

Ninth Annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison

2019 Exit Report

November 14-17, 2019
Saint Louis, Missouri



ALLIANCE
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

Table of Contents

***INTRODUCTORY NOTE*..... 3**

***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*..... 6**

***THE 2019 NCHEP EXIT REPORT*..... 9**

***APPENDIX*.....29**

***THANK YOU FOR READING*32**

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Thank you and welcome

Thank you for your interest in the 2019 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (the 9th NCHEP!) and for your interest in our planning efforts for the 2020 conference. We're thrilled to share this 2019 conference Exit Report with you, as it details the higher education in prison community's experiences with the 9th annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison hosted in Saint Louis, held November 14-17, 2019. We hope this report will continue to inspire efforts to expand equity, excellence, and access nationally through higher education in prison programs.

Welcome, and truly—thank you for reading.

What is the annual NCHEP Exit Report?

The annual NCHEP Exit Report has become, since 2017, one of the primary ways in which the Alliance for Education in Prison reviews, assesses, and prepares the groundwork for planning the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison. The “Exit Report” additionally serves as an opportunity to reflect on the current state of the field of higher education in prison and to make observations about its future trajectory. The history of the Alliance’s Exit Report dates back to 2017, when the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison first started collecting and reporting on data on the conference experience in a systematic way.¹ In 2018, it took the additional step of both shortening the report and making it—for the first time—“public.”² Retroactively, the 2017 report has been made public on the Alliance’s website. This 2019 report, the second to be made immediately public, then marks the third time the Alliance has worked to publish a conference Exit Report. Each year, the Alliance has multiple kinds of readers in mind when it researches, writes, and publishes the Exit Report. This readership includes, for example (and in no particular order):

- (1) The planning committee for the 2019 conference, for whom the report operates as an official debrief on the conference experience
- (2) The planning committee for the 2020 conference, who should read the report with the goal of absorbing as many lessons as possible, so as to make the 2020 conference experience the “best yet”
- (3) The staff and advisory board of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison
- (4) Participants in the 2019 conference in Saint Louis
- (5) Anyone involved with the planning or conference experience across the broader higher education in prison stakeholder community
- (6) Anyone in the community (higher education in prison stakeholders, or not) who want to learn more about the NCHEP and/or the field of higher education in prison

The Alliance’s goal, then, is to make its annual Exit Report accessible, informative, and practical for all readers within this broader community.

¹ The 2017 report was initially done as a trial run and designed for internal use by the Alliance and its board. While it was not initially offered for public feedback, it is now posted on the Alliance’s website: higheredinprison.org.

² The 2018 Exit Report was published publicly and is available for reading on the Alliance’s website: higheredinprison.org

How is the annual NCHPE Exit Report put together?

Since 2017, the Alliance's Director, Mary Gould, has teamed with co-author and the Alliance's Information Manager, Jesse Gant, to co-author the Annual Exit Report. As the Alliance's staff grows, additional members of our team contribute to various aspects of reporting. Each year, and again with the Saint Louis NCHPE, this work comes together in the initial weeks and months following the conference, especially as the Exit Surveys are completed by the conference participants. Each year, building largely from the Exit Surveys, the Exit Report brings together a large amount of information, including:

- (1) Participant experiences in planning, attending, and or/reporting on the 2018-2019 conference experiences. This can help provide, for example, a more contextual or holistic understanding of the conference experience.
- (2) Feedback from participants collected in the annual Exit Surveys (these are often distributed to participants and posted on the conference website)
- (3) Data collected during the various planning and hosting processes, such as registration, paper submissions, etc. For the 2019 conference in Saint Louis, the Alliance and its planning committee amassed a large amount of material in planning
- (4) Personal experiences of the conference participants and conference planners that were collected anecdotally, in sessions, etc.

When the 2019 NCHPE in Saint Louis concluded, co-authors Mary Gould and Jesse Gant moved, using similar processes implemented since 2017, into the assembly of conference feedback and Exit Surveys, weaving their findings into this report.

The co-authors then drafted and presented what follows to the stakeholder community by January 2020, making its findings "public" in time for the 2020 planning committee to get to work in January. As you read, then, please keep in mind that many of the discussions contained within build from not only the Exit Survey, but the planning committee, the Advisory Board, the Alliance Staff, and more. Each year, the co-authors strive to make sure these voices are represented and heard in the Exit Report. Their inclusion helps make the annual Exit Report an important step in the planning process, both as de-brief on the experience, and as planning document. At the same time, it is very difficult each year (and perhaps impossible) to get full participation with the Exit Surveys. Even when 1/3 of the participants return surveys (which sometimes happens with this conference) it is important to remember that very rarely does a conference (or any large event) get that rate of return. At the same time, the best that can be said is that this report reflects just 25% of the participant feedback, via the Exit Survey. Still, this valuable feedback provides at least some hard evidence of the conference experience for a significant subset of the conference goers.

What does the Exit Report consist of?

The 2019 Exit Report has again been designed and written to present the mass of information generated from the 2019 NCHPE experience (from initial planning stages, through the conference itself, and feedback) into three more manageable sections. In doing so, it adopts the basic structure of the 2018 Exit Report.

- An Executive Summary offers the "brief" version of the 2019 Exit Report. Think of it as the required or essential reading, the section that features the most condensed, essential conclusions of the 2019 Exit Report.
- The body of the 2019 Exit Report offers the fuller, more complete version of the year's exit report. Think of it as the year's highly recommended reading, providing readers with greater depth of knowledge on the 2019 conference experience.
- The attached Appendix, meanwhile, is included to serve as reference material, useful for readers to consult and engage at any time.

What is the Executive Summary?

The first piece of the report to draw your attention to is the “Executive Summary,” which was produced with the intent of providing readers with a short, readily accessible, visually appealing, and to-the-point version of the longer 2019 NCHEP Exit Report. The Executive Summary is designed to display the most essential conference data. It is designed for portability and accessibility; as a prompt for group discussion, and as a quick “brief” on the essential 2019 Exit Report takeaways. As with the 2018 version, it is again designed to be approached and engaged in perhaps 15-20 minutes by most readers.

What makes the Exit Report Itself Distinct from Its Executive Summary?

The 2019 Exit Report (main report) is distinct from its Executive Summary in that it offers a fuller portrait of the conference experience. A longer and more detailed version, it requires a greater investment in time and attention, but it also (we feel) offers far more information and depth than the Executive Summary does. As such, it is an important document for anyone who imagines they will be heavily involved in, for example, the planning of the 2020 NCHEP, the operations of the Alliance and its partners, and anyone with long-range interests in the field of higher education in prison. Throughout, we make it our goal to provide key lessons and takeaways, all presented in clear language, easy-to-read formatting, and handy, practical, “how-to” steps and next steps. The Exit Report, we believe, provides an accessible, practical, and informative document that that wider higher education in prison stakeholder community can continue to use and learn from in the years ahead. The Exit Report can be approached and made sense of by most readers in perhaps a half hour to an hour’s time.

What’s in the Appendix?

The third part of the 2019 Exit Report presents important data sets as reference materials, or as an “appendix.” These materials should also be useful to the higher education in prison community. Members of the 2020 NCHEP planning committee, for example, will want to pay close attention to sections where “tips” for the 2020 conference planners are assembled and explicitly stated. They draw from the conference-participant Exit Survey feedback and from anecdotal evidence provided by 2019 planners and attendees. They also offer an invaluable structure for next year’s important planning decisions regarding NCHEP 2020. Investing fifteen minutes or so of your time will again be enough for most readers with this material.

What are the Key Findings of the 2019 Exit Report?

The following report reveals that the 2019 conference was in many ways a smash success. After the 2018 conference asked participants what it means to “build the movement,” it is clear that the movement for higher education in prison is building, is growing more diverse, and is evolving in ways that are productive and energizing. The field is growing stronger, gaining stability, and moving forward with confidence in turn. Invited into the imaginative and transformative space of moving “beyond the barriers” in 2019, the conference looks forward to 2020 as an opportunity to carry its growing momentum into new and exciting possibilities.

Please turn to and read the Executive Summary. Then, please devote your attention to the full 2019 Exit Report. As you do, please make full use of the Appendix as well. When you are done, use and work with these documents. Whether you are an Alliance staff member, board member, conference planner, or working in the field, all of these materials are designed to be used and discussed, referenced as stand-alone documents. In conjunction with the release of the 2019 Exit Report the Alliance will create opportunities for feedback and continued conversation.

