences, which place restrictions on some 27,000 occupational licenses, such as healthcare, cosmetology, and real estate (Reentry Coordination Council, 2022; Donaldson and Vera, 2021). Not only do people need a job to sustain themselves, but it is often also a condition of probation or parole (Colbert, 2025). When it comes to ways that postsecondary institutions might directly impact employment in a near-term capacity, it is also important to note that while work-study jobs offer the opportunity for formerly incarcerated students to meet potential employment conditions of their parole and eliminate the need to navigate transportation between work and school, many campuses have restrictions on formerly incarcerated individuals working on campus (Colbert 2025; Castro and Zamani-Gallaher, 2018).

Collateral consequences can also directly result in greater food insecurity among formerly incarcerated learners. For one thing, there is a lifetime ban on accessing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for all individuals with a felony drug conviction on their record, however, all six New England states have either opted out or modified the ban[3] (Leverentz, 2010; Collateral Consequences Resource Center, n.d.).

While estimates have varied across studies, anywhere between 20 to 91% of formerly incarcerated individuals have reported experiencing food insecurity, which is twice the rate of the same in

2 According to the National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, collateral consequences are "legal and regulatory restrictions that limit or prohibit people convicted of crimes from accessing employment, business and occupational licensing, housing, voting, education, and other rights, benefits, and opportunities."

3 Five of the six New England states have opted out of the ban, while Connecticut has modified it (Collateral Consequences Resource Center, n.d.). See Conn. Gen. Stat. Ann. § 17b-112d for more information.

the general population (Landon and Jones, 2021). Even without a felony drug conviction, benefits programs that are administered by states are often suspended for individuals who are incarcerated for more than 30 consecutive days, necessitating that individuals reapply to receive these benefits post-release. It is important to note that through a prerelease waiver, states can process SNAP applications for eligible individuals prior to release, thereby facilitating a smoother transition to the community (Reentry Coordination Council, 2022). And yet, as of June 30, 2025, Maine is the only state in New England to offer such a waiver (Food and Nutrition Service, 2025).

In a similar fashion, Medicaid benefits are suspended for any individual who is incarcerated for longer than 60 consecutive days. Unlike SNAP and TANF, however, if the individual is released within three years, they do not need to reapply (Dwyer, 2016).[4] In Massachusetts, incarcerated individuals may apply for MassHealth—the program that encompasses both Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program—30 days prior to their release to receive a minimum of 12 months of coverage regardless of any eligibility changes that may occur during that year (Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2024; MassHealth, 2024). The Connecticut Department of Social Services and the Rhode Island Office of Health and Human Services have each submitted proposals to extend Medicaid eligibility to incarcerated individuals up to 90 days prior to release, which would create an on-ramp to post-release care (Putterman, 2024; UnitedHealthcare Community and State, 2024). Similarly, beginning in 2026, incarcerated individuals in Vermont will have access to Medicaid coverage 90 days prior to release (Weinstein, 2024). Through the 1115(a) waiver, NH's Community Re-Entry Program provides eligible individuals with Medicaid-covered health services 45 days pre-release, thereby establishing care relationships and Medicaid coverage prior to reentry (Wyatt, 2025). In Maine, formerly incarcerated individuals that are eligible for Medicaid must be assisted in reapplying for the benefits should they be incarcerated long enough for a termination of the benefit to occur (Maine Revised Statutes § 3174-CC, 2023). Facilitating a smoother transition to the community through healthcare coverage and establishing care can be significant, considering that many formerly incarcerated individuals are managing "substance use disorders, mental health issues, and trauma while pursuing employment or higher education upon reentry" (Donaldson and Viera, 2021, p. 7).

The Postsecondary Institution's Role in Reentry

The section that follows provides some context from the literature about the range of challenges that may surface for postsecondary institutions as they seek to serve reentering students. When there is a delay in meeting returning students' basic needs, they may not be able to pursue postsecondary education (Cantora and Zander, 2025). However, many colleges cannot meet their students' basic needs and may turn to partnerships with community-based organizations that can offer wraparound reentry support (Alpert et al., 2024). These partnerships can be incredibly successful. In fact, through conversations with leadership at community-based organizations and higher education in prison programs and program administrators, Pokornowski (2023) uncovered that the "most successful programs coordinate with offices and services across their home campus, with community partners, and, in an ideal situation, with relevant state agencies" (p. 11).

Leveraging the pre-existing supports of community-based organizations may allow postsecondary institutions to focus their efforts on areas where they can have a direct impact.

4 Importantly, though, if an individual releases to a community that is in a different state from that in which they were incarcerated, they need to reapply for Medicaid and re-establish eligibility (Reentry Coordination Council, 2022).

For example, the median application attrition rate for those with a felony conviction is 62.5%, which is three times higher than the general population's (Castro and Zamani-Gallaher, 2018). This can pose a significant barrier since 70% of 4-year institutions and 40% of community colleges include a question pertaining to the applicant's history of conviction and/or arrest (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023). Much like the screening processes in employment, this practice disproportionately impacts students with multiple marginalized identities (Castro and Zamani-Gallaher, 2018). Colleges could consider removing such a question and allowing students the option to choose whether to self-identify. Having to disclose one's record multiple times can compound feelings of stigmatization and reinforce othering, which may impact a student's persistence (Colbert, 2025). Furthermore, considering that the campus environment plays an important role in the academic persistence of formerly incarcerated students, colleges must work to ensure that their campuses are supportive (Colbert, 2025).

