



Uneven Terrain

Learning Spaces in Higher Education in Prison

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ITHAKA S+R

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Introduction

Prison spaces and educational equity

How can prison education programs fulfill their obligation to provide their students with an educational experience that is as close as possible to the one of students on main campuses?

In recent years, the Justice Department has made major investments to address reported substandard conditions of confinement, with federal funding becoming available to “transform prison cultures, climates, and spaces; research and evaluate correctional culture and climate; and research and evaluate jails.”¹ At the same time, a confluence of other factors—including new technology uptake spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, an influx of federal funding for state digital equity initiatives, and the reinstatement of federal Pell Grant funding for incarcerated students—have pushed new funding into the correctional landscape. We are at a critical juncture, where change is happening rapidly in a space historically resistant to it.

With the reinstatement of federal Pell Grant funding for students who are incarcerated in June 2023, research, advocacy, education, and correctional organizations are all reexamining how higher education in prison is provided and, especially, how its impact and success are measured. A major question for the field is taking shape: what does equitable access to quality instruction look like in this context? How can prison education programs fulfill their obligation to provide their students with an educational experience that is as close as possible to the one of students on main campuses?

Thus far, our research into equitable access has focused largely on two areas: instructional delivery and practices, and technological access and use. This report, part of a larger project undertaken with Ennead Lab and supported by Ascendium Education Group, broadens and deepens our interrogation of that central question of educational access and equity by exploring the role of space, architecture, and design in the context of

¹ For an overview of the Justice Department’s recent work in this area, see Lauren-Brooke Eisen’s and Ram Subramanian’s blog post for The Brennan Center for Justice, “Justice Department Making Historic Investment in Prison and Jail Reform,” updated 18 December 2023, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/justice-department-making-historic-investment-prison-and-jail-reform>.

higher education in prison.² Understanding that the actual physical spaces of the prison system and the infrastructure that serves it are both aging and already strained by changes in population, policy, and technology, this report explores issues of educational access and equity by interrogating how carceral spaces impact student learning inside prisons.

In the first section of this interim report, we discuss how outdated prison infrastructure hinders the educational experiences and outcomes of incarcerated students. This underscores the need for innovative solutions to address environmental challenges and enhance educational equity in state prison systems, especially as the restoration of Pell grants broadens access to higher education. The second section of the report builds on 25 semi-structured interviews with former students, instructors, and department of corrections (DOC) officials, offering a summary of their perspectives on educational spaces in prisons. It highlights how widely educational experiences differ within and across higher education in prison programs, and details both current challenges and potential opportunities to improve the educational experience for incarcerated students. Key findings from these interviews include:

1. Factors beyond classroom architecture and design influence how students experience educational spaces and, ultimately, their educational journey. Elements such as facility operations, poor study materials, relationships with correctional staff, and security concerns hinder the ability of students to complete assignments, engage with course content, and fully benefit from the educational programs offered.
2. Most prison classrooms are inadequate to serve as spaces for learning and education, featuring uncomfortable furniture, poor lighting, ventilation and noise control, and lacking basic technology. These conditions create distractions that may diminish the ability of incarcerated students to focus.
3. Like those attending college on the outside, incarcerated students need functional, flexible, and inclusive educational spaces. This

² So far, the issue is most pointedly raised and illustrated in Vera Institute for Justice and MASS Design Group's 2018 collaboration, "Reimagining Prison," which explored the history of prison architecture and its relation to prison ideology and reform. Vera Institute of Justice and MASS Design Group, "Reimagining Prison: Design Strategies to Increase Public Safety and Improve Societal Well Being," eds. Cara Compani, Sarah Lustbader, Jeffrey Mansfield, Michael Murphy, Fred Patrick, Cindy Reed, and Regina Yang, Vera Institute of Justice, 2018, <https://www.vera.org/downloads/mass-design-group-reimagining-prison-booklet.pdf>.

requires rethinking classroom layouts, designing non-instructional spaces to support learning (including libraries and personal desks inside cells), incorporating technology, and ensuring accessibility to meet diverse learning needs inside the prison.

Prison Environments, Educational Spaces, and Learning Impacts

Environment matters

Ithaka S+R works closely with higher education in prison educators and administrators, students and alumni, correctional leaders, and our colleagues at other research organizations. In discussions about technology, self-censorship, and instructional practices with stakeholders from these groups, we have learned just how deeply challenging spatial, design, and architectural limitations can be for higher education in prison. Based on these preliminary conversations, we realized the need for new research on the intersection of prison architecture and design, instructional environments and learning, and instructional best practices.

