

**Eighth Annual National Conference on
Higher Education in Prison**

2018 Exit Report

November 7-11, 2018
Indianapolis, Indiana



ALLIANCE

FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

Table of Contents

The 2018 Exit Report

Introductory Note	3
Executive Summary	6
2018 NCHEP Exit Report	11

Appendices

Appendix 1	2018 NCHEP Exit Survey Visuals	27
Appendix 2	NCHEP 2019 Tips for Conference Planners	28

Final Notes

Thanks for Reading	31
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Thank you and Welcome

Thank you for your interest in the 2018 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) and our planning efforts for 2019. We are excited to share this 2018 conference Exit Report with you as we believe it captures much of the spirit of the 2018 NCHEP conference in Indianapolis, held November 7-11, 2018. We hope the findings in this report inspire the continued growth of the movement to support quality higher education in prison we are all a part and proud of.

Welcome.

What is this Report?

This report is designed for multiple audiences. They include: (1) People involved with the planning and implementation of the 2018 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP); (2) The staff and advisory board of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (Alliance); (3) The 2019 NCHEP planning committee; (4) Attendees of the 2018 NCHEP and (5) The broader higher education in prison stakeholder community. Our goal in compiling the 2018 NCHEP Exit Report has been to make it accessible, informative, and practical for this broader community moving forward.

How was it put together?

Authors Mary Gould and Jesse Gant (and Alliance for Higher Education in Prison staff members) collaborated to research, assemble, and draft the bulk of this report in the weeks and months following the 2018 NCHEP. Researching and writing the report involved bringing together large sets of information, including: (1) Participant's experiences in planning, attending, and/or reporting on either the 2017 or 2018 NCHEP conference (to make points of comparison); (2) Feedback from participants collected in the Exit Surveys (these were distributed to all registered conference participants and posted on the 2018 NCHEP website);¹ (3) Data collected during registration (4) Other information generated during the planning and conference hosting process writ large and (5) personal experiences of conference participants and conference planners that were shared following the conference in feedback other than the Exit Survey (e.g., email feedback and inquiries).

When the 2018 NCHEP conference in Indianapolis concluded, the authors moved to integrate the feedback from the exit surveys and other data into this report. The authors drafted and presented what follows to planning committee members and Alliance for Higher Education in Prison Board members, sharing these findings publicly in January 2019. As you read the report, then, please keep in mind that many of the discussions draw together not only the vantage points of the 117 exit survey respondents, but perspectives and experiences of the planning committee and the broader pool of conference attendees. We believe these voices together help make this a stronger report. At the same time, we recognize that the number of voices presents a serious and important-to-acknowledge limitation: less than 1/3 of all conference participants contributed personal experiences/feedback to this report. Many participants no doubt experienced participation fatigue in the days and weeks following the conference, and typically, those who had moderate-to-positive experiences tend not to fill out exit surveys. It is also worth keeping in mind that our 25% response rate is also within the average (even above average) for most external surveys.

¹ According to our count, 117 conference participants out of an estimated 440 conference attendees completed the surveys, producing a return rate of about 25%.

What does the report consist of?

The 2018 Exit Report has been designed to present these many moving parts into three more manageable sections.

- An **Executive Summary** (see pp. 6-10) offers the “brief” version of the report. You might think of it as the *required* reading, or the section featuring the most condensed version of the final report’s findings.
- The body of the **2018 NCHEP Exit Report** (see pp. 11-27), meanwhile, will offer the fuller, more complete version of this year’s exit report. Think of it as the year’s *suggested* reading. It will provide readers greater depth of knowledge on the 2018 conference experience.
- The two attached **appendices, meanwhile**, (see appendices 1-2, pp. 28-29) are designed as reference materials for all readers to consult and engage at any time.

What is the Executive Summary?

The first piece of the report we would like to draw your attention to is the “Executive Summary,” which was produced this year with the hope of providing a short, readily accessible, visually appealing, and to-the-point version of the longer 2018 NCHEP Exit Report. The Executive Summary is designed to display the most essential conference data. It is designed for portability, as a prompt for group discussion, and as a quick “brief” on the essential 2018 Exit Report takeaways. Fifteen minutes with this document should be enough for most readers.

What about the Exit Report itself, distinct from the Executive Survey?

The second key piece we would like to highlight is the actual 2018 NCHEP Exit Report. The Exit Report, much more than the Executive Summary, offers the fuller portrait of the 2018 NCHEP conference experience. As such, we encourage members of the higher education in prison stakeholder community to read this longer version front-to-back. Throughout, we have again made it our goal to provide readers with the most essential lessons and takeaways, presented in a clear format, and one that will quickly map out the steps future conference planners should consider. This, we believe, also will also provide an accessible, practical, and informative Exit Report document the stakeholder community can continue to use and learn from in the years ahead. The Exit Report will demand a half hour or less of most reader’s time.

What’s in the Two Appendices?

The third part of the report presents two of important data sets as reference works for the reader, or “appendices.” These materials will be useful to the stakeholder community on a number of fronts. Members of the 2019 planning committee, for example, will want to pay close attention to Appendix 2, where “tips” for the 2019 conference planners are assembled. They draw heavily from the conference-participant Exit Survey feedback and from anecdotal evidence provided by 2018 planners and attendees. We feel they offer an invaluable structure for next year’s important planning discussions regarding NCHEP Saint Louis, 2019. Investing fifteen minutes or so of your time makes sense for engaging with these materials.

What are its findings?

The following report reveals that our community is in the midst of fast, dynamic, complicated, exciting, and sometimes difficult growing pains. With all this change comes real challenge and opportunity. It will be important for the Alliance and the 2019 conference planning committee, especially, to have a set of important discussions in the coming weeks and months. These discussions need to make progress on answering some fundamental questions, such as:

- What is this conference for?
- Who does the conference best serve?
- What kind of movement, exactly, is the conference trying to build?

- How can the 2019 conference be best used to engage and spell out answers to these important questions?

We believe the attached report and its findings will help spur these discussions along by drawing attention to the important questions surrounding the conference's broader content and goals. Please turn to and read the Executive Summary. Then, please make your way into the full body of the 2018 Exit Report itself. When you are done, the Executive Summary, the 2018 Exit Report, and the attached appendices can all be used, discussed, and referenced in the months to come as stand-alone documents. Please use them and refer to them frequently!

There is every reason to believe that the 2018 conference in Indianapolis offered a strong and confident forward step for our broader community. But as the often-powerful and impassioned feedback from the conference also reveals, we clearly have plenty of room to grow and improve, and plenty of energy to harness. With the right care and attention, these organizational strengths will be in place for 2019 and for many years to come. But to keep the momentum, and to keep building the movement, we also need to devote time to important questions about who the conference serves, what contributions the conference makes to "building the movement" for higher education in prison, and how to sustain the conference as the higher education in prison community grows. With these steps and our continued hard work, there will be many exciting developments to look forward to next year in Saint Louis.

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Authors, 2018 Exit Report
January 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2018 NCHEP Conference
November 7-11, 2018
Indianapolis, Indiana

Introduction

The 2018 NCHEP conference held in Indianapolis, Indiana, November 7-11, 2018, presented an important and constructive forward step for the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (Alliance) and the broader Higher Education in Prison (HEP) Community. By several measures the biggest and best-attended National Conference for Higher Education Prison (NCHEP) ever held, and in only the second year the Alliance had ever hosted the NCHEP, the 2018 conference drew an estimated 440 participants to Indianapolis. This represented a roughly 30% overall annual increase in conference participation from 2017. More, the 2018 NCHEP hosted its first-ever slate of pre-conference professional development workshops, as well as its first-ever open-mic night. At the same time, the clear growth of the conference in 2018 also exposed growing concerns. These became particularly clear as participants offered feedback on the overall conference content, with issues of race, representation, and belonging/inclusion within the Alliance and the broader HEP community, and organizational transparency looming large.² The Alliance also faces a number of challenges moving forward in terms of ensuring the sustainability of the cost of the conference as the number of participants continue to grow and the conference continues to become a more recognized professional-develop opportunity for the field.

Fig A.

2018 NCHEP Major Conference Adjustments to Make

Strong Foundations

The 2018 NCHEP displayed undeniable evidence of strength as its numbers grew and the stakeholder community members it hosted engaged one another.