Jesse Gant, Information Manager, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison
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January 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
2019 NCHEP Conference
November 14-17, 2019
Saint Louis, Missouri

Introduction

The ninth annual 2019 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) held in Saint Louis, Missouri, November 14-17, 2019 offered a window into movement for higher education in prison that is growing stronger, more confident, and more stable as a new decade begins. This was the Alliance's third year (2017-2019) hosting the annual NCHEP Conference (begun in 2010). Many participants documented a variety of rich and meaningful experiences in their exit surveys, calling, for example, the 2019 NCHEP "the best and most inspiring conference I've ever been to." "You truly heard and responded to some of the issues raised in 2018," another added. It is always great to hear positive feedback from participants, especially focused on positive improvements to the overall conference experience. It also underscores the need to keep pushing the conference experience forward, making the experience even more meaningful and productive for 2020.

Fig A. **2020 NCHEP Major Conference Adjustments to Make**

Strengths

There were many aspects of the 2019 NCHEP that worked extremely well. These aspects should give confidence to the 2020 planners.

- The higher education in prison community remains fast-growing, engaged, and dynamic
- Most community members continue to hold the NCHEP in high regard
- Many aspects of the conference messaging again worked very well and were enhanced with a set of recent updates.
- The urban, centralized locale opened up new opportunities and seemed to improve the conference experience in tangible ways
- The 2019 NCHEP experience operated in more cohesive, unified, and positive in tone than in years past, according to Exit Surveys
- The move toward an entrance fee was not prohibitive for many (although access and affordability remain a concern to address)
- Communications were informative, multi-channel, relevant and helped to keep participants informed
- Participation/Representation of the formerly incarcerated & people of color (particularly women)
- The efforts to redesign and center the Resource and Exhibit Hall was well-received

Areas to Improve

There are also several areas that need improvement.

- Planning Committee process needs to be more clearly articulated so community members are clear about their role and responsibilities and the NCHEP continues to represent the experience/expertise of the community
- Cost of attendance and long-range stability is still a concern
- Content Quality
 - Theme and Tracks need to be infused more into the sessions of the conference

- Proposal and Review Process needs to be more robust to ensure the quality of presentations
- Presentations and Breakout Session participants need more support to ensure quality presentations that are seen as valuable and meaningful by participants (the Exit Survey suggests concerns with the quality of presentations)
- Training and Support needs to be more available to conference attendees
- Communications
 - More access to information for collaboration and networking is needed in advance of the conference (e.g., social media groups, email list shared in advance of the conference)
 - Many suggested that communication on-site might also be improved by additional technology (e.g., conference app)
- Networking opportunities need to be enhanced and extended to more participants
- New/additional stakeholders need to be engaged and present at the conference
 - Funders
 - Corrections
 - Alumni students

Fig. B
Key 2019 St. Louis NCHEP Figures

Item	Numbers	Category
a	467	Registered online at least a week before the conference.
b	485	Online registrations submitted prior to the conference start (November 14)
c	14	Online registrations completed while the conference was running
d	10	Did not register online; completed on-site Registration
e	31	Conference Participants who registered but did not check-in
f	478	Overall Conference Participants (Low-end estimate). This figure is based purely on online registrations, on-site registrations, and check-ins
g	553	Overall Conference Participants (High-end estimate). This figure assumes additional community participation, registrants who did not check-in and attended the conference
h	540	Official* Conference Attendance Estimate
i	130	Total Number of Formerly Incarcerated Participants (Based upon available information and not accounting for participants who did not register or chose not to answer questions during registration)
j	357	Estimated number of higher education in prison programs, organizations, funders or other organizations with representation at the 2019 NCHEP
k	21	Number of Second Chance Pell Site programs with representation at the conference
l	113	Exit Survey Responses Completed All 2019 conference participants were asked to complete exit surveys on a voluntary basis once the conference concluded. Approximately 21% of all conference participants contributed.
m	7	Total Concurrent Sessions
n	57	Total number of panels hosted within the conference's six concurrent sessions

o	233	Total number of participants who presented at concurrent sessions as either panelists or moderators
p	27	Total panels accepted as emerging scholar presentations
q	\$193,600.00	Total Cost of Hosting the 2019 NCHEP ³ (including: printing and design, catering, audio/visual, honoraria and supplies; not including: financial aid packages and fee waivers, service and administrative fees, and Exhibit and Resource Hall poster printing ⁴)
r	\$105,414.94	Total Cost of Financial Aid and Fee Waiver Program ⁵
s	\$95,000.00	Total Funds Raised for Financial Aid and Fee Waiver
t	\$20,00.00	Total Funds Raised for Conference Sponsorship
u	\$120,700.00	Registration Fees (including \$750.00 additional funds contributed to Financial Aid efforts)
v	\$24,693.71	Total Fees and Administrative Costs on Funds Raised (Registration Fees, Financial Aid and Conference Sponsorship)
w	345	Total Number of Conference Participants Paying a Registration Fee
x	277	Total Financial Aid Awards and Fee Waivers Requested (accounting for individuals making requests for both)
y	49	Total Financial Aid Awards
z	116	Total Fee Waivers Awards
aa	74	Financial Aid and Fee Waivers Awarded to Participants Formerly Incarcerated (best estimate based upon the information provided by applicants)
ab	111	Financial Aid and Fee Waiver Requests Not Funded (accounting for individuals making requests for both)

Fig. C
Attendance Figures for the Concurrent Sessions

Session #	Date	Time	Total Attendance	Average Attendance
1	Friday, November 15	11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.	333	37
2	Friday, November 15	2:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.	284	41
3	Friday, November 15	4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.	240	40
4	Saturday, November 16	11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.	360	72
5	Saturday, November 16	2:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.	134	38
6	Saturday, November 16	4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.	230	28.75
7	Sunday, November 17	9:00 to 10:30 a.m.	No Data	No Data ⁶

³ This is the best estimate of the total cost available at the time of completing the Exit Report (January 6, 2020), which we estimate to be 99% complete.

⁴ The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison assumed the cost of printing posters for Exhibit and Resource Hall presenters (who submitted posters by the printing deadline).

⁵ This is the best estimate of the total cost available at the time of completing the Exit Report (January 6, 2020), which we estimate to be 99% complete.

⁶ In 2017, 2018, and 2019, the Alliance has missed the opportunity to conduct room counts during at least one of the concurrent sessions. For future planning efforts, staff and volunteers need to make sure accurate room counts are conducted for all sessions during the conference.

THE 2019 NCHEP EXIT REPORT

Introduction

The ninth annual 2019 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) held in Saint Louis, Missouri, November 14-17, 2019 offered a window into movement for higher education in prison that is growing stronger, more confident, and more stable here at the beginning of a new decade. This was the Alliance's third year (2017-2019) hosting the annual NCHEP Conference (begun in 2010). Many participants documented a variety of rich and meaningful experiences in their exit surveys, calling, for example, the 2019 NCHEP "the best and most inspiring conference I've ever been to." "You truly heard and responded to some of the issues raised in 2018," another added. It is always great to hear positive feedback from participants. It also underscores the need to keep pushing the conference experience forward, making the experience even more meaningful and productive for 2020.

- **Bigger than ever.** The biggest and most widely attended NCHEP ever held, the 2019 conference drew an estimated 540 participants to Saint Louis, 100 more than the conference drew a year earlier in Indianapolis. This roughly 23% increase also means the NCHEP conference has continued a steady pace of growth over the past several years. In 2017, the conference drew roughly 300, and in 2018 it drew roughly 440.⁷
- **A strong formerly incarcerated co-hort.** Formerly incarcerated participants (130 in 2019) also made up an estimated 24% of the 2019 conference participants. While this was roughly comparable to the number that attended in 2018 (129), the larger conference meant that the formerly incarcerated were a smaller percentage of participants this year. This is down, both from the 30% (29.3%) of formerly incarcerated participants in 2018 and the 27% percent in 2017. Over the past three years, the conference has averaged 26.76% participation rate of the formerly incarcerated.⁸
- **"Special" events responsive and in-touch with the community.** The 2019 NCHEP also featured its second annual open-mic night, on its way to becoming one of the most beloved aspects of the annual conference experience. In addition, several other conference special events vastly enriched the conference experience, especially those that engaged conference participants in learning more about the host city.

At the same time, the exciting and continued growth of NCHEP, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, and the broader higher education in prison community also highlight the need for more careful and systematic planning efforts moving forward and also continued efforts to improve the quality and focus of conference content.

I.

Attendance and Participation

⁷ The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison started gathering and reporting data on the national conference beginning with its first Exit Report in 2017, which was initially used and discussed only internally. Subsequently, the 2017 Exit Report was posted to the Alliance's website. In 2018, the Alliance published its Exit Report and hosted a series of subsequent public discussions on it, a practice that will continue with this year's 2019 report. See Jesse Gant and Mary Gould, "The Seventh Annual Conference on Higher Education in Prison: Exit Report, January 12, 2018," *The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison*. For data from or to discuss this internal report, please contact the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison. For the 2018 report, see Jesse Gant and Mary Gould, "Eight Annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison: 2018 Exit Report, November 7-11, 2018," *The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison*, 9.