The aging nature of the US prison infrastructure has led to conditions that often do not align with guidelines for best practices in prison administration or education.³ The structural layout, architectural design and construction, interior decoration and design, and building infrastructure (i.e., HVAC, plumbing, electric, cable, internet) of prisons differs dramatically by era and, as the Vera Institute of Justice and MASS Design Group note, aligns to some extent with the ideology from the time

³ For more, see: Lily Berhnheimer, Rachel O'Brien, and Richard Barnes, "Wellbeing in Prison Design: A Guide," *Matter Architecture*, December 2017, https://www.matterarchitecture.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/421-op-02_Design-toolkit-report-online.pdf; Kelly Blakinger, "Do Texas Prison Conditions Violate Human Rights Standards? One Scottish Court Says Yes," *The Marshall Project*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/03/17/do-texas-prison-conditions-violate-human-rights-standards-one-scottish-court-says-yes>; and Vera and MASS Design's "Reimagining Prisons."

period the prison was constructed.⁴ Examining the history of prison architecture also reveals a persistent tension between two competing value-sets, which Yvonne Jewkes and others have delineated as “punitive” and “rehabilitative” approaches to incarceration.⁵ This tension still plays out in discussions around educational costs and opportunity for individuals on the inside, feeding friction between warehousing people convicted of crimes and increasing educational access and opportunity—which data reliably shows reduces recidivism rates and improves the quality of life of people who are released from prison.⁶

A growing body of research suggests that persistent environmental issues inside of prisons are barriers to well-being and negatively impact learning.

A growing body of research suggests that persistent environmental issues inside of prisons are barriers to well-being and negatively impact learning. This point is made most neatly in a 2019 study from St. John et al which focuses on “recognizing the limits of rehabilitative efforts in debilitating settings.”⁷ The authors highlight several factors that negatively impact learning inside prisons, including overcrowded classrooms, competition for educational spaces, the absence of gardens or greenery, limited mobility, and increased security checks for students transitioning between spaces. Additionally, environmental issues such as dilapidated facilities, persistent loud noise, poor lighting, temperature control problems, and inadequate air quality further contribute to an environment that hinders effective learning.

⁴ Vera and MASS Design, “Reimagining Prisons.”

⁵ Yvonne Jewkes, “Prison Design and the Need for Reform,” *Nature Human Behavior* 1 (2017): 846-848.

⁶ This opinion piece from the New York Times Editorial Board neatly summarizes some of the common punitive-oriented resistance to offering quality education in prisons: “A College Education for Prisoners,” *New York Times*, 16 February 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/16/opinion/a-college-education-for-prisoners.html>.

⁷ Victor J. St. John, Kwan-Lamar Blount-Hill, Douglas Evans, Dave Ayers, and Samantha Allard, “Architecture and Correctional Services: A Facilities Approach to Treatment,” *Prison Journal* 99, no. 6 (2019): 748–770, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885519877402>.

Achieving college standards in disparate conditions

Each state's prison system, policies, governance, and facilities are different and face unique and complex challenges in solving spatial and environmental problems, retrofitting spaces, and redesigning learning environments. For example, several states in the US South face increasingly urgent temperature control issues, as prisons designed in a time when air conditioning was not persistently needed now face dangerous conditions in the wake of global climate change.⁸ Similarly, differences in the construction of individual facilities will have major impacts on how prisons can redesign learning spaces to increase educational equity and opportunities for their students. For example, we know that the thick, concrete construction and the remote rural location of some prisons make installing expensive high-capacity internet infrastructures particularly challenging and, in some cases, make Wi-Fi virtually unusable.

Colleges, like the prison facilities described above, also vary greatly from location to location. However, through building codes, accreditation standards, and a general sense of competition between universities to attract the best students, there is a level of consistency between the educational spaces and experiences provided to students. Equally, within a college, there is an expectation that the quality of education across majors and student populations is maintained. This same expectation should and must be extended to the incarcerated student population; they receive the same federal grants and upon completion of a program, a recognized degree from the same university. As such, while we have acknowledged that the conditions across prison facilities vary greatly, the expected conditions within educational spaces should not. Based on the research we have done to date and the interviews we conducted, we present a variety of tools which can be deployed to elevate existing spaces, or in rare instances provide new ones, to the level expected of a postsecondary education.

⁸ Kendra Pierre-Louis, "Prisons Aren't Remotely Ready for Extreme Weather," *Bloomberg*, 8 July 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-08/texas-heat-dome-shows-prisons-aren-t-ready-for-climate-change-extreme-weather>.

