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*RESEARCH IN BRIEF*

# How College and University Presidents Discuss Prison Higher Education



THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH  
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**ALLIANCE**  
FOR HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
IN PRISON

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# How College and University Presidents Discuss Prison Higher Education

This research brief offers insight into how college and university presidents of institutions with prison higher education programs talk about and explain providing postsecondary education to incarcerated learners. Against the backdrop of recent federal policy changes alongside the magnitude in program growth, we seek to document and understand how college and university presidents talk about prison higher education. Additionally, the recent expansion of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students (see: FAFSA Simplification Act, 2019) alongside unprecedented speed in program growth, draws further importance to understanding how campus presidents articulate the reasons for prison higher education, as a way to inform future access to postsecondary education for incarcerated people as well as provide insight into the perceived relationship between the goals of higher education and prison higher education.

Through individual interviews with campus presidents, this research uses Critical Discourse Analysis to address the following questions:

- ▶ **How do campus presidents narrate their support of prison higher education and prison education programs listed in the National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs?**
- ▶ **What narratives emerge among campus presidents, and what potential might they hold for ultimately expanding access to postsecondary education for incarcerated people?**

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 31 campus presidents, we examine the ways they discuss prison higher education and why their institution hosts a program. In 2023, members of the Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison conducted 30-minute interviews via Zoom from March through October. Our team used purposeful selection and collaborated with the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison to include participants in the 2023 Cohort Program. The presidential participants represent diverse institutional types and credential pathways offered to incarcerated students (see Table 1).

Presidents share common discourses in describing their reasons for hosting a prison higher education program, amid competing priorities and potential pushback. In what follows, we focus on three themes elevated by campus presidents in discussing prison higher education: a) **mission and margin**; b) **knowledge and experience**; and c) **duties of higher education**.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Presidents perceive prison higher education as a core component of their institutional missions.
2. Presidents believe prison higher education betters society through postsecondary attainment, reduced recidivism, and access to employment.
3. Presidents' explanations for supporting prison higher education are deeply connected to their personal and scholarly experiences. They frequently referred to their own experiences going inside the prison to meet students or attend commencement as being highly impactful to their belief in and commitment to supporting the work.
4. Many presidents see prison higher education as fulfilling a moral imperative because of a belief that the current system of incarceration is ineffective and unfair.
5. Presidents acknowledge that prison higher education is not revenue-generating and requires a significant investment of money, time, and labor on behalf of the institution. Yet, prison education must meet the bottom-line: "no margin, no mission."
6. Many presidents referenced the "enrollment cliff" in higher education as an opportunity and incentive for prison higher education.
7. Presidents do not generally see prison higher education programs as a detriment or political liability.

## MISSION AND MARGIN

Regardless of institutional type, campus presidents overwhelmingly referred to the college or university mission as a core reason why prison higher education programming occurs at their institution. At the same time, the majority of presidents of public institutions stood out in their emphasis on the importance of margin. In all, presidents described their programs as contributing to enrollment growth (margin) but also serving a larger purpose that closely aligned with their mission.

When asked why they host a prison education program through their campus, those who lead two-year institutions referred directly to the mission of open access. As one president leading a two-year institution noted:

**That's what the community college mission is about, and we give people not just second chances, third chances, fourth chances. If I happen to be talking with a student who is frustrated, who maybe has to leave, I'm like, "Look, we'll be here. When you're ready, come back." That's what we do.**

References to institutional mission were made by all presidents and those leading public institutions more commonly mentioned the importance of margin. One president (2-year, public) directly connected the viability of programs to the availability of institutional funding: "In addition to the things that I've already mentioned, it's [supporting prison higher education] enrollment, it's FTE; those two things drive funding." Enrollment growth was

the most commonly cited way that margin could be increased by prison higher education programs.

