



REPORT

Assessing Mississippi's Higher Education in Prison Data Infrastructure

Prepared for the Woodward Hines Education
Foundation

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April 10, 2026



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This research was made possible with grant funding provided by Ascendium.



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Executive summary

The restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students and the expansion of Prison Education Program approval requirements have increased expectations for how higher education in prison programs collect, manage, and use data. In Mississippi, these changes come at a moment of growing interest in expanding access to postsecondary education inside correctional facilities, alongside heightened demands for accountability, coordination, and evidence of program quality.

This report documents Phase 1 of a multi-phase effort to understand Mississippi's current higher education in prison data landscape and identify opportunities for improvement. Drawing on stakeholder interviews, document review, and engagement with the Mississippi Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (MCHEP) and other state partners, the assessment examines what data are currently collected, how those data are used, where there are gaps and inconsistencies, and what limits the usefulness of existing data for decision-making.

Phase 1 findings point to a set of recurring challenges in higher education in prison:

- Data practices vary widely across institutions and facilities.
- Many programs rely on manual or paper-based processes that limit efficiency and scalability.
- Stakeholders often lack confidence in the accuracy and consistency of available data.
- Staffing constraints and reliance on individual relationships create risk and fragility.
- New compliance expectations tied to Pell restoration increase data burden without corresponding increases in capacity.

At the same time, the assessment surfaced important areas of alignment and momentum. Stakeholders broadly agree on the value of improved data practices, greater transparency, and stronger coordination across agencies and institutions. There is shared recognition that better data is needed not only for compliance, but also for program improvement, planning, and communication with policymakers and funders.

Building on these findings, the report outlines a path forward and several next steps. Together, these efforts are designed to move from assessment to action while laying the groundwork for more sustainable, statewide higher education in prison data infrastructure.

Introduction

The restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students and the expansion of Prison Education Program approval requirements have brought renewed attention to data in higher education in prison programs. States are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only compliance, but also program quality and outcomes. In Mississippi, these federal policy changes coincide with growing interest in expanding access to postsecondary education inside correctional facilities, creating both pressure and opportunity to strengthen how data are collected and used.

This report documents Phase 1 of a multi-phase effort to assess Mississippi's higher education in prison data landscape and identify practical pathways for improvement. The assessment draws on stakeholder interviews, document review, and engagement with MCHPEP and other state and institutional partners and seeks to answer several questions:

- What data are currently being collected?
- How do data move across institutions and agencies?
- Where are there gaps, inconsistencies, and inefficiencies?
- How are data used for compliance, program management, and planning?

Importantly, this work looks beyond technical systems alone. Findings highlight how processes, relationships, staffing, and capacity shape data quality and trust. In many cases, substantial information is being collected, but stakeholders hesitate to rely on it for decision-making due to concerns about consistency, completeness, or sustainability.

Phase 1 also revealed areas of alignment across the ecosystem. Stakeholders share a common interest in improving transparency, reducing reporting burden, and strengthening coordination across

agencies and institutions. These shared priorities create a strong foundation for moving from diagnosis to action.

The remainder of this report is organized to support that transition. Following a description of the needs assessment framework and methods, the findings section presents results organized by the framework's topic areas. The final sections outline opportunities for Phase 2 implementation, including a series of steps to strengthen Mississippi's higher education in prison data infrastructure over time.

Needs assessment

The needs assessment is guided by the following overarching research question:

How can Mississippi build a coherent, sustainable, and stakeholder-aligned data infrastructure to support higher education in prison programs, considering current data practices, technical capacity, collaboration, data quality, and long-term growth?

To answer this question, we developed a needs assessment framework organized around seven topic areas (see Appendix A). Together, these areas capture both the technical elements of data infrastructure and the relational and organizational conditions that shape how data is collected, shared, and used in practice.

The framework is intentionally practical. Rather than focusing on idealized systems, it reflects the realities described by stakeholders across correctional facilities, higher education institutions, and state agencies. Each topic area includes a guiding research question that anchors the analysis and structures the findings section that follows.

Methods and scope

The needs assessment was conducted between October and December 2025 and draws on three complementary sources of evidence:

- Document and desk review, including national research on higher education in prison data infrastructure and federal requirements related to Prison Education Program approval and Pell restoration.
- Semi-structured interviews with Mississippi stakeholders representing two analytic strata:
 - Strata 1: System-level and intermediary actors focused on vision, goals, and cross-sector coordination.
 - Strata 2: Institution- and program-level actors focused on day-to-day data collection, reporting, and use.
- Preliminary synthesis of interview findings organized around what data exist, how data move, and who is responsible for managing them.