⁸ Jesse Gant and Mary Gould, "2018 Exit Report," 9; "2017 Exit Report," 5.

Takeaway

The ninth annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison was the biggest in the conference's history, a history that dates back to 2010. More than 540 participants took part. In addition to the 540 participants who attended and played a role in the conference, an estimated 130 participants (roughly 24% of all conference participants) were formerly incarcerated and 74 formerly incarcerated participants were supported by financial aid or fee waivers provided by the Alliance.⁹ The total attendance number represents a substantial jump in attendance from the 2018 conference attendance in Indianapolis, which drew roughly 440, according to the Alliance's official 2018 estimate.¹⁰ 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 the conference's attendance growing. It is especially good to see the number of formerly incarcerated participants rising overall. On the other hand, it is concerning to see the percentage of formerly incarcerated participants not increasing at the same rate as the overall conference attendance (24% of the 2019 conference participants were formerly incarcerated; 30% of the 2018 conference participants were formerly incarcerated, while 25% of the 2017 conference participants were formerly incarcerated). This is a concern for the Alliance and should be for the broader higher education in prison stakeholder community. Funder engagement in supporting financial aid and fee waivers continues a steady decline since 2017, as conference support more generally remains a lower priority in philanthropy. This trend is an opportunity to continue helping funders understand the value of the NCHPEP for our formerly incarcerated colleagues. The Alliance is also invested in helping to support programs in their efforts to raise funds to ensure they are able to support their formerly incarcerated staff and program alumni in attending the NCHPEP (and engaging professional development opportunities). This continued and energetic growth in conference attendance will bring even more energy to the conference experience in the coming years.
- Similarly, the NCHPEP's growing conference attendance also presents continuing challenges. As many conference participants pointed out in their 2019 Exit Surveys, the rooms at the conference were often overflowing with audience members. While this is certainly a welcomed challenge and opportunity for both the Alliance and the broader higher education in prison community and its presenters, it also puts the conference experience in a tough spot in terms of its sustainability, as more attendance will require more resources to provide more financial aid, meals, and continued high-quality facilities to match the growing community and its needs. It is also a community taking diverse approaches to its work, with participants at the 2019 conference showing films, hosting live-stream sessions, and more.

The good news is that these challenges are actionable and can be solved. By securing the proper space early in its planning process, starting fundraising efforts earlier and more clear messaging requirements for submissions and providing support for emerging scholars, the Alliance and its 2020 planning committee can give continued attention to the things that matter most with the conference: its participants, overall sustainability and content.

⁹ Financial Aid, previously called "Scholarships" in 2017 and 2018, covered the cost of the registration fee, travel, accommodations and reimbursement for incidentals. The registration fee waiver covered the cost of the \$350.00 registration fee.

¹⁰ Gant and Gould, "2018 Exit Report," 9.

Key Points

Of the roughly 540 conference participants, 113 (a return rate of 21%) completed Exit Surveys in the weeks following the conference.¹¹ These surveys, distributed and administered by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, made it quite clear that the vast majority of participants had very positive experiences with the 2019 NCHEP. In terms of participant and attendance highlights, the 2019 Conference blended a slate of keynote speakers, plenary sessions, concurrent sessions, networking sessions, and meetings, alongside elements like a newly designed “Exhibit and Resource Hall,” a new component proposed and developed by the 2019 Planning Committee.¹²

- In addition, the 2019 conference in Saint Louis hosted the 2nd Annual NCHEP Open Mic Night, provided space yet again for its popular “Wellness Room,” and even managed to host a lunch session and walking tour at the nearby “Old Courthouse,” significant as the site where the enslaved couple Dred and Harriet Scott sued for their freedom in the decades before the Civil War, leading the Supreme Court to rule that blacks were not citizens of the United States.

Big, well-attended, and diverse, the 2019 conference offered plenty of exciting and challenging options to the higher education in prison community this year.

Foundations to Build Upon

This is a fast-growing and energized community that continues to make room for a unique and memorable space with its annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison.

- **Continued Growth and Energy.** The 2019 NCHEP again, after seeing growth in both 2017 and 2018, set an all-time high record attendance. The 2019 NCHEP in Saint Louis was the best-attended conference in NCHEP history.
- **A strong formerly incarcerated cohort.** The challenges outlined above are real, but the NCHEP remains unique as one of the nation’s premiere conference opportunities for supporting the professional development and work of the formerly incarcerated.
- **Conference participants remain engaged and deeply committed to their work.** Despite the many social, political, and economic fault lines that members of this community routinely navigate in their everyday work, it seems clear that the annual NCHEP conference participants remain engaged with the work to provide access to higher education for currently and formerly incarcerated people. Most of the conference participants in Saint Louis, for example, stayed and worked for the duration of the three and a half-day conference (Thursday, November 14, to Sunday, November 17). Roughly 90% of the 2019 Exit Surveys indicated that most participants were in Saint Louis for at least three of the conference days. The conference’s seven total concurrent sessions drew at least 1,581 total participants, a figure that was likely much higher since room count figures were not even assembled for the entire 7th concurrent session, held on Sunday, November 17. Even so, panelists, moderators, and presenters could reliably assume an audience of more than 40 for each session at the conference; attendance and participation numbers were so high that conference participants struggled with issues of packed rooms and over-filled spaces rather than perhaps the more common conference experience of speaking to a room filled with

¹¹ The Exit Surveys were made available to conference participants between roughly November 16 and December 6, 2019.

¹² The 2019 NCHEP was the first planned and administered with the support of a community-based planning committee.

largely empty seats.¹³ For some helpful perspective on these numbers, consider that in 2018, the conference drew an estimated 1,153 audience members, and filled rooms (on average) with 28 participants. Compare that with the 2019 figures (1,581 participants and 43 participants (on average) per room, and you get a snapshot of the energy and intensity of this year's conference.¹⁴ All aspects of the conference, in fact, were well attended, and guaranteed presenters a sizeable audience for their messages and ideas. Similarly, all the available evidence indicates audiences brought their characteristic passion, concern, care, ideas, critical thinking, and energy to the sessions as well. In many cases, perhaps the 2019 conference was perhaps *too* successful in these areas. "Some of the session rooms were not large enough," a conference goer noted, "so people sat on the floor."

- **The diversity of the community provides a clear strength to continue building from, and each year, the NCHEP broadens the #highereducationinprison community.** Both community demographics and the diversity of the speakers centered at the conference speak well of this community's strength. In the 2019 Exit Surveys, conference participants (echoing some of the major conference demographics from 2018) again identified themselves into these top categories, listed here in order: (1) teachers/instructors; (2) practitioners; (3) college/university administrators; (4) advocates/allies; (5) researchers; (6) former and current students; and, (7) re-entry providers. Many participants also identified their work in government, policy making, and as family members/friends of current students. More identified as workers in the non-profit sector, as filmmakers, as social workers, and as providers of technical/technology-based assistance to higher education in prison programs. Similarly, the vast majority of keynote and plenary speakers at this year's conference were women and/or women of color. Respondents in the 2018 Exit Reports, recall, had identified issues of identity, representation, and exclusion at the conference, drawing particular attention to the selection of the conference's most prominent speakers (i.e., keynote and plenary sessions). In 2019, the NCHEP planning committee and the Alliance responded with a set of speakers that answered these concerns. Many of the women centered and foregrounded in prominent speaking positions at the conference were also formerly incarcerated and/or women of color.

Adjustments to Plan For

The community's continued growth means planning will need to accommodate higher demand, presenting a host of potential challenges to the annual conference planners.

- **Conference attendance data present an annual and ongoing challenge to conference administration.** Each year, and for a host of sometimes surprising and counterintuitive reasons, the actual count on the NCHEP's annual participation presents something of a challenge to the Alliance staff. As with the 2017 and 2018 NCHEP conferences, the online and in-person registration processes proved inadequate (for a host of reasons) to capturing either the number of people who actually attended the conference or the number of people who registered for the conference. While the Alliance made several notable improvements to its overall processes on both the back-end and the front-end in administering the registration this year, most notably in the use of a standardized registration portal, the reality is that it is very hard to guarantee those who attend the conference actually register and present themselves for check-in at the registration desk.

¹³ See Figure C in the 2019 "Executive Summary," page 4, for more information on the conference concurrent session attendance.

¹⁴ Both the 2018 and 2019 Exit Reports include a "Figure C" in the Executive Summaries that break down the attendance figures for the concurrent sessions.