- **The higher education in prison stakeholder community is a fast-growing, diverse, highly engaged, and dynamic one.** HEP stakeholder community members are energized and highly engaged, and this makes for an exciting time to be involved with the field of higher education in prison. In addition to the large spike in overall conference attendance, for example, (up roughly 30%) attendance at the concurrent sessions jumped nearly 40% from 2017, which demonstrates the dedication community members have to learning from and supporting one another. The HEP community numbers are fast-growing and are giving shape to a rich set of simultaneous, heartfelt, often intensive discussions.
- **Most conference participants consider the annual NCHEP conference an exceptionally well-run, positive overall conference experience.** Especially on logistical matters (on things like the hotel, the food, the administrative back-end systems, the conference support processes, etc.) participants offered rave reviews of their overall experience. This means the 2019 NCHEP conference planners have a solid foundation to

² The annual NCHEP conference presents content within a number of venues each year. As mentioned, the 2018 conference brought elements old and new into the mix. As with past years, the 2018 conference featured plenary speakers, plenary sessions, concurrent sessions, networking sessions, poster sessions, and meetings. In a new slate of content offerings, the 2018 conference also featured a set of pre-conference workshops and an open-mic night. Feedback on nearly every one of these conference aspects highlighted concerns or ideas about improving access, inclusion, belonging, and representation.

build upon in thinking about next year's events. The NCHEP has a very solid track record in place now in terms of being an accessible, affordable, hi-quality conference experience.

- **NCHEP continues to be an accessible and affordable conference for participants.** Again, the bulk of the conference feedback suggests that the conference did not impose additional financial stress on the HEP stakeholder community. The affordability of the conference remains one of its most characteristic features, including offering travel scholarships which is highly unusual for most professional conferences. .
- **Many aspects of the conference messaging run well.** With a large, diverse, and expanding community, communication is bound to be a challenge. Yet the feedback from the conference suggests that the conference's communication channels and practices remain strong and in fact helped make the conference overall a much better experience for participants.

Adjustments to come

At the same time, each of these strong foundations contain a set of potential pitfalls that will need to be addressed heading into 2019.

- **With fast growth comes the potential for community fragmentation.** The content of the conference, especially, requires more careful and sustained attention. It is vital that future planning committees spend time ensuring that content both supports the theme of the conference and a many stakeholder interests. Conference planners and broader HEP community members need to continue to answer why this work is being done, who it is meant to serve, how it can be made more transparent, and how it can be best sustained.
- **A contingent of community members (survey respondents) expressed concern that the conference (and associated communities like the academic community, the “ivory tower”) is elitist and out of touch.** As evidence, conference participants are pointing to the lack of inclusion of formerly incarcerated speakers at the plenary sessions, as a majority of the leaders within the concurrent sessions, as represented generally within the spaces of the conference, and/or in terms of who “leads” the conference in more basic terms. The 2019 NCHEP conference planners will need to take concrete and meaningful steps to address these concerns.
- **NCHEP remains an accessible and low-cost experience for many participants, but the cost of hosting and administering the conference is at risk of becoming unsustainable.** Quality of experience has its costs, and it seems clear that the Alliance cannot sustain its current conference model without making a set of changes to its registration and donation metrics. Like most other professional conferences, this will mean that the 2019 planners will need to ask that conference participants offer more to sustain the cost of hosting the conference.
- **A lack of transparency, real or perceived, is furthering the sense of division within the community.** Some of the most important flashpoints regarding transparency seems to be not only over issues of leadership and representation, but over the call, submission, and review processes, which respondents consider overly complicated and sometimes arbitrary, or, at the very least, not clearly explained/described in an accessible location. The 2019 planners can and should pay much more attention to communication and transparency around the call, submission, and review processes and procedures in an effort to ensure that all participants/presenters are aware of why/what decisions are being made (and not assuming that conference process/procedures are known).
- **Communication efforts need to keep pace with the times.** The Alliance and NCHEP planning committee have been relying on email, the Prison_Ed listserv, and the conference website as its main “portals” of communication with the extended higher education in prison community. Feedback suggests that social media and other options such as text-based communications might be better utilized. Opening up new channels of communication

could provide better access to information and could also address concerns over transparency (perception of lack of transparency).

Fig. B
Key 2018 Conference Numbers

Item	Numbers	Category	Notes
a	346	Registered online at least a week before the conference (By October 31, 2018). Note: the stated “deadline” for registration, published on the conference website, was October 16.	These participants completed the online registration process in advance long enough for the conference planners to best accommodate/plan for conference using their registration information.
b	366	Online Registrations Submitted Prior to the Conference start (Nov 7).	These participants completed the online registration before the conference (successfully registering online before November 7, 2018). Note that 20 participants registered in the week before the conference; this proved difficult for the conference planners to accommodate for a host of reasons.
c	13	Online registrations completed while the conference was in operation	These participants completed the registration process even as the conference was in operation. Some registered as late as Friday, November 9, 2018.
d	42	Did not register online; completed on-site check-ins	Confusion during the registration process led to a large number of conference participants believing they had registered in advance, but in fact most had simply completed the donation process to the conference (which did not register them). The volunteer staff at the registration desk (through no fault of their own) further complicated the registration process by asking onsite registrants to write their email and contact information on the registration sheets. While an effective solution, it also produced a fair amount of information that had to be made sense of in the days following the conference.
e	25	Conference Participants who registered but then did not attend (cancelled)	
f	423	Overall Conference Participants (Low-end estimate) based purely on on-site registrations and check-ins)	This number plays it conservative by counting only the number of people who physically checked into the conference and were recorded by registration desk staff. Actual conference participation may have been higher than this figure, given the likelihood of at least a nominal amount of people not

			registering or checking-in and attending the conference nonetheless. According to our data, we estimate that as many as 47 additional registrants may have attended the conference without checking in.
g	470	Overall Conference Participants (High-end estimate) Assumes all registrants who did not check in attended the conference	This number assumes everyone who registered prior to the conference (and did not check in) nonetheless (a group of 47 people) made their way to Indianapolis and participated. It follows that those in this group did not cancel their registrations.
h	<u>440</u>	Official* Conference Attendance Estimate	Looking at the online registration, check-in, cancellation, and on-site processes holistically (considering the high-end and low-end estimates together), we believe this is the best working representative figure of those who attended the 2018 NCHEP Conference in Indianapolis. It trends conservative in its estimation.
i	<u>129</u>	Formerly Incarcerated Participants	People formerly incarcerated made up 30% (29.3%) of the total conference attendance. This number (129) also represents the number of participants who registered and checked in; it is quite possible that the number of formerly incarcerated participants was slightly higher
j	268		Estimated number of higher education in prison programs, organizations, institutions, funders, or other organizational entities that had representation at the 2018 conference
k	27		Number of Second Chance Pell Site programs with representatives at the conference
l	117	Exit Survey Responses Completed	All conference participants were asked to complete exit surveys on a voluntary basis once the conference concluded. About 25% of all conference participants complied.
m	295	Total Scholarships Requested	
n	103	Scholarships Awarded	
o	87	Scholarships Awarded to Formerly Incarcerated	
p	183	Travel Fellowship Requests Not Funded	9 Scholarship recipients either declined an award or removed their application (after submission). The scholarship request portal was closed one week prior to the start of the conference.
q	7	Total Concurrent Sessions	
r	49	Total number of panels hosted within the conference's 7 concurrent sessions	
s	228	Total number of participants who presented at concurrent	

		sessions as either panelists or moderators	
t	1,153	Total participant attendance at all concurrent sessions	27.5 (up from 22 in 2017) participants, on average, sat within each panel hosted during the conference's seven concurrent sessions

Fig. C
Attendance figures for the Concurrent Sessions

Session #	Date	Time	Total Attendance	Average Attendance
1	Fri., Nov. 9	11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.	262	37 (Highest Average)
2	Fri., Nov. 9	2:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.	224	32
3	Fri., Nov. 9	4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.	183	26
4	Sat., Nov. 10	11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.	237	34
5	Sat., Nov. 10	2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m.	186	27
6	Sat., Nov. 10	4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.	No data	No Data*
7	Sun., Nov. 11	8:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.	61	9
TOTALS			1,153	27.5

*Data was inadvertently not collected by conference volunteers for this session.

