

What's the deal with Pell in prisons?

Answers to frequently asked questions

In July 2023 Pell grant eligibility was reinstated after Congress removed a ban that has prevented incarcerated students from using federal financial aid since 1994.



will be approved to offer Pell by July 1, 2023.

We publish a regular newsletter about education in prisons — College Inside. We asked readers what questions

How the process works will vary by state, by facility, and by individual. Only a limited number of prisons

they had about Pell Grants. Here are some answers to common questions:

What is a Pell Grant?

Pell Grants are federal financial aid awarded to low-income college students who have not already earned a bachelor's or graduate degree. The maximum award is roughly \$7,000 a year, but the amount depends on your financial need, the cost of the program, and your status as a full- or part-time student.

How do I sign up?

You cannot apply for a Pell Grant unless there is an approved prison education program at your facility. If you are accepted to that program, you fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. You should contact the education department or your counselor to find out whether a Pell-eligible program is available at your facility. **Do not fill out and submit the FAFSA on your own or have someone on the outside submit it online on your behalf.** Wait until you are asked by your college to do so.

What strings are attached?

Unlike student loans, Pell Grants do not have to be paid back. But if there is an approved prison education program at your facility, you should ask if there are any expenses you'd be expected to pay that are not covered by Pell and what credential (certificate or degree) you'll be earning. You should also be aware that there is a lifetime limit on Pell Grants (see later question). You must be enrolled in a degree-seeking program.

Does the money come directly to me?

No, this money goes directly to the college on behalf of the student

What is lifetime eligibility for Pell? Can I run out?

You can receive Pell Grants for the equivalent of six years or twelve semesters of full-time study — this includes college both inside and outside. If you are enrolled part-time, your lifetime eligibility would be reduced by that amount. (For example, if you were enrolled half-time for two semesters, that would equal one semester of lifetime eligibility).

Keep this in mind when you are making decisions about whether to enroll in a program. For example, if you want to earn a bachelor's degree in sociology in the future, it might not make sense to use Pell to pay for an associate's degree in automotive technology.

Does the department of corrections get paid from my Pell Grant?

Pell goes to colleges, not corrections agencies. And in fact, college programs are often costing the DOCs because of the need for staff to accommodate movement of professors and students and the approval of materials. It's often actually a drain rather than a boost to the DOC budget.

What do Pell Grants cover? (And why don't I get to keep my books?)

Pell Grants usually go towards covering tuition, fees and other operating expenses of the program. It often depends on whether a program is only funded via Pell or if there is other funding from the college, state, or private donations.

Different programs have different rules about books. Sometimes programs pay for the books and reuse them for future students. Many times students can't keep their books because of DOC property rules.

If I used Pell Grants before 1994, am I eligible now? And what if I was enrolled in college before I was incarcerated?

Yes, as long as you haven't used Pell for more than 12 semesters (the total lifetime limit for Pell eligibility).

I heard that you can't use Pell Grants if you have a student loan in default.

You aren't eligible for Pell Grants if you have a defaulted loan, but the Education Department has recently created a new process called "Fresh Start" that allows you to bring your loans into good standing.

If you currently have a loan in default, write to P.O. Box 5609, Greenville, TX 75403. In your letter, include your name, social security number, date of birth, address of your facility and the following: "I am a confined or incarcerated individual. I would like to use Fresh Start to bring my loans back into good standing."

Am I eligible for Pell Grants after I'm released?

Yes, as long as you haven't run out of your lifetime eligibility. Once you are released, you may use Pell Grants for any college program you're accepted to as long as you otherwise qualify (meaning your income is low enough).

What if I already have a degree?

You can only use Pell for undergraduate education. If you have a certificate or associate's degree, you could still use Pell for a bachelor's degree. However, you can't use Pell for a second bachelor's degree or for graduate programs (education beyond a bachelor's degree like a master's or Ph.D.).

Can I apply for a Pell Grant if I have a life sentence or life without parole?

Congress removed any restrictions in Pell eligibility related to conviction or length or sentence, but states can still use those factors in determining who is allowed to enroll in a prison education program or who they prioritize for enrollment.

Can I use Pell for correspondence courses?

There is nothing in the federal rules that says that Pell can't be used for correspondence courses, but print-based correspondence programs have to go through the same approval process. The approval and accreditation process is time and resource intensive, so it will be a while before many of the programs offering print-based programs will use Pell. Ultimately, it depends on whether or not your corrections agency approves those programs.

Can I use Pell to pay for a program offered by a for-profit college?

No, incarcerated students cannot use Pell for programs offered by for-profit colleges.

What if I'm undocumented?

Only U.S. citizens are eligible for Pell Grants. If you are undocumented, there may be other sources of state financial aid, depending on where you are incarcerated.

What should I do if I'm at a prison that doesn't offer an approved Pell-eligible program?

If there are other facilities in your state that are operating college programs, you might be able to request a transfer.

Where do I get more information?

If you have questions about the federal student aid application process, call 1-800-433- 3243. If you have a question about defaulted loans, call 800-621-3115 or 877-825-9923, or send mail to: U.S. Department of Education, Default Resolution Group, P.O. Box 5609, Greenville, TX 75403-5609.

If you'd like to sign up for a print version of **College Inside**, our regular newsletter about education in prison, you can write to



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You can also have a friend or family member sign you up online here: <https://tinyurl.com/collegeinside>.