

Unlocking Potential: Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education

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Fact Sheet

Postsecondary education is transformative—for participants in prison, students in the community, and the corrections and college staff who work with them. College in prison communicates a simple, transformational idea: people leaving prison have futures we should value and great potential we should encourage and tap.

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) launched *Unlocking Potential: Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education* in 2012. Supported by five national foundations, the demonstration project gave colleges and state corrections agencies in Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina

“I’ve seen people get out of prison and do good, but I’ve seen everybody that’s gotten out of prison that’s been in this program—a lot of them are doing really great....They had a second chance to do something.”

—A PATHWAYS STUDENT

the means to offer programs in prison and build reentry pathways that would keep participants engaged in education after their release. More than 1,400 students participated and completed a total of 471 credentials, including certificates, associate’s degrees, and bachelor’s degrees. During the five-year project, Vera and its partners piloted numerous strategies to support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students in their pursuit of higher education and laid the

groundwork for a rigorous outcome evaluation. The full report describes the project’s design and implementation as well as the experiences of Pathways partners and students. It also provides recommendations on policy and practice for college programs with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.

The Pathways model

The model Vera developed for Pathways is a continuum of high-quality postsecondary educational programming, combined with academic and reentry support, beginning in prison and continuing in the community. The programs allowed participants to attain a postsecondary credential while cultivating support among corrections agencies, policymakers, and communities for access to college education for incarcerated people. The model involves three types of activities: those completed in prison; activities done after students’ release; and efforts to foster stakeholder engagement, policy change, and sustainability.

Vera provided technical assistance to the three participating states in four areas:

- › developing strong partnerships between correction agencies and colleges;
- › providing research support on areas of interest to Pathways sites;
- › facilitating contacts across sites and engaging external experts on specific practices; and
- › convening the Pathways National Advisory Board to advise Vera and the sites on project implementation.

Pathways students in prison

The three participating states already had experience providing college programs and training in prison. Through Pathways, each state proposed offering multiple supports to incarcerated students, including academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, study space, access to computers, shared housing and, in North Carolina, Internet service. Through these

supports, project partners sought to replicate the services available on a college campus as much as possible.

The students selected in the three states varied in their levels of educational attainment and the amount of time since their last formal education. Some participants had experienced success in high school that was abruptly interrupted by struggles with substance use, mental illness, an arrest, and/or incarceration.

Preparation for participants' release is an integral part of the Pathways model. The programs' navigators, coaches, and counselors performed essential services for their students. These staff assisted participants in reaching their educational goals and returning to life in the community.

Pathways students in the community

In many ways, supporting college enrollment immediately after people's release is more complex than making it available in prison. As implementation progressed, it became clear that the initial Pathways goal of students completing a credential within two years of release was not just challenging but possibly unrealistic. Like other nontraditional students, people recently released from prison have many demands on their time and face competing financial, familial, and other pressures.

In addition to the demands of balancing educational goals and other responsibilities, Pathways students typically faced these types of challenges:

- › **Stresses related to reentry.** As people move abruptly from a rigidly structured prison environment to a much different social experience in the community, they face numerous psychosocial and practical challenges. These include adjusting to cultural, technological, interpersonal, and other changes that may have occurred while they were incarcerated, as well as difficulties finding affordable housing, employment, and meeting their financial obligations.
- › **Parole obligations.** Although some parole officers were supportive of students' educational goals,

parole requirements typically hinder—or explicitly prohibit—connections among peers who have a criminal history. But staff and administrators of Pathways and other college programs consider this type of contact beneficial as it is often associated with people continuing their education. Pathways sites experimented with strategies to bring students

“It was the most transformative thing [you] have ever seen.... You start thinking: ‘I might have a chance.’”

—A PATHWAYS STUDENT

together, such as holding meetings and study sessions at parole offices and reentry organizations.

- › **Enrollment.** The process of enrolling in a college program in the community presented obstacles involving institutional practices, financial assistance, logistical hurdles, and processes that require the use of technology unfamiliar to students. Pathways sites found success in hiring staff who helped participants navigate these institutions and cultivated champions on campus to welcome formerly incarcerated students into their communities.

Change has begun to take root in these systems. The practices Pathways used can sow the seeds for larger changes in prisons, allowing people who are incarcerated—and therefore their families and communities—to create a different path for the future.

For more information

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The full report is available at www.vera.org/unlocking-potential. For more information about the report or the Pathways project and postsecondary education in prisons, visit www.vera.org/projects/college-in-prison or contact Ruth Delaney, program manager, at rdelaney@vera.org.

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's

increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit www.vera.org.