Postsecondary education can help to counteract the internalized stigmatization that occurs through the experience of incarceration (Castro and Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Caskey and Price-Williams, 2023; Quach et al., 2022). However, campuses must take it a step further to ensure that the environment they are creating is not one of further stigmatization. In fact, through her interviews with formerly incarcerated students, Adley-Marrithew (2024) found that at the college level, formerly incarcerated students were looking for "better understanding" from the college (p. 29). This could take multiple forms, including financial support, social support, open enrollment, and having a dedicated person they could go to, such as a mentor with lived experience or a reentry navigator (Adley-Marrithew, 2024; Colbert, 2025). By creating a campus culture rooted in destigmatization and knowledge sharing, programs can tackle one of the many barriers to degree completion.

With so many interconnected and inextricable challenges shaping the reentry process, returning students can feel overwhelmed and unsure of where to go to access basic services. Student Affairs professionals can act as intermediaries connecting reentering students with relevant and helpful resources both on and off campus (Johnson, 2020). However, this is not an easy task. Postsecondary programs may struggle to develop comprehensive reentry supports due to funding constraints, staffing constraints, or lack of experience. Returning students may struggle to find the resources and time to continue or begin their postsecondary education journeys. With this in mind, we conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with postsecondary education and reentry program providers to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated students and the strategies these programs are employing to overcome them.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This thematic analysis is concerned with the most poignant themes that surfaced during our conversations with postsecondary education providers. NEPEC held four focus groups and conducted nine semi-structured interviews, engaging 23 unique postsecondary programs, of which 20 are New England-based. Programs that offer postsecondary education programming in-facility (in prisons or jails) made up 70% of those who participated. The remaining 30% was comprised of community-based providers that work in partnership with in-facility programs and programs that exclusively provide post-release postsecondary education opportunities.[5] Given the specific audience for this white paper (postsecondary education leaders across New England), we chose to limit the thematic analysis that follows to the comments of the college and university providers we engaged. Insights from the conversations that we had with the community-based organizations (CBOs) are spotlighted throughout wherever relevant.

Multiple in-facility programming providers emphasized the difficulty of determining the scope of their respective programs when it came to reentry support. Indeed, many providers spoke to the importance of meeting student basic needs as a prerequisite to meaningful educational continuity post-release, and yet these same providers noted that due to the financial constraints on their institutions, their roles were often limited to academic reentry. Thus, one of the central themes that emerged from both the focus groups and interviews was the challenge of solidifying the scope of a postsecondary education program's responsibilities during reentry. These themes form the backbone of the thematic analysis that follows that draws on the conversations that were conducted through the focus groups and interviews mentioned above.

Theme 1: The Scope of Postsecondary Programs During Reentry

An overwhelming majority of our participants emphasized that their programs function primarily in areas pertaining to academic reentry even though they know students experience academic concerns and basic needs as simultaneous, intertwined priorities. Many factors influence this segmentation of focus. When it comes to reentry planning pre-release, participants emphasized that they are limited in supporting students with reentry planning because the agreements they have with their respective departments of correction (DOCs) mandate that their scope does not reach beyond the academic. It is not so much that reentry cannot be discussed while working with students on the inside, but rather that conversations remain at the level of gathering background versus crafting resource-intensive plans. At this stage, postsecondary education providers often collaborate with reentry teams within DOCs unless they have an established CBO partner who can begin to plug students into the social services they will need post-release. Importantly, even with the introduction of a CBO partner, DOC reentry teams are still involved in the process.

Post-release, postsecondary education programs experience an evolution in the role that they can play, but they still tend to rely on referrals to community partners to support their students' basic needs. The decision to refer students for support is usually attributable to one of a few main reasons. Many postsecondary programs are operating under financial constraints and simply cannot afford to expand their programming to encompass in-house support for basic needs like housing, health, and employment. In addition, many students are released to geographic areas far from a program's campus and thus continue in the program in an online-only capacity. In such instances, students cannot access on-campus resources and need to be connected to providers in their immediate area.

5 For more details about methodology, please see Appendix 2.

National Spotlight: Tennessee Higher Education Initiative

"We begin meeting with students 12 months pre-release. There's a minimum of a once a month visit by a pre-entry counselor where our goal is to build a durable reentry plan. I believe that's the biggest factor in our success." – Laura Ferguson-Mimms, THEI.

The Tennessee Higher Education Initiative (THEI) began by negotiating discounted tuition rates for currently incarcerated students. When Governor Bill Lee announced the Tennessee Correctional Education Investment (CEI)[6], they pivoted to providing wraparound supports for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. With over a decade of experience in the field, they have learned that the 90 days prior to release and the 90 days following release are among the most critical in an individual's reentry journey.

To support individuals during this period, THEI uses both a pre-entry team that plans with the students while they are in prison, and a transitional programs team that works with students once they are released. The handoff between these two teams is critical, because "if a ball is dropped on either side of that, it can be very detrimental." As of December 1, 2025, they are leveraging a newly created position, a transitions bridge coordinator, who focuses intensively on that 180-day period. Subsequently, the transitional programs team picks up what they call a "durable reentry plan"—one that is both aspirational and flexible. Their collaboration with higher education institutions begins at the same time as the pre-entry planning.

