

# **UNLOCKING VIRGINIA'S WORKFORCE:**

## **THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON**

*While I was incarcerated in federal prison over 20 years ago, I was grateful to have access to college programming. I took full advantage of every course available, completing 33 credit hours and earning a certificate in Business Administration with Legal Applications from Marist College.*

*Making the dean's list was more than an academic milestone – it was a turning point. It allowed me to see a better version of myself and awakened a hunger for knowledge that helped me prepare for life beyond the prison walls.*

*Education gave me purpose, discipline, and hope. As a young woman and mother, I knew I had to rebuild not just my future, but also my sense of self-worth.*

*I wanted to excel – not just to redeem myself from past mistakes – but to show my family and myself that I was capable of transformation and success.*

*This is why access to higher education in prison is so vital. It changes lives.*

*It changed mine.*

*—Kemba Smith Pradia*



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Together, we are unlocking potential and building a more just future for all.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia stands at a critical crossroads. With up to 14,000 individuals in state prisons across the Commonwealth now eligible for federal student loans, Virginia has an untapped resource that can address multiple urgent challenges: workforce shortages, rising incarceration costs, and persistent racial and economic disparities. *Unlocking Virginia's Workforce* makes a clear, data-driven case for why expanding higher education behind bars is not only just, but also smart economic policy.

This report builds on Virginia's major step toward expanding access to higher education in its prison system through the passage of HB 2158, a bipartisan bill led by Delegates Betsy Carr and Carrie Coyner. While ultimately vetoed by Governor Glenn Youngkin, the legislation would have established a statewide Prison Education Task Force and set a 2030 deadline to implement consistent literacy, GED, and degree programs across all state correctional facilities. It mandated formal partnerships between the Virginia Department of Corrections, the Virginia Community College System, and other state agencies and educational institutions to ensure quality and continuity. The bill also required annual public reporting on program access and waitlists, improved data sharing, and equitable educator compensation to support successful program delivery.

Governor Youngkin had previously supported the effort through Executive Order 36 in 2024, which laid the groundwork by directing agencies to strengthen pre-release education and reentry pathways. While he vetoed the bill to continue ongoing efforts named in the legislation, his additional 2025 budget vetoes may limit infrastructure growth at institutions that partner in this work. Still, the core framework, funding requests, and accountability measures remain intact, positioning Virginia as a national leader in building postsecondary opportunities for incarcerated people and aligning correctional education with broader workforce and equity goals.

The first chapter, "Virginia Can't Afford to Delay Prison Higher Education Reform," outlines the economic losses the Commonwealth incurs by limiting access to postsecondary education in prisons. With only a fraction of incarcerated individuals enrolled in higher education, Virginia is missing the opportunity to further reduce recidivism and incarceration-related costs while preparing individuals for meaningful employment upon release.

The second chapter, "Unlocking Access, Unleashing Potential," focuses on access and the systems required to support educational success. It explores the urgent need to improve

technology infrastructure in prisons, leverage expanded Pell Grant eligibility, address special education needs, and ensure continuity of education through reentry. Without these investments, Virginia's economy will continue to suffer from avoidable workforce gaps.

Chapter three, "Advancing Equity to Strengthen Virginia's Economy," emphasizes that economic progress depends on equitable access to opportunity. Too often, women, people in rural correctional facilities, and individuals serving long sentences are excluded from prison education programs. Expanding higher education equitably ensures that all Virginians can contribute to the state's economy, support their families, and end intergenerational cycles of incarceration.

The final chapter, "Prison Education Strengthens Virginia's Talent Pipeline," demonstrates how higher education in prison prepares individuals for employment and economic reintegration. With Virginia currently facing a worker shortage, investing in prison education is a proven strategy to grow the talent pipeline. Partnerships between colleges, reentry programs, and employers are essential to matching educational credentials with market needs.

By modernizing its approach to prison education, Virginia can turn its correctional facilities into engines of personal and economic growth. Furthermore, by continuing to invest in access to higher education for incarcerated individuals, Virginia can strengthen its workforce pipeline, reduce recidivism, and increase public safety – while saving taxpayers millions annually. This report provides a blueprint for a smarter, more equitable, and economically sound path forward – one that taps into the potential of every Virginian and builds a safer, stronger Commonwealth for all.



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# INTRODUCTION

*“With approximately 10,000 people returning from incarceration annually, formerly incarcerated individuals make dedicated and skilled employees, strengthening Virginia’s workforce.” - Kenneth Hunter, Virginia Consensus for Higher Education in Prison, Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy*

Virginia’s economy is at an inflection point. Despite strong job growth and low unemployment in recent years, the Commonwealth faces a persistent workforce shortage. There are only 47 available workers for every 100 job openings in the state.<sup>1</sup> Sectors critical to Virginia’s future – healthcare, skilled trades, and technology – are struggling to fill positions. At the same time, the state spends over \$61,000 annually to incarcerate each individual in state prison.<sup>2</sup>

Yet within Virginia’s correctional facilities lies a largely overlooked asset: thousands of incarcerated individuals with the potential to become educated, employed, and economically productive. Roughly 95% of incarcerated people will be released at some point<sup>3</sup> – and about 12,600 people exit prisons in Virginia each year.<sup>4</sup> They could be much better prepared to enter the labor market. And increased economic opportunity, in turn, translates to increased community safety.<sup>5</sup>

*“As Virginia faces growing demands for skilled workers, higher education in prison represents an untapped opportunity to train and support returning citizens who are eager to contribute to their communities and the economy.” - Resilience Education*

This report makes the case that expanding access to higher education in Virginia’s prisons is a strategic economic investment. Postsecondary education in prison reduces recidivism, strengthens the state’s workforce pipeline, and delivers significant cost savings. National research shows that participation in prison college programs reduces the likelihood of reconviction by up to 66%.<sup>6</sup> States that invest in prison education see collective annual savings in incarceration costs exceeding \$365 million<sup>7</sup> – savings Virginia could share by scaling its efforts.

Virginia has made early progress. With the expansion of Pell Grant eligibility and the implementation of Governor Glenn Youngkin’s Executive Order 36, the state is positioned to significantly increase educational access within correctional facilities. However, current efforts remain under-resourced and uneven. Of the up to 14,000 individuals incarcerated in Virginia now eligible for federal student loans (Pell Grants), only about 500, or less than 4%, are enrolled



in higher education programs.<sup>8</sup> Infrastructure gaps, limited access to technology, and inequities based on gender and facility location continue to undermine the promise of education as a tool for transformation.

*Unlocking Virginia's Workforce* is organized around four key areas for action. First, it explores the economic cost of inaction and the importance of building political and public will to invest in prison education. Second, it examines the infrastructure – technological, programmatic, and logistical – required to expand access. Third, it highlights the need to advance equity across the system, ensuring that all incarcerated people, regardless of gender, race, or geography, have a fair opportunity to learn. Finally, it details how education behind bars can power workforce development and improve reentry outcomes through stronger connections to employers.

By aligning prison education with economic and workforce priorities, Virginia can build safer communities, reduce public spending, and unlock the potential of thousands of its residents.





## METHODOLOGY

This report employed a mixed qualitative methods approach to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of higher education in Virginia's prisons and the opportunities for reform. Our methodology included:

- **Stakeholder Engagement and Interviews:** We conducted interviews with a range of stakeholders, including formerly incarcerated individuals, educators, advocacy organizations, and state agency representatives, to gain insight into lived experiences and institutional perspectives.
- **Literature Review:** We reviewed existing research on correctional education, workforce development, recidivism, and policy interventions to ground our analysis in current evidence and best practices.
- **Landscape Analysis:** We assessed the availability, reach, and structure of postsecondary education programs in Virginia correctional facilities, identifying gaps, barriers, and models of success.
- **Field Survey:** A targeted survey was disseminated to partners and practitioners involved in prison education across the Commonwealth, the Mid-Atlantic region, and across the U.S., to gather on-the-ground data regarding program capacity, technological infrastructure, and student demand.

Together, these methods allowed us to triangulate findings and provide a nuanced, data-informed analysis that centers both systemic context and individual experience.



