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Beyond Pell Restoration: Addressing Persistent Funding Challenges in Prison Higher Education Toward Racial and Economic Justice

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This research considers Pell grant restoration for incarcerated people for the field of higher education in prison. Using the original data, we outline the limits of Pell funding in the prison context by surfacing persistent funding challenges that the Pell grant alone cannot address and may exacerbate. By providing the necessary investments to support higher education in prison, Pell restoration could be an effective lever for advancing racial and economic justice. Using a lens of racial and socioeconomic justice, we identify gaps in prison program costs and argue that the long-term effects of Pell reinstatement will depend on whether the expansion is accompanied by investments in a range of institutional infrastructures and resources. Concluding are implications and recommendations to adequately and responsibly support the growth and infrastructure of higher education in prison programs.

Keywords: Pell grant, Pell restoration, higher education, higher education in prison, racial justice

As a part of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (Pub. L. No. 103–322), congress rescinded Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated people. Prior to the 1994, those in prison who met the low-income requirements of eligibility could receive the Pell grant to pay for higher education. While research assessing the impact of Pell grant eligibility on the overall availability of higher education in prison is limited, its conclusions are clear: removing the Pell grant from prisons drastically reduced the number of institutions providing college coursework during incarceration and the number of students enrolled in postsecondary education behind bars (Tewksbury et al., 2000; Tewksbury & Taylor, 1996).

Consistent and adequate funding to support college coursework and programming offered inside prisons has been a persistent challenge for the field (Gehring, 1997; Herron et al., 1973; Silva, 1994).¹ Prior to the ban on Pell grants, no more than 10% of the total incarcerated population were ever provided with postsecondary education (United States General Accounting Office, 1994). This lack of widespread educational opportunity during incarceration was due to a combination of factors, including unstable and inconsistent funding. The tremendous difficulty in building reliable partnerships between prisons and institutions of higher education also contributed to the dearth of opportunity (Gehring, 1997). The widespread loss of prison higher education after the ban on Pell grants is a compelling indication that the infrastructure necessary to sustain quality postsecondary education was lacking, including institutional buy-in among state and federal corrections and among colleges and universities themselves.

Almost 30 years after the ban on Pell grants in prison, the field is faced with a similar set of challenges related to both stability and funding, with significant implications for racial and socioeconomic justice. In 2020, in an end-of-year bipartisan spending bill, congress lifted the ban on Pell grant distribution to people in prison (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021). The legislation amends the 1965 Higher Education Act to restore Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated people and does so without sentencing or conviction restrictions—a longstanding concern among students and practitioners of higher education in prison. Yet, while access to the Pell grant will certainly expand institutional capacity to subsidize tuition costs, restoration of Pell will not single-handedly solve the myriad funding challenges currently faced by higher education in prison. Moreover, Pell restoration will bring new challenges for this vulnerable and rapidly changing field.

Communities of color and low-income communities are disproportionately targeted for incarceration in the United States, and these same communities benefit the most from Pell grants on nonprison campuses (de Brey et al., 2019). Thus, an examination of the impact of restoring Pell in prison is also a critical means to understanding access and opportunity more broadly for Black students, students of

¹ Higher education in prison encompasses a wide range of programming provided by or in close partnership with colleges and universities to individuals incarcerated in jails, prisons, and detention facilities. In general, higher education in prison includes courses and programming provided to students who have earned a high school diploma, general equivalency diploma (GED), or equivalent secondary credential or are located in states with ability to benefit (Castro & Gould, 2018). College preparation courses, credit and noncredit-bearing courses, and supplemental or enrichment instruction are all part of what constitutes higher education in prison. Instruction in prison can be provided via multiple modes, such as in-person on-site, asynchronous or synchronous online, broadcast, correspondence, or a combination of approaches. Content and programs of study are diverse, much like they are at colleges and universities across the United States, and all institution types are involved in the prison higher education space, with 2-year schools comprising over 50% (Royer et al., 2020).

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color, and students from low-income backgrounds. Accordingly, in this article, we consider the return to Pell with caution, by outlining the limits of Pell funding in the prison context. Using a lens of racial and socioeconomic justice, we identify gaps in prison program funding and argue that the long-term effects of Pell reinstatement will depend on whether the expansion is accompanied by investments in a range of institutional infrastructures and resources.

Prison Higher Education and the Pell Grant: The State of the Field

The Pell grant is designed to expand access to postsecondary education and economic opportunity, and it has been extraordinarily successful in facilitating this goal. In 2019, for instance, Pell grants provided funding to 42% of all undergraduate students in the United States. (Cahalan et al., 2021). Because it helps to offset decades of socioeconomic divestment and race-based discrimination, need-based student aid like the Pell grant increases college application and enrollment rates among communities of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. Indeed, Black students comprised the highest percentage of Pell recipients in the 2015–2016 academic year (de Brey et al., 2019). More than half of students receiving Pell come from families making less than \$20,000, and three out of four recipients of Pell reported no net family assets (Protopsaltis & Parrott, 2017).

By all accounts, Pell's role in facilitating access to higher education for students in prison has been similarly decisive. Researchers and practitioners argued that by the 1970s, expanded postsecondary educational opportunity in prisons was almost entirely driven by access to Pell grants (Gehring, 1997; Newman et al., 1993; Page, 2004; Wright, 2001; Yates & Lakes, 2010). As Wright (2001) writes, "the [Pell] program was probably the single most important influence on the growth of prison higher education throughout the 1970's and 1980's" (p. 14). The positive influence of Pell on the numbers of in-prison higher education programs and enrollment was likely driven by students' eligibility to receive funds, as the overwhelming majority were positioned to meet requisite income criteria during incarceration.

