



Exploring the Landscape of College and Community Reentry Partnerships

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ITHAKA S+R

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Executive Summary

Now that federal Pell Grant funding has been reinstated for learners who are incarcerated, the field is in flux. Higher education in prison programs and their home institutions, departments of correction, and accreditation and oversight bodies are all adapting and developing their practices to meet new policy and regulation needs. Two major facets of the revised regulations for Pell funding are particularly critical for college in prison programs, namely the requirement to track and report student data, and the obligation to document how they or their partner organizations provide reentry services. This report focuses on the latter issue.

Reentry includes a broad and fluid category of service offerings that have historically been provided through a constellation of state and local offices, nonprofit and charitable organizations, businesses, and community members. Colleges are increasingly offering related or complementary services as the demographics of their students shift and basic needs services expand; however, many colleges are not specifically designing these services with current and recently incarcerated students in mind. On the other hand, community organizations that have provided reentry services for years suddenly find themselves facing a changing educational landscape and shifting expectations, as more of the people they serve come out with college credit or the desire to attend college immediately on reentry. The national reentry landscape remains largely fragmented and provincialized—both because reentry needs are necessarily locally defined and met, and because the array of services that can be considered reentry is so broad and expansive. This has led to a dearth of national level information about reentry practices, college transition, and college-community organization partnership models.

With this context in mind, and with generous funding from ECMC Foundation, Ithaka S+R is exploring how colleges and community-based organizations partner to meet the needs of formerly incarcerated students. This report consolidates findings from our landscape research and is intended to help provide an overview of the field of college and community partnerships for student reentry, present case studies of notable partnership arrangements and programs, and offer preliminary findings from research in progress on how colleges and community

organizations can best work together to serve students who will be reintegrating or are formerly incarcerated.

Key Findings

- The field of providers serving the needs of returning citizens is at once large and disaggregated.
- Contextual factors such as education and employment; family and social support networks; state, local and charitable service and program offerings; and college support services all influence individual reintegration needs and priorities.
- Reintegration needs, therefore, must be individually assessed and prioritized for each student on a case-by-case basis.
- Colleges employ a variety of partnership structures and service coordination strategies to ensure that reintegrating students' needs are met. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, it is clear that cross-departmental and cross-organizational collaboration, communication, and coordination—both within and beyond the university—are important to aid successful transition to college on the outside.

Examining a Field in Flux

Context and Methods

When federal Pell grant funding was reinstated for students who are incarcerated in July 2023, one key stipulation of the revised policy was that college in prison programs would need to provide information about how their students could access reentry services.¹ The regulations did not stipulate that colleges must themselves provide reentry services—allowing

¹ “Pell Grants for Prison Education Programs; Determining the Amount of Federal Education Assistance Funds Received by Institutions of Higher Education (90/10); Change in Ownership and Change in Control” Office of Postsecondary Education, Department of Education, Rule 87 FR 65426, pp. 65426-65498, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/10/28/2022-23078/pell-grants-for-prison-education-programs-determining-the-amount-of-federal-education-assistance>.

for collaborations and partnerships between colleges, state agencies and actors, and community organizations. As a result, more attention is being paid to collaborations between colleges and community organizations to provide crucial services for students who are preparing to reintegrate, transitioning to college on the outside, or reentering after receiving college education in prison.

As colleges start to create programs and forge partnerships to better serve the needs of their formerly incarcerated students, they face a re-entry field that is at once large and extremely fragmented. This was one of the main findings of our review of the vast literature on the broader field of reentry—including scholarly sources, white papers, as well as reentry guides and resources for impacted people—which we performed before beginning our landscape of existing college and community partnerships to serve students.

While a well-developed body of research exists on the barriers faced by returning citizens—from access to housing, healthcare, and employment, to reconnecting with social and family networks—little is known about the national landscape of reentry services beyond a few general features (e.g., their concentration in urban versus rural areas), and even less about best practices and effective strategies to support this population. Recent trends, moreover, suggest that we might be on the cusp of a shift in this area, including a rethinking of what are considered “best practices” in the field. Changes in reentry, workforce development, and education in prison are poised to push the field beyond simple recidivism (or reoffense) rates and toward new measures of success.² The Council of State Governments’ Reentry 2030 initiative is driving inter-agency collaboration for reentry success at the state level,³ and nonprofit organizations like Jobs for the Future seem to be inching workforce development, education, and reentry services toward alignment in the field.⁴ As Emilee Green of the Illinois

² “Measuring Reentry Success Beyond Recidivism: An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief,” RTI International and the Center for Court Innovation, 2023, https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Look%20Beyond%20Recidivism_March%2029%202023.pdf.

³ For an introduction to the initiative, see: <https://www.csg.org/2024/03/13/reentry-2030/>. The initiative also has its own website which highlights major developments in the initiative: <https://reentry2030.org/leadership/>.

⁴ Jobs for the Future (JFF) has expanded their Center for Justice and Economic Advancement and has been increasingly active and visible working on issues of reentry and employment for people who are or were incarcerated, for more see: <https://www.iff.org/work/center-for-justice-economic-advancement/>.