# VIRGINIA CAN'T AFFORD TO DELAY PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

With federal support reinvigorating the national prison education landscape, the Commonwealth has a unique opportunity to reduce incarceration costs, strengthen its workforce, and address systemic inequities – all through the expansion of higher education in prison. (Although recent federal legislation will significantly impact access to higher education,<sup>9</sup> Pell Grant eligibility remains for incarcerated students.) Yet despite federal momentum and mounting evidence of benefits, Virginia continues to underserve its incarcerated population, reaching just 500 out of up to 14,000 individuals with higher education opportunities.<sup>10</sup> This gap reflects both a policy failure and a missed economic opportunity.

## A National Turning Point, A State Lagging Behind

Established in 1972, Pell Grants provide financial aid to eligible low-income students.<sup>11</sup> In 1994, the federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act eliminated Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, effectively decimating the higher education landscape in prisons. What had once been a robust system of over 770 programs collapsed to just eight by 1997.<sup>12</sup> For nearly three decades, incarcerated learners were locked out of federal tuition assistance, curbing their pathways to growth and reentry success – and denying Commonwealth businesses access to more qualified applicants. At the same time, research showed devastating impacts on incarceration, recidivism, and employment trends.<sup>13</sup>

The Second Chance Pell experimental program began in 2015.<sup>14</sup> Four Virginia community colleges participated, establishing associate degree programs in 11 state prisons. Five years later, the FAFSA Simplification Act reinstated Pell Grant access for all incarcerated Americans, with implementation regulations taking effect in 2023.<sup>15</sup> The door to educational opportunity reopened, allowing accredited prison education programs to provide college courses supported by Pell funding. The US now boasts roughly 400 higher education programs in prisons – but Virginia has been slow to seize this moment.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this policy shift, as of 2024, only 11 of Virginia's almost 50 correctional facilities currently offer college-level programs, and access remains hindered by technological limitations, inconsistent leadership, and long waitlists.<sup>17</sup> Only five state institutions of higher education (4 community colleges and one four-year institution) and one private college have engaged in the new opportunity to offer postsecondary programs, so far. Seventy percent of incarcerated adults



want to enroll in postsecondary education, but a quarter of them sit idle on waitlists, without a clear path forward.<sup>18</sup> In a state with a rapidly evolving labor market and mounting economic pressure, this underinvestment carries high costs.

### **Higher Education in Virginia Correctional Facilities**

Several Virginia colleges and universities offer educational programs within correctional facilities, providing incarcerated individuals with opportunities to pursue college degrees and build brighter futures. These programs range from associate to bachelor's degree offerings and reflect growing momentum across the Commonwealth to address both rehabilitation and workforce development through education.

Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC) operates one of the most well-established Higher Education in Prison Programs in the state. It provides an Associate of Science in General Studies degree at three correctional facilities: Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, Buckingham Correctional Center, and Dillwyn Correctional Center. The program is a partnership with the Virginia Department of Corrections and the Virginia Department of Correctional Education and is currently the largest higher education program for incarcerated women in Virginia.<sup>19</sup>

Virginia Wesleyan University became the first four-year institution in the Commonwealth to offer a bachelor's degree program inside prison. The university provides this program at St. Brides and Indian Creek Correctional Facilities, aiming to equip students with academic knowledge and foster critical thinking for successful reentry into society.<sup>20</sup>

Southside Virginia Community College (SVCC) offers the "Campus Within Walls" program, operating in multiple facilities across central and southern Virginia. This initiative provides educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals through partnerships with the Virginia Department of Corrections and other stakeholders.<sup>21</sup>

Rappahannock Community College (RCC) runs a longstanding education program at Haynesville Correctional Center. Operating for nearly 15 years, this program is recognized for delivering a quality academic experience tailored to the needs of incarcerated students.<sup>22</sup>

The University of Virginia (UVA) is preparing to launch a new bachelor's degree program at Fluvanna Correctional Center through its Virginia Prison Education Program. This initiative, supported by external grant funding, will make UVA the first public university in Virginia to offer a bachelor's degree in a prison setting.<sup>23</sup>

Together, these initiatives represent a growing commitment among Virginia's higher education institutions to provide equitable access to learning behind bars and foster hope, build skills, and promote public safety through education.



*“Higher education in prison – specifically in Maryland – has not only complemented broader reentry and workforce efforts but has become a vital part of workforce development and sustainable economic mobility. Virginia has an opportunity to build on what’s worked in Maryland by aligning prison education programs with industries that believe in second chance hiring and are unwavering in their commitment to creating opportunity.” - Andrea Jones, Director of Advancement, Goucher Prison Education Program, Goucher College*

## A Fiscal and Public Safety Imperative

Virginia spends an average of \$61,000 per year to incarcerate a single person.<sup>24</sup> With nearly 30,000 held in the Commonwealth’s prison system<sup>25</sup> (not including jails), the state’s corrections budget has reached roughly \$1.5 billion annually.<sup>26</sup> While Virginia recently announced the lowest recidivism rate in the US (of 17.6%), though the Commonwealth eliminated parole in 1995, reducing prison returns further could dramatically lower corrections’ burden on taxpayers.<sup>27</sup> Recent research shows that participation in higher education reduces the odds of recidivism by 41.5% – a far greater impact than that of basic education or vocational training alone.<sup>28</sup> Another study in New York State found a whopping 66% drop in reconviction rates among those who engaged in college programming while incarcerated.<sup>29</sup>

Investing in higher education behind bars pays dividends. According to national estimates, expanding postsecondary education in prisons could save states over \$365 million annually in incarceration-related costs.<sup>30</sup> These savings, if realized in Virginia, could be redirected toward public services that improve health, education, and infrastructure across communities.

## Virginia’s Labor Crisis Demands Bold Solutions

This is not only a justice issue. It is a workforce issue. Virginia’s economy is experiencing acute labor shortages.<sup>31</sup> With 243,000 job openings and only 113,000 unemployed individuals available to fill them, the state has just 47 workers for every 100 open jobs.<sup>32</sup> That gap places Virginia among the five most-challenged states in terms of labor supply.<sup>33</sup> Key industries – from health care to manufacturing to tech – are struggling to recruit skilled workers, threatening economic momentum and competitiveness.

Virginia cannot afford to leave qualified workers behind bars and underprepared. Postsecondary education programs in prison can equip returning citizens with the credentials and competencies needed in high-demand fields. The Virginia Office of Education Economics



monitors the alignment of postsecondary education and labor market categories and could be deployed to address the incarcerated population specifically. Nationally, 75% of new jobs created between 2010 and 2016 required a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>34</sup> In this context, the bachelor's degree remains a pathway to stable, higher-paying employment – and an essential credential for building a career, not just finding a job.

The state's small business ecosystem, which employs nearly half of Virginia's workforce, would also benefit from an expanded pool of qualified, work-ready individuals.<sup>35</sup> Programs that support the educational advancement of incarcerated people contribute directly to workforce readiness and economic inclusion, especially in communities disproportionately impacted by incarceration.

## Narrow Inequities, Expand Opportunity

The promise of higher education in prison extends beyond fiscal savings and labor force support. It also advances racial and economic equity. Black Virginians represent just 19% of the state's population but account for 45% of those in jail and 54% of those in state prisons.<sup>36</sup> This disparity reflects the broader systemic inequalities that plague the criminal legal system. By providing access to education – a proven lever for upward mobility – Virginia can begin to dismantle some of the racial and economic barriers that have historically defined its justice and education systems.