Yet, the availability of Pell grants in prison also presented problems. For some programs, the Pell grant was used as a slush-fund of sorts, allowing institutions to collect Pell dollars while providing substandard instruction and curriculum with little to no state or federal oversight. This phenomenon is described in detail by Gehring (1997), who writes:

Many colleges and universities earned reputations for taking Pell grants and other funds without improving their program. This author worked at a community college that viewed its prison education program as a "cash cow." Prison libraries were insufficient to support postsecondary studies, but few programs invested in library materials. On a per student basis, resources for prison programs were usually less than those for on campus programs. Inmate [sic] students often had to do without computer labs, adequate advisement, cultural events, and so forth. Some colleges assigned exorbitant charges for text deliveries. The general formula for BEOGs/Pell grants was that the federal government provided approximately 50% of costs for fees and books—but several postsecondary providers were caught doubling tuition for inmate [sic] students in relation to those "on campus," to collect 100%. (p. 50)

Congressional debates in the 1990s about postsecondary education for incarcerated people alluded to these abuses of federal student

aid as but one reason to fully ban Pell grants during incarceration. Additionally, these debates in congress became juxtaposed with the 1970s tough-on-crime era policies spearheaded by the Nixon Administration—a movement that would ultimately expand the U.S. carceral system at extraordinary rates by disproportionately targeting communities of color for incarceration (Davis, 2003; Dilts, 2014). On the way to full removal of Pell eligibility during incarceration, congress passed restrictions to accessing federal student aid based on length and type of sentence. As an example, just 2 years prior to the full removal, congress denied those with life sentences without parole and those with death sentences the ability to access federal student aid (Pub. L. No. 102–325).

In essence, congressional leaders framed debates over Pell grant eligibility in prison as centering around deservingness, unearned privileges, and the potential for abuse (Yates, 2012). Particularly, compelling was the false narrative that pitted incarcerated and non-incarcerated college students against one another; the idea was that incarcerated Pell recipients reduced the overall award amount of nonincarcerated recipients (Page, 2004). A commissioned report by the United States General Accounting Office (1994) unequivocally refuted this claim, showing instead that incarcerated people accessing Pell grants did not have an impact on awards to non-incarcerated students. Despite the evidence demonstrating the positive impact and value of Pell grants during incarceration; however (e.g., O'Neil, 1990; Parker, 1990; Taylor, 1992), lawmakers ultimately rescinded Pell grant eligibility to those in prison.

Opportunities and Challenges of Pell Restoration

The history of Pell grants in funding higher education in prison is popularly understood as a story of tragedy: When Pell grants were available to incarcerated people, higher education in prison thrived. When they were pulled from prisons, programs disappeared, with some programs being described as closing virtually overnight (SpearIt, 2016). Research conducted by Tewksbury et al. (2000) found that prison higher education dramatically shrank under the ban in terms of both the numbers of college-in-prison programs and the scope of offerings. Just 1 year after the ban, enrollment in higher education among incarcerated people decreased 44%, with at least nine states (out of 43 providing data) reporting the complete removal of postsecondary education across their facilities (Tewksbury & Taylor, 1996). Thus, at the same time, U.S. incarceration rates were exploding through targeted enforcement and disenfranchisement of Black, Latinx, native, and low-income communities, the federal government eliminated one of the most successful policy mechanisms to facilitate access to postsecondary education in prison.

Congress fully restored access to Pell grants to incarcerated students in December, 2020. The Act takes effect no later than July 2023, and at that time an estimated 463,000 incarcerated individuals will become eligible for federal student aid (Martinez-Hill & Delaney, 2021). This restoration of Pell in prison was the culmination of intense activism, often led by people who are directly impacted by the criminal legal system. The United States Department of Education (2015) launched an Experimental Sites Initiative to test the effectiveness of Pell grant eligibility for a select number of colleges and incarcerated students. The initiative provided a limited number of people in prison the opportunity to access Pell grants, circumventing the prohibition of Pell use for incarcerated people. In 2020,

67 additional institutions of higher education were added to the experiment, totaling 130 colleges and universities eligible to facilitate Pell grant awards for currently incarcerated students. Since the start of the experiment, approximately 17,000 incarcerated people have enrolled in higher education using the Pell grant across 28 states (Delaney & Montagnet, 2020).²

The initiative did not completely remove barriers to access, however. Instead, it included eligibility guidance based on type of conviction and length of sentence—factors that have historically disadvantaged communities of color. The call for participation in the experiment noted that:

The experiment will require that participating institutions: . . . Only disburse Pell Grant funding to otherwise eligible students who will eventually be eligible for release from the correctional facility, while giving priority to those who are likely to be released within five years of enrollment in the educational program; [and] only enroll students in postsecondary education and training programs that prepare them for high-demand occupations from which they are not legally barred from entering due to restrictions on formerly incarcerated individuals obtaining any necessary licenses or certifications for those occupations. (United States Department of Education, 2015)

It is not yet clear whether these or other recommendations will persist when the full reinstatement of Pell takes effect. Even federal guidelines might not override local, state-level, or facility-specific preferences (i.e., prioritizing students with shorter sentences) or other de facto requirements (i.e., people living in specific units of custody levels being ineligible for educational programming). We can expect, however, that the abrupt expansion of eligibility for Pell will attract many new colleges and universities to the field of higher education in prison.

Equity, Higher Education, and Mass Incarceration

The return of Pell is likely to have disproportionate impacts for communities of color, given their overrepresentation in the incarcerated population. The sheer number of people behind bars in the United States is stunning: over 2.2 million people, with upwards of 8 million under some sort of state supervision, such as house arrest, ankle monitoring, drug testing, probation, or parole (Gottschalk, 2015). Yet, not everyone shoulders the burden of incarceration equally. Black communities are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is 5.1 times the imprisonment of Whites; in five states (Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Vermont, and Wisconsin), the disparity is more than 10 to 1 (Nellis, 2016). The accumulated disadvantage of concentrated poverty, systemic racism, and strategic social disinvestment has and continues to make communities of color and low-socioeconomic communities especially vulnerable to mechanisms of state punishment.

