

*Equity and Excellence in Practice:  
A Guide for Higher Education in Prison*

Discussion Guide and Instructions



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# Discussion Guide and Instructions

## *Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison*

Thank you for your interest in a discussion of the report *Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison*. This report is the first comprehensive report written by practitioners to share recommendations for higher education in prison programs. Published in 2019 by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance) in collaboration with Prison University Project and with support from Lumina Foundation, the report draws on lessons learned from existing programs offering post-secondary education in prison settings. It provides a clear and specific summary of what the authors believe are the most essential components of high quality in-prison higher education programs that uphold a commitment to equity, excellence and access and presents many of the challenges that higher education in prison programs face each day. As a community of practice, we all can improve if we engage in co-learning opportunities like this discussion.

### **Your ideas matter to us and will shape future uses of this report**

The Alliance intends to use the *Equity and Excellence* report as a blueprint for its future work. As the organization matures, it plans to provide more extensive support to new and existing programs and to the field as a whole. To this end, the Alliance is inviting program leaders, students, partners and supporters throughout the United States to engage in structured discussions about the report itself, inviting new voices and perspectives to the ongoing evolution of the report and its recommendations, with a goal of growing the field of higher education in prison and improving the quality of existing and emerging programs. As a community of practice, we all can improve if we engage in co-learning opportunities like this discussion.

### **How to use this discussion guide**

This discussion guide is a useful tool for facilitators leading thoughtful conversations about the content in the report, and for note takers seeking to capture important ideas and action items. You'll find questions, materials and guidelines as well as instructions and tips for both facilitators and note takers. The purpose of the discussion guide is to: create a dialogue among people who care about improving equity, access and excellence in higher education in prison programs. Staff and program administrators can use this discussion guide to:

- Discuss opportunities and talk with students and other stakeholders about your program and higher education in prison, more broadly.
- Support efforts to continuously improve the *Equity and Excellence in Practice* report.
- Guide the ongoing work of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison.

The discussion guide ends with an invitation to share your feedback with the Alliance in an effort to help improve our programming efforts.



# Instructions for Facilitators

These discussion groups are designed to gather feedback about the *Equity and Excellence* report from students, program administrators, community and corrections partners, and other stakeholders. Their main purpose is to help the Alliance determine how best to support higher education in prison programs and advance access, excellence and equity across the field.

## *General Recommendations*

1. Discussion groups can be any size. However, in order to ensure everyone has an opportunity to actively participate, we recommend groups of 20 or fewer. The discussion guide offers recommendations for individual, small group and larger group discussions.
2. In an effort to avoid interpersonal dynamics that might inhibit constructive feedback from students, we recommend that corrections administrators or program directors do not lead discussion groups. We recommend that people in leadership positions either serve as note takers or as discussion participants, and that the discussion leader be someone with facilitation and/or teaching experience who does not currently hold a senior leadership position within the program or facility. Discussion groups should (ideally) engage multiple program stakeholders, including a combination of current students, program alumni, board members, funders, teachers, DOC administrators, etc.
3. Discussions should last approximately 90 minutes.
4. Assign a note taker (who is not the facilitator or a participant) in advance.
5. Emphasize confidentiality and inclusivity throughout the discussion. Though none of the questions are specifically about people's individual experiences, it is important that participants feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and know that their information will be kept confidential by the discussion group leader and other participants. Students might feel inhibited by the presence of corrections staff and/or program administrators or program leadership; if there is any sense that retribution against students cannot be prevented, the program should consider not hosting a public discussion, using only the individual and/or small group feedback worksheet, and/or limiting the size and scope of the discussion group. This decision should be at the discretion of the program's leadership team.
6. Emphasize to participants that there is no right or wrong answer to any question, and that they are not required to participate.
7. Remind participants to review the Introduction of the *Equity and Excellence* report —specifically, that no program is achieving all of