Educational programming also offers powerful intergenerational benefits. Parents who pursue college degrees while incarcerated not only transform their own futures but set new expectations for their children. Research shows these programs can help break cycles of incarceration and poverty, creating ripple effects that strengthen families and communities.<sup>37</sup>

## Models to Learn From, Momentum to Build

Virginia is not the first to explore these reforms. Other states' efforts demonstrate compelling impact:

- Washington State has built tuition-free pathways through its community college system, emphasizing reentry support alongside academic instruction.<sup>38</sup>
- The State University System of New York (SUNY) partners with their member colleges statewide, offering college degrees inside 29 state prisons and one federal facility. SUNY



schools serve 1,000 students a year, making it the largest provider of higher education in prison in New York.<sup>39</sup>

- Another New York program, the Bard Prison Initiative, has reduced participant recidivism rates to below 4%.<sup>40</sup>
- California's corrections department reports that more than 13.5% of the state's prison population are enrolled in college courses.<sup>41</sup>

Virginia's own HB 2158 (2024) – vetoed by Governor Youngkin – would have provided a strategic roadmap for expanding educational access in all state correctional facilities by 2030. The bill included mandates for infrastructure upgrades, teacher recruitment, salary parity, and interagency collaboration. If fully implemented, HB 2158 would not only have expanded college access for incarcerated students, but also integrated Virginia's prison education programs into its broader workforce and economic development plans.<sup>42</sup>

## Delay Is Costly – Need for Action Is Urgent

Incarcerated Virginians are eager to learn.<sup>43</sup> The infrastructure for delivering that education is within reach. And the benefits – for public safety, for the economy, and for families – are undeniable. Every year Virginia delays action is another year of wasted potential, lost savings, and deepened disparities.

The question is no longer whether higher education in prison works. The question is whether Virginia will lead or lag behind in seizing this transformative opportunity. In 2024, more than 100 bills in 33 states addressed education access for people who are incarcerated – 21 of which were enacted.<sup>44</sup> In 2024, several states, including Connecticut and Utah, enacted legislation to expand access to education opportunities to students in carceral settings. And Oklahoma removed barriers to student financial aid for incarcerated students, something Virginia has already done.



### **Maryland Expands Educational Access in Prison**

In 2024, Maryland took significant steps to expand educational access in its prison system and improve reentry outcomes. The General Assembly passed the Resources and Education for All Prisons (REAP) Act, which revised the duties of the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) concerning postsecondary education in correctional settings. Under the new law, the department is tasked with supporting incarcerated students in accessing Pell Grants and must set clear participation goals for higher education programming. Additionally, the agency is responsible for creating systems to track progress and report outcomes to the Maryland Higher Education Commission.<sup>45</sup> In 2024, DPSCS announced a memorandum of understanding with the University System of Maryland to offer programs for incarcerated individuals to receive bachelor's degrees and credit-based certificates.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond these reforms, Maryland lawmakers also approved new bodies to evaluate and strengthen prison education and reentry systems. S.B. 1036 established a task force to examine strategies for improving support services for individuals leaving incarceration. Meanwhile, S.B. 623 and H.B. 209 created the Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission to develop comprehensive recommendations for education within the criminal justice system.



# UNLOCK ACCESS, UNLEASH POTENTIAL

Expanding higher education in Virginia's prisons is about more than offering degrees and credentials. It's about building systems of support that ensure educational success for incarcerated learners – many of whom face overlapping barriers related to poverty, trauma, disability, and systemic racism. Even as the reinstatement of Pell Grants opens doors, real access depends on more than tuition. To truly unlock incarcerated students' potential, Virginia must invest in infrastructure, streamline systems, and design education with inclusion and continuity in mind.

Without these changes, the state will continue to forfeit both the talent of its incarcerated population and the economic benefits that come with their successful reentry.

## The Technology Divide

*“One of the largest areas of learning disparities is in technological advancements. Many employers require competency in digital tools. With little possibility to offer incarcerated learners practical means of learning about technology advancements or increasing digital literacy, it can be difficult for them to put their education to use in increasingly digitized workforces.”- Resilience Education*

Technology is fundamental to learning and economic participation in the 21st century. Yet in prison classrooms, technology remains severely restricted. A national survey of college-in-prison programs found that nearly one in four respondents reported students lacked access to even one digital device (desktop, laptop, or tablet).<sup>47</sup> Only 3% of programs offered access to all three. While some programs in Virginia provide laptops, this is the exception – not the rule. Access is uneven, and digital tools are rarely used for coursework beyond basic advising or administrative tasks.<sup>48</sup>

Even when incarcerated students do gain access to computers, they often lack headphones – crucial tools for anyone learning independently, and especially valuable for students who are neurodiverse, partially deaf, or otherwise disabled.<sup>49</sup> Internet access is almost nonexistent, which makes it virtually impossible for students to engage with online resources, conduct research, or prepare for the digital demands of today's college and career environments.<sup>50</sup>

These constraints not only compromise educational quality, but also contribute to the broader digital divide. When students return home, they face a job market and higher education





landscape built around digital literacy they may never have had the chance to acquire.<sup>51</sup> In mid-2024, the Virginia Department of Corrections told media it was working to broaden access to the Internet and technology so that students can work in their pods and enroll in other curricula.<sup>52</sup> It is not clear that the technology envisioned is of a type that will specifically support the normative delivery of educational content and applications as utilized by institutions of higher education with their on-campus, matriculated students – a parity referred to in Pell grant regulations.

## Inadequate Learning Environments

Many prison classrooms are physically unsuitable for learning.<sup>53</sup> Reports describe malfunctioning HVAC units, poor ventilation, inadequate lighting, and deteriorating infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> Crowded spaces, constant noise, and rigid furnishings create stressful and distracting environments that undermine focus and engagement. These “hard architectures” serve carceral priorities, not rehabilitation, and dehumanize students and fail to support intellectual growth.<sup>55</sup>

Additionally, students in maximum security facilities are often barred from attending group classes.<sup>56</sup> That policy cuts them off from peer support, mentorship, and relationships with instructors – key elements of college success. And dormitory-style housing units make it nearly impossible to find quiet time to study, a problem felt especially acutely by students who are neurodivergent or who experience sensory sensitivities.<sup>57</sup>

Education thrives in environments of safety, trust, and dignity.<sup>58</sup> Most Virginia prison classrooms – where they exist – are not designed to support these conditions. Programs in other states express the same limitations.<sup>59</sup> If education is to flourish behind bars, physical and operational infrastructure must change.

## Pell Grants Are Not a Panacea

Reinstating Pell Grant eligibility was a historic win, but serious barriers remain. Incarcerated students face an array of obstacles when applying for financial aid. Chief among them is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) itself.<sup>60</sup> Primarily due to lack of internet access, most incarcerated students, including all in Virginia, are required to complete and submit a paper version of the FAFSA, which is long and cumbersome to work with. Bidirectional communication with the Department of Education is challenging because of lack of standard email channels for student applicants. Though recent reforms have simplified the form, students



under age 24 are still required to provide parental tax information – an often-impossible request for those estranged from family or unable to make contact from prison. The form and application process are also not tailored to the unique conditions of incarceration, creating friction in what should be a streamlined process.

### **FAFSA Dependency Override for Students with Incarcerated Parents**

If a student's parents are incarcerated, this is considered an unusual circumstance that may allow the student to file the FAFSA without parental information. This is referred to as a "dependency override". Here's how parental tax information relates to incarcerated students seeking financial aid:

FAFSA & Parental Information: Dependent students (typically under age 24) must normally provide parental income information on the FAFSA.

Incarcerated Parents & FAFSA: If a student's parents are incarcerated, obtaining their tax information for the FAFSA can be difficult or impossible.

Dependency Override: Students with incarcerated parents may qualify for a dependency override, which allows them to complete the FAFSA as an independent student without providing parental data.

Documentation: To obtain a dependency override, students may need to provide documentation, such as a court order or official documentation demonstrating the parent's incarceration.

Financial Aid Administrator Role: Financial aid administrators at colleges or trade schools can help students determine their eligibility for a dependency override and may request additional documentation to support the student's claim of unusual circumstances.

The risk of disrupted aid also looms large. In New York, a 2023 strike by prison guards led to widespread cancellations of in-prison college programs.<sup>61</sup> Because many students had not completed enough of the semester, federal regulations forced colleges to return financial aid funds, creating bureaucratic and financial chaos. Though Virginia has not yet experienced such large-scale disruptions, the threat of lockdowns, transfers, staffing shortages, or natural disasters is ever-present. Without continuity planning, incarcerated students can lose not only their courses, but their Pell aid eligibility altogether.