THE 2018 NCHEP EXIT REPORT

Introduction

The 2018 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) held in Indianapolis, Indiana, November 7-11, 2018, presented an important and constructive forward step for the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance), in only its second year hosting the conference, and the broader Higher Education in Prison (HEP) stakeholder community. By several measures the biggest and best-attended NCHEP ever held, the 2018 conference drew an estimated 440 participants to Indianapolis. This figure represented a roughly 30% overall annual increase in conference participation from 2017. Formerly incarcerated participants also made up an estimated 30% of the entire conference attendance. The 2018 NCHEP managed to host its first ever slate of pre-conference professional development workshops, as well as its first-ever open-mic night. At the same time, the clear growth of the organization and its sustaining community also highlighted the need for many adjustments to be made moving forward. These became particularly clear as formerly incarcerated participants offered feedback on the overall conference content, with issues of race, representation, and belonging/inclusion looming large as areas of concern in much of the content feedback.³ The Alliance also faces a number of challenges moving forward in terms of ensuring the sustainability of the cost of the conference, as well as broader organizational transparency.

I.

Attendance and Participation

Takeaway

The 2018 NCHEP conference was the best-attended in the history of the event. In addition to the 440 participants who attended and played a role in the conference, an estimated 129 participants (roughly 30% of all conference participants) were formerly incarcerated and 87 formerly incarcerated participants were supported by travel scholarships provided by the Alliance. These numbers help highlight and contextualize some of the changes the conference will need to make moving forward. On the one hand, of course, it is great to see conference attendance growing. It is especially good to see the number of formerly incarcerated participants rising overall (30% of the 2018 conference participants were formerly incarcerated, while 25% of the 2017 conference participants were formerly incarcerated). This growth in conference attendance will bring welcomed energy and important perspective to the community moving forward. On the other hand, growing conference attendance also presents to the broader stakeholder community a set of distinct challenges, such as the risk of the Alliance not having the resources to provide travel scholarships, food, or hi-quality facilities to all conference goers in the not-too-distant future. There is also the continued need to stay on pace with or, ideally, ahead of the varied interests of a growing stakeholder community. The good news is that some aspects of the conference as they pertain to attendance and participation can be easily improved upon, and fast. This will provide time to pay attention to the most important aspects of the conference: content and participation.

Key Points

Again, by and large, most conference participants expressed satisfaction with their overall conference experience, especially those who compared their experiences to other professional and/or academic conferences they had attended either in 2018 or at some point in their past experience. In terms of attendance

³ The annual NCHEP conference presents content within a number of venues each year. As mentioned, the 2018 conference brought elements old and new into the mix. As with past years, the 2018 conference featured plenary speakers, plenary sessions, concurrent sessions, networking sessions, poster sessions, and meetings. In a new slate of content offerings, the 2018 conference also featured a set of pre-conference workshops and an open mic night. Feedback on nearly every one of these conference aspects highlighted issues of racialized access, inclusion, belonging, and representation.

and participation, most participants had positive feedback on questions regarding the overall size, accessibility, and inclusivity of the conference.

Foundations to Build Upon

This is a fast-growing and energized community that continues to foster a unique space.

- **The 2018 NCHEP set an all-time high record attendance.** The stakeholder community achieved its highest-ever overall conference attendance in Indianapolis with an estimated 440 participants.⁴
- **We have an active and engaged formerly incarcerated cohort.** The 2018 conference in Indianapolis drew an estimated 129 formerly incarcerated participants, together constituting about 30% of the overall conference figures. This again means that the 2018 conference drew an even higher ratio of formerly incarcerated participants than did the 2017 conference, which drew 25% formerly incarcerated participants. The conference, in short, continues to foster a unique community (an incomparable one, really) in the U.S. higher education landscape.
- **Despite the many difficult societal, political, and economic divides it intentionally engages and confronts, to say nothing of the personal and broader traumas our community regularly navigates, members remain engaged with one another.** The conference saw a 41% increase in the concurrent session attendance by participants in 2018. Most who attended also invested a lot of their energy into the conference. For example, 47% of conference participants said they attended at least 5-6 of the concurrent sessions, while 21% claimed they went to 7 or more sessions/events. That's encouraging as an indicator of the health of the conference. All aspects of the conference, in fact, were well attended, and guaranteed presenters a sizeable audience for their messages and ideas. Similarly, audiences brought their passion, concern, care, ideas, critical thinking, and energy to the sessions in turn.
- **The 2018 Conference hosted the first-ever professional development pre-conference workshops.** Participants offered strong and supportive feedback on the pre-conference experience. Unlike most other areas of the conference content, very few negative remarks about the pre-conference workshops characterized the feedback. People clearly valued the hands-on and tangible professional development workshop skills highlighted within the workshop spaces. Almost all participants encouraged continuing offering "hands-on"/practical workshops at the 2019 NCHEP.
- **The diversity of the community provides a clear strength to build from.** Community attendance is still very diverse. In the exit surveys, conference participants identified themselves as teachers, students, funders, correctional workers, advocates, and more. 37% of the exit survey respondents indicated that they were "practitioners;" 40% self-identified as teachers or students. And again, 3/10 conference participants were formerly incarcerated, a fact at the heart of what makes this conference so unique.

Adjustments to Plan For

Fast community growth demands changes both immediate and long-term for the conference and its planners and participants.

- **Large numbers complicated the registration process; the Alliance and the conference volunteers struggled (again) to assemble/record an actual count of the conference participants.** As with 2017, the online and in-person registration backend processes had issues. These issues were compounded by the processes involved in the registration and on-site check ins. The first problem was that registration and registration fees were collected on

⁴ The 2018 NCHEP Exit Survey visuals PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix 1) has several attendance graphs and charts worth consulting. See slides 7-9.

two separate online (Google form and Network for Good) platforms, leading many to believe they had registered for the conference when in fact they had only donated or paid the (optional) registration fee. The second issue was that too many people registered on-site or the week before the conference (80+ people) which made planning and accommodating them in time for the conference very difficult (most notably affecting the ability to plan for meals and causing unexpected/increased costs that could not be budgeted). A final issue was that there were also at least 25 people who registered for the conference but did not attend. There needs to be a way to de-incentivize late registrations in the hopes of attending (receiving a scholarship) and (at the same time) incentivizing people to cancel their registration early if they know they will not be able to attend. One possible outcome of the need to institute a required fee for all registered participants will also address this issue.

- **Strong attendance comes with a major downside. Namely, is the conference size (and its attendant costs) sustainable over the long-term?** There are at least two major related issues brought to mind as the conference's numbers grow. First, expanding attendance figures can degrade the quality of the conference experience for participants. The exit surveys provided palpable evidence that many conference participants felt marginalized, for example, within the panels and sessions precisely because the room attendance/panel memberships were so high. Second, large numbers can also escalate the costs of hosting the conference. Hosting more people means providing more meals, scholarships, travel support, reimbursements, and the like. The issue of size/growth of conference attendance is not unique to this conference/community and, in fact, it is likely that any professional community in its first decade of formation has experienced these same "growing pains" and evolution from a small community (able to convene at a very low (or no) cost at a small venue (e.g., college/university campus) to where we are now, as a group that can only convene as a unified group at a hotel (or similar large venue) at a higher cost.
- **The Alliance and broader HEP community are both eager to see better and more equitable representation and participation of formerly incarcerated people in the plenary and concurrent sessions made a reality; many participants are suggesting this representation is in fact overdue and that appeals for it have gone unheard.** Some of the conference participant's most commonly-asked questions on these points are worth reproducing here: What explains the difficulty the conference has historically had in putting a formerly incarcerated speaker within one of the opening night plenary sessions? Why is the over-incarceration of African Americans not similarly reflected in the formerly incarcerated participation of the conference speakers and presenters? Similarly, why did the 2018 conference put a formerly incarcerated speaker into a plenary offering on the conference's last (and least-attended) day? The conference planners for 2019 need to take the lead on ensuring the conference makes progress on these fronts and acknowledge (in public communication and internal discussion) that the pace of change in the conference planning process (in many cases) often will not keep pace with the needs/interests of the participant community and continue to strive to close this gap.