- **Late and on-site registrations.** There needs to be a way to de-incentivize late registrations in the hopes of attending (receiving financial aid) and (at the same time) incentivizing people to cancel their registrations/financial aid 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 continue to address this issue.
- **No-shows.** The community needs to act responsibly in communicating any inability to attend the conference if circumstances make it necessary, especially when conference planners remain unaware of this intention. And, most especially when the participant is connected to either a fee waiver or financial aid package. When the Alliance is never notified it is impossible to redirect these funds. Recognizing that it can be difficult and even painful to disclose this information, the Alliance and the 2020 planning committee can help create steps to ensure participant comfort and support throughout any no-show decisions.
- **Expanding attendance figures can reduce the quality of the conference experience for participants.** The 2019 exit surveys provided palpable evidence that many conference participants experienced crowding (which also then runs the risk of promoting feelings of exclusion) within the panels and sessions, and again precisely because the room attendance/panel memberships were often so high.
- **To continue emphasizing growth means having to also recognize the escalating costs of the conference.** Hosting more people means providing more meals, financial aid packages, travel support, reimbursements, and the like. The issue of size/growth of conference attendance is not unique to this conference/community, of course. Any thriving professional community concluding its first decade of formation has experienced a common set of “growing pains.” We continue in our evolution from a small community that has been able to convene at a very low (or no) cost at a small venue to where we are now. Only a hotel can really accommodate the sheer size of this annual conference, for few other venues can host, feed, and accommodate more than 500 annual visitors without taking on prohibitive costs.
- **The importance of the Exit Surveys.** In 2018, 27% of conference participants completed their exit surveys compared to the 21% who did so in 2019. Exit Surveys are important, and the Alliance and its community would do well to continue incentivizing and encouraging the completion of these important data sets. Similarly, the community should strive to help provide the vital information that comes from them.

II. Logistics

Takeaway

When it comes to the conference logistics, conference participants again used their Exit Surveys to rate the NCHEP 2019 conference in Saint Louis as an exceptionally well-run conference. The surveys solicited feedback on several logistical aspects of the conference, including the registration process, the location of the conference (Saint Louis), and even the hotel and meals. Additionally, surveys further sought out responses on the lived, everyday experience of the conference, seeking information on both proven annual NCHEP mainstays like the Wellness Room, as well as newer planning committee-proposed and designed elements,

such as this year's re-designed "Exhibit and Resource Hall." As in the past, these aspects of the conference received generally rave reviews—both the 2017 and 2018 Exit Surveys also rated the conference logistics higher in terms of rates of satisfaction than any other conference component, points that speak to the Alliance's strong and very consistent track record now in hosting and administering an exceptionally well-run conference. Asked, in any case, to rate the logistical aspects of the conference on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low satisfaction and 5 being "very satisfied," the conference logistics generated an average score across the surveys of 4.3. Performing at or above average this year in the Exit Survey participant ratings were the conference hotel (4.5), as well as the conference location (Saint Louis) which earned a 4.3. Slightly below the average score overall were the Wellness Room (4.2), the Exhibit and Resource Hall (4.1), and the meals (4.1).

Key Points

The exit surveys, building on successes in both 2017 and 2018, again expressed high 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 well in Saint Louis.

- **The 2019 NCHEP was again, undeniably, an accessible conference.** Many positive comments emphasized the conference's accessibility. "I was actually very impressed with the venue," a respondent noted. "It was great." "This was a perfect hotel, location, and accommodation," another added. "From my perspective, the venue was extremely well located downtown, access was easy, and the design of the conference area worked very well." The St. Louis conference also featured gender-inclusive bathrooms.
- **A solid majority of all conference participants, and on nearly every imaginable logistical question, agreed that the conference was well-organized and administered.** Important aspects like the hotel and location fared very well in the Exit Reports, while elements like the Wellness Room, Exhibit and Resource Hall, and meals also did well. Unlike in 2018, clear signage and conference layout ensured little confusion about the location of the wellness room or the exhibit and resource hall.
- **Meals were again generally popular, though perhaps not as popular as in 2018 at Indianapolis.** To some degree, the quality of the food at the annual conference is largely dependent on the quality of the hotel, and respondents did recognize this. Most agreed that the meals enhanced the conference sense of community. Most felt that the meals were timed regularly and appropriately to the rest of the conference's main events. Many participants commented on the healthy choices available and the largely vegetarian and vegan options available, which is not often common at large events/conferences.
- **The Wellness Room was again popular and appreciated.** Conference participants have historically *loved* the wellness room, and this was again true in 2019. Popular again this year were its inclusions of supplies of Advil, "hot packs," and tea, as well as free feminine hygiene products. New additions like a Yoga session facilitated by a local yoga instructor were also popular and appreciated.
- **The was clear improvement in the number, quality and location of the "Exhibit and Resource Hall.** The 2019 Planning Committees efforts to relocate the Exhibit and Resource Hall to make it more accessible and part of the conference and to design templates for presenters to use had a significant effect on the quality of the presentations and the "foot traffic" generated. In addition, the Alliance's dedication of funds to pay for printing of posters for display ensured that cost would not be prohibitive for conference participants.

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 for some people, as they have been in years past.** Some, for example, found Saint Louis difficult to get to. “It was challenging to fly into St. Louis from my location.” “Pick cities that have better access to direct flights,” another noted. Each year, participants on either the East or West Coast often lament the typically “midwestern” locations of the conference. As one respondent noted this year, “It would be nice to have the conference in a different geographical location. Last year was a somewhat midwestern location and this year was too.” It is worth keeping in mind, of course, that for the Alliance and the broader higher education in prison community to continue offering financial aid packages to the conference participants, this question of the geographical location of conference location factors heavily, since hosting the conference in a generally middle section of the country means that substantial savings on airfare can be translated into great conference accessibility for those in need. Additionally, more central locations ensure that fewer time zones are crossed and travel times are reduced for the major of conference participants (not to mention the cost of hotel rooms/accommodations are often lower in the “smaller market” locations of the past few years.
- **People liked the hotel, but they did not necessarily love its location.** This isn’t to say the hotel did not have its naysayers. One respondent seemed to have a dysfunctional room. “Showers had no pressure,” they said, and the “toilet would barely flush.” A more widespread problem that shows up each year in the Exit Surveys comes from the point that these types of large conference hotels rarely have interior rooms with windows, since their sheer size makes them rather cavernous buildings. More relative to the city where the conference was held, Saint Louis, remarks ranged from the simply dismissive—“I never need to go to Saint Louis again,” “it’s a pretty boring city” to more constructive ones. Participants made valid points about the city’s walkability, its access to nightlife, and shared their perspectives on the city’s food and entertainment options. Some noted, for example, that the hotel did not seem all that interested in profiling “the type of food St. Louis is known for,” and that future conferences might try to build in a more localized feel, perhaps better integrating the hotel with the place where the conference is hosted. It is worth keeping in mind that a city or place, however, cannot be learned or fully appreciated in the span of a single visit. Observations like “find a location closer to/more embedded in communities affected by incarceration,” are actually quite unfair, both to the conference planners and residents of Saint Louis, given the city’s history and contemporary relationship with mass incarceration. Perhaps what many of these comments suggest is the need for conference planners to do more to expose conference participants to the relevant issues at play in the host city.
- **Not everyone loved the food.** “The quality of the food provided by this hotel was awful,” a respondent concluded. Some wanted more “meat,” while others wanted more vegetarian and vegan options. Some found the meals “repetitive,” and not accommodating to those with food allergies. In contrast, some said, “the food was exceptional!” and others praised the health-conscious choices that were made. Perhaps these conclusions are not surprising given the more than 500 that attended, but there were more negative comments about the food in 2019 than there were in 2018. A good set of guiding principles for the conference planners in the future is to prioritize quality and inclusivity in meal options, considering all kinds of dietary choices, allergies, and people! Food should also be served at accommodating heights;

participants in wheelchairs or of shorter stature should have access the same as everyone else.

- **There are still wellness options to pursue.** The 2020 conference planners, for example, might take note of the requests for outdoor runs and other group physical activities in the Exit Surveys.
- **Not all accessibility ratings earned high marks.** People noticed, for example, that there were small kids at the conference who might have been better accommodated, perhaps in the wellness room. One respondent lamented the lack of a swimming pool at the hotel.

III. Communications

Takeaway

In terms of communications, many aspects of the conference communication systems also worked really well. The exit surveys show that the vast majority of the conference respondents indicated they were “provided all the information needed” and “prior to arriving in Saint Louis.” Once more, as with other areas of feedback with this conference, survey respondents were happy with the communications channels, be they through the Alliance for Higher Education Website, emails, or on social media. Any lingering challenges with communications in 2019 seemed to be around perhaps unavoidable issues of frequency (needing more, or wanting less), channels (more social media, which platforms?), and/or around questions of depth and thoroughness—“I realize you are trying to be thorough,” one respondent noted, for example, but “Alliance emails are very long.” By and large, however, the conference’s communications systems clearly worked well. “Communication was great,” went several responses in the Exit Reports.