*"Being incarcerated is expensive, particularly if you're also sending money to your family on the outside. College is expensive, and funding is limited. Starting college courses when you don't believe you'll have the time or funds to finish is overwhelming." - Rachel Thompson, Program Coordinator, Prison-to-College Program, Pennsylvania College of Technology*



## Build Continuity from Prison to Reentry

The transition from incarceration to community is one of the most vulnerable points in a person's educational journey. Yet Virginia has not developed a coordinated system to ensure continuity for students leaving prison. Incarcerated learners may lose access to programs mid-semester due to transfers between facilities. Even after release, reentering students often face challenges securing transcripts, enrolling in programs, accessing student support services, or continuing coursework begun inside.

In short, the current system doesn't just fail to support reentry – it actively interrupts it.

Colleges are beginning to address this interruption, including by considering credit mobility and degree completion. This critical transition point must be robustly addressed. Programs that provide strong reentry support – academic advising, transcript portability, housing connections, and employment pipelines – can significantly boost graduation and employment rates, building a more stable workforce and reducing recidivism.

### Spotlight: Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison

For 26 years, Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison has provided transformative college education opportunities to incarcerated individuals across New York State. Operating in five correctional facilities in partnership with five accredited New York colleges, Hudson Link offers a holistic and cost-effective model—just \$5,000 annually per student—that follows students from pre- to post-release, ensuring a seamless continuum of academic and wraparound support.

Founded in 1998, Hudson Link is the only nonprofit in the United States led by formerly incarcerated individuals that delivers college degree programs inside prisons. More than half of its staff are justice-impacted, exemplifying the power of second chances and peer leadership. Their mission is to reduce recidivism, restore families, and strengthen communities.

The results speak for themselves: while the national recidivism rate exceeds 67% within three years, fewer than 2% of Hudson Link graduates return to prison for a new offense. And within three months of release, 85% of alumni are employed—many in social services—helping to build stronger, more resilient communities.

<https://hudsonlink.org/>

## Meet the Needs of Students with Disabilities

Incarcerated students are more likely than the general population to have learning disabilities, mental health needs, or cognitive challenges.<sup>62</sup> Cognitive disabilities such as autism, Down



syndrome, and learning disorders are estimated to impact about 25% of incarcerated people.<sup>63</sup> However, few programs have yet engaged adequate student support services, though awareness and movement in this direction is evident in convenings of educational partners.<sup>64</sup> Most programs lack dedicated support staff. Instructional materials and digital platforms often fail to meet accessibility standards. Students with disabilities are disproportionately excluded from postsecondary opportunities and face greater barriers to completion when they do participate.<sup>65</sup>



The Commonwealth can look to Washington State. In recent years, Washington has made efforts to improve disability rights behind bars, shifting to ADA standards from the prison's own internal policies and requiring annual progress reports to the legislature on efforts to expand access to accommodations and supports for students with disabilities.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast, the Commonwealth's relative inattention to access violates not only the principles of equity, but the practical goals of workforce development. Employers across Virginia need diverse talent – and that includes workers with disabilities. Investing in effective and inclusive prison education helps meet that need.

## Invest in Stronger Systems

*"A truly modern, effective, and equitable prison education system in Virginia should mirror the quality and accessibility of education available in the community, including access to technology and learning environments comparable to college campuses. Achieving this vision will require comprehensive policy reform and strong community support. Prison education should be seen as an investment in society rather than a free benefit for incarcerated individuals." - Kenneth Hunter, Virginia Consensus for Higher Education in Prison, Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy*

To support the full promise of higher education in prison, Virginia must invest in the systems that make educational success possible:

-  **Modern classrooms and technology infrastructure** that support accessible, inclusive, and effective learning
-  **Streamlined FAFSA processes** adapted for incarcerated learners



- ☑ **Continuity mechanisms** that allow students to complete their education post-release or after facility transfer
- ☑ **Disability accommodations** built into both program design and deliver
- ☑ **Stronger data systems** to track outcomes, measure equity, and support continuous improvement

As the state expands postsecondary programming under the new expanded Pell eligibility, these system-level investments must be treated as essential – not optional. The risk of inaction is too high: lives interrupted, talent wasted, and economic recovery slowed.

## Remove the Barriers, Reap the Rewards

The desire to learn is already present, and the confidence can be built. Seventy percent of incarcerated adults surveyed want to pursue higher education, and many sit on waitlists, ready for the opportunity.<sup>67</sup> But wanting to learn is not enough – students need functioning classrooms, working computers, reliable access, and systems that support their journey from application to graduation.

If Virginia is serious about reducing workforce shortages and building a more equitable economy, it must take seriously the barriers that limit access behind bars. Unlocking access means unleashing the full potential of people – and of the state itself.

*“So many of the people in our program didn’t believe they were smart enough or worthy of college. Watching them reclaim their confidence through education is one of the most powerful parts of this work.”- Rachel Thompson, Program Coordinator, Prison-to-College Program, Pennsylvania College of Technology*



# ADVANCE EQUITY TO STRENGTHEN VIRGINIA'S ECONOMY

Virginia's path to a stronger, more resilient economy depends on the full participation of its people – including those incarcerated and those returning to society. Yet access to higher education in prison remains both limited and uneven. Women, people of color, people housed in rural or maximum-security facilities, individuals with disabilities, and those serving long sentences broadly lack access to the life-changing opportunities that college programs offer.<sup>68</sup>

Equity in higher education behind bars is not just a moral imperative. It's an economic one. By ensuring all incarcerated Virginians can access postsecondary education, the Commonwealth can better prepare a diverse workforce, strengthen family stability, and reduce the intergenerational harms of incarceration.

## Incarcerated Women: Overlooked and Underserved

Across the country, women are the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population, yet prison education programs often overlook their needs. Female correctional facilities are fewer and farther between, and they often offer more limited educational opportunities than their male counterparts.<sup>69</sup> This disparity is compounded by the fact that many incarcerated women are primary caregivers whose successful reentry can have immediate, stabilizing effects on families and communities.

Women's employment post-incarceration may benefit more from degree-track programs than from career and technical education (CTE). For example, CTE programs offered to women in Virginia often parallel those offered to men, while job opportunities for women in those fields are much less likely. Virginia higher education advocates report hearing from women in Virginia that they cannot get hired as an HVAC technician or electrician, though those are the educational programs offered through the Department of Corrections.<sup>70</sup>

*"You cannot build any kind of future-ready workforce while ignoring women. If we can't access education, we can't break the cycles of incarceration. You can't say you care about public safety when you deny people the tools to build a better life for themselves. We build futures inside prisons every day. The question is whether we are building classrooms or cages. When we educate a woman while incarcerated, we will see a real return on investment in the stabilization of the family and the community."*

*– Kimberly Haven, National Higher Education Policy Strategist*



When women are denied access to college, the ripple effects are profound. They return home without the skills and credentials needed to support themselves or their children, further entrenching cycles of poverty and incarceration. Ensuring equal access for women – especially programs that accommodate caregiving responsibilities and address trauma – is vital to building strong families and communities.

It is important to note, the vast majority of incarcerated women live with complex PTSD from lifelong trauma, often beginning in childhood—making education especially difficult in non-trauma-informed settings or with male instructors. Developing tailored curricula and a shared resource database can help meet their specific needs, while advocating for equitable funding and policies will remove systemic barriers to education and reentry. This work reflects both the transformative power of education and the strength of collective action to build a more just and inclusive future for women.

## Gender Identity, Housing, and Educational Inequity in Prisons

Transgender and gender nonconforming people face significant barriers to accessing education while incarcerated, largely due to how they are housed. Some are placed in facilities based on their sex assigned at birth, others in units aligned with their gender identity, and many are held in separate or restrictive housing—such as solitary confinement—often justified as “protective custody.” These placements not only increase vulnerability to harassment and violence but also severely limit access to educational programming, rehabilitative services, and peer support. Research from The Sentencing Project found that a majority of transgender women in California prisons preferred to remain in men’s facilities due to safety concerns, highlighting the lack of truly safe and affirming options for housing placement.<sup>71</sup> Transgender people are also disproportionately placed in solitary confinement, which further isolates them from opportunities for learning and growth.<sup>72</sup> These institutional practices functionally exclude transgender and gender nonconforming people from education behind bars, reinforcing cycles of trauma and marginalization. Addressing these barriers requires intentional, gender-affirming approaches that prioritize both safety and inclusion in all aspects of correctional programming, including higher education.

