



Unlocking Potential: Why Virginia Must Invest in Higher Education in Prisons

Expanding higher education in Virginia's prisons isn't just about justice—it's a powerful investment in safer communities, economic growth, and long-term savings for taxpayers. The time to act is now.

Why is Higher Education in Prison Important?

Higher education in prison serves as a transformative tool for incarcerated individuals, providing opportunities for growth and can drastically improve reentry outcomes.

Significant Cost Savings: Education in prison is a sound financial investment that reduces long-term incarceration costs. It costs an average of \$61,000 per year to incarcerate one individual in Virginia.¹ By expanding access to higher education and reducing recidivism, Virginia can lower incarceration costs and direct resources toward community investments. National research estimates that expanding postsecondary education in prisons could save **over \$365 million** annually in prison-related costs—a savings Virginia could share by growing its prison education programs.²

Addressing Racial and Economic Disparities: Virginia's prison population is composed of 43 percent Black individuals, despite Black residents making up only 20 percent of the state's overall population.³ Expanding higher education in prisons is a critical step toward reducing longstanding racial and economic inequities in the legal system. Individuals from marginalized communities, who are disproportionately impacted by incarceration, benefit from the pathways to upward mobility that education provides.

Breaking the Cycle of Intergenerational Incarceration: College programs in prison have a profound ripple effect that extends beyond individual students. Education offers a foundation for positive change, improving family dynamics and providing children with a model of resilience and success, reducing the likelihood of future justice involvement.⁴

The research on the impact of prison education programs highlights the following key benefits:

Hope as a Pathway to Progress: Prison educational programming fosters a sense of purpose and builds hope by offering people the tools to envision and work toward a better future. The opportunity to pursue higher education empowers incarcerated individuals to redefine their identities and is a powerful incentive for positive behavior, reinforcing personal growth and increasing the likelihood of successful reentry into society.

Improving Public Safety: Incarcerated individuals participating in higher education programs are **significantly less likely to return to prison.** Research estimates that individuals who participate in higher education opportunities in prison reduce their risk of reconviction by 66 percent, directly contributing to building safer communities and reducing the strain on the criminal legal system.⁷

Building Pathways to Economic Stability: A college degree or certification unlocks access to better job prospects, making it a critical factor in successful reintegration. By enhancing employability and providing skills aligned with workforce needs, education creates a **pathway to long-term economic stability and upward mobility.**⁸

Strengthening Virginia's Workforce Pipeline: Prison education programs equip individuals with the skills and qualifications needed to pursue meaningful careers, **fostering a sense of purpose and hope** for a better future. By empowering incarcerated individuals to redefine their identities and pursue higher education, the state can fill critical workforce gaps, support economic growth, and increase the likelihood of successful reentry and long-term employment.



Virginia's Prison Education System Leaves Potential Untapped

Virginia's current prison education landscape reflects both progress and unmet potential. While some facilities offer access to basic literacy, GED preparation, and limited vocational training, the availability of higher education programs remains inconsistent. This leaves many incarcerated individuals without the opportunity to pursue college-level coursework that could transform their futures. By failing to invest in prison education, the state overlooks a critical segment of its future workforce, undermining efforts to build a stronger, more inclusive economy. Addressing these gaps requires a clear understanding of the challenges that have limited the growth and impact of higher education programs in Virginia's prisons.

Second Chance Pell: Progress, But Just the Beginning: Second Chance Pell: Progress, But Just the Beginning: Launched in 2015 and expanded by 2023, these programs now enable individuals in Virginia’s Department of Corrections to access federal Pell Grants for college degrees and vocational training. Yet, despite this progress, **Virginia’s efforts remain drastically under-scaled**, reaching just 600 students out of an estimated 14,000 incarcerated individuals—a fraction of the population in need.⁹

Outdated Systems, Limited Opportunities: Most Department of Corrections facilities in Virginia lack the technological infrastructure needed to support modern higher education programs. Limited internet access, outdated computer systems, and insufficient digital resources prevent incarcerated individuals from engaging with online learning platforms, conducting research, or accessing virtual classrooms—critical components of a comprehensive college education. These **technological gaps severely limit the scope and impact of higher education programs** behind bars.¹⁰

Limited Access in the Face of High Demand: Despite the growing demand for educational programs, only 11 out of 45 correctional facilities in Virginia offer college courses -- a disappointing reality shaped by inconsistent leadership commitment and the logistical challenges of a geographically large state. Long waitlists, limited program capacity, and restrictive eligibility criteria further restrict access, leaving thousands of incarcerated individuals without the chance to pursue life-changing higher education.¹¹

A Brighter Future: The Transformative Power of Higher Education in Virginia’s Prisons

Expanding higher education in Virginia’s prisons offers a clear and compelling pathway to safer communities, economic growth, and more stable futures for thousands of individuals. While some progress has been made, current programs reach only a small fraction of the incarcerated population, leaving untapped potential for growth. Virginians deserve to know where programs are in place, what they offer, and how they impact the lives of those who participate.

Governor Glenn Youngkin’s Executive Order 36 represents a significant step forward. It aims to enhance technological and physical infrastructure, increase program capacity, and boost participation in Pell-funded initiatives. The plan also emphasizes strengthening partnerships with Virginia’s Community College System to deliver a broader range of degree and vocational programs. The initiative seeks to create a more robust pipeline for educational advancement within correctional facilities by addressing barriers such as limited digital access and inadequate program availability.¹²



Several states have emerged as leaders in implementing successful higher education programs in prisons, providing Virginia with concrete models for expansion.

- **New York’s Bard Prison Initiative (BPI)** is a nationally recognized program that offers rigorous, accredited college courses across six correctional facilities. BPI graduates have earned associate and bachelor’s degrees and boast a recidivism rate of less than 2 percent, compared to the national average of over 40 percent.¹³
- **California’s Corrections to College initiative** is another standout model, leveraging partnerships with the California Community Colleges system to deliver in-person and distance learning courses across 34 prisons. California has enrolled over 7,000 incarcerated students annually and has expanded access to associate, bachelor’s, and even master’s degree programs.¹⁴
- **Washington State’s Postsecondary Education in Prison program** has also made significant strides, offering tuition-free degree pathways through partnerships with community colleges and universities. Washington’s focus on reentry services has led to improved employment outcomes and reduced recidivism rates for program participants. These programs demonstrate the power of strong institutional partnerships, robust funding, and comprehensive reentry support in making higher education in prisons a transformative tool for both individuals and communities.¹⁵

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JPI would like to thank [Georgetown Undergraduate Legal Project](#) for their partnership in our continued efforts to expand higher education in Virginia prisons. The project provides practical training to undergraduate students at the intersection of law, policy, & social justice through volunteer opportunities with local organizations, allowing volunteers to give back to some of the DMV’s most vulnerable communities.