II. Logistics

Takeaway

In terms of logistics, participants rated the NCHPEP 2018 conference in Indianapolis as an exceptionally well-run conference. Its transportation, administrative systems, meals, hotel rooms, support facilities, etc., generated the highest participant reviews of any major aspect of the conference. While the Alliance, community, and the 2018 conference planners should all be proud of these accomplishments, this success also creates a special new set of challenges for the planners of the 2019 conference. Participants will expect an exceptional NCHPEP experience moving forward. The 2019 planning committee and staff will have to

carefully consider how to message the rationale for the logistical choices being made (e.g., hotel location, access to airport, choice of city, etc.).

Key Points

The exit surveys expressed the highest overall satisfaction with the logistical aspects of the conference.

Foundations to Build Upon

In logistical terms, it is not hard to find evidence that things went very well in Indianapolis.

- **The 2018 NCHEP was, undeniably, an accessible conference.** Though only 48.7% of the exit survey respondents (not a majority) were willing to *strongly* agree that the hotel and host city were “accessible,” 80% of respondents (a clear majority) could at least agree that things overall were accessible. Only about 15% of those who filled out exit surveys could not agree that the conference location was accessible.⁵
- **A solid majority of all conference participants, and on nearly every imaginable logistical question, agreed that the conference was well-organized and administered.** It seems fair to say that for the most part, all of the conference systems ran well, and helped ensure a very good conference experience for the vast majority of the conference participants. The wellness room, for example, proved hugely popular yet again. A remarkable 77% of the total exit survey respondents used the wellness room in some capacity. The Exhibit Hall also proved quite popular, as did the hotel and its facilities and staff overall.
- **Meals were a smash hit.** Snacks and coffee, as well as breaks, were extremely popular. The meals in general helped benefit the conference “theme,” building community. Evidence bears this out. A clear majority (58%) of conference respondents felt strongly that the food was exceptional quality, while an even more impressive 76% of total respondents felt that the food was better than expected. Only 13% of conference exit survey respondents took some kind of issue with the food, and only 5% had strong negative reactions.⁶
- **The wellness room will not be going anywhere anytime soon.** Conference participants *love* the wellness room. Special shout-outs this year went to its inclusions of advil, “hot packs,” “tea,” and especially “fruit.” People are already thinking about what the wellness room could offer next year, and they are wondering if more classes, possibly team sports, as well as free feminine products, as well as other health/wellness products (e.g., cold and cough medicine) might be included as part of the room’s offerings.

Adjustments to Plan For

Not all logistical issues went smoothly, though.

- **Air and especially ground transportation issues to/from the airport were again a concern, as they were in 2017.** Most of the few concerns leveled in the exit survey took issue with the hotel’s distance (“remote” “far away” and statements like “more convenient” were commonplace in a few of the surveys) from the airport (resulting, for instance) in a costly cab or Lyft/Uber ride for those who did not book travel with the free service recommended to participants before the conference. Still, 50% of exit survey respondents said they “strongly agreed” that the conference city and hotel were accessible, while another 21% simply agreed it was accessible, meaning most participants (71%) found the hotel's location adequate. Only about 19% of the survey respondents found the hotel not accessible,

⁵ The 2018 NCHEP Exit Survey visuals PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix 1) has several logistics-related visuals worth consulting. See slides 10-16.

⁶ The 2018 NCHEP Exit Survey visuals PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix 1) has several meal-related visuals worth consulting. See slides 17-20.

and only 9% said they would strongly disagree with the idea that the hotel proved easy to access. A few also said the lack of indirect flights to Indianapolis presented a problem.

- **People loved the hotel, but they did not necessarily love its location.** When asked if they had any suggestions for improving the venue of the conference (again, 80% agreed that this year's conference was accessible) the number one suggestion for 2019 had to do with improving the future location of the hotel. Some found the Indianapolis hotel "remote," lacking "windows," "inaccessible to nature," "far away," and "cut off," for example. In 2019, it will be important for the conference planners to be more transparent about the rationale for choosing a hotel (e.g., reduced cost for the host as well as participants -- room costs are lower at a hotel outside of a city or within a mid-sized city as opposed to a larger city that hosts frequent conferences).
- **Not all accessibility ratings earned high marks.** At least one exit survey asked for more gender-inclusive or gender-neutral bathrooms, and that survey further noted that the lack of them risked causing greater logistical and safety concerns for small numbers of our community. Similar concerns were repeated in other areas of the exit surveys, and again-- 2019 planners would be well-served in making sure that these concerns are addressed in St. Louis.
- **Some processes didn't work well, even if they did not translate to negative participant experiences.** Conference planners admittedly have substantial room to improve on the conference registration process, for example, which confused a good number of people, and left many unregistered for the conference. Those attending the conference on federal grants, for example, cannot donate to the conference, and given that there were separate processes for the donation and actual registration workflows, many people were left confused by the multiple processes. It seems crucial for the 2019 NCHEP planners to consider ways of streamlining and improving the registration and registration fee process overall.
- **Signage, advertising, and transparency about the conference support systems/experiences/content might all be improved.** The annual NCHEP provides some great conference options each year, but it is remarkable how many people miss (or go uninformed about) some of the most popular conference features, such as the the Wellness Room, Exhibit Hall, or panels simply because they cannot find them or never learned about them. It makes sense for the 2019 conference planners to give some thought to how the Wellness Room and Exhibit Hall, especially, might be better marked with clearer signs. Many people missed the exhibits because, as they put it in the exit surveys, they "had no idea" there was an Exhibit Hall. Others reported they consciously opted out of reading the program, maps, or daily emails, or arriving early to plenary sessions to hear the "daily announcements" read, and then expressed regret at having missed these conference aspects.

III. Communication

Takeaways

In terms of communications, many aspects of the conference communication systems also worked well. The exit surveys show that 61% of respondents indicated they were "provided all the information needed" and "prior to arriving in Indianapolis," a figure that becomes even higher when expanded to include those who both "strongly agreed" and just "agreed"—in that last case, almost 80% of the exit survey respondents were happy with the communication prior to the conference. The real challenge of communication was the frequency (needing more), channel (more social media), the information (stakeholders want more transparency) and the depth of the messages (desire for more substance and detailed overview of rationale for decisions -- in other words, more transparency).⁷

⁷ The 2018 NCHEP Exit Survey visuals PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix 1) has several communications-related graphs and charts worth consulting. See slides 21-27.

- Most learned about the conference through emails, and the Prison_Ed listserv. These systems simply need to be kept active, further cultivated, and maintained.
- Second to that, it was the conference website, correspondence with those in the field, word-of-mouth, and then social media that helped spread the word (and apparently, in that order). This makes sense. NCHEP has not pursued an aggressive social media set of platforms, and that is potentially one area where planners and organizers could improve their communications and messaging. Notably, many of the Exit Survey respondents self-reported using social media (80%) but not as many as one might expect or think. Still, exploring social media for more (and more detailed) communication is the correct path for 2019.

Conference planners in 2019 would be well-served to maintain the daily (during the conference) emails, keep the website updated (especially when it comes to the conference schedule--posting it as soon as it is available) and utilizing the listserv to their advantage, especially for all matters related to the conference planning, registration, and call/proposal/review process. Planners should also put into practice more active engagement with social media and doing what's possible to ensure that the event is keeping pace with relevant technology and communication trends, while keeping in mind the extent to which the organization and planning committee is limited by its small staff.

As the exit surveys also reveal, there are signs of fatigue within the community over the volume and rate of emailed communications. Many people now seem to be opting out of email communications in general, preferring instead (apparently) to be texted or called when important information needs broadcasting or further distribution. While NCHEP planners, organizers, and participants cannot possibly accommodate all the various preferred communications methods the broader HEP community has or purports itself to having, it is worth keeping in mind that while email seems to be the best and most effective way to reach people, it also makes sense to ensure that community members are actively cultivating a wide array of communications and messaging options. Especially as an apparent trend toward active disengagement with conference communications is being embraced by at least a small subsection of the conference community.

Meanwhile, there is also clear room to improve and expand the conference communications, and this seems especially clear and urgent these areas:

- Messaging and communications transparency
- The conference-related call, submissions, proposal, and review process
- Better use of social media platforms as a way to make improvements on these concerns in the years to come

Key Points

The 2019 Planning Committee needs to make improvement on its call/submissions/and review process, particularly related to distribution, response timing, and transparency of process. Finally, all communications systems need to be better integrated and utilized in order to better serve a fast-changing community.

