Creating Opportunities, Supporting Excellence, and Working for Justice

The Colorado Coalition for Higher Education in Prison Best-Practices Study on Statewide Education Coalitions

The Colorado Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (C-CHEP)

By Stephen J. Hartnett, JoyBelle Phelan, Sean Mueller, and Michael Clifton

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“The key to helping folks understand our projects is to remember that this is not just about what we’re doing in prison—this is about what we’re doing for our campuses and our communities.

This work transforms the lives of everyone who’s involved, not just people inside but professors, administrators, librarians, and advisors. It transforms our institutions, it’s going to help people remember why they love teaching, and it’s going to help us rethink higher education.

Our prison work is about transformation, not just inside prisons, but for everyone.”

Father Thomas Curran, Founding Director,
the Jesuit Prison Education Network

THE RATIONALE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON COALITIONS

This study begins with the conviction that statewide coalitions aligning the work of Higher Education in Prison providers (HEPs), Departments of Corrections (DOCs), community groups, incarcerated students, elected officials, and other stakeholders offer non-partisan and common-sense avenues for advancing community goals. As Faiza Chappell states in *Stakeholder Collaboration for Postsecondary Education in Prison*,

> Having stakeholders work together results in stronger communication and interaction among entities, better policy outcomes, and increased organizational performance. Stakeholder collaboration can directly impact idea-generation in the field, lead to more resource sharing, and result in higher rates of accountability among stakeholders.[1]

We likewise begin with the understanding that the HEP field has matured to the point where we no longer need to argue for the benefits of higher education in prison—for that fact has been established beyond any reasonable doubt. Positively impacting self-efficacy, facility environments, workforce development, post-release outcomes, community resilience, and more, the salutary impact of higher education in prison is recognized across political camps and cultural divides, making it one of the age's few bipartisan places of consensus.[2] In short, HEP-related work has moved beyond the need for justification and toward questions of design, scale, long-term responsibility, and community opportunity.

Nonetheless, we open this report with a tribute to the key reason why we support HEP endeavors and statewide coalitions: because they multiply our capacities for growth, agency, and care, hence strengthening our democratic lifeways. Here is how Chantry Loewen puts it in a poem he wrote while incarcerated at the Sterling Correctional Facility in Colorado:

> To speak of social justice
> Means imagining an unknown future
> To speak of social justice
> Means balancing action and fact
>
> Regardless of a number
> I still have a name
> I will not let my past
> Dictate my present
>
> My dreams for the future
> Shape my right to succeed
> I will use the key of freedom
> Earned through education
> Despite being a prisoner of this society.[3]

Echoing Loewen's declaration, we begin from the assumption that higher education—for the free and the imprisoned—offers "the key of freedom," supercharging our "dreams for the future" and sharpening the skills we need to contribute to our democracy.

Writing in *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*, Andrew Foust deepens this call for self-advancement through learning. Reflecting on the dehumanizing judgments and assumptions that accompany incarceration and post-prison life, Foust describes the emotional work required to grow beyond those narratives. Quoting William E. Henley's *Invictus*—"I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul"—Foust frames education as a practice of reclaiming authorship over one's own story. Education, he suggests, cultivates a flexible and inquisitive mindset that allows people to see themselves and the world differently, building confidence, curiosity, and a renewed sense of possibility. "Manifesting these words," Foust writes, "has changed my life."[4]

Loewen's and Foust's reflections testify to how higher education in prison enables damaged souls to begin the hard work of rebuilding new selves and new relationships rooted in a sense of hope and possibility. The function of the alliances and coalitions we address herein is to multiply that sense of hope and possibility by expanding educational opportunities.

> **"Incarcerated students are college students, just on a different campus. They deserve the full range of support their peers on the main campus receive."**
>
> **Tanya Erzen in *Bridging the Divide: Connecting University Teaching & Learning Resources to Higher Education in Prison Programs* [5]**

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

On May 1, 2025, the University of Colorado Denver's Prison Education Program (UCD PEP) received a one-year pilot grant from the ECMC Foundation to stand up the Colorado Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (C-CHEP). As part of the grant's scope of work, UCD PEP committed to conducting a best-practices study by surveying a range of stakeholders in the Higher Education in Prison (HEP) field, including leaders of PEPs, statewide coalitions, and national advocacy organizations. A complete list of interviewed parties appears below.

As part of the grant process, UCD PEP committed to conducting the research in collaboration with formerly incarcerated scholars, ensuring that the voices of system-impacted colleagues were front and center in this work. This commitment reflects UCD PEP's broader goal of creating jobs and other avenues of professional development for formerly incarcerated students and activists, whom we support as they move into roles as scholars, prison educators, community advocates, and coalition leaders.

Conducting this best-practices study therefore unfolded with two clear goals. First, we sought to learn from our colleagues about what does—and does not—work in building a statewide coalition dedicated to supporting educational equity and excellence for incarcerated students. Second, we aimed to ensure that the project created opportunities for formerly incarcerated colleagues to thrive as leaders while enabling our fledgling group to engage in robust idea testing, norm sharing, and team building.

To fulfill these goals, UCD PEP Director Stephen Hartnett invited three coalition members—who are also local activists, formerly incarcerated, and skilled researchers—to join the project: JoyBelle Phelan, Sean Mueller, and Michael Clifton. With this team in place, we conducted interviews, reviewed the websites of our interviewees' organizations, and studied our colleagues' annual reports and policy briefs.

Over the first six months of our work, we interviewed 33 colleagues, listed alphabetically by last name:

- Chris Agans from New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (hereafter NJ-STEP)
- Mirvais "Mir" Aminy, California State University, Fullerton Project Rebound (hereafter CSUF-PR)
- Natalie Aragonez, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter the Alliance)
- Ken Arellano from the Denver Office of Climate Action, Sustainability and Resilience
- C. Jason Bell, SFSU Project Rebound: Consortium (hereafter SFSU Project Rebound)
- Jim Bullington, Adams State University Prison Education Program (hereafter ASU-PEP)
- Leigh Burrows, Colorado Department of Corrections (hereafter CDOC)
- Cait Chamberlin, Georgetown University, Prisons & Justice Initiative (hereafter PJI)
- Father Thomas Curran, Jesuit Prison Education Network (hereafter JPEN)
- Flor Esquivel, Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter IL-CHEP)
- Patrick Flynn, University of Maine at Augusta Prison Education Partnership (hereafter UMA-PEP)
- Alexa Garza, Texas Center for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter TexCHEP)
- Emily Hainze, Georgetown University, Prisons & Justice Initiative (hereafter PJI)
- Lauren Hansen, formerly with Adams State University Prison Education Program (hereafter ASU-PEP)
- Robert Hitt, Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project at Auburn University (hereafter APAEP)
- Corinne Kannenberg, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter the Alliance)

- Michael Kostis, University of Central Florida Prison Education Program and Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter FPEP and FCHEP)
- Molly Lasagna, Ascendium Education Group, formerly with the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative (hereafter THEI)
- Allison Lopez, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter the Alliance)
- Daniel McGloin, University of Maine at Augusta Prison Education Program (hereafter UMA-PEP)
- Peter Moreno, University of Wisconsin–Madison Prison Education Initiative (hereafter PEI)
- Danny Murillo, University of California, Berkeley Underground Scholars (hereafter BUS)
- Ess Pokornowski, Ithaka S+R
- Richard Ray, Michigan Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter MiCHEP)
- Naomi Roma, Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter IL-CHEP)
- Mara Sanchez, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter the Alliance)
- Abraham Santiago, the Connecticut-based Second Chance Educational Alliance and the University of Connecticut's Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy
- Rachel Sander, State University of New York Prison Education Program and New York Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter SUNY-PEP and NYCHEP)
- Kyes Stevens, Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project at Auburn University (hereafter APAEP)
- Allan Wachendorfer, Vera Institute for Justice (hereafter Vera)
- Keri Watson, University of Central Florida Prison Education Program and Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter FPEP and FCHEP)
- Charlotte West, Open Campus Media (hereafter Open Campus) and College Inside
- Darren Wheelock, Marquette University McNeely Prison Education Consortium (hereafter MPEC)

While not exhaustive of all possible allies and colleagues, this list reflects an intentional effort to speak with leaders from all regions of the nation, representing different coalition models, organizational structures, and guiding norms. We believe these conversations provided a sufficiently broad base of evidence from which to draw tentative conclusions about our shared challenges, promising practices, and strategic considerations for building durable statewide coalitions.

Upon completing the interviews, we conducted a cluster analysis of the transcripts to identify key themes, narratives, areas of overlap, and points of confusion, allowing insights from the interviews to structure this report.

Please note that quotations from interviews appear in the text without citations; quoted passages from published materials are referenced in the endnotes.

After drafting our findings, we shared all quoted passages and paraphrased concepts with the colleagues who generated that content, ensuring their approval prior to publication. A few quoted passages used herein were generated during that fact-checking process via email exchanges.

Following academic conventions, we use colleagues' full names the first time we quote or refer to them and then use only their last names in subsequent instances; we likewise write out each group's full title the first time we reference it and then use its acronym thereafter.

Hence, to the best of our ability, the findings presented here reflect the collective wisdom of our interviewees—we are grateful for their insights and their commitments to working for social justice.

Photo: Dwayne Joe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across our interviews, several common themes emerged, despite differences in state contexts, governance structures, and funding environments.

First, we encountered a deep sense of *educators as public servants*. In our conversation with the Florida Prison Education Program (FPEP), Keri Watson said her group's driving question is "What is the best way to bring the most classes to the most people who are incarcerated? How do you serve your state?" As Mara Sanchez from the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance) said, "we always want to remember that there's people on the inside who need us to be doing this work." In our interview with Chris Agans, the Director of New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prison (NJ-STEP), he stressed the phrase "lift them up," indicating how his team's mission is rooted in an ethic of care and empowerment. Kyes Stevens, the founder of the Alabama Prison Arts and Education Project (APAEP), put it beautifully: "What we put first is a deep, unmovable love of learning and people who want to learn."

