



WORKING PAPER

**ACCESS, SUCCESS, AND CHALLENGES IN COLLEGE-IN-PRISON PROGRAMS WITHIN
THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK**

Higher Education for the Justice-Involved*

State University of New York, System Administration

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Summary

Higher education in prison is valuable to individual students, their families, the communities to which they return, and the larger society. But college programs for incarcerated people are often difficult to implement and lack transparency regarding student participation, courses and services offered, and educational outcomes. Even most research studies treat college-in-prison programs as “black boxes,” with little information about what happens within programs, and they typically focus on criminological rather than educational goals in assessing programs.

The State University of New York aims to improve educational access, success, and equity by generating and using evidence from a data system that reveals how incarcerated SUNY students engage in and progress through the college-in-prison programs in which SUNY institutions participate as well as the students’ educational activities and outcomes after their release. The data system opens the black box by analyzing how students access and proceed through the programs, and it focuses on educational goals, which fit SUNY’s mission to provide education of the highest quality to “all segments of the population.”

The data system is created by linking SUNY system-wide education data with information from the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). Data linkage, analysis, and reporting are done in ways that protect the privacy and security of information about individual students. Using an indirect method, 1,439 SUNY students were identified as incarcerated and enrolled in one or more of the 13 SUNY community colleges that offered college-in-prison programs between the academic years 2010-11 and 2019-20.

Analyses found that, after 2016, apparently as the result of increased public funding, enrollment of incarcerated SUNY students grew sharply, students increased the number of classes they took each year, and a greater proportion of incarcerated students attended college full-time. Incarcerated students were found to be highly diverse in race, ethnicity, age, and community, though they differed in some respects from all people in state prisons. They were younger, less likely to be Hispanic, and more likely to be white and non-Hispanic than all state prisoners, and they were more likely to come from upstate regions of New York. They were also diverse in their carceral conditions. Although many students were serving relatively short minimum sentences of five years or less, a large group of students were serving long sentences of 20 years or more.

Incarcerated SUNY students were nearly all enrolled in associate degree programs offered by community colleges. The classes they took were heavily weighted to general academic studies—such as English language and literature, social sciences, psychology, history, philosophy and religious studies, and mathematics—though business and management classes were also prominent. Students took few science classes as well as few college preparatory or developmental courses, even though other research suggests that many people in prison would benefit from such classes.

Incarcerated SUNY students typically received excellent grades. However, many students left programs after taking only a few classes and earning a few credits, and most of the students who eventually graduated took more than three years to do so. Students who were transferred between facilities and who were serving shorter sentences showed the lowest graduation rates, apparently because few continued their education after their release. These and other findings suggest the need to coordinate across college-in-prison programs, to build pathways between in-prison programs and higher education institutions in the communities where students return, and to extend the system of data and analysis to all higher education programs and institutions where incarcerated and formerly incarcerated college students attend or should attend to improve their opportunities for college completion and access to additional programs. The findings also suggest areas where in-prison programming should be expanded—to include, for example, more science classes, more college preparatory courses, and more baccalaureate programs, especially in maximum security facilities where individuals are serving lengthy sentences.

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Twenty-seven years after eliminating Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated college students, the United States reversed that decision in the FAFSA Simplification Act, part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Pell eligibility for incarcerated students was offered in the 1972 amendment to the federal Higher Education Act but rescinded with passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994.

When Pell funding for college-in-prison programs was withdrawn, most programs folded. In the years that followed, a slow and partial recovery of college-in-prison programs began, financed by a variety of limited-term public and philanthropic sources, but they have not approached the number of programs and student enrollments achieved during the pre-1994 Pell-funded years.

The reinstatement of Pell, expected to begin in the fall of 2023, combined with the simplification of the FAFSA form, will no doubt expand access to higher education among the more than 1.4 million people in state and federal prisons.² Bipartisan support for this expansion of access has been based in part on concerns about the costs of mass incarceration, combined with decades of research that finds consistent associations between enrollment in college-in-prison programs and reduced recidivism.³ In a 2018 meta-analysis of control-group studies, for example, Bozick and colleagues estimated that prisoners' participation in postsecondary education programs decreased their chances of recidivism by nearly half.⁴ In light of the high rate of recidivism in the U.S.—more than 40 percent of released prisoners are re-arrested in their first year after release—such effects have the potential to save many years of imprisonment to people and the enormous social and financial costs of incarceration to families, communities, and governments.⁵

Several studies have found that the effects of college on recidivism are stronger and more consistent for students who complete programs. Pompoco, et al. found that college completers were less likely to return to prison, while no significant effects were detected for persons who only participated in classes.⁶ Chappell's 2004 meta-analysis concluded that recidivism rates were lower among persons who finished their

¹ The HEJI team thanks the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision for sharing its data and expertise with the State University of New York. An overview of this paper was presented at the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison, Denver, Colorado, November 13, 2021.

² As of year-end 2019: E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2019," *Bulletin*, NCJ 255115 (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, October 2020), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>.

³ On bipartisan and conservative support for criminal justice reform, see David Dagan and Steven M. Teles, "Conservative Reform and the Future of Mass Incarceration," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (January 2014): 266-276; Brian Walsh and Ruth Delaney, "America Is Ready to Reinstate Pell Grants for Students in Prison," *Think Justice Blog* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, November 20, 2020), <https://www.vera.org/blog/america-is-ready-to-reinstate-pell-grants-for-students-in-prison>.

⁴ Robert Bozick, Jennifer Steele, Lois Davis, Susan Turner, "Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14 (2018): 404.

⁵ Leonardo Antenangeli and Matthew R. Durose, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008: A 10-Year Follow-Up Period (2008-2018)*, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ 256094, Washington, DC, September 2021. On the effects of incarceration on communities, see Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶ Amanda Pompoco, et al., "Reducing Inmate Misconduct and Prison Returns with Facility Education Programs," *Criminology and Public Policy* 16, no. 2 (May 2017): 515-548.

postsecondary programs than among those who enrolled but failed to finish.⁷ And Duwe and Clark found that earning a postsecondary degree in prison was associated not only with a lower rate of recidivism but also a greater number of hours worked and higher overall wages.⁸

While completing college may reduce recidivism, more basic justifications exist for offering higher education to incarcerated people. At least in New York, access to higher education is considered a right. The mission of the State University of New York is to “provide to the people of the New York educational services of the highest quality, with the broadest possible access, fully representative of all segments of the population”⁹ No exceptions are noted. Likewise, the state legislature charged the City University of New York with the responsibility for providing students of all ethnic and racial groups and both sexes with equal access and opportunity and serve as “a vehicle for the upward mobility of the disadvantaged in the city of New York.”¹⁰

In addition, higher education is associated with an enormous range of life opportunities and outcomes. Earning an associate or bachelor’s degree boosts full-time employment and earnings and is correlated with improved health and reduced mortality, and the economic premium of college is growing.¹¹ Having a college degree also is associated with increased rates of marriage, community engagement, political participation, and self-reported positive assessments of life.¹² Reflecting the growing sense that earning a college degree is key to full participation in American economic and social life, numerous efforts to increase college graduation rates have been launched in the past two decades, including state and national initiatives to make community college free of charge.¹³ In New York, the state’s tuition assistance program (TAP), Excelsior Scholarships, and other public funds have made public college tuition-free for nearly all lower-income and many middle-income residents, though TAP eligibility has not yet been extended to incarcerated students.¹⁴

Analyses of college-in-prison programs have typically paid little attention to completion rates, however, as well as to other traditional measures of educational programs and performance, such as student access and

⁷ Catheryn A. Chappell, “Post-Secondary Correctional Education and Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis of Research Conducted 1990-1999” *Journal of Correctional Education* 55, no. 2 (June 2004): 148-169.

⁸ Grant Duwe and Valerie Clark, “The Effects of Prison-Based Educational Programming on Recidivism and Employment,” *The Prison Journal* 94, no. 4 (2014): 454-478.

⁹ State University of New York, Mission Statement, at <https://www.suny.edu/about/mission>. The New York Constitution has been interpreted as giving all students access to a “sound, basic education.” To date, that concept has been construed as providing a “meaningful high school education” that prepares students to “function productively as civic participants.” But the growing importance of postsecondary education in the economic, political, and social life suggests that this construction may soon change. On the New York education clause, see Thomas Gais and Cathy Johnson, “Education,” in *Protections in the New York State Constitution Beyond the Federal Bill of Rights*, edited by Scott N. Fein and Andrew B. Ayers (Albany, NY: Albany Law School, Government Law Center, 2017): 25-27.

¹⁰ New York Consolidated Laws, Education Law – EDN s. 6201.

¹¹ Rachel Fulcher Dawson, Melissa S. Kearney, and James X. Sullivan, “Comprehensive Approaches to Increasing Student Completion in Higher Education: A Survey of the Landscape,” Working Paper 28046, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, November 2020): 2; Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008): 290; Anthony P. Carnevale, Stephen J. Rose, and Ban Cheah, “The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings,” Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University (Washington DC: CEW, 2011).

¹² Anne Case and Angus Deacon, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020): 167-183.

¹³ William G. Bowen and Michael S. McPherson, *Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Also see Lumina Foundation, “A Stronger Nation,” at <https://www.luminafoundation.org/our-work/stronger-nation/>; and The White House, “Fact Sheet: The American Families Plan,” (Washington, DC: White House Briefing Room, April 28, 2021), at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>.

¹⁴ Higher Education Services Corporation, “Chapter 3: Student Information,” 3.01(k), <https://www.hesc.ny.gov/partner-access/financial-aid-professionals/programs-policies-and-procedures-guide-to-grants-and-scholarship-programs/chapter-3-student-information.html>.

diversity, curriculum, instructional quality, and student retention. As Bozick, et al. noted in their meta-analysis, many studies classified respondents “simply as correctional education participants and nonparticipants” and reported little information on even basic characteristics of the programs, much less on their implementation or the ways in which students progress or fail to progress to graduation.¹⁵

The treatment of college-in-prison programs as “black boxes” and the long-time focus on recidivism as their purpose may be changing. In 2020, the Institute for Higher Education Policy proposed a rich array of performance criteria for in-prison programs, including criteria relating to student success, academic quality, civic engagement, and soft skills.¹⁶ An entire 2018 issue of *The Prison Journal* was devoted to rethinking metrics in the field of higher education in prison in an effort “to ensure quality, access, and equity for currently and formerly incarcerated students.”¹⁷ And the statute reinstating Pell for incarcerated students lists credential attainment and post-release education as evaluation criteria and requires the U.S. Department of Education to report on education-focused characteristics of college-in-prison programs, including information on curricula, program transfers, instructors, and academic outcomes.

Still, system-wide analyses of the participation of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated college students and their education outcomes have been scarce. An exception is Stanford Criminal Justice Center’s 2020 report, “Striving for Success,” which uses administrative data from several California community colleges to examine the participation, grades, persistence and retention, and unit load of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.¹⁸ The Vera Institute is tracking credential completions, among other outcomes and program characteristics, for Second Chance Pell Programs.¹⁹ Although single-program analyses are also rare, one fine example is the Incarcerated Student Education Program at Cerro Coso Community College in California.²⁰

The purpose and findings of the report

This report extends those efforts. It links administrative data collected by SUNY and the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) between 2010 and 2020 to reveal student engagement and outcomes in SUNY-involved college-in-prison programs. It addresses such questions as:

- Who participates in SUNY in-prison programs, and who does not?
- Which programs are incarcerated students enrolled in and what courses are they taking?
- Are students persisting in their academic programs, and if they are not, when do they drop out?
- Do students earn degrees or other credentials? If so, how long do they take to finish programs? And do they continue their education and complete programs after release?

¹⁵ Bozick, et al., “Does Providing Inmates,” 2018: 408-409. Exceptions include, Lois M. Davis and Michelle C. Tolbert, “Evaluation of North Carolina’s Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Program” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019); and Marjorie J. Seashore and Steven Haberland, with John Irwin and Keith Baker, *Prisoner Education: Project NewGate and Other College Programs* (New York: Praeger, 1976).

¹⁶ Michael Scott Brick and Julie Ajinkya, “Supporting Success: The Higher Education in Prison Key Performance Indicator Framework,” Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP, September 2020).

¹⁷ Mary Rachel Gould, “Rethinking Our Metrics: Research in the Field of Higher Education in Prison,” *The Prison Journal* 98, no. 4 (2018): 387-404.

¹⁸ Rebecca Silbert & Debbie Mukamal, “Striving for Success: The Academic Achievements of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Students in California Community Colleges” (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Criminal Justice Center, January 2020), at http://risingscholarsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/general/StrivingForSuccess_4printR1.pdf.

¹⁹ Ruth Delaney & Chase Montagnet, “Second Chance Pell: A Snapshot of the First Three Years” (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2020). For a qualitative analysis of the implementation and outcomes of college-in-prison programs, see Steven J. Meyer, Linda Fredericks, Cindy M. Borden, and Penny L. Richardson, “Implementing Postsecondary Academic Programs in State Prisons: Challenges and Opportunities,” *Journal of Correctional Education* 61, no. 2 (June 2010): 148-184.

²⁰ Cerro Coso Community College, Incarcerated Student Education Program, “Program Data,” <https://www.cerrococo.edu/isep/program-data>.

- And how do program completions by students vary with respect to carceral conditions and personal characteristics?

Comparable questions are asked regarding non-incarcerated students in efforts to improve their education outcomes.²¹ They are no less important for improving higher education for incarcerated students.

The report is one part of a SUNY initiative to expand and improve its services to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in New York.²² With funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, SUNY System Administration is working with its campuses to build a supportive community of college-in-prison programs, develop resources to strengthen the programs, ease pathways for formerly incarcerated students to continue their education, and create a data system that reveals key features of the programs and their performance. The research component of the initiative also includes interviews with college administrators, faculty, and formerly incarcerated students to understand how students view college-in-prison programs, the challenges colleges face in implementing their programs, including during the pandemic, and the ways SUNY can better support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. Although this report includes references to some interviews, forthcoming reports will offer a more complete summary of those findings.

After describing SUNY's role in educating incarcerated people in New York and the data used in the analyses, the report examines how enrollment has changed in recent years; who participates in the programs, including how students differ from or resemble other state prisoners; which courses they take and what grades they earn; how many classes each student takes and credits he or she earns; how students persist from one year to another in programs; whether they graduate and how long it takes if they do. The report also explores students' academic progress and how it varies by personal characteristics and the conditions of their confinement. Finally, the report discusses the findings' implications for policy and practice.