## Center Racial Equity in Prison Education Access

Racial disparities are deeply embedded in both the criminal legal system and access to higher education within prisons. Black Americans are significantly overrepresented in correctional facilities – comprising about 14% of the US population but 42% of the incarcerated population.<sup>73</sup>





In Virginia, Black individuals make up just 19% of residents yet account for 45% of those in jail and 54% of those in prison.<sup>74</sup>

These disparities extend into educational opportunities.<sup>75</sup> While access to college in prison is limited overall, it is especially scarce for Black and Brown learners. Structural inequities, such as under-resourced prison facilities, narrow program eligibility criteria, and biased disciplinary policies, disproportionately limit educational access for students of color behind bars. Even within prison education programs, racial gaps persist in enrollment, completion rates, and post-release support.<sup>76</sup>

Expanding higher education in prison with an intentional focus on racial equity is critical. Doing so not only addresses the legacy of systemic racism in education and incarceration, but also offers a powerful pathway toward economic mobility and community stability for those most harmed by mass incarceration. Prioritizing equitable access ensures that college-in-prison programs fulfill their promise as tools for transformation, opportunity, and justice.

## Geography Shouldn't Determine Opportunity

Access to prison education programs in Virginia is wildly uneven across geography. While facilities in or near urban centers are more likely to offer postsecondary programs, rural prisons – often where the need is greatest – are left behind.<sup>77</sup> Students in these facilities face long waitlists, minimal course offerings, and insufficient access to technology.

Rural exclusion also reflects broader challenges in the state's education and workforce systems. Many of Virginia's rural areas already suffer from job loss, depopulation, and limited access to higher education.<sup>78</sup> Expanding college-in-prison programs in rural facilities offers a dual benefit: supporting incarcerated students while investing in local economies. These programs create teaching opportunities, build partnerships with regional colleges, and prepare returning citizens to fill jobs in nearby communities.

According to a 2020 census review by the Prison Policy Institute, “many of the state's biggest and smallest communities are disproportionately harmed by mass incarceration.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, Virginia knows which communities returning citizens will return to and therefore has the capacity to anticipate the industries most available for employment for returning citizens. Unfortunately, that has not been incorporated into any systematic planning for college program offerings in Department of Corrections facilities to align education with workforce needs.





### **Spotlight: The Power of Virginia's Colleges and Community Colleges**

Virginia is home to an impressive network of high-quality, competitive colleges and community colleges that offer a diverse array of academic and workforce development opportunities for students of all ages and backgrounds – including those impacted by the justice system. With 15 public four-year universities, more than 30 private colleges and universities, and a system of 23 Virginia Community Colleges (VCCS) operating over 40 campuses, the Commonwealth provides a rich landscape of higher education options. These institutions are renowned not only for their academic rigor but also for their commitment to equity, access, and innovation. From the University of Virginia, James Madison University, and Virginia Tech to Norfolk State University and Virginia State University – two of the state's historically Black colleges and universities – Virginia's four-year institutions compete nationally in research, teaching, and graduation outcomes. Meanwhile, the Virginia Community College System offers open access to education with affordable tuition, flexible schedules, and workforce programs that directly align with local and regional job markets.

Tuition at Virginia colleges ranges from approximately \$4,600 to \$5,500 per year for in-state community college students, \$12,000 to \$18,000 for public university students, and \$20,000 to over \$50,000 at private institutions – often offset by financial aid. In stark contrast, Virginia spends \$61,000 per year to incarcerate a single person, underscoring how investing in education is not only more cost-effective but also more transformative for individuals and communities.

Geographically, these institutions are spread across the entire Commonwealth – from urban centers like Richmond and Northern Virginia to rural communities in the Southwest and coastal communities in the Tidewater Region – making education accessible to a broad cross-section of Virginians. Many are located near or within the same regions as Virginia's almost 100 correctional facilities, creating real opportunities for partnerships that bring higher education inside the walls.

Virginia's colleges are uniquely positioned to serve incarcerated learners by offering quality postsecondary education that supports reentry, strengthens communities, and builds pathways to employment. As Second Chance Pell expansion and other reforms take hold, these institutions have the power – and the infrastructure – to lead the nation in transforming lives through education behind and beyond the bars.

### **The Myth of the “Short-Timer”**

Another persistent barrier to equity in prison education is the arbitrary exclusion of individuals serving long sentences. Many postsecondary programs – including those funded through the Second Chance Pell initiative – prioritize students who are within five years of release.<sup>80</sup> While this may be practical from a reentry standpoint, it overlooks the long-term benefits of education for all incarcerated people, regardless of their sentence length. It also ignores the reality of unpredicted early releases, which are common enough to merit consideration.



Education fosters hope, stabilizes correctional environments, and allows people to become mentors and leaders. Those serving long sentences often serve as informal teachers, tutors, and peer mentors – roles that become far more impactful when supported by formal education.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, sentence lengths can change due to early release mechanisms such as parole, second look, compassionate release or other policy reforms. Denying access now risks leaving behind a population that could one day reenter society better prepared to contribute.

In fact, some of the most successful college-in-prison programs in other states – such as the Bard Prison Initiative and Operation Restoration in Louisiana – intentionally include students with long sentences, recognizing that these individuals are often among the most committed and influential learners. Virginia should follow suit.

## Racial and Disability Justice Are Economic Justice

Equity also requires intentional action to support students who face systemic barriers rooted in race, class, and disability. Black Virginians make up just 19% of the state’s population but, due to racially disparate enforcement at every step of the criminal legal system, comprise 54% of the prison population.<sup>82</sup> They are also more likely to be incarcerated in high-security facilities that offer fewer educational options.<sup>83</sup> Addressing these disparities demands more than expanding enrollment – it means analyzing access by race, tracking outcomes, and investing in programs that serve marginalized communities with intention and care.

Incarcerated students with disabilities – particularly those who are neurodivergent or have learning differences – may also face disproportionate exclusion. Many programs lack the training, technology, and instructional design needed to meet their needs.<sup>84</sup> Simple accommodations like extended time, assistive software, or quiet study spaces can make the difference between success and failure. Without them, students with disabilities are pushed to the margins of programs they are qualified and eager to participate in.<sup>85</sup>

Equitable education in prison is an economic development strategy. By giving every incarcerated Virginian a fair chance to pursue a degree or credential, the state can unlock the potential of individuals too often left out of workforce planning.

## Equity in Design, Not Just Delivery

True equity means embedding inclusion into every layer of design – from classroom layout to curriculum choices to admissions policies. For instance, current program admissions often



prioritize individuals with a high school diploma or GED. But what about those just below the threshold, who may be just weeks or months away from qualifying? Rigid policies can exclude people who would otherwise thrive with the right support.

Likewise, prison program delivery often fails to account for those working prison jobs, managing mental health needs, or navigating housing transitions. Flexible scheduling, wraparound supports, and accommodations for learning styles are not luxuries – they are necessary features of an inclusive educational system.

### **Goucher Prison Education Partnership (GPEP): Expanding College Access Behind Bars**

Since 2012, Goucher College’s Prison Education Partnership has offered rigorous liberal arts education to incarcerated students at two Maryland state prisons: Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) and Maryland Correctional Institution–Jessup (MCIJ). Each year, approximately 130 students enroll in GPEP courses taught by faculty from Goucher and partner institutions, meeting the same high academic standards as students on the main campus.

GPEP provides comprehensive academic support, including tutoring, advising, course materials, and workshops on college readiness. Volunteers assist with tutoring, administrative tasks, and post-release support, including helping alumni apply to complete their degrees.

Students who graduate while incarcerated earn a Goucher College bachelor’s degree in American Studies. Those released before finishing may continue their studies on Goucher’s main campus or transfer credits to another institution. More than 40% of GPEP graduates have earned honors. Many others use their college education to secure meaningful employment and contribute to their communities.