Second, our colleagues framed their work as committed to a sense of *educational opportunity and equity*. That goal entails ensuring incarcerated students have the same educational quality and support services as their on-campus peers, meaning HEP leaders and coalition partners advocate not just for offering college in prison but for ensuring an across-the-board commitment to excellence and equity. In our interview with Molly Lasagna from the Ascendium Foundation (and formerly the Director of the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative, or THEI), she reported her team's work began "from the perspective of enabling equity across the programs we worked with . . . . That meant we weren't trying to stand on the shoulders of others, we were trying to figure out how to rise the tide for everybody."

Third, our interviewees argued that building a successful PEP, and then linking those PEPs into statewide coalitions, is just one step in a larger process of *social justice movement-building*. "It can't just be about getting students into programs," Lasagna argued, "it can't be about just getting them through programs. It has to be something bigger: Getting out of prison and having the opportunity to leverage that education into sustainable success. We want your students to get out and be the boss of something . . . . The end-goal is economic mobility." Sanchez from the Alliance added a deep sense of mission, saying "this is social justice work, this is deep heart work that we live and breathe and dream about." Speaking with a sense of urgency, Lauren Hansen, formerly with the Adams State University Prison Education Program, put it clearly: "this is about lighting a wildfire to make systems change."

Fourth, our interviewees emphasized the need for system-impacted colleagues to play guiding roles in our organizations, pointing to *an ethic of inclusive leadership*. That means not only drawing upon the stories and experiences of the incarcerated to shape our strategic communication practices but creating spaces for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students to thrive as organizational leaders. As Corinne Kannenberg from the Alliance argued, "It's really important that when you welcome folks who have direct experience, they're more than just storytellers; you've got to welcome them to the table as leaders addressing solutions." Embodying this mission, three of the authors of this report bring their experiences as system-impacted colleagues to the project.

While those four themes cut across state lines, program models, and coalition structures, our interviews also surfaced a series of complications and ethical questions, which we turn to below in our section on "Cross-Cutting Themes from the Interviews." Before we dive into that section of the report, however, we offer a Big Picture look at the state of the field.

THE BIG PICTURE:
TACKLING "LAYERS OF COMPLICATIONS" BY BUILDING TRUST AND MOVING TOWARD MORE INFORMATION-SHARING

Across our interviews, we encountered a sense of wonder about how educators, higher education administrators and staff, corrections officials, elected representatives, community leaders, and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students have come together to advance the cause of higher education in prison. Jim Bullington from the ASU PEP said, "I've been doing this work for twenty years and I can't tell you how long I felt like I was drifting out there, pretty much alone . . . But now, because of the Alliance and C-CHEP, it's incredible—I'm feeling a real sense of solidarity in the state and around the nation. I'm just blown away by the growing sense of community." That sense of gratitude echoed across our interviews. When we asked Father Thomas Curran, the leader of the Jesuit Prison Education Network (JPEN) and a Jesuit priest, about this response to the HEP community coming together via alliances and coalitions, he laughed and cracked a smile, "you know," he said, "in my line of work, we call that a miracle."

At the same time, our interviewees expressed a sense of bafflement at the complexity of this shared work. As Allan Wachendorfer from the Vera Institute for Justice observed, "we're talking about layers of complications." Echoing that theme, Agans from NJ-STEP described his group as a troubleshooting problem-solver that serves the state by "managing through the chaos." Much of this complexity stems from the challenge of bridging different institutional cultures, meaning our work hinges on bringing higher education into prisons while working alongside elected officials, state agencies, and community groups, each with their own protocols, norms, and workflows. Statewide alliances further multiply these challenges, as coalitions coordinate among community colleges, private institutions, and state universities with distinct institutional histories and hierarchies. Given these many moving parts, disorder often feels like a natural condition of PEPs and statewide coalitions. When asked how the Michigan Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (MiCHEP) navigates these layers of complication, Richard Ray laughed and said, "we work very slowly, very carefully, building relationships at the speed of trust."

Throughout the interviewing process, we repeatedly encountered the importance of trust-building. For PEP directors, coalition facilitators, and DOC leaders, coming together as a community hinged in large part on finding creative ways to meet partners where they are. More established programs tend to advance social transformation and student-centered service while simultaneously cultivating a "big tent" ethic of inclusion, norm-testing, and compromise. In practice, this means that the language of conciliation and invitation opens doors to collaboration while rigid "should" and "must" statements tend to close off possibility.

Addressing how coalitions navigate these layered complications while building

trust requires a commitment to transparency and information-sharing. As Ess Pokornowski from Ithaka S+R explained, "our work is naturally fragmented and siloed because we're all coming from different institutional homes. It's not that folks are intentionally obfuscating things, it's just that there is so much work happening, at so many levels and different places, that it's really hard to see the full picture at a state level, let alone the national level." Confronting this dilemma, Pokornowski argues, is one of our central missions, meaning advocacy groups and coalitions need to help distribute "as much basic information as possible," hence "trying to make the bigger picture visible."[6]

For Ray and MiCHEP that goal of "mak[ing] the bigger picture visible" means sharing coalition news over email, through social media, at endless meetings, and on the group's website and in its annual reports. Many of our colleagues expressed a sense of overwhelmed fatigue at the amount of work required simply to maintain college classes in prison, yet Pokornowski, Ray, and others were clear that our alliances and coalitions can do more in the areas of information sharing. For our colleagues, we found strong consensus that transparent governance, plus more information-sharing, expressed through invitational "big tent" rhetoric, fueled the process of building trust across institutional cultures.

Across our interviews, colleagues stressed the point that effective statewide coalitions are vital because they function not only as conveners but also as system-builders, creating the infrastructure necessary for high-quality prison education. We were especially impressed by how Ray and the MiCHEP have brought together roughly 150 staff from member institutions into role-based affinity groups across campuses.[7] These gatherings (see Best Practices Insert #2) are intentionally designed to strengthen relationships among practitioners serving incarcerated students in PEPs. By providing structured spaces for collaboration, MiCHEP enables these groups to surface shared challenges, problem-solve collectively, and transform frontline experiences into emerging best practices.

This inclusive model underscores a broader truth: statewide coalitions are more than meeting facilitators; they are translators, infrastructure builders, and the connective tissue that makes coordinated systems possible. Coalitions rooted in structured collaboration offer a roadmap for every state's developing network, demonstrating how intentional infrastructure can elevate and expand educational opportunities for incarcerated college students statewide.

With this "big picture" framing in place, we turn now to the seven themes that emerged in our interviews.

SEVEN THEMES FROM THE INTERVIEWS

1 Coalitions as Fragile, Essential, and Collaborative

Nearly every group we spoke to began its work as a loosely organized and volunteer-driven gathering of HEP leaders and local activists. As Rachel Sander from the New York Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (NY-CHEP) said, "we started out as a coalition of the willing," a coming together of colleagues who saw the same need for a more organized approach to advancing the cause of higher education in prison. Following a period of barbeques, or dinners, or working lunches, where friends and allies assembled to discuss possibilities, each group reached the point of asking: *what comes next? How do we formalize the work in some kind of institutional setting?*

Our interviews revealed a wide range of answers to that question. Sander and the NY-CHEP decided to avoid creating more bureaucracy, so they remain a loose coalition. After almost a decade of growth and evolution, the NJ-STEP is housed at Rutgers, enabling the group to draw upon its host's massive prestige and pull within the state, while contracting formal roles with the NJDOC. In Tennessee, the THEI began as an independent 501(c)3 but evolved into the Tennessee Prison College Coalition (TPCC), which now maintains tight working relationships with the state government, the Tennessee Board of Regents, and the TDOC. In Illinois, the IL-CHEP is housed within the Adler University (from Chicago) Institute of Public Safety and Social Justice, providing the group with a stable institutional home from which it plays a mediating role between Illinois-based PEPs and the ILDOC. Likewise, in Florida, the F-PEP thrives on the campus of the University of Central Florida. These examples demonstrate that there is no single best way to create a long-term model of coalition sustainability, as each group has worked with different local contexts and possibilities, cobbling together allies and resources. Across these different organizational models, colleagues emphasized the need for a sense of political realism about what is possible in any given state. For example, Alexa Garza from the Texas Center for Higher Education in Prison (TexCHEP), noted that "The culture of each respective state plays a significant role in the success of coalitions and their stakeholders. We must be honest about the realities on the ground."

Throughout our interviews, colleagues emphasized the importance of cultivating collaboration as one of the key tools for navigating shared challenges. When the THEI began the work that led to the launch in 2019 of the TPCC, Lauren Rhae noted that success required a "colleagues, not competitors, mindset."[8] More than any other issue we encountered, interviewees underscored the centrality of this collaborative approach. In practice, collaboration includes sharing information about funders; building relationships with departments of corrections, state governments, and other stakeholders; exchanging strategies for managing PEPs; facilitating credit transfer and transcript sharing; and assembling teams capable of effective advocacy and strategic communication. Although the Alliance is a national organization rather than a state coalition, we echo the ethos the Alliance's Sanchez described when she said, "we're a big tent organization, an umbrella organization, so we take all comers and we prioritize the engagement and leadership of people who have directly experienced incarceration." Successful coalitions, regardless of

structure, benefit from modeling this kind of generous collaboration and inclusive leadership.

In terms of shared challenges, our interviews surfaced geographic dynamics that mirror broader patterns within American civic life. In Illinois, development centered around Chicago dominates the northern part of the state, while southern Illinois is rural and culturally distinct from the urban core. In New York, the southeastern corridor drives much of the state's economy, while many prisons are located in the rural north and west. In Colorado, the urban, affluent Front Range—including Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins, and surrounding suburbs—feels far removed from the rural eastern plains bordering Kansas and the Western Slope stretching toward Utah. Reflecting on the vastness of his state, Ray from MiCHEP laughed when thinking about road trips from downstate to the Upper Peninsula, noting that "oh my, it's not just a different zip code, it's so far away you almost need a passport." Across cases, educators based on urban campuses described epic commutes to reach prisons in remote regions. Coalition leaders consistently emphasized how geography, development patterns, and cultural distance complicate their work as educators and advocates. These geographic challenges have pushed PEPs and coalitions to expand their pool of instructors, often looking beyond main-campus faculty to engage educators from community colleges or branch campuses located closer to prisons. Particularly in large states, some coalitions are moving away from the state as an organizing principle, focusing instead on regional networks.