But while prisons are frequently cited as the starkest example, they are not the only American institution where racial stratification is deeply embedded. Higher education in the United States is also racially segregated and unequal. For White, Black, and Latinx students between the ages of 18 and 24, college enrollment breaks down in the following ways: 41% White students, 37% Black students, and 36% Latinx students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). These data do not provide a full picture of the inequality, however. White students are also overrepresented at selective institutions where there are more resources available

designed to help them graduate. In contrast, enrollment for Latinx and Black students is concentrated at less-selective schools, including nondegree-granting programs and 2-year schools, across the nation where the likelihood of graduating are much lower (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2018). A resounding 30% of Black students and 40% of Latinx students attend the nation's poorest funded colleges.

Additionally, nearly one in three Pell recipients attend colleges that spend the least in dollars per full-time enrolled student (Hillman, 2020). A recent report demonstrated a strong relationship between the use of Pell grants and college selectivity, suggesting that 63% of Pell grant recipients attended colleges or universities with average spending per full-time equivalent of \$14,945, while just 5% of Pell grant recipients attended colleges or universities with average spending of \$52,111 (Cahalan et al., 2021). This is important, because how colleges and universities spend money on their respective populations has implications for racial and socioeconomic equity. Indeed, there is a strong empirical link between college spending and student outcomes (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2018).

In particular, targeted spending in the areas of instruction and academic support services, like tutoring, financial aid advising, and health care improve the chances that students will be successful. For example, when colleges spend more money on “teaching, advising, and outreach, they tend to improve key measures of student success like graduation rates and time-to-degree” (Hillman, 2020, p. 2). These findings hold true across a range of institutional types (Hall, 2019). In fact, the link is the strongest at open-access and other less-selective colleges, where the majority of low-income and minority students are currently enrolled. These schools are likewise those where the majority of incarcerated students are enrolled (Royer et al., 2020).

In the longer term, the supports that colleges and universities provide to students are critical to their success, and these effects are magnified for student populations who have historically been excluded from attending higher education. Spending in the areas of instruction and academic support may involve hiring more faculty and staff, reducing their workload, reducing class sizes, and increasing faculty-to-student ratios. Investments in these areas are associated with higher graduation rates, higher postgraduation earnings, and lower student loan defaults (Hillman, 2020).

Undoubtedly, Pell restoration will increase access to postsecondary education during incarceration, and this is a good thing. However, in the following sections, we explore how the existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities endemic to American incarceration might exacerbate these concurrent inequalities in access to higher education. Specifically, we highlight three distinct and pressing challenges for the field of higher education in prison in light of the restoration of Pell.

First, student support services that assist in retention, persistence, and time-to-degree are scarce in the field, in part because it requires substantial effort and resources to adequately transfer such services to settings inside prisons and jails. The restoration of Pell does not, in-and-of-itself, ensure that incarcerated students will have access to such supports. In a penal context where communities of color and low-income communities are disproportionately represented, college spending in these areas is likely to be especially crucial to advancing racial and socioeconomic justice.

² The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult for new college-in-prison programs in the second cohort to begin and for more established programs to continue on-site, face-to-face programming. Consequently, current enrollment and completion numbers for the experiment are imprecise.

Likewise, there are well-documented difficulties with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application and award processes for incarcerated people (Royer et al., 2021). Recent research finds that large shares of incarcerated people are currently ineligible to receive the Pell grant (Tahamont et al., 2022) because of barriers imposed by systemic racism and concentrated poverty, such as previous student loan default and incarcerated students' inability to access tax information and other required records. These barriers are not addressed via Pell restoration.

Finally, higher education in prison programs will play a key role in Pell restoration, but they do not work alone. Administrators, leaders, policy makers, and government officials must recognize what is at stake in Pell restoration and work to disrupt and repair the existing racial and economic inequalities throughout higher education, which are amplified in prisons and jails. For many, the move into prisons by colleges and universities signifies a step toward greater equity, but this is not an automatic outcome of recent reforms. Rather, greater attention needs to be paid to the broader trends in higher education and the persistent racial divide in access and outcomes, in order to avoid replicating those inequities inside prisons and jails. This will require additional strategic investment in the infrastructure of prison higher education.

Data and Methods

This study seeks to better articulate and understand the influence of Pell restoration on the field of higher education in prison through a lens that centers racial and socioeconomic justice. Accordingly, we employ a concurrent mixed-method research design (Creswell et al., 2003; Greene, 2007) using data integrated from two sources: results from the 2020 *Understanding the Landscape of Higher Education in Prison Survey* and interviews with members of the inaugural *Higher Education in Prison Cohort Program*. Specifically, the method used a concurrent triangulation design through targeted interviews with program directors conducted alongside the distribution of a national survey. The purpose of the concurrent triangulation design was to collect both qualitative and quantitative data that would help us define and articulate the relationship among Pell restoration, funding of higher education in prison, and persistent challenges faced by leaders in the field. Data integration occurred during the analysis phase, where equal priority was given to interview and survey data toward convergence.

Our research addresses the following research questions:

- What are the most pressing funding issues for college-in-prison programs?
- How and to what extent does the restoration of Pell address the funding challenges that college-in-prison programs face?
- What implications arise when we consider the opportunities and challenges of Pell through a racial and socioeconomic justice lens?

Survey data for this report are drawn from responses to the 2020 *Understanding the Landscape of Higher Education in Prison Survey* (Landscape Survey). This survey was designed as a confidential follow-up to the 2020 Annual Survey of Higher Education in Prison Programs (Annual Survey). The Annual Survey was launched by

the research team in March 2020 as part of an effort to create a comprehensive national database of all higher education in prison programs in the United States. An invitation to take the Annual Survey was sent to the primary contact email address of all known higher education in prison programs ($n = 289$) and also distributed as a link through a public listserv of higher education in prison stakeholders.