Methodology

This project employed qualitative methodologies to explore student, faculty, and administrator experiences of educational spaces in higher education in prison programming. Ithaka S+R and Ennead Lab collaborated to develop a series of semi-structured interview guides, informed by both Ithaka S+R's and Ennead's relevant area expertise and the expansive landscape review. The guides focused on educational spaces within the prison facilities and how higher education in prison programs and their students navigated these spaces and the department of correction policies and systems that were in place. We were interested in learning how accessible educational spaces were for students inside and how various environmental and design barriers within these spaces impacted student success and learning outcomes. (See the Appendix for more information and a copy of the interview guides.) The interview guides were then evaluated for clarity and appropriateness through a series of test interviews.

We used immediate networks, social media, and snowball sampling to recruit participants for the interviews, which lasted from 45 minutes to an hour in length and were conducted and recorded over Zoom. We do not identify participants and have de-identified the information gathered to encourage candid responses and in recognition of the sensitive nature of the topic, especially for students who are or were recently incarcerated. Currently or formerly incarcerated students were also compensated with an honorarium of \$50 for sharing their experiences.

We conducted 25 interviews, and the recordings were transcribed by a third-party service. After importing transcripts into Dedoose, a qualitative coding software, we developed a coding protocol to analyze interview data. We then used this protocol to code the interviews, ensuring consistency in our analysis. From the coded data, we selected key excerpts to identify common themes and glean insights.

While this report cannot purport to be representative of the whole field's experience of space in higher education in prison programming, we hope the findings will serve as a place to begin reconsidering the role of

educational spaces and environmental impacts in higher education in prison, broadly, and in the development of policy, the assessment of programs, and the consideration of educational equity, more specifically.

Findings from Interviews on Educational Spaces in Prisons

Key Finding 1: Facility operations, resources, and staff impact access to and efficacy of educational spaces

From the diverse pool of interviewees, we learned that the accessibility of educational spaces and programs varies greatly across facilities, and that this does not depend uniquely on classroom design and architectural elements. Rather, factors such as the type of facility in which a program is housed, regulations around movement, classroom materials, security, technology, and even relationships between the educational program and correctional staff can facilitate or hinder students' access to, and experience of, educational spaces. Below, we provide some examples of factors related to facility operations, resources, and staff that our interviewees described as having an impact on the accessibility of classrooms and other educational spaces.

Competing priorities for students

For many students, scheduling conflicts with other types of programming meant that participating in a higher education in prison program can result in trade-offs. Because class times are often selected based on room availability and DOC and faculty staffing, rather than student schedules, students might be forced to miss out on classes because they need to comply with other requirements, such as work or non-educational programming. Some of our interviewees also talked about how class times interfered with mealtimes and even medication distribution. As an interviewee described, *“because [classes] would run to 6:30pm and they*

start feeding at 5 o'clock and they shut it down by 6pm, it was either a choice of getting to class on time or missing a meal." Given the many requirements incarcerated students often face, flexibility in class scheduling and access is crucial to help them maintain a consistent learning routine.

Relationships with correctional staff

Relationships between higher education programs and correctional staff were also mentioned by several interviewees as a vital factor that could facilitate, or hinder, students' ability to access educational spaces. The quality of these relationships—and whether correctional staff in a given facility were supportive of educational programming—could impact students' ability to leave their dorm or pod, pass through security, and move through the facility to attend class or reach their study space in a timely fashion. In some cases, student and faculty mobility could even differ from day to day inside the same facility, depending on which correctional officer was working. Many respondents shared stories of being pulled out of class for various reasons and often not being “called out” or let out of their pod for class by correctional officers. According to one interviewee *“It just depends on your CO [Correctional Officer], and whether they like you or not.”*

Relationships with correctional administration and staff also influenced the ability of higher education in prison programs to secure space to conduct their classes. Some education staff members, for instance, talked about the importance of maintaining positive relationships and building trust with correctional staff to move freely to class, and to allow them to bring in necessary class material. As one interviewee stated, *“I think a lot of our access to space has felt governed by the availability of correctional officer labor...[and] the head teacher labor as well. It seems like as DOC has trusted us more, we've been able to hold classes in the evenings, for example, when the head teacher is not there anymore to supervise the classes or to supervise the getting of materials.”* Program staff who were not able to build such trust—as in a case where the educational director was seen to favor general education over higher education—could end up being assigned smaller classrooms or forced to hold class at inconvenient times for both faculty and students.