If a student is up for release, or even if they just have a parole hearing date, the team at THEI contacts the higher education program to discuss the academic reentry plan. For example, if a student is released mid-semester and they are enrolled in a fully in-person program, THEI works with the college to create a plan to finish the semester as it is extremely difficult for a student to leave prison and go straight to campus. They buy the student a laptop and create supports that ultimately help the individual continue their education during this transition.

While the scope of participant support remains primarily academic once students release, new opportunities arise in terms of how programs can support their continuing students. During the interviews and focus groups, participants stressed the importance of fully leveraging available resources in their local environment and noted the ways in which campus location dictates the approach a program must take. For example, a focus group participant from Massasoit Community College in Massachusetts explained how their campus is located in a service-rich region, making referrals simple. Similarly, in Connecticut, there are six reentry welcome centers around the state, where staff are trained to connect reentering individuals to potential accommodations like transitional housing.[7] One participant from Connecticut State Community College (CT State Community College) noted that they work with these centers extensively to coordinate wraparound support while simultaneously working with their campuses to set studentsup academically. By contrast, another postsecondary provider, who works with the University of New Haven Prison Education Program and Yale Prison Education Initiative collaboration, noted that because their campus is not near any

6 CEI was a three-year, $10.5 billion investment that was introduced in 2019 to expand postsecondary, career, and technical education in eight correctional facilities (Franz, 2025). The investment covered costs including tuition and books (Franz, 2025). While this investment resulted in THEI's shift to wraparound support, they still negotiate discounted tuition for baccalaureate degree pathways.

7 If an incarcerated individual opts to enroll in a reentry center, they are transported there by the Connecticut Department of Correction on the day of their release (New Life II, n.d.).

of these centers, their program opted to create a reentry guide to serve their alumni.[8] Importantly, this guide does not negate the need for "one-on-one triage work" as the program provider emphasized most of their referral work still takes place this way. Even if a program's campus is located near one of the six centers, the center may lack the resources necessary to provide all referred reentering students with basic needs support. In fact, reentry centers across the state are estimating that they will need to turn away hundreds of reentering individuals due to funding constraints (Otte, 2025).

> *"As a college, we don't have the reentry support services or all the things that are needed for students in terms of housing, medical, and things to that effect. So, we try to tap into what's already existing within the state." – Teresa Foley, CT State.*

The importance of asset mapping was reiterated by many programs with some describing how they created vetted referral lists and others just beginning to embark on this. A focus group participant from the University of Maine at Augusta noted that there is a substantial statewide reentry network in their state that overlaps with individuals working in recovery. Using these connections, this program is able to find students housing. Another Maine-based participant works with their students in substance use recovery as early as they can during incarceration to get them on the waiting list for very limited sober housing. In Rhode Island, the Department of Corrections hosts monthly Reentry Alliance meetings, which are attended by both service providers and recently released individuals. These meetings allow providers to create networks of support services and formerly incarcerated individuals to connect directly with local resources.

One participant from White Mountains Community College (NH) noted that their institution, which serves three counties, is located in the most geographically dispersed region in their state. This has led them to focus on "creating and maintaining" partnerships "so that [they] can best serve the individuals in front of [them]." One such example is their approach to supporting returning students with housing. As their institution is not a residential college, they are not able to use their own campus infrastructure to provide affordable housing, so they partnered with a local hotel that gives their students reduced rates, thereby allowing them to reside near the campus should they choose to continue their education in-person.

Partnerships do not always mean that the programs refer their students to programs off campus. In fact, several participants noted partnerships that brought external service providers to campus. For example, Tufts University Prison Initiative of Tisch College (TUPIT)'s reentry program, MyTERN, brings a diverse array of guests to connect students with existing resources and help them navigate the many unfamiliar processes that are part of holistic reentry. These have included the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens; MassHire, for employment support; Justice for Housing, which helps students identify housing vouchers and other affordable lodging opportunities; and financial credit counselors, who provide financial literacy support.

Beyond community-based partnerships, participants emphasized that the reentry support provided by postsecondary education programs should mirror population-specific services that institutions offer veterans or first-generation students, for example. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such supports differ between two and four-year institutions as community colleges have been working to meet the needs of adult learners and contemporary learners for longer. Most of the community colleges we spoke to run their own food pantries and clothing closets and some provide free childcare on campus.

8 The higher education providers represented in this research use the term 'alumni' differently. Alums can refer to students who have completed their academic journeys, passed a threshold of credits completed, or were enrolled in coursework while incarcerated and have since been released.

> *"Our discussions have centered on defining our scope of reentry services. As a community college, we typically serve a broader range of needs than other institutions. So, our primary focus is ensuring students are connected to the resources they need. This means either providing those resources directly or facilitating connections to someone who can."*
> *– Leah Maciejewski, White Mountains Community College.*

In sum, when it comes to supporting student basic needs, these educational programs work as bridges, connecting students to vetted partners, thereby allowing the programs to focus their efforts on educational continuity.

Theme 2: The Hidden Curriculum of College, Campus Culture, and Program Design Impact Reentering Students' Educational Continuity

2.1. Navigating the Hidden Curriculum of College Through Coursework and One-on-One Support

There are many potential barriers to educational continuity that fall within the scope of direct services provided by the programs we engaged. One barrier to educational continuity that programs seek to address is demystifying what is referred to as the hidden curriculum of college, which includes "navigating financial aid, registration, academic expectations, and professional development opportunities" (Gutiérrez et al., 2025, p. 5). The research literature about the hidden curriculum focuses on the experiences of first-generation students. And yet many of the program providers we engaged noted how the experience of their formerly incarcerated students can be productively understood through this paradigm of students wrestling with a hidden curriculum as well. To help students navigate the potentially unfamiliar and often confusing aspects of academic reentry, participants generally took one of two paths: either offering student success-related coursework for credit or providing one-on-one support services.