Other presidents exhibited more intrinsic ties in their sense-making of both mission and margin, explaining that higher education boosts enrollment while still aligning with who they are as an institution. One particular president (4-year, public) explained that “enrollment stability” is becoming an increasingly crucial consideration for small colleges and a reason for enrolling incarcerated learners at their institution:

**Well, I think higher education is approaching a real critical time moving forward. I think the enrollment demographic cliff is very real ... And as higher education leaders, as we look toward the future ... it's [higher education in prison] gonna be increasingly important if a small college wants to be viable and sustainable into the future that it creates opportunities for enrollment stability.**

One president, (4-year, public) said succinctly: “No margin, no mission.” Relatedly, a handful of presidents mentioned that to serve incarcerated learners well, institutional resources had to be intentionally and strategically allocated:

**We commit resources, we commit talent, a lot of talent, and I really would discourage any president from thinking they should do this because this is going to be another revenue stream ... It needs to be part of your core mission and vision and purpose and values.**

Presidents articulated their reasons for hosting prison higher education programs through mutually informed ideas of mission and margin.

## **KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE**

When asked to explain why they direct resources to prison education, presidents referred to a range of their own academic and experiential knowledge of incarceration that has influenced their educational leadership practice, as it relates to the prison education program at their institution. Although our interview protocol included a question directly asking presidents how they personally felt about higher education in prison, participants often cited personal, professional, and academic reasons as they narrated their own reasons for supporting their program. These references were made across participants' educational background, institutional types, familial ties, and core values.

One of the few Black presidents interviewed (4-year public), cited his own experiences and understandings of how incarceration can affect one's life opportunities:

I feel that it's very important. Growing up in an inner city community, understanding some of the challenges that's happening today, was happening back then. And really understanding that as we make decisions, we have to be accountable to those decisions. But at the same time, some of those decisions don't need to be to the point where we don't have a future. And so, I really understand the importance of building, I understand the importance of second chances. And all of those things really speak to who I am as an individual.

Presidents commonly mentioned their experiences attending commencement ceremonies inside facilities when describing their support for prison higher education. One president (2-year, public) mentioned the mutual respect she felt between herself and the incarcerated graduates: "I was able to shake their hands and congratulate them. So, it was tremendously meaningful for me."

For another president (2-year, public), the best two days of his school year are spent inside the prison:

Every time anybody sees the first graduation, to see families in there, and it's like, "Okay, I know what I'm doing now." I think that's the big thing. I don't miss one of those graduations ever. I love two great days of the year. When the students show up, but then when I graduate them too, when they walk across that stage, those are two best days of the year.

The experience of participating in a graduation ceremony or other events at the prison that created proximity between the campus president and incarcerated students were formative for many of our participants. Equally as important the presidents we spoke with was their exposure to academic and/or professional learning opportunities that created an awareness of systemic inequality and the complicated nature of incarceration in the U.S.

## DUTIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Presidents felt that their prison education program was contributing to the institutional mission and the broader purposes of postsecondary education in society. Presidents specifically referenced prison education programs as a "social good" that positively contributes to outcomes like social mobility and employment. Additionally, presidents shared that the impact of the prison education program can help address immediate contextual needs as well as reduce the numbers of people who are released from prison only to return.

Recidivism reduction was often tied to also contributing to the betterment of communities:

The data are clear that it [prison education] benefits the student, it benefits the community, it reduces recidivism, it makes a more productive citizen for the workforce. So for us, it really speaks to what

**we're about, what we're supposed to be, and it's all about trying to educate our community and make our community a better place for everyone to live.**

Other presidents also referred to the impact of prison education on reduced recidivism. One president (4-year, private) specifically discussed reducing recidivism as making financial sense: “It just makes sense. It’s good for the universities, and it’s good for the students. And we should be lobbying to have state dollars educate incarcerated individuals because it saves money in the long run because of recidivism.” Relatedly, another president (4-year, public) framed a reason for supporting prison higher education as way to prevent recidivism as hinging on access to the kind of opportunity only postsecondary education can provide:

**But bear in mind you got a lot of people in prison in the United States who are going to be getting out. And they're either going to be a liability afterwards because they don't have opportunities. Or they're going to be contributing to making stronger communities and stronger work forces. Because they do have opportunities and we are the connective tissue in that in my view.**

The connective tissue that this president mentions was a commonly articulated connection among some presidents between what they viewed as an issue of social inequality and how specifically access to postsecondary education could help.