Beyond trust and relationships, staff availability can determine space accessibility within prison. If correctional staff is not available, classes are canceled, presenting challenges for both faculty and students. As a former

incarcerated student revealed, *“There are classrooms available [here], but we were usually not able to access them due to a shortage of staff... [class was canceled] for lack of someone being present to monitor us.”*

Security

Access to classes was occasionally limited or changed due to security concerns or procedures. For example, one interviewee mentioned that *“a lot of times there would be security issues...they would have to close everything. Everybody would have to go back...and then they would just cancel class after that. The classes were canceled quite frequently because of that. Maybe once or twice a week.”* In addition, security-related changes in class schedules often lead to missed classes, interrupted learning, and disruptions in the classroom if students are joining late. Instructors also face challenges maintaining a consistent teaching schedule if there are frequent disruptions caused by security procedures.

Access to study materials

Our interviewees reported varied access to study materials inside classrooms across different higher education programs. A few staff members told us that their programs had dedicated college textbooks or reading material available for their students, either located in the general library or in the education wing on campus, but even when textbooks were available inside or near classrooms, they were usually outdated, and students were not always able to take them out of the classroom for studying and completing assignments.

Storage issues

Most students and educational staff interviewed said they would make photocopies of the assignments or book pages and bring them into the facility for class. While having more supplies was generally welcomed by students, that could also become a problem when people needed to store educational material in their dorms or pods since it runs counter to limits for personal belongings. In most facilities, people have a small tote or box they can store under their bunks and are only allowed to have a certain number of books in their possession at any time. Some formerly incarcerated students mentioned that they could keep only between 10-15 books in storage, while one former student mentioned that they had a 50-page limit for their personal locker. Another formerly incarcerated student also illustrated the challenges of maintaining educational materials in a limited space by highlighting that *“you had to fit all your*

personal property within four cubic feet, your personal books had to fit in with your hygiene stuff, personal clothing, etc.”

Technology

Some students only had access to pencil and paper, while others had access to computer labs, or might have laptops or tablets.

Most educational staff we interviewed mentioned that access to technology for students in their classrooms could vary significantly. Some students only had access to pencil and paper, while others had access to computer labs, or might have laptops or tablets. One interviewee mentioned that their facility had a “*typewriter lab... It’s not a computer lab, but a typewriter lab that the students can occasionally use, but we don’t book it for classes, and they don’t have consistent access to it.*”

Four programs we spoke with had computers in the classrooms, but only two had personal laptops available for students to use either inside the classroom or to check out. Laptops had no internet access, so they were primarily used to type up papers or homework assignments. This lack of access to information severely limits the scope of the work students can accomplish, both inside and outside the classroom, as this former student illustrates:

As of current, within the Federal system, there’s almost no internet access. The only access that you’ll get is through a core links program which only provides you with email and as crazy as it sounds, you don’t even have features such as copy and paste and selecting text to copy and paste...it’s things that you take for granted but then when you have to sit down in front of a computer and pay \$0.05 for every minute that you type and you can’t copy and you can’t paste... it makes it really difficult to do anything. But they also won’t let you get materials in digital either. So, the only way you can actually pursue a post-secondary education is to find a university that still has an extremely outdated paper course program where they will mail you all the details or you have to have somebody on the outside who’s willing to support you in a way that they will...print everything off, they will mail it to you. And then you have to hope that you have professors who are understanding enough to not hold you to that same time frame.

Although most higher education programs had libraries with computers or computer labs that students could use, staff did mention that these devices were available to the entire prison population, so the amount of time their students were able to access them was minimal. Some students

also had access to tablets, and some were able to use them to complete their schoolwork. Copiers or printers were not usually available—one participant revealed that while they were told there was a printer they could use, it was usually locked up and not accessible.

Key Finding 2: Physical conditions of classrooms often hinder the educational experience

While the operational and organizational factors examined above have an impact on the experience of educational spaces inside prison, the central theme in all our interviews was the importance of physical conditions of the classrooms themselves—such as their size, location, furniture, ventilation, lighting, and temperature control—as well as conditions and availability of other learning spaces, and how those affected the learning experience. Interviewees brought up how issues like noise, outdated infrastructure, and inadequate maintenance, for instance, created uncomfortable and distracting conditions inside classrooms. Many also emphasized the importance of study spaces beyond the classroom, from libraries to computer labs and even chapels. The following section presents our main findings, examining various types of environmental and infrastructure challenges.