Criminal Justice Information Authority notes, there is a well-established body of research on the characteristics of people who are reintegrating, what their reintegration needs are, and how important reentry and reintegration programming is; however, there is a dearth of research on service design and provision models.⁵ This may be due in part to the provincialized nature of social and administrative services in our nation: different state policies, agencies, and partnerships are deployed to provide reentry services in strikingly different permutations across the US, a fact confirmed by our review of hundreds of existing reentry programs and guides across the country. As a result, the experience of returning from prison differs widely across states, and even across municipalities within the same state.

Given these premises, each higher education in prison program will have to navigate a highly localized context, and forge a different set of local and regional relationships—to community organizations, its home campus and institutional resources, the local community, etc. Take for example housing considerations. In some states or metropolitan areas, subsidized housing may be available or provided for students who are reintegrating, other areas might be served by robust networks of scattershot housing initiatives, and still others might be served primarily by large nonprofit or charitable organizations with limited real estate. In some areas, such housing may be specifically available to people who are reintegrating, while in others, legal discrimination may prevent them from accessing housing. Likewise, finding mental health and healthcare services for reintegrating students might look very different for a small community college operating in a low-income urban area and a large, statewide education institution with strong medical and mental health programs operating multiple hospitals and clinics.

As part of our initial research, we attempted to scan and consolidate a list of national reentry service providers to better understand what services were available where, and how easily information about them might be accessed. In the process, it became clear that dated resource lists and

⁵ Emilee Green, “An Overview of Evidence-Based Practices and Programs in Prison Reentry,” Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, Research and Analysis Unit, 19 December 2019, <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/an-overview-of-evidence-based-practices-and-programs-in-prison-reentry>. Green’s report for ICJIA offers a great overview of the research and the field, though both have changed a bit in the wake of Covid-19.

websites made finding accurate information on the internet about services available, individuals eligible, and contact information extremely challenging. There are likely many reasons for this—including such dynamics as shifts in funding and coordination under different state government administrations, short-lived service providers that pull down seed funding but don't reach sustainability, and the fact that many community organizations persist through the labor of individual founders or dedicated but limited volunteer networks.

After performing initial research on the broader reentry field, we convened an advisory committee of leaders representing higher education in prison programs, community-based organizations partnering with colleges, and coalitional organizations active in reentry. Our six advisory members are drawn from six separate states representing the East Coast, West Coast, Southwest, South, and Midwest regions. Half of the committee has lived experience personally going through reentry. We used a snowball recruitment method to find potential advisory members and continue expanding our network of contacts in the field. We began by asking contacts who they thought was doing the best or most exciting work around reentry, setting up exploratory interviews with those individuals and concluding by asking them the same questions, leading to more exploratory interviews. Through this process, we slowly built our advisory committee, spread awareness among leaders in the field that we are actively researching this issue, and gained information for future recruitment in the case study and cohort phase.

As the final phase of our initial landscape review, we conducted a series of case studies. We conducted eight initial, informal screening interviews, and then conducted follow-up interviews with four programs to serve as case studies. We made sure that the programs we studied represented a geographically and institutionally diverse set, and we especially thank the Emerson Prison Initiative, the Gateway Program at Red Rocks Community College, New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons, and the Washington University at St. Louis Prison Education Program for their time and transparency.

This interim research report gathers our findings-in-progress from these research activities. It is our hope that this research and the cohort project that will follow will help share knowledge about existing models of collaboration and facilitate more expansive partnerships between higher education institutions and community organizations to leverage resources, knowledge, and expertise that already exist but are often functionally siloed.

Understanding the Landscape

What Are Reentry Services? Lessons from a Scan of the Field

There is a sizable body of research on reentry, especially addressing the barriers and challenges faced by returning citizens and examining factors that affect the likelihood of recidivism. Given the size and complexity of this field of study—at the intersection of multiple disciplines, and spanning both policy and scholarly research—finding an accessible and manageable point of entry can prove challenging, and it can be overwhelming for college and program administrators who are considering developing programs and partnerships to support students who are formerly incarcerated. To that end, we’ve gathered here some of the main lessons we identified from the literature that are particularly relevant to planning or providing reentry programming for students. These lessons should prove useful for program administrators and higher education practitioners considering partnerships with community programs.

One of the most important lessons highlighted in the literature is that, despite that most returning citizens share some particularly acute and common reintegration needs, reintegration needs cannot be easily generalized, as they are at once wide-ranging and context dependent. Even understanding how to define them can be challenging. The US Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs offers this brief introduction to reentry services: “The risks and needs of individuals returning home from incarceration are often unique. The programs and

services offered to returning individuals should address their critical needs such as housing, employment, family unification, and treatment for substance use, mental, and physical health as necessary.”⁶ Two things in this definition were reinforced in nearly all of the conversations we had with experts in the field: (1) that individual risks and needs “are often unique” and (2) that housing, employment, family unification, and medical and mental healthcare are some of the most urgent issues for individuals who are reintegrating after a period of incarceration.