> *"Even down to… how to complete the application… how to upload the necessary documents, where to get your transcript. So, it's those very basic steps that we're not familiar with because it's pretty much laid out and done for you while you're inside and completing school." – Jennifer Berry, Hudson Link for Higher Education.*

Four New England programs described reentry or pre-entry coursework. While programs were at different stages in establishing such coursework, all the programs were using these classes as a vehicle to tackle the barrier of hidden curriculum.

For example, the Community College of Vermont Prison Education Program is working to launch a transition resilience course that was designed by their academic council, which includes student representation. The course is available during and post-incarceration and is open to other contemporary learner populations, such as veterans, to avoid inadvertently identifying students who enrolled in the class as having a lived experience of incarceration. Boston College Prison Education Program (BCPEP) offers an onboarding course that is rolled into an English literature class during students' first semester post-release. Students are advised to wait to enroll in any other classes until they have completed this course as it is designed to prepare students for success in subsequent coursework. The course also features a unique structure with flexible deadlines for assignments to enable students in the early days of academic reentry to build skills and confidence in a lower-pressure environment.

A participant from Massasoit Community College noted that their course teaches students "how to college," addressing common questions that come up during academic reentry, and helps students identify careers that they may be interested in pursuing. Considering that one's options for a degree

major expand considerably post-release, such coursework aims to illuminate how educational and career pathways align. Notably, among the providers we engaged, these courses intended to support academic reentry are in multiple cases a relatively new development, signaling an evolution in the way programs view their role in supporting formerly incarcerated students with educational continuity.

The other primary way that programs assist students in surmounting barriers associated with the hidden curriculum is by providing direct support. For example, some program providers noted having staff or senior leadership accompany prospective students to admissions offices, walking them through the enrollment process, and connecting students in-person with contacts at other postsecondary education institutions to which the student is interested in transferring. Such one-on-one support is sometimes routed through college and career advising.

> *"One thing we do ourselves is plan for educational continuity. And so, if that's coming to Emerson, then that means accompanying students through the FAFSA process, registration, orientation, and more. We've also had students decide to attend community colleges and so sometimes educational continuity looks like going to the community college campus with them and walking them through all the processes to get set up there."*
> *– Mneesha Gellman, Emerson Prison Initiative.*

In providing direct support, programs make use of various combinations of institutional personnel. For White Mountains Community College's Prison Education Program, that involves leveraging both faculty and staff advisors. While students are still incarcerated, they work with staff advisors, who are familiar with the college's prison education programming. Post-release, students are connected with a faculty advisor while retaining a relationship with the same staff advisor they worked with during their incarceration. With this model, students get comprehensive curriculum support while maintaining their well-established staff-side connection. This program is also working to pilot a trauma-informed training—which was originally developed by the Emerson Prison Initiative—that they would administer to all faculty and staff who are involved with prison education programming. Such trainings recognize that individuals may have traumatic histories that inform their present-day behaviors and experiences and work to holistically support well-being by creating safe and supportive environments. BCPEP has a dedicated academic advisor who is located within the institution's college of continuing education who is already familiar with the unique needs of contemporary learners and able to draw on this experience to support reentering students.

While utilizing staff to support students was the most common direct support approach among the programs we engaged, some programs mentioned using peer support as well. For example, a New England community college retains a peer navigator whose responsibilities include "online student outreach," admissions and registration support, and coordination of basic needs services. For their 70 hours of work each term, this peer navigator also gets 18 credit hours of free tuition per semester and a $400 credit towards their textbooks. Inspired by the work of Thad Tatum and other formerly incarcerated leaders in Louisiana, Western Mass CORE has adapted the model of the Formerly Incarcerated Peer Support Group (FIPS, for short).[9] This support group is student-led and meets bi-monthly at Holyoke Community College to cover topics related to navigating the hidden curriculum of college as a formerly incarcerated student. For example, the group used a session to explore how to deal with probation and parole while being a college student. Such groups not only address the significant shift in academic culture from incarceration to community but can also contribute positively to a student's sense of belonging—counteracting some of the negative impacts of stigmatizing campus environments.

9 To learn more about FIPS, see (Boles et al., 2022).

2.2. Creating Cultures of Support Through Dedicated Physical Spaces and Community Building

Providing students with a supportive community through building positive campus culture and robust peer networks is a key element of programs' work to bolster educational continuity post-release. The programs engaged for the white paper tended to adopt one of two main models. The first involves creating dedicated physical space on campus for reentering students. By way of example, two community colleges created dedicated student lounges for formerly incarcerated students, in response to student feedback. In each instance, students were then able to affirmatively choose to enter these spaces. In this way, both programs were intentional about not requiring students to identify themselves as formerly incarcerated but rather providing them with the option to make use of this community-centered space.

> *"Students didn't feel there was a place for them to kind of hang around on campus and maybe have some conversations that they didn't feel like having with other mixed groups of students." – Nicole Hendricks, Western Mass CORE.*

The second model, which was more common among the programs engaged in this research, is to involve students who are farther along in their post-release coursework to create a sense of belonging and help newly released students navigate their academic reentry journey.[10] For example, in their reentry onboarding course, one BCPEP provider tries to "create a community with the newer students" by engaging those who are farther along: "Sometimes veteran students will sit in, and we do a dry run of a semester," they explained. Another provider at Wesleyan University's Center for Prison Education organized an alumni reunion. This gave rise to a small cohort of students developing their own bi-weekly Zoom group that the provider has been able to support through a micro grant.