Interview protocols were designed to be flexible, recognizing the wide variation in roles and institutional contexts across the ecosystem. Not every question was asked in every interview. Instead, conversations were tailored to participants' expertise while maintaining enough structure to support cross-interview comparisons.

The interviews captured perspectives from community colleges, public universities, the Mississippi Department of Corrections, statewide coordinating bodies, and workforce and data agencies. The goal was not to produce a comprehensive inventory of all data systems, but to surface recurring patterns, constraints, and opportunities that shape how data function in practice.

Program landscape

Six colleges and universities in Mississippi currently offer credit-bearing coursework to individuals who are incarcerated (see Appendix B). These programs operate across nine correctional facilities statewide, including public, regional, and privately run facilities.

During the Fall 2025 semester, approximately 405 students were enrolled in higher education in prison programs. Program staff consistently reported that student interest exceeds current capacity. Barriers to expansion include limited funding, staffing, technology access, and physical space within facilities.

Mississippi's higher education in prison programs are also entering a new phase of maturity. Several are beginning to see their first graduates, while others anticipate completions within the next one to two years. With completion rates increasing, stakeholders noted growing pressure to track post-completion outcomes, including continued education, transfer, and post-release trajectories.

This shift underscores the importance of strengthening data systems now. As programs grow and mature, data demands will increase, not only for compliance but also for planning, improvement, and communication with policymakers and funders.

Findings

The findings that follow are organized around the seven topic areas of the needs assessment framework. This structure reflects how stakeholders described their experiences with higher education in prison data and highlights how challenges and opportunities intersect across technical, organizational, and relational dimensions.

Rather than treating issues in isolation, the framework allows related concerns to be considered together. Decisions in one area, such as technical infrastructure or staffing, often shape outcomes in others, including data quality, trust, and sustainability.

Shared purpose

How do key stakeholders define the purpose of data collection, and which inputs and outcomes do they prioritize for measuring program effectiveness?

Stakeholders most often discussed data in the context of compliance and accountability. They described how enrollment counts, progress toward degree, and completion metrics are essential for meeting requirements related to Pell Grants, Prison Education Program approval, accreditation, and institutional reporting.

Beyond compliance, respondents emphasized the importance of data for external communication and advocacy. Many described a strong need to “tell the story” of higher education in prison using credible, numeric indicators that resonate with legislators, funders, and senior agency leadership.

At the same time, stakeholders consistently noted that data should also support internal improvement, not just external reporting. However, priorities differ by role:

- Higher education actors focus on academic momentum indicators such as course completion, persistence, and progress toward degree.
- System-level and policy actors prioritize comparable, empirical

metrics that can be aggregated across institutions.

- Workforce and reentry stakeholders emphasize longer-term outcomes such as employment and recidivism, while acknowledging current limitations in data access and ownership.
- Intermediary organizations stress the importance of translating data into clear, accessible messages for broader audiences.

Overall, stakeholders value data, but no single, agreed-upon outcome framework currently guides data collection across the ecosystem.

Scope of available data

What data are currently collected, how are they managed, and what limits outcome measurement?

Across interviews, stakeholders described a relatively consistent set of data currently collected to support higher education in prison programs.

Data collected by higher education institutions, collected at the student-level, connect students with their relevant:

- Admissions applications and eligibility materials for participation in the HEP program
- Enrollment records and course registrations
- Grades, credits earned, and progress toward degree
- Completion and graduation information
- Pell eligibility and participation

The Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) maintains student-level records containing core identifiers (e.g., DOC ID), facility location, custody status, transfers between facilities, and release dates within corrections databases.

Higher education in prison program staff also try to track relevant student-level data to meet compliance and oversight regulations, such as Prison Education Program approval requirements. Some programs additionally collect survey data or qualitative documentation to meet funder or partner reporting expectations.

At the system level, the Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB) and Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) collect student-level enrollment and completion data from their system institutions each semester to meet

state and federal reporting requirements. Like a higher education institution reporting to IPEDS, it is then the responsibility of the IR offices at MCCB and IHL to aggregate the data to meet their reporting needs or interests.