In terms of best practices for service provision, the Congressional Research Service’s 2015 report on reentry and reintegration noted four major conclusions from a literature scan in the field: (1) begin during incarceration, but take place mostly in the community; (2) are intensive and typically last for at least six months; (3) use risk-assessment classifications to focus services; (4) use strength-based approaches to connect service providers and individuals that are reintegrating.⁷ The report further notes that “Many of the programs that have been proven to be effective share some of the same attributes, regardless” of what specific kinds of services they provide.⁸ More recent research has emphasized that peer-mentorship is a particularly effective component to include in reentry programming.⁹ College in prison programs preparing to offer, expand, or revise student reentry services would do well to keep these aspects in mind.

⁶ “Reentry Special Feature” Office of Justice Programs, Department of Justice, <https://www.ojp.gov/feature/reentry/overview>.

⁷ Ibid. 17. We’ve paraphrased the list that James provides and slightly changed the language used in points 3 and 4 to align more closely with our research.

⁸ Nathan James, “Offender Reentry: Correctional Statistics, Reintegration into the Community, and Recidivism.” Congressional Research Service, RL34287, Updated 31 March 2016, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

⁹ Dave Sells, Anderson Curtis, Jehan Abdur-Raheem, Michele Klimczak, Charles Barber, Cathleen Meaden, Jacob Hasson, Patrick Fallon, and Meredith Emigh-Guy, “Peer-Mentored Community Reentry Reduces Recidivism,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 47 No. 4, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0093854820901562>. Esther Matthews, “Peer-Focused Prison Reentry Programs: Which Peer Characteristics Matter Most?” *Incarceration*, 1 July 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/26326663211019958>.

Why Should Colleges and Universities Invest in Developing these Services and Programs?

According to The Vera Institute of Justice, currently “there are more than 750,000 people in prison eligible to enroll in a postsecondary program, and surveys indicate that more than 70 percent of those individuals are interested in postsecondary education.”¹⁰ This consideration of college eligibility leaves out students who might be incarcerated in jails or detention facilities, and cannot account for those students who will become eligible for postsecondary education while incarcerated. When we consider, moreover, that over 500,000 people are released from prisons each year in the United States, it becomes clear that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are part of the current and future student body at colleges and universities around the US.¹¹ That institutions of higher education are responding to the impending “enrollment cliff” by trying to recruit more adult learners and nontraditional students only emphasizes the importance of considering how best to support students who have been incarcerated.

Planning to support students who have been incarcerated may well help develop programs, services, and partnership models that can better serve all students. Reintegrating students face a unique set of overlapping challenges: they are leaving a total institution where choice, communication, access to healthcare, access to technology, and opportunities for education and gainful employment are all dramatically limited. This fact amplifies the urgency of providing basic needs support for college students who are previously incarcerated, especially as the basic needs identified for student success dovetail with the most critical needs for reintegration.¹² This suggests that lessons learned and

¹⁰ Niloufer Taber, Amanda Nowak, Maurice Smith, Jennifer Yang, and Celia Strumph, “The First Year of Pell Restoration: A Snapshot of Quality, Equity, and Scale in Prison Education Programs,” *Vera Institute of Justice*, June 2024, https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/The-First-Year-of-Pell-Restoration_Report.pdf.

¹¹ Wendy Sawyer, “Since you asked: How many people are released from each state’s prisons and jails every year?” *Prison Policy Initiative*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/25/releasesbystate/>.

¹² Michelle Hodara, Libbie Brey, Destiny McLennan, and Sam Riggs, “ECMC Foundation Basic Needs Initiative Evaluation Report 1: Sustaining Basic Needs Services at Postsecondary Institutions,” *Education Northwest*, January 2023,

partnerships developed to serve reintegrating students might function in dialogue with programs and partners that serve student basic needs more broadly. That is, colleges and universities that develop programs, services, and partners that can help formerly incarcerated students transition to college on the main campus and/or meet their major needs for reintegration might be developing networks and processes that can be scaled or expanded in some capacity to help serve all students facing basic needs challenges. Conversely, colleges and universities that have built robust student basic needs programming might already have a blueprint and a set of partners to help support students reintegrating after incarceration, as long as students who are reintegrating can access and use those resources reliably. So called “Crime Free Housing” policies were banned in California in 2024; however, the majority of states and locales still allow landlords to turn away potential residents because of existing convictions or records in the criminal legal system.¹³ Even when policies do not outright ban or prohibit students with records, there may be additional information requests (such as detailed conviction histories or letters of support from probation or parole officers) that create additional burdens, and students may find disclosing this information to be traumatizing or embarrassing.

How Colleges and Community Organizations Collaborate

In our preliminary conversations with the leaders of community organizations and higher education in prison programs and case study interviews with program administrators, it became clear that the programs that serve student reintegration the best make use of many of the best practices strategies outlined in the research:

<https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ecme-bni-evaluation-report-508c.pdf>.

¹³ Liam Dillon and Ben Poston, “New law has Californians with criminal records ‘quite hopeful’ they’ll finally find housing,” *LA Times*, 27 December 2023,

<https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2023-12-27/crime-free-housing-law-ban-state-law>.