The analyses find that enrollment in SUNY-involved college-in-prison programs has grown markedly since 2016, largely in response to the availability of public funding, specifically federal Second Chance Pell (SCP) funding and grants from the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII), an initiative of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. SUNY college-in-prison students are quite diverse in age, race, and ethnicity, though a greater proportion of students are white, non-Hispanic, and younger than all persons in state prisons. The type of classes they take also vary, though most are in the liberal arts and humanities and social science subject areas. Incarcerated students take few science classes, and with the exception of a business entrepreneurship program, few classes with a specific occupational focus.

Although the vast majority of incarcerated SUNY students received good or excellent grades, many ended their enrollment after taking only a few classes and earning a few credits. One of three incarcerated SUNY students eventually completed their degrees, almost all while in prison; but only one out of nine finished their associate programs within three years. Graduation rates were higher among college programs offered in maximum security prisons and for students serving longer sentences, carceral conditions that may be connected to the higher graduation rates we found among older, Black, and Hispanic students. Completion rates also were associated with facility transfers. SUNY students who resided at prisons without a college program at the time of their release or while in custody in the fall of 2020 were less likely to graduate than those who remained at facility served by a SUNY or other college program.

The analysis suggests that if we want to increase opportunities for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students to earn college credentials, it may be necessary to adjust college programs to different carceral

²¹ William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College in America's Public Universities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

²² Higher Education for the Justice-Involved is the team leading the initiative at SUNY. For more information, see "Higher Education for the Justice-Involved" at <https://www.suny.edu/impact/education/heji/>.

settings. Students serving shorter sentences, typically in medium security facilities, are especially in need of stronger pathways between college-in-prison programs and the colleges in the communities to which the students are returning. Students serving longer sentences may also benefit from improved post-release educational opportunities and support, though they may also benefit from a greater availability of baccalaureate programs, which are now scarce among SUNY programs for incarcerated students.

The analyses also give rise to questions requiring further investigation, such as: Why are Hispanic people apparently under-represented among SUNY students? Why do so many students end their enrollment after only a few classes and credits? Can students enroll in college programs earlier in their time in prison and make greater progress toward their degrees? And how can SUNY increase the chances that formerly incarcerated students can continue their education post-release? These and other questions, identified and sharpened by the current research, will require deeper analyses, drawing on qualitative as well as quantitative data, to provide evidence for future program and system-level improvements.

SUNY and college-in-prison programming in New York State

SUNY campuses have a long history of serving incarcerated students, dating at least to 1970, when Dutchess Community College began offering in-person college courses at Green Haven Correctional Facility supported by private funding.²³ Soon afterwards, several SUNY campuses launched college-in-prison programs. In the wake of the 1971 uprising at the Attica Correctional Facility, Genesee Community College initiated a full-time degree program there in 1973.²⁴ Cayuga Community College launched a program at Elmira Correctional Facility in 1974, as did Ulster Community College at Eastern Correctional Facility and Clinton Community College at Clinton Correctional. Most of the programs received financing from federal Pell grants, which became available to incarcerated students after the 1972 amendments to the Higher Education Act, as well as the New York State Tuition Assistance Program, which was enacted in 1974. By 1976, SUNY colleges hosted nine of the 17 college-in-prison programs operating in New York State.²⁵

Nearly all SUNY programs closed after the revocation of incarcerated students' eligibility for Pell grants in 1994 and the elimination of TAP funding for college-in-prison programs in the state budget of the following year. Some private colleges sustained their programs with private funding, such as the Consortium of the Niagara Frontier (composed of Niagara University, Canisius College, and Daemen College) and the Bedford Hills College Program at the women's facility of Bedford Hills. The revival of SUNY's role did not begin until 2010, when private support established the Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP), which partnered with Cayuga Community College to serve students at the Auburn, Cayuga, and Five Points prisons.

A year later, Sullivan Community College began offering a degree program at the maximum-security Sullivan Correctional Facility in partnership with Hudson Link, a nonprofit organization that administered the program and raised private funds to support it. Ulster Community College joined the Hudson Link consortium in 2016, and Columbia-Greene Community College came onboard in 2017. Herkimer

²³ Linda Charlton, "South 40' Tries to Aid Convicts: Education Program and Rehabilitation Are Used Here," *New York Times* (April 23, 1972). For a general history of college-in-prison programs in the U.S., see Max Kenner, "The Long History of College in Prison," in *Education for Liberation: The Politics of Promise and Reform Inside and Beyond America's Prisons*, edited by Gerard Robinson and Elizabeth English Smith (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019): 9-29.

²⁴ Doran Larson, "Localizing Prison Higher Education," *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 170 (Summer 2015): 12.

²⁵ The SUNY institutions included the community colleges of Broome, Cayuga, Clinton, Corning, Dutchess, Genesee, Ulster, and Westchester as well as the four-year college at New Paltz (Emmert 1976). Five CUNY institutions offered programs (LaGuardia, Hostos, New York City, and Staten Island community colleges, plus John Jay College of Criminal Justice), as did three private colleges (Marist, Skidmore, and [Sage] Junior College of Albany). From Ellen B. Emmert, "Offender Assistance Programs Operated by Postsecondary Institutions of Education, 1975-76" (Alexandria, VA: American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1976).

Community College also joined a consortium, teaming with Hamilton College and Colgate University to create the Mohawk Consortium in 2014, now named the Hamilton-Herkimer College-in-Prison Program.

Other SUNY campuses created stand-alone programs. With support awarded by CJII in 2017, Jefferson Community College established programs at the Cape Vincent, Watertown, and Gouverneur facilities. Mohawk Valley Community College also used CJII to support its degree program at the Marcy facility. North Country Community College was selected as a federal Second Chance Pell Experimental Site in 2016. It serves four prisons, including one federal facility. Genesee Community College re-established its program at Attica with private funding in 2011, now partnering with the University of Rochester’s Education Justice Initiative. Finally, two SUNY campuses—Adirondack Community College and SUNY Potsdam—were selected as Second Chance Pell sites in 2020 and began classes in the 2021-2022 academic year. Potsdam is offering the first four-year degree in-prison program in SUNY’s history.

SUNY campuses now have a presence in 20 of the state’s 52 correctional facilities and serve about half of all college students in New York State prisons. As Table 1 shows, the institutional arrangements vary markedly. Eight programs are in partnerships with other institutions, while five are stand-alone programs. Funding also varies. Four SUNY programs are federal Second Chance Pell sites; three receive public support under CJII; one has been financed by a state appropriation item; and seven rely on private sources or some combination of public and private financing.

TABLE 1. SUNY CAMPUSES INVOLVED IN COLLEGE-IN-PRISON PROGRAMS, INCLUDING PARTNERSHIPS, CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES AND SOURCES OF FUNDING.

Campus	Partners	Facility	Funding
<i>Community colleges</i>			
Columbia Greene CC	Hudson Link	Greene	Private, SC Pell ^a
Ulster County CC	Hudson Link	Shawangunk	Private
Sullivan CC	Hudson Link	Sullivan	Private
Herkimer County CC	Hamilton-Herkimer CIPP	Mohawk, Midstate	State
Cayuga County CC	Cornell University	Auburn, Cayuga, Five Points	Private & CJII ^b
Corning CC	Cornell University	Elmira	Private
Genesee CC	Rochester Educ. Justice Init.	Attica, Groveland	Private
Mohawk Valley CC	--	Marcy	CJII
North Country CC	--	FCI Ray Brook, Bare Hill, Franklin, Adirondack	SC Pell
Jefferson CC	--	Cape Vincent, Gouverneur	CJII
Adirondack CC ^c	--	Washington	SC Pell
<i>Four-year colleges</i>			
SUNY Potsdam ^c	--	Riverview	SC Pell
Purchase College ^d	Marymount Manhattan Coll.	Bedford Hills	Private

^a Second Chance Pell

^b Criminal Justice Investment Initiative/Manhattan District Attorney's Office

^c Programs newly launched in 2021-2022 academic year.

^d Purchase College faculty participate in the Bedford Hills program.

Source: Higher Education for the Justice Involved, SUNY.

The diverse origins, funding, and partnerships of SUNY-involved programs are more than matched by the diversity among New York programs involving non-SUNY institutions. Private programs operating in New

York include the multi-facility Bard College Prison Initiative as well as single-facility programs operated by Medaille, Mercy, and Bennington colleges and New York University. Private colleges also partner with SUNY institutions in mixed-sector college consortia, such as the Hamilton-Herkimer CIPP and programs managed by Hudson Link and Marymount Manhattan. In addition, John Jay College and Columbia University offer credit-bearing, non-degree programs. Finally, Ashland University, a private institution in Ohio, uses Second Chance Pell funding to support distance-learning at four upstate facilities.

SUNY and non-SUNY programs together cover 34 of 44 medium and maximum security prisons in New York State.²⁶ Most offer associate degrees or certificates, though several baccalaureate programs exist, including those offered by Bard, Mount Saint Mary, Mercy, Marymount Manhattan, Nyack, and St. Thomas Aquinas as well as the newly established public program at SUNY Potsdam. New York Theological Seminary offers the only graduate degree, a master's in professional studies.

The rich diversity of college-in-prison programs in New York reflects strong institutional commitments to this work and permits local flexibility and innovation. The programs have shared information and collaborated on projects over the past two years in a revived New York State Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (NYCHEP).²⁷ It is still, however, far from comprising a *system* of college programming. Although individual institutions may collect and report data on enrollment, graduations, and post-release employment, little information is available on how all of these programs combine to serve incarcerated people in New York, even though programs affect each other through student transfers, shifts in facilities served, and influences on policies and practices. Because of its large and widespread enrollment of incarcerated students and extensive data reporting system, SUNY is in a good position to begin creating a more transparent system of programs, one capable of improvement guided by evidence.

Data

Education data used in this report come from the SUNY Institutional Research Information System (SIRIS), which compiles student, term section, course, degree, and financial aid data from SUNY's 64 campuses. SUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics (OIRDA) identified 1,892 SUNY students who took classes located in a correction facility between the 2010-11 and 2019-20 academic years, and who did not take classes on the main campus in the same semester.²⁸ Names, birth dates, and other information were then used to link the SUNY students to persons in the released and in-custody files maintained by the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS).²⁹

The linking of SUNY and DOCCS data was supervised by SUNY's OIRDA. Because SUNY participates in the National Student Clearinghouse, data on SUNY students' enrollment in and graduation from other U.S. colleges and universities were also made available.³⁰ After linking was completed, personally identifying data (e.g., names and dates of birth) were stripped from the dataset. SUNY researchers then analyzed the de-identified, merged data, which were stored on secure SUNY servers and password protected. The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) of SUNY New Paltz, which conducts Institutional Review Board reviews for

²⁶ DOCCS operates 50 facilities as of December 2021: 17 maximum security, 27 medium security, and five minimum security prisons and one drug treatment campus. However, six facilities are scheduled for closure in March 2022, including maximum prisons Southport and Downstate; the medium security facility of Ogdensburg; the minimum security facilities of Rochester and Moriah Shock Incarceration; and the Willard Drug Treatment Campus.

²⁷ "New York Consortium for Higher Education," <https://nychep.org/>.

²⁸ SIRIS's "Term Section Data Dictionary" includes a "Location Type" element (TT160), which includes a code for "Correction Facility: Instructional activity occurs at a correctional facility."

²⁹ The "release" and "in custody" files supplied to SUNY by DOCCS are the same data available on the DOCCS "Inmate Lookup" website, at <http://nysdoccslookup.doccs.ny.gov/>. The files are complete as of November 1, 2020. We thank DOCCS for providing us the publicly available data in a user-friendly format.

³⁰ National Student Clearinghouse, ***

SUNY System Administration, determined that the process of combining, maintaining, and analyzing the data complies with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) under the “audit and evaluation” exception and with federal Human Subjects Research requirements.³¹

Of SUNY students identified as taking a class while incarcerated, 1,439 were matched with individuals in the DOCCS files. Time periods of their incarceration and college enrollment were also checked to ensure they overlapped. Most of the 348 incarcerated SUNY students not matched with DOCCS data had been enrolled in three SUNY campuses operating in non-DOCCS facilities, including a federal prison, a county jail, and a juvenile center.³² In this report, only the SUNY students linked to DOCCS facilities are analyzed.

Finally, interviews with SUNY administrators and faculty and formerly incarcerated students (though only those no longer in community supervision) are noted at times in the report. These interviews—about two dozen in number—are part of SUNY’s overall study of college-in-prison programs, offering context for the quantitative analyses. Future reports will discuss their findings.

Enrollment trends

Both the number of incarcerated students and the classes they took have grown rapidly among SUNY community colleges in recent years. The bars in Figure 1 show how many incarcerated SUNY students were enrolled during each academic year between 2010-2011 and 2019-2020. Enrollment was low and flat from 2011-12 to 2015-16. Although several colleges supported programs—including Cayuga, Genesee, Jefferson, Mohawk Valley, North Country, and Sullivan—total enrollment averaged less than 200 students per year.

After 2016, enrollment swelled, facilitated by public funding of college-in-prison programs. North Country Community College secured funding through the Second Chance Pell program in 2016.³³ In 2017, Cayuga and Corning colleges, in partnership with the Cornell Prison Education Program, received financial support from the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative, as did Jefferson and Mohawk Valley colleges.³⁴ Growth continued through the 2018-19 academic year, though it tailed off in 2019-20. The decline likely reflects pandemic-related class cancellations and disruptions in the spring of 2020.

The trend in classes taken by students has largely paralleled changes in enrollment. The line in Figure 1 shows the number of classes in which students were enrolled. Classes more than doubled between 2015-16 and 2016-17 and continued to rise until they peaked in 2018-19 at over 3,300. In fact, classes increased more than enrollment; students began taking more classes per academic year in 2016-17. Between 2011-12 and 2015-16, incarcerated students enrolled in an annual average of between 2.9 and 3.7 classes. In 2016-17, the mean number of classes grew to 4.4 and 5.4 in 2017-18, falling to 5.1 in 2018-19 and 4.3 in 2019-20.