Foundations to Build Upon

The HEP community needs to maintain and further cultivate its existing communications strengths.

- **The communications systems that are in place work ok overall in guaranteeing an operational and overall positive conference experience.** People value and deeply appreciate the use of emails, listserv, and the conference website in order to share information about the conference. The 2019 conference planners should do all they can to ensure their cultivation and maintenance. Yet there are also signs of online communication fatigue becoming an issue, as well as examples of participants making conscious distancing decisions from internet and email-based reading tasks. This presents a challenge to organizing and hosting an effective conference.

- **Networks matter (especially higher education ones) for spreading the word.** The daily emails and listserv remain vital to how this community organizes itself and spreads the word about its programming. It follows that existing higher education in prison programs drive most of the knowledge and communication about the conference. Without their support, it is hard to imagine how information about the conference (or organization) would spread.

Adjustments to Plan For

There are several clear and easy to accomplish opportunities for improving communication in advance of the 2019 conference.

- **Social Media presence and practices offer room for improvement.** The social media presence of the HEP community needs to expand and be better utilized, while (ideally) being tailored specifically to the goals of the annual conference or at least major field-level discussions and debates. In this way, conference planners, organizers, and participants might better consider using social media as an alternative channel for people to get news and information about the conference and the broader movement for higher education in prison.
- **The conference website might be improved on a few fronts.** For example, it could be made more printer/device friendly (until the conference has an app). It also helps to have the essential conference information presented as early as possible, especially the schedule and panel information. People also rely on the website to register, process reimbursements, and provide exit survey feedback on the conference--indeed, nearly all aspects of the conference operations run through the website. As the number and diversity of devices grow, it makes sense to ensure the website can be read and that materials can be printed from the website whenever possible.
- **Some new conference attendees felt overwhelmed and would have appreciated better communication, especially regarding transportation processes.** "Some type of help should have been provided," a formerly incarcerated participant noted as they reflected upon navigating an airport and transfer flight for the first time in advance of the conference. Others recommended the creation of a section of the website called, "What to expect if you're attending the conference for the first time as a formerly incarcerated participant," and urged that it be written by and for the formerly incarcerated conference participants.
- **Planners should be mindful of the volume and rate of email communications.** Some members of the community are disengaging with email communications. There is risk of exasperating this tendency if emails become too frequent or inconsequential, for example, in their content.
- **Planners, organizers, and participants need to better manage communications and staffing on-site during the conference.** Many participants, for example, struggled to get the help they wanted at the registration desk or in their dealings with the hotel. Especially when Alliance staff or volunteers were busy with other tasks, and away from the front desk reception area, it was sometimes hard for conference participants/front desk staff to know who to reach or communicate with in order to make decisions on behalf of the broader conference (regarding flights, hotel rooms, cancellations, how to order more coffee, what to do about potential IT or facilities issues, and the like).
- **In general, the call/submission/review process needs attention; this dovetails with the broader content-related concerns of the conference.** There also needs to be more transparency, relatedly, in the submissions, call for presentation proposals, reviewing processes, and more.
- **There needs to be better facilitation of communication prior to the conference between and among panels and moderators.** The exit surveys indicated there were some issues reaching members of their panels and moderators (e.g., facilitating communication in advance of the conference). To the extent that it is possible, the conference planners can consider how they can help facilitate, or at least encourage, these interactions.

- **More stability is needed surrounding communications systems and infrastructure.** The conference website address changes each year, and Google (and other software used) do not easily allow planners, staff, and organizers to replicate many aspects of the conference workflow or broader systems year in and year out. To prevent people from losing track of the conference website the conference website needs to be integrated onto the Alliance’s main website.

IV. Pre-Conference

Takeaway

The pre-conference workshops were perhaps the most positively-reviewed conference aspect (second to logistics) coming out of the 2018 NCHEP conference.⁸ The pre-conference workshop model, either as a pre-conference event or integrated into the main content of the conference, should for sure be included and improved upon for 2019. Almost 90% of the conference’s broader exit survey respondents said the conference should include a pre-conference in 2019. There were six pre-conference workshops in 2018, arranged in a morning and afternoon session, and then repeated. When asked if these pre-conference workshops “offered me tools and resources that I can apply,” conference participants in strong majorities (more than 65% of respondents) said they could either strongly agree or agree that the pre-conferences did the job. Those who disagreed made up only about 20-25% of the workshop participants. While this is hardly an insignificant minority of the pre-conference participant pool, it seems clear that the quality of the pre-conference workshops can be improved the more the NCHEP works to host such sessions in the future. This will be especially true if session leaders continue to share their ideas, their best practices, and their lesson plans in careful reflection and ongoing dialogue with their workshop leadership experiences.

Pre-conference workshop leaders were also solicited for their feedback, and also reported positive findings.⁹ The 5 workshop leaders who offered responses noted majority support for:

- Maintaining the overall length of the 2018 pre-conference workshops
- That presenters in 2019 also lead two daily workshops if at all possible (2019 planners might consider alternates if participants feel two is too many; the group seemed fairly divided on this point)
- Consider making the workshops even bigger. When asked about their workshop attendance, the participants all noted that the attendance either seemed just right (a majority) or that more could have been invited in with no negative impact on the overall quality of the workshop

Key Points

Practical, hands-on, and with tangible outcomes, the pre-conference workshops were enthusiastically received. Those who participated in the pre-conference workshops did not, by and large, generate the more mixed feedback that emanated from the more traditional sessions, plenaries, or panels.

Foundations to Build Upon

The 2019 conference should for sure include (and probably expand) the pre-conference offerings.

- **The 2019 Conference should include, repeat, (and possibly expand) the pre-conference workshop topic offerings.** Exit survey and presenter survey responses were

⁸ There were six workshops, and both presenters and participants seemed to agree that they should be retained and re-offered in 2019. They included 1) Starting a Higher Education in Prison Program 2) Fundraising as a Lever for Sustainability 3) Strategic Planning for a Higher Education in Prison Program 4) Transitioning to Campus 5) Professional Development Basics and 6) Scholarly Research and Publication

⁹ Slides 2-5 of the “2018 NCHEP Exit Survey Visuals” PowerPoint contain some of the visual evidence generated by this aspect of the conference exit survey feedback, which was conducted separate from the broader 2018 Exit Survey. Meanwhile, slides 28-33 document the exit survey results pertaining specifically to the pre-conference.

glowing in their comments about the pre-conference. “People responded well,” and “it was super helpful for folks,” went some common remarks. “Very practical,” and “exactly what I needed,” others added.

- **The 2019 planning committee should consider integrating the pre-conference sessions (workshops) into the body of the conference (in addition to doing the workshops during the pre-conference).**
- **People clearly got a lot out of the pre-conference workshops.** This was true of both the presenters and the workshop participants. One typical participant response offered, “This is the only workshop I attended that I wished had been longer.” “It was SO amazing,” another noted. Leaders of the workshops agreed. “Everything ran really smoothly,” one wrote afterwards, and “we had everything we needed.”

Adjustments to Plan For

There is room to better fine-tune the existing pre-conference workshops in order to ensure an even more successful pre-conference in 2019.