- **Most learned about the conference through either emails or the conference website hosted by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison.** These systems simply need to be kept active, further cultivated, and maintained. Moving forward, a good guiding set of principles for NCHEP conference planners is to produce clear, consistent, concise, and accessible communications on a variety of platforms, in as timely a manner as possible. Since starting to host the conference in 2017 the Alliance has heard feedback that information is needed earlier than it is sometimes offered. As a young organization and newly engaged with conference planning, the reminders about starting messaging earlier are valuable. It never hurts to be as transparent as possible about major decisions or conference planning milestones along the way, either. Also notable in the Exit Surveys for 2019 is the community’s usage of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter. In that order, they are the most popular platforms embraced by the conference participants.

Conference planners in 2020 would be well-served to maintain the daily (during the conference) emails. They should strive to keep the website updated (especially when it comes to the conference schedule--posting it as soon as it is available) and create a website layout that is more user-friendly than in the past. And, continue to utilize the listserv as well, especially for 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 annual NCHEP is keeping pace with relevant technology and communication trends.

- **Signs of email fatigue were fairly prominent in the 2018 Exit Survey feedback results, but they were less common in the 2019 survey results.** One explanation, perhaps, is that the Alliance and the 2019 conference planners made a concerted effort to shorten their email communications

over the past year and to also maintain space on the conference website for archiving messaging. But it is probably unrealistic--and unnecessary--to abandon email entirely. A conference this size will demand the sharing of a lot of information, along with regular updating, announcements, and sharing of resources. Clearly, many community participants rely on email as the primary way they learn about the conference. It seems clear the Alliance and the 2020 conference planners stand to benefit from a more systematic approach to its communications and messaging in the coming year, blending approaches like the website, emails, social media, and more.

Key Points

The 2020 Planning Committee can continue to make improvement on its communications related to call/submissions/and review process, particularly related to submission requirements, distribution, response timing, and transparency of process. Finally, communications can continue to be better utilized and integrated into the conference planning, hosting, and review process (on a calendar year) to better serve a fast-changing community and its fast-evolving conference.

Foundations to Build Upon

The annual NCHEP planning community can continue to cultivate its existing communications strengths.

- **The communications systems that are in place work well overall in guaranteeing an operational and overall positive conference experience.** Conference participants value and appreciate the planner's use of emails and the conference website, especially, in sharing and updating information about the conference. The 2020 conference planners should do all they can to ensure their continued cultivation, invigoration, and maintenance.
- **Networks and organizations matter (especially higher education ones) for spreading the word.** Systems like email and the Alliance for Higher Education website will remain vital to how this community organizes itself and spreads the word about its programming. It is also remains true, however, that existing higher education in prison programs continue to drive most of the knowledge and communication about the conference. Without their support, it is hard to imagine how information about the conference (or community) would spread.

Adjustments to Plan For

There are several clear and easy to accomplish opportunities for improving conference communications in advance of the 2020 conference.

- **The community's social media presence offers a clear place for continued growth and engagement.** The Alliance and the NCHEP had a fairly narrow social media presence until this most recent year (2019). With 2020, the social media presence of the HEP community can continue 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 further consider using social media as yet another 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 can still be made more printer/device friendly (until the conference has an app). It may also help 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. In fact, nearly all aspects of the conference operations run through the website and supporting emails. 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 conference attendees felt overwhelmed and would have appreciated better communication, especially regarding transportation processes.** This year, while the St. Louis Metrolink offered a cheap, reliable, and direct link from the hotel to the airport, this information was not clear or perhaps as widely shared as it could have been. Some of the respondents, for example, seemed unaware in the feedback that there was public transportation accessible between the airport and the hotel, instead opting for things like Uber or other forms of ridesharing. Those that did make their way to Metrolink generally found the system advantageous, though there was the risk of boarding a train on the wrong line, as at least one respondent unfortunately experienced. Still, conference planners should take these points seriously. Transportation is an annual point of concern in the survey feedback, and anything the planners can do to make getting to and from the conference airport easier will go a long way in making the conference a more positive experience for participants. A suggestion from the 2018 Exit Report still resonates—consider utilizing a section of the conference website called something like: “What to expect if you’re attending the conference for the first time as a formerly incarcerated participant.” This page might be especially helpful for those navigating local and national transportation networks for maybe the first time, or perhaps the first time in the conference destination, for example.
- **Planners should continue to be mindful of the volume, rate, and length/depth of detail of emailed communications.** While perhaps the frustration over the length of email communications has somewhat passed on given the Alliance’s attempts to be more concise with some of its communications, the risk of encouraging the community’s email fatigue is still a real one.
- **Planners, organizers, and participants need to better manage communications, decision-making processes, and staffing on-site during the conference.** Many participants, for example, struggled to get the help they wanted at the registration desk, coat room, 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). The interior rooms of conference hotels can also be wi-fi blackout zones or areas with limited cell reception, and so planning to communicate with one another via text or internet-based chat systems, for example, may not be possible or as efficient as one might assume.
- **In general, the call/submission/review process needs continued refining; this point also dovetails with the broader and ongoing content-related concerns of the conference.** There needs to be both more transparency and quality in the submissions, call for presentation proposals, reviewing processes, selection of proposal reviewers and more. Some participants are also frustrated with the quality of the presentations themselves at the conference. The 2020 conference planners might consider ways to therefore ensure, making interventions in the process early on, that the quality of presentations takes a dramatic step forward in 2020.

- **There needs to be better facilitation of communication prior to the conference between and among panels and moderators.** The exit surveys indicated there were again (this was also raised in 2018) persisting 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 (which will be accomplished in 2020 and then will remain a consistent location for the NCHEP).

IV. Content

Takeaway

In 2019, as with the exit surveys from 2018 and 2017, the content aspects of the conference drew a range of thoughtful and reflective commentary from participants. Again, as with much of the feedback this year, the commentary on the conference content was supportive, positive, and constructive. The Exit Survey responses suggest that while the Saint Louis NCHEP in many ways represented a step forward, the 2020 planning committee still has work to do in improving the overall quality of the content as the conference, and perhaps especially in the realm of the conference concurrent sessions.

Still, compared to the experience in 2018, there were many forward steps this year on the content front. Most conference participants in 2019, for example, both recognized and utilized the conference theme--Beyond Barriers--in their preparations and thinking. In 2018, only 29% of the Exit Survey respondents could strongly agree that the conference content helped support the theme of “Building the Movement,” and only a slim majority of the those surveyed could agree that the conference as a whole enhanced its theme. In 2019, by contrast, 75% percent of the survey respondents not only recognized the theme but integrated it more fully into their approaches and thinking. Asked whether they could strongly agree if the theme enhanced this year’s conference, respondents offered a score of 4/5. While this score puts the theme of the conference below the overall rankings of things like the conference’s logistical categories and questions, it is nonetheless strong, and shows improvement over 2018. These and other content foundations can be built upon in 2020 and are detailed more fully below.

- **Many of the content-related survey responses confirm positive findings elsewhere in this report, particularly in areas like attendance and participation.** A majority of the conference participants (54%) who completed exit surveys in 2019, for example, attended an estimated 6-15 concurrent session presentations during the course of their weekend, while a strong minority (22%) reported that they attended at least 11. A fair number (8%), meanwhile, indicated that they had attended at least 16 presentations. Given that most participants were active during every day of the conference, these clear and substantial investments in time and energy made by the conference participants speak well about the health of the community and the conference as a whole. They also underscore, along with the packed rooms, strong attendance, and positive commentary about the conference experience in general, that the 2019 NCHEP by and large offered engaging content.

What to make of the more constructive feedback within the content reviews?