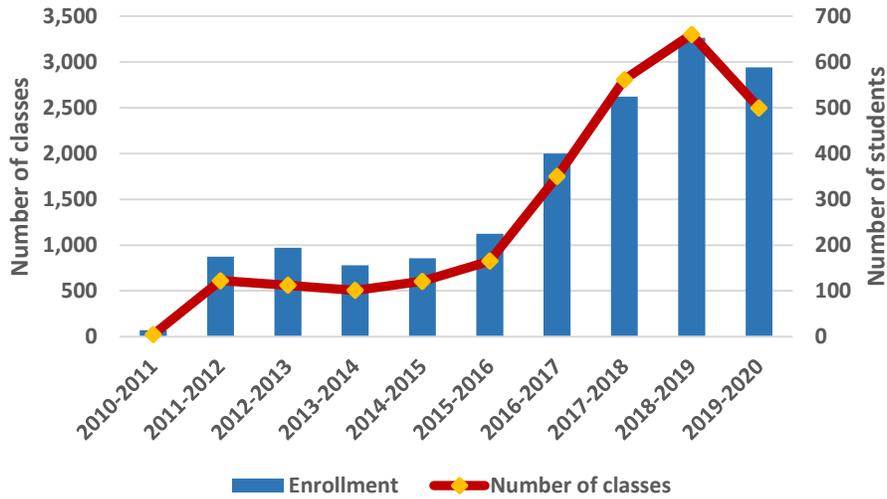
³¹ See Privacy Technical Assistance Center, “FERPA Exceptions—Summary,” https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/FERPA%20Exceptions_HANDOUT_horizontal_0.pdf; and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protections, “Prisoner Involvement in Research (2003),” <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance/prisoner-research-ohrp-guidance-2003/index.html>.

³² Seventy-three percent of the unmatched SUNY students were enrolled in North Country Community College, Monroe Community College, or Columbia Greene Community College. North Country operates a program at the Federal Correctional Institution at Ray Brook; Columbia Greene offers college-level courses for youths at the Office of Children and Family Services’ Brookwood Secure Center; and Monroe held classes at the Monroe County jail.

³³ U.S. Department of Education, “Institutions selected for participation in the Second Chance Pell experiment in the 2016-17 award year,” <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/second-chance-pell-institutions.pdf>.

³⁴ CJII, “College-in-Prison Reentry Programs” (August 7, 2017), <http://cjii.org/college-prison-reentry-programs/>.

FIGURE 1. INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS ENROLLED EACH ACADEMIC YEAR, COMPARED TO NUMBER OF CLASSES, 2010-11 TO 2019-20.

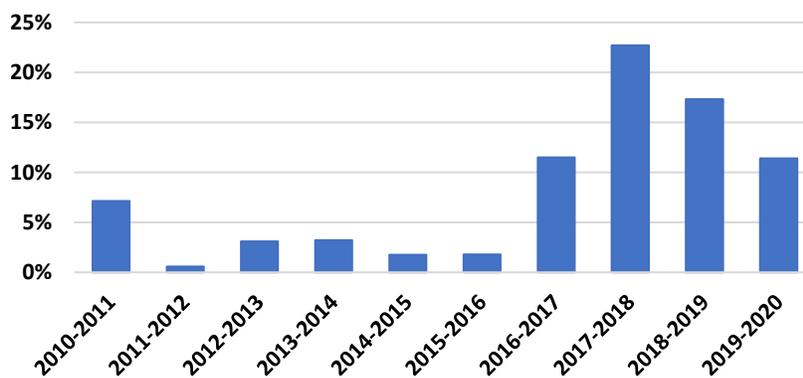


Note: Number of students = 1,439; number of classes = 13,489.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

The increased intensity of student participation also appears in Figure 2, which shows the percentage of students enrolled full-time. Only 2-3 percent of incarcerated students were enrolled full-time until 2016-17, when the percentage increased to 12 percent and nearly doubled the following year to 23 percent. The policies of funders may have incentivized programs to increase course-loads. Second Chance Pell recipients must meet academic progress requirements, including minimum credits per semester; and students cannot receive federal aid after exceeding 150 percent of the published length of the degree program.³⁵

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS ENROLLED FULL-TIME, BY ACADEMIC YEAR, 2010-11 TO 2019-20.



Note: Number of students = 1,439

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

³⁵ Allan Wachendorfer and Michael Budke, “Lessons from Second Chance Pell: A Toolkit for Helping Incarcerated Students Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid,” (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2020): 25.

Who participates in college-in-prison programs?

Although most research indicates that a large proportion of prisoners with high school degrees or their equivalent want to participate in college programs, few actually do.³⁶ Programs may be constrained by inadequate funding, poor relations between facilities and colleges, not enough qualified and willing faculty, or a lack of classroom space. Individuals may be prevented from enrolling by policies restricting participation, such as the length of term, type of conviction, participation in other programs, and disciplinary issues.³⁷ Second Chance Pell and the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative, for example, prioritize funding for individuals expected to be released from prison within a few years.³⁸

Students who participated in SUNY programs while incarcerated differ in several ways from the total prison population in New York State.³⁹ Only 4.1 percent of SUNY students during this period were women, slightly lower than the 4.6 percent of women in DOCCS facilities in 2019. However, no current SUNY students are female. The only incarcerated female SUNY students during this period were enrolled in a Genesee Community College program at the Albion facility, a program that no longer operates. All women's prisons in New York host college programs, but they are operated by private colleges and universities, though SUNY Purchase faculty participate in the Bedford Hills consortium led by Marymount Manhattan College.⁴⁰

Incarcerated SUNY students also differ from all state prisoners in race and ethnicity (Figure 3). Based on self-reported data from DOCCS, almost one-third of incarcerated students were non-Hispanic whites, greater than their representation among all incarcerated persons. By contrast, only 17 percent of students were Hispanic, less than their 23 percent among all state prisoners. Nearly half of incarcerated students were non-Hispanic Blacks, slightly less than their proportion among all incarcerated people.⁴¹ About 3 percent of both students and total prisoners identified as Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, or other categories.

³⁶ In a survey of Pennsylvania state prisoners, Tahamont, et al. found that about 80 percent of respondents were interested in participating in the Second Chance Pell college program. Sarah Tahamont, et al., "Ineligible Anyway: Evidence on the Barriers to Pell Eligibility for Prisoners in the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program in Pennsylvania Prisons," *Justice Quarterly* (2020): 1-25 [Table A2]. In contrast, CUNY's Institute for Justice and Opportunity indicated in a 2019 report that only 4 percent of the people in DOCCS custody with a high school diploma or its equivalent were currently enrolled in a college program. Prisoner Reentry Institute [now Institute for Justice and Opportunity], *Mapping the Landscape of Higher Education in New York State Prisons* (New York City: John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2019): 26.

³⁷ Tahamont, et al., "Ineligible Anyway."

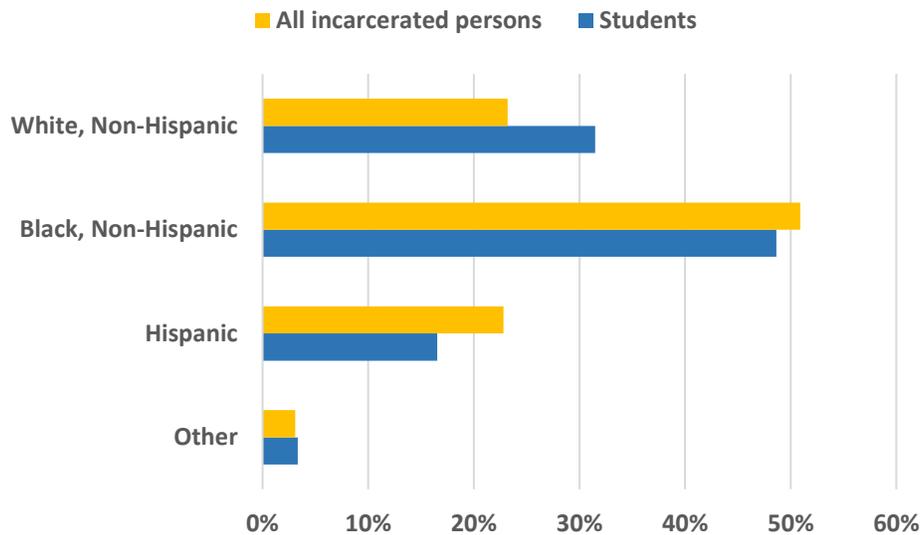
³⁸ SCP prioritizes students to be released within five years. CJII focuses on persons to be released within 1.5 to 5.5 years.

³⁹ New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, "Under Custody Report: Profile of Under Custody Population as of January 1, 2019," (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2019): 14.

⁴⁰ Purchase College, State University of New York, "Two Professors Find Inspiration Teaching in Prison," Press Release, no date, <https://www.purchase.edu/live/news/702-two-professors-find-inspiration-teaching-in-prison>.

⁴¹ To identify the countries of origin of Hispanic people in their custody, DOCCS collects information on their parental heritage. However, only the self-reported ethnicity data were available for this analysis.

FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, COMPARED TO AVERAGE ANNUAL DISTRIBUTION OF ALL STATE PRISONERS, 2010-11 TO 2019-20.



Note: Number of students = 1,439; average annual number of incarcerated persons = 32,249.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Note: “Hispanic” includes persons of any race. “Other” includes Asian and Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaska Native, Other, and Unknown. Race and ethnicity of state prisoners are calculated as the weighted average of percentages for each year between 2010 and 2020; weights are based on the number of students enrolled each year. For example, averages for recent years are given greater weight than averages in earlier years, when fewer students were enrolled.

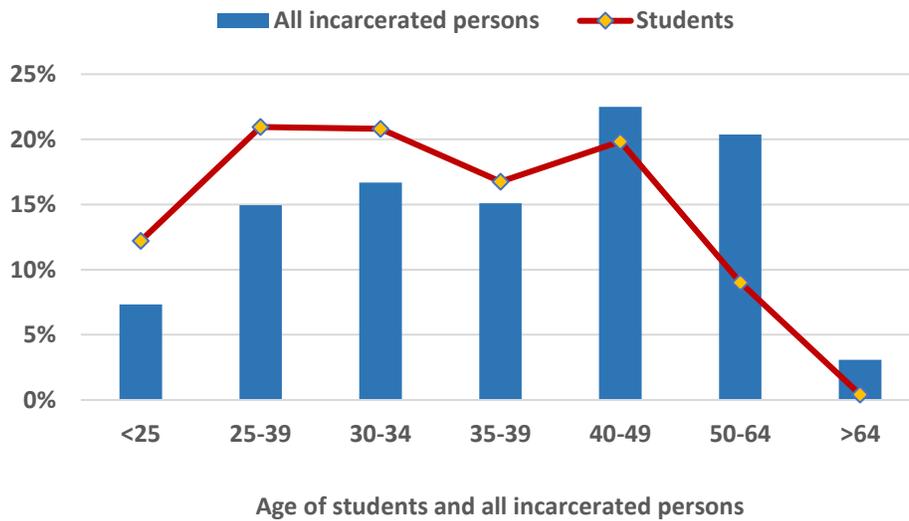
The over-representation of white prisoners and the under-representation of Hispanics among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated college students has been noted in other studies.⁴² One contributing factor may be the different proportions of prisoners who began their prison terms without a high school diploma or equivalent. A 2016 national survey of state prisoners found that 66 percent of Blacks and 67 percent of Hispanics had not completed a high school education before their incarceration, compared to 50 percent of non-Hispanic white prisoners.⁴³ Yet even if similar differences exist in New York, they do not explain why Hispanics are under-represented while Blacks are not.

Incarcerated SUNY students vary greatly by age. Figure 4 shows the age distribution of students when they first enrolled in a SUNY program (represented by the line) and compares it to the distribution of ages for all incarcerated individuals (shown by the vertical bars). About 29 percent of the students were 40 years of age or older when they began college; a sharp drop-off in participation appears only among prisoners 50 years or older. Despite this diversity, SUNY students differ in age from all incarcerated individuals. Incarcerated college students were typically younger than state prisoners as a whole, illustrated by the line hovering over the bars among the lower age categories, and by its placement under the bars among the older categories.

⁴² See Silbert and Mukamal, *Striving for Success*: 12; and Ruth Delaney and Chase Montagnet, “Second Chance Pell: A Snapshot of the First Three Years,” *Policy Brief* (New York: Vera Institute, April 2020): Figure 4.

⁴³ Authors’ analysis of (unweighted) data from the Survey of Prison Inmates, United States, 2016 (ICPSR 37692), available at <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/NACJD/studies/37692>.

FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS BY AGE, COMPARED TO ALL STATE PRISONERS, 2010-11 TO 2019-20.



Note: Number of students = 1,432; average annual number of all incarcerated persons = 35,491.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

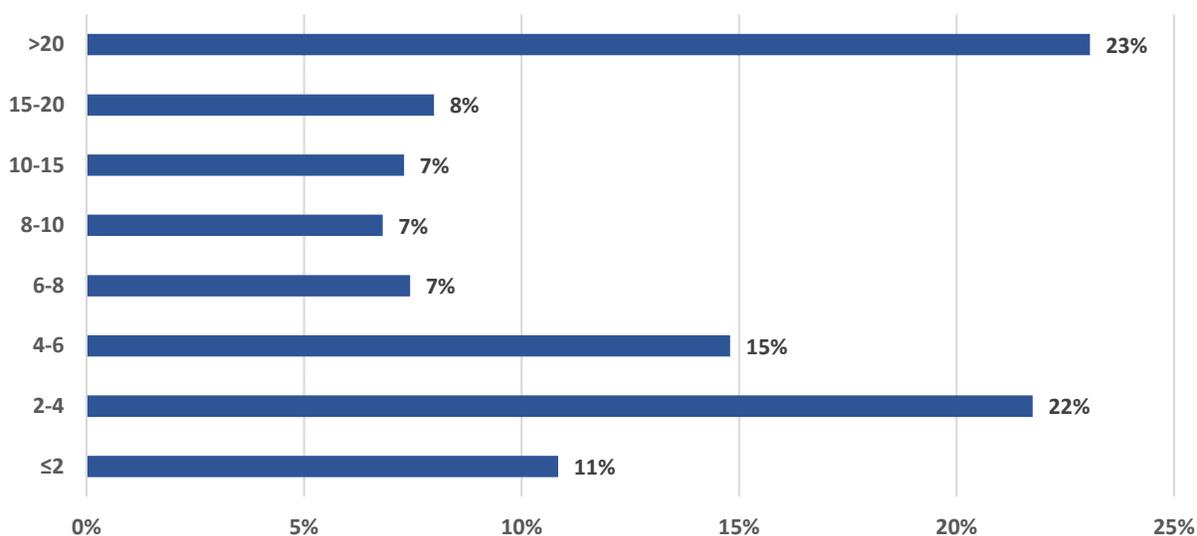
SUNY students in college-in-prison programs also vary a great deal in their carceral conditions. Many students have been in prison for relatively short periods. Figure 5A reveals that 31 percent of the students were serving aggregate minimum sentences of five years or fewer when they first enrolled in SUNY programs. Yet an even larger percentage, 38 percent, were serving sentences of more than 20 years.⁴⁴

Students also vary with respect to when they began college relative to the time they first entered prison. This period may include multiple sentences and returns to prison. Many incarcerated SUNY students, about 45 percent, began taking classes within five years of their initial entry into prison (Figure 5B). However, most students began college work after longer intervals since their first prison entry. The long delays may reflect unmet demand for college in earlier years, when programs were smaller and less well funded. Yet other factors and events, such as the time needed to get high school equivalency or other program responsibilities, may have also delayed student enrollment.

