Reimagining Admissions and Enrollment Practices:

College in Prison Programs

By Erin Corbett, Ed.D.
Second Chance Educational Alliance[1]

Policy and Practice Brief | August 2020

See all briefs at hackthegates.org and www.chhs.colostate.edu/rise/public-engagement/hack-the-gates/

HACK THE GATES
RADICALLY REIMAGINE ADMISSIONS

There are currently over 4,600 postsecondary institutions in the U.S. Of these colleges and universities, over 200 sponsor some form of a college in prison program.[2] While some college in prison programs offer open enrollment access, others demand that interested students demonstrate their academic worth through problematic and traditional methods that include, but are not limited to, standardized tests, written essays, and proof of "extracurricular" activities.

The problem with recreating an exclusionary admission practice inside prison facilities is that they reinforce the myth of meritocratic access, a myth, rooted in the propagation of white supremacy, that consistently disadvantages Black, Latinx, and low-income students. If a postsecondary institution sponsors a college in prison program, what, exactly, is the purpose of mapping the notion of selectivity and elitism onto a population that continues to be marginalized?

In this brief, I challenge and problematize the illogical use of the selectivity-based admission practices in college in prison programs. Such practices ultimately reproduce elitism and inequities. To provide a starting point for solutions, this brief offers three principles that can guide the elimination of structural barriers to college entry for confined learners. Through the three-principled framework, college in prison programs can holistically gauge incarcerated candidate readiness for postsecondary pursuits. Programs must:

1. **Re-conceptualize** an admission process that accounts for incarcerated student access to time, information, and opportunity[3];
2. **Implement and strengthen** avenues to award credit for prior learning, and;
3. **Shift assessment and program paradigms** to leverage a competency mastery model.

[1] This brief was assembled with significant input from students enrolled in both Continuing Education and Degree Granting programming with Second Chance Educational Alliance, Inc. Due to COVID-19, extended conversations were not possible as revisions were made, but not recognizing their valuable input would be dishonest.
[2] Castro, E. L., Hunter, R., Hardison, T., Johnson-Ojeda, V., & Suzuki, H. (2018, June). The landscape of postsecondary education in U.S. Prisons. Research Brief. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison, University of Utah.
[3] Iloh, C. (2018). Toward a New Model of College "Choice" for a Twenty-First-Century Context. *Harvard Educational Review*, 88 (2), 227-244.

Successful reimagining of admission protocols for incarcerated students is contingent upon having a program leader or administrator who is not only cognizant of the current climate around race and race relations, but who, especially at this time of social unrest, is also keenly aware of the unique sensitivities needed to lead in the wake of "racial crisis."[4] Thoughtfully incorporating the three ideas into admission processes can increase college access for incarcerated prospective students. These recommendations, outlined below, highlight the need to understand that the replication of inequitable, selectivity-based admission systems cannot lead to increased college access for incarcerated students and true systemic change for confined learners across the country.

RE-CONCEPTUALIZE STUDENT ACCESS TO TIME, INFORMATION, AND OPPORTUNITY

The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, in "Equity and Excellence," outlines the need for admission practices of college in prison programs be transparent, formalized, and publicly available. Beyond the transparency of the process, though, is the need to critically examine what is needed in higher education in prison to determine a candidate's capacity to succeed in college. Because admission and enrollment processes serve as initial points of contact with higher education institutions for prospective students[5], they should clearly communicate and demonstrate the centering equity in access and success and anti-racist teaching and learning philosophies. Without an entrance process that prioritizes anti-racism and equity, the continued, and uninterrogated, use of modified free world admission practices based on selectivity and exclusion perpetuate current inequities embedded in the postsecondary admission process.

Constance Iloh's model of college-going[6] highlights that the prevailing college

[4] Kezar, A., Fries-Britt, S., & Espinosa, L. (2020, June 15). Are campus leaders prepared for the impact of the racial crisis? *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/06/15/many-colleges-must-work-harder-engage-racial-healing-opinion
[5] Erzen, T., Gould, M. R., & Lewen, J. (2019). E*quity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison*. Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and Prison University Project.
[6] Iloh, C. (2018).

choice model does not account for the nuanced complexities of college-going experiences and realities among minoritized populations. Models of college choice rely on a particular level of privilege held by students in regard to the amount of choice they have in terms of available institutions, relevant credentials, etc. Iloh's model is specifically "designed to account for complex college pathways and not just isolated choices at one point [recognizing] that the P-20 education pipeline is likely fragmented and complex for a plethora of students," (p. 4). For confined learners there is precious little "choice" in college-going; therefore, higher education in prison programs must adapt to both address and account for the diversity of educational experiences of students when constructing an admission/enrollment process. Accommodations should include:

- **Broaden higher education in prison partnerships to include community-based organizations and other community institutions.** Higher education institutions are accustomed to operating independently and autonomously, often without substantive input from the communities in which they are situated. However, to provide a quality program that foregrounds the holistic nature of education, colleges and universities offering programs inside prisons should embed community representation in admission/enrollment processes. Community partnership also provides a measure of accountability and mutual beneficence currently lacking in prison education programs.
- **Broadly implement an open and rolling admission timeline.** A more flexible, comprehensible admission process demands the creation of application timelines that adequately account for innovative ways to collect and assess the materials submitted by prospective applicants. No longer should free world admission practices simply be mapped onto a population that fits neither the age nor lived experience that incarcerated students bring to the classroom and to their expectations of postsecondary rigor and value.
- **Create application processes that center portfolio assessment.** Students interested in pursuing postsecondary opportunities are often involved in programs, some academic and some non-academic, that help cultivate life skills. These programs often provide certificates or other documentation

to indicate completion and skills learned. This information, along with documentation for Prior Learning Assessments, could help demonstrate a student's work ethic, commitment, dedication, and other relevant skills.