- **Some presenters have room to improve on the design and execution of their workshops.** As this was the first time a pre-conference was held, it makes sense that the sessions will get better with time and practice. Some survey-generated feedback touched on points seasoned instructors will know and recognize: some discussions were allowed to wander off topic; some lesson plans might have suffered from disorganization. It also seems the hotel rooms worked against at least a couple of the workshops. “Room setup made it so that our voices were competing with each other to be heard,” one presenter noted, adding, “I don’t think this is something the planners could have anticipated.” That may be true, but the conference organizers risk similar kinds of situations in the future if these potentials are not recognized in advance, especially if the attendance at the pre-conference workshops continues to expand.
- **Continue to better center the formerly incarcerated.** Exit surveys suggested that the design of the pre-conference workshop take into consideration the needs of the formerly incarcerated. On this point, it is worth noting that the 2018 conference planners actually did solicit this input prior to announcing the pre-conference workshops, but requests for ideas did not generate responses (15 formerly incarcerated people were consulted for ideas for topics and no feedback was offered). Additionally, it might be noted that 50% of the sessions were ‘tracked’ for formerly incarcerated participants (though participants were not required to choose a track). Perhaps for 2019 it makes sense to cast a wider net for this kind of feedback, or somehow incentivize the labor involved in coming up with such ideas.
- **Consider how to more fully integrate the pre-conference workshops with the rest of the conference.** Again, for a conference that often gave rise to concerns of exclusion, some participants took the organization of the pre-conference to mean that it was somehow devalued against the bulk of the “main” conference events. Or that because it involved a separate registration process, for example, it was somehow considered “other” to the conference. Because hosting a whole separate slate of events (and adding an additional day, at least) to the conference involves an additional layer of added costs and logistical (travel) concerns, it is unfortunate that such charges arose in the exit survey feedback. Pre-conference planners for 2019 should try to somehow mitigate against these misconceptions and/or address them by simply integrating the practical focus of the pre-conference into the main conference.
- **Use the pre-conference registration form to solicit specific information from participants on what they hope to get out of the workshop, or why they are attending that particular workshop.** Presenters indicated it would have been valuable to have this information before entering the room. At the same time, volatility in the attendance and registration process meant that a lot of people switched their workshop attendance decisions at the last minute, and if that pattern holds in the future, there will be no good reason to

invest in learning about the workshop participants in advance, because they may not be attending the workshop they indicated or signed up for.

- **Be mindful that the pre-conference adds a lot of work for the planners, its presenters, and the conference participants.** There is real risk that adding more pre-conference programming will burn people out, even as the pre-conference drew rave reviews. The pre-conference events require a large commitment from participants and planners. Help presenters out a bit, perhaps, with some incentives. Incentives might include networking opportunities and down-time with other presenters in different workshops, or (for example) opportunities to discuss best practices and approaches.
- **Similarly, remember that workshop leaders are performing their service on top of all their other professional and personal obligations.** Leading two workshops in a day is a lot to ask; recognize and consider ways to incentivize the hard work that goes into the pre-conference at various levels.

A Final Note

Asked if there were any suggestions for pre-conference workshops for 2019 that would not repeat the topics offered this year, most presenters indicated that it would be best to repeat the topics, better hone them, and perhaps adjust some small things (an argument, perhaps, for the continued sharing of resources and tips among presenters). At the same time, some suggestions did come forward:

Suggestions from Presenters:

- “People became very interested in the connection to art and entertainment now coming into the spaces of the formerly incarcerated.” “Re-entry,” too.
- “I would love to do a controlling our narrative workshop” or “debating opposition to us in higher education”
- “Strategic planning”
- “Fundraising” -- more of it

Suggestions from Participants:

- STEM outreach
- Starting a Program
- Curriculum development and course design
- Conference boundaries and self-care (turn the Friday plenary into a workshop) (multiple)
- Repeat them!
- Fundraising (multiple)
- No opinion-no suggestions (multiple)
- Want to take more (multiple)

V. Content

Takeaway

The content aspects of the conference drew, by far, the most feedback, ranging from constructive to more negative. This range of responses made the content areas of the 2018 Indianapolis conference distinct from the other aspects of the conference.¹⁰ While conference participants in general had a strong overall

¹⁰ The annual NCHPEP conference typically delivers its content in one of several ways common to most comparably-sized professional venues. With the 2018 Indianapolis conference organized around the theme, “Building the Movement,” planners deployed several conference “tracks” to guide and structure the conference call for papers, and with it, the submissions and review process in turn. Building on the theme and the conference tracks, ideally, the conference planners then invited several keynote speakers to host plenary sessions wherein (again, ideally) speakers were

conference experience, and while many aspects of the conference drew nothing short of rave reviews (see the feedback on logistics and communications, for example), the content aspects of the conference did not inspire such widespread goodwill from Exit Report respondents, even as most people seemed satisfied with the conference overall. The main line of criticism suggested that a decent number of respondents have begun to feel excluded from the space. To help explore this, when conference participants were asked if the conference content helped enhance the conference theme, “Building the Movement,” for example, a modest 29% percent strongly agreed, while another 24% just simply agreed. This meant only a slim majority could agree that the conference enhanced its own stated theme. No other aspect of the conference drew such a lukewarm response. In the meantime, notably, 21% (a sizable minority) felt ambivalent (neither agreeing or disagreeing) that the conference content served the conference theme, and perhaps most tellingly, roughly 1/3 of the total respondents said they could not agree (and in 12.2% of responses, in fact, disagreed) that the conference built on the theme. Even modest disagreement on the question of whether the conference served the theme of “building the movement” ought to give the broader HEP community pause and needs to inspire more conversations in the near future (and perhaps continuing into the 2019 conference) about the “movement” itself that the conference is part of.¹¹

What to make of the constructive criticism within the content reviews?

As suggested in the introductory note, it seems the content problem areas of the conference stemmed largely from a host of difficult and potentially vexing questions that have yet to be answered by the conference hosts, planning committee, and/or broader HEP community. It follows that there will be several important content-based questions that the 2019 conference planners will need to address in order to make improvements in the content aspect of the conference moving forward.

Did All of the Conference Content Feedback Highlight A Call for Change?

In a word, yes, with the important exceptions being the open mic and pre-conference. It is worth taking a closer look at the substance of the feedback regarding each of the conference content areas.

- **On the Theme and Conference Tracks:** Many exit surveys, for example, took the opportunity to wonder aloud what kind of movement, and led by whom, was being implied or suggested by the theme. Many more bristled with suspicions that formerly incarcerated students and people of color were being marginalized from the “movement.” Still others remarked surprise in learning that there was a conference theme at all. Many wondered why topics like abolition, toppling oppression, ending racism, and dismantling capitalism/higher education/the prison-university-industrial complex were not given space for discussion, while topics like evaluation, assessment, fundraising, and more, were. On some level, the theme “building the movement” seemed to also install a set of expectations around the conference politics, which then created a gap between expectation and experience that confounded many participants. The following table helps shed some further light on the submitted and accepted papers to the conference.

invited to address the conference community as a whole for roughly an hour before hosting and moderating (in most instances) a question and answer session. Additionally, beyond the plenary sessions, concurrent sessions also brought together all the proposed papers, panels, workshops, and more into a set of smaller-sized sessions for more specialized discussions on pre-planned topics throughout the conference, all arranged according to a pre-set schedule. Last but not least, the content of the conference also took shape in places like the first-ever NCHEP open mic night, an evening networking session, and throughout the conference in additional venues such as meetings, poster sessions in the exhibit hall, and in informal venues such as over breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, where community members were invited to continue their discussion of the field and broader higher education in prison community.

¹¹ The 2018 NCHEP Exit Survey visuals PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix 1) has several content-related graphs and charts worth consulting. See slides 34-45.

Fig. A
Submissions and Acceptances to the 2018 NCHEP

#	Description /Notes
106	Participant submissions made to the 2018 NCHEP conference
74	Overall submissions accepted
70%	2018 Submissions Acceptance Rate
15/4 (74%)	Submissions and Rejections to Student Support Services Track
10/3 (70%)	Submissions and Rejections to Public Engagement and Policy Track
21/2 (91%)	Submissions and Rejections to Practices, Foundations, and Politics Track
39/7 (83%)	Submissions and Rejections to Pedagogy, Teaching, and Learning Track
10/5 (50%)	Submissions and Rejections to Data, Assessment, and Evaluations Track
10/4 (60%)	Submissions and Rejections to Organizing, Administration, and Leadership Tracks
9	Number of panels created by combining two or more presentations (originally proposed as single panels)
11	Number of additional presentations as a result of combining panels

- On the Plenary Sessions:** If there is a coherent narrative to the conference, perhaps it offers a story on how the content areas of the conference came (in complex ways) to reinforce/buttrese some of the deep-seated suspicions and resentments clearly taking root in the HEP (broader American?) community, and again often around the gap in expectations surrounding the conference theme and that of the actual content of the conference. For example (and keeping in mind some of the divides suggested above in the conference theme and tracks discussion), many exit surveys expressed what became a pretty clear lens of analysis on the conference overall. Frustrated, perhaps, with the way the tracks and theme narrowed the playing field away from what many understood “movement” politics to be or involve, many began to fit this observation into a story emphasizing, for example, how the opening plenary sessions also (like the theme and tracks) seemed to privilege (and again note the divides on display here) practitioners over students, whites over blacks, and experts (academics) over students and activists. Fair or not, it follows that when the last plenary (held on Sunday, in the lowest-attended space) featured a formerly incarcerated black speaker, it looked to many like the

Alliance was trying to marginalize him (and there were even a few exit surveys that suggested that this marginalization was intentional).