Classroom sizes and location

Interviewees mentioned that most classrooms could accommodate between 10-25 students, with larger spaces sometimes available. Some interviewees mentioned that when larger rooms are available, they are often used for multiple classes being held concurrently, which can result in noise issues. As one interviewee explained, *“we used to have a [much] larger capacity, but it wasn't as conducive to a good classroom, because it was just kind of divided in half of this large room. So, there was always a lot of competing noise between lecturers and students.”* The larger concurrent classes often led to overcrowded conditions which made it difficult for students to concentrate and for instructors to manage the class effectively.

The location of classrooms also varied, with some interviewees mentioning that classrooms were in separate buildings, former visiting rooms, designated areas in a gym, etc. One interviewee added that *“the*

education building itself is the former morgue and sort of hospital from the epileptic asylum era.” This detail highlights how educational spaces in prison are often retrofitted into existing facilities, sometimes with complicated histories. The different locations of classrooms can directly impact accessibility for both students and instructors. Some sites may be less conducive to learning due to distractions or logistical challenges, affecting the overall effectiveness of the educational programs.

The location of a classroom can impact students with disabilities or ongoing health issues since inaccessible classrooms create physical barriers that limit participation and engagement.

The location of a classroom can impact students with disabilities or ongoing health issues since inaccessible classrooms create physical barriers that limit participation and engagement. An instructor illustrated this by noting that *“We just had a student who was walking with a cane for a while and then went and had back surgery and came back in a wheelchair and his friends in the class hauled him up the flights of stairs in his wheelchair to get him into the classroom... it's not an accessible space.”* A former incarcerated student also noted that if you were *“wheelchair bound, more than likely, you weren't going to attend college...They were going to put you out at a unit where there wasn't college. So, by default you were going to be stuck.”* This underscores the need for accessible classrooms that can accommodate all students, ensuring that physical barriers don't hinder their educational progress.

Furniture

Many interviewees mentioned that furniture arrangements inside classrooms often appeared “random,” mixing uncomfortable desks and chairs that were mismatched in height. As a former student mentioned, *“The chairs were [all] different heights, they were all different kinds of desks. It really was just like people threw a bunch of classroom supplies together into a room and then whatever you got was what you got.”* Another student said: *“When you arrive in the classroom, it's the most random assortment of seating and surfaces. It's like there's some...old school standalone desks with the attached seats with the attached desk. There are some trapezoids, there's some long tables, there's some circles and you just kind of have to jam them all together and figure out a seating*

solution that works.” In addition, classrooms typically featured fixed tables or desks and detachable chairs. Movable furniture, which could be rearranged to facilitate different teaching styles, like group setups for seminars, was rarer. Even when in use, some facilities had policies against such flexible arrangements, due to security concerns, which ended up overriding educational needs.

Many interviewees mentioned that maintenance and cleanliness varied, with some classrooms in older facilities having even more worn-out furniture. Also, several interviewees noted that the haphazard classroom setups disrupted the creation of a cohesive educational environment, and many observed that uncomfortable furniture distracted students and hindered their ability to focus.

Access to educational furniture—such as whiteboards, chalkboards, and projectors—was generally limited. Several staff and students reported dealing with whiteboards or chalkboards that were too small, in poor condition, or lacked erasers and writing instruments. These conditions made it harder for instructors to convey information clearly, and presented additional barriers for students who might need their assignments presented visually in order to interact with and digest complex instructional materials.

Environmental conditions: temperature, ventilation, lighting and sound

The presence or absence of windows, and their importance for natural light and ventilation, were often mentioned. Several interviewees described classrooms in which windows were hardly accessible—too elevated, or with thick screens—resulting in poor ventilation and light. Others mentioned that many of the classrooms in which they taught or learned lacked windows altogether. Classroom lighting was often described as “poor,” either too dim or too bright. An instructor described how lighting affected visibility by mentioning that *“the lighting is bad. The room with windows, the projector is very washed out and hard to see...the lighting is dim enough that it's really depressing.”* Several interviewees also mentioned that poor ventilation and lighting hindered comfort and visibility, making it difficult for students to read and stay focused on tasks and for instructors to teach effectively.