- All of the programs we spoke with emphasized listening to the needs of the students they serve as a starting point.
- They gather student data and feedback and use it to drive decision-making and revise program services.
- Though they may not always use these terms to describe it, they often use a social work model to help identify and prioritize reintegration needs on an individual basis.
- They use assessment tools and techniques—in some cases a one-to-one interview with a peer mentor, navigator, or counselor, in other cases a questionnaire or structured form—to help determine individualized needs and barriers.
- Many employ former students and/or build mentorship programs or alumni networks to help foster community, inclusion, and informal support structures that will persist.
- The most successful programs coordinate with offices and services across their home campus, with community partners, and, in an ideal situation, with relevant state agencies.

Through these conversations, it also became clear that leaders in the field of reintegration services proactively understand how their program, their college, and their partnerships must work together to offer site specific, individualized services to support reintegration. In particular, participants frequently highlighted the importance of having a dedicated individual serving as a reentry navigator or coordinator. They echoed the research in noting that peers who had been through the reentry experience are particularly well-suited to serving in such a role. These positions frequently borrow from social work methods and perspectives and serve to provide individualized support for people who are reintegrating by connecting them to needed services, often through personal introductions and warm handoffs.¹⁴ The importance of roles like these cannot be overstated, because the information ecosystem on reentry resources is so disaggregated and difficult to navigate that localized, individualized knowledge is crucial. In some locations, as our landscape scan made clear

¹⁴ The Tennessee Higher Education Initiative has done much to increase awareness of the potential importance of this particular role, and has highlighted the State of Tennessee's Re-entry Navigators, which were created and funded through the Correctional Education Investment. They are among the leaders in the field in terms of best practices and documentation. For more on their approach, see: "Moving Forward: Resources and Tools for Tennesseans Transitioning from Incarceration," THEI, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f230830aa00c81307c8b59a/t/62da13900e1ec07c0c32e622/1658459138859/Moving+Forward+Guide_web.pdf.

to us, simply finding information about existing reentry services at all may be difficult. This is especially true in rural areas, where services might be accessible primarily through community connections or by word of mouth.

Below, we highlight the philosophy and approach of four institutions doing interesting and important work in the field of reentry and reintegration. These case studies emphasize just how different the structure and development of reintegration services offered by college in prison programs may be, depending on where they are located, what resources they have at their disposal, to what extent they are embedded in local communities, and what their relationships are with state agencies and local organizations. To ensure that we demonstrate just how different service providing programs might look, we've highlighted the work of one state consortium, two postsecondary education in prison programs from private institutions, and a post-release program housed in a community college.

Site Specific, Need Specific Approaches to Supporting Student Reintegration

Program Profile: New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP)

About the Program

Program Type: Statewide Consortium (currently four contributing universities)

Program Size: Estimated at 500 Students at a given time

Home institution: Rutgers University, operated in collaboration with Drew University, Princeton University, and Raritan Valley Community College

Location: New Jersey, operating a standard curriculum across five facilities

We discussed NJ-STEP's program structure, philosophy, student needs, and community partnership models with Regina Diamond-Rodriguez, director of transitions, and Chris Agans, the program's executive director.

Agans and Diamond-Rodriguez emphasized that the scope and scale of the program allow them to leverage a variety of resources on behalf of

students who are reintegrating. They noted that college campuses that are embedded in cities and connected to the surrounding community can be ideal places to support the reentry process because many of the key resources that reentering students need parallel services already developed, provided, and offered through campus.

About Reintegration Services and Partnerships

Agans and Diamond-Rodriguez highlighted three major areas where NJ-STEP provides relevant reintegration services. First, in addition to traditional college student support services—like counseling centers, student health centers, financial aid resources, tutoring, etc.—NJ-STEP benefits from having access to Rutgers University’s statewide resources, which also include community clinics and an office of disability services that can perform advocacy at the state level and provide assessments. Second, the program also works collaboratively with the New Jersey Department of Corrections and the New Jersey State Parole Board, and Agans and Diamond-Rodriguez emphasized that those partnerships are integral for providing housing through community programs, halfway houses, and small reentry support grants. They emphasized that in addition to brokering formal partnerships, these state agency programs also provide opportunities for NJ-STEP to further develop community partnerships. Finally, NJ-STEP supports alumni endeavors—and both Diamond-Rodriguez and Agans highlighted they consider NJ-STEP students as students-for-life and work to ensure that alumni feel engaged, connected, and supported. The alumni support the program provides can take many shapes: from providing scholarships for continued education beyond the program to connecting students and graduates to funding opportunities, working directly with entrepreneurial students beginning their own businesses or nonprofits to help provide services.

Community is the key to the approach, as Diamond-Rodriguez and Agans explained. To both develop a sense of community and get valuable feedback: “The one thing that really drives all reentry services is the community. We are a community. Everything we do is community driven. We do focus groups with students and alums to ask ‘how is this working?’ ... We need to do these focus groups to see what’s working and what’s not and be able to provide partner organizations that feedback.” NJ-STEP’s focus on developing a sense of community in the program, and working with the communities the program is embedded in stood out to their colleagues and were the reason we heard we should speak to them during exploratory interviews. In fact, Agans made a point of noting that STEP is

not a program, it is a commitment that Rutgers has made to its students; it is a community and a commitment that goes beyond the length of enrollment.