Within strong and generally positive conference feedback on the conference content, there are nonetheless several participant comments that suggest the quality of the conference presentations could use some sustained attention throughout the planning process in 2020. What were there clearest areas identified for improvement as they pertain to the quality of the conference? Here are some common points of discussion:

- **Several key content-related questions remain both unanswered and up for grabs.** Several key questions for this conference remain open-ended and evolving with the field. This is both encouraging and important for the community to recognize and work through. Many of the questions first presented in the 2018 Exit Report still resonate and remain key: *Who is this conference for? Who should it serve?* How the community answers these questions moving forward will be very important. The 2020 planning community would do well to adopt a transparent and deliberative process to provide fuller and more transparent answers to these questions in the coming year.
- **The community could use some help in thinking through the conference theme and its importance, both for the conference itself, and to setting the agenda for the broader field year-to-year.** While most participants recognize that the conference theme serves a variety of functions, including a host of very practical ones during the paper call, submission, and review process, some community participants remain unconvinced that a theme is necessary or even all that useful. Some, for example, urged in their feedback that the theme only limits the discussion, forcing (for example) arbitrary parameters around what should be an open-ended and evolving discussion. That is certainly one risk with adopting a conference theme. But a well-utilized and integrated theme can also be a powerful tool for enhancing the overall quality of the conference. It can, for example, set the agenda for the conversation, ideally promoting a much higher and sustained level of inquiry around a high-stakes problem or question. It can add nuance and perspective to things that the community finds divisive or is struggling to come to terms with. A well-chosen theme can also be a very practical forward step for the conference planners—particularly as the conference gets bigger and bigger, the theme discussion can be used to better understand where proposals are coming from and why, as proposals that do not engage the theme of the conference (for instance) may be ones that are also not really engaged with the field or active in the current conversations.
 - **Conference participants are already thinking about some theme ideas for next year.** Common words and phrases that appeared in the recommended theme discussions for 2020 included: “collaboration,” “values in theory and practice,” “self-care,” “sustainability,” “centering students,” “abolition,” and “transitioning out.” Many ideas are clearly still in development, and this is not doubt a selective list, but planners might note their presence and consider ways to better foreground the theme discussion that will come early on in the process for next year’s planning committee.
- **The Conference Tracks served their purpose, but many of the conference tracks remain under-utilized and under-engaged by the community.** One conference track, “Collaborations and Partnerships: Working Across Campus, Corrections, and/or the Community,” for example, drew the overwhelming amount of attention from survey respondents, as 78% of the Exit Surveys listed it as the conference track that best reflected their interests at the conference. The rest, however, drew comparatively very little attention, and one—the “politics of higher education in prison”—only drew two recognitions from the surveys, or less than 2% of the total surveys offered. On the one hand, this evidence shows that the problem and challenge of collaborations and partnerships is something of a “hot topic” right now in the field and suggests these conversations should continue. On the other hand, the evidence shows that necessary discussions about things like politics, equity, policy, the higher education in prison landscape, student voices, and pedagogy, for example, are at risk of being marginalized in people’s thinking and approaches.

- **The Keynote and Plenary Sessions are raising some high stakes planning questions.** By and large, survey responses to the Keynote and Plenary Sessions this year were positive, even enthusiastic. People seem to be thinking about 2020 in terms of a “bigger ticket” set of keynote speakers, or names that could potentially draw a lot of attention to the conference and the field. Names like Michelle Alexander, Ruth Gilmore, Lynn Novick, and Ken Burns turned up as recommendations for next year’s speakers, for example. The selection of a keynote speaker (or speakers) for the conference is a fairly hi-stakes one, and again gets us back to some basic questions—who is this conference for? Who should it serve? The planning committee in 2020 might note that conference participants would like to see a higher-profile name in some of the keynote positions. At the same time, other community members are worried that these options might eclipse space, for example, for people formerly incarcerated and/or presenters that are doing central work in the field of higher education in prison.

- **Conference planners will be looking for more high-quality special events to make their conference experience even more memorable.** Within the 2019 Exit Surveys, the special events at the Saint Louis conference enjoyed high ratings, earning a 3.8/5, with most people strongly agreeing that the “special events were valuable” to their conference experience. But against the other measurements generated within the surveys (on matters like logistics and communications, for example) the special events ratings were among the lowest offered. This should not discourage the planning committee members charged with Special Events planning in the coming year, however. If anything, the ratings are a sign that there’s momentum building around these conference aspects, and that with some creativity and innovation, the special events planned to supplement and enrich the conference will become some of the most popular and cherished components of the annual NCHEP.
 - **The 2019 conference featured several special events—a film screening, a lunchtime walking tour of a nearby historic site, an open mic night, a wellness workshop, a yoga session, and more. As these offerings stand to become both more numerous and diverse in the future, they will need to be better messaged and marketed.** In their feedback for 2019, many participants noted that they found themselves either too busy with other things to take advantage of the special events offerings or did not fully appreciate these things were being offered in the first place. Many more remain skeptical that these events benefit the overall conference experience or enrich the conference theme and broader conversations, a point that underscores the importance of keeping the conference theme and field discussions in mind when special events are being planned. Planners can certainly better message and advertise the special events offerings in the future, and stress (for example) the importance of participant wellness as being firmly in line with the promotion of a strong conference experience overall. Many aspects of this conference generated strong statements of appreciation and thankfulness in the feedback. There does seem to be growing traction, for example, not only for continued yoga sessions and wellness workshops, for example, but perhaps opportunities for more outdoor activities, such as group runs or even an NCHP 5k at some point during one of the conference mornings. One participant, for example, expressed regret that excellent running paths existed very close to the hotel (along the Mississippi River and the base of the Arch) but that the entire conference passed without this knowledge being made widely available.

**Figure A.
Submissions and Acceptances to the 2019 NCHEP**

#	Description/Notes
133	Presentation submissions made to the 2019 NCHEP Conference
81 ¹⁵	Overall submissions accepted. Submissions were accepted as panels, individual papers, workshops, as posters, and more.
60%	2019 Submissions Acceptance Rate
43	All Submissions to Conference Track “Collaborations and Partnerships”
23	Acceptances to Conference Track “Collaborations and Partnerships”
32	All submissions to Conference Track “In the Classroom”
16	Acceptances to Conference Track “In the Classroom”
17	All submissions Conference Track “Equity and Policy in Practice”
13	Acceptances to Conference Track “Equity and Policy in Practice”
15	All submissions to Conference Track “Elevating Voices”
11	Acceptances to Conference Track “Elevating Voices”
15	All submissions to Conference Track “Surveying the Landscape”
10	Acceptances to Conference Track “Surveying the Landscape”
11	All submissions to Conference Track “The Politics of Higher Education in Prison”
8	Accepted submissions to Conference Track “The Politics of Higher Education in Prison”
60	All submissions by Emerging Scholars ¹⁶
27 (45% acceptance rate)	All accepted submissions by Emerging Scholars

Key Points

The 2020 conference presents an important opportunity to build upon and better refine the quality of the presentations made at the annual National Conference for Higher Education in Prison.

Foundations to Build Upon

¹⁵ Not all accepted submissions were presented at the 2019 NCHEP, as some submitters later declined their acceptance.

¹⁶ We define “Emerging Scholars” as anyone who is new to scholarship, conference attendance, or presentation in a venue like this one. It may also include anyone else considering themselves in need of support in advance of presenting at the NCHEP.

When it comes to assessing the content areas of the conference, it is important to remember that many things did go right in 2019. While the content of the presentations overall can use some room for improvement, these areas continue to provide a foundation from which to build upon.

- **The theme discussion is building momentum.** Buy-in and appreciation for theme as a conversation starter and agenda setter is growing. It is beginning to be recognized and utilized in thinking and conversations, and soon can be powerful for setting the agenda for the field.
- **Participants generally find the topics covered and the formats used in presentations engaging and meaningful.** Most people find the topics at the conference relevant and engaging. In terms of format, people also appreciate that the panels and sessions can be creative in how they approach their problems, discussions, and research questions.
- **Skype and other “live” streaming formats are making the sessions more interactive, inclusive, dynamic, and engaging.** The 2020 planning committee should work to ensure that the conference session spaces can be utilized to host these kinds of events. Balanced with this goal should be a clearer sense as to what makes these practices valuable and effective, so that proposals and speakers best-utilize the live streams. Cost is also a factor here—conference hotels equipped with hi-speed wireless internet are going to be necessary moving forward.
- **The conference tracks discussions are making it clear that words like “collaboration” and “partnerships” are some of the most active and engaging in the field right now.** By far, the “collaborations and partnerships” track generated the most attention in the survey feedback.
- **The conference’s special events are helping enliven the conference culture and experience.** This year’s special events—including the 2nd annual open mic night and a lunchtime walking tour of the nearby “Old Courthouse”—also scored high with participants, earning a 3.8/5. The Open Mic night, in particular, is fast becoming a conference hallmark. “The open mic night was life changing,” one respondent noted. Others thanked the conference planners for their thoughtfulness in planning a visit to the Courthouse. The “courthouse is an incredible piece of U.S. history directly related to our work,” a participant noted, while others simply appreciated the chance it offered to get outside, go for a walk, and enjoy some necessary downtime. The events proved so popular, in fact, that several of the comments urged they be included not just next year, but for the foreseeable future in the conference planning. “Another historical location is an absolute must,” read one survey, while another expressed the view that the open mic night might just be the best thing about the annual conference. Whether you agree with that statement or not, it seems clear that the special events are doing good things for the conference experience, and that planners would do well to integrate not only more such events but seek out ways of making the existing ones better-quality as well.
- **Networking works.** The networking opportunities at the conference remained strong and scored high, earning a 4.2/5 on the 2019 exit surveys. The more the community can do to provide sustained and meaningful opportunities for the community the better. The conference can annually provide such opportunities by foregrounding structured networking events, putting an emphasis (perhaps) on areas of common ground or common connection within the community (creating opportunities for people to network at the regional and state levels, for example), and by ensuring that there’s at least some down time accessible at the

conference. Many people network at the conference when there are opportunities to, and too rigorous and approach in scheduling can mean a lack of necessary down time.