The Landscape Survey was launched as a confidential follow-up in December 2020 to collect more detailed information about responding programs and was therefore distributed to all respondents of the Annual Survey ($n = 131$). The follow-up survey consisted of 93 questions, gathering descriptive program information for the 2018–2019 academic year (July 1, 2018–June 30, 2019). Questions included where programming was offered and to whom, what certificate and degree pathways were offered, and what additional programming existed for incarcerated students. Also included within this survey were specific questions about the source of funding for programs and tuition for student enrollment, as well as the use of the FAFSA, Pell funds, and compensation for instructors. The Landscape Survey had a response rate of 45.8% (60 out of 131 programs).

Some programs did not answer all survey questions, accounting for the varying range of sample sizes reported throughout this analysis. Some programs had multiple representatives who participated in the survey. When that occurred, responses from different program affiliates were combined to create one entry for that program. At the conclusion of the project, all participants were entered into a drawing to receive one of five \$1,000 awards to their program for participation in the survey.

Responding programs were largely higher education in prison programs within a single college or university ($n = 46$, 76.7%) and provided in-person, on-site instruction at an average of 3.2 prisons ($SD = 5.5$). Six participating programs offered primarily remote instruction, with those programs working at an average of 26.3 facilities ($SD = 19.2$). Among the 60 participants, 27 offered credit-bearing certificates to students and 39 offered at least one degree pathway. To the best of our knowledge, these data represent the only source of broad-based information on the landscape of prison higher education programs in the country. More information about responding programs is included in Table 1.

In addition to collecting quantitative program data, we interviewed a subset of programs through the Higher Education in Prison Program Cohort. The cohort is a 2-year, colearning project that was launched by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison in 2019. In the summer of 2019, higher education in prison programs were invited to submit applications for inclusion into the cohort, and prospective programs were then selected by a team of interdisciplinary reviewers based on preset criteria. The reviewers paid close attention to program diversity, and accordingly selected programs to construct a cohort that was representative of the broader higher education in prison program landscape, such as including both credit-bearing and noncredit-bearing programs, and including programs with in-person and on-site instruction, correspondence programs, and programs using multiple modes of instruction. Institutional type, credential pathway, number of students, and type of prison were also considered in the review process. The selected members of the cohort included 12 higher education in prison programs, all at different stages of development and with various leadership structures and types of programming. Selected programs committed to active participation

Table 1
Descriptive Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Program characteristic	Survey respondents (<i>N</i> = 60)	Survey nonrespondents (<i>N</i> = 71)
Region		
Midwest	7 (12.1%)	18 (25.4%)
Northeast	14 (24.1%)	20 (28.2%)
South	18 (31.0%)	19 (26.8%)
West	19 (32.8%)	13 (18.3%)
Average number of academic institution partners	1.51	1.34
Type of academic institution partners		
Public 2-year	34 (40.5%)	30 (33.3%)
Private, nonprofit, 2-year	0	0
Private, for-profit, 2-year	1 (1.2%)	0
Public 4-year	21 (25.0%)	23 (25.5%)
Private, nonprofit, 4-year	28 (33.3%)	37 (41.1%)
Private, for-profit, 4-year	0	0
Average number of facilities where program provides		
Face-to-face instruction	3.21	2.98
Remote instruction	11.6	15.1
Average number of certificates offered	4.59	3.79
Average number of degrees offered	2.05	2.26

Note. The Landscape Survey was distributed to all respondents of the Annual Survey. Characteristics of nonrespondents were calculated from Annual Survey data. Averages are made up only of programs that offer a particular mode of instruction or credential.

over the course of 2 years and were compensated for their participation through a grant to support their core program activities.

For the present study, the research team interviewed representatives from all 12 cohort members during the summer of 2020. Interviews were semistructured and consisted of several general areas of conversation, including programmatic challenges, funding, and future opportunities or areas of growth. The interviews were conducted online, then transcribed and coded.³ A minimum of two team members individually read and coded each of the transcripts, and a combination of inductive and deductive coding was used to draw meaning from the transcriptions. The team then discussed interpretations and themes during weekly meetings to generate shared understandings and consensus.

Analysis

We begin by describing the current sources of funding for higher education in prison programs, with particular focus on how tuition is currently covered. Then, we present challenges related to funding for higher education in prison programs, including hiring staff and expansion. The final section explores the longer term challenges for higher education in prison programs that are not addressed by Pell restoration alone and that elucidate some of the key racial and class equity issues at stake.

Sources of Funding for Higher Education in Prison

A total of 33 programs provided information about their sources of funding (Table 2). The most common sources of funding were private foundations or philanthropic donations ($n = 17$, 51.5% of programs) or funds from the associated college or university ($n = 16$, 48.5% of programs). In the cohort interviews, several participants discussed the transformative support provided by private grants or donations. These funding sources allowed programs to hire staff and

buy books, supplies, and technology—opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible. Federal and state grants comprised a quarter of funding sources for these programs. Additional sources of funding not listed in Table 2 included federal and state contracts, Pell grant funds, and student-paid tuition. Overall, individual donors and foundations were rarely reported ($n = 2$, 6.3%).

If not completely or partially subsidized, student tuition can be one of the largest budget items for college-in-prison programs and one of the greatest barriers to launching and sustaining a program. From the *Landscape Survey*, the most common sources of tuition included scholarships ($n = 12$, 37.5%) and tuition subsidies ($n = 10$, 31.25%; see Table 3) from the college or university. About one in five programs reported that the Department of Corrections in the state in which they provide programming pays or partially pays for tuition ($n = 7$; 21.9%). Few programs required individual students to pay tuition themselves, either through student loans ($n = 3$, 9.4%), students and their families ($n = 3$, 9.4%), veterans' benefits ($n = 3$; 9.4%), state funding provided directly to the student ($n = 1$, 3.1%), or by taking on other forms of debt ($n = 3$, 9.4%).