It is, however, the programmatic dedication to ongoing dialogue and feedback, and the practice of regularly gathering data and assessing program performance that stood out to us as particularly important practices among the field. The intentional establishment of an alumni network and alumni interaction within the program also paralleled intentional practices aimed at developing community, increasing a sense of student belonging, and providing peer mentorship and employment pathways that we heard about from other interviewees (Mneesha Gellman of the Emerson Prison Initiative) and from project advisers. As Agans told us, “We don’t do it all right” and “the best way to get critiqued is to talk to our students.”

NJ-STEP has a host of partnerships and relationships with external organizations, nonprofits, trade schools, and employers. Diamond-Rodriguez noted that it is difficult to neatly map all of their partnerships because they cultivate relationships among the community, seek partnerships as student needs arise, and may not actively partner with organizations again until new student needs arise. NJ-STEP, then, has a constellation of partnership types, with some formal partnerships utilizing memorandums of understanding with government agencies and nonprofits, and a variety of informal or semi-formal partnerships—what might be called “handshake partnerships.” For example, they currently have 16 employment and internship partners in diverse geographical locations throughout the state. They also refer students to existing organizations with which they do not have structured partnerships.

Agans and Diamond-Rodriguez highlighted one particularly noteworthy organizational partner with whom NJ-STEP has a long-standing relationship: the Reform Church of Highland Park Affordable Housing Corporation. NJ-STEP has partnered with the Reform Church of Highland Park Affordable Housing Corporation (RCHP-AHC) for 15 years to help provide reintegrating students with housing. Providing subsidized housing for students was the top reintegration need that Diamond-Rodriguez identified for the program, as well. RCHP-AHC was originally able to provide subsidized housing through a local grant, and their subsidized housing program and NJ-STEP have grown in parallel over the last decade and a half.

“There is no one housing solution. If there are five students you need five different solutions. The dorms alone aren’t the answer. Let go of the idea that there is a kind of silver bullet that will solve everything. You need to be thinking about a multi-pronged approach with fewer beds per solution.”

Advice for New Programs

When asked what advice they would give to programs just starting out or just beginning to think about offering students services for reintegration, Agans and Diamond-Rodriguez highlighted housing and employment as the most frequent needs. As Agans and Diamond-Rodriguez emphasized: “There is no one housing solution. If there are five students you need five different solutions. The dorms alone aren’t the answer. Let go of the idea that there is a kind of silver bullet that will solve everything. You need to be thinking about a multi-pronged approach with fewer beds per solution.” They recommended that individuals or programs beginning to think about college and community partnerships for reentering students start by working with campus partners and understanding the needs of the people you’re working with. For example, family housing might look different than dormitories and may feel more mature. Recovery housing might also afford a different option. Then, they suggest, you move on to consider what is available to subsidize housing and what organizations or agencies you can partner with. Most importantly, though, they recommended that programs talk to students and provide them with a menu and options to encourage agency. The process of securing housing for formerly incarcerated students is not easy or simple, and they emphasized that it may take many rounds of negotiations to obtain and deliver an option. Challenges may come from unexpected places, for example, managing to reach an agreement between probation and parole agencies and campus residential life. Each campus has different policies and a different appetite for risk, and it is important to discover early whether the campus is supportive of housing formerly incarcerated students or you need to seek outside solutions. Agans noted that, beyond housing and employment, other frequent student needs they encounter and help their students navigate include professional development and internships, technology literacy, basic needs, financial aid, mental health counseling, and, importantly, community and a sense of belonging.

Program Profile: Emerson Prison Initiative

About the Program

Program Type: Postsecondary Education Program in Prison

Program Size: 30-40 Students

Home Institution: Emerson College; Private not-for-profit college with roughly 5,000 students

Location: Massachusetts, Offering classes in Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk (MCI Norfolk)

We discussed the Emerson Prison Initiative's program structure, philosophy, student needs, and community partnership models with EPI's executive director, Mneesha Gellman, and reentry coordinator, Betsey Chace.

The Emerson Prison Initiative has existed since 2017 and has been a credit bearing program since its inception. Logistical limitations and the fact that many of the early students in the program were serving long sentences meant that reintegration concerns emerged as the program developed and they saw that students needed connections back to the program on the outside. For the first three years of the program, Gellman ran it alone, without funding or additional support, outside of technical assistance from the Bard Prison Initiative. That work began as ad hoc, volunteer work, in partnership with the community. In 2021, EPI officially started the Reentry and College Outside Program (RECOUP) to formalize and institutionalize that work.