2.3. Designing Programs and Coursework to Maximize Flexibility

Providers emphasized how their programs were intentionally designed to maximize flexibility—from the structure of the coursework to the faculty chosen as instructors. Understanding that many formerly incarcerated students will be juggling the often-competing priorities of work and school, several participants discussed designing their programs to easily accommodate the unexpected. Some noted that their programs are part-time eligible so that students can work full-time while continuing their education at a more manageable enrollment intensity. The Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens (LARC) program at Clark University (MA) even offers all their courses at night and breaks them into seven-week terms.

As the road to reintegration can be rocky, some programs mentioned encouraging students to take a leave of absence or reduce their courseload while they worked to establish (or reestablish) stable foundations for themselves from which they could meaningfully engage in academic work. For example, a participant at the University of Maine at Augusta's Prison Education Partnership said that most of their students "tend to reduce their load or take a semester off" post-release to engage in "intensive recovery services" or begin a new job. In either scenario, the student will work with a reentry navigator to create an academic plan that meets their specific needs.

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10 It is important to note that parole requirements may limit or prohibit contact between people who have been recently released. Such prohibitions create a situation wherein programs that are implementing peer-to-peer support may have to think through sustainable and systemic solutions that allow them to navigate variable parole restrictions while working to build community among formerly incarcerated students.

> *"[T]he thing that I appreciate about the program is that we're running on the same schedule as the program as any other student would on the outside. And so, if a student is released, there is no interruption. They could walk right into the same class that was being held at the same time on the outside, so that they could continue their study. So, there was a lot of intent that went into that." – Jose Rodriguez, College Unbound.*

Because release dates can be unpredictable and are not necessarily aligned with academic calendars on campus, students sometimes release in the middle of a semester. Some participants noted that the academic calendar for their prison education program mirrors that of their on-campus programs so that when students release, they are able to immediately continue their education. Notwithstanding, even when this transition is smoothed in that way, it can be difficult and requires flexibility and support from the college and professor.

Another aspect of intentional design relates to work to ensure credit mobility and robust transfer pathways for reentering students. A participant from White Mountains Community College emphasized the intentionality behind their decision to offer liberal arts and business administration associate degrees when they launched their initial in-facility course offerings. They knew that these degrees offered the best chance of transferring to a baccalaureate program. Other programs we engaged have established 2+2 degree pathways, which allow their students to seamlessly transition from earning an associate degree offered by a community college to a baccalaureate degree program at a partner four-year institution.

Beyond specific 2+2 pathways, sometimes, state policy plays a role in broadening credit mobility for a reentering student. For example, in Massachusetts, if a student were to release and be unable to commute to the community college in which they were enrolled on the inside, they might have options to transfer laterally to a closer community college if they were enrolled in one of the foundational associate degrees for transfer. Similarly, if a student in Massachusetts emerged from incarceration with an earned associate degree, they could avail themselves of vertical transfer options to a four-year public institution through the state's Mass Transfer program.

National Spotlight: Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges

"While each of our college partners maintains local control, it's essential that students encounter consistent processes across institutions, such as transcript review, credit evaluation, and degree mapping. That consistency allows pathways to transfer smoothly between colleges and supports stronger alignment with our four-year partners as well." – Chastity Pennington, Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges.

The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) is a system-level oversight entity that provides administrative support and direction to all 34 of the state's public community and technical colleges. They work as a liaison between the two-year institutions, four-year institutions, and the Department of Corrections to facilitate transfer pathways, create uniformity in student experience, and identify best practices.

Through an intentionally designed system of coordinated collaboration, SBCTC leverages monthly reporting from college teams and DOC that allows community navigators and facility navigators to reach as many prospective students as possible and provide them with a student-centered educational experience. Regardless of whether an incarcerated individual is currently enrolled in coursework within the facility, the facility navigators begin individual outreach to create an academic reentry plan. During this process, they also help to address any educational trauma that may be preventing a prospective student from enrolling. This academic reentry plan is eventually coupled with DOC's reentry plan. When the student is six months pre-release, they are virtually connected to their community navigator, so they can begin to establish a supportive relationship to aid in guiding them towards a successful reentry.

Importantly, both the community-based and facility-based education teams work to reduce stigma and biases through on-campus trainings. SBCTC also offers their own set of trainings to administrative staff and faculty across all 34 colleges.

Many of the providers explained that their programs offer the option of distance education to provide the greatest degree of flexibility; however, continuing one's education online presents its own set of challenges.

Theme 3: Building Digital Skills Through Access and Programming

"In prison, you don't have to apply for your classes online. You don't have to learn about a database. So, a lot of the calls that we get related to education are people are just really like, 'I don't even know what to do.' … Some of them have not had a lot of interaction with technology. So, it's really a struggle." – Mike Rowe, Hudson Link.

Digital skills are a crucial component of academic reentry for both distance and in-person education. Depending on funding and the resources available, some programs offer free laptops to their students—either to facilitate their in-person learning or to enable their participation in distance education. That being said, less than half of the New England programs we engaged in our research provide laptops. For the programs that do, this is often made possible through grants rather than institutional funding. Some programs rely on partnerships with CBOs focused on technology access. For example, one provider with The Educational Justice Institute (TEJI) at the Massachusetts Institute

of Technology noted that the Massachusetts-based nonprofit Tech Goes Home gives students a free laptop if they complete at least one of the organization's digital literacy courses while incarcerated in a county-level correctional facility.