By integrating the experiences and voices of incarcerated students into the broader academic community, GPEP fosters dialogue and reflection on justice, education, and equity – enriching Goucher College as a whole.

<https://www.goucher.edu/learn/goucher-prison-education-partnership/>

Finally, equity requires transparency. Students must know what programs are available, how to apply, and what to expect. Virginia should publish annual data on interest, access, enrollment, and outcomes – disaggregated by race, gender, disability, geography, and sentence length – to ensure that progress is measured and gaps are addressed.<sup>86</sup> Further, the Virginia Department of Corrections should ensure that staff understand the need to collect and share this information – and how that will benefit them.



## A More Inclusive Economy

When incarcerated individuals have the opportunity to pursue higher education, their families, communities, and the Commonwealth all benefit. These learners return home with the skills and credentials needed to fill workforce gaps, support their families, and participate in civic life. They become taxpayers, caregivers, entrepreneurs, and employees.

But when educational access is limited to the most “convenient” students – those in well-resourced facilities, nearing release, or those without disabilities – the state forfeits the contributions of thousands of Virginians who are ready to grow, learn, and give back. An equitable prison education system is not an idealistic aspiration. It is a strategic necessity.

## Education for All, Progress for Virginia

*“Higher education in prison changes an incarcerated person’s perceptions of society and their place in it.” - Quadaire Patterson, Brilliance Behind Bars Inc.*

Virginia cannot afford to exclude swaths of its incarcerated population from college opportunities. Economic progress demands an investment in all people, not just a select few. By advancing equity in prison education – across gender, geography, sentence length, race, and disability – Virginia can build a more just, more prosperous future.

Education behind bars is a second chance for individuals. Done equitably, it is also a second chance for the Commonwealth to build a smarter, stronger economy.



## **Resilience Education & Darden PREP: Business Education Behind Bars**

Resilience Education works to reduce recidivism and foster economic mobility by delivering high-quality business, financial education, and professional support to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, preparing them for successful reentry and long-term career growth. Through deeply rooted partnerships with institutions like the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, UVA Law, and the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC), Resilience has built a scalable model that brings graduate business and law school students into correctional facilities to teach directly – supporting incarcerated learners in developing the tools, mindset, and networks needed for reentry and entrepreneurship.

Resilience Education's flagship offering in Virginia is the Darden Prison Reentry Education Program (Darden PREP), which operates at multiple VADOC facilities, including Buckingham and Dillwyn Correctional Centers and Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. Darden PREP offers three core courses: Foundations in Business, Financial Capability, and Entrepreneurship. MBA instructors from Darden volunteer each semester to teach these courses inside facilities using case-based Socratic classrooms that build critical thinking, confidence, and applied decision-making skills.

The program is intentionally designed to center dignity, choice, and leadership development – giving students not just tools for employment, but for long-term agency. College-level courses end with presentations and actionable plans, and learners receive certificates from Darden and Resilience Education, which they can share with fair chance hirers.

To date, more than 500 incarcerated learners in Virginia have participated in Resilience Education courses (and Resilience Education now offers these courses in other states as well). Evaluations show high completion rates and powerful student feedback – many report increased financial literacy, a deeper sense of purpose, and a renewed belief in their ability to lead. The award-winning curriculum includes over 100 case studies delivered in the Socratic teaching method, which drives the self-efficacy of the students. To ensure quality instruction, MBA instructors complete a comprehensive, three-part training series focused on understanding the carceral environment, trauma-informed practices, and facilitation. These trainings are led by staff at Darden PREP and Resilience Education, in partnership with the VADOC.

Resilience Education is also working in close partnership with the Decarceration and Community Reentry Clinic of the UVA School of Law to pilot a new course offering: Business Law for Reentry. This course equips incarcerated individuals with practical legal knowledge in areas such as business formation, contracts, licensing, and employment rights. Law students help deliver content through case discussions, real-world examples, and applied legal exercises. The course was first offered as a workshop series at Fluvanna in Spring 2024 and 2025 and is set to expand to other sites, pending approval.

<https://www.darden.virginia.edu/darden-prep>



# PRISON EDUCATION STRENGTHENS VIRGINIA'S TALENT PIPELINE

As Virginia navigates a period of economic uncertainty and a tightening labor market, expanding access to higher education in prison is no longer just a question of justice – it's a smart workforce development strategy. With more than 243,000 job openings across the Commonwealth and fewer than 115,000 unemployed workers to fill them, the state faces a critical supply-demand mismatch.<sup>87</sup> Key sectors such as professional services, healthcare, logistics, manufacturing, and tourism are already struggling to find skilled talent.<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, approximately 14,000 people incarcerated in Virginia's state prisons may be eligible for federal student aid.<sup>89</sup> The vast majority will return home – and most want to work.<sup>90</sup> When educational opportunities are made available behind bars, these individuals can reenter society with the tools to succeed in today's economy, closing gaps in Virginia's labor force while rebuilding their own futures.

## The Economic Case for College in Prison

National research has long established the link between education and employment. People who complete a college degree in prison are more likely to find work, earn higher wages, and remain out of the criminal legal system. A 2013 RAND study found that people who participate in correctional education are 13% more likely to gain employment post-release.<sup>91</sup> More recent research shows that participation in higher education while incarcerated reduces the odds of recidivism by more than 40%, while increasing access to career pathways that align with the evolving needs of the labor market.<sup>92</sup>

In Virginia, the demand for postsecondary credentials is only growing. Between 2010 and 2016, 75% of new jobs created nationally required a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>93</sup> In the Commonwealth, the top employment sectors – professional and business services, government, education and health, and trade and transportation – all require some form of postsecondary education or specialized training.<sup>94</sup>

By investing in college-in-prison programs, Virginia can better prepare returning citizens to contribute meaningfully to these sectors while alleviating persistent labor shortages.



## A State Facing a Workforce Crisis

Virginia's labor market is under pressure. The Commonwealth has just 47 available workers for every 100 job openings<sup>95</sup>, and economists predict a net loss of up to 32,000 jobs in 2025 – many of them tied to the federal government, which employs one in eight Virginians.<sup>96</sup> As federal spending slows and layoffs loom, sectors like administration, manufacturing, and tourism are expected to take the hardest hits.

In this landscape, it is imperative to grow and diversify the talent pipeline. And that means tapping into underutilized pools of potential – like people in prison. Programs that provide access to postsecondary education while incarcerated not only improve individual outcomes, but create a more inclusive and responsive workforce. Returning citizens, particularly those with credentials and career readiness training, are well-positioned to fill essential roles in Virginia's evolving economy.

## Aligning Education with Market Needs

A key to maximizing the economic impact of prison education is alignment. Postsecondary offerings inside correctional facilities should connect directly to high-demand industries and employer needs. This requires partnerships between community colleges, reentry programs, and employers across the state.

For example, educational programming in prison can prioritize credentials in areas like logistics, health services, information technology, and skilled trades – sectors facing some of the largest talent gaps. Virginia's professional and business services industry, which includes consulting, engineering, and tech firms, is currently the state's top employer.<sup>97</sup> Equipping incarcerated students with industry-recognized credentials and soft skills can directly support this sector's growth.

The Virginia Department of Corrections partners with the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) to train people in prison for employment prior to release. VEC continues to work with formerly incarcerated individuals once they have transitioned into the community. However, the program is only available to those within one year of release – and is not available at all facilities.<sup>98</sup>

Partnerships with employers can also smooth the path to reentry by creating hiring pipelines, offering apprenticeships, and reducing stigma around justice-impacted workers. These





partnerships benefit both workers and businesses – expanding the pool of qualified applicants while boosting job retention and performance. BreakFree Education, based in Washington, D.C., is one example of a supportive reentry program in partnership with employers.<sup>99</sup>

### **BreakFree Education Fellowship: Overcoming the Tech Gap for Returning Citizens**

Launched in 2021, the BreakFree Education Fellowship offers an 18-month, paid, on-the-job training program for individuals released under Washington D.C.'s *Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act*. All Fellows were charged with offenses in their teens or early twenties and are now building meaningful careers with local and national nonprofit partners.

