

# SERVING STUDENTS WITH SECOND CHANCE PELL

**Incarcerated students and the institutions that serve them share their experiences.**

**By Mark Toner**

DURING THE 2019 NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SUMMIT, TRUSTEES and other community college advocates made the case for allowing the nation's more than 2 million incarcerated individuals to use Pell Grants to earn postsecondary credentials or degrees. But the formerly incarcerated also spoke for themselves.

"I made a mistake, but I am not a mistake," Shon Holman said of the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative's efforts to bring college into prisons during a standing-room-only briefing on Capitol Hill sponsored by ACCT and the Los Angeles Community College District.

Holman was joined by Sean Addie of the U.S. Department of Education, Ruth Delaney of the Vera Institute of Justice, Molly Lasagna of the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative, Daniel J. Phelan of Jackson College in Michigan, and Mike Fong, a board member with the Los Angeles Community College District at the NLS event, which, along with a policy focus session, highlighted for community college leaders the opportunities and challenges of serving incarcerated students.

Awareness of the challenges incarcerated Americans face returning to society has grown along with their numbers. Since the 1970s, the prison population has increased sevenfold to about 2.3 million Americans today. While the U.S. represents about 5 percent of the global population, it accounts for one-quarter of the world's prisoners. And incarceration "reinforces many of the disadvantages people who go to prison actually faced before prison," Delaney told NLS attendees. "Education, poverty, and incarceration are all pretty closely intertwined."

The vast majority of today's incarcerated population have no higher education background — only 6 percent have completed any education beyond high school. Most leave prison with few marketable skills, making it all the more difficult to readjust upon release.

But incarcerated individuals who earn higher education credentials before they re-enter society are far more likely to succeed — a newly revised study says earning credentials reduces the odds of recidivism by 48 percent within three years of exiting prison, up from 43 percent in earlier results, according to Delaney. "That's a promising number," she says. "It really shows that this has a big impact on people's lives."

Some community colleges, including Jackson College, have offered programs in prisons since the 1960s, but Pell Grant funding for incarcerated individuals was curtailed in 1994 as part of an omnibus crime bill. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education launched a pilot Second Chance Pell program. Participating institutions include approximately 30 community

colleges, which have awarded more than 700 certificates and 230 associate degrees to date.

While there's no set end date for the pilot program, it must be reapproved administratively each year. However, U.S. Department of Education officials, Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chair Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), and other lawmakers have expressed interest in fully reinstating the program as part of the anticipated reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Were that to happen, as many as 463,000 incarcerated individuals could be eligible for Pell Grants — a figure Delaney calls unrealistic, but even with smaller numbers of participating students, Second Chance Pell could result in a 10 percent increase in employment among the formerly incarcerated and a \$45 million increase in earnings in the first year of release, she said. Equally importantly, states would save \$365 million a year in the costs of re-incarcerating those who enter careers as they exit prison.

Three presidents of community colleges that educate incarcerated students described the challenges of operating programs in prison during the NLS policy focus session.

One of the most significant challenges, they said, involves limitations on technology use. Students in New Jersey prisons, for example, must do all classwork — and even fill out the FASFA — using pencil and paper, said Michael McDonough, president of Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey, which serves nearly 530 prisoners in seven correctional facilities, about half of whom qualify for Second Chance Pell.

Another challenge for institutions involves verification for federal financial aid, McDonough cautioned. Many incarcerated individuals have issues with their legal identity or family members who refuse to provide tax information. The lack of Internet access presents an even greater challenge in Texas, where required state assessments are typically administered online, said Dennis Brown, president of Lee College.

On average, Raritan Valley's incarcerated students take seven credits per semester, all towards a single associate degree program in general studies geared towards transfer to a four-year institution. More than half have a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Of Raritan Valley's 61 incarcerated graduates to date, 50 have gone on to four-year degree programs, according to McDonough. In fact, the college's current Phi Theta Kappa honor society president is a formerly incarcerated student.

"It's a modest program, but it has empowered both faculty and students," McDonough said. "And I think it's transformed our institution in many, many ways."

Lee College has offered courses for incarcerated individuals since the 1960s, currently enrolling about 1,100 inmates. The distance of correctional facilities from campus — one is a 90-minute drive from Lee’s main campus in Houston — poses logistical challenges, Brown said.