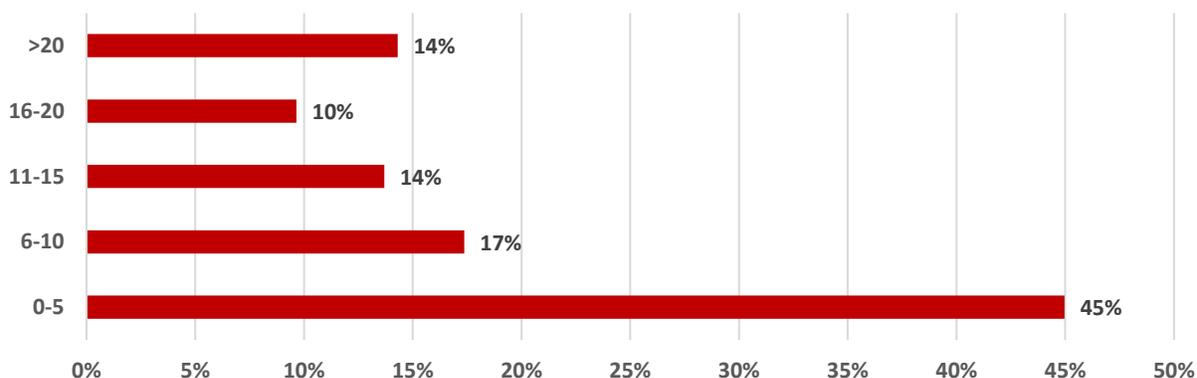
⁴⁴ Aggregate minimum sentences are calculated by DOCCS and represent the total amount of time a person must serve in prison. Individuals with indeterminate sentences are typically imprisoned between a certain minimum and maximum amount of time set by the court. While most prison sentences are still indeterminate, the Sentencing Reform Act of 1995 established determinate sentences for repeat offenders convicted of violent felonies. Determinate sentences have no minimum sentence, only a maximum. Such individuals must serve at least 6/7 of the determinate term before he or she is eligible for release. Figure 5A uses DOCCS’s estimates of aggregate minimum sentence for people with indeterminate sentences and 6/7 of the maximum sentence for those with determinate sentences. For more information, see New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, “Inmate Information Data Definitions,” <https://publicapps.doocs.ny.gov/ILookup/fpmsdoc.html>.

FIGURE 5. SENTENCES AND INCARCERATION OF SUNY STUDENTS, 2010-11 TO 2019-20.

A) AGGREGATE MINIMUM SENTENCE OF SUNY STUDENTS, IN YEARS



B) YEARS BETWEEN STUDENT’S FIRST ENTRY INTO PRISON AND FIRST SUNY CLASS



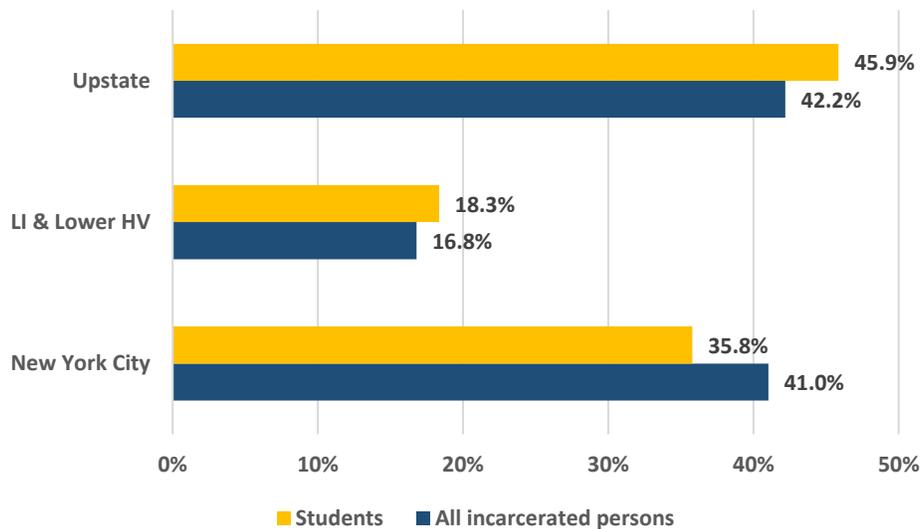
Note: Number of students = 1,439. For calculation of sentence length, see note 44.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

At the national level, at least 95 percent of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point.⁴⁵ When incarcerated SUNY students are released, they will return to all regions of the state. Figure 6 compares the “counties of commitment,” aggregated by region, of SUNY students to all people in state prisons. Counties of commitment are where an individual was convicted and committed to serve time in a correctional facility. They are also places where he or she will be required to return if and when paroled. Compared to all state prisoners, SUNY students are less likely to come from New York City: 36 percent of the students come from the city, compared to 41 percent of all persons in state prisons during this period. They are more likely than all state prisoners to come from the Upstate, Hudson Valley, and Long Island regions of the state.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Reentry Trends in the United States,” at <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/reentry.pdf>.

FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS BY COUNTY OF COMMITMENT, COMPARED TO ALL STATE PRISONERS, 2010-11 TO 2019-20.



Note: Number of students = 1,439; average annual number of incarcerated persons = 35,491.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Students in SUNY college-in-prison programs are thus diverse in race, ethnicity, age, and community. They also differ from all state prisoners. They are younger, more likely to be white, and less likely to be Hispanic; and more of them come from upstate regions. They also vary in the conditions of their incarceration, especially in the length of their sentences. Substantial numbers of students serve short as well as long sentences, differences, as seen below, that are associated with student outcomes.

Program content and size

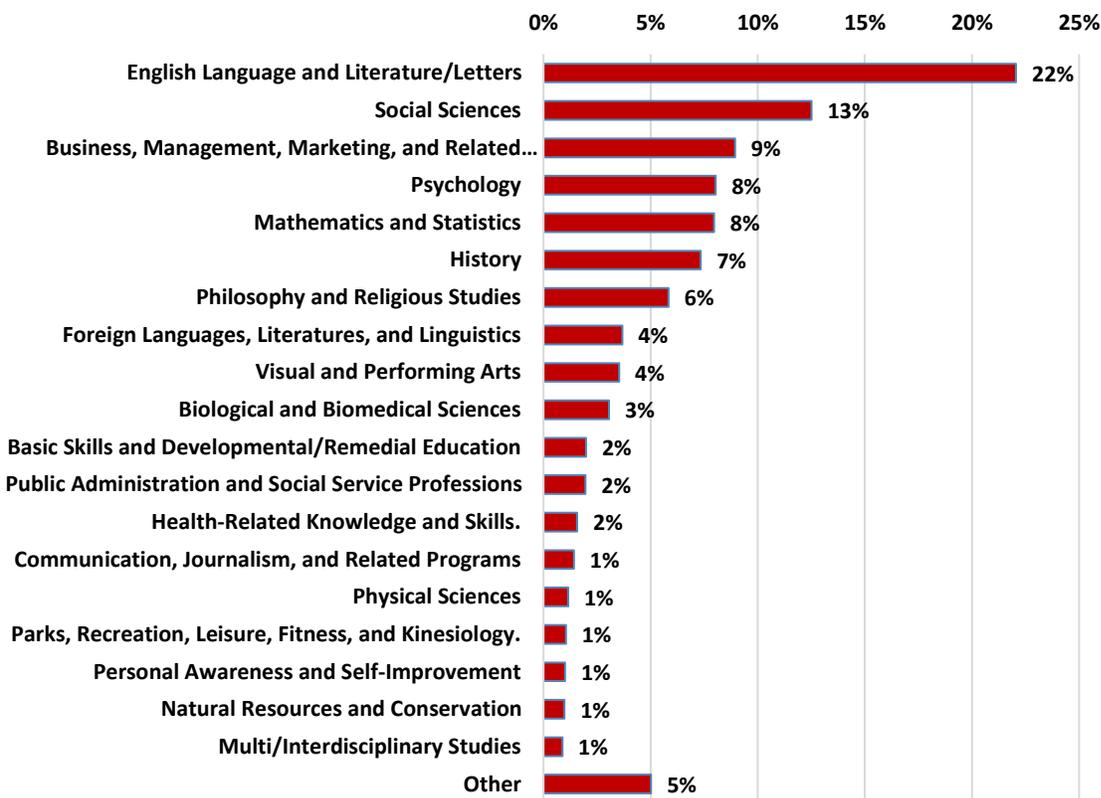
All SUNY college-in-prison programs are credit-bearing and transferable; both criteria are DOCCS requirements. DOCCS does not require programs to offer degrees, but all of SUNY’s in-prison programs do so. Programs involving SUNY’s community colleges offer associate degrees, while SUNY Potsdam has recently started a baccalaureate program. SUNY’s community college programs are, for the most part, open-admission. Entrance is formally available to all students who meet basic requirements, such as high-school equivalency, though most of the colleges require entrance exams for placement purposes.

All but one of the degree programs offered by SUNY colleges are within the Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) category of Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies, and Humanities.⁴⁶ The program at North Country Community College is the exception; it offers a business degree in Entrepreneurship Management. These degree programs are reflected in the types of classes incarcerated SUNY students took between the 2010-11 and 2019-20 academic years. Figure 7 shows the distribution of courses taken by the students according to CIP subject area codes. English language and literature (22 percent) is the largest category of courses, followed by social sciences (13 percent). Other liberal arts and science areas include mathematics and statistics, psychology, and history (8 percent), philosophy and religious studies (6 percent),

⁴⁶ For a description of the CIP taxonomy, see <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cipcode/default.aspx?v=55>.

and foreign languages and literature (4 percent). The only non-liberal arts category found among the top ten subject areas is “Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services” at 9 percent.

FIGURE 7. PERCENTAGE OF CLASSES TAKEN BY INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS, BY CLASSIFICATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS CODES, 2011-2020.



Note: Number of classes = 13,489.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Some subjects are notable for their comparative absence. Students took few science classes, for example. Biology classes comprised 3 percent of the total, and only 1 percent of the classes were in the physical sciences. Computer and information science courses made up less than 1 percent of the classes (not shown; included in the “Other” category). Also, only 2 percent of the classes were classified in the “Basic Skills and Developmental/Remedial Education” category. Although, as noted below, most incarcerated students performed well in their classes, our interviews with college administrators and faculty as well as other studies suggest that some students, as well as potential students, would benefit from preparatory courses in writing and math before taking regular classes.⁴⁷

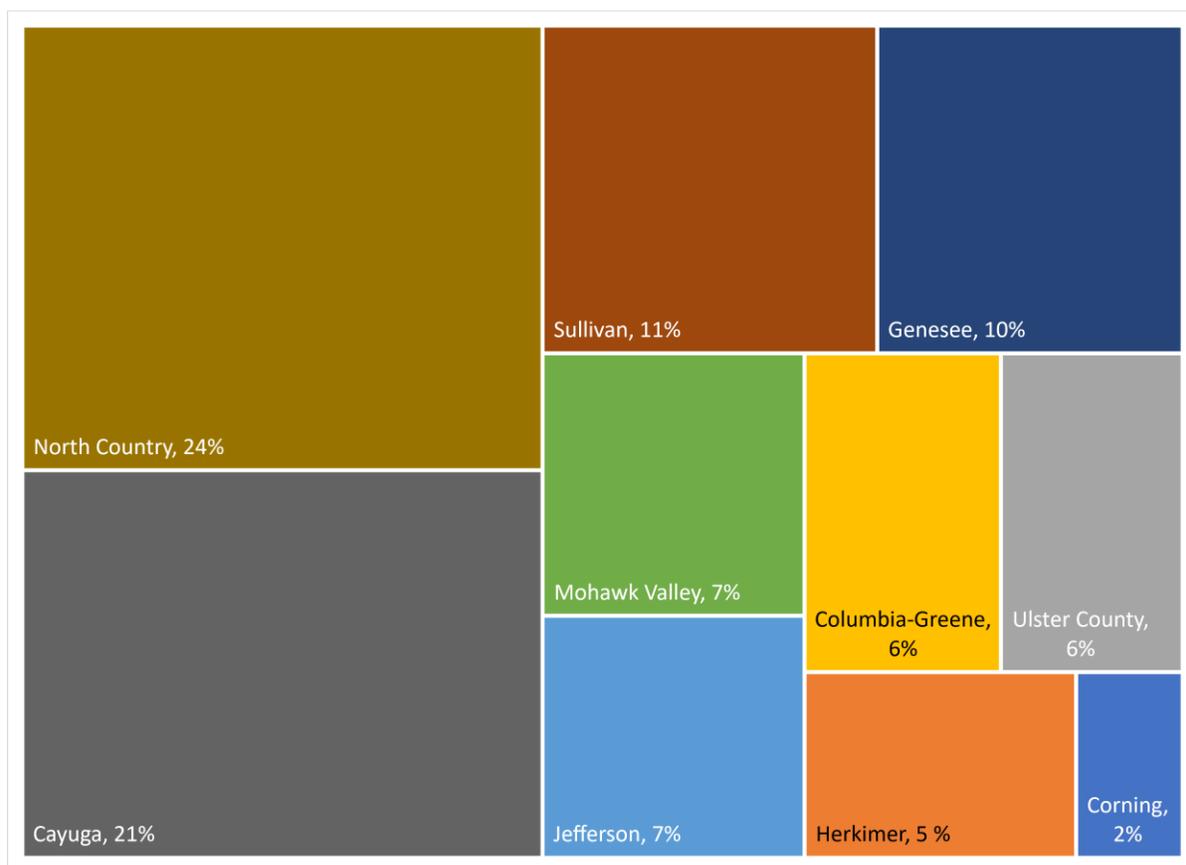
Courses with a specific occupational focus also are less common. Some students enrolled in classes in categories with such emphases, such as health professions, parks and recreation, law enforcement, firefighting, mechanic and repair technologies, precision production, and culinary services. But the total number of classes students took in all of these classifications—most of which are combined in the “Other” category in Figure 7—was less than 1 percent of all classes. DOCCS offers its own vocational education

⁴⁷ Tanya Erzen, Mary R. Gould, and Jody Lewen, *Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison* (St. Louis, MO: Alliance for Higher Education in Prison & San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2019): 24.

classes, so access to employment-focused education and training programs is broader than these data suggest, though gaps may still exist that community colleges could fill.