The Fellowship provides a living wage, hands-on training in workplace technologies to overcome the technology gap, and the professional development needed to support long-term success. Fellows earn at least \$50,000 annually, with many exceeding \$75,000. To date, 94% have secured permanent roles at their host organizations.

Beyond employment, Fellows report powerful personal milestones – reconnecting with family, affording simple joys like birthday gifts or travel, and forming lasting bonds with colleagues. These everyday wins reflect deeper progress: a shift in public perception about the value and potential of returning citizens in the workforce.

The program not only transforms individual lives but also strengthens DC's nonprofit sector by demonstrating what justice-impacted individuals can achieve when given real opportunity.

<https://www.breakfree-ed.org/fellowship>

## **Small Businesses, Big Opportunity**

Small businesses are the backbone of Virginia's economy, comprising 99.5% of all firms and employing nearly half of the workforce.<sup>100</sup> Many of these businesses are women-, veteran-, and minority-owned, and they span a wide range of industries. These employers are often deeply connected to local communities – and uniquely positioned to benefit from a talent pool that is also rooted in those communities.

When formerly incarcerated people reenter society with education, skills, and credentials, they are better able to secure stable employment, contribute to small business growth, and even become entrepreneurs themselves. Supporting higher education in prison is a direct investment in the kind of inclusive economic development Virginia needs to thrive in the years ahead.





## Economic Reintegration Builds Safer, Stronger Communities

Workforce participation is one of the most powerful predictors of successful reentry. People who find stable, meaningful employment after prison are less likely to recidivate, more likely to support their families, and more engaged in their communities.<sup>101</sup> Education plays a crucial role in this process – equipping individuals with not only technical skills, but confidence, communication abilities, and a renewed sense of purpose.<sup>102</sup>

In this way, prison education is not simply about individual transformation. It's about community and statewide resilience. Each successful reentry is a win for public safety, for economic development, and for the generational stability of Virginia's families. Research shows that access to higher education in prison is a critical pathway to economic stability, reducing the structural barriers that drive cycles of incarceration and poverty. Investing in education – not punishment – creates safer communities by equipping individuals with the tools to succeed and contribute meaningfully after release.

## Build the Pipeline, Strengthen the System

To fully realize the potential of prison education as a workforce strategy, Virginia must take several key steps:

- **Expand access** to high-quality postsecondary education in all state correctional facilities, not just a select few.
- **Ensure alignment** between educational offerings and Virginia's high-demand industries.
- **Create bridges** between prison education programs and community colleges, workforce boards, and employer partners.
- **Support data systems** that track outcomes and allow programs to adapt to market needs.
- **Invest in reentry supports** like career counseling, job placement services, and wraparound care.

If implemented with intention, these changes could position Virginia as a national leader in using higher education to rebuild lives and strengthen the economy.



## A Smart Investment in Virginia's Future

Higher education is one of the few strategies that simultaneously reduces recidivism, supports families, and strengthens the workforce. As Virginia confronts a labor shortage and the need for inclusive economic growth, expanding access to higher education in prison must be seen not as a secondary or social issue – but as a strategic economic priority.

With the right investments, the incarcerated men and women of today can become the educators, tradespeople, caregivers, entrepreneurs, and the business and community leaders of tomorrow.



# CALLS TO ACTION

## For the Business Community

- ✓ **Hire Fairly.** Commit to hiring formerly incarcerated individuals, especially those who have earned degrees or certifications while incarcerated.
- ✓ **Invest in the Talent Pipeline.** Partner with prison education programs to develop apprenticeships, internships, or workforce readiness initiatives that prepare students for in-demand careers.
- ✓ **Support Second Chances.** Advocate for policies and practices – internally and publicly – that reduce barriers to employment for returning citizens.

## For Elected Officials

- ✓ **Fund Education Behind Bars.** Champion and allocate sustained public investment in prison education infrastructure, staffing, and technology.
- ✓ **Advance Equity Through Legislation.** Support bills that expand access to higher education for incarcerated individuals and remove barriers to Pell Grant use and credit transfers post-release.
- ✓ **Lead with Data.** Implement statewide accountability and transparency measures to track educational interest, access, completion rates, and employment outcomes for incarcerated learners.

## For Department of Corrections Agency Officials

- ✓ **Prioritize Education.** Integrate postsecondary education as a core component of rehabilitation and reentry strategy – not an optional add-on.
- ✓ **Eliminate Access Barriers.** Streamline enrollment processes, expand eligibility criteria, and ensure secure digital access to learning platforms.
- ✓ **Partner Across Systems.** Deepen collaborations with colleges, workforce agencies, and community-based organizations to build robust reentry pathways tied to education.

## For Commonwealth Colleges

- ✓ **Open the Doors.** Expand academic programming and credential pathways to incarcerated learners with the same academic rigor and expectations as on-campus students.



- ☒ **Create Continuity.** Offer post-release transfer, advising, resources, and enrollment support to ensure returning students can continue or complete their education.
- ☒ **Champion Inclusion.** Publicly affirm the value of higher education in prison and actively participate in dismantling stigma around justice-impacted learners.



## CONCLUSION

Virginia stands at a pivotal moment – one that demands bold leadership, strategic investment, and a reimagining of how we build a stronger, more inclusive economy. Expanding access to higher education in prison is not only a matter of justice; it is a proven, cost-effective strategy to address workforce shortages, reduce recidivism, and repair long-standing inequities.

Throughout this report, we have shown how prison education delivers measurable returns: lower incarceration costs, higher employment rates, and safer communities. We have illustrated how systemic barriers – technological, procedural, and cultural – continue to exclude thousands of incarcerated Virginians from the life-changing opportunities that college access provides. We have made clear that equity must be built into every layer of program design and delivery to ensure that no one is left behind.

With more than 243,000 job openings across the Commonwealth, and 14,000 incarcerated individuals now eligible for Pell Grants, the time to act is now. Every day that passes without action represents lost opportunity – for individuals eager to learn and work, for communities yearning for economic revitalization, and for a state with the potential to lead.

Virginia has the tools, knowledge, and momentum to transform its correctional facilities into engines of economic growth and human development. But doing so will require political will, sustained investment, and an unwavering commitment to equity.

Let this report be a blueprint for that future. A future in which incarcerated individuals return to society not as statistics, but as graduates, workers, parents, and leaders. A future in which economic progress is shared by all Virginians, regardless of their past. And a future in which Virginia becomes a national model for how education, when truly accessible, can unlock human potential and fuel statewide prosperity.



# APPENDIX A: LETTERS FROM INCARCERATED COLLEGE STUDENTS AT PENNSYLVANIA COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY

## Letter #1

Hey! Please tell me more about the “Pardon Me” film? Also, I need for you to mention the importance of educating incarcerated individuals about civics while we are incapacitated. Prior to coming to prison, most of us did not know what it meant to be a citizen, nor did we feel like we were citizens. How can you expect those being released from prison to successfully reintegrate into society without knowing their rights and duties? I believe that learning about civics should be a part of voluntary programming (promoted by transformed incarcerated individuals). I have tried to propose this to the powers that be, but you know how it is in here. Instead of being open to suggestions, they tend to focus on who the information is coming from (an incarcerated individual) and either present a watered-down version of it (plausible deniability), or disregard it altogether. I have even tried to propose that it be facilitated by volunteers, but their go-to excuse not to implement it seems to be a lack of classroom space. How could there be a lack of classroom space in the DOC for a key component of rehabilitation and transformation? If you need someone inside to articulate the significance of civic literacy: the potential benefits of it, and harms of continuing to omit it from the curriculum, please do not hesitate to mention my name. Oh, please let [redacted] know that I asked about him and I wish him happy holidays. Take care brother!

## Letter #2

October 5, 2024

Professor Craig A. Miller  
Pennsylvania College of Technology  
One College Ave  
Dept. 112  
Williamsport, PA 17701

Dear Dr. Miller,



Prior to your visit to the jail, I was interested in looking into school. Now I am convinced it's something I want to do. However, I really have no idea where to begin as far as starting the process. I just know I am seeking a degree that makes me marketable as a construction contractor that plans, designs, and executes the building of residentials, home and additions. I want to lead the projects.