Despite this breadth of collection, stakeholders emphasized that having data does not equate to being able to use data. Several constraints limit effective outcome measurement:

- Data is often spread across multiple systems or formats, including paper.
- Manual processes increase the risk of error and delay.
- Definitions and data elements vary across institutions and facilities.
- MCCB and IHL lack the information necessary to identify higher education students within system data and generate disaggregated reports.
- Limited ability to link education data with corrections, workforce, or post-release outcomes.

As a result, many stakeholders described collecting data primarily to meet immediate reporting needs rather than to support longitudinal analysis, comparison, or planning.

Technical infrastructure and capacity

What technical infrastructure and institutional capacity exist to support higher education in prison data?

Technical infrastructure for data varies widely across institutions and facilities (see Appendix C). Most colleges rely on their existing student information systems for admissions, enrollment, and academic records. However, access to these systems inside correctional facilities is often limited or nonexistent.

Common workarounds include:

- Paper-based data collection inside facilities
- Manual data entry after materials leave the facility
- Ad hoc spreadsheets maintained by program staff

These approaches allow programs to function, but they introduce inefficiencies and increase staff burden. Stakeholders noted that small programs often depend on a single individual to manage data collection, entry, and reporting, creating vulnerability when staff capacity is stretched or roles change.

Importantly, there was little appetite for creating entirely new systems solely for higher education. Instead, stakeholders expressed interest in solutions that better adapt existing institutional systems to the prison context.

Documentation of data collection and sharing procedures

How are data collection, reporting, and sharing procedures documented and operationalized?

Documentation of data collection and sharing procedures is uneven across the ecosystem. In many cases, processes are known by individuals rather than formally documented.

Stakeholders described:

- Informal, experience-based knowledge of how data move
 - Reliance on personal relationships to resolve issues
 - Limited written guidance that can be transferred when staff leave
- Data sharing across institutions and agencies typically relies on memoranda of understanding or one-off agreements. While these arrangements enable some collaboration, they are not designed for routine, automated exchange and can slow access to information.

The absence of shared documentation makes it difficult to standardize practices, onboard new staff, or scale data efforts beyond individual programs or relationships.

Data fidelity and quality

To what extent do data definitions and collection methods vary, and how does this affect quality?

Concerns about data quality were raised across interviews. Stakeholders are hesitant to rely on existing data for decision-making, even when substantial information is collected.

Key challenges include:

- Inconsistent definitions of core data elements
- Variation in how and when data are collected
- Errors introduced through manual and paper-based processes
- Limited training for staff responsible for data collection

Data is frequently collected by administrators, navigators, or faculty who balance multiple responsibilities and may not have formal data training. This contributes to low confidence in the accuracy and completeness of data, particularly when they are aggregated across institutions.

As a result, stakeholders tend to use data cautiously, prioritizing compliance reporting over analysis or comparison.

Relationship strength and collaboration

How do relationships influence data collection, analysis, and sustainability?

Relationships play a central role in how higher education data function in Mississippi. Stakeholders described how strong partnerships, particularly between MCHEP and department of corrections leadership, enable data sharing and problem solving.

At the same time, engagement across stakeholders is uneven. Some institutions and agencies are deeply involved, while others remain peripheral. Several respondents described underdeveloped or missing connections with state-level actors. This lack of connection led to a sense of limited alignment which may ultimately impede program scalability.

Data sharing is often relationship-based rather than system-based. While this approach allows work to move forward, it reinforces fragmentation and creates vulnerability when leadership or personnel change.

Stakeholders emphasized that clearer articulation of the purpose and value of shared data efforts could help strengthen participation and collaboration over time.

Growth and sustainability

What is needed for long-term scalability?

Stakeholders identified several conditions as necessary for long-term growth and sustainability of their data systems:

- Stable funding and legislative support, supported by credible data
- Greater coordination or centralization to reduce siloed systems
- Formal governance structures that span corrections, higher education, workforce, and data agencies
- Dedicated roles that combine relationship management with technical expertise

Current conditions pose challenges to sustainability. Many programs operate with minimal staffing, concentrating responsibility in a small number of individuals. Funding uncertainty limits investment in technology and data capacity. Access to facilities and data often depends on local leadership, making standardization difficult.

Despite these constraints, stakeholders highlighted promising developments, including increased alignment among state-level actors, growing familiarity with Prison Education Program requirements, and interest in leveraging statewide data systems.

Opportunities moving forward

Building on Phase 1 findings, this section outlines how the project will move into Phase 2, focused on targeted implementation and near-term action. Rather than attempting to address all challenges at once, Phase 2 emphasizes selecting feasible, high-impact activities that align with existing capacity and demonstrate momentum.