> *"We made laptops available with Internet access available to students so that they may develop the skills necessary to succeed in a modern professional environment."*
> *– Bryan O'Connor, Community College of Vermont.*

More common ways that programs further digital skill building include: (1) incorporating technology use into their in-facility programming and (2) providing formal digital skills programming to their students post-release. For providers that supply their currently incarcerated students with technology, the focus is on creating familiarity with using laptops, a learning management system (LMS), and (when accessible in-facility) any relevant software. As one participant from Mount Wachusett Community College noted, if your students do not have access to the Internet, the LMS will not "have all of the same bells and whistles," but it will help "some in the transition" to have had "at least some digital literacy access behind the walls." Importantly, access to the LMS that is typically used on campus may not be permitted for use in facilities; for example, Canvas—a popular LMS—is not permitted for use within Massachusetts correctional facilities. Moreover, access to the Internet and technology is variable not just from state to state but also from facility to facility.

In terms of formal programming to build digital skills post-release, this can occur through the onboarding or reentry coursework described earlier. For example, one provider at BCPEP utilizes these classes as an opportunity to walk students through the intricacies of navigating commonly used software used within their academic institution, such as Google Suite. In the context of this course, this provider also brings in staff from their institution's Information Technology department to help students set up their laptops and ensure they are able to log in to the various university systems. Other programs offer digital literacy certificates or academic pathways. Regardless of the particulars, these programs that offer formal programming for digital literacy all do so through credit-bearing coursework.

Theme 4: Addressing Financial Barriers Through Financial Aid and Direct Assistance

Unsurprisingly, financial barriers, including the cost of tuition, can be among the biggest barriers to educational continuity. Of course, federal financial aid can play a significant role in reentering students surmounting financial barriers to educational continuity. In fact, multiple participants noted the various ways their institution's financial aid package or Pell Grant eligibility supports students through large refunds or direct disbursement. One program noted that, while not ideal due to its delayed timing, their students can receive up to several thousand dollars in financial aid refunds depending on how many classes they are taking.

National Spotlight: Hudson Link for Higher Education

"And then in 2022, we had enough staff that we were comprehensively surveying the alumni population. And when they're asked what they want our help with, about a third of them said degree completion." – Lila McDowell, Hudson Link.

Three years ago, Hudson Link started their Finish Line program, which provides scholarships and financial support for formerly incarcerated students. The direct funding support runs the gamut of needs, including rent, transportation, and any other financial barrier that may prohibit a student from attending school—as "so much of the challenge is not just the tuition, it's all the other money you aren't making because you're going to school."

While Finish Line provides scholarships, staff members ensure that students are aware that the resources are not guaranteed year after year. This is partly due to how difficult it can be to fundraise for tuition support as many foundations explicitly prohibit the use of grant funds for such purposes. Since scholarship funds are limited, priority goes to individuals who were enrolled in educational programming through Hudson Link while incarcerated, followed by those who are closest to completing their credential. Regardless of whether someone receives a scholarship, all students receive support from Finish Line coordinators to complete admissions and financial aid applications.

While the reinstatement of incarcerated learners' eligibility for Pell Grants will likely lead to an increase in the number of Pell-eligible programs, Pell awards alone often do not cover the full cost of attendance. To support educational continuity, the programs we engaged employ a range of financial supports beyond federal financial aid including scholarships, institutional aid, completion grants, and tuition-free programming. However, the costs associated with continuing one's education are not the only financial barriers students face. In fact, during reentry, people often find themselves struggling to cover the costs associated with meeting basic needs, like housing, health, and transportation. A student's inability to afford these costs negatively impacts their ability to continue their education. Recognizing this, over one-third of the New England programs represented in this white paper offer some form of direct financial assistance to reentering students.

"And this year we did recognize that we had a lot of alumni coming home who really did need some startup or emergency funds. So, what we did is we took the funds that we'd set aside for these full-time grants and we started breaking it up into smaller fellowship grants. So, we've broken it up and now we're doing this with a lot more fellows. And I would say the average grant that we're making is about $6,000."
– Zelda Roland, Yale Prison Education Initiative.

One community college provider stated that their program offers gift cards to a local grocery store, which students can request in the amount of $100 or $200, as well as pre-paid gas cards for students in need of transportation support. Informed by conversations with their students, a program based in Massachusetts used grant funding to tackle some Registry of Motor Vehicles related fees—including driver's license reinstatement costs and license-related debts that had increased over the period of an individual's incarceration.

Most other programs reported providing less narrowly targeted direct assistance so that students could use the funds as they see fit to meet their basic needs. This blanket funding might take the form

of a reentry grant or course completion stipends. For example, TUPIT's MyTERN program provides its students with $2,000 per semester, paid out in four equal installments, while LARC pays students $1,000 for every three courses they complete in a calendar year—and an additional $500 is available on completion of the student's certificate pathway. Another program noted that their students receive $1,300 a month in the form of an institutional award to support their housing needs—a sum that is packaged with the student's financial aid offer.