It is important to underscore the sense of fragility that haunts these efforts. Colleagues from around the nation expressed an acute awareness that individual HEPs and statewide coalitions linger in liminal spaces, their survival often hanging by a thread. For example, in 2024, the Georgia State University Prison Education Project (GSUPEP) announced it was shutting down. Operating as a Second Chance Pell pilot program, campus administrators determined that making the transition to the new category of federally approved PEPs—a process rich with complexity—would burden the campus with "substantial administrative demands" that exceeded the school's "current financial constraints."[9] In this case, campus leadership pulled the plug, shocking colleagues and leaving incarcerated learners in the lurch.

Prison educators and activists also point to recent events in Alabama, although in this case the situation is complicated. Hosted by Auburn University (AU), the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project (APAEP) was the only bachelor's degree–granting program in the state prison system. Their offerings were paused in 2024 when the ADOC initiated an investigation of program staff due to thier violating facility procedures. While the ADOC subsequently invited the APAEP back into its facilities, AU leadership moved in 2025 to sunset APAEP's for-credit programming, for reasons not yet announced publicly.[10]

For statewide coalitions, the news from Georgia and Alabama underscores the necessity of shared governance structures and building partnerships with both DOC and campus leadership, formalized MOUs that address program continuity, clear communication protocols during crises, and coalition-level capacity to buffer against institutional disruption. Without these safeguards, students, teachers, and staff remain vulnerable to policy shifts beyond their control. By pointing to the fragility of our work we advocate for statewide educational coalitions as mediating entities that can negotiate between DOCs, campus leadership, and specific facilities, hopefully creating the bonds of trust and respect that can help programs mature into sustainable organizations.

2 From Precarity to Sustainability

Across interviews, philanthropy emerged as the backbone of most higher education in prison efforts. As Sanchez of the Alliance emphasized, while foundations such as Mellon, Ascendium, Laughing Gull, and ECMC play a critical role, philanthropy alone cannot carry the full weight of statewide systems. Interviewees consistently described stability as emerging only when philanthropic support is paired with state appropriations, institutional absorption of tuition or in-load teaching, and, in some cases, dedicated public revenue streams.

In New Jersey, for example, Agans of NJ-STEP described how the state's cannabis excise tax has helped create a more stable funding environment for education and reentry initiatives, reducing reliance on year-to-year fundraising and allowing programs to plan beyond pilot phases.[11]

In more conservative states, faith-based philanthropy remains especially influential. Interviewees in Tennessee and Alabama described the central role of Christian donor networks in framing education as aligned with redemption, transformation, and public safety. Stevens, founder of the APAEP, emphasized that this mission-driven framing often opens doors that more technocratic arguments do not.

Religious institutions also function as stabilizing anchors. Father Curran from JPEN explained that mission clarity draws sustained donor support: "We do this because of who we are . . . education is transformative." Across interviews, this shared sense of purpose was frequently described as a source of program continuity and community strength—and as a fund-raising asset.

Nonetheless, across our interviews, partners warned of the fragility of soft-money funding. Philanthropic grants support innovation and expansion, but they also produce cyclical precarity, requiring programs to rebuild their budgets every one-to-three years. As colleagues from Connecticut, Illinois, and Alabama noted, relying solely on grants leads to chronic burnout, urgent staff turnover, and an inability to plan beyond the lifespan of a single award. Sustainability, they argued, demands not just dollars, but durable institutional homes, shared governance, and commitments that outlast charismatic founders or grant cycles.

Most of our interviewees flagged the competitive nature of seeking external funding. As Michael Kostis from FPEP observed, "everybody's trying to get water from the same well, so it can be difficult to encourage everybody to work together." In this context, the funding environment can strain collaboration, especially when institutions—sometimes even within the same coalition—seek support from the same limited philanthropic sources. When we asked Allison Lopez from the Alliance how she navigates the exhausting work of securing stable funding, she reframed the challenge: "The funding part is really about building relationships and including those funding groups not just as donors but as thought partners." Multiple colleagues echoed this point, noting that bringing funders into strategy conversations early improves long-term stability and reduces siloed, campus-by-campus approaches.

One example stood out across our conversations: New Jersey's Tuition Assistance Grant (TAG) model for incarcerated students. As NJ-STEP colleagues explained, the state's decision to extend TAG eligibility to incarcerated students fundamentally changed the

sustainability equation.[12] Pell Grants remain capped and rarely cover full costs so, as Agans noted, the TAG "fills the holes" that Pell cannot, enabling both student success and institutional stability. Achieving this sustainable model required years of coordinated legislative advocacy and relationship-building, including Agans' work to reshape how New Jersey imagines its incarcerated learners (see Best Practices Insert #1).

This braided model—Pell + philanthropy + state support—offers a compelling horizon for national HEP advocacy, as supplemental state-level aid would dramatically improve fiscal stability for most programs. Moreover, pursuing such policy change requires coalitions to deepen internal partnerships across campuses: building relationships with Financial Aid, Government Relations, Advancement, Institutional Research, Workforce Development, and Academic Affairs supports effective advocacy, strengthens campus-level administration, and can open doors to expanded funding possibilities.

Other states offered variations on this theme. Sander from NY-CHEP and the State University of New York PEP (SUNY PEP) described how New York's multi-college ecosystem functions only because the SUNY System Office absorbs key administrative responsibilities, including clearance coordination and modest recurring support to participating campuses, allowing individual programs to operate within a shared infrastructure rather than as isolated pilots. In Wisconsin, colleagues emphasized the stabilizing role of system-level capacity, noting that UW System coordination, combined with philanthropic support from institutions such as Marquette University, helps buffer programs from volatility and leadership turnover. At Georgetown University, Prison and Justice Initiative (PJI) leaders described a hybrid model in which the university absorbs faculty costs through in-load teaching or adjunct appointments, while networks such as the JPEN provide gap-filling resources, including travel stipends, convening support, and small unrestricted grants. Father Curran of JPEN emphasized that this combination allows programs to maintain continuity even when external funding fluctuates. Across our interviews, participants stressed that programs are most resilient when higher education leaders treat prison education as a core access mission rather than an optional or time-limited pilot.

Within our conversations about the complicated dynamics of fund-raising, interviewees repeatedly cautioned against expanding too quickly. Father Curran of JPEN warned that philanthropic funding can unintentionally incentivize rapid scaling before systems are ready, arguing that sustainability depends on growth that is "modest, achievable, and sustainable." Similar concerns emerged in interviews from Alabama and California. Stevens, from APAEP, described the risks of outpacing institutional capacity, noting how expansion without secure funding and staffing can undermine both student stability and staff well-being. In California, higher education partners similarly emphasized that program growth needs to align with DOC readiness and institutional infrastructure, particularly when adding new facilities or academic pathways.

Taken together, these interviews reveal a clear pattern: hesitation around funding and expansion is often a sign of maturity rather than weakness. Coalitions that move deliberately, diversify revenue streams, clarify institutional responsibilities, and establish a coordinating backbone are better positioned to sustain long-term success.

In a landscape of persistent precarity, sustainability is achieved not through a single revenue source but by braiding together multiple streams that reinforce one another. Interviewees emphasized that coalitions flourish when leaders widen the circle of responsibility, engaging funders, state officials, campus administrators, and DOC partners in shared, long-term stewardship rather than annual crisis-driven fundraising.

Best-Practices Insert #1
NJ-STEP and TAG: Expanding Student Support
Notes by Chris Agans

NJ-STEP maximizes financial aid opportunities for justice-impacted students by combining Pell Grants with New Jersey's Tuition Aid Grant (TAG) program. While Pell remains the primary funding source, TAG plays a small but strategic role in closing gaps, ensuring students can persist without financial barriers.

Across New Jersey, the NJ-STEP supports the educational goals of approximately 400 students per year enrolled in part-time work (usually 6 credits/term) toward an Associate Degree and approximately 120 students per year enrolled in part-time work toward a Bachelor Degree. NJ-STEP students are overwhelmingly enrolled part-time due to space and schedule allocations. TAG awards are proportional to enrollment load, applied as "last dollar" awards, and available only to part-time enrolled Associate's students or full-time enrolled Bachelor's students. As a result, they are rare for Bachelor's students and relatively small in dollar amount for Associate students.

To restore TAG eligibility for incarcerated students, NJ colleges partnered with the Vera Institute of Justice and engaged a lobbying team to push for Bill S2055. This legislative campaign drew significant attention to NJ-STEP, resulting in additional financial and political support from lawmakers in the form of a state line allocation for direct operational funding.

NJ-STEP projected $1–1.3M annually at full scale, which is less than 0.3% of NJ TAG's roughly $450M budget. In practice, draw down is typically less than 15% of that estimate due to "last dollar" requirements, documentation barriers, and part-time enrollment patterns. Combined with the state line allocation, however, this modest funding provides a combined resource pool for supporting sustainability.

Regardless of total dollar awards, one major benefit of NJ-STEP's approach is clearing students for both Pell and TAG while they are still incarcerated. This proactive step ensures that upon release, students transition seamlessly into college with aid already in place, effectively removing administrative delays, supporting the overall reentry process, and reducing the risk of attrition. Notably, TAG awards in New Jersey are larger for full-time enrolled students than Pell grants, meaning they are an essential tool for keeping college affordable in a high tuition state.

Even limited state aid can make a meaningful difference when applied strategically. By combining Pell with targeted TAG support and clearing aid early, NJ-STEP ensures programs can augment Pell revenue and students have the resources to complete degrees, inside or out.

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons

3 Tension and Trust in DOC and Campus Relationships

Trust with central offices of departments of corrections emerged as a critical baseline across interviews. Leaders from programs including NJ-STEP, SUNY, Georgetown's PJI, and statewide initiatives in Tennessee and Alabama emphasized that higher education in prison cannot operate without central-office endorsement. At the same time, interviewees were clear that such approval alone is insufficient. Watson of the FPEP described this dynamic through what she called the "warden's house" model, noting that each facility reflects the priorities, leadership style, and openness of its warden, resulting in vastly different conditions for educational programming even under the same state umbrella. Sander of SUNY echoed this point, observing that within a single state system, one facility may actively welcome college programs while another effectively "shuts it down at the door." Together, these interviews underscore the need for coalitions to cultivate multilayered relationships including strategic and policy-oriented engagements with the central-office level paired with sustained relational work at the facility level where daily practices ultimately determine program success.