- **On the Concurrent Sessions:** A similar kind of pattern deepened in many people's eyes in regard to the concurrent sessions. When asked if the concurrent sessions were useful and relevant, an encouraging 30% of conference participants strongly agreed, but a bigger number, 35%, just simply agreed. Meanwhile, roughly 20% of all exit survey respondents disagreed that the concurrent sessions were useful and relevant. Fair or not (and the HEP community writ large needs to debate and reflect on this), it is clear that at least for some, the leadership, racial and gender composition, themes, topics, and tone/rhetoric of many of the conference concurrent sessions (among other factors) seemed to reinforce the view that the 2018 NCHEP conference had an agenda or bias toward white practitioners in the field at the expense of especially formerly incarcerated students and people of color.
- **On the Open Mic:** It is perhaps notable that the open mic night (the first such event hosted by the conference) briefly offered a space for conference goers to elaborate an important counter-narrative to the conference. Indeed, nearly all of the participants who signed up for space at the open mic were formerly incarcerated students, and, in marked contrast to the tone, style, and broader rhetoric of the concurrent or plenary sessions, for example, the open mic gave rise to a performative space almost exclusively based on personal and creative storytelling modes, and not research or debate/exchange in the field of higher education in prison. In the exit surveys, meanwhile, 85% of respondents (the strongest consensus on any content question) urged that the open mic be featured again next year.

Key Points

The 2019 conference presents a crossroads opportunity to begin sorting out some very important questions for the HEP community moving forward.

Foundations to Build Upon

When it comes to assessing the content areas of the conference, it is important to remember that at least a couple things did go right.

- **The conference should have a theme, but the theme needs to be offered and framed in line with a better sense of who the conference is actually for and why and its purpose/meaning needs to be clearly articulated.** Many conference participants noted this year's theme added to the conference dynamic overall. Others didn't immediately see the connections but noted that the theme selection made sense once it became clear to them.
- **Conference tracks should be maintained, but in general the design and implementation of tracks needs to be better considered and communicated especially related to the relationship between politics and practice.**
- **The plenary and concurrent sessions drew large attendance and spurred vigorous discussion.**
- **The open mic night should for sure be included again in the 2019 planning.** It was, arguably, the bright spot of the 2018 conference content planning efforts, but it cannot solely stand as an answer to the problems of disparity in representation and inclusivity throughout the conference as a whole.
- **The networking session seemed to be reviewed favorably, as well, but it too warrants some thinking in terms of structure and approach in advance of 2019.** The networking sessions were attended sparingly (more attendees participated during the Pre-Conference as opposed to the Conference).

Adjustments to Plan For

There are several adjustments to make on content issues in the planning committee for 2019.

- **Basic content-related questions remain unanswered.** Who is this conference for? Who does it serve? Answers to these questions were not fully in place throughout the planning process in 2018s and as a result, the content areas of the conference suffered. Given more

time to plan and more organizational structure and stability (which was not in place in 2018) there should be more time for these vital conversations.

- **As a result, from the conference theme on down to the minutiae of the daily sessions, a sense of community exclusion grew.** The conference theme, at least for many conference participants, gave rise to resentments or perspectives that said certain views and individuals were not welcomed at the conference.
- **Some have begun to feel their perspectives are not valid.** The conference tracks, for example, seemed, at least for some participants, to unnecessarily winnow the field down and away from a set of intellectual and activist priorities, moving decisively away from activist, radical, and more broadly “politicized” subjects like prison abolition, oppression, race, and, as one exit survey put it, “dismantling capitalism.”
- **Repetition of speakers leads to charges of “cliques” and favoritism.** When certain speakers and topics get some attention and others don’t, sometimes for consecutive years at a time within the conference, planners invite understandable questions regarding who belongs and is valued at the conference.
- **Content also seemed, at times, incoherent.** Many exit surveys wondered why certain concurrent sessions (pairings) had titles that did not match the presentation content.

VI.

Cost and Scholarships

Takeaway

The exit surveys revealed that the 2018 conference participants considered the Indianapolis experience both affordable and accessible. Most participants credited, explicitly, the scholarships and other financial aid measures the Alliance offered. As many noted in their exit surveys, it would have been “impossible” for roughly one out of four conference participants to attend without such aid. The Alliance extended a total of 103 travel scholarships, and 87 of these scholarships, importantly, went to formerly incarcerated community members. The scholarships provided transportation, a hotel room, and all meals for scholarship participants for the duration of the conference. Unlike almost all other conferences, moreover, no conference attendee (either with a scholarship or without one) was required to pay a fee, and almost no conference attendees paid a fee that covered the “actual” cost of participation. At the same time, of course, these points also help shed light on why the financial structure of the conference, again as a “no cost” conference, might not be sustainable in the long-term.

Key Points

Affordable and accessible for many participants, the 2018 NCHEP continued the conference’s track record of keeping financial insecurities at bay for the vast majority of its participants. Travel scholarships and other forms of financial aid, particularly for formerly incarcerated members, often proved decisive in whether or not people attended the conference. The sustainability of this scholarship model, however, is at risk, and needs to be addressed.

Foundations to Build Upon

It is important to retain and further cultivate an affordable, accessible, and hi-quality conference.

- **Most participants found the conference to be both affordable and accessible in terms of overall cost.** For a community with expressed financial insecurity, the low cost of attending the annual NCHEP conference remains one of the conference’s great virtues.
- **Scholarships continue to be an important determinant (and aid) in conference participation.** Even a quick scan of the exit survey results reveals that for many conference goers, the availability of scholarship support is often *the* determining factor in whether or not a person decides to attend and participate in the conference.
- **The Alliance has earned good favor for its commitment to easing the financial burden the conference imposes upon participants.** Participants respect the Alliance for

acknowledging and answering the financial needs of its broader community. This goodwill has helped many community members recognize that a more realistic financial approach may be necessary in the future.

- **Community leaders recognize and anticipate that some financial corners might have to be cut in the future in order to keep the conference in good fiscal health.** The exit surveys seem to agree (and anticipate) that some adjustments to the financial model of the conference might be for the good of the conference long-term.

Adjustments to Plan For

There is concern about the long-term financial stability of the broader HEP community.

- **The cost of the conference is not sustainable.** It is admirable, but also unusual, for a conference of this size to provide all-inclusive financial aid to large members of its community.
- **Participants will need to be more realistic about the conference costs overall.** The exit surveys already indicate that at least some community members are willing (or anticipating) that the “all inclusive,” “no cost,” model of the conference will soon be a thing of the past. If those with the means to chip in are required to do so, it will be for the benefit of the organization. This help will also uphold the important financial commitments the Alliance needs to retain with its scholarship awards.
- **The demand for scholarships is outpacing their availability.** With the number of applications for scholarships increasing each year the conference is held, it seems more urgent than ever to ensure that funding is available for the members of the community who need it the most. In most cases, formerly incarcerated participants stand to benefit the most from scholarship aid. But there are broad financial needs across the higher education landscape, including graduate student communities, adjunct and contingent faculty, staff, research communities, and more.
- **The 2018 conference revealed a continuing problem of “surprise” costs during the conference.** Surprise costs can be very stressful for members of this community, and they often come in the form of goods or services that could not be fully anticipated or accommodated by the conference planners. Good examples include checked baggage fees, medical or health supply costs taken on during the conference (again, often in unanticipated circumstances) or in instances of miscommunication, understanding, or human error--as when, for example, a transportation company failed to register a name for a ride to the airport and ended up stranding a guest at the hotel. Or when, for whatever reason, a participant needed to leave the conference early and needed to re-book a flight at a higher rate. To some extent, these issues will be unavoidable to any large conference. But perhaps with greater flexibility, transparency, and design/allocation of staff roles on-site during the conference, the Alliance can at least have a more transparent process and set of identifiable resolutions/pathways to solution in place to comfort members of the community when these issues arrive. Another payoff is that Alliance staff members and volunteers might be able to dedicate less attention to these matters while the conference has them busy with other more pressing concerns.
- **The 2019 conference planners might consider a different term than “scholarship” when it comes to allocating financial support.** The word “scholarship” seems to be broadcasting the wrong kind of signals to at least some members of the community. It may make more sense to call them award packages instead, or perhaps financial aid or something comparable. Those attending the conference on “scholarship” have not been awarded funding, necessarily, based on the merits of the quality of their proposals, their broader research, or standing in the eyes of the Alliance (necessarily). In any case, “scholarship” seems to be reinforcing negative perceptions of the conference hierarchy (and academia’s broader assumed aloofness and structural elitism).