- **The keynote, plenary, and concurrent sessions drew large attendance and spurred robust discussions.**

Adjustments to Plan For

Even with the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the 2019 conference, there are several adjustments to make on content issues in the planning committee for 2020.

- **Steps can be taken to improve the overall quality of the conference.** The planning process for 2020 might focus especially on the call, submission, and review process to ensure higher-quality submissions earlier in the process. This will also help ensure that moderators and others involved in the panels will have better experiences commenting upon and engaging with submitted works. Similarly, the decisions surrounding the selection of a keynote speaker(s) for the conference are important and also fairly hi-stakes, creating many opportunities for improving the quality of the conference—and the field—moving forward.
- **Several logistical points with the conference sessions need to be addressed.** Much of the feedback in 2019 highlighted concerns around things like starting on time, papers going beyond their stated length, and moderators not having time to review papers or formulate thoughts on submissions prior to the conference. Relatedly, it makes sense for the conference planners to be mindful of the steps that might be productively taken to shorten the length of some of the submitted and delivered papers at the conference, as well as strategies that might be pursued to help presenters with the difficult work of giving an effective presentation while, at the same time, engaging audiences.
- **Breadth of community coverage and recognition.** The inclusivity of the conference is always an important relevant concern each year. Planners should strive to make sure that all members of the higher education in prison community are considered and made to feel welcome at the conference and should consider ways to insure greater inclusivity, particularly of voices/experience/expertise that are often marginalized – people formerly incarcerated, people of color, women, LGBTQ and transgender community members.
- **Create more space for complex and challenging conversations.** While the overall spirit of the 2019 was notably more collegial, this does not mean that significant challenges still face the higher education in prison community. In part, how and when to discuss relevant challenges (e.g., language use, lack of representation for formerly incarcerated people in program leadership and predatory programming practices) need to find more/larger space at the conference.
- **Better-utilized conference tracks.** Conference planners have identified several conference “tracks” that together ought to encapsulate virtually every major important discussion held in this field. Yet in 2019, only one of those tracks— “collaborations and partnerships”— seemed to really energize the conference participants as something near and dear to their interests. For the field to continue to grow and thrive, curiosity about the breadth of the field will need to be energized, and questions broadened in turn.
- **More special events, more quality in special events.** The conference planners made several important forward steps with this year’s special events planning. There’s more to be done, however, not only in terms of more events, but higher-quality ones. Important spaces like the open mic, for example, need continued attention and care. They’re becoming near

and dear to what this conference means. These events are also helping make the conference unique and memorable to conference participants and provides an important public experience of collective sharing.

- **The formation of cliques and special interests.** While the networking opportunities at the annual NCHEP have been historically strong and rewarding, there is a risk with any large community that special interests and what some respondents described as “cliques” will form. To mitigate against these unfortunate tendencies, the NCHEP planners can take confidence in knowing that many things are already working well in terms of networking at the conference. But to “Get people out of their cliques,” as one respondent noted, the existing spaces can be better utilized and structured to create better, more structured and sustained networking opportunities. Networking opportunities need to be better incorporated into the conference schedule and treated as an equally valuable opportunity for resource and information sharing (on par with the breakout sessions). Spaces like the meals, for example, should be emphasized and supported as networking opportunities. Conference planners might consider offering participants a list of ice-breaker questions they can use when they sit down with strangers, for example.

V. Cost and Financial Aid

The 2019 Exit Surveys revealed that despite the conference moving forward with its first-ever implementation of a registration fee, most conference participants considered the Saint Louis experience both affordable and accessible. The decision to move toward a required registration fee for the 2019 conference grew from long-range concerns highlighted in the 2018 Exit Report, which raised points about the long-term cost and sustainability of the conference and the ability of the Alliance to continue hosting the event without some contribution from participants.¹⁷ Even with this decision, however, most participants found the cost of the conference to be reasonable. In their Exit Reports, for example, the roughly 75% of NCHEP conference goers who also attend other professional or academic conferences throughout the year indicated that by and large, the NCHEP conference was basically on par in terms of its registration fee with other conferences. Asked to comment on the cost of the conference, for example, a third indicated that the NCHEP registration fee was roughly equal to what other conferences had asked in 2019 for a registration fee, and while the other two-thirds were divided—one third saying the NCHEP was “more expensive” than other conferences, and the other third saying the NCHEP was “less expensive” than other comparable conferences.

- **Financial Aid Packages Helped Boost the Participation of the Formerly Incarcerated.** Meanwhile, it is important to note that many formerly incarcerated participants at the conference specifically noted that the Alliance’s financial aid packages, assembled from a \$115,000¹⁸ pre-conference development effort led by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and its Advisory Board, as crucial and even deciding factors in their abilities attend and participate in the conference. “I am incredibly grateful to have had it made available for me,” a participant noted. Overall, 277 conference participants in 2019 applied for financial aid help—in terms of both financial aid packages and registration fee waivers (some applying for both)—prior to the conference. In the end, the Alliance and its Advisory Board were able to extend 49 full financial aid packages and 116 registration fee waivers. As in years past, the vast majority of the financial aid packages went to formerly incarcerated people. Combined between financial aid waivers and financial aid packages, 74 people formerly incarcerated received some kind of substantial financial help with the conference.

¹⁷ Jesse Gant and Mary Gould, “2018 Exit Report,” Section 6, Cost and Scholarships, 24-25.

¹⁸ \$95,000 raised to support financial aid and fee waivers and \$20,000 raised in general sponsorship funding.

Respondents to the exit surveys also indicated that the financial aid packages, by and large, provided support for the full cost of the conference, including registration, transportation, hotel, and all meals for the duration of the conference. Any extra costs taken on by financial aid recipients (and there were some small costs, largely related to transportation to and from the airport) had been submitted to the reimbursement process by the time this Exit Report was drafted.

Key Points

Affordable and accessible for many participants, the 2019 NCHEP continued the conference's track record of keeping financial hardships at bay for a key constituency of its participants, even as it moved toward its first-ever application of a conference registration fee. At the same time, the Alliance and its Advisory Board realize the real burden that conference participation can have on individuals and organizations and the difficult situation posed by professional development opportunities – while they are important, they are also costly. The careful and thoughtful application and administration of a financial aid process, meanwhile, particularly for formerly incarcerated members, also proved important in determining whether or not formerly incarcerated participants were able to attend the conference. The continued economic sustainability of the conference remains an issue, however, and will require the community to come to some creative and community-focused solutions. The continued participation of many formerly incarcerated people at the conference will also be in many ways linked to this continued support.

Foundations to Build Upon

It is crucial for the broader higher education in prison community, including its funders, to retain their commitments to providing an affordable, accessible, and hi-quality conference that can continue helping to build and sustain this community's long-range sustained energy and growth.

- **Most participants found the conference to be both affordable and accessible in terms of overall cost, even as the conference moved to its first ever usage of a registration fee.** For a community widespread financial insecurity and experiencing real hardship, the low cost of attending the annual NCHEP conference remains one of the conference's great successes. It is also necessary to continue pursuing more ways to subsidize and reduce the cost for all participants.
- **Financial Aid awards continue to be an important determinant (and aid) in conference participation, particularly for formerly incarcerated participants.** Even a quick scan of the exit survey results reveals that for many conference goers, the availability of financial support is often the determining factor in whether or not a person decides to attend and participate in the conference.
- **The Alliance has earned respect for its commitment to easing the financial burden the conference imposes upon participants.** Participants appreciate 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, including annual registration fees, will 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 continued adjustments to the financial model of the conference will be for the good of the conference and the #highereducationinprison community long-term.
- **Funders need to continue to be engaged in helping to alleviate the financial hardship of conference attendance.** The higher education in prison community can contribute to

helping educate funders to the importance and value of the NCHEP and challenge conventional notions in philanthropy that conferences are “one-time engagements” with little long-term outcomes. The NCHEP (and higher education in prison community) can help to reverse this “mindset” but conveying the value of networking and educational opportunities presented at the national conference and the long-term value of these experiences long after the end of the conference.

Adjustments to Plan For

It is not cheap to host a national conference. Steps need to be taken to ensure the long-range sustainability of the conference and the higher education in prison community.