SUNY college-in-prison programs differ greatly in size. Figure 8 shows the distribution of student enrollments by SUNY institution from 2010-11 to 2019-20. The four largest programs—North Country, Cayuga, Sullivan, and Genesee—enrolled about two out of three of the total number of students during this period. Five of the programs are affiliated with two consortia—Cayuga and Corning with CPEP, and Sullivan, Columbia-Greene, and Ulster with Hudson Link—and account for 46 percent of incarcerated SUNY students. The remaining 54 percent of the students were enrolled in independently operated programs.

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS BY INSTITUTION; ALL STUDENTS, 2010-11 THROUGH 2019-20.



Note: Number of students = 1,439.

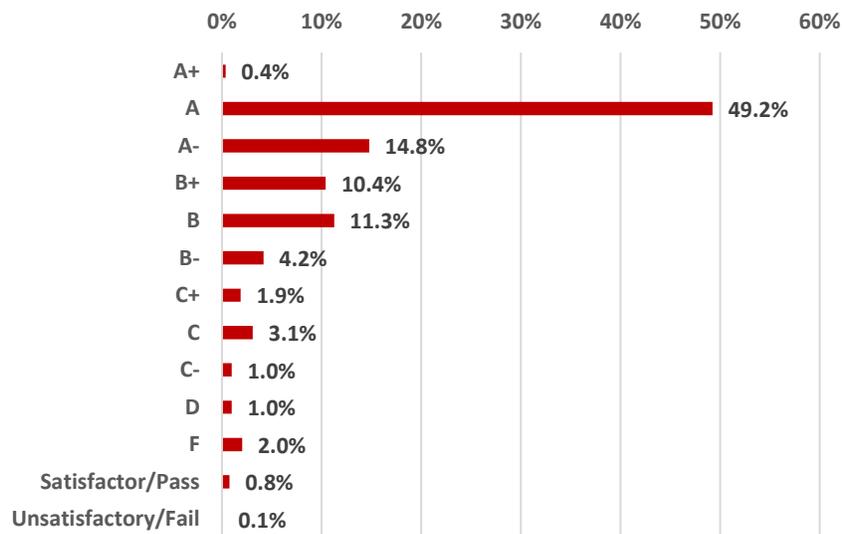
Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

College-in-prison programs also differ in the types of prisons where they operate. Five SUNY institutions—Ulster, Sullivan, Cayuga, Corning, and Genesee community colleges—serve maximum security state prisons, while five others—North Country, Mohawk Valley, Jefferson, Columbia-Greene, and Herkimer—operate in medium security facilities. The number of students are split in half as well: 50 percent of incarcerated SUNY students enrolled between 2010-11 and 2019-20 were in programs hosted by maximum security prisons, and the other half were in programs hosted by medium security facilities.

Success, persistence, and completion in college-in-prison programs

Incarcerated students get good grades. As Figure 9 illustrates, 57 percent of the classes taken by the students were A- or above; in another 23 percent of the classes, students earned grades between B- and B+. Only 3 percent of the grades were Ds or Fs.⁴⁸ Students completed and passed their classes 87 percent of the time. In our interviews, faculty praised incarcerated students. As one professor said, the men and women in prison “really think education is liberation . . . They come, they’ve done all the reading, they want to talk about it, they’re concerned about their grades. They see this as something of a lifeline to them.” In discussions with administrators and instructors, we heard no evidence of grade inflation in prison-based programs.

FIGURE 9. GRADES RECEIVED BY INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS, 2010-11 TO 2019-20.



Note: Number of grades = 11,303. Of 13,489 classes taken by students, 2,186 (16.2 percent) were not graded: 7.4 percent were withdrawals; 3.2 percent were incompletes; 0.8 percent were not gradable classes; 0.2 percent were audits; and in 4.6 percent of the classes, no grade was reported.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

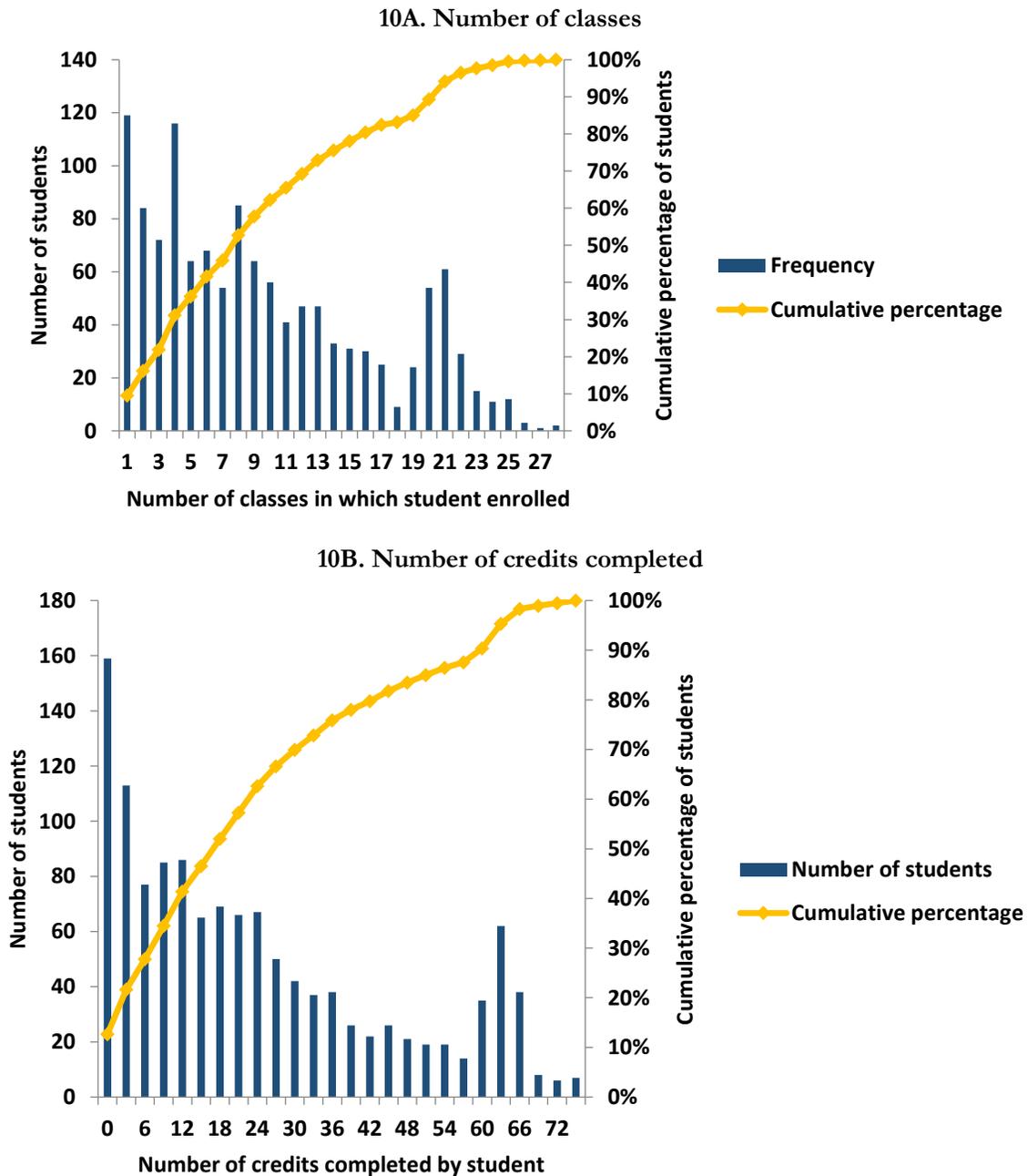
Although incarcerated college students performed well in classes, persistence and retention rates in college-in-prison programs reveal a mixed picture. Figure 10A presents one way of estimating persistence: the number of SUNY classes each student enrolled in, anytime between 2011-2012 and 2019-2020 (the few students who took classes in the 2010-11 academic year were dropped from the analysis because they may have taken classes in previous years). Figure 10B shows a similar analysis though for credit hours rather than classes.

Both figures show that a large proportion of students stopped taking classes early on and earned few or no credits. About 22 percent of the students enrolled in no more than three classes or received no more than three credits. After that initial mode, the number of students, by their total classes and credits, shows a general though uneven decline until reaching nadirs just shy of 20 classes and 60 credits, roughly the numbers required for associate degrees. After that point, an increased number of students pushed on and appeared to complete their degrees, suggested by the second mode in each distribution at 20-22 classes and 60-66 credits.

⁴⁸ Silbert and Mukamal, *Striving for Success*, also found that incarcerated students earned strong grades in their analyses of programs at six community colleges in California.

Still, most students did not get that far. Only 15 percent of the students enrolled in 20 or more classes, and only 12 percent earned 60 credits or more.

FIGURE 10. DISTRIBUTIONS OF THE NUMBER OF CLASSES AND CREDIT HOURS ENROLLED IN BY INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS, 2011-12 TO 2019-20.



Note: Number of students = 1,257.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Because enrollment in SUNY college-in-prison programs has grown so much in recent years, the quick drops in the numbers of classes and credits in Figure 10 may in part have been a consequence of the limited time

some students had been enrolled before the spring of 2020, the last semester in our analysis. Perhaps many of the students enrolled in 2019-20 will eventually complete more credits and earn degrees.

One way to address that possibility is to analyze student cohorts. Figure 11 takes that approach. The first calendar year of enrollment for each student in a SUNY college-in-prison program was identified between 2013 and 2019.⁴⁹ Then, the number of students still enrolled in or who had graduated from an associate degree program was tracked in subsequent years.⁵⁰ Students did not need to be continuously enrolled; a few skipped a year and were counted when they reappeared. Nor did students need to be enrolled in the same college program they started with; transfers to other college-in-prison programs were included in counts.

This analysis does not tell us why a student left a program without graduating. Students may leave college coursework if and when they are released from prison, lose eligibility due to behavioral sanctions, their financial assistance ends, they transfer to facilities that do not have college programs, they voluntarily withdraw, or they leave for any number of other reasons. More detailed data are needed to identify why program withdrawals occur.

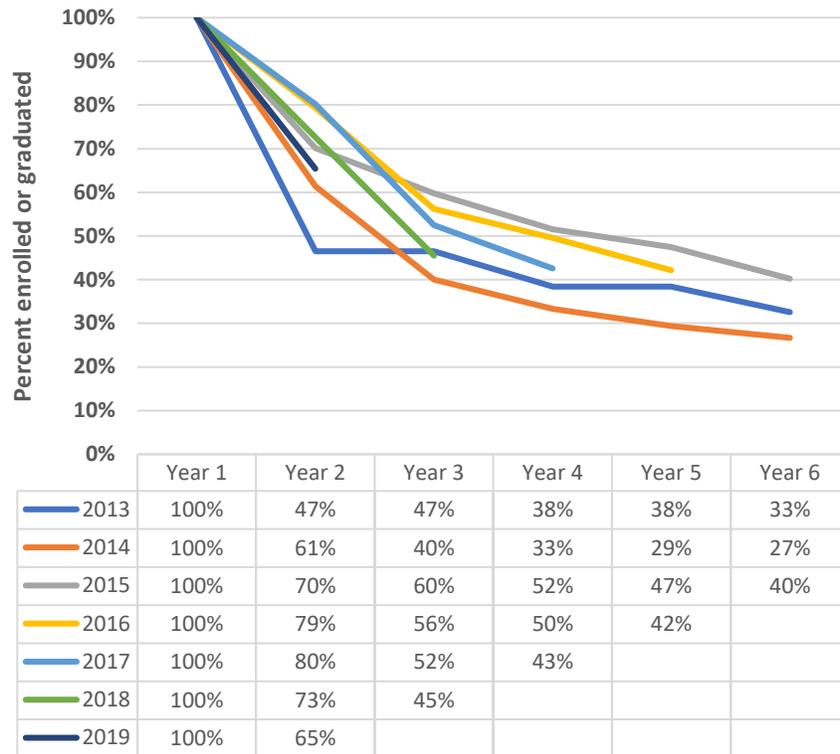
Figure 11 shows, for each student cohort, the percentage of students who were enrolled or who had graduated six years from their initial enrollment—in other words, the share of students who had not left the program before completing it. For example, of the 86 students in the 2013 cohort, 47 percent continued to take classes or completed the program in 2014 (Year 2). In the same cohort's third year—for this cohort, that would be 2015—no additional decline in participation or completion occurred. In the sixth year, 33 percent of this cohort of students had either graduated or were still enrolled. Recent cohorts showed fewer years as they bumped against the end of our data series.

All cohorts showed rapid enrollment drops in the second and third years, though cohort experiences varied. Student retention was greater for cohorts starting in 2015. Second year retention for students in the 2015 cohort was 70 percent, compared to only 47 percent for the 2013 cohort and 61 percent for students starting their college work in 2014. Retention rates for the 2015 cohort continued to be higher in subsequent years, and even higher for the 2016, 2017, and 2018 cohorts. Only the 2019 cohort showed a lower rate, perhaps dampened by the pandemic in the spring term of 2020.

⁴⁹ Calendar rather than academic years were selected for the analysis in order to include summer sessions. Students who first appeared in 2012 or earlier were excluded from the analysis because some may have been enrolled in prior years.

⁵⁰ Eight percent of the credentials earned by incarcerated SUNY students were undergraduate certificates. These are not included in the analyses.

FIGURE 11. STUDENT RETENTION IN COLLEGE-IN-PRISON PROGRAMS, BY CALENDAR YEAR, 2013-2019 COHORTS.



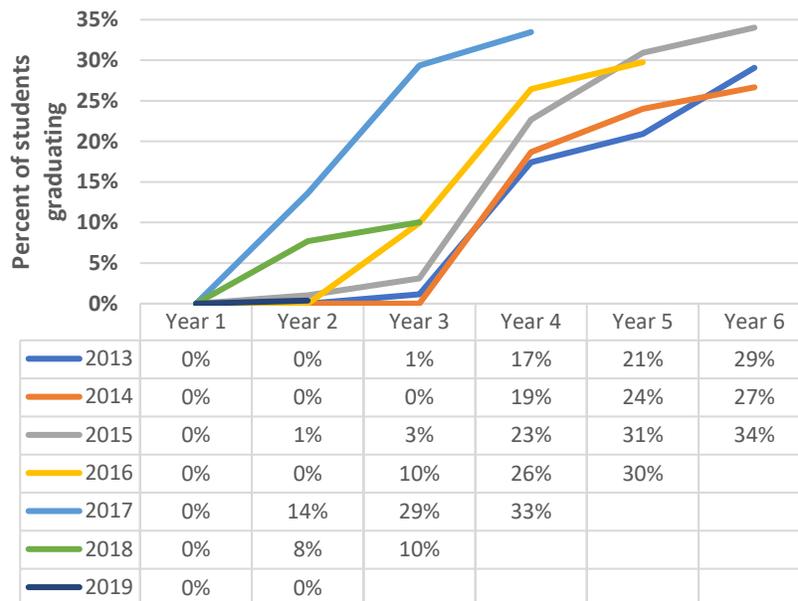
Note: Each line represents the percentage of students in an annual cohort who continue enrollment in or who graduate from a SUNY college-in-prison program. Seven cohorts are included, 2013-2019. The horizontal axis indicates years from cohort’s initial enrollment, where Year 1 is the first year of enrollment. All years are calendar years. Enrollment and graduation data from 2013 through spring of 2020. Total number of students = 1,183.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Figure 12 shows the cumulative percentage of students who graduated from SUNY college-in-prison programs with associate degrees.⁵¹ Just as in Figure 11, rates are shown separately for each annual cohort of students, beginning with the 2013 cohort and continuing through to students starting programs in 2019. For most of the cohorts, Year 4 showed the largest increases in graduations; cumulative completion rates ranged between 17 percent for the 2013 cohort to 33 percent for the 2017 cohort. Graduation rates grew in subsequent years though more gradually until they reached around one-third of the students.