Lasagna noted that while academic institutions are notoriously siloed, similar fragmentation characterizes state governments and corrections ecosystems. Across interviews, partners described DOCs as comprising multiple internal "subcultures"—including central-office leadership, wardens, programs divisions, education staff, custody staff, and unionized frontline workers—each with distinct logics, roles, and pressures. These internal divisions can impede coordination across units and, more importantly, limit the extent to which DOC employees feel equipped or authorized to support higher education initiatives.

While our colleagues all shared stories about how these fluctuations between DOC leadership and individual facilities impacted their programing, Lasagna encouraged coalitions to think about capacity building on a wider scale. Looking beyond colleges or DOCs, she encouraged PEP and coalition leaders to envision a broad landscape of potential stakeholders, including departments of education, departments of labor, elected officials, campus administrators, and community partners. "We need to build the capacity of a wide range of state agencies and stakeholders to understand this population of students," she argued. Coalitions, then, serve as bridges not only between colleges and prisons but across entire state systems.

The work of HEP coalitions is therefore both organizational and educational. Organizationally, coalitions align institutions around shared procedures, expectations, and mission commitments. Educationally, they cultivate a common understanding of incarcerated students as full, capable members of the academic community while sharing basic evidence about participating facilities, enrollment numbers, programmatic offerings, and more.[13]

Interviewees consistently warned that when approaching these organizational and educational tasks, tone matters. "Hectoring, shaming, and blaming never works," Lasagna reminded us. In coalition work, relational posture becomes a strategic tool. Laura Ferguson Mimms described this approach as the practice of "calling in rather than calling out," a principle echoed across interviews with SUNY, JPEN, Illinois, and Michigan colleagues.[14] Trust grows in environments where partners feel respected and included, not criticized or exposed.

Photo: The Climate Reality Project

This educational work extends to college campuses as well. Many interviewees were candid—sometimes painfully so—about the resistance or confusion they encountered from campus units such as Financial Aid, Admissions, Registrars, and IT. Ray from Mi-CHEP captured the challenge succinctly: "You're asking major players at large institutions to link elbows with your program, but you're advocating for students they mostly won't see and probably won't meet." Because incarcerated students remain physically invisible to much of campus leadership, they can be misunderstood or deprioritized. Coalition leaders therefore carry the responsibility of "pulling students out of the shadows" and helping campus colleagues recognize incarcerated students as academically serious, highly motivated, and deserving of the same support offered to traditional on-campus students.

This realization reframes PEP work as multidirectional, suggesting HEP coalitions need to build shared understandings and narratives with prison staff, campus staff, legislators, funders, and community partners. As part of this multidirectional work, Lasagna urged programs to help campus partners see that incarcerated students are "not on the moon—they are college students." If institutions commit to running PEPs, she argued, "then you need to make sure these students are getting what they need to succeed." This includes equitable access to learning technologies, writing centers, advising, disability resources, and all the scaffolding that supports student success. Lasagna calls this "equity adaptation work"—the process of adjusting institutional systems and practices so that incarcerated students are meaningfully integrated into the academic community rather than treated as peripheral or exceptional.

Throughout our interviews, colleagues returned to the fragility of relationships with departments of corrections. With the Georgia and Alabama situations hovering in the background, Sander of SUNY described the long arc of building trust with DOC partners, emphasizing years of consistent presence, careful adherence to security protocols, clear communication, and responsiveness to institutional constraints. She also noted how quickly that trust can erode when programs overstep expectations or fail to follow through. Wisconsin partners similarly stressed the importance of reliability and respect

Photo: Kamil Kalkan

for DOC chain-of-command structures, observing that credibility is built through predictability and disciplined communication. Father Curran of JPEN underscored that higher education and corrections operate in "different industries," each with distinct missions, pressures, and operational logics.

In this context, interviewees described coalitions as essential mediators and translators, helping campuses navigate DOC expectations, supporting DOC staff through campus misunderstandings, and preventing miscommunication from escalating into conflict.

Turnover emerged across interviews as a major structural challenge. Flor Esquivel of IL-CHEP described entering her role amid what she called "heavy conflict" between higher education institutions and the Illinois Department of Corrections, noting that leadership changes and staffing disruptions often force programs to rebuild trust, re-establish processes, and re-orient educators to the realities of working inside prisons. In Connecticut, Abraham Santiago similarly observed that newly appointed wardens often arrive with little familiarity with higher education programming, requiring renewed relationship-building at the facility level. Throughout our interviews, colleagues echoed these concerns, emphasizing that turnover—both within DOC leadership and on college campuses—resets relationships and disrupts program continuity.

Across these contexts, interviewees described coalitions as stabilizing forces during periods of churn, maintaining shared documentation, onboarding new DOC staff and campus partners, and functioning as institutional memory to help programs navigate inevitable personnel changes. For example, Patrick Flynn and Daniel McGoin from the University of Maine at Augusta Prison Education Partnership (UMA-PEP) noted that their program's success is rooted, in part, in its ability to stand as a source of trusted consistency, helping partners navigate the institutional challenges flagged above. We were particularly impressed by how the MiCHEP handles these issues, and so we refer readers to Best Practices Insert #2 for details on how they create shared learning spaces for a wide variety of cross-institutional partners to learn together while building shared norms and expectations.

Best Practices Insert #2
MiCHEP's Integrated Model of Building Partnerships
Notes by Richard Ray

To address the complications of aligning different organizations—including multiple campuses, DOC leadership, individual facilities, state agencies, and other stakeholders—the Michigan Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (MiCHEP) has created two programs that offer opportunities for partners to visit each other's institutions and to learn from each other, hence creating spaces for idea sharing, norm testing, collaboration building, and program alignment.

Fostering Systems Alignment through the MiCHEP Site Visit Program

The MiCHEP Site Visit Program brings together institutional senior leaders, program directors, faculty, MDOC senior leadership, facility administrators, and incarcerated students for joint, yearly site visits to every main campus and prison-based college program. Breaking down institutional isolation by creating these team-building moments works because it:

- Creates a shared understanding of systemic barriers and opportunities.
- Promotes peer learning across institutions and facilities.
- Supports collaborative problem-solving and follow-through.
- Strengthens trust and accountability across higher education and corrections.

By addressing challenges such as classroom access, scheduling, study space, and instructional conditions collectively, the Site Visit Program helps align policies and practices in service of improved instructional quality and student experience statewide.

Strengthening Communities of Practice through the MiCHEP Affinity Group Project

MiCHEP's Affinity Group Project convenes cross-institutional communities of practice focused on high-impact functional areas such as program leadership, faculty and instruction, student support, academic administration, and instructional technology. Fostering affinity groups based around job-specific areas of expertise works because it:

- Aligns day-to-day operations with statewide goals and federal requirements.
- Accelerates adoption of effective campus practices across institutions to prison-based college programs.
- Reduces duplication and institutional isolation.

By sharing best practices across campuses, the Affinity Groups convert individual expertise into shared infrastructure, enabling Michigan's college-in-prison system to adapt, scale, and improve consistently.

One Integrated Model for Student Success

The Site Visit Program and Affinity Group Project demonstrate MiCHEP's core insight: That durable improvements in postsecondary outcomes for incarcerated students require intentional systems alignment, not standalone innovation.

MiCHEP offers a replicable model for how higher education and corrections can work together to deliver equitable, high-quality college education in prison. For additional information, please go to www.michep.org.

The photo depicts a student in the Hope-Western Prison Education Program at Muskegon Correctional Facility. The other man is an incarcerated tutor who is a graduate of the Calvin Prison Initiative transferred to MCF to work with HWPEP students. Image used with the permission of the MDOC and MiCHEP.

MiCHEP

4 Pathways, Parity, and the Student-Centered Ethos

Across our interviews, colleagues emphasized degree pathways and credit portability as top priorities, alongside parity with on-campus curriculum as a guiding value. Interviewees also noted recurring tensions between workforce and liberal arts frameworks. Workforce language often resonates politically, while liberal arts education is frequently framed as cultivating critical and transferable skills. Our colleagues agreed that persistent gaps in student support, including advising, writing readiness, and FAFSA navigation, remain central challenges across the field. Despite these challenges, interviewees shared a baseline commitment to serving students with a strong sense of educational equity. As Tanya Erzen writes in *Bridging the Divide*, "Incarcerated students are college students, just on a different campus. They deserve the full range of support their peers on the main campus receive."[15]

Echoing Erzen's statement, we were struck by our colleagues' commitment to centering the needs and experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. As Pokornowski from Ithaka S+R said, "our work begins by foregrounding student needs. We might all have different rationales for why we do this work, or how we think it should happen, but in the end we're all trying to support folks who are stuck inside." This ethos of care becomes a north star when programs face difficult choices or competing priorities. As Pokornowski added, a good guiding question is "What is the most ethical thing we can do in any given situation? How can we support our students without reproducing harm?"

Interviewees stressed that centering students requires durable structures of support, not just good intentions. Counseling, advising, tutoring, writing support, technology access, and reentry transition services were all identified as fundamental—not optional—components of high-quality programs and coalitions. At NJ-STEP, Agans established a full-time student support counselor in every participating facility, describing that role as "the backbone of student success." Likewise, in Michigan, the MDOC hired a cadre of College Program Coordinators to work with students, aspirants, and MiCHEP member program staff on enhancing access and other quality improvements. Wisconsin's Peter Moreno built a similar multi-campus advising network to ensure continuity. These strategies emerged as clear best practices across the field.

Academic pathways and credit mobility also emerged as central concerns across interviews. Sander of SUNY emphasized the importance of ensuring that academic credits reliably follow students as they move across facilities or transition into the community, noting that interruptions in credit transfer frequently derail academic progress. At Georgetown's PJI, Cait Chamberlin and Emily Hainze highlighted the role of clearly articulated academic pathways in protecting students from institutional variability. They emphasized that students' progress toward a degree should not depend on the particular facility where they are housed or the preferences of an individual instructor. Instead, students should be able to understand where they are in their degree plan and what steps come next.

Interviewees across states emphasized parity with campus curriculum as a core principle of higher education in prison. Sander of SUNY described curricular parity as a non-negotiable norm, stressing that courses offered inside must mirror those offered on campus in content, rigor, and expectations. California interviewees similarly emphasized that incarcerated students benefit when held to the same academic standards as their campus peers, rejecting approaches that lower expectations or dilute coursework. Across the board, colleagues shared stories of how their students demonstrate exceptionally high levels of engagement and enthusiasm, challenging common assumptions about student ability or readiness.