Only a limited number of college-in-prison programs were eligible for the Second Chance Pell Experiment, but Pell grants were used to pay for student tuition in 31.3% of programs ($n = 10$) responding to the *Landscape Survey*. All programs that reported using Pell grant funds also relied on at least one other source to cover the costs of tuition, including individual donors, scholarships, tuition subsidies, and student payments. Put another way: Additional sources of funding were necessary to cover all of the costs of tuition. This may mean that Pell grants are insufficient to cover individual student costs, and therefore, students are supplementing Pell funds with

³ Initially, interviews were intended to be conducted in-person during site visits planned with each of the 12 programs. Due to the pandemic (2020/2021), however, site visits were cancelled and all cohort member interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Table 2
Source of Funding for Programs Participating in the Landscape Survey

Funding source	Number of programs using this funding source ($N = 33$)	Average percent of total operating budget
Private foundations or philanthropic donations	17	33.3%
College or university	16	25.3%
Federal grants or appropriations	10	15.0%
State grants or appropriations	8	11.1%
Individual donors	11	7.4%
Corporate grants or donations	4	0.9%
Earned income	1	0.9%
Other	5	4.4%

Note. For additional sources of funding, participants included federal and state contracts, Pell funds, and student-paid tuition.

other sources. Alternatively, or in addition, this may suggest that programs are enrolling students who are not eligible for the Pell grant or are not successfully able to apply for it, and therefore are covering their tuition via other means, including student self-pay (Table 4).

Concerns about students' eligibility and ability to apply for Pell were voiced consistently by our interviewees. During the cohort interviews, several participants expressed excitement about recently being admitted into the second round of the Second Chance Pell Experiment. One program director described access to Pell as an "entirely new playing field," and another program director expressed that their inclusion in the second round "relieves a lot of worry about how we'll fund or support tuition for students." Yet, although excitement was expressed by all those who were admitted, there was also concern among the cohort members about how Pell funds would change the funding structure of their programs and how their programs would navigate the FAFSA process, especially in support of equitable access for students.

Indeed, one of the greatest challenges on the Pell restoration horizon is how best to distribute grants to those individuals most in need during incarceration: people of color and people who are economically under-resourced, who have historically been excluded from access to quality education (e.g., see: Royer et al., 2021). For

college in prison programs, answering this question will be paramount to ensuring that the Pell grant is not simply being disbursed to those who have the privilege of meeting requirements during incarceration and/or who have been able to avoid the pitfalls that prevent successful completion of the FAFSA.

There are a variety of reasons someone would be ineligible to access the Pell grant during incarceration. First-hand accounts from practitioners indicate that the largest hurdles for incarcerated people in accessing Pell are: verification, previous loan default, and access to requisite documents like previous tax filings (Royer et al., 2021; Tahamont et al., 2022). Incarcerated people were routinely flagged for FAFSA verification by the U.S. Department of Education during the first round of the Second Chance Pell Experiment, a process that requires the applicant to submit additional documents to verify finances (Wachendorfer & Budke, 2020).

A total of 37 programs provided information about the use of the FAFSA within their programs through the *Landscape Survey*. No student completed the FAFSA in 56.8% of programs ($n = 21$) and all students completed the FAFSA in just 5.4% of programs ($n = 12$). Ten of the programs that required all students to complete the FAFSA were enrolled in the Second Chance Pell experiment. In open-ended responses, survey participants described numerous barriers that prevent timely completion of the FAFSA for incarcerated people,

Table 3
Source of Tuition for Students of Programs Participating in the Landscape Survey

Tuition source	Number of programs ($N = 32$)	Percent of programs
Scholarships from the college or university	12	37.5%
Federal funding: Pell grants	10	31.3%
Tuition subsidy	10	31.25%
Department of Corrections, Department of Public Safety, etc.	7	21.9%
State funding: direct to program	4	12.5%
Federal funding: Veterans benefits	3	9.4%
Student loans or student debt	3	9.4%
Students or their families	3	9.4%
Scholarships from any entity other than the college or university	2	6.3%
Federal funding: other	2	6.3%
Foundations	1	3.1%
Individual donors	1	3.1%
State funding: direct to student	1	3.1%
Other	4	12.5%

Note. For additional sources of funding, participants included tuition waivers and student-assistance grants.

Table 4
Compensation for Instructors of Programs Participating in the Landscape Survey

Compensation for instructors	Total number of instructors (<i>N</i> = 707)	Percent of instructors	Total number of programs (<i>N</i> = 41)	Percent of programs
Adjunct rate	375	53.0%	22	53.7%
Teaching load	77	10.9%	21	51.2%
Stipend	91	12.9%	8	19.5%
Volunteer	86	12.2%	8	19.5%
Course credit	15	2.1%	3	7.3%
Teaching assistantship	9	1.3%	3	7.3%
Adjunct replacement pay	6	0.1%	1	2.4%
Other	49	6.9%	5	12.2%

Note. For additional types of compensation, participants included combinations of the above, full-time corrections employees, and program staff.

including lack of internet within the prisons, inability to bring in financial aid counselors to provide adequate information to students, and challenges with student qualification. Respondents reported that incarcerated students consistently struggled with qualification because of verification, selective service requirements, prior loan defaults, and inability to access financial information from spouses or families as required by the U.S. Department of Education. An added burden was the need for additional staff to assist in the financial aid process, from information and completion sessions through to dispersion of funds.

These concerns were echoed in our cohort member interviews. Acquiring the necessary tax and income documents during incarceration is burdensome for any incarcerated person, but can be nearly impossible for individuals who do not have family or community on the outside who can readily retrieve and securely send such documents on their behalf. Some also face difficulties because they have not had the life experiences that would produce such documents (e.g., tax and income records). Consequently, social inequity is magnified in such situations because accessing Pell means that someone either does not have prior student loan debt, which is unequally distributed across racial and socioeconomic groups, or has access to information and documents and/or has a community of support who will provide these materials.