Interviewees mentioned that temperature regulation was also another significant issue. Some classrooms were subject to extreme

temperatures—too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer. In some study spaces, air conditioning or heating was either absent, insufficient, or very noisy, making prolonged use uncomfortable or even impossible. Regarding the lack of temperature control, one interviewee mentioned that *“it’s pretty difficult to retrofit them for HVAC and many of our students are in non-air-conditioned living areas. So, they’re in that all the time. Some of my teachers won’t teach in the dead of summer because of this.”*

Poor acoustics pose an additional challenge for learning inside prison classrooms. We heard that architectural features like high ceilings or tiled concrete walls caused sound reverberation and created auditory issues. Often, classrooms were echoey and required students and instructors to shout to be heard. As one interviewee mentioned, *“The sound sometimes goes in two ways. One, it’s like sound doesn’t travel, so we have to sort of be yelling at each other to be heard. And the other is like the room is just so echoey that it’s hard to discern what anybody is saying.”* Such structural features were often exacerbated by noise from malfunctioning HVAC systems or fans, or other environmental sounds within the prison, further disrupting learning and teaching.

“From the leaky ceiling with the oil drum to the wasps to the sinkhole opening up in front of the school and canceling class, we just deal with a lot of decrepit infrastructure that...are just distractions from college.”

Infrastructure issues, including leaky ceilings and pest infestations, also compounded these challenges. As an instructor revealed, *“from the leaky ceiling with the oil drum to the wasps to the sinkhole opening up in front of the school and canceling class, we just deal with a lot of decrepit infrastructure that makes it—that are just distractions from college.”* Addressing these issues will be important to creating an adequate educational environment, one that truly supports learning within prison facilities.

Availability and utilization of non-classroom spaces

When asked about educational spaces, many of our interviewees mentioned the importance of learning spaces beyond classrooms, such as designated study areas like chapels, day rooms, and computer labs. Some interviewees described resorting to studying in their cells, or any space

available to them, due to noise or limited access to quiet spaces. As one interviewee said, *“We dedicated time and space when we could and [spent] time for like an hour where we could either be outside or we could be in the day areas. And just took that space over for studying. I know students all over the country do those kinds of things and take space where they need it and make it happen wherever they can.”* Although interviewees recounted going to great lengths to optimize the available space, the lack of quiet areas was often indicated as a factor negatively affecting their ability to concentrate and complete academic work.

Access to study spaces was often hindered not just by environmental or architectural factors, but by policies and day-to-day dynamics of life inside prison facilities. Many interviewees mentioned that even when facilities provided designated study halls or group work areas, students’ collaboration outside of the classroom was still limited due to prison policies around movement and lockdowns, especially in higher security institutions. These strict regulations often limited the ability of students to get access to study spaces and materials. It also limited opportunities for group work or peer learning.

Prison libraries often provided additional study space; however, accessibility to them varied. Some interviewees mentioned that prisons restricted their use to a few hours, and only on certain days, while other facilities regulated access through passes that allowed only a few people at a time. Libraries also serve multiple purposes, including for general reading and legal research, which creates competition for space. Restrictions on hours, limited passes, and seating capacities end up impacting access to another of the few existing quiet spaces to complete academic work and assignments inside carceral facilities.

Key Finding 3: Educational spaces inside prison should emphasize functionality and flexibility

In interviews for this study, we asked participants about their views on what would make for an ideal educational space inside prisons. Most people answered that question by emphasizing the importance of both function and “comfort” for educational spaces. As explained in greater detail below, functionality refers to how well a space supports learning activities, while comfort plays an important role since it affects how effectively students can focus and engage.

While this project focuses on educational spaces within prisons, it's important to recognize that findings from research on K-12 and higher education classrooms offer similar insights into the factors that influence learning environments across different contexts.⁹ Existing research on the impact of physical classrooms on student satisfaction has demonstrated that classroom conditions, student comfort, and access to technology all play a critical role in shaping student outcomes and success.¹⁰ Comfort, which encompasses both ergonomic design and environmental factors, is key to a classroom's functionality. Ergonomic design considers elements like table and chair height, seat width, and backrest position, all of which impact concentration.¹¹ Environmental factors such as lighting, temperature, ventilation, and noise also affect comfort. Discomfort and other forms of distraction due to environmental and physical factors compete for brain and body attention—providing these improved conditions allows students to focus on the education rather than on their surroundings. The need for these improvements, and the level to which their lack hindered focused learning were consistently emphasized in the interviews.¹²

Existing research on the impact of physical classrooms on student satisfaction has demonstrated that classroom conditions, student comfort, and access to technology all play a critical role in shaping student outcomes and success.