Programs cited a variety of funding sources from legislative earmarks and state budget line items to philanthropic investments and fundraised donations; however, a common refrain was funding uncertainty. To manage this, some of the programs explained that they are looking to form strategic partnerships with other organizations. Just as the programs partner to meet student basic needs in reentry, some providers see partnerships as buttressing their financial sustainability above and beyond extending their capacity or providing complementary expertise. For example, Western Mass CORE partners with Tech Foundry, a local nonprofit, for digital literacy work. Through this partnership, the program's students get free access to digital skill building and after completing six classes, they are given a laptop, allowing the program to allocate its scarce time and limited funding elsewhere.

> *"We as an institution have not received any funding to do this work… That said, it's really about knowing your community … and being able to connect individuals to the organizations that are actually providing the services that they need… There are organizations that are really good at doing the services that our individual students need and are being funded for it but oftentimes are underutilized because people don't know that they exist." – Jose Rodriguez, College Unbound.*

CONCLUSION

Reentry is both a pivotal and challenging point in an individual's life post-incarceration, characterized by the presence of multiple intersecting and competing priorities. For reentering students, it may be difficult to navigate continued education while attempting to overcome major structural barriers to meet their basic needs. This has led postsecondary education programs to examine how to best support their students during this transition. While there is no clear path, most of the participants in our qualitative research emphasized that their scope is primarily academic reentry. However, recognizing that students have needs far beyond the academic realm, postsecondary institutions have explored partnerships and one-on-one case management to assist their students in navigating housing, health, and other basic needs. Notably, every individual we spoke to utilizes strategic partnerships in some capacity. Thus, institutions may not need to meet every reentry need themselves but can work to ensure that the network of collaboration is easily navigable and accessible for their students.

When it comes to the support directly offered through the postsecondary institution, some programs attempt to center student voices and lived experience in designing new initiatives and adapting existing ones to better meet student needs. This occurs through student voice councils or informal check-ins with those enrolled in their program. Furthermore, ensuring that there are opportunities for students to see aspects of their identities reflected in staff can be a pivotal part of creating a sense of connection and trust between program teams and students.

While this white paper has been focused on the scope of postsecondary education programs and the strategies that postsecondary institutions across New England are employing to tackle barriers to reentry, we want to name that even for institutions with enviably robust resources and networks for student support, reentry remains a challenging and unpredictable time for formerly incarcerated students, and the task of supporting students during this period is a complex one. With the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated learners, the salience of academic reentry will grow as more institutions offer certificate- or degree-bearing programming. Thus, we expect that more innovation will emerge from this surge of activity as more program providers think through these complex challenges together. We are excited to see how the work of academic reentry may evolve in unexpected and innovative ways. As the field continues to develop, it is imperative that programs employ a student-centered lens, approach curriculum and program design with a high level of intentionality and ensure that their campuses—both digital and in-person—do not perpetuate environments that further stigmatize students with lived experience of incarceration.

APPENDIX 1: SELECT GLOSSARY

Academic Reentry: In the context of this paper, academic reentry pertains to the transition from incarceration to life post-release with the specific goal of continuing or completing one's postsecondary education.

Alum: The postsecondary education providers represented in this research use the term 'alum' differently. For some programs, alums are students who have completed their academic journeys, and for others the term describes students who have taken 30 or more credits with the program.

Application Attrition: We use this term to describe the phenomenon in which applicants who indicate that they have been convicted of a felony start an application, but do not complete it.

Collateral Consequences: According to the National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, collateral consequences are "legal and regulatory restrictions that limit or prohibit people convicted of crimes from accessing employment, business and occupational licensing, housing, voting, education, and other rights, benefits, and opportunities."

Community-Based Organization: A local, nonprofit organization that is working to meet the specific needs of their community.

Credit Mobility: Describes the manner in which academic credits and learning experiences transfer "to and across higher education institutions" (Kepner, 2025).

Educational Continuity (also referred to as academic persistence): This paper uses this term to refer to the continued enrollment in and/or completion of a postsecondary educational pathway at any postsecondary institution.

Employee Retention: An organization's ability to keep its employees from leaving through practices such as providing competitive salaries, benefits, and a positive work environment.

Financial Aid: An umbrella term referring to programs that help students pay for college, including grants, scholarships, work-study jobs, and loans.

Higher Education in Prison: An umbrella term referring to postsecondary educational programming within carceral facilities.

Implicit Bias: Subconscious prejudice/negative attitude about a particular group of people (e.g., associating negative stereotypes with women).

Pell Grant: The federal Pell Grant program provides financial assistance in the form of grants to high-need students, who have not earned a postsecondary degree. Congress took historic, bipartisan legislative action to reverse a ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated learners that was in effect since 1994. Effective July 1, 2023, eligible incarcerated people can access federal Pell Grant funding for the first time in almost 30 years.

Prison Education Program (PEP): Denotes approved educational programming created in accordance with official U.S. Department of Education processes for Pell-eligible prison education programs.

Reentry Programs: These programs aim to support individuals in surmounting some of the most common post-release challenges and can be housed within a variety of agencies or institutions, including postsecondary institutions, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

Reentry: Describes a point in time where an individual is released from incarceration and is reentering their community. During this period, individuals are attempting to secure housing and employment and establish access to healthcare; depending on the terms of release, reentry might also entail navigating community supervision. All of this is occurring while an individual is attempting to navigate life post-release.

Returning/Reentering Students: We use these terms to refer to students who are continuing their academic journeys as they are released from incarceration.

Second Chance Pell: In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education launched the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, which allowed incarcerated students to access Pell Grants at a select number of higher education institutions for the first time since the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was enacted in 1994.