COMPETENCY MASTERY

The third policy recommendation for envisioning an equitable admission/enrollment process for incarcerated students asks schools to reconsider another entrenched notion about educational value: the credit hour. From the early twentieth century, the idea of the credit hour, as a standardized unit that universally communicates how much knowledge someone has acquired, has been germane to how we conceptualize progress in teaching, learning, and knowledge acquisition. Speaking on the outdated nature of the credit hour—the Carnegie Unit—Ernest Boyer noted, "for far too long education in this country has been based on seat time, not on learning...the time has come to bury once and for all the old Carnegie Unit."[7]

Rooting curricula and credentials in competency mastery allow instructors and students the flexibility to differently explore and accurately assess teaching and learning inside prison facilities. Seymour and colleagues note[8]:

> Competency-based systems and the disaggregation of the roles of faculty offer renewal for faculty through a shift from being responsible for everything that occurs in a course to focusing on specific skills and passions: designing and curating powerful environments for students' construction of knowledge (p. 11).

Whether critiquing the advantages of stackable credentials or analyzing the benefits of creating a more flexible learning environment, schools and programs that meaningfully incorporate competency mastery, perhaps through a focus on project-based learning, allow students to see the value and

[7] As cited in Seymour, D., Everhart, D., & Yoshino, K. (2017). *The Currency of Higher Education: Credits and Competencies.* American Council on Education & Blackboard. https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/currency-of-he.pdf
[8] Ibid.

connectedness of their studies. Researchers note, "Badges, microcredentials, and competencies can accrue exchange value among students and employers" (p. 14)[9].

IMPLEMENT AND STRENGTHEN CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Some college in prison programs proudly do not accept credits for prior learning, emphasizing that the only valued and valid credits are those from their institution. However, this practice is shortsighted and consistently disadvantages incarcerated students. Data from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) indicate that awarding credits through Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs) led to better outcomes for students, particularly around graduation rates and persistence levels.[10] CAEL found that in addition to shortening the time required to earn a degree on the front end, 43% of PLA accepted students in their study earned a bachelor's degree, compared to approximately 15% of the non-PLA students in the sample.[11] As a way to shorten time to degree completion, and increase persistence and graduation rates, the offering of PLA is an opportunity for schools to demonstrate their commitment to radically democratize education.

Deciding upon the benefits of incorporating PLA into admission/enrollment practices for incarcerated students requires that higher education in prison program administrators understand the role of student portfolio and portfolio assessment. Additionally, successful PLA programs/credit exchanges demand that institutions relinquish the outdated notion that the only knowledge of value is that which is gained in the traditional classroom.[12] Whether college in prison programs begin accepting credit from College Level Examination Program tests (CLEP) or Defense Activity for Non-Traditional

[9] As cited in Seymour, D., Everhart, D., & Yoshino, K. (2017).
[10] Klein-Collins, R. (2010). *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning assessment and Adult Student Outcomes.* The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524753.pdf
[11] Ibid.
[12] Lakin, M. B., Nellum, C. J., Seymour, D., Crandell, J. R. (2015). *Credit for Prior Learning: Charting Institutional Practice for Sustainability.* American Council on Education. https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/credit-for-prior-learning.pdf

Education Support tests (DANTES), or if they develop their own ways to award credit for prior learning, the creation of a credential pathway that intentionally incorporates PLA can improve student outcomes. CAEL (2010) found that the following considerations should be taken into account when thinking about the inclusion of credits for PLAs (p.54):

- Use credit so students can obtain advanced credit standing
- Waive prerequisites that would normally increase time to completion
- Use PLA credits to meet general education requirements
- Use credits to meet program/major requirements
- Adequately fund initiatives that seek to award credit for prior learning

CONCLUSION

Fundamentally, re-conceptualizing college in prison program admission through a focus on prior learning and competency based mastery and assessment "open up possibilities for long-needed renewal of higher education and institutional opportunities to participate in [the transition]... to an information society, [restructure of] the economics of higher education, and [increasing] access for underserved populations," (p. 49)[13]. The call for this level of democratization in access and success demands an understanding of what Stewart describes as the elimination of the "gentleman scholar" mentality that drives higher education, both ideologically and in practice.[14] If higher education is to better serve minoritized populations, it must disrupt the very policies and practices that have benefitted populations that leverage and weaponize proximity to privilege and white supremacy.

[13] Everhart, D., & Seymore, D. M. (2017). Challenges and opportunities in the currency of higher education. In K. Rasmussen, P. Northrup, & R. Colson (Eds.), *Handbook of research on competency-based education in university settings* (pp.41-66). IGI Global.
[14] Stewart, D-L. (2020). Twisted at the roots: The intransigence of inequality in U.S. higher education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning,* 52 (2), 13-16.

Acknowledgements

This policy and practice brief was made possible by funding from the Joyce Foundation for the Hack the Gates project—a joint partnership between ACCEPT: Admissions Community Cultivating Equity & Peace Today and the RISE Center at Colorado State University.

ADMISSIONS COMMUNITY CULTIVATING EQUITY & PEACE TODAY

ACCEPT

RISE

Race and Intersectional Studies in Educational Equity

The Joyce Foundation