

Best Practices for Building Post-Release Educational Pathways

**Normalizing educational opportunity so that people
with records can work quality jobs**

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For many people who are incarcerated, postsecondary classes offered by the facility in which they're serving their sentences represent a first step on an educational journey that is likely to continue after they are released—one that could ultimately lead to an industry-recognized credential, an associate's or bachelor's degree, or even a master's degree or a PhD. To facilitate the process of moving from incarceration to on-campus or online classes, colleges and their partners must develop structures and programs that are intentionally designed to support people who are navigating this transition. This brief offers practitioner-informed recommendations from Rutgers University's New

Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons ([NJ-STEP](#)) initiative, the higher education in prison program at Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) in Iowa, and [Prison-to-Professionals](#) (P2P) that can help colleges create pathways that honor and support students' visions for reentering their communities and continuing their educations.

Core Principles

- **Build alongside, not for.** Work with students to define their own visions for reentry and continuing education. Figure out what your college can do to create a straightforward process that enables students to achieve their goals in a way that works for them.
- **Reach out to people who have firsthand experience** in navigating the criminal legal system for help in planning and supporting programs for individuals who are transitioning from incarceration.

Recommended Practices

1. Design pathways that students can access when and where it makes sense for them (see Core Principle 1).
 - a. Some students will choose to attend other institutions within the state or in other states, either to comply with regulatory requirements of the state or county in which they committed their offense or because they want to study at institutions that are more conveniently located, offer better opportunities for establishing family or community support networks, or simply offer a better fit for their academic interests and goals. In these situations, you should explore options for warm handoffs to advisors at the new institutions who understand the nuances of working with learners who are returning from incarceration. As a starting point for identifying a point of contact, look into the college's TRIO program and other college student support

programs, such as federal [Educational Opportunity Centers](#) or state-specific initiatives. If a student is looking to connect with an institution outside your local or state network, consider engaging prison education program leaders who work in the geographic areas where students plan to continue their studies.

In Iowa, pathway navigators at each of the five colleges offering programs in corrections facilities have a detailed understanding of what each college offers, and they can connect with one another to make sure students are supported as they transition to on-campus or virtual programs.

- b. To assist students with the transfer process, make sure they know how to request their transcripts and obtain copies of syllabi for courses they're interested in. Be mindful of the need to waive transcript fees for students who are incarcerated or are returning from incarceration.
 - c. Keep in mind that most students transitioning from incarceration are moving from programs that offer a limited number of classes to colleges in which they'll have a wide array of classes and academic subjects to choose from. Don't assume that these students will want to continue with the educational paths they started while incarcerated. Help them assess what's right for them, and make sure they understand the many ways changes in their courses of study could affect their learning pathways, including the impact on credit transfers, Pell Grant eligibility, timelines for degree completion, and the need to complete prerequisite classes for advanced studies, if that's what they're interested in.
 - d. Understand that some students might not be ready to continue their educations right away. Before continuing their studies, they may need to find a place to live or get a job that offers a steady income, for example. But even while they're addressing those and other basic needs, you can still keep them connected to your college. For example, NJ-STEP provides students with guest library passes and helps them access the tech devices they need while they figure out their next steps. The program also works with halfway houses and assessment centers to provide services and organizes community meetings and workshops led by students and alumni.
2. Start the conversations about post-release educational planning at least a year in advance, if possible. Work with your state's corrections agency to find out who might complete their sentences within the next year and reach out to them to discuss how continued education fits into their plans.
 - a. In Iowa, pathway navigators have access to data on people who are nearing their release dates, and program staff have regular conversations about who might be released soon and what their educational needs might be.

- b. NJ-STEP also has access to data on release dates and confirms the information with the New Jersey Department of Corrections.
 - c. In both programs, program staff talk with students about their post-release plans and frequently get updates from the students themselves about release dates.
- 3. Pay attention to every detail: Reentry planning is more than college planning. For example, there are a lot of logistical questions to consider. Where will the students live? How will they get to campus? Do they need computers or internet access? If possible, engage students' case managers in these conversations because case managers should have access to any pertinent information about state and local rules and regulations that will impact students' plans.
 - a. Start with students' desired outcomes and goals, as well as their key concerns.
 - b. Coordinate with your state's corrections agency and other government offices to find out what services they provide—augment those offerings, don't duplicate them.
 - c. Work with students to create multiple backup plans.
 - d. The Education Justice Project at the University of Illinois published a national edition of a guide called [Mapping Your Future: A Guide to Successful Reentry](#) in fall 2022. It outlines key steps to take before and after release, including planning for education as well as housing, health care, employment, and technology needs.
 - e. The Tennessee Higher Education Initiative developed the [Moving Forward](#) guide that provides resources and tools for individuals as they prepare for and transition back into their communities. The guide was developed by individuals who have successfully transitioned from prison to communities, and in partnership with supporting organizations.
- 4. Offer students opportunities to work with mentors, especially people who have firsthand experience navigating the criminal legal system.
 - a. Students may be uncertain about continuing their educations, and they may question whether college is really for them or wonder whether they will feel welcome and included on campus. Connecting them with mentors who have gone through similar experiences signals that your college believes in them and will welcome them and help them prepare for what to expect.
 - b. Mentors with lived experience understand the unique challenges that students who were previously incarcerated may face, and they know what questions these students are likely to have about navigating the college environment.

- c. Mentors don't have to be tied to a specific institution. Consider working with organizations like the [Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network](#) or P2P to find mentors.

While there are many additional factors to consider when developing post-release educational pathways—including articulation agreements and credit transfer—these core principles and recommendations will help colleges support students throughout the transition process in a way that prioritizes students' agency to define their own success.