An example of the unequal distribution of difficulty meeting Pell eligibility requirements in prison is the student loan debt crisis for Black borrowers (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), which nearly triples after graduation (Scott-Clayton & Li, 2016). Because Black communities are disproportionately targeted for incarceration and also hold substantial student loan debts in the aggregate, addressing loan default rates among Black borrowers is an equity imperative for Pell restoration in prison. Otherwise, Black incarcerated applicants as a population are positioned to be ineligible for Pell at disproportionate rates.

Capital Challenges: Fundraising for Staff, Instructors, and Expansion

Compounding concerns about FAFSA were issues related to adequate funding for student financial aid personnel and other student services. Across all participants in the cohort interviews, administrative and operational funding was named as a primary challenge. Most programs lacked long-term, stable sources of funding, which prevented their ability to strategically plan for both the program as a whole and for their students, in either the

short- or longer term. As one program director described, “The lack of stability is really hard for us because we try to be as transparent as we can with the students. . . . It puts a lot of pressure on us, which in turn puts pressures on them.”

Program directors also discussed the burden of constant fundraising, which often required many hours searching for resources and applying for grants. Indeed, across our interviews, participants expressed a desire for more consistent sources of funding, which would give their staff and students assurance about the future of the program and allow for appropriate planning. Additionally, stable funding enabled programs to expand their reach. Program directors who had access to consistent funding were able to broaden the types of programming they offered to incarcerated student, adding credential- or degree-granting programs, extracurricular activities and supplemental support (including reentry), or to expand educational opportunities to people in additional correctional facilities. As one program director explained as follows:

We’ve been surprisingly good at fundraising. We did get a foundation to support our degree cohort because that was a big expense and that shot our budget up. We got a family foundation based here to support that tuition, because otherwise. . . . That was the hard one.

The interviewees who expressed greater confidence in their ability to expand their programs typically also had broad community and university support. As one program director described as follows:

We are now about to start a BA program, which no one in the state’s been able to do. We have staff and stable funding. We’ve received funding from so many organizations; we’ve built, you know, in collaboration with the students a structure where I think we have huge buy-in from the community and from the students.

Conversely, others described the challenge of working without strong support from the university. One participant described how portions of grant funds awarded to their program were frequently absorbed by their sponsoring university and so were not always used for their intended purpose, which then required even more effort on the program’s part to locate additional sources.

Programs that received funds from multiple sources and could anticipate ongoing and sustaining support were able to engage in short- and long-term strategic planning, which included the hiring of personnel who could assist with tasks like data collection, program evaluation, and administration. In fact, the largest funding challenge expressed during interviews with program directors was the lack of

resources to hire additional staff. As one program director described as follows:

I don't have long-term resourcing, so that's a huge issue. And that's the single biggest pain. It also prevents me from hiring dedicated staff, because I would like to have a specific counselor that deals with nothing but [the program]. I can't do that because I don't have the funding to do it. And that's only going to get worse given the current general [college funding] situation.

Many of our interviewees described the myriad ways their existing staff were overburdened. As a result, even funding for part-time or intern-level positions was seen as benefitting programs. Several program directors told us that they prioritize the addition of staff when looking for grants or other sources of funding. Because staff positions are then tied to specific sources of funding; however, there was concern among programs about the finite nature of those positions and what would happen when the funding ended.

The limited nature of funding for staff led to many programs relying upon volunteer labor. Without dedicated staff to provide student support services—in particular, for students who need additional support during the financial aid application process—many programs are not able to help students who are pulled for verification. Because of the disproportionate number of people of color who are incarcerated and have previous experiences that would trigger verification (loan default, etc.), and because programs do not have the administrative staff to provide support, they would thus be excluded from participation. Put another way, the lack of funding for robust administrative support can easily mean the difference between an individual student being able to enroll in a program, or missing out on the opportunity to participate in a postsecondary education.

Concerns about adequate personnel extended to the programs' leadership and executive staffing. In the *Landscape Survey*, a total of 45 participating programs provided information about their leadership, defined as the individual or group with decision-making responsibilities for the program. Of those programs, leadership teams consisted of an average of 3.1 people (range = 1–9), with 18.0% of the positions filled by volunteers and 82.0% filled by paid staff, either full- or part-time. Nearly, a quarter of programs had at least one leadership position that was filled by a volunteer ($n = 11$, 24.4%). Taken together, this means that a significant portion of leadership positions within higher education in prison programs are filled on a volunteer basis. In addition to being less stable than paid staff, relying on volunteers also becomes a significant equity issue for the field. Having the requisite time and resources to volunteer as a college program director, student services coordinator, or college administrator—academic positions that in almost all other contexts would be considered full-time jobs—is a privilege that is not equally distributed across populations.

Reliance on volunteers, and the equity issues this raises, was also an issue with instructional staff. A total of 49 participating programs provided information about the compensation they provide to course instructors (Table 3). Of those programs, all but one provided compensation to at least some instructors. Participants from 41 programs gave more detailed information about the type of compensation given to instructors in their program ($n = 707$ instructors), and these data suggest that the most common type of compensation was adjunct rate pay, which was given to 53% of instructors across all programs ($n = 375$) and was used by 53.7% of programs ($n = 22$). The other two most prevalent methods of compensation utilized by

programs were offsets to faculty teaching loads ($n = 19$, 46.3% of programs) and teaching stipends ($n = 8$, 19.5% of programs). Yet, although almost all programs offered compensation to at least some of their instructors, volunteer instructors were still utilized by 19.5% of programs ($n = 8$) and across programs, 12.2% of instructors worked on a volunteer basis ($n = 87$). Taken together, the data suggest that many programs are in need of additional monetary support in order to compensate all of their leadership, instructors, and staff. These needs will not be met by Pell alone.