Phase 2 is expected to span approximately nine months, beginning in March and concluding in December. Guided by stakeholder input and a structured convening, this phase will focus on collaborative problem solving while laying the groundwork for longer-term system building.

Establishing a plan for the future

A central opportunity emerging from Phase 1 is the need for a shared, statewide articulation of what higher education in prison data should accomplish over time. Stakeholders consistently emphasized the absence of a common reference point for understanding program scope, progress, and outcomes across Mississippi. Addressing this gap requires both near-term transparency and longer-term planning.

Statewide higher education in prison report

One foundational step is the collaborative development of a recurring statewide report on higher education in prison in Mississippi. Initial efforts should focus on a facilitated process to determine:

- What information the report will include
- How data will be collected and submitted
- Who will steward and own the report
- Frequency and timeline for publication

The primary value of the report is transparency and shared understanding, not compliance. A single, trusted source of information would support advocacy, inform policymakers, and position MCHP as a

coordinating hub. At the end of our engagement, we will have a publication-ready report, including some data on student enrollment and experiences.¹ We'll also include example report modules that could be adapted and added in the future should additional data (either from institutions or from national data providers) become available.

Long-term data infrastructure planning

At the same time, stakeholders recognize that statewide reporting is only one component of a broader data ecosystem. Longer term, stakeholders see value in engaging with national data systems such as the Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). While returns from an investment in these systems may be limited in the near term given current cohort sizes and data constraints, these systems will become increasingly valuable as programs grow, students complete credentials, and post-release outcomes become more central to evaluation and policy conversations.

Together, these efforts provide a forward-looking framework that clarifies where Mississippi's higher education in prison data infrastructure is headed, even as near-term work remains grounded in existing systems and capacity.

Supporting programs and producing the data needed

A second, equally important thread running through Phase 1 findings is the need to support programs in producing the data that future statewide and longitudinal efforts will depend on. Many programs already collect substantial information, but do so through manual, paper-based, or ad hoc processes that limit data quality, staff capacity, and confidence in use.

Rather than creating new systems, support should focus on helping programs adapt existing institutional processes to the prison context. This may include:

¹ We will explore the feasibility of collecting data files directly from MCCB or from participating institutions, and if possible, collect those data files to produce the report. If that's not feasible, we can also explore using a survey instrument to collect some of this information from institutions and programs in the shorter-term.

- Standardized paper forms designed for easier digitization
- Clear workflows for moving data from facilities into institutional systems
- Develop shared training resources focused on data collection, documentation, and stewardship. A teach-the-trainer approach could allow institutions to build internal capacity using shared materials supported by MCHEP.

By strengthening these foundational practices, programs will be better positioned to contribute to statewide reporting efforts and to engage with longer-term data infrastructure initiatives as they mature.

Phase 2 kickoff meeting

Phase 2 will begin with a virtual kickoff convening designed to validate findings, refine priorities, and establish a shared direction for implementation. The meeting will:

- Review Phase 1 findings and invite corrections or additions
- Present potential Phase 2 activities as discussion starters
- Use interactive exercises to assess feasibility and risks
- Conclude with a structured prioritization process and formation of working groups

The kickoff meeting serves as both a decision point and a launchpad for collaborative action. It is intended to build consensus around priorities, clarify roles, and ensure that Phase 2 activities remain aligned with both immediate program needs and longer-term system goals.

Conclusion

This Phase 1 needs assessment highlights both the promise and fragility of Mississippi's higher education in prison data ecosystem. Stakeholders share a strong commitment and growing alignment, but current data practices are not yet well matched to the demands of growth, accountability, and sustainability.

Phase 2 is designed to build on this foundation through targeted, collaborative action. By prioritizing a small number of feasible activities, engaging stakeholders through a structured process, and strengthening coordination and capacity, Mississippi can make meaningful progress toward a more durable and trusted higher education in data infrastructure.

Acknowledgements

This report is made possible with funding from Ascendium Education Group, whom we thank for their support. Thanks to the incredible people in Mississippi for sharing their time and expertise with us. Thank you to the higher education in prison program administrators, higher education institution staff, and state agency staff that spoke with us. We have withheld mentioning anyone by name, title, or organization to protect anonymity, but this research wouldn't exist without their open and candid participation. Special thanks as well to Juni Ahari and Kimberly Lutz for their editing support.