Conclusion

The 2018 NCHEP conference held in Indianapolis, Indiana, November 7-11, 2018, provided proof of many strong foundations to build from (along with ongoing adjustments to make) in anticipation of the 2019 conference. While there were many aspects of the conference worth celebrating, such as the record-setting attendance, the successful hosting of the first-ever pre-conference workshops, and the smash success of the first-ever open mic night, there were also clear concerns that developed and that are in need of thoughtful attention. The most important of them, unfortunately, will not be easy to answer. Still, the Alliance and more broadly the community of higher education in prison undeniably stands to benefit from the hard questions it needs to ask itself in the coming weeks and months.

Appendix 1
2018 NCHEP Exit Survey Visuals

Exit Survey Results--PowerPoint
[Exit Survey Results \(Visuals--PowerPoint\)](#)

Appendix 2

NCHEP 2019 Tips for Conference Planners

A number of the 2018 Exit Surveys highlighted a desire for greater organizational transparency. In that spirit, we are sharing the suggestions that have been passed on to the 2019 conference planners, well in advance of the St. Louis conference. Please take this list of recommendations as an indication of the seriousness with which we are approaching the exit survey feedback each year.

Fig. A.

2019 Conference Planners: Big Picture Priorities (And In This Order)

Content

This is the biggest area for improvement heading into 2019. It's a big one, and quite complex, and deserves our collective attention.

Communications/Messaging

Communications and messaging concerns are deeply interconnected with the content discussion, and can be best leveraged in the call, submission, and review process and general efforts toward more transparency.

Cost and Scholarships

We need to find a way to promote the stability of the conference. The easiest and probably most effective step is to start requiring a conference fee and messaging this change as early as possible.

Logistics

There is a strong track record on this front. Maintaining it will present many challenges, and too dramatic a decline in experience may only further exacerbate them. One added effort in 2019 will be to invest in technology that will help streamline registration and content submissions and general management.

Pre-Conference

The 2018 version worked well; let's fine-tune and find the perfect place for the sessions (either during a pre-conference or during the "general" conference).

Attendance and Participation

We have reached a good size for the conference. Any bigger courts potential risks and exponentially increasing downsides.

Fig. B.

Concrete Suggestions for 2019 Conference Planners

Content

1. Use content management system (from vendor) to manage the conference (registration and presentation submissions)
2. Feature fewer concurrent sessions
3. Determine, in advance of the review process, a percentage or amount of sessions that will be accepted, based upon the amount of space and desired number of presentations
4. Limit the amount of presenters on panels and individual paper presentations
5. Decline more content/proposals to address the amount of content (do not combine panels)
6. Provide more opportunities for the HEP community of stakeholders to provide input/feedback/ideas on plenary speakers/sessions in advance of the conference
7. Consider moving away from the model of four plenary sessions (suggestions from Exit Survey)
 - a. Suggestion 1: Open Conference Model
 - b. Suggestion 2: Concurrent Panel Showcase

8. Diversity is critical: more plenary sessions led by people who are formerly incarcerated and people of color
9. Consider the representation of plenary speakers and the timing of events (e.g., opening the conference with a keynote speaker who is formerly incarcerated) and doing a more theoretical keynote on Friday morning
10. Local flair/connection: consider having some representation/events from local groups (from the city/state where the conference is being hosted)
11. There needs to be more transparency in the submissions, call for presentation proposals, reviewing processes, acceptance and pairing process

Communications/Messaging

1. Communicate/message more effectively what is expected of presenters (given how many presenters have not presented at a conference before)
2. Promote greater transparency with all aspects of the planning process (e.g., who is on the planning committee and how they were selected and how other decisions were made)
3. Address the concern that the conference location is “too fancy” and assumption that the Alliance is more funded than it actually is
4. Do more messaging around why the conference is being hosted at a hotel and not a campus (as it was when the conference began and less than 100 ppl attended)
5. Better messaging around the choice of hotel and the efforts to limit the cost of rooms
6. Focus on using social media (primarily: Twitter and Facebook) for updates and information about the conference (leading up to and during the event)
7. Do more to communicate the “meaning,” theme, and broader purpose of the conference
8. Do more to connect the theme of the conference to the everyday experience of the conference
9. Provide more information on conference “best practices” for presenters, especially given how many participants have not presented at a conference
10. Promote and Advertise: Do more messaging leading up to the conference related to promoting “special events” and keynote and plenary sessions
11. There needs to be more transparency in the submissions, call for presentation proposals, reviewing processes, acceptance and pairing process. It should not be assumed that all attendees are familiar with the conventions of a conference (academic or otherwise) and more attention needs to be placed on this aspect of professional development

Cost

1. Make registration fee mandatory and decide a rate that is closer to the actual cost of the conference (including the cost of meals)
2. Communicate/message the rationale for requiring a mandatory registration fee and the unsustainable structure of a conference of this size (without a required fee)
3. Continue to ensure that there are accessible scholarship/financial aid funds for the conference
4. Explore partnerships with organizations/funders who specifically can and want to support attendance for formerly incarcerated people

Logistics

1. Communicate more clearly the reason why the conference is being hosted in a hotel (e.g., we are too large of a group for campus)
2. Registration and Registration Fee need to be hosted on the same platform
3. The committee needs to address the issue of "last minute" and on-site registration
4. The conference needs a more robust conference planning tool (online platform)
5. Ask registrants to provide gender pronouns to be included on name tags
6. Work with the hotel to arrange for “All Gender” bathrooms
7. Find a better way to incentivize volunteers to “staff” the registration table (and ensure their proper training)

Pre-Conference

1. Include the pre-conference workshops as part of the planning for the 2019 conference
2. The planning committee should consider integrating the pre-conference sessions (workshops) into the body of the conference
3. While there was strong support of the 2018 Workshop topics and enthusiasm about keeping them the same, and this might not be a bad idea and continue to hone/refine what was started in 2018, but also might open up suggestions to the broader community
4. Ensure that communication about the Pre-Conference is clear and work to dispel the perception that the Pre-Conference is “exclusive” or “closed” to any participants
5. Because hosting a whole separate slate of events (and adding an additional day, at least) to the conference involves an additional layer of added costs and logistical (travel) concerns, it is telling that these best-intentions of conference planners again tended to produce charges of elitism or exclusion
6. Pre-conference planners for 2019 should try to somehow mitigate against these misconceptions (that the Pre-Conference was “other” than the general conference) and/or address them by simply integrating the practical focus of the pre-conference into the main conference

Attendance and Participation

1. The conference is probably at or near ideal/peak capacity--time to emphasize quality over numbers
2. The word “scholarship” seems to be broadcasting the wrong kind of signals to at least some members of the community. It may make more sense to call the award packages, instead, financial aid or something comparable. Those attending the conference on “scholarship” have not been awarded funding, necessarily, based on the merits of the quality of their proposals, their broader research, or standing in the eyes of the Alliance (necessarily). In any case, “scholarship” seems to be reinforcing negative perceptions of the conference hierarchy (and academia’s broader assumed aloofness and structural elitism)
3. Need a better integrated (seamless) registration process that will better support accuracy for the conference planners and a smoother registration process for participants

Thanks for Reading

Thank you for taking time to review the 2018 Exit Report. We hope that you will continue to provide feedback and engage in conversations about the national conference, the work of the Alliance for Higher Education and higher education in prison more broadly. To do so, we invite you to provide comments/ideas/feedback here on our [website](#). Additionally, we will be inviting anyone to participate in a series of conversations about the Exit Report. More information about these open conversations will be posted to the Prison_Ed Listserv.