Colleagues also suggested that statewide coalitions could play empowering roles by mediating between prison-based GED programs and individual HEPs, helping to align academic norms, credit transferability, and student recruitment. Working as sharers of information and facilitators of student growth, coalitions can help students envision next steps in their academic journey, moving seamlessly from GED completion to college enrollment.

Many colleagues also acknowledged the need for writing readiness and early ac-

ademic scaffolding to support student success in credit-bearing programs. Interviewees affiliated with the Alliance, Ithaka, and the Vera Institute emphasized the importance of structured reading and writing support both prior to and alongside college-level coursework, noting that these foundations shape students' ability to engage fully with academic expectations. Sander of SUNY noted that while incarcerated students consistently demonstrate talent and motivation, gaps in early academic support can limit their ability to translate that potential into sustained academic progress. We refer readers to Best Practices Insert #3 for details on how the Denver-based Unbound Authors addresses these concerns by providing cross-institutional and system-wide writing support to students. We should note that while such all-volunteer operations offer crucial support to students, individual HEPs and statewide coalitions need to figure out how to fund such work—while heroic, the volunteer model is not sustainable.

Financial aid navigation, particularly FAFSA completion under Pell restoration, emerged as a persistent barrier across interviews. Colleagues affiliated with Georgetown, the Alliance, and the Vera Institute described significant obstacles, including lack of internet access, selective service requirements, incomplete or inaccessible prior transcripts, and the extensive need for staff-mediated paperwork. Interviewees emphasized that FAFSA completion inside correctional settings requires navigating systems that were not designed with incarcerated students in mind. Multiple interviewees argued that coalitions should prepare for these complications by coordinating dedicated liaisons or training campus financial aid personnel who understand the prison context. The UCD PEP has tackled these FAFSA issues by partnering with the Colorado Department of Higher Education to offer "FAFSA Awareness Workshops." The THEI has created materials meant to build financial aid literacy among students, staff, and HEP teachers.[16] Across these examples, our interviewees pointed to the need for individual HEPs and statewide coalitions to shoulder the burden of demystifying how incarcerated students can go to college without incurring debt.

Several interviewees identified post-release continuity as a major vulnerability in the student experience, particularly at the point of release. Agans of NJ-STEP described his program's reentry model as intentionally structured to preserve academic momentum, ensuring that students are welcomed onto campus with tailored advising and peer mentoring that support continuity rather than disruption. California interviewees echoed these concerns. Jason Bell of Project Rebound emphasized that release represents a critical academic transition that requires intentional coordination to prevent students from losing progress or connection. Danny Murillo of Underground Scholars similarly stressed the importance of sustaining institutional belonging after release, noting that students are best served when reentry is treated as a continuation of their educational pathway rather than a rupture. Chamberlin and Hainz of the PJI reinforced this framing, emphasizing that release should function as a continuation of academic progress rather than a reset.

To help our colleagues work toward this goal, we point to the Vera Institute of Justice's 2024 report, *The First Year of Pell Restoration: A Snapshot of Quality, Equity, and Scale in Prison Education Programs*. Breaking down HEP practices into the buckets of "quality," "equity," and "scale," with five areas of analysis within each bucket, Vera offers a 15-point rubric for evaluating program effectiveness.[17] As statewide coalitions proliferate, Vera's model offers a clear roadmap for how we can work across educational institutions and carceral facilities to strive toward a shared sense of community excellence.

Best-Practices Insert #3
Unbound Authors: Writing Centers as Educational Infrastructure in Carceral Settings

Notes by JoyBelle Phelan

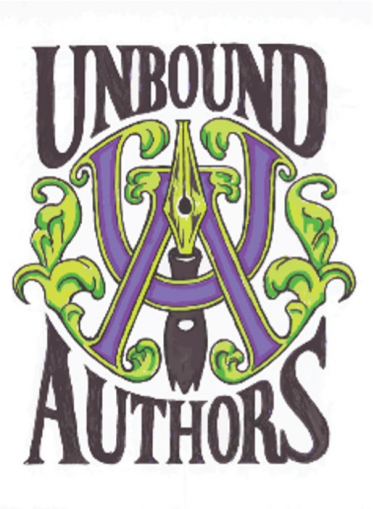
Unbound Authors (UA) is a Colorado-based nonprofit writing center operating inside correctional facilities and partnering across multiple universities and higher education in prison programs to provide sustained literacy and communication support to incarcerated learners. Rather than functioning as a degree-granting initiative or standalone arts program, UA serves as foundational educational infrastructure supporting academic success, workforce preparation, and civic participation.

UA's model is grounded in the recognition that many justice-impacted students enter higher education with uneven academic preparation and limited access to sustained writing instruction, feedback, and revision. By offering consistent writing support inside facilities — before, during, and alongside college enrollment — UA strengthens the learning community that prison-based higher education programs need to succeed.

Across participating facilities, UA provides writing labs, individualized feedback, and instruction focused on core competencies including reading comprehension, analytical thinking, argumentation, narrative clarity, and professional communication. Programming supports a wide range of writing needs, from college coursework and journalistic reporting to reentry-focused and workplace-relevant writing. Participants are encouraged to bring their own projects, reinforcing learner agency while building transferable skills.

UA operates in close coordination with facility education staff and partner organizations, aligning its scope with Department of Corrections policies and institutional constraints. Programming is designed to be flexible and accessible to students across enrollment statuses, helping mitigate gaps created by part-time attendance, limited course offerings, and inconsistent access to tutoring or writing centers. Moreover, writing skills developed inside facilities carry forward into college classrooms, reentry programs, and employment contexts, contributing to persistence and completion outcomes.

From a systems perspective, Unbound Authors demonstrates how writing centers — a familiar component of campus academic support — can be adapted to carceral environments as shared infrastructure. Rather than duplicating degree programs, UA complements existing higher education in prison initiatives by addressing a cross-cutting need: literacy and communication as prerequisites for academic success. This model demonstrates that strategic investment in writing support can yield outsized benefits for prison-based higher education ecosystems.



5 Professionalism, Labor, and Inclusive Leadership

Because the PEPs and coalitions we interviewed are often precarious organizations struggling to secure long-term sustainability in terms of finances, staff, office space, and more, we encountered a wide range of responses to what, for lack of a better word, might be called professionalism. Some groups have no website; others have websites that lack depth and usability; yet others run websites rich with information. Some groups have formal bylaws or MOUs, while others have a handshake mentality. While the University of Illinois' Education Justice Project (EJP) is a PEP, not a coalition, we point to its *EJP Handbook* as a model of professional organizational communication.[18] The Annual Report of the MiCHEP provides another good model of how to represent our work in a professional, public-facing, information-rich format.[19] As we and our colleagues build out our programming and events, the EJP and MiCHEP examples can serve as models for how to reach students, staff, and stakeholders with information-rich and inspiring messaging that models professionalism.

As on our home campuses, the PEPs and coalitions we interviewed expressed widespread uncertainty about best practices for staffing their classes. Rather than trying to summarize the varying answers we heard in our interviews, we point readers to the 2023 Alliance report, *The Landscape of Higher Education in Prison, 2020-2021*. In table 3, "Compensation for Instructors," they report that from the 2,956 prison teachers who worked for the 83 prison education programs that responded to their survey:

- 38% of PEP instructors were adjuncts or other part-time employees paid adjunct rates.
- 21% were tenure-track faculty who teach in prisons "on load."
- 17% were volunteers.
- 7% received some unspecified stipend.
- Remaining labor situations included teaching-for-credit, serving as graduate teaching assistants, receiving adjunct replacement pay, and others.[20]

We want to be careful not to assume a direct link between teaching quality and salary or rank; nonetheless, we point to this data as evidence that PEPs and coalitions have a long way to go if we hope to build sustainable and equitable labor policies. Moreover, as Wachendorfer reminded us, the "Best Interest Determination" process that all PEPs must follow requires in-facility programs to demonstrate equal quality of instructional staff as offered on-campus. As our coalitions evolve, this question of how to advocate for teaching excellence balanced with fair labor practices needs to be at the forefront of our collective efforts.

One issue on which all interviewees agreed was the importance of creating central roles within PEPs and coalitions for colleagues with lived experience inside prisons. Whether called Voice Councils or Student Advisory Boards or Think Tanks, our colleagues spoke highly of incorporating incarcerated students into our leadership structures.[21] Garza from the TexCHEP put it this way: "As a formerly incarcerated leader, I bring lived expertise that deepens this work, even as I navigate systems that may not always view that experience as legitimate authority. Building trust across that divide is part of the coalition-building process itself."

Murillo of Underground Scholars echoed that same point, saying, "If you don't have directly impacted people in leadership, you're making decisions about us without us." As Garza, Murillo, and many other colleagues stressed, one of the markers of healthy PEPs and statewide coalitions is their commitment to inclusive leadership, making sure that colleagues with lived experience help to lead our efforts.