About Reintegration Services and Partnerships

Gellman and Chace emphasized that the reentry programming they have been developing is not intended to duplicate or provide existing services but to facilitate connection. They noted that because the campus is in the Boston area, there are a number of organizations and service providers, and the challenge for reintegrating students lies in navigating bureaucratic obstacles to getting those services. They see the reentry side of EPI's program as being aimed at "filling in the gaps that people might potentially fall through," to quote Gellman. As reentry coordinator, this work falls to Chace, who described her role as supporting students at the Boston campus navigate all the steps to be a traditional student, building and developing tools like a reintegration checklist, and developing and maintaining relationships with resources and organizations that already exist. Gellman also highlighted the importance of Chace's prior experience and connections as a volunteer and advocate and her deep knowledge and understanding of the state level carceral infrastructure, which she noted have been integral to Chace's role and the success of RECOUP.

Emerson Prison Initiative collaborates with a variety of offices on campus to ensure that students who are reintegrating access and use existing resources, such as the registrar, financial aid, the student health center,

counseling services, student accessibility services, and the writing center. They are also in talks to further develop access to these resources for students receiving education on the inside.

The initiative has a few formal partnerships. Emerson Prison Initiative partners with Brandeis Education Justice Initiative and the nonprofit organization Partakers, which offers services through two major program areas: one providing direct mentorship support services for college students who are incarcerated and the other providing a variety of reentry support services. They also work closely with Justice 4 Housing, which provides affordable housing and family reunification support for people who are formerly incarcerated. The initiative also works with the mayor's office in Boston. Importantly, Chace noted that the initiative's partnerships with Justice 4 Housing and the mayor's office help formerly incarcerated students access federal public subsidized housing on appeal, which would normally be unavailable to them because of a federal ban which restricts people with conviction histories from accessing such housing. The Department of Housing and Urban Development recently proposed a rule change to the relevant regulations, but it has not yet gone into effect.¹⁵

Chace noted that because of policy and available resources, many of the reintegrating students have access to temporary housing for three to six months, which helps to mitigate some of the immediate need for housing felt so acutely by the leaders of other programs and services to whom we spoke. Gellman and Chace both described the program's service development and provision process as being student-driven, as Chace put it: "What we focus on is what students ask us for." In their case, that is assistance getting phones or state IDs, a food pantry and access to affordable food, and technical assistance with applications and documentation. They noted that one key area where services are still in development for them is creating a community of support for reintegrating students, students finishing degrees on the main campus, and EPI alumni in the area. EPI already provides some structured activities and engagements with alumni, but Gellman and Chace said that they are at work on wellness workshops and expanding structured opportunities for students and alumni to engage and develop relationships.

¹⁵ Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Reducing Barriers to HUD-Assisted Housing," 24 CFR Parts 5, 245, 882, 960, 966, and 982, 10 April 2024, <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2024-06218/p-1>.

Advice for New Programs

When asked what advice they might give to programs or organizations just beginning to think about providing reintegration services of college students who are or were incarcerated, Gellman suggested they ask their students and alumni what services they need and perform a needs assessment of the community that they serve. She emphasized the importance of both letting the community define its own needs and build services and programming in conversation with them to help address those needs. She also suggested that they take good stock of what services and programs are already available in the area and whether students are aware of and able to access them, reiterating the idea that programs should not duplicate services that already exist. Chace concurred, saying “listen to the students and try not to make assumptions.” She went on to explain how trivial-seeming assumptions can harm students, noting that some of Emerson Prison Initiative’s students on the main campus did not have cars or vehicles upon release. It might be easy to assume that a program can just help such students access and navigate public transportation; however, they have learned that many of their students are not safe taking public transit and finding or helping them obtain alternate forms of transportation is necessary. “Listen to the students” and “check yourself on assumptions,” she reiterated.

Program Profile: Washington University in St. Louis Prison Education Project

About the Program

Program Type: Postsecondary Education in Prison Project

Program Size: Estimated at 90 students at a given time

Home institution: Washington University in St. Louis, private not-for-profit university with roughly 15,000 students

Location: St. Louis, MO; Operating in Missouri Eastern Correctional Center (MECC), Women’s Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center (WERDCC)

We heard that the Washington University in St. Louis Prison Education Project was partnering with community organizations to develop innovative services and programs that leveraged the moderately sized private university’s resources to help serve the community in St. Louis and the

surrounding area. In order to learn more about the program’s structure, philosophy, student needs, and community partnership models, we spoke with its interim co-program administrator, Savannah Sowell, and Jami Ake, a founding member of the Washington University in St. Louis Prison Education Project and current teaching professor in the Interdisciplinary Project in the Humanities.

Ake was a founding member of the program in 2013 and brought experience from working in the survivor space to ask what it means to leverage the resources of Washington University in St. Louis to serve the community and live up to the university’s stated ideals. She emphasized that the program’s approach was to bring a social justice, student-centered, and survivor-centered orientation to students. That is, they emphasize the student as a singular individual, with specific needs, and specific guidance that does not end with a diploma or a credential. According to Ake, “It’s all part of that whole package of student-centered work. We follow our students for years after they leave and have a philosophy that we are in a lifelong partnership. It just so happens that what happens next is a lot more complicated for folks who are on the inside.” Ake also noted that her training in social work and previous work in the survivor community has been instrumental to designing reentry services.