Challenges Beyond Funding

As the Pell restoration process unfolds, it is critical to examine if and to what extent Pell funds will address the funding challenges faced by higher education in prison programs, as well as the implications of these challenges for equity in access to college. But across both our survey and interviews, program leaders also expressed other, related but distinct challenges faced by their programs. The most commonly cited challenge faced by these programs was a lack of long-term funding, but participants also discussed myriad issues related to program quality, such as inadequate access to technology, the lack of institutional support from the college or university, the unpredictable and fluid conditions of prison, and a general desire for more organizational structure. Pell restoration alone cannot solve these issues. More concerning, though, is that Pell restoration might actually exacerbate some of these concerns by imposing the additional administrative burden of administering Pell, particularly in the absence of the internet.

For example, the insufficiency of technology in prison presents additional hurdles to completing the FAFSA, but also to providing quality higher education more broadly. Departments of corrections are notorious for their restrictive stance toward technology and equipment, and access to digital resources inside penal facilities is a long-standing barrier for higher education in prison programs (Tanaka & Cooper, 2020; Wachendorfer & Budke, 2020). Access to computers or tablets, as well as to an intranet or the internet, are needs that are shared by most programs, including those that need to offer asynchronous or hybrid learning opportunities. One program director explained that significant technology hurdles for their program include “getting enough computers, having the students have access to those computers in their cells, and getting a streaming service that is effective.” This concern was also shared by participants of the *Landscape Survey*, many of whom listed addressing technology needs as one of their top three priorities for the next 5 years. Among the technology priorities noted by respondents were raising money for computer labs, achieving at least limited access to the internet within the facilities, and adapting a reliable learning management system for use in their program.

Likewise, the restoration of Pell is likely to strain the already limited institutional supports provided to many programs. Incarcerated students do not have access to the same on campus resources as other students, including access to financial aid offices. Thus, student support services, including financial aid counseling, must be adapted or created inside the facility. This process requires additional resources, capacity, and staffing—all of which require additional funding. Yet, while most programs reported at least some support from their college or university partners, working closely with an academic institution also presented difficulties. Several participants discussed how changes in institutional leadership directly impacted

their programs, with fewer opportunities provided when there was a less supportive person in a supervisory role and more opportunities presented when a particular supervisor championed the program. For this reason, the success of a program can rest on strong relationships with and support from institutional leaders, but building these relationships can be difficult given the unique nature of work within a prison and compared to those on campus.

These issues might easily be exacerbated by the reintroduction of Pell. For example, Pell availability for college-in-prison may create financial incentives for more institutions of higher education to expand into prisons. These institutions might see new prison programming as a way to boost overall enrollment numbers, but might have little knowledge of or experience in the field, or engaging with the ethics of working inside prisons and matriculating (and supporting) incarcerated students. Inexperienced academic institutions or those with no or weak accreditation status coming into the field, especially without appropriate guardrails in place to protect incarcerated people against exploitation, could easily exacerbate ethnorracial and socioeconomic inequalities (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018).

The challenges of partnership also extend to working with the prison administration. Many aspects of programming within the prison are outside the control of college program leaders, including timelines, access to information, and rules or regulations. One participant described working with prison leadership as “walking on eggshells all the time” due to the constant threat of overstepping a boundary and displeasing the department of corrections. Challenges of working within the prison include difficulty gaining access inside, limitations on what materials can be brought to the prison, and restricted access to students. These challenges reduce the ability of programs to offer support services to students, such as tutoring, academic advising, or financial aid support. Again, these issues are likely to become even more critical with the return of Pell, which will put additional strain on the services that currently exist while offering little in the way of additional funds to bolster necessary supports.

Discussion

Incarcerated individuals who are eligible for the Pell grant (and able to enroll in a prison higher education program) will be able to offset at least partial tuition costs when Pell is fully restored. This is significant, both for the student and the program. However, throughout our interviews with program directors, as well as in a survey of programs across the county, prison higher education programs noted other costs that present persistent challenges. Addressing these other costs—which are a function of both instructional and academic support—are essential in advancing racial and socioeconomic justice in higher education in prison in particular, and thus, in higher education more broadly.

Our research indicates that funding for prison higher education remains a consistent problem for programs, and one that bringing back the Pell grant cannot fully address. In fact, results from this research suggest that the return of Pell will potentially bring new problems to prison higher education and/or exacerbate existing challenges for the field. These challenges are likely to negatively impact marginalized student communities who comprise a disproportionate share of the incarcerated.

There are a few important limitations to this research worthy of note. The first is the absence of student perspectives. Our focus in this study was the administrators of higher education in prison programs, because they are well positioned to provide specific insight into the dynamics of Pell restoration. However, additional

research is needed to elucidate the experiences of incarcerated students with the FASFA and Pell. This research should be carried out with attention to the particular dynamics and ethics of human subjects research in prison (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018).

Additionally, the majority of participating programs in our survey were fairly well-established, programs with more than one staff member, and programs associated with a single college or university. The relatively longevity of these programs likely affects their ability to compensate instructors and support paid staff, as well as to benefit from institutional and/or state-level support. Newer programs and/or programs with less funding may have been less likely to complete the survey, both because of their limited resources and the availability of academic or historical records pertaining to their program.

Another potential limitation is that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic likely influenced program leaders’ ability and/or desire to complete the survey in the spring of 2020. Interviews with program leaders may have been similarly impacted by the pandemic, given the particularly devastating effects that COVID-19 had on individuals inside prison and jails. While interviews conducted via Zoom enabled lengthy and in-depth conversations, there were likely limitations in perceiving body language and other cues that could have aided in gathering and interpreting data.

Finally, we recognize some more general limitations of the data. To the best of our knowledge, the results we describe draw on the most comprehensive information available about prison higher education programs, and the first systematic attempt to describe the national landscape of higher education in penal institutions. However, our data are limited in at least three important ways. First, it is very possible that some programs were not included in our sample, either because they do not have a public presence or because we did not find them in our search. This is especially likely to have excluded smaller or newer programs. Second, like most surveys, there are likely also response biases that affect the generalizability of our findings. That our survey was conducted during COVID might have made it especially difficult for programs struggling with high infection rates to find time to respond. Finally, one crucial finding from our survey is that many programs currently collect only limited data on their programs, funding, and student populations. This likely resulted in some programs declining to take the survey because they could not answer some or many questions, and other programs likely skipped some questions or estimated with variable levels of accuracy due to issues with data quality. While we believe these issues do not negate the usefulness of our results, we also believe that these issues emphasize the pressing need to continue investing in and supporting data collection on prison higher education, both at the program, state, and national levels.