Additionally, there was a profound belief shared among presidents that their institution’s prison higher education program was fulfilling a type of moral obligation because of their “concerns about the way our [punishment] system works” (2-year, public). One president (2-year, public) mentioned their career as a lawyer and how many people involved in the legal system “had been dealt a bad hand one way or another”. These inequities foregrounded the “larger purpose” presidents saw their programs as serving, which included community betterment across campus and community lines:

**What really matters to me and I think what matters to our community is thinking about it's not just what we do on campus. What's the reason for what we're doing on campus? And I think our community really embraces that concept that it's for a larger purpose which is about how we make ... I don't want to say something like as big as how we make the world better, but how we contribute to societal development. That's what education should be for. And so, I think that certainly from my leadership and the prison piece fits really easily into that, that's what's meaningful.**

Finally, the idea that the prison higher education program could (and does) have a profound impact on the campus and community was perhaps best expressed

by one president of a four-year private institution. He offered the following when asked what he would say to a college president at an institution without a higher education in prison program, “I would say ... are you and your institution ready to be transformed? Because if not ... education is just a commodity.” For this president, it was clear that the purpose of higher education was fully being expressed through the work of the in-prison program.

## Conclusion

Presidents were adept in expressing ways to discuss or justify the work of prison higher education across multiple stakeholders. Reflective of the type of discernment required by campus presidents (Thompson, 2018), these leaders understood that there are personal, institutional, economic, moral, and political reasons to support prison higher education. In all, presidents with prison higher education programs expressed confidence in their efforts and desires to continue the programs. Future efforts to expand prison higher education should strategically involve campus presidents.

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**Table 1**

## Presidential Participant and Affiliated Institution Information

Number	Institution	Institutional Type	Race	Gender	Highest Credential & Discipline
1	A	4-year Private	White	Woman	PhD Humanities
2	B	4-year Public	White	Man	PhD Social Science
3	C	4-year Private	White	Man	MBA, JD
4	D	4-year Private	White	Man	MFA
5	E	4-year Public	Black	Man	JD
6	F	4-year Public	White	Man	PhD Education
7	G	2-year Public	White	Man	MA Education
8	H	4-year Public	White	Man	PhD Sociology
9	I	4-year Private	White	Woman	PhD Humanities
10	J	4-year Public	White	Man	PhD Education
11	K	2-year Public	Hispanic	Woman	PhD Education
12	L	2-year Public	White	Man	EdD
13	M	2-year Public	Black	Woman	EdD
14	N	4-year Private	Hispanic	Woman	PhD Social Science
15	O	2-year Public	White	Man	PhD Humanities
16	P	2-year Public	White	Woman	EdD
17	Q	2-year Public	Asian	Woman	PhD Social Science

18	R	4-year Private	White	Man	EdD
19	S	2-year Public	White	Man	PhD Education
20	T	2-year Public	White	Man	JD
21	U	2-year Public	White	Man	PhD Education
22	V	2-year Public	White	Man	EdD
23	W	2-year Public	Hispanic	Woman	PhD Social Science
24	Y	2-year Public	White	Woman	MPA
25	Z	4-year Public	White	Man	PhD Education
26	AA	2-year Public	Hispanic	Woman	PhD Humanities
27	AB	4-year Public	White	Woman	EdD
28	AC	4-year Public	Black	Man	EdD
29	AD	4-year Public	White	Man	PhD Social Science
30	AE	2-year Public	White	Woman	EdD
31	AF	2-year Private	White	Man	PhD Humanities

**Note:** Our research team pulled race, gender, and the highest credential completed from institutional websites. For gender, we made assumptions based on pronouns used in the institution bio for each president. To protect anonymity, we created broad disciplinary categories for the highest credential completed.