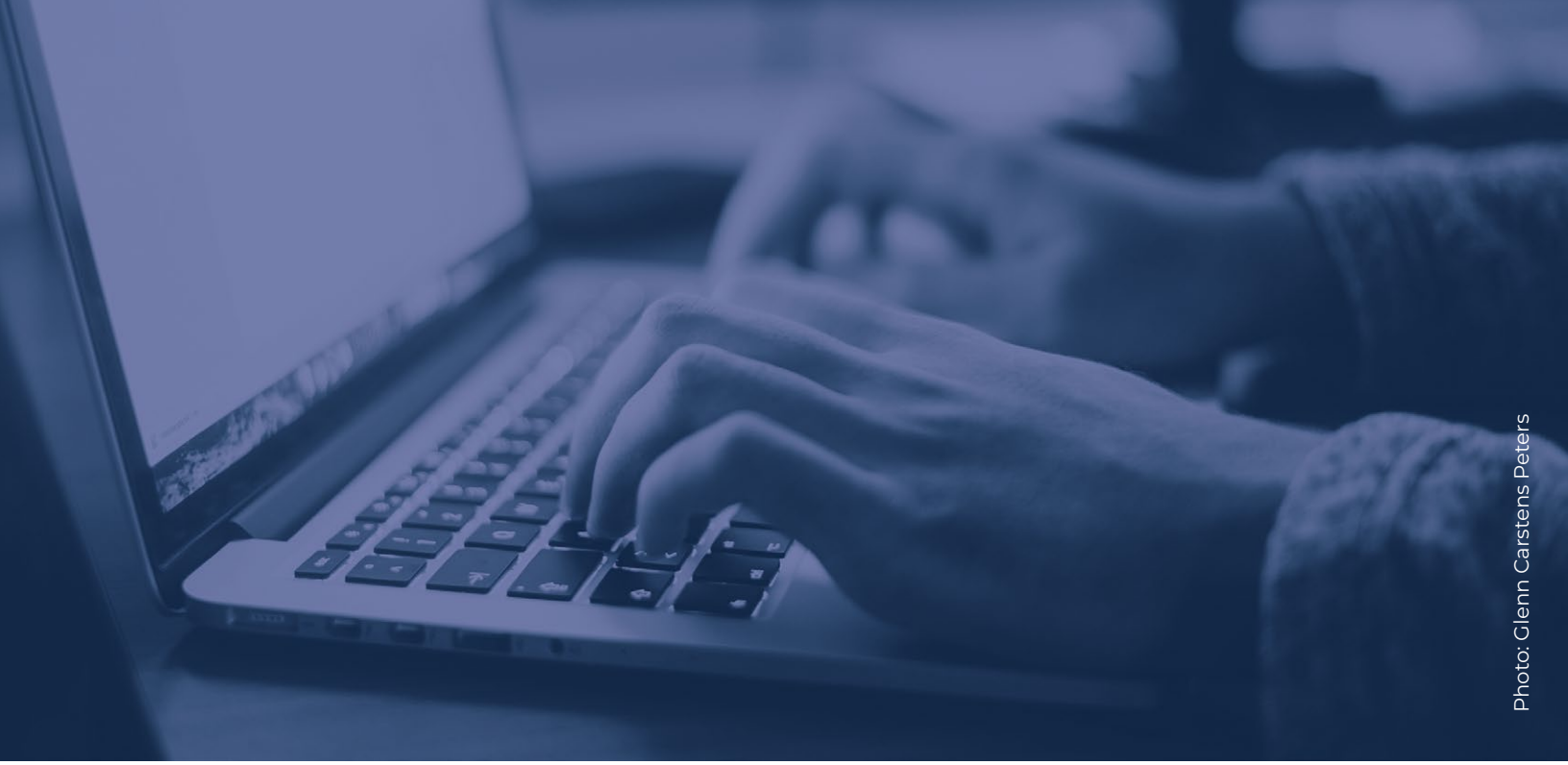


Photo: Glenn Carstens Peters

6 Strategic Communication

Messaging within and about HEP coalitions is highly political. Interviewees described how conservative states often succeed with workforce development, redemption, and cost-saving frames, while more liberal states tend to emphasize equity and social justice. Across contexts, colleagues cautioned that storytelling is powerful but must move beyond tokenization. Websites, conferences, and publications were repeatedly identified as important signals of legitimacy. Throughout our interviews, colleagues emphasized that effective strategic communication is fundamentally about aligning messages with audience values, aligning program activities with institutional missions, and aligning coalitions across diverse campuses and corrections partners. As Pokornowski from Ithaka S+R reminded us, "we all come to this work with different rationales and vocabularies, but our messaging must always begin with the people we serve."

Most interviewees stressed that strategic communication in HEP is not about persuasion in the abstract; rather, it involves positioning PEPs within the goals, pressures, incentives, and cultures of their state's political and institutional landscape. This requires fluency in multiple rhetorical registers. As the Alliance's Lopez put it, "you can't have one message; you need a whole toolkit."

Within these framing ideas about the importance of strategic communication in advancing our shared educational goals, our interviewees pointed to two key themes: public rhetoric about workforce development and arguments about how education enhances democracy:

6a Workforce Development

Allan Wachendorfer from the Vera Institute for Justice emphasized that successful strategic communication requires a strong understanding of one's audience.

When coalitions approach DOCs, state governments, or local campuses, a key first step is to ask, "What speaks to their mission? What are you doing that overlaps with why they do this work?" Wachendorfer suggested that leading with workforce development can be a winning angle because "there's no partisanship behind workforce development . . . . We all need jobs."

He elaborated:

> Our students want a good job to enable them to support their families. But a good job is more than just income, it's how someone feels like a member of society, it shows how you are valued and how you value yourself. And for employers, they need their employees to come prepared with the skills you all are offering through your PEPs. Your students are critical thinkers, they know how to communicate, how to work in teams, how to compromise for the greater good. This is why education in prison and workforce development is win-win for everybody.

Multiple interviewees echoed this point, noting that the workforce frame wins bipartisan support and resonates strongly with DOC staff, many of whom view programming as contributing to safer, more stable facilities. SUNY and Florida colleagues described workforce messaging as "opening the door" to deeper conversations about liberal arts and civic education.

We want to highlight one especially salient example of merging prison education and workforce development. At the ASU PEP, Bullington and Hansen have developed a model that includes hiring incarcerated instructors. At the Territorial Correctional Facility in Cañon City, Colorado, the ASU PEP hired David Carrillo to teach business classes.[22] At the Denver Women's Correctional Facility, they hired Serena Ahmed to teach sociology classes.[23] While this model remains uncommon due to credentialing requirements, Carrillo's and Ahmed's success has sent a bold national message about the expertise and talent locked away behind prison walls while showing how PEPs can merge traditional educational goals with workforce development.

Interviewees also noted that workforce messaging can be complicated by the reality that many incarcerated students experienced economic marginalization prior to entering prison. The Prison Policy Initiative has documented that, prior to incarceration, people who went to prison earned "41% less than non-incarcerated people of similar ages," confirming that incarceration is deeply entangled with structural poverty.[24] This data explains why Chamberlin and Hainze from the PJI emphasized that higher education in prison is not simply about job preparation but about addressing longer arcs of inequality, noting that programs are often working to "repair trajectories that were derailed long before prison." This framing allows workforce narratives to speak truthfully about economic inequality without slipping into deficit language. We accordingly urge programs to balance messages of opportunity and transformation without implying that students lacked value or capacity prior to incarceration.

Finally, several interviewees warned that workforce messaging can inadvertently reinforce tokenizing narratives if it centers on the success stories of "exceptional individuals" rather than working for systemic change. As Pokornowski noted, "We have to be careful. Storytelling is powerful, but we cannot tokenize people or use their stories only to secure funding." With that caveat in mind, we found our colleagues eager to share how the work of PEPs and HEP coalitions creates opportunities for historically marginalized

students to envision themselves as capable and qualified, knocking down barriers to economic mobility and community leadership.[25]

6b Healing a Fragile Democracy

Whereas workforce development messaging often appeals to citizens concerned with measurable economic indicators, a second major strand of strategic communication we encountered in our interviews focused on social justice, community engagement, and building the networks and relationships necessary to heal our fragile democracy. This perspective reframes prison education as a matter of democratic participation, civic belonging, and broader community well-being. As Tanya Erzen, Mary Gould, and Jody Lewen argue in *Equity and Excellence in Practice*, this narrative "frames the field of higher education in prison as an educational enterprise that is centrally concerned with promoting the flourishing of individuals, communities, and society, rather than as a 'correctional' intervention in 'criminality'."[26]

MiCHEP exemplifies this approach of merging the language of job preparedness and civic participation. Their constitution states that "The Consortium is dedicated to the restoration of personal agency, dignity, and economic opportunity for students, and, where appropriate, to their successful reentry into society as informed and capable citizens committed to the common good." SUNY and Georgetown interviewees similarly framed education as a means of restoring civic engagement, reducing isolation, preparing students for career choices, and strengthening connections between campuses and surrounding communities.

Several colleagues emphasized that democracy-centered messaging requires careful and intentional relationship-building with DOC partners. As Sander of SUNY explained, "We don't lead with abolition language. We lead with student language. We lead with dignity and access." This approach does not reflect a compromise of values. Rather, it illustrates a strategic sequencing of conversations that invites engagement and trust across diverse institutional and political stakeholders.

Interviewees across states cautioned that communication missteps—especially in tone—can undermine trust with DOC or legislators. As Lasagna put it, "A strategic communication plan can't just be about virtue signaling." Instead, successful messaging "requires a little shapeshifting sometimes—not deception, but knowing what your audience cares about." When speaking to conservative voters or policymakers, Lasagna found that "economic development, public health, and community safety" resonated. In Tennessee, she also found that "redemption arguments" spoke to religious constituents.

Meanwhile, educators in liberal states stressed language tied to equity, harm reduction, accessibility, and second-chance opportunities. Even here, interviewees noted that messaging must remain coherent across coalitions. As Esquivel of the Il-CHEP warned, "If one campus talks safety and another talks liberation, and a third talks cost savings, DOC doesn't know what to expect from us."

Taken together, our interviewees suggest that coalitions play a crucial harmonizing role by developing communication strategies that can flex across audiences while remaining grounded in shared values, including dignity, opportunity, high-quality education, and the belief that incarcerated students are full members of our academic communities, capable workplace colleagues, and leaders with democratic aspirations.

Photo: Pin Adventure Map

7 The Need for National Coordination

Across interviews, colleagues repeatedly identified the absence of stable national coordination as a growing gap in the field. Ithaka S+R has called for the creation of a national clearinghouse; the Alliance continues to function as an umbrella organization but with limited capacity; and Vera Institute's pivot away from HEP field-building has left both space and uncertainty. Interviewees across states expressed a strong desire for more regular national convenings, noting that beyond the Alliance and ad hoc events, the field currently lacks durable national infrastructure.

As Lasagna put it, "We all love the Alliance, they're doing amazing work, but we need more. We need more convenings. We need more coalition building. We need more networks. We need more connective tissue across the field." Her comments reflected a widespread theme across interviews: while statewide coalitions are proliferating, the national infrastructure needed to support them has not kept pace. Interviewees across states expressed a shared sense that the field has outgrown its current national scaffolding.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that the rapid growth of the field represents both a significant success and an increasing strain. Colleagues within the SUNY system described the challenge of building new systems while continuing to operate active programs. Several interviewees also noted that while the Alliance provides essential convenings, working groups, and public education, the organization was not designed to serve as the sole coordinating body for a rapidly expanding national landscape. Interviewees emphasized that the Alliance staff are doing extraordinary work with limited capacity, and that the proliferation of new coalitions has magnified the need for broader, more durable coordination infrastructure beyond the capacity of any single organization.