⁵¹ A small number of students graduated with an undergraduate certificate, but they are not included in these counts.

FIGURE 12. CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED STUDENTS WHO EARN ASSOCIATE DEGREES, BY YEAR FROM FIRST ENROLLMENT, 2013-2019 COHORTS.



Note. Each line displays the cumulative percentage of an annual cohort of students who complete associate degrees. The horizontal axis indicates the number of years from their initial enrollment. Year 1 is their first year of enrollment in a college-in-prison program. Graduation data from 2013 through spring of 2020. All years are calendar years. Number of students = 1,183; number of graduates = 232.

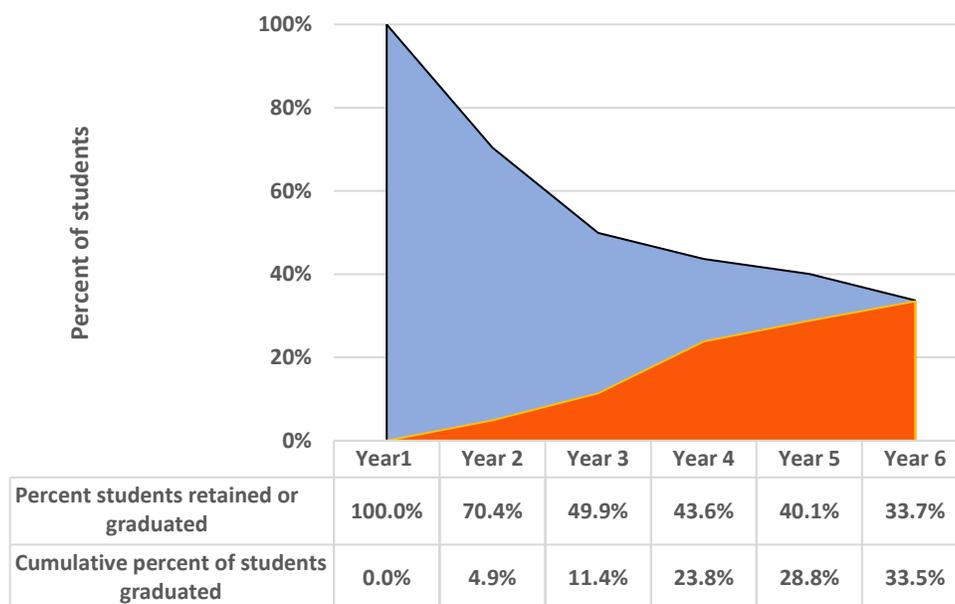
Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Again, the more recent cohorts fared better. A significant number of graduations occurred in Years 2 and 3 for the 2016, 2017, and 2018 cohorts, in contrast to the negligible numbers of completions during those years for the earlier cohorts. The 2017 cohort showed an especially rapid increase in graduation, reaching one-third of its students by Year 4, and the 2016 cohort was not far behind. The 2019 cohort was an exception to this trend—again, perhaps as a result of the pandemic and the disruption of classes in the spring of 2020.

Figure 13 combines data from all seven cohorts to trace the overall patterns of retention and graduation over time. The total area under the top line shows the percentage of students who were still enrolled or who had graduated each year from their first year of enrollment. In Year 2, for example, 70.4 percent of the students who had initially enrolled in SUNY college-in-prison programs (Year 1) were still enrolled or had graduated. That percentage dropped to 49.9 percent in the third year and 33.7 percent in the sixth year.

The lower red region indicates the cumulative percentage of students who completed their programs. It began at zero percent in Year 1, increased to 4.9 percent in the following year, and then doubled in each of the following years. By the sixth year, 33.5 percent of the students had graduated, just slightly less than the line showing retained and graduated students. The difference between the two lines—the blue region—represents the percentage of students who were enrolled yet not graduated. The near-elimination of the blue region by the sixth year means that almost no students were still enrolled and had not graduated.

FIGURE 13. RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES OF SUNY COLLEGE-IN-PRISON STUDENTS, BY YEAR FROM INITIAL ENROLLMENT, 2013-2019 STUDENT COHORTS COMBINED.



Note. The horizontal axis indicates the number of years from students' initial enrollment. Retention and graduation data complete from 2013 through spring of 2020. All years are calendar years. Number of students = 1,183.

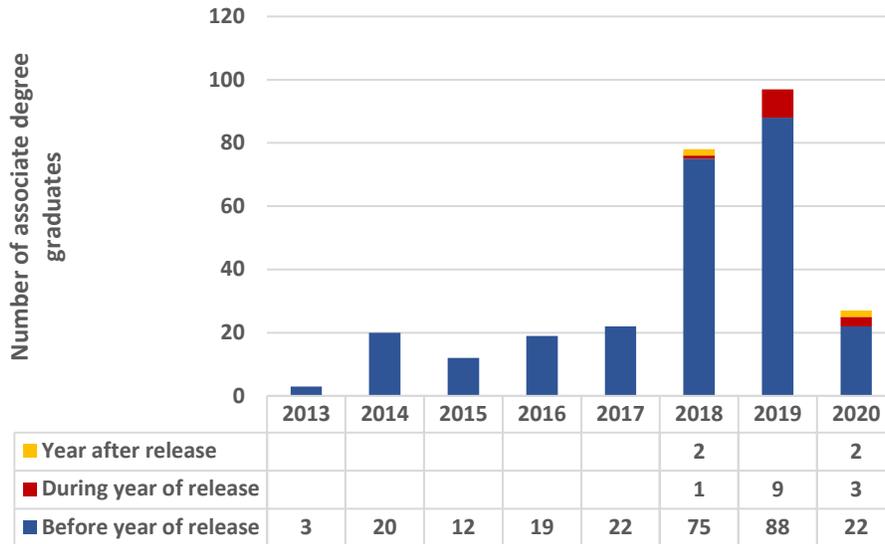
Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Although one of three SUNY college-in-prison students graduated, it took six years to reach that level. Only 11 percent of incarcerated students completed degree programs within three years, much lower than the 28 percent of first-time, full-time non-incarcerated students who graduated from two-year public colleges within that period.⁵² We should note that the graduations referenced in Figures 11 to 13 include *any* college completion through the spring of 2020, including graduations earned from non-SUNY institutions. Drawing on data from the National Student Clearinghouse, some incarcerated SUNY students completed their associate degrees from Medaille, Mercy, Bard, and Canisius colleges—all New York institutions that have or once had college-in-prison programs—though 97 percent of the completions were at SUNY institutions.

Also, nearly all of the graduations occurred while students were still in prison. Figure 14 shows the number of associate degree graduations by calendar year and relative to each student's period of incarceration. As expected, most of the graduations occurred in 2018 and afterwards, two years after the large increase in enrollment. (The large drop in graduations in 2020 reflect incomplete data—spring graduations are included but summer or fall data are not—and the effects of the pandemic.) Figure 14 also suggests that very few completions happen after students are released. Only four out of 278 graduations occurred after the year students left prison. Some students may have completed their programs in the *same* year of their reentry but *after* their release, yet only 13 students finished their programs at that time.

⁵² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, DC: NCES, 2020): Table 326.20, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_326.20.asp.

FIGURE 14. TIMING OF GRADUATIONS: ASSOCIATE DEGREE GRADUATIONS BY CALENDAR YEAR AND BY YEAR RELATIVE TO STUDENT’S YEAR OF FINAL RELEASE FROM INCARCERATION, ALL COHORTS, 2010-2020.



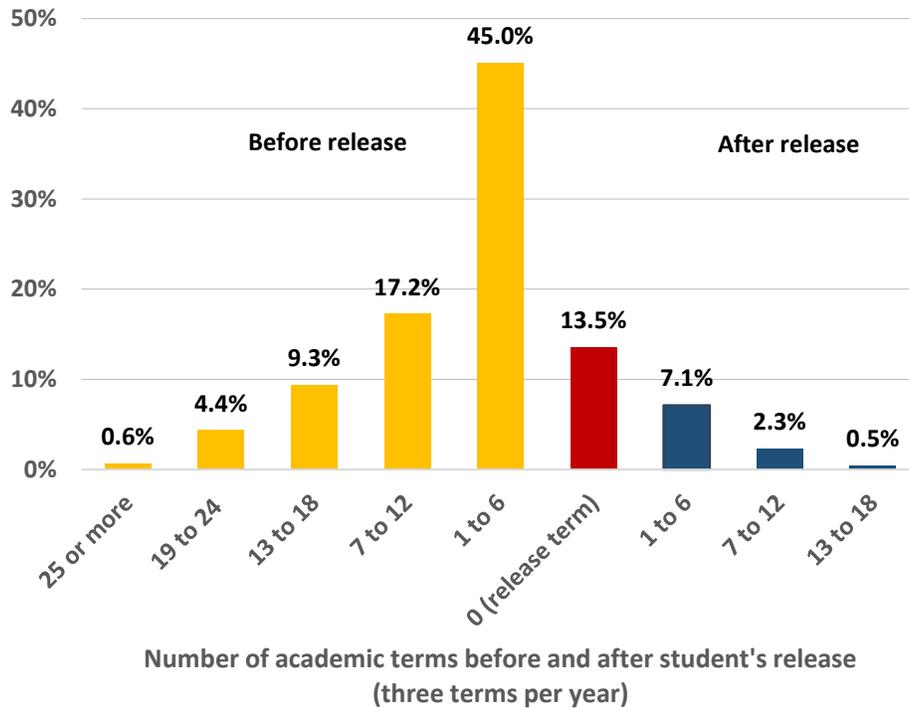
Note: Total number of graduations = 278. Unlike Figure 12, which only includes student cohorts 2013-19, graduations in this figure come from all cohorts, thereby including a larger number.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Post-release graduations are rare in large part because post-release enrollment is uncommon. Only about one out of ten incarcerated SUNY students continued their college education after their release from prison. Figure 15 demonstrates this point by indicating the last term in which an incarcerated or formerly incarcerated SUNY student is enrolled. (There are three terms per year.) These data only include the 644 students who left prison anytime on or before the spring of 2021; of the 1,439 students in our sample, 795 had not been released as of November 2020. We extended the data series for SUNY enrollment to pick up as many post-release enrollees as possible. This analysis, however, does not include formerly incarcerated SUNY students who enrolled in non-SUNY institutions, though those are probably a small number.

Figure 15 shows that most students, nearly six out of ten, ended their enrollment within SUNY either at the time of their release (13.5 percent) or sometime in the prior two years (45.0 percent). Almost three out ten students (31.5 percent) stopped attending SUNY classes earlier, in some cases several years before their release from prison. About one out of seven students ended their enrollment within SUNY more than four years before their release (i.e., 13 terms or more). Again, we see a diversity of educational conditions among incarcerated SUNY students. Many incarcerated students end their enrollment with their release from prison, while a smaller yet significant number stop taking classes several years before they leave.

FIGURE 15. THE LAST TERM IN WHICH INCARCERATED AND FORMERLY INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS ARE ENROLLED IN A SUNY INSTITUTION, ONLY RELEASED STUDENTS INCLUDED, 2010-2021.



Note: Total number of students = 644. Only students released by the spring of 2021 are included; 795 incarcerated students were not included, as they were not released. Only SUNY enrollees were tracked.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Barriers to college completion do not appear to be linked to students’ performance in individual classes; the great majority of incarcerated SUNY students passed their classes and earned good grades. Much of the problem instead stems from the large drop in student participation during the first three years of enrollment, when about half the students leave the program. Both the size of the drop and the rate of completion have improved among recent cohorts, perhaps in part because more students enrolled full-time and took on larger course loads. Yet it still takes considerable time for incarcerated students to finish their degrees, and completion for the vast majority of students only occurs while they are still in prison. Post-release college enrollment and graduation are uncommon. One implication of these findings is that student outcomes may be affected by the circumstances of their incarceration, effects which in turn can shape the relationship between graduation rates and the personal characteristics of students.

Variation in outcomes

Incarcerated SUNY students are diverse. They differ in age, race, ethnicity, community, and countless other individual characteristics. The students also live under different conditions. Some reside in maximum security prisons and serve very long sentences, while others are in medium security facilities and expect to be released after a few years. Some are moved frequently between different prisons, while others may remain at one facility for many years. Such differences can affect access to college-in-prison programs as well as opportunities to complete degrees.

To see how students vary in their completion rates, we restrict the analyses to students who began their studies between 2013 and 2017. As the data on graduations are complete through the spring of 2020, students who start college in 2017 would have nearly four years to finish their programs. Students who began programs in 2012 or before are not included because some earlier programs paused temporarily, and some of the earlier students may have begun college before our data series. Analyses in this section thus show the graduation rates of the 621 students who first enrolled in a SUNY program anytime in the five-year period between 2013 and 2017.

Figure 16 compares the graduation rates of these students across different carceral conditions. The top graphic reveals that SUNY students in programs operating in maximum security prisons had higher completion rates than students residing in medium security facilities. In the SUNY programs that offered classes in maximum security prisons, 40.5 percent of students in the 2013-2017 cohorts graduated, while among the SUNY programs operating in medium security facilities, only 22.3 percent of students earned degrees by the spring of 2020.

People assigned to maximum security prisons typically serve longer sentences than those in medium security facilities, so it is not surprising that SUNY students with longer prison sentences also had higher graduation rates (middle graphic, Figure 16). Students serving aggregate minimum sentences greater than 20 years were five times more likely to graduate than students serving sentences of five years or less. In light of the many years incarcerated most students need to complete degree programs, students with short sentences may find it difficult to graduate before their release—and as we have seen, few finish degrees after leaving prison.