- **The cost of the conference remains high, and the continued costs associated with hosting it risks undermining the participation of formerly incarcerated people and current students.** It remains admirable, but also highly unusual, for a national conference of this size to provide all-inclusive financial aid packages and registration fee waivers to large members of its community and a conference experience that hosts all meals, for all participants. Organizations can help by continuing to include conference participation as a line item in their budgets and continue to educate funders about the importance of conference attendance as professional development, especially for formerly incarcerated staff and program alumni.
- **Participants are investing in the work of better understanding the costs associated with hosting the conference, and the plusses and minuses of literally every component and decision made at the conference. But the problem of limited resources is real.** The 2020 planning committee should strive to keep the costs of the conference as low as possible, so as to ensure the continued participation of those with financial need, and from across the higher education in prison community. The Alliance should continue to maintain transparency around the costs of the conference, prior to and following the event (most notably in the form of the Exit Report Executive Summary) and posted on the Alliance’s website.
- **The demand for financial aid awards continues to outpace their availability.** As in 2018, there were more than a 100 financial aid requests from community members that went unfunded and that number increased to 111 in 2019. With the number of applications for aid packages both a reliable and steady component of the conference planning, it is imperative that financial aid be made available to the members of the community who need it the most—the conference’s formerly incarcerated participants. But there are broad financial needs across the higher education landscape, including graduate students, adjunct and contingent instructors, community college instructors and staff, research communities, department of corrections workers, and of course more.
- **The 2019 conference largely mitigated the problem of “surprise” costs, but incidental costs and hiccups with things like transportation, the registration process or hotel-check in process can be very stressful.** Most of the issues this year proved fairly easy to fix; an Uber ride here, a missed train there, a room charged to the wrong organizational credit card account. The Alliance also worked in the days following the conference to ensure that these costs were put into a sweeping and comprehensive reimbursement process, and for the most part, these efforts seemed effective. But 2020 conference planners should do whatever they can to ensure that those experiencing financial precarity have a way to participate in the conference with as few economic surprises as possible and should consider

ways to continue to mitigate “surprise” costs (e.g., platforms for ride and room shares and considering ways to lessen the cost of transportation from the airport to the hotel).

Conclusion

The 2019 NCHEP held in Saint Louis, Missouri, November 14-17, 2019, provided compelling evidence of a strong, stabilizing, and forward-looking higher education in prison community. There are many strong foundations to continue building from (along with ongoing adjustments to make) in anticipation of the 2020 conference. While there were many aspects of the conference worth celebrating, such as the record-setting attendance, collegial atmosphere and the new and continued success of many conference special events (including the open mic night), there were also clear concerns that developed and that are in need of thoughtful attention moving into 2020, including improvements to the quality of presentations and sessions, creating more networking opportunities, and continued attention to the cost and sustainability of the NCHEP. Not all aspects of this successful conference worked perfectly, and there are challenges to confront with community-wide humility moving forward.

APPENDIX

NCHEP 2020 Tips for Conference Planners

In its commitments to equity, excellence, and access, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison again offers these suggestions to the 2020 NCHEP conference planners and planning committee as it considers next year's NCHEP planning process. Please take this list of recommendations as a further indication of the seriousness with which we approach the exit survey feedback each year.

Figure A: 2020 Conference Planning Big Picture Priorities (in this order)

Content (Breakout Sessions, Keynote and Plenary Sessions)

Each year, the question of the content of the conference presents a wide array of large and often complex questions. As with 2017, 2018, and 2019, the quality of the conference content is again the main priority for the 2020 conference.

Communications/Messaging

Communications and messaging concerns are always going to be deeply related to and interconnected with the content of the conference. It makes sense, then, that these areas (including social media, the Alliance website, email, and more) would rank as the second-highest priority for 2020.

Emerging Scholars

It is the community's broad network of emerging scholars—a tremendously diverse group—that ultimately creates and delivers the content for the annual conference. We define "Emerging Scholars" as anyone who is new to scholarship, conference attendance or presentation or anyone else considering themselves in need of support in advance of presenting at the NCHEP. Again, inextricable from the content priorities for the 2020 planners, the community's emerging scholars are a major priority this year.

Cost and Financial Aid

A growing community means greater demands in terms of cost. To ensure the sustainability of the conference, and to uphold the Alliance's commitments to equity, excellence, and broad access, cost and financial aid concerns are a major priority for the upcoming year.

Special Events

The 2020 conference is in a great position to benefit from an expanded slate of special events offerings. Fairly recent additions to the conference, such as the open mic night, have been tremendously popular. It is time to make the conference's special events even more vital to the conference experience.

Logistics

The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison has established a strong track record the past several years in hosting and administering an A-rate conference. Conference logistics, however, must remain a priority because they are essential for the conference to work.

Attendance and Participation

And last but not least, ensuring strong conference attendance and participation remains a priority for 2020, as well. As the community grows, and grows fast, new risks and potential downsides emerge and increase.

Fig. B
Concrete Suggestions for 2020 Conference Planners

Content (Breakout, Keynote and Plenary Sessions)

1. Prioritize setting a strong planning agenda through the early selection of a meaningful and relatable conference theme
2. Use a more robust call, submission, and review process to ensure high quality and relevant presentations
3. Limit the amount of submissions from a single individual and/or program
4. Help presenters in their efforts to start sessions on time, remain within time limits, and better collaborate with moderators/other panelists
5. Create an application system for submissions reviewers
6. Support presenters in their efforts to develop presentations (especially submissions with an Emerging Scholars designation)
7. Stress the important of engagement between presenters and panel/session chairs in advance of the conference
8. Create clearly articulated recommendations for session chairs/facilitators on how to succeed in their role
9. Ensure that formerly incarcerated people are centered in the conference's main sessions (Keynote and Plenary)
10. Provide more opportunities for the HEP community to provide input, feedback, and ideas on speakers and sessions well in advance of the conference
11. Maintain the conference commitment to diversity and inclusion
12. Continue centering and uplifting the voices of the formerly incarcerated
13. Continue to create space for important conversations for the field, particular to topics related to equity, inclusivity and other complex topics that should be addressed by the entire community
14. Better interweave local connections at the conference—consider using representatives of local communities relative to each year's conference location
15. Incorporate more “how-to” Workshops (training and support opportunities) into the conference schedule

Communications/Messaging

1. Make the conference website easier to navigate
2. Have an app for the conference schedule
3. Livestream all Plenary and Keynote sessions
4. Create more materials/resources related to inclusivity (e.g., creating inclusive presentations; inclusive/human-centered language; statement on collegiality)
5. Announce and promote Keynote and Plenary Sessions in advance of registration
6. Continue to streamline messaging (esp. email)
7. Create more opportunities to give feedback throughout the conference
8. Take more advantage of the Alliance's growing social media presence (e.g., NCHEP Private Facebook group)

Emerging Scholars

1. Provide more guidance on how to prepare a conference submission
2. Provide resources on how to present at a conference
3. Have multiple ways to receive support (written guides, on-site support, calls in advance of the conference)

Cost and Financial Aid

1. Generate more financial aid and fee waiver funds
2. Open up opportunities to apply for “hotel” or “travel” reimbursement only
3. Add “room share” to the already established “ride share” opportunity on the NCHPEP Facebook account (private group)
4. Start messaging registration and registration fees earlier so programs can budget accordingly

Special Events

1. Better interweave local connections at the conference—consider using representatives of local communities relative to each year’s conference location
2. Design a “closing activity” for the conference to help participants transition away from the conference
3. Continue to center a connection to the host city/state (as related to mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, and/or higher education in prison)
4. Offer at least one “outdoor” group physical activity for conference participants
5. Continue to host Open Mic Night

Logistics

1. Incorporate networking opportunities (and more of them) directly into the conference schedule (during breakout sessions)
 - a. Community Colleges
 - b. New/Emerging Programs
 - c. Regional Groups
 - d. Statewide Groups
 - e. Faith-based Programs
 - f. Jail Programs
2. Clearly mark the hours of the Registration Table, Exhibit Hall and Wellness Room (on signage throughout the conference).
3. Provide more resources about the host city/state and key points of interest within the city
4. Consider creating resources pages on the conference website:
 - a. “What to expect if you’re attending the conference for the first time”
5. Provide very detailed overviews of how to get from the airport to the conference hotel

Attendance and Participation

1. Ensure that attendance continues to represent the vast diversity of the field of higher education in prison
2. Create more opportunities for networking and collaboration
3. Ensure that new members of the community/conference have access to information and resources in advance of the conference to help them learn more about the event
4. Distribute a conference participant email list in advance of the conference

THANK YOU FOR READING

Thank you for reading the 2019 Exit Report. We hope that you will continue to provide feedback and engage in conversations about the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison, the work of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, and the community of higher education in prison more generally.

We invite you to provide your comments, ideas, and feedback on this report here on our [website](http://www.higheredinprison.org) (www.higheredinprison.org).

We also invite you to participate in a series of upcoming conversations about the Exit Report, with details to be announced soon on our website and mailing list.