The Texas college has awarded more than 500 credentials in a variety of technical fields to incarcerated individuals to date. Along with participating in the Second Chance Pell pilot, Lee College provides funding for incarcerated students through its foundation. Incarcerated individuals also can get loans from the state of Texas, which requires repayment as one condition of parole. Second Chance Pell funding has helped Lee to provide prepackaged classroom resources that Brown calls “the Internet in a box,” as well as transition specialists that support and track students from release into employment.

“If [Pell] was opened up across the country, the potential of having a large number of students taking our courses is tremendous,” Brown said.

Tacoma Community College in Washington currently serves about 475 women in two correctional facilities, offering programs ranging from GEDs to associate degrees, said president Ivan Harrell. The majority take short-term programs, which are funded by the state — although associate degree programs are not, “which is why the Second Chance Pell program is really helpful,” Harrell said.

Washington state has significant resources that help support incarcerated individuals, Harrell said. Tacoma credentials associate degree programs administered by a local nonprofit, the Freedom Education Project of Puget Sound, and the state now provides navigators in correctional facilities and on college campuses to provide wraparound supports to newly released students. “The concept is still relatively new, but it seems to be working extremely well to help with that transition,” Harrell said.

Tacoma’s programs are challenged by the large number of transient inmates, who often are transferred to different facilities where they may no longer have access to classes. Many inmates have defaulted on past student loans or opt to pursue paid

work release options because of financial needs, Harrell said. Anyone who teaches in Washington prisons has to go through a six-week training process, and as a result most faculty are hired specifically to teach in prisons despite a waiting list of faculty who want to teach in the program, Harrell said. “One of the things we’ve got to do better is connect our non-incarcerated faculty to have a better connection,” he said.

Along with the logistics of teaching in prisons, other departments are impacted, speakers cautioned. “Pell Grant funds [for incarcerated individuals] come through colleges just like any other students,” Brown said. “You’re 90 miles away from the main campus and you suddenly have 500 new grant recipients. There are a lot of challenges in how you are able to execute in a timely matter to get them in their classes... However many staff you think you need to run the program, double it.”

The good news is that perceptions about incarcerated individuals are rapidly changing, as evinced by “ban the box” campaigns and other hiring efforts.

“More so than I’ve ever seen, employers today are willing to hire inmates with the marketable skills they bring with them upon release,” Brown said.

Other college stakeholders also support these efforts. Research conducted by the Vera Institute shows that the public is broadly supportive of postsecondary education for incarcerated individuals that helps them become contributing members of their communities. “Public attitudes have changed quite a bit,” Delaney said.

Community college leaders often see working with the incarcerated as a natural fit with their mission as open access institutions. “It’s important to remember that almost everybody eventually leaves prison,” Delaney said. “So these effects apply to people who are going to live in our communities, and our neighbors and friends going forward.”

*Hear more about Shon Holman’s experience in ACCT’s In the Know podcast on Second Chance Pell, available at <https://intheknowwithacct.podbean.com/e/second-chance-pell/>.*

## ONE STUDENT’S VOICE



Second-Chance Pell Grant Recipient January Newport

Ohio resident January Newport began her education through Sinclair Community College’s prison education program while at the Dayton Correctional Institute. After being released, she completed an associate of applied science degree at Sinclair’s Dayton campus.

Newport left prison with the educational requirement to obtain a certificate in Chemical Dependency Counseling Assistant (CDCA) and passed the state exam through the

Ohio Chemical Dependency Professionals Board. She is now a licensed chemical dependency counselor and case manager at Recovery Works

Healing Center in West Carrollton, Ohio, where she helps the addicted population in an intensive outpatient setting.

“When I was incarcerated the second time, I focused solely on my recovery. I found out when I got released that that was not enough to keep me away from going back to my old life. Working minimum wage jobs, I did not have any direction in life,” Newport said. “Being a single mom with two children also did not help. The money I was making was not going to help me pay the bills. When I found Sinclair the third time that I was incarcerated, it was like a saving grace. Education combined with the recovery program provided a more holistic approach — that was what I needed. It gave me something to look forward to, goals to set, and something to take with me when I left prison. It gave me a foundation to build upon and just purpose and direction moving forward. I am now an employee in a career I am passionate about, a mother of two, and a caring, empathetic, genuine woman. I am a woman with purpose and direction in life.”