Transfers between correctional facilities may also affect completions. Transfers of prisoners are common in state prison systems; DOCCS reported more than 160,000 transfers in 2018, a year when the average number of incarcerated persons was about 46,000.⁵³ Transfers occur for many reasons. People may be moved from maximum to medium security facilities as they approach release; they may be transferred to a facility better prepared to meet their medical or mental health needs; they may be removed from a facility to avoid conflict with other prisoners; or they may relocate to an institution closer to their family.⁵⁴

DOCCS has a policy of placing holds on transfers of college students during semesters, but interviews with college administrators suggest that transfers still occur, though they are more common between semesters. DOCCS administrators have told us that if transfers of college students do occur, they try to move people to facilities with college programs.⁵⁵ Yet even these transfers can inhibit completion, as many New York prisons are served by private institutions, which may not accept all credits earned at SUNY colleges.

We have no direct data on facility transfers from DOCCS. We can, however, establish a minimal estimate by determining whether a SUNY student was released from, or was at a later time in custody at, a prison served by a SUNY or nonprofit college program, or whether they ended up residing at a facility served by no higher education institution. Among the SUNY students in the 2013-2017 starting cohorts, 77 percent were released from or in custody (as of November 2020, the final month of our data) at a prison served by a college-in-prison program. The remaining 23 percent were at a final facility that offered no college program.⁵⁶

These differences correlate with graduation rates. The degree completion rate was 36.4 percent for students whose final facility was served by a SUNY or other higher education institution (bottom graphic, Figure 16).

⁵³ DOCCS College Providers Meeting, Albany, NY, March 8, 2019.

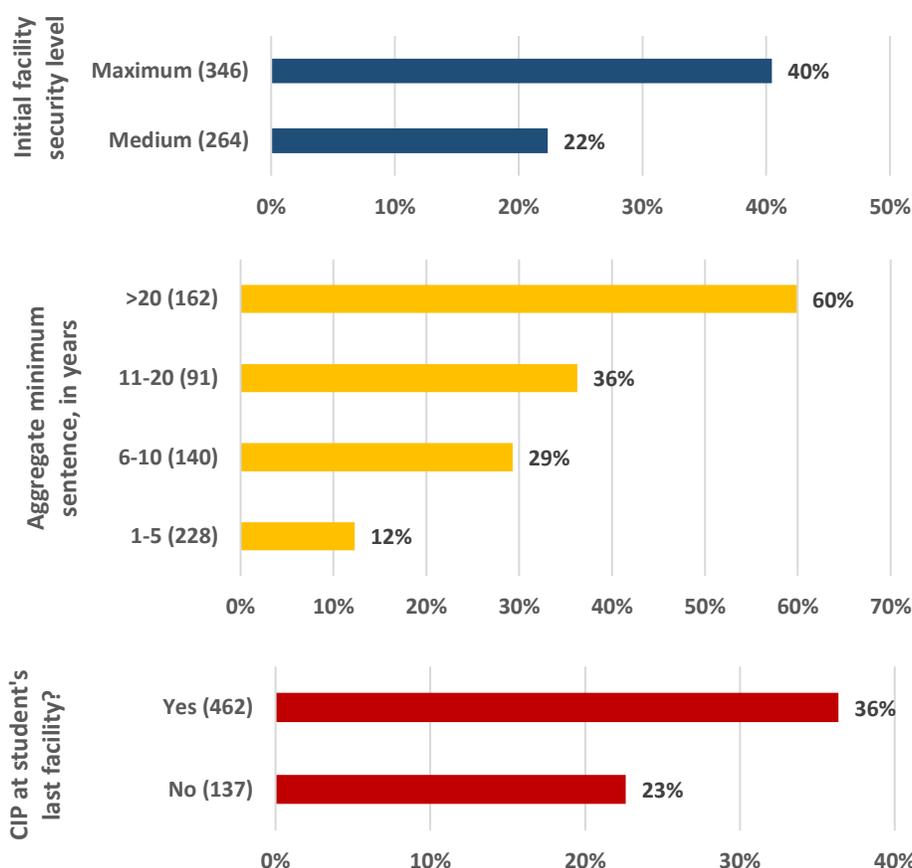
⁵⁴ For information on DOCCS transfer procedures, see Directive #4017, “Inmate Transfer Procedure,” at <https://doocs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2020/11/4017.pdf>. Legislation enacted in 2021 requires the department to place incarcerated parents in facilities near their minor children, when such placement is “suitable and appropriate.” New York State Correction Law, s. 72-C.

⁵⁵ Meeting with DOCCS administrators, November 3, 2021.

⁵⁶ Total number of students in this analysis is 599.

For students whose final facility had no college program, their completion rate was only 22.6 percent. Even this minimal estimate of student transfers from SUNY programs suggests that transfers, in combination with the absence of programs in some facilities, may block educational success.

FIGURE 16. GRADUATION RATES OF STUDENTS BY CARCERAL CONDITIONS: A) SECURITY LEVEL OF PRISON WHERE SUNY PROGRAM OPERATES; B) AGGREGATE MINIMUM SENTENCE; C) COLLEGE-IN-PRISON STATUS AT FACILITY WHERE STUDENT IS RELEASED OR RESIDING WHILE STILL IN CUSTODY IN NOVEMBER 2020; 2013-2017 STUDENT COHORTS.



Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

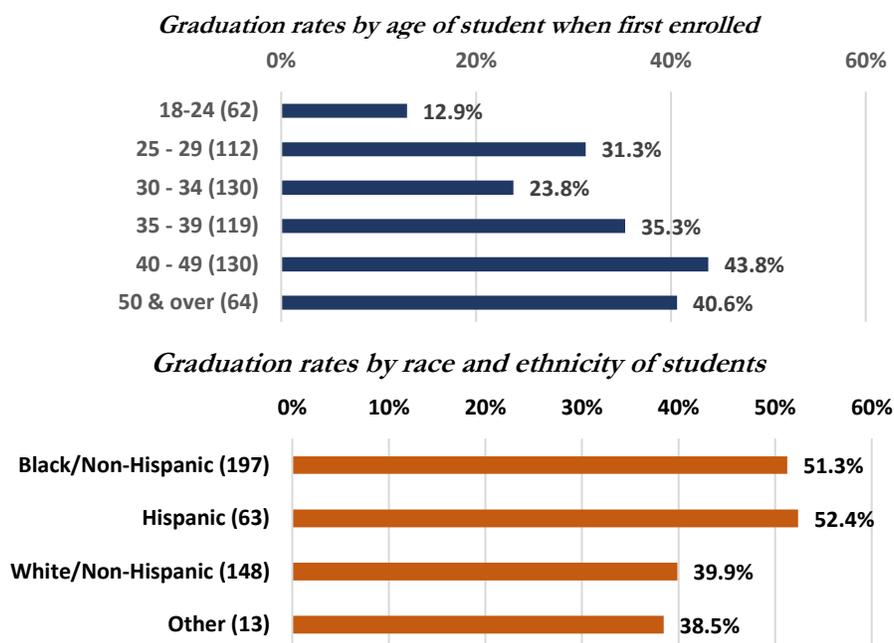
Note: Data on graduations include 2013 through spring term 2020; only those students who were first enrolled in 2013 through 2017 are included in figures. Number of cases in each category in parentheses.

Graduation rates of incarcerated students also vary by age, race, and ethnicity. Figure 17 (top graphic) reveals that older students—based on the age when they began SUNY classes—were more likely than younger students to graduate with associate degrees. Thus, although SUNY students are younger than all persons in state custody (Figure 4), students who finished their programs skewed older.

Students who graduated also differed in race and ethnicity from all incarcerated students (bottom graphic, Figure 17): Black and Hispanic SUNY students showed higher graduation rates than white and other students, perhaps in part because Black and Hispanic state prisoners were more likely to serve long sentences.

Thirty-nine percent of Black students, and 34 percent of Hispanic students, were serving aggregate minimum sentences of 15 years or more, compared to only 18 percent of non-Hispanic white students.⁵⁷

FIGURE 17. GRADUATION RATES BY AGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY OF STUDENTS, 2013-2017 STUDENT COHORTS.



Note. Data on graduations include 2013 through spring term 2020, but only those students who were first enrolled in 2013 through 2017 are included in figures below. Total N = 621. Number of cases in each category in parentheses.

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Implications

Our findings point to strengths in the education services offered by SUNY institutions to incarcerated students. SUNY colleges enroll a fast-growing number of incarcerated students, who are taking increasing course loads and earning good grades. The programs offer a core of general education courses, particularly in the humanities, social sciences, and mathematics as well as an increasing number in business administration. And about one-third of the students who began college-in-prison programs complete associate degrees.

At the same time, the analyses suggest areas for improvement, including challenges regarding student access, college curricula, student retention and completion, and program resilience. Some of the problems may be addressed by expected reforms already in the works, such as the reinstatement of Pell Grants for incarcerated students. But others may require changes in services, capacities, and policies—or more data and analysis to understand the scope and character of the problems and possible causes.

Access. Compared to non-incarcerated SUNY students, incarcerated students are much more diverse in age, race, and ethnicity.⁵⁸ When compared to all incarcerated people, however, students enrolled in SUNY college-

⁵⁷ N=1,439. Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

⁵⁸ In fall 2016, 57.3 percent of all SUNY students were non-Hispanic white, 10.8 percent were Black, and 12.3 percent were Hispanic/Latino. State University of New York, “Data Brief: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” *Annual Series* (June

in-prison programs are more likely to be young, white, and non-Hispanic. Many serve comparatively short sentences and begin their college programs soon after entering prison. Another sizeable group of students serve long sentences, however, and have enrolled many years after first entering prison. Finally, the total number of students relative to the number of state prisoners with high school equivalency remains small, even after the growth in enrollment after 2016.

These findings indicate that access to college-in-prison programs remains a challenge, while financial assistance can help. Large increases in enrollment after 2016 occurred among SUNY programs receiving funding through the Second Chance Pell program and the Manhattan District Attorney's Criminal Justice Investment Initiative. Yet three of 17 maximum security prisons in New York still do not offer higher education, nor do seven of 27 medium security facilities.⁵⁹ The forthcoming reinstatement of Pell grants to incarcerated students should create opportunities to provide programs at additional facilities. Pell grants for incarcerated students will be available to accredited higher education institutions approved by their state departments of corrections as offering programs in the best interests of the students.

Pell reinstatement may also expand enrollments where programs already operate. Unlike Second Chance Pell and CJII, Pell Grants do not limit assistance to students based on their expected release. Legislation reinstating Pell for incarcerated people also simplified FAFSA application forms and documentation, changes that also should improve access, as many incarcerated people struggle to complete FAFSA applications.⁶⁰

Yet other barriers remain. Some facilities do not have space to expand enrollments. Facilities may differ in the opportunities they give to colleges to speak to prospective students. Incarcerated people also face challenges in getting high school transcripts and other documents required in college applications. Still others may not apply or enroll due to a lack of proficiency in English, perhaps accounting for some of the gap in Hispanic participation, or a weak preparation in math and writing.⁶¹ Disciplinary sanctions, competing program schedules, and other factors may limit access. More research is needed, both qualitative and quantitative, to understand how the pool of applicants can be expanded and the application process can be eased.

A striking finding regarding incarcerated college students is their diversity. Although many students are young and serve relatively short sentences, a smaller yet significant group of students are older and have been, or expect to be, in prison for a very long time. Such differences may be associated with distinct challenges in access—in part because they may seek different college programs. People serving long sentences, for example, may want to matriculate to baccalaureate programs after they complete associate degrees, a prospect that leads to a discussion of program offerings and curriculum.

Curriculum. Classes taken by incarcerated SUNY students have overwhelmingly been in the humanities, social sciences, psychology, and mathematics, along with courses in business and entrepreneurship. A curriculum grounded in the humanities, social sciences, and mathematics almost certainly meets many students' needs. The courses encompass many of the general education requirements students must fulfill to earn a bachelor's degree at a SUNY institution.⁶² By offering incarcerated students a rigorous liberal arts

2017): 9, <https://www.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/diversity/reports/Diversity-Data-Brief-June2017.pdf>.

⁵⁹ DOCCS has five minimum security facilities and one drug treatment center. Along with other factors, the brief residencies of individuals in these facilities make college programming difficult to implement.

⁶⁰ Tahamont, et al., "Ineligible Anyway," Wachendorfer and Budke, "Lessons from Second Chance Pell."

⁶¹ In 2016, DOCCS adopted a language-access policy aimed at ensuring that people with limited English proficiency have meaningful access to its services, programs, and benefits in accordance with the nondiscrimination provisions of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. See New York State Corrections and Community Supervision, "Directive #4490: Cultural and Language Access Services," at <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2020/11/4490.pdf>.

⁶² State University of New York, "General Education Requirements," at <https://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/genedreq/>.

curriculum and skilled instructors, programs can open students to new ideas, foster critical thinking, raise questions about personal identity and relations to others, and nurture intellectual confidence and metacognition, i.e., a capacity to reflect on how one thinks and learns.⁶³ In a focus group conducted by our team, a formerly incarcerated student said that education gave him “a sense of self-fulfillment,” that it “saved my life” and allowed him “to see the way things are.” Interviews with other former students also suggested that humanities, arts, and social sciences classes not only forced them to think critically about fundamental questions but also honed their writing and speaking skills as they worked to express their own ideas.

Our data, however, show that incarcerated SUNY students have not accessed a complete liberal arts and science curriculum, as very few took science classes. Reasons for this gap are unclear. One factor may be the difficulty of offering laboratory work in prisons; another may be a lack of faculty interest. Many college-in-prison faculty came from humanities and social science departments, often out of concerns for social justice. Faculty in the sciences may be less aware and concerned about such issues. Whatever the reasons, the absence of science and technology classes not only restricts opportunities for future education pathways and careers, it may also prevent some students from finding what truly engages them intellectually.⁶⁴

Another gap in programs offered by SUNY institutions is suggested by the small number of developmental and preparatory classes taken by students. Other studies of college-in-prison programs have found that many incarcerated students benefit from such classes at the beginning of their programs, especially courses that address deficits in writing, reading, and mathematics.⁶⁵ Although we found that incarcerated SUNY students earned good grades in most of the classes they took, it is possible that the early departures of many students from programs stemmed in part from a lack of college preparation, and that more incarcerated people would consider enrolling in college if preparatory classes were widely available.

