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## POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN NORTH CAROLINA JAILS AND PRISONS

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### INTRODUCTION

Jails and prisons in this country do not adequately prepare incarcerated individuals for successful public lives after their criminal sentence ends. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that almost 60 percent of individuals released from prison will be convicted of a new offense within five years of release.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this system has failed, rather than “corrected,” the individuals, families and communities involved within it. Accordingly, society must consider reforms to the conditions of incarceration.

Roughly 95 percent of state prisoners will one day be released.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, how they spend their time behind bars matters not only to those individuals but to their communities as well. The pursuit of higher education is perhaps the most worthwhile use of time for those incarcerated. Educational programming within prisons and jails can change the way individuals serve their period of incarceration and help them to become employable, stable members of society upon release. Efforts to improve postsecondary correctional education have proliferated over the past several years, but

more work is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of these programs.

A college degree has become one of the most valuable assets one can attain in the United States. For example, one report found that a bachelor’s degree is worth more than \$1 million in lifetime earnings.<sup>3</sup> And in the justice system, one study found that an incarcerated person’s education level is highly correlated with his or her chances of recidivism: The recidivism rate for those with postsecondary education credits was 44 percent lower than those incarcerated within general population who did not participate in higher education programs.<sup>4</sup> But many incarcerated people still do not have the opportunity to seek out higher education while serving a criminal sentence.<sup>5</sup>

Currently, in North Carolina, community colleges provide more than 90 percent of correctional education programming for incarcerated individuals. While adult education and literacy programs have the largest enrollments, the state requires colleges to offer entire for-credit certificates, diplomas or associate degree programs. According to a program administrator, postsecondary correctional education programs, which are predominantly vocational, awarded more than 6,000 vocational non-credit certificates; 1,458 vocational for-credit certificates; and nearly 100 associate and bachelor’s degrees to incarcerated people in 2006.<sup>6</sup> For the 2016-2017 fiscal year, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety reported that 673 incarcerated individuals completed requirements to obtain a postsecondary degree, and of those, 33 incarcerated individuals completed the requisite requirements to obtain an Associate of Applied Science diploma.<sup>7</sup> However, under current North Carolina statutes, educational funds unfortunately cannot be used to provide postsecondary correctional education for the attainment of Associate of Arts, Associate of Science or Associate of General Education degrees.<sup>8</sup>

So, although North Carolina correctional facilities and their partnerships with community colleges have successfully instituted some correctional education programs, with more access to postsecondary education, incarcerated individuals could see increased economic potential and thereby make their communities healthier and stronger upon release.

### CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

For the last several decades, North Carolina has worked to support postsecondary education in its prisons, but more must be done before educational programs for incarcerated individuals are truly effective.

In 1987, the North Carolina state legislature ordered inter-agency collaboration between the state’s correctional

department (later consolidated into the North Carolina Department of Public Safety) and its community college system to provide educational opportunities for people incarcerated in prisons.<sup>9</sup> In 1993, the legislature appointed the State Board of Community Colleges to oversee this collaboration.<sup>10</sup> Since then, individuals in prison have increasingly pursued correctional education: Over 11,500 certificates, diplomas and degrees were awarded in 2008, compared to approximately 3,700 in 2000.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, in 2010, the program that provided tuition waivers for those in prisons was changed and replaced by the current funding mechanisms, which have led to decreased accessibility.<sup>12</sup>

In 2013, the Vera Institute of Justice’s Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project expanded postsecondary education opportunities in North Carolina prisons. This initiative supported the development of postsecondary education services for adults within two years of release from prison and throughout their first two years in the community after release.<sup>13</sup> The five-year project ended in 2018, and the RAND Corporation is currently studying its effects.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety works to provide a variety of educational opportunities to those incarcerated and partners with community organizations to help improve post-release employment outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

For example, the Wiser Justice Program, operated by Guilford College, sends professors into prisons to teach courses in business, English, criminal justice, sociology, psychology and conflict resolution. Currently, the program runs for five semesters and allows incarcerated students to earn up to 30 college credits.<sup>16</sup> What began as a two-year pilot initiative has expanded and recently received funding to continue programming for the next three years.<sup>17</sup>

But, at a local level, postsecondary correctional education looks much different. Often, individual county jails struggle to provide correctional education. Because individuals spending time in local jails are usually held for shorter lengths of time than those incarcerated in state prisons, it is often difficult to provide effective educational opportunities. Nevertheless, postsecondary educational programs in jails can be immediately and directly beneficial to communities, and access should be ensured.

While North Carolina jails house fewer individuals than prisons at any given time,<sup>18</sup> because of short stays, jails often touch more lives. Those who leave county jails quickly re-enter their communities, and having them return better off is a huge benefit to society. For this reason, some county jail facilities partner with local community colleges to craft effective, compacted classes. In 2015, the Alamance County Sheriff’s Office partnered with Alamance Community College to facilitate secondary education attainment in the county jail.<sup>19</sup> Other North Carolina counties such as Meck-

lenburg and Wake have educational programs as well.<sup>20</sup> Such efforts are encouraging, but both state prison and county jail populations would benefit from increased access to postsecondary correctional education.

Changes to current grant funding mechanisms—namely, increased scholarship funds for incarcerated individuals—could constitute a significant step forward. Research and powerful anecdotes show that postsecondary education programming in particular can enhance public safety, rebuild families, restore dignity to the incarcerated and make fiscal sense for taxpayers.

Below is an overview of current funding mechanisms and an analysis of how they could be changed to support increased access to postsecondary education behind bars.