Vera Institute's shift toward supporting work that highlights career pipelines has left both space for and uncertainty about organizations that will take the lead on HEP

field-building in the future. Indeed, colleagues celebrated Vera's earlier role in convening partners, producing field-wide reports, and establishing shared standards, yet noted how this transition has left a coordination gap that statewide coalitions and smaller research organizations are now attempting to address. As one Connecticut interviewee observed, there is no longer a national entity providing consistent coordination, policy guidance, or technical leadership.

On the technology side, Ithaka S+R has stepped forward as a national leader. When we spoke with Pokornowski, they described Ithaka's role as a clearinghouse of information regarding educational technology, digital access, and the infrastructural alignment required to support incarcerated students. "We are deeply invested," they said, "in making as much information and knowledge as possible as accessible and transparent as possible." This includes cataloging learning management systems, tracing how states manage digital access, and identifying regulatory or contractual obstacles that prevent smoother alignment between higher education institutions and carceral agencies.

Pokornowski noted that Ithaka's work operates at the intersection of student needs, faculty capacity, higher education institutional contracts, and correctional agency commitments. This intersection is often where statewide coalitions encounter their most complex logistical barriers. Interviewees described persistent misalignments, including SUNY's need to navigate multiple learning management systems across its campuses; Connecticut's procurement restrictions shaped by broader New England administrative norms; Michigan's efforts to balance DOC security protocols with campus technology ecosystems; and California's multi-system environment spanning the CSU, UC, and community college systems, which contributes to fragmented approaches to digital access.

Recognizing these misalignments, Pokornowski emphasized the need for a national entity capable of documenting, interpreting, and coordinating technological and structural differences so that statewide coalitions are not continually reinventing solutions. Multiple interviews echoed this concern. A Wisconsin partner described how states often end up solving similar problems in isolation, while an Underground Scholars colleague emphasized the need for shared templates, models, and practical playbooks rather than relying solely on one-off convenings.

Across interviews, participants expressed a strong desire for more regular and structured national convenings, beyond annual gatherings. Interviewees described the value of quarterly or semi-annual spaces that bring together coalition leaders, DOC partners, funders, researchers, and formerly incarcerated practitioners. Our colleagues emphasized the importance of having a consistent national forum where coalitions can land, exchange strategies, and situate their work within broader field trends. Such convenings could help align state-level efforts with national developments, share emerging practices, and adapt to policy changes such as Pell restoration and expanding digital infrastructure requirements.

Taken together, these interviews reveal that national coordination is one of the most significant gaps in the current HEP landscape. While the Alliance, Ithaka, and a handful of research organizations provide essential leadership, the field is operating without durable national infrastructure. There is no central repository for shared standards, no consistent federal or philanthropic guidance, and no coordinated calendar of national convenings. As state coalitions mature, the demand for a stronger national backbone will continue to grow.

Photo: 2Y Kang

LESSONS AND CONCERNS

In the preceding pages we have addressed the seven themes and emerged from our interviews. Now we step back from those observations to frame some overarching lessons and concerns.

First, given the complexity of running a successful PEP, let alone linking arms to forge statewide coalitions, we want to foreground a cautionary bit of wisdom from Father Curran of the JPEN. Based on his work traveling around the nation to advise member campuses, he has learned to foreground a sense of institutional caution captured in three words: *modest, achievable, sustainable*. Better to build a solid and lasting foundation, he argued, than to rush into programming that might fall apart under duress or administrative changes. A number of statewide coalition leaders even urged us to consider limiting the number of PEPs that join a given coalition to ensure a strong sense of shared mission and vision, which can be compromised by rapid expansion that outpaces the group's ability to incorporate new members. Throughout our interviews, colleagues described moments when funder interest, media attention, or institutional enthusiasm pushed programs to expand faster than their underlying infrastructure could support. Colleagues shared stories of how some programs enrolled too many students too soon, placing significant strain on advising capacity, technology access, faculty pipelines, departments of corrections partnerships, and internal quality controls. Echoing Father Curran's advice, multiple colleagues urged coalitions to prioritize organizational sustainability over flashy visibility: what matters is building durable programming, not maximizing rapid growth.

Second, across our interviews, colleagues repeatedly stressed that statewide coalitions are inherently fragile enterprises. Timing, political climate, institutional culture, and leadership continuity all matter. In New Jersey, Agans of NJ-STEP described how the coalition's success was shaped in part by consolidating partners early under a unified structure, combined with strong legislative timing and a clear policy window. In Tennessee, Lasagna explained that meaningful policy change became possible only after years of trust-building with the Department of Corrections, emphasizing that systems move only once relationships are firmly established. In Connecticut, Santiago shared a similar lesson, noting that coalition progress required moving deliberately and allowing relationships to set the pace for institutional change. Every one of our interviewees shared this concern: That our individual PEPs and our emerging statewide alliances are fragile organizations that require constant maintenance and care, with growth pegged to the political possibilities in each state.

Third, across our interviews, our colleagues foregrounded the risk of over-reliance on individual champions. Time and again, partners described how coalitions or prison education programs hinged on one or two extraordinarily committed leaders, often juggling multiple roles without adequate institutional support. In Illinois, Esquivel described how leadership transitions can destabilize coalitions when responsibility is concentrated too narrowly.

We heard similar concerns from prison educators in California, Colorado, Michigan, Texas, Wisconsin, and others. Across the interviews, participants stressed that while programs may weather short-term funding gaps, they struggle to endure leadership turnover without shared governance, distributed responsibility, and formalized systems that outlast any single individual.

Fourth, many interviewees underscored how easily coalition work can become siloed or, conversely, overextended. At SUNY, Sander described the persistent tension between building statewide systems and responding to the daily operational demands of running active prison education programs. In Wisconsin, Darren Wheelock emphasized that coalition work is not merely technical but deeply political and relational, requiring ongoing negotiation and trust-building across institutions. This work extends beyond relationships with departments of corrections to include mediating institutional rivalries, aligning curricular expectations, clarifying credit transfer protocols, and reconciling differing institutional missions. This concern focused, then, on finding the right balance between tending to the details of running individual HEP programs and committing to the networking, alliance-building, and cross-institutional work needed to foster successful statewide coalitions.

Fifth, working with departments of corrections surfaced some of the most consistent concerns across interviews. Participants expressed appreciation for how much the national landscape has shifted, noting that DOCs that once viewed college programs with skepticism or hostility increasingly recognize them as partners in a shared enterprise. At the same time, interviewees repeatedly emphasized the asymmetry of power inherent in these relationships. Ray of MiCHEP described the importance of remembering that correctional systems hold statutory authority over facilities, while higher education partners enter as guests invited to provide programming rather than to govern institutional operations. This structural reality, he noted, requires coalitions to cultivate patience, humility, and reliability as they adapt to staff turnover, shifting security protocols, and other institutional constraints.

Sixth, virtually every one of our interviewees raised concerns about the quality of program messaging and internal alignment among coalition members. Several partners warned that coalitions can fracture when participating institutions pursue divergent goals, narratives, or strategies. Esquivel from Illinois emphasized that when campuses communicate inconsistent frames—such as liberation, public safety, or enrollment metrics—departments of corrections can struggle to understand who the coalition is and what it stands for. Coalitions are most effective, colleagues in New Jersey, Connecticut, Texas, and Alabama mentioned, when they harmonize messages, clarify shared values, and present a unified front to DOC, legislators, funders, campus administrators, and community partners.

Seventh, many interviewees emphasized that coalitions flourish when they center students not just rhetorically, but structurally. This means building formal feedback loops with incarcerated students, ensuring that their in-

In Fall 2024, the Jesuit Prison Education Network (JPEN) and the Institute of Social Concerns of the University of Notre Dame formed the Consortium for Catholic Higher Education in Prison. The newly formed group of 21 Catholic Colleges is pictured at its inaugural meeting, on the campus of Notre Dame, with representatives from Department of Corrections staff representing 15 states.

sights shape program design, and incorporating formerly incarcerated leaders into coalition governance. Jason Bell of Project Rebound in California emphasized that coalitions weaken when student leadership is treated as symbolic rather than integral to decision-making. Several partners cautioned that without intentional participation of system-impacted people, coalitions risk reproducing hierarchical or exclusionary dynamics rather than dismantling them.

Taken together, these lessons and concerns highlight the inherently delicate nature of coalition building in higher education in prison. Coalitions thrive when they pace themselves, distribute leadership, respect DOC authority, harmonize messaging, cultivate political and relational literacy, and remain disciplined in their commitment to student-centered work. They falter when they grow too quickly, rely on isolated champions, or neglect the relational infrastructure required to stabilize complex systems. The field's most successful coalitions are those that hold tightly to an ethic of care while building structures that endure beyond individuals, working toward goals that are modest, achievable, and sustainable.

Photo Gallery:

Participants in the Second Annual Colorado Conference on Higher Education in Prison, held at CU Denver, January 30, 2026. Photos by Bryan Reckard.

BEST PRACTICES

On our campuses, in our PEPs, across our coalitions, throughout our networks, we continue to build up capacity, raising voices as we can, aspiring to construct what Lasagna calls "institutional density." We understand the phrase as pointing toward our collectively building sustainable programs rooted in an ethic of care and collaboration. Hence, by way of conclusion, we summarize here a series of best practices—as harvested from our nationwide interviews—that answer the question, "For HEP coalitions, alliances, and consortiums, what does institutional density mean?"

- At the campus level, that means weaving together networks of academic advisors, financial aid officers, registrars, writing center-style tutors, teachers, administrators, and other allies committed to providing our incarcerated students with educational opportunities and excellent support services.

- At the DOC level, that means weaving together a network of system-level administrators, facility wardens, educational staff, frontline personnel, and, perhaps most importantly, incarcerated students, who all function as ambassadors and liaisons, bridging campus and prison cultures.

- At the community level, that means weaving together networks of reentry specialists, housing coordinators, workforce development experts, wellness coaches, second-chance employers, and other allies who can help to facilitate safe and effective transitions from incarceration back to our communities.