SUNY institutions also offer few opportunities for baccalaureate degrees. SUNY Potsdam recently secured eligibility to establish such a program with Second Chance Pell funding, but the program is just starting and is available at only one facility. To be sure, such programs are not easy to implement in prisons. They require a greater diversity of courses and faculty, better access to research materials, more advisement, and greater funding.⁶⁶ But as our analyses show, many students serving long sentences complete their associate degrees, after which they may spend years in prison without an education program. As New York prisoners are serving increasingly lengthy terms, a growing number may want and be able to complete a bachelor’s degree.⁶⁷

Finally, few of the classes taken by incarcerated students are designed to prepare them for specific occupations or careers. That may not be a major deficiency, as DOCCS personnel offer 27 vocational programs among its facilities. But whether these meet all the vocational needs of people who expect to return to an increasingly wide variety of communities and labor markets (see below) is an open question. Such

⁶³ Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison* (New York: The New Press, 2016): 142. For examples of liberal arts teaching in prison and its value, see Daniel Karpowitz, *College in Prison: Reading in an Age of Mass Incarceration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

⁶⁴ The National Science Foundation has recognized the importance of the science curriculum in prisons by funding STEM Opportunities in Prison Settings (STEM-OPS), a team of organizations conducting a variety of activities aimed at expanding STEM education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. See Education Development Center, “STEM Opportunities in Prison Settings,” <https://www.edc.org/stem-opportunities-prison-settings>.

⁶⁵ Lois M. Davis and Michelle C. Tolbert, “Evaluation of North Carolina’s Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Program” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019): 28; Criminal Justice Investment Initiative, “College-in-Prison Reentry Program: Mid-Evaluation Report” (New York: CUNY Institute for State & Local Governance, December 2020): 7-8, 33-36.

⁶⁶ For an example of a public university offering a baccalaureate program in prison, see California State University, Los Angeles’ Prison Graduation Initiative, <https://www.calstatela.edu/engagement/prison-graduation-initiative>.

⁶⁷ Correctional Association of New York, “People Incarcerated in New York: Population Profile and Recent Trends,” *Issue Brief* (New York: CANY, 2019): 4.

programs can be effective. In their meta-analysis, Bozick, et al. estimated that both vocational and academic programs increased the odds of employment and reduced recidivism.⁶⁸ SUNY's community colleges as well as its Educational Opportunity Centers and ATTAIN Labs could fill additional vocational and occupational gaps, though implementing the programs could require flexibility from facilities, as many programs require specialized equipment, including access to technology.

Continuity and completion. Incarcerated SUNY students earn high grades, and over one-third graduate with associate degrees. Yet many students require six years before graduating, and about half of the students earn no more than 18 credits. Students are most likely to leave programs in the first three years of enrollment; after that, participation stabilizes, and for those who remain enrolled, an increasing proportion graduate. Graduation rates are higher for students serving long sentences in maximum security facilities; for older, Black, and Hispanic students; and for those who have not been transferred to prisons lacking college programs.

Graduation rates of incarcerated students are lower than those of non-incarcerated students in SUNY community colleges. First time, full-time student graduation rate for all SUNY community colleges is 29 percent in three years.⁶⁹ By the end of the third year after initial enrollment, the estimated graduation rate for incarcerated SUNY students is only 11 percent, and it takes five years for incarcerated students to attain a 29 percent completion rate (Figure 13). Few incarcerated students attend college full-time, a fact that surely contributes to students' slow and incomplete progression, yet other factors may also inhibit completion. Why, for example, do so many students leave programs before earning less than a third of the credits needed for graduation? Would some students benefit from preparatory classes? Are available programs and classes not interesting to many students? Are courses required for graduation not available? Are exits attributable to transfers, behavioral sanctions, or funding problems?

Do credits not transfer when students move between college-in-prison programs, as many students do? This is not a problem when transfers are between SUNY institutions, but slippage is possible when private institutions are involved. To improve credit transfer within the CJII initiative, SUNY has developed a methodology for mapping courses across institutions, based on categories used by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.⁷⁰ A similar solution could be employed by other institutions offering programs for incarcerated people. Finally, completions might increase if students received some credit for accomplishments outside regular academic programs, such as DOCCS's postsecondary vocational programs.

What is clear is that college completion rates are particularly low among students serving shorter sentences, mostly in medium security prisons. To better serve these students, it is essential to strengthen pathways between in-prison college programs and college campuses in the communities to which they return. SUNY campuses are well placed to serve these students. In the last three decades, there has been an enormous shift in the communities from which incarcerated people come and return. In 1990, the "counties of commitment" of three out of four persons leaving prison were in New York City. By 2020, only about one out of three came from the city (Figure 18). Growth was greatest in upstate regions, where many SUNY campuses are located. SUNY can also offer returning citizens free access to Educational Opportunity Centers—which provide job training, skill development, and career advising—as well as Advanced Technology Training and Information Networking (ATTAIN) labs that offer extensive opportunities to learn and earn credentials in basic as well as more advanced computer skills.⁷¹

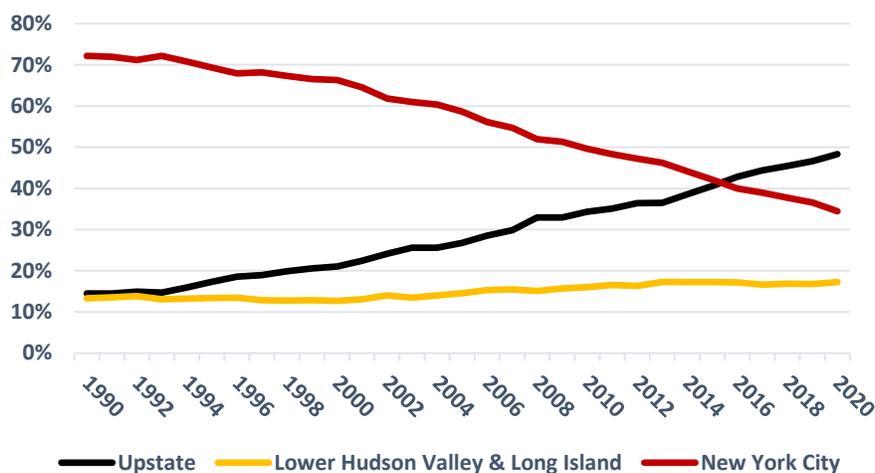
⁶⁸ "Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes": 404, 406.

⁶⁹ Based on the Fall 2017 cohort. Data from the Office of Institutional Research & Data Analytics, State University of New York, System Administration.

⁷⁰ State University of New York, "College-in-Prison Transfer and Articulation Work," <https://www.suny.edu/impact/education/heji/transfer-and-articulation/>.

⁷¹ SUNY University Center for Academic and Workforce Development, at <http://www.ucawd.suny.edu/index.php>.

FIGURE 18. PERCENTAGE OF RELEASED DOCCS PRISONERS BY REGIONS OF THEIR COUNTIES OF COMMITMENT, 1990-2020.



Source: DOCCS Release File, November 2020.

Note: Counties of commitment are the places where individuals were committed to state prison and where they are expected to return if and when they are placed into community supervision.

It is difficult for newly released prisoners to continue their education, however, and our data indicate that few do.⁷² Most face immediate challenges in securing housing, jobs, transportation, and identification, let alone stress in adjusting to their families and communities. Many struggle with substance abuse disorder or other mental health problems, while few of them enroll in appropriate treatment programs.⁷³ Some have parole conditions that make classes difficult to attend.

Applying to and enrolling in college also can be hard. Formerly incarcerated students may struggle to secure transcripts, complete FAFSA forms, provide proof of residency, and pay for tuition, fees, and expenses. If they matriculate to campuses, formerly incarcerated students must contend with an unfamiliar environment and unfamiliar technologies, and they do so with fellow students of very different ages, races, and backgrounds.⁷⁴ SUNY made progress in welcoming formerly incarcerated people by eliminating the “box” in admission materials asking applicants about their criminal backgrounds.⁷⁵ However, we know little about the experiences of formerly incarcerated people after they arrive on campus.

Creating pathways that give formerly incarcerated students opportunities to continue their studies and complete programs will require coordination with other agencies, organizations, and services. Fortunately, an increasing number of college-in-prison programs recognize the need for post-release educational access and are attempting to bridge the divide. Examples include CUNY’s Prison-to-College Pipeline, Illinois’ Education Justice Project, the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP), and the Vera Institute’s Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education. SUNY’s New York partners, particularly

⁷² Ruth Delaney, Fred Patrick, and Alex Boldin, “Unlocking Potential: Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education” (New York: Vera Institute, May 2019): 38-39.

⁷³ Cheryl Lero Jonson and Francis T. Cullen, “Prisoner Reentry Programs,” *Crime and Justice*, 44, no. 1 (September 2015): 527-529.

⁷⁴ Mary Ellen Mastrorilli, “With Pell Grants Rising: A Review of the Contemporary Empirical Literature on Prison Postsecondary Education,” *Journal of Correctional Education* 67, no. 2 (September 2016): 56.

⁷⁵ State University of New York, “Admission of Persons with Prior Felony Convictions or Disciplinary Dismissals,” at <https://www.suny.edu/sunypp/docs/847.pdf> and https://www.suny.edu/sunypp/documents.cfm?doc_id=846.

Hudson Link and the Rochester Education Justice Initiative, also have experience in facilitating the reentry of formerly incarcerated college students.

Such programs, however, are not easy to implement, as a recent report on the Pathways project in North Carolina concludes.⁷⁶ The challenges are likely to be even greater at a statewide scale. In the short run, providing incarcerated SUNY students information, assistance, and contacts regarding educational and training opportunities before their release could be a valuable first step. It could also be helpful to research the experiences of formerly incarcerated people on SUNY campuses to understand how their transitions could be more welcoming and successful.

Resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic affected nearly all higher education programs and institutions in the U.S., though the effects may have been especially severe among college-in-prison programs. Volunteers were shut out of all New York State prisons in March 2020, forcing programs to shift overnight from in-person teaching to various ad hoc ways of maintaining contact with students—ranging from mail or hand-delivered correspondence to phone and email—if contact continued at all. By early 2021, several programs developed video connections between students and faculty, though the quality of the connections varied greatly. The cessation of in-person instruction may have contributed to the enrollment decline in 2020, a drop that may persist even now, after instructors were allowed to reenter the facilities in the fall of 2021.

Many DOCCS personnel have tried to help college-in-prison faculty and administrators continue academic programs, but the experience reveals the need to build redundancy in the relationships between the higher education institutions and their students in state facilities. New pandemics, lockdowns, weather-related access problems, and other events may disrupt in-person programming in the future. By now, colleges and universities have extensive experience in effective distance-learning—which can never be a substitute for in-person instruction but can augment and backstop it—and it makes sense to apply this expertise in building a consistent capacity across facilities to support quality distance-education. If such a capacity is developed, it could also serve other purposes, such as offering a wider range of classes to incarcerated students via SUNY Online and other sources of well-tested distance instruction.⁷⁷

Toward a higher education system for the justice-involved

Decades of research have demonstrated the value of college-in-prison in terms of recidivism and employment after students leave state facilities, as nearly all of them do, typically as young people in their mid-30s.⁷⁸ For many incarcerated students, college has even more profound effects, opening them up to new ideas, building intellectual skills and confidence, suggesting careers they had never before contemplated, and rethinking their relationships with families, friends, communities, and the polity.

Although benefits accrue even from brief student experiences with college programs, research on higher education for both incarcerated and non-incarcerated people underlines the increasing importance of completing college. The challenge, however, is to build a system of higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people that offers them real opportunities to complete college programs that meet their needs, just as non-incarcerated students can now do. The task has become urgent with the forthcoming reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students. Access to college financial assistance will increase for low-income people in prison, based on the same individual eligibility criteria that apply to non-

⁷⁶ Lois M. Davis and Michelle C. Tolbert, “Evaluation of North Carolina’s Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Program,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2957.html.

⁷⁷ State University of New York, “SUNY Online,” at <https://www.sunyonline.edu/>.

⁷⁸ In 2019, the median age of individuals leaving New York State prisons was 36, based on the authors’ analyses of DOCCS release data.

incarcerated students. And as this report demonstrates, access to public financial assistance can greatly increase college enrollment among incarcerated people.

But access to what? To college programs with the same rigor, coverage, and coherence as those offered to students on the main campus of the college or university? To programs that offer realistic pathways for learning and credentials that open opportunities for real careers and other potential benefits of college attainment? Or just to a short exposure to college while in prison, perhaps a few classes in a scattershot of subjects that diminishes the stock of Pell funding a student can draw on? Or a distance-learning program that establishes no strong relationships between the student and instructors as well as his or her peers, and that fails to sustain the student's attention? Or even a strong, exciting in-prison program that, under the circumstances in which it operates, can rarely be completed before the students leave the facility—after which they have few if any opportunities to build on their achievements and complete degrees?

SUNY's mission is to provide “educational services of the highest quality, with the broadest possible access” to all New Yorkers. To perform that task for incarcerated people is difficult in part because much of the educational process is not controlled by individual programs. How each program's students fare educationally often depends on whether their students enroll and succeed in additional in-prison programs and eventually on college campuses across the state. It is therefore not sufficient to understand and improve what happens to students within individual programs. Just as students move across facilities, college-in-prison programs, and back to communities, so should higher education institutions in New York work together to build an inclusive educational system for both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.

The system would not be centrally directed, but it can be more transparent and coordinated than the current collection of independent programs and institutions. At minimum, it is essential to see what happens to students—to extend data collection and analysis to *all* college-in-prison programs in the state, and to postsecondary institutions that can and should serve formerly incarcerated students.

An initial task could be the development of agreement on the purpose of such a system—the principles and goals of higher education for justice-involved people. SUNY and CUNY have drafted lists of such principles in recent years, as have the Prison University Project and the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison at the national level.⁷⁹ They emphasize the centrality of academic equity, of providing incarcerated students with academic programs that are as rigorous, complete, and supportive as those offered to non-incarcerated students, and that eliminate racial, ethnic, gender, and economic barriers to student engagement and success. Other criteria might focus on how a data system operates and is used, such as protections of student privacy and applications that focus on system improvement rather than rewards or sanctions for individual programs.

Such principles and guidelines could shape the development of a statewide system of measurement and analysis, one that would provide practical, timely guidance for increasing educational opportunity and excellence, and that would add substantially to the research infrastructure for higher education in prison.⁸⁰ In the meantime, SUNY intends to continue reporting on how SUNY's incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students are faring and where improvements are needed—and then work with SUNY institutions and other stakeholders to move toward a more open, supportive, and successful higher education system for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.

⁷⁹ Erzen, Gould, and Lewen, *Equity and Excellence*: 3.

⁸⁰ Meagan Wilson, et al., “Facilitating a Higher Education in Prison Research Infrastructure,” *Working Paper* (Ithaca S+R, June 2021), <https://higheredinprisonresearch.org/paper/working/>.