Student Retention: The continued enrollment in and/or completion of a postsecondary educational pathway within the same postsecondary institution.

Substance Use Disorder: Individuals who struggle with a substance use disorder struggle with an addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, characterized by significant difficulty resisting the use of such substances.

System-impacted: We use this term to describe people who are currently incarcerated as well as people who have been incarcerated and those with arrests or convictions but no incarceration.

Transfer Pathways: Structured and coordinated pathways between postsecondary institutions that provide students with a curated transfer experience.

Work-Study: A federal program wherein undergraduate and graduate students with demonstrated need are able to procure part-time jobs to help pay costs associated with their education.

APPENDIX 2: METHODS

This white paper utilized desk research, interviews, and focus groups to carry out a landscape analysis of common reentry-related struggles and strategies amongst program providers across New England.

Data Collection:

- Qualitative data was collected through an exploratory survey, which we disseminated to 46 program providers across the region. In the instances in which multiple individuals from the same program were emailed, we requested that only one representative submit a response. Respondents were asked some demographic questions (e.g., where their program is located, if it is Pell-eligible, etc.) and to identify the most pertinent challenges facing their programs. Respondents were also given optional spaces to provide qualitative comments to explain their responses. We received 19 unique responses from program providers across the six New England states.
- Qualitative data was also collected through semi-structured focus groups and interviews. We invited 21 New England-based programs to take part in one of four semi-structured focus groups. Due to scheduling constraints, we ultimately engaged 18 program providers in these focus groups and two providers in semi-structured interviews. In select instances, we invited four program providers from one of the focus groups to have a 30-minute follow-up interview to expand on their responses during the session. Additionally, we engaged six providers across the three national programs we spotlighted in this white paper in semi-structured interviews. This brings the total participant number to 26 and program representation to 23.

Data Sampling:

- Participants were selected using purposive sampling, wherein both respondents to the survey and individuals who participated in focus groups and interviews were selected based on their roles in higher education in prison programs.

Data Analysis:

- Qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews were coded thematically using Dedoose, a qualitative and mixed methods data analysis software, to investigate recurring themes and find relevant quotes for inclusion in the publication. Codes were created through both inductive and deductive methods.
- Data from the survey was used to inform the interview questions and begin creating a coding scheme.

Ethical Considerations:

- All participants provided their written and verbal informed consent and were provided with the option to remain confidential.
- Interview and focus group recordings were stored securely.

Notes on Sample Composition:

- Of the 20 New England programs we engaged, ten are independent postsecondary institutions, eight are public postsecondary institutions, and two are nonprofit organizations that facilitate credit-bearing and/or degree-granting programs in-facility. Over half (14) of these programs culminate in postsecondary degrees. Of the remaining six non-degree programs, four offer credit-bearing coursework.
- It is useful to note that certain states in the New England region have more higher education in prison programs than others, potentially influencing how often a given state is mentioned in the white paper or represented among the participant list in **Appendix 2.2**.
- Some research participants also engage in other NEPEC initiatives, such as the Higher Education Working Group, potentially impacting their responses.

APPENDIX 2.1: FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The NEPEC team is committed to sharing what we have developed, so it can be used by others or to further contextualize the work. If you are interested in viewing the full focus group and interview protocol, please email nepec@nebhe.org.

APPENDIX 2.2: FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

NAME	PROGRAM	STATE	METHOD
Jennifer Berry	Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison	New York	Group Interview
Hilary Binda	Tufts University Prison Initiative	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Michelle Brooks	Boston College Prison Education Program	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Carole Cafferty	The Education Justice Institute at MIT	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Laura Ferguson-Mimms	Tennessee Higher Education Initiative	Tennessee	Group Interview
Patrick Flynn	University of Maine at Augusta Prison Education Partnership	Maine	Focus Group
Teresa Foley	Connecticut State Center for Prison Education	Connecticut	Focus Group
Mneesha Gellman	Emerson Prison Initiative	Massachusetts	Focus Group

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NAME	PROGRAM	STATE	METHOD
Beth Goldstein	Babson Venturing Out Prison Entrepreneurship Education Initiative	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Nicole Hendricks	Western Mass CORE	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Matthew Kite	Roger Williams University Extension School	Rhode Island	Focus Group
Leah Maciejewski	White Mountains Community College	New Hampshire	Interview
Lila McDowell	Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison	New York	Group Interview
James Monteiro	Reentry Campus Program	Rhode Island	Focus Group
Bryan O'Connor	Community College of Vermont Corrections Education Program	Vermont	Focus Group
Chastity Pennington	Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	Washington	Interview
Anonymous Provider	Community College	New England State	Focus Group
Anonymous Provider	Community College	New England State	Focus Group
Lauren Rhae	Tennessee Higher Education Initiative	Tennessee	Group Interview
Jose Rodriguez	College Unbound	Rhode Island	Focus Group
Zelda Roland	University of New Haven Prison Education Program and Yale Prison Education Initiative	Connecticut	Focus Group
Michael Rowe	Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison	New York	Group Interview
Carine Sauvignon	Massasoit Community College Correctional Education and Returning Citizens Program	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Tressa Stazinski	Mount Wachusett Community College Second Chance Pell Program	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Shelly Tenenbaum	Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens at Clark University	Massachusetts	Focus Group
Tess Wheelwright	Wesleyan Center for Prison Education	Connecticut	Interview

APPENDIX 3: REFERENCES

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