These caveats aside, our data have important implications for both policy and practice. One potential remedy to the challenges of Pell is to address how the reintroduction of Pell to those in prison is currently structured. A recent study found that over 30% of first-generation and low-income students experienced difficulty completing the FASFA (Schraeder, 2021), but the hurdles are even greater for people who are in prison. As indicated by our data, the majority of higher education in prison programs in the United States do not currently have their students fill out the FAFSA, which means that any programs who join the Second Chance Pell Experiment will need additional infrastructure (i.e., administrative support, instructional materials) to facilitate the FAFSA process for incarcerated students.

For nonincarcerated students, however, the college or university first applies the Pell grant toward tuition and fees, and for individuals

who live on campus, it is also applied to room and board. Any money leftover is directly paid to students for other education expenses. Pell disbursement works similarly for incarcerated students, with one important caveat: Guidance provided by the United States Department of Education (2020) encourages colleges and universities to use existing or create new eligible fees for incarcerated students so there is not leftover balance. Funds can also be used to compensate third-party technical assistance providers. This reallocating of funding could be used to support the significant increase in administrative support needed to ensure that currently incarcerated students have the support they need to navigate the FAFSA.

Allowing incarcerated students to be eligible for institution-specific scholarships and grants or other forms of tuition subsidies is another way to help close this gap. We believe that this is a promising way to remedy the potential inequity in enrollment for students of color in higher education in prison programs, as students who are ineligible for Pell could be funded directly through the college or university. Additional research is needed to more fully understand the complex nature of financing higher education in prison and how, specifically, colleges are covering the costs of tuition for both Pell-eligible incarcerated students and those who are not Pell eligible, and the extent to which these supports advantage or disadvantage communities of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Specifically, future research should aim to better understand the mechanisms for ensuring consistent and sustained funding, equity in funding across race/ethnicity, how program growth is supported or inhibited, and pathways to support for students.

In addition, across both survey and interview data, there was a consistent theme of institutional disconnect between the prison higher education program and the affiliated academic institution or the broader mission of the college or university. Our data suggest that the work of prison higher education is often positioned as a largely philanthropic endeavor on behalf of foundations and penal institutions, who view higher education in prison as simply community engagement or interventions to reduce recidivism. Similarly, for many colleges and universities, prison programs are viewed as service work rather than part of their fundamental educational mission. This suggests a need to better integrate the work of prison higher education programs into the central infrastructure and resources of the college or university, or to facilitate college programs operating in prisons to move toward independent accreditation. In either case, this will require changing the narrative to position higher education programs in prison as worthy of the same quality and consideration that would be expected of any satellite campus or self-contained college.

Relatedly, there is a clear and pressing need for institutions of higher education to expand personnel who can support programs operating in prison. High rates of volunteerism within the field of prison higher education is compelling evidence that instructors and staff care about the work and are willing to sacrifice monetary compensation. For many initiatives just getting off the ground, who do not have institutional resources or support, recruiting volunteer instructors, tutors, and staff is one of the only ways to launch a program. Yet, the large percentage of programs relying on volunteers is also indicative of a great deal of invisible labor and lack of institutional buy-in.

For colleges and universities, teaching as part of a higher education in prison program should be viewed as the equivalent labor of teaching on the central campus or in any other satellite classroom. Additionally, blurring the lines between “volunteerism” or “service” and “teaching” can alter the experience in the classroom for both students and

instructors in potentially problematic ways. The fact that programs must rely on volunteer labor suggests that the affiliated academic institution has not committed the necessary resources to adequately support in-prison higher education. It also means that material privilege is a requirement to participate in advancing the work of higher education in prison.

In sum, our work suggests that Pell restoration should be approached with a deep awareness of the broader trends in the field related to college spending and equity. Over half of all the institutions in the United States that provide higher education in prison are 2-year schools (Royer et al., 2020). Many of these institutions are already stretched thin, and Pell restoration is going to require even more resources from the affiliated college or university. For example, in some cases, programs will need people from the affiliated academic institution to travel to penal facilities and support the completion of FAFSA. Programs will need individuals in financial aid, admissions, and registrar offices to become familiar with their programs and the records of incarcerated students. Because incarcerated people will be officially enrolled, many programs will need to provide and/or expand student support services at penal facilities. Mandated reporting to the U.S. Department of Education will likewise require additional work on behalf of institutional research offices. Much more communication, both written and in-person, will need to occur because the vast majority of incarcerated people do not have access to the internet or video conferencing capabilities. These and other resources will be critical to ensuring that Pell restoration results in meaningful and equitable expansion of access to high-quality higher education in prison.

In practice, this means understanding Pell restoration in the broader context of racial and socioeconomic stratification in higher education. Our findings suggest that Pell grants are but one part of a more robust funding landscape for prison higher education and, while significant, they cannot work alone. To fulfill the promise of Pell grants in prison, higher education in prison programs need institutional buy-in and financial assistance in the areas of infrastructure, tuition, and staff.

By providing the necessary investments to support higher education in prison, Pell restoration could be an effective lever for advancing racial and economic justice. Institutions of higher education, alongside Departments of Corrections and state and federal policy makers, could make issues of equity a priority in the implementation of Pell in prison. Alternatively, without a concerted focus on racial and socioeconomic equity, the return of Pell could replicate inequities persistent throughout higher education, including inequality based on family income, race/ethnicity, and parental education. Thus, the return of Pell in prison should be approached with caution, and without losing sight of other investments that are necessary to ensure the provision of high-quality, higher education that is accessible to all.

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