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About Reintegration Services and Partnerships

Ake and Sowell credited the project’s Reentry Advocate, Denis Shine, with creating a rough hierarchy of reintegration needs from roughly five recurring core needs identified. Shine calls these core needs “the magic five.” Reintegrating students need to figure out: (1) where they will live; (2) what they will do for a job, which they recognize is at least initially limited by the way that parole often functions; (3) emotional support, family support, and health insurance; (4) SNAP benefits and/or affordable food sources; (5) ongoing legal concerns and documentation. Each reintegrating student has the opportunity to participate in reentry

planning, where a reentry coordinator will utilize an interview and a form assessment to determine what needs are most urgent and to produce a tailored letter and plan for each reintegrating individual.

Ake emphasized that one feature of the project from its inception was to ensure that students were invited to and felt welcome on the main campus upon reentry. Like Gellman, she noted that this was a situation that did not come up in the first years of the program, but when students starting reintegrating the project was faced with making campus accessible to them and making campus life welcoming and meaningful. Ake explained that many of their campus partnerships were formed through mission alignment, in trying to make the campus an inclusive, welcoming, and meaningful place for nontraditional and diverse students. In that sense, they have worked with offices and centers including the office of diversity and inclusion, the career center, the school of social work, the library, an on-campus reentry working group, and a growing network of students on campus. Ake and Sowell highlighted how unexpected connections and confluences can sometimes create meaningful environments and communities. They explained how in a previous program Washington University students from the main campus worked as tutors on the inside and developed meaningful professional relationships with students who were incarcerated. When the incarcerated students began reintegrating, their former tutors became resources and catalysts in the formation of community: introducing reintegrating students to other students, connecting them to resources and groups, and ensuring that there were familiar faces on campus.

Ake and Sowell noted a variety of partnerships with external organizations in the community and emphasized the program's attempts to ensure that it works in and with the surrounding community. They again credited Denis Shine with his work growing, expanding, developing, and constantly evolving relationships with external partners. They mentioned that Criminal Justice Ministries is a key partner who provides a variety of services for individuals who are reintegrating. Keyway is an involved partner that helps women find housing and sober housing alternatives. The Reentry Collective, a student-founded mutual aid collective, is also an active partner. In addition to partnering with local organizations, the Washington University in St. Louis Prison Education Project also publishes a reentry guide for the broader St. Louis community, consolidating information about local resources. Shine is constantly looking for new partnerships and actively builds relationships with organizations,

programs, and services that do not yet fill specific student needs with the understanding that a student may in the future request such services. This proactive approach ensures that the program is actively engaged in the broader community of reintegration service providers. Moreover, the project also provides ongoing workshops and educational programming that it shares with and delivers to partner organizations and providers in the community, ensuring that university resources serve the community directly.

Advice for New Programs

Ake and Sowell noted that it is important to understand when students are reintegrating, “it turns out that the little stuff is the big stuff,” to quote Ake. That is, because students face so many complex challenges at the same time, reintegration can seem overwhelming. They caution service providers working with a reintegrating student not to assume that a reaction or response to challenge or barrier is disproportionate, and to understand that there are a host of intangible challenges and issues that students are grappling with.

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Like Agans and Diamond-Rodriguez, and Gellman and Chace, Ake and Sowell also emphasize the importance of starting with the students. “Ask your stakeholders, your constituents: what do you need? And what do we, the program and service providers, see that our stakeholders and constituents don’t that they might need? How can you manage expectations around that?” Ake offered. Sowell emphasized that “Not all starting programs will be able to have a full-time reentry person, but having someone who can be dedicated to reentry and to planning for it, even when it isn’t necessarily happening right now and might not happen for a time, is important. Thinking about current concerns, future concerns, and planning for people’s milestones is crucial to being prepared when needs do arise. Try to plan and plot needs before they are crises. Try to hold space for that as a continuous component of the program.”

Program Profile: College Gateway Program at Red Rocks Community College

About the Program

Program Type: Reintegration and College Inclusion Program

Program Size: Roughly 100 students at a given time, (varies by semester)

Home institution: Red Rocks Community College

Location: Lakewood, CO

In addition to speaking to individuals leading reentry initiatives associated with prison education programs, we also wanted to make sure that we addressed other potential college-community partnerships for reentry. In particular, we were interested in finding colleges that take a deliberate approach to serving nontraditional student populations and have programs specifically designed to assist students who are formerly incarcerated reintegrate to society, transition to campus, and find a sense of community and belonging.¹⁶ In this context, we spoke with Catherine Lachman, coordinator of the Gateway Program at Red Rocks Community College.

The College Gateway Program arose out of a grant funded project that originally used Lachman's experience in the criminal legal system—first as a police officer of thirty years, and then supplemented by her experience in retirement as a leader of a community policing project focused on diversion. As that grant project was winding down, the then-president of Red Rocks Community College tasked Lachman with building a program specifically designed to help students who were reintegrating and transitioning to the community college campus. The program officially served its first students in 2006 and touts how its programming directly correlates to reductions in the central eight criminogenic needs and

¹⁶ We also had an exploratory interview with leadership in Project Impact at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. While logistical challenges and heavy representation in our case studies from colleges on the East Coast precluded us from featuring them as a case study, we would like to highlight and acknowledge that Project Impact's approach to serving system-impacted students broadly, instead of focusing just on reintegrating or formerly incarcerated students, is novel, noteworthy, and may be worth considering for community colleges serving large nontraditional student populations looking to address intersectional barriers to student success.

reduces recidivism.¹⁷ This language, which echoes the framing of Risk, Needs, Responsivity paradigms commonly used in correctional reentry planning and assessment, makes program success concretely legible to correctional entities. Lachman emphasized more individual and human-centered measures of success as well, noting that students have gone on to earn advanced degrees and the program has hired previous students. In the program's first year, it served 111 students, though the population of students directly served each year varies.