When discussing ideal educational spaces in prisons, it's important to recognize that while our interviews offer valuable insights into what an ideal environment might look like, we cannot independently assess the feasibility or impact of these proposed changes. The complex and bureaucratic nature of prison systems often makes implementing changes

⁹ Benjamin Cleveland and Kenn Fisher, "The Evaluation of Physical Learning Environments: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Learning Environments Research* 17 (2014): 1-28.

¹⁰ Mary C. Hill and Kathryn K. Epps, "The Impact of Physical Classroom Environment on Student Satisfaction and Student Evaluation of Teaching in the University Environment," *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 14, no. 4 (2010): 65.

¹¹ Nurul Jannah Amirul, C. N. Ahmad, A. F. Yahya, M. F. N. L. Abdullah, N. M. Noh, and M. Adnan, "The Physical Classroom Learning Environment," *Proceedings of the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Conference* 2, no. 1 (2013): 1-9.

¹² Peter Barrett, Fay Davies, Yufan Zhang, and Lucinda Barrett, "The Impact of Classroom Design on Pupils' Learning: Final Results of a Holistic, Multi-level Analysis," *Building and Environment* 89 (2015): 118-133.

challenging. Nonetheless, the perspectives from instructors, correctional staff, and former students provide a clear picture of the elements that would enhance educational spaces in prison, turning them into more effective learning environments. Below, we outline the changes suggested by interviewees.

Functional classroom and study spaces

Many interviewees started by highlighting the importance of in-person education, explaining that their ideal educational space would have enough classrooms and in-person instructors to accommodate the program, in contrast to the correspondence courses some students have had to rely on. Ideally, multiple classrooms to accommodate different subject matters would help reduce noise and distraction.

Many also mentioned that adequate classroom furniture with matching chairs and tables would be helpful. Comfortable seating, for instance, is essential in supporting periods of study since it can help students and instructors focus on classroom activities. As one former student illustrated, *“there was a big difference between the classroom I found in college and the one I found while incarcerated...the chairs in college [were] more relaxed and comfortable to sit on. And sometimes, you could actually not feel very comfortable learning in this classroom while in incarceration.”* Interviewees also mentioned that the use of wood tables and warmer materials, as opposed to metal and concrete, creates a less institutional feel. As one interviewee said, *“a lot of these spaces [are] metal and linoleum and exposed concrete, those huge concrete brick type things that are painted over. So, it’s like something in the room to indicate both a kind of warmth... like we’re going to really engage with each other’s ideas.”*

Central tables for group discussions, whiteboards permanently installed, and secure storage for student work and supplies would also help make prison classrooms feel more like college classrooms. Some interviewees mentioned that circular seminar tables for group discussions have helped in promoting engagement and interaction, making participants feel more like college students. On storage, one formerly incarcerated student noted: *“I’d like to see a dedicated area for post-secondary education that is supportive of a post-secondary education, that is supportive of having an area where you can securely store your materials. You don’t have to worry about being, for a lack of better words, getting in trouble for having that much paper.”* Others mentioned that an ideal educational space would

allow for flexible use of classroom space for various teaching styles, beyond traditional lectures, and include functional furniture and storage that could support different styles of learning. Finally, interviewees mentioned that incorporating non-prison decor like murals, vibrant paint colors, carpets, could improve the ambiance to make educational spaces more appealing.

Participants also mentioned a number of environmental factors—lighting, acoustics, and adequate heating and air conditioners—that are essential to creating an ideal learning experience inside prison.

Technology and resources

Among interviewees, there were differing opinions on what would be the best use of technology in an ideal educational space. When asked about what kind of technology they would prefer, some interviewees were satisfied with the technological resources they had access to and struggled to imagine what else they might need, while others thought tablets, standalone computers, and laptops would be helpful. As one instructor said, it would be beneficial to have a *“standalone computer or a server computer that had college material, had a partition for college material so that we could load a semester’s worth of material on and then clean it off at the end kind of thing would be lovely.”*

Others mentioned that more “no-frills” tools like larger whiteboards or blackboards are necessary for teaching and presentations. Reliable and accessible printers are also helpful since they help students in acquiring educational materials that they can transport and store. Preprinted notes and recorded lectures can support various learning styles and ensure that students have access to the information they need. As one instructor noted, *“if there were some dedicated print resources that perhaps could be password authorized by a teacher so that classroom materials could be printed rather than carried in, that would be nice.”* Additionally, having resources that work like a library with labeled bookshelves, a system of checking out books and digital resources, would aid in independent study. Finally, instructional technology like video conferencing, which was underutilized due to security concerns, could be valuable, especially when remote learning is the only option.