- Across these avenues of work, "institutional density" means networking with elected officials and a wide range of state agencies to help shape legislation, funding priorities, and support capacities in service of our students.

- At the fiscal level, this means networking with grants agencies, philanthropists, alumni organizations, donors, and anyone else who can help to nudge our work toward a sense of long-term balance. As seen in the example of NJ-STEP, working to win annual state allocations is another key part of building this "institutional density" and shifting our organizations from a sense of precarity toward sustainability.

- At the strategic communication level, this means cultivating journalists, videographers, social media influencers, artists and galleries, publishers, and other colleagues who can help us to shift societal perceptions about our students away from fear and bias toward a sense of compassion and solidarity. Alliances and HEPs can support

these strategic communication efforts by aligning messages and inculcating values-rich, student-centric, and hopeful rhetoric that dovetails with local norms and contexts.

- At the educational pipeline level, this means cultivating early exposure and engagement among traditional on-campus students and administrators, inviting them into PEP classrooms, collaborative workshops, and shared learning spaces so that our campus colleagues carry lived understanding of higher education in prison into their professional roles.

- At the coalition level, this means finding creative ways for individual PEPs to work in concert, sharing information, expertise, and resources, ideally multiplying our ability to work for the best interest of our students and the communities we serve. Ideally, we pursue this work with a collaborative mindset that foregrounds offering trainings, orientations, on-boardings, and team-building workshops that help to norm expectations for teachers, staff, students, and other program partners.

- At an aspirational level, this means creating the educational infrastructure needed to facilitate personal growth, institutional evolution, and social justice. As JPEN's Father Curran put it, "the miracle of this work is in all of us, teachers, students, guards, administrators, community allies, learning how to make ourselves available to transformation."

While much of this report has focused on building structures, networks, and institutional capacity, learning itself is not confined to classrooms or formal programs. In "A Prison Pastoral: Cell with a View," Jaffa reflects on how attentiveness, curiosity, and observation can become forms of learning and liberation even in confinement. Quoting Einstein—"Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better"—Jaffa draws a parallel between observation and higher education, suggesting that learning invites us to look more closely into knowledge, into self, and into possibility. His reflection reminds us that education can flourish even under constraint, transforming isolation and trauma into journeys toward freedom.[26]

As the C-CHEP evolves, we aspire to fulfill these goals, layering our individual PEPs into a larger, stronger, more effective organization that can maximize our talents while spreading the good news that higher education in prisons is a cost-effective means of reducing recidivism, healing our democracy, strengthening the workforce, and enabling students drawn from historically marginalized communities to thrive.[27]

(Above and below) Participants in the Second Annual Colorado Conference on Higher Education in Prison, held at CU Denver, January 30, 2026. Photos by Bryan Reckard.

ECMC FOUNDATION LEADING THE WAY

The UCD PEP, the emerging C-CHEP, and the authors of this report are deeply grateful for the ECMC Foundation's (ECMCF) role in fostering the evolving national landscape of Higher Education in Prison (HEP) coalitions.

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Reflecting on the year of planning and organizing that ECMCF funded to support the launch of the THEI, Lasagna said, "one of the key things that came out of that work is that by the end of the year, we all liked each other . . . . We learned that our interests were being represented and that we were speaking the same language and looking in the same direction." That kind of coalition-building work requires sustained conversation, idea testing, relationship building, and institutional alignment. As Kostis from the F-CHEP observed, this organizational labor obliges coalition leaders to "just go out there and meet, and meet, and meet . . . you're driving all over the state to engage with anyone who will talk to you." The ECMC Foundation makes our coalition-building work possible by providing the resources necessary to support that essential, exhausting, and exhilarating groundwork.

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ENDNOTES

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2. See Grant Duwe and Valerie Clark, "The Effects of Prison-Based Educational Programming on Recidivism and Employment," *Prison Journal* 94, no. 4 (2014): 454-478; Lois Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer Steele, et al., *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education* (RAND Corporation, 2013); Laura E. Gorgol and Brian A. Sponsler, *Unlocking Potential—Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons* (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011); Stephen J. Hartnett, Meghan Cosgrove, Jacob Carlock, Keean Davis, Kenji Jones, Sean Mueller, Manuel Sisneros, and Taveuan Williams, "Celebrating the Arts and Education in Prison as Practices of Survival, Resistance, Healing, and Transformation," *Liminalities* 21, no. 4, 2025, http://liminalities.net/21-4/celebrating.pdf; the essays in *Higher Education and the Carceral State*, ed. Annie Buckley (Routledge, 2024); Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison* (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality/Vera Institute of Justice, 2019); and the work in *Education Behind the Wall: Why and How We Teach College in Prison*, ed. Mneesha Gellman (Brandeis University Press, 2022).

3. Chantry Loewen, "Know My Truth," excerpt from a longer poem submitted to, but not published in, *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* 18 (2022), manuscript on file with the UCD PEP.

4. Andrew Foust, "What You Make of It: Restorative Justice and Self-Improvement," *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* 21 (2025): 21.

5. Tanya Erzen, *Bridging the Divide: Connecting University Teaching & Learning Resources to Higher Education in Prison (HEP) Programs* (Ascendium/University of Puget Sound, 2025), 7.

6. See Ess Pokornowski, *Technology in Higher Education in Prison Programs* (ITHAKA S+R, 2023), where they offer a checklist of best practices for how to use technology to enhance prison education programs.

7. On MiCHEP's "Affinity Groups," see MiCHEP | Affinity Groups.

8. Quoted in Lydia Franz, *Cross-Agency Collaboration for Quality Correctional Education: How the Tennessee Prison College Coalition is Expanding Post-Secondary Opportunities for Justice-Impacted Students* (Institute for College Access and Success, 2025), 5.

9. Georgia State University's quoted explanations are from Sara Weissman, "Georgia University's Decision to Close Prison Program Prompts 'Heartbreak'," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 12, 2024.

10. Charlotte West, "Auburn University's Prison Education Program 'Indefinitely Suspended'," *Open Campus*, April 4, 2025; thanks to Kyes Stevens and Robert Hitt for filling in additional information.

11. New Jersey's Cannabis Excise Tax is a complicated piece of governance, under which the Social Equity and Excise Fee (SEEF) allocates funds into five categories, including "Community Reinvestment Programs designed to uplift communities disproportionately affected by past cannabis-related criminalization, especially through educational and job-training programs" (see https://www.nj.gov/cannabis/highpoints/20241028.shtml#:~:text=The%20Social%20Equity%20Excise%20Fee,cultivators%2C%20established%20under%20N.J.S.A.%2017%3A30%2D3.4).

12. See more about New Jersey's TAG at https://www.hesaa.org/Pages/TAG.aspx.

13. For a good example, see Luis Soberon and Carlos Ignacio Navaro, *Opening Doors: The State of Higher Education in Texas Prisons* (Texas 2036, 2024), www.texas2036.org/TDCJ.

14. Quoted in Franz, *Cross-Agency Collaboration for Quality Correctional Education*, 10.

15. Erzen, *Bridging the Divide*, 7.

16. See the THEI's "Navigating Forward" tab, which offers students a series of handouts that demystify higher education, including the FAFSA and Pell process: Navigating Forward -- Your Guide to Higher Education in Prison.

17. Niloufer Taber, Amanda Nowak, Maurice Smith, Jennifer Yang, and Celia Strumph, *The First Year of Pell Restoration: A Snapshot of Quality, Equity, and Scale in Prison Education Programs* (Vera Institute of Justice, 2024), figure 3, pages 7-9.

18. See the annual *EJP Handbook*, from the University of Illinois' Education Justice Project, at EJP-Handbook_Staff_8-20-25.pdf. For another good example, see *Unlocking College: Strengthening Massachusetts' Commitment to College in Prison*, a 2022 position paper from the Boston Foundation.

19. See the MiCHEP *Annual Report*, Annual Report 2023-2025.pdf - Google Drive. For another good example, see Thomas Gais, Rebecca Grace, and Paul Wilner, *Participation and Outcomes in SUNY College-in-Prison Programs* (SUNY, 2023).

20. Stephanie Gaskill, Mary R. Gould, Ved Price, Erin L. Castro, and Amy Lerman, *The Landscape of Higher Education in Prison, 2020-2021* (The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, 2023), 12.

21. Among the many good examples of student leadership bodies, perhaps the longest-running is the Graterford Inside-Out Think Tank, a team of incarcerated learners near Philadelphia who have been working with Lori Pompa and the Temple University-based Inside-Out Center since 2002. See their note to new program participants, "Welcome from the Graterford Inside-Out Think Tank," in *Turning Teaching Inside Out: A Pedagogy of Transformation for Community-Based Education*, ed. Simone Weil Davis and Barbara Sherr Roswell (Palgrave, 2013), 278-279. For more information, see www.insideoutcenter.org.

22. Carrillo was subsequently granted clemency by Colorado Governor Jared Polis. Since returning to free society, he has continued to serve as an educator in prison, as chronicled in Jason Gonzales and Charlotte West, "After his Release from a Colorado Prison, David Carrillo Continues to Educate Students on the Inside," *College Inside*, April 11, 2024. On Carrillo's journey, see his autobiography, *Kiko: From Life Without Parole to Life with Purpose* (2025).

23. See Charlotte West, "'A Culture Shift' as Colorado Starts its First Bachelor's Degree Program at a Women's Prison," *College Inside*, May 2, 2024.

24. Bernadette Rabuy and Daniel Kopf, "Prisons of Poverty: Uncovering the Pre-Incarceration Incomes of the Imprisoned," *Prison Policy Initiative*, July 9, 2015, 1 and captions to figures 3 and 4, p. 3.

25. On workforce development with incarcerated learners, see Abdi Awad, Leo Hylton, and Victoria Scott, *Education in Action: Exploring Remote Employment and Work-Based Learning during Incarceration* (Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, 2025)

26. Tanya Erzen, Mary Gould, and Jody Lewen, *Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison* (Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and the Prison University Project, 2019), 2.

27. For a succinct summary of such goals, see The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison's *Strategic Plan, 2025-2028,* https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5e3dd3cf0b4b54470c8b1be1/68d40d8f5e53d18b6013a732_AHEP_StrategicPlan2025-7MB.pdf.

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