## CURRENT POSTSECONDARY FUNDING MECHANISMS

Attempts to increase spending on correctional education have been met with opposition—specifically, from those who question whether incarcerated individuals should receive benefits. But the benefits of these programs extend beyond the lives of their participants. Evidence shows that education programs within prisons are a cost-effective way to improve public safety. For example, one cost-benefit analysis found that correctional education is nearly “twice as cost-effective as incarceration” and calculated that correctional education cost the state about \$1,600 per crime prevented, while extending prison sentences cost around \$2,800 per crime prevented.<sup>21</sup>

Monetary support for North Carolina’s correctional education programs is usually derived from a line item under the state corrections budget, state financial aid, college headcount dollars or a combination of these factors.<sup>22</sup>

### Headcount Dollars for Colleges

College headcount dollars refer to the amount of funding allocated per student enrolled at a public college or university.<sup>23</sup> North Carolina does not appropriate funds specifically for prisoner education so, for the purposes of funding, colleges can treat incarcerated students the same as non-incarcerated students. This means that colleges who enroll incarcerated students can include those students in their headcount and receive additional funding from the state.

Traditionally, community colleges receive their headcount funds the year after services are provided. But given the heavy start-up costs associated with correctional education programs, the North Carolina legislature agreed to pass Department of Correction funding through to community

colleges to cover their start-up costs during the first year of new programs.<sup>24</sup>

Headcount dollars incentivize community colleges to remain involved in correctional education, as adding incarcerated students to their headcounts increases operating funds. In this way headcount dollars have effectively provided educational opportunities for people in prison, but this type of funding does not necessarily apply to those housed in jails.<sup>25</sup> This is because community colleges are barred from counting students in county jails in their headcount numbers for funding purposes.<sup>26</sup>

However, the removal of this barrier is critically important for those in North Carolina jails, as a typical jail stay lasts one year or less.<sup>27</sup> Further, the relationship between those serving jail time and their communities is closer than that of prison inmates, and providing postsecondary correctional education programming during detention can make a critical difference in re-entry outcomes. Since countless children and families have lost their loved ones to the walls of a jail cell, North Carolina should prioritize rebuilding stronger families by allowing those in jail the opportunity to start earning their postsecondary degree behind bars.

In light of this, using headcount dollars to provide correctional education programs may not be the best way to fund correctional education. Since correctional education carries special considerations and logistical issues, additional funding might be necessary to ensure that quality programming is accessible to those incarcerated.

### State Grants for College Students

In addition to headcount dollars granted to colleges, each year the state of North Carolina gives away millions of dollars directly to students in the form of state-funded educational grants. These include the North Carolina Student Incentive Grant, the North Carolina Education Lottery Scholarship and the North Carolina Legislative Tuition Grant, among many others.<sup>28</sup>

Some of these state-funded grants are available to incarcerated students, but they are currently ineligible for three of the four largest pools of grant monies – which includes the North Carolina Education Lottery Scholarship, the North Carolina Need Based Scholarship for Independent Colleges and the North Carolina Community College Grant Program. This is because North Carolina ties these grant opportunities to the same criteria established for Pell Grant qualification, and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 made incarcerated individuals ineligible for Pell Grants.<sup>29</sup> Even if the federal government has not yet addressed this educational funding disparity, the state should remove the link to Pell Grants and amend their own

qualifications to include incarcerated individuals who want to improve their lives.

Meanwhile, one of the largest and most well-known grant opportunities specifically for incarcerated students is the U.S. Dept. of Education’s Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Youth Offenders grant, which has enabled the University of North Carolina to offer 63 post-secondary classes on-site in 12 correctional facilities.<sup>30</sup>

The Youth Offender grant is certainly a step in the right direction, but its eligibility is limited to incarcerated individuals under 25 years old and thus access to correctional education for older incarcerated individuals remains sorely needed. Put simply, those with longer sentences will likely be faced with greater obstacles upon re-entry, and postsecondary correctional education can help them improve their prospects.

### RESULTS OF CURRENT POLICIES

When incarcerated individuals have greater access to educational opportunities, recidivism rates decrease. Indeed, a 2014 study found that earning a postsecondary degree while incarcerated reduces the chance of being incarcerated again by 24 percent.<sup>31</sup> Scholars have also estimated that, when measured in reduced incarceration costs, savings can translate to a \$5 return for every \$1 invested in a correctional education program.<sup>32</sup> These benefits trickle down to families and communities, who benefit when individuals in prison become educated.

In 2019, the North Carolina Department of Commerce published a preliminary analysis of the employment and recidivism outcomes of over 22,000 individuals released from prison in 2012. Unsurprisingly, they found that those who had been assigned a job or had participated in a workforce service the year prior to release—such as educational programming—displayed higher rates of employment and lower return-to-prison rates than those who had not.<sup>33</sup> Approximately 35 percent of the former group were employed during their first year following release and did not return to prison compared to 23 percent of the latter.<sup>34</sup>

These results are encouraging, but because individuals who choose to participate in such programming are a self-selecting group, more data and evaluation are needed to study the effects of education behind bars.

### CONCLUSION

Postsecondary correctional education creates more post-release opportunities and decreases the likelihood of recidivism, improving public safety and supporting communities across North Carolina. Accordingly, the state’s residents and

policymakers alike should support and work to expand its existing programs. The most logical way to do this is to make incarcerated students eligible for the largest state-funded grants and to increase educational programming within local county jails. North Carolina's legislature should also capitalize on the opportunity to reform any statutes that bar or limit access. Doing so will ensure that correctional education is available to those who wish to contribute positively to society upon release.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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