Study and collaboration spaces

Many of our participants reported that designing more dedicated spaces for studying and collaboration would greatly enhance the educational

experience for incarcerated students. Creating third spaces that are not cells or classrooms could help students to study in a quieter and more focused environment. Establishing quiet, easily accessible, see-through study areas within existing prisons could help provide a safe zone for studying. Private spaces with resources are also important, as an instructor discussed, *“if we had a resource nook, it would be very logical to have an academic advising meeting in that space where there is some sort of feeling of privacy to be able to talk about academic matters.”*

“If you could potentially create a space that offered that separation from what is the prison mindset, where people can focus on secondary education and not have all of the outside distractions, it gives an opportunity for those walls to come down...”

Some interviewees mentioned that having separate units for college students could help encourage more group work and academic collaboration, ensure more access to study spaces during lockdowns or outside classroom hours, and ultimately foster a sense of community amongst students. As one instructor noted, we *“requested for a long time for college students to be housed together in some sort of college dorm situation, which keeps being denied. But many of our students do live in [the] same units.... we know that they'll, in the common spaces, they'll get together and work on assignments.”* Since students already seem to be forming informal study groups within their shared living units, it demonstrates that a structured unit could provide additional support for learning. In addition, as one interviewee observed, *“If you could potentially create a space that offered that separation from what is the prison mindset, where people can focus on secondary education and not have all of the outside distractions, it gives an opportunity for those walls to come down, for vulnerability to come down.”*

Inclusivity and accessible design

Many of the recommendations concerning classroom furniture and design would also go a long way towards making educational spaces more accessible and compliant with ADA requirements. As an instructor mentioned, from an *“ADA perspective, I'd like not to see desks attached to chairs. They're uncomfortable for a lot of people, so typically standalone tables are better with chairs pulled up to them because it gives a lot of flexibility for individuals.”* The classroom's location is another important factor to consider when designing accessible educational spaces in prisons. For instance, the need to navigate multiple flights of stairs can make class inaccessible to both students and instructors, who often need to carry books and other supplies as well.

Conclusion

The findings of this report underscore the necessity of reimagining prison educational spaces to foster better educational outcomes and support prison reform efforts. Many prisons suffer from inadequate and outdated infrastructure, poor environmental conditions, and inequitable use of space, which significantly hinder the educational experiences of incarcerated people. To improve educational spaces in prisons, it's essential to focus on functionality, flexibility, and inclusivity, including rethinking classroom layouts, designing additional spaces for study and learning activities, integrating technology, and ensuring accessibility for all students, including those with disabilities. The extent of the success of environmental upgrades will also rely on optimization of certain operational protocols and the consistency of their implementation.

Flexible use of space, furniture, and technology can greatly improve learning environments within prisons without requiring new construction or large capital investments. Re-designed classrooms with improved lighting, minimized noise, and consistent temperatures can facilitate better learning outcomes. Additionally, providing furniture that is movable and suitable for long-term use can enhance the comfort and functionality of educational spaces. Basic classroom resources such as whiteboards, projectors, and printers are also vital for supporting effective instruction. Moreover, rethinking the use of non-classroom spaces such as libraries and dayrooms for educational purposes can be highly beneficial. Repurposing these areas can provide incarcerated students with additional opportunities for studying and learning, contributing to a more holistic educational experience. Ultimately, implementing more flexibility into the design of educational spaces in prison can create a more equitable and effective learning environment for incarcerated students, benefiting both students and the broader prison community.

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In this report, we've identified three areas where flexible use and education-conducive redesign can improve educational experiences and outcomes: adjustments to operations and logistics can improve the quality of access to and use of spaces for education and learning; functional and flexible redesign of classroom spaces can directly improve learning environments, make them more conducive to focus, and diversify instructional approaches and activities; and educational redesign of third sites like libraries and multipurpose rooms can create more spaces conducive to learning. In this process we have been guided by questions of both equity and ethics. Namely, how can we rethink spatial design and use to ensure that students' educational experience on the inside more closely mirrors the campus experience outside of prison? In instances where classroom spaces are non-existent or irreparable, solutions for creating new spaces for higher education may need to be considered, but only with operational safeguards to prevent unintended future re-purposing for uses other than education. In prisons with existing spaces in need of upgrades, there is an additional hurdle of finding creative solutions for minor interventions that improve environmental qualities while still satisfying mandated security and operational standards inherent to the prison setting. In a future issuance, we will suggest a series of strategies for determining the best approach, depending on the particular conditions of a facility, and present provisional remedies for achieving improved conditions.

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