I will not be able to pay the costs of tuition, room and board, books, etc. on my own. Can you please describe to me what you are able to offer as far as financial assistance to make this a reality?

I would like to give you my mom's contact info so that she can help serve as a point of contact when it comes to relaying information back and forth, since communication in the jail can be tricky. Her name is [redacted] and her number is [redacted]. My address is [redacted]. Please do not hesitate to reach her. She is strongly supportive and overjoyed at this decision.

Sincerely,  
[Redacted]

P. S. Please tell me if I got the business letter format your course taught us down – this is my first real opportunity to try and use it! Thanks. Take care.

### Letter #3

I'm currently incarcerated at Lycoming County Prison. I am writing this letter to share my experience taking a college course for the first time and how it changed my perspective on life. The course that was offered to us was English Communication. It helps you develop skills for clear, concise, accurate, and ethical written communication through the development of various workplace documents such as letters, memos, proposals, emails, and reports. I really enjoyed taking this course, it showed me that it's never too late and you can really make something of yourself no matter where you are and what obstacles you are facing. There are people out here that really care about you and are willing to give you an opportunity. You just have to take it once it's presented to you. I am happy I took this course and completed it. This course really was an eye opener for me. It showed me that a thirty-seven-year-old that's incarcerated can still make something of himself. These three credits I received for this course are just the beginning for me, this opportunity was the foot in the door I needed. After I am released, I am going to continue my education. I never thought I would be even considering going back to school, but I am very grateful for the opportunity I was given. I want to especially thank Ms. Rachel, Dr. Haden, and



Craig Miller. Without them I would have the same mindset I had when I first came to jail. This experience really changed my life and I hope there are more courses coming soon to the prison for more inmates to experience the same as me. I just hope my next course will be at an actual college and not in prison, but if it is I will gladly take the course.

Thank you 😊

## Letter #4

I want to give my appreciation to my Pen Tech College peers for their hard work and dedication for getting the ENL010 course approved for Lycoming County Prison.

Completing this course while incarcerated changed my life tremendously! The inspirational speakers were very motivational. I gained a lot of knowledge on how they attained and maintained their success. I was very inspired by how every single person spoke about completing college courses to contribute to their success. This way of teaching to show us how to become successful was very impactful!

This course needs to have a follow-up course after it's completed. The value in these courses could change the world to a better place. I know from my own experience that the ignorance in prison is very high, we need more funding to educate inmates immediately to help decrease recidivism. Please continue what you're doing to help inmates get educated, we are very appreciative!

I wish I was in your presence to shake your hands and give you all high-fives for helping us transform our lives. I want to thank Rachel Thompson, Shanna Haden, and Craig Miller for their hard work and dedication to making this course a success. My family loves you and so do I, thank you so much, see you soon!

## Letter #5

This is an open letter to any educators who believe that perhaps the greatest impact they can make professionally is by bringing higher education to the disenfranchised populations of men and women in prison:

Having recently completed Pennsylvania College of Technology's ENL010 Workplace Communication course as current inmates of Lycoming County Prison in Williamsport, PA, we





can tell you that you are not only noble in your cause but you are making a big difference where any difference is desperately needed. We are very grateful for this opportunity and would like benefactors of the program to now we have collectively agreed on two main reasons why college courses like ENL010 makes each of us less likely to recidivate:

1. First, if you are willing to take the resources to help improve my life, I am willing to match your investment. Trapped in a system that is designed to make conditions more difficult to succeed, prison to college programs constitute the exception to this rule. Yes, I have made many poor choices that let me here. However, I am not about to miss the opportunity to acquire a tool (a degree) that will help keep me out of the next one. If a college or university believes I am worthy of one of their degrees then I am going to work hard and show everyone why they valued me correctly (yes, this may be our pride speaking but it is also our commitment).
2. Second, I am now more competitive in the job market and I am aware of it. This is a powerful reason for educating incarcerated individuals to prevent recidivism and has been backed by extensive research time and time again through the decades. I know that higher education places me in a position to sustain a stable and meaningful lifestyle. This is far more appealing than the revolving door I have come to know as jail. Watch me build something better for myself now that I have the credentials.

The reality is we were unlikely to pursue a college education if Pennsylvania College of Technology had not shown an interest in us and extended the opportunity first. Furthermore, they made this life-changing offer when we were at our lowest point (i. e. prison) which made us more likely to take it seriously, give it 100% and desire to continue to see it through to the end. This timing is part of the beauty of prison in college programming.

We would really like to prove we are worthy of an education by demonstrating our potential after release – both in the classroom and in our career success as alumni. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do.

Sincerely,  
[Redacted]  
[Redacted]



## Letter #6

This class has impacted me in a very positive way and gave me the confidence to be more open about furthering my education. With the teacher being present and available when needed, it built my confidence with communication whenever I had questions. To me education is a major priority and means to be willing to learn and not being hesitant to ask questions when you don't understand. With this experience I've been able to participate in, it gave me the desire to want to pursue my education upon my release and utilize the three credits I have been honored to receive.

## Letter #7

My name is [Redacted] and I have been in the B. O. P. for eight years.

I have been here at Lewisburg for a little over two years and have worked in the Education Department for most of that time.

When I was younger, education felt like a chore. Something I had to do grudgingly and I felt little satisfaction doing so.

Since being here at Lewisburg I have found a new passion for learning, as well as teaching. I have helped numerous people receive their GED and was given the opportunity to enroll in Dr. Miller's United States History to 1877 course.

Never has an education class meant so much to me or my peers as this class does. It is something each of us looks forward to, and it has us discussing lecture topics and assignments for days after each class.

Higher education was something I had long since given up on, thinking my past precluded me from it or my age would make it too difficult, but I am now trying to figure out how I can continue on this journey.

I am extremely thankful for the chance to participate in this pilot course, and I am not alone in anxiously awaiting any further course offerings.

Taking this course has opened the doors of possibility for me and has given me a sense of confidence educationally.



## Letter #8

Dear Dr. Craig and Rachel:

I want to start this off by telling you both how much this program means to me and others in my position. Allowing us to expand our options in life is major. I know most of us get out of prison and repeat the same cycle because we feel like there's no way out or other option in life for us. This program helps a lot of people see that our life doesn't stop here nor is it too late to change for the better.

This program means a second chance to me and I'm glad to have the opportunity to be part of the program. I look forward to enrolling in PCT this upcoming January to further my education. Thank you so much. I appreciate everything you and your program has done for me this far.

Sincerely,  
[Redacted]

## Letter #9

Dear Craig and Rachel,

I had wanted to thank you for this program as well as all your help. It's great to have people recognize that inmates are still human, that we deserve a second chance to better our lives. I've grown so much within this short amount of time and it's all to this program! With that said, Craig and Rachel, I thank you so much for all your hard work, words can't explain how grateful I am to be a part of this, it's changing my life!

Sincerely,  
[Redacted]

## Letter #10

Dr. Craig Miller,

I wanted to write you and say I appreciate you allowing me to participate in this college course. Through the course I was able to change the entire focus of my life. I am definitely going to continue on with my education through the Penn Tech College. I am more than excited and see



a bright future for myself. I appreciate getting to meet you and participating in the course you offered to us. I know this will help me to improve my life all around the board. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
[Redacted]



## APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. In your experience, what are the most significant barriers to accessing and completing higher education programs for incarcerated individuals in Virginia?
2. How do you see higher education in prisons contributing to Virginia's workforce development and economic goals — both now and in the future?
3. What kinds of partnerships or policy changes would most effectively support the expansion and sustainability of prison higher education in the Commonwealth?
4. Who is currently being left out of prison higher education programs, and what needs to happen to ensure more equitable access across gender, geography, and sentence length?
5. What would a fully modernized, effective, and inclusive prison education system look like in Virginia — and what do we need to do to get there?



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Justice Policy Institute is dedicated to reducing the use of incarceration and the justice system by promoting fair and effective policies.

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