Appendix A

Needs assessment framework

This appendix presents the needs assessment framework that guided Phase 1 of this work, outlining the core topic areas and questions used to structure interviews, analysis, and synthesis. The framework is included to provide transparency into how findings were generated and to offer our most current conception of this space.

Topic Area	Research Question
Shared Purpose	How do key stakeholders define the purpose of data collection, and which inputs and outcomes do they prioritize for measuring program effectiveness?
Scope of Available Data	What data are currently collected across programs, how are they managed and reported, and what barriers limit the collection and use of data needed to measure outcomes?
Technical Infrastructure and Capacity	What technical infrastructure and institutional capacity exist across correctional facilities, higher education institutions, and state agencies to support the collection, management, and use of HEP data?
Documentation of Data Collection and Sharing Procedures	How are data collection, reporting, and sharing procedures documented and operationalized, and what roles do different stakeholders play in managing the flow of data across institutions and agencies?
Data Fidelity and Quality	To what extent do data definitions and collection methods vary across stakeholders and what challenges affect the validity and completeness of reported data?
Relationship Strength and Collaboration	How do relationships and collaboration among stakeholders influence data collection, analysis, and sustainability of data management practices?
Growth and sustainability	What strategies, structures, and stakeholders are needed to ensure the long-term growth, scalability, and sustainability of data systems supporting HEP programs?

Appendix B

Program landscape

To clarify the programmatic landscape in Mississippi, the table below provides key information about each higher education in prison program currently operating in the state, including the approximate size of the program and status of the program’s PEP application (when applicable).

Institution	Program Size (approximate number of Fall 2025 enrollees)	Credential(s) Offered	Correctional Facilities HEP Operates Within	PEP Application Status	Have any HEP students completed the program?
Mississippi Delta Community College	100	Associate of Arts	Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman), Issaquena County Correctional Facility, Washington County Correctional Facility, Bolivar County Correctional Facility, Delta Correctional Facility	Application with ED for final step of provisional approval	No, but they have students who are nearing completion.
Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College	10 students in the AAS program; 10 CTE students	Associate of Applied Science; also offer a 45-hour career technical program in commercial and residential maintenance	George County Correctional Facility	Secured provisional PEP status; SACSCOC site visit scheduled for February 2026	Yes. The program had their first graduates in May 2025.
Meridian Community College	26	None. Currently unable to provide all courses needed for an Associate of Arts.	East Mississippi Correctional Facility	N/A – have not applied	No.
Southwest Mississippi	140	Associate of Arts	Wilkinson County Correctional Facility	Have received initial approval from MDOC and are now working on SACSCOC and ED application	No, but they expect to have their first graduate in December 2026.

Community College					
Hinds Community College	49	Associate of Arts	Central Mississippi Correctional Facility	SACSCOC site visit scheduled for February 2026, after which they will submit application to ED for provisional approval	Yes. The program had their first graduate in Summer 2025.
Mississippi Valley State University	70	Bachelor of Science	Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman), Bolivar County Correctional Facility	Plan to submit application to ED by end of 2025	No, but they expect to have their first graduates in Spring 2026.
Northeast Mississippi Community College		Associates of Arts	Alcorn Regional Correctional Facility		Yes.

Appendix C

Student technology access in correctional facilities

Technology access for HEP students across the state is highly variable. The table below describes the level of technology access available within each HEP program, including the course modality options available to students.

Institution	Technology Access Description
Mississippi Delta Community College	Courses are live streamed via Zoom. Students submit assignments through Canvas (LMS). The specific computer set up varies by correctional facility, where some have a hardwired computer lab (e.g., Parchman) and others provide students with access to laptops.
Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College	Academic courses are completed asynchronously through Canvas (LMS). The college provides laptops for academic and CTE students.
Meridian Community College	No computer access allowed within the correctional facility.
Southwest Mississippi Community College	Students have access to the internet and can take hybrid courses and some synchronous, live-streamed courses, but can't yet take fully online courses. The institution is working to institute new internet hotspots and has purchased Chromebooks for the students to use, but the correctional facility has yet to grant approval for their use. Once students have access to those computers, the college will allow them to enroll in online courses.
Hinds Community College	Students can take online courses, in addition to the in-person courses offered at the facility. The corrections facility supplied the computers.
Mississippi Valley State University	Access varies by the correctional facility. At Bolivar, a regional facility, students can take synchronous, live-streamed courses. MSVU is working with Parchman, the state facility, to make Zoom course offerings available to students starting in Spring 2026.