About Reintegration Services and Partnerships

The College Gateway Program utilizes a consolidated services model to offer financial aid and advising in the program office, ensuring that students who are formerly incarcerated receive guidance from individuals familiar with and embedded in the community who also understand their specific needs. In addition to having a dedicated space where students can gather, speak with program staff, and work with embedded advisers, the program also offers three, three-credit courses aimed at helping students transition to college and plot the course of their education and career. Lachman highlighted how important making space to process trauma and heal is for the program and explained that part of the mission of the program was to help the college understand that the issues and experiences faced by reintegrating and system-impacted students are complex and manifold, and it is unrealistic and unfair for the college to “take them on and expect them to make it work.” As she explained, “they need to know that we care about them.”

The program has a variety of partners and considers part of its role is to educate the broader college community, for example, by working with the theater department of the college to develop personal essays from program courses into public-facing theater. The College Gateway Program previously worked with Jefferson County in Colorado with a mutual referral program—where students in the county were referred to College Gateway and the program could refer students to the county for assistance getting food, clothing, and housing support. They currently partner with Aurora Mental Health and refer students to local organizations in their area to

¹⁷ For more, see Debbie Gowensmith, Neil Gowensmith, Kourtney Osentoski, Laura Blackmond, and Miriam Nowrouzi, “Returning Citizens Through a Different Lens,” The Denver Forensic Institute for Research, Service, & Training, University of Denver, Presentation, <https://www.rccc.edu/sites/default/files/DUphotovoice2018%20PDF.pdf>.

source basic student needs.

The program maintains strong working relationships with the Department of Corrections and the Department of Probation and Parole. Lachman noted, though, that their working relationship with the Department of Corrections has evolved over time in order to protect student privacy. Red Rocks Community College now also offers noncredit courses inside correctional facilities.

Advice for New Programs

When asked what advice she has for programs just beginning to provide or plan similar services, Lachman emphasized “you need to get the community involved” and “start by helping them heal. The whole thing that makes this program work is that students feel safe.” She also highlighted that it is important to make sure that people leading and working in the program have lived experience and understand community needs: “You just have to know how much students in the program have to deal with and what they go through.”

Conclusion

Approaching Best Practices and Developing Future Partnerships

We need better, more granular data before we can say with confidence what best practices are when it comes to college and community organization partnerships for student reentry. And the field has reason to be optimistic that good data is coming: with the reinstatement of federal Pell Grant funding, colleges and corrections are now gathering meaningful data about student demographics, retention, and success which should become available in the near future. There is much work to be done in considering what student success measures to track, how, who should have access to them, and where that data should be housed in order to protect students, but that work is underway.

After speaking with leaders in the field, it is clear that the programs seen as most innovative, interesting, and successful share a number of

features in common: they already gather meaningful student-level data, they listen to student experiences and needs, they provide individualized services based on student needs, they collaborate with partners that already excel in providing services and help students to access them, and they develop a strong sense of community and inclusion.

While many of the partnerships that we heard about were informal, scaling services and ensuring that state agencies and departments, main college campuses, and programs that directly serve students who are or were incarcerated will likely necessitate creating more formal agreements—such as contracts or memoranda of understanding. The next phase of this research project, set to begin in early 2025, will explore exactly how partnerships between community organizations and colleges are developed and whether there are any paradigmatic structures, formulas, or documents that can help expedite or ease the process of partnership formation. We will work with a cohort of 10 colleges and 10 community organizations to either develop, expand, or deepen reintegration service partnerships.

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Appendix: Terms and Concepts

The term reentry refers to a vast array of needs, services, and programs and a pivotal moment in the lives of individuals who have been incarcerated. While the term “reentry” has functioned as a catchall moniker for this field, we also came across two other noteworthy terms: reintegration and transition. Despite the fact that these words are often used somewhat interchangeably, we find that they can serve three important and distinct purposes in understanding reentry as a moment in an individual’s life, a process, and a context.

Below, we offer some provisional definitions below for those interested in thinking more about the different dimensions of reentry. When collapsing these frames of thinking or talking about the holistic process, we prefer the term reintegration for its focus on a process unfolding over time.

- **Reentry** refers to the moment when an individual leaves incarceration and makes their way back into broader society. It is about a moment in time and a movement in space.
- **Reintegration** denotes the process that it takes for an individual to successfully rejoin the community.
- **Transition** refers to making moving from college in prison to becoming a college student on the outside, which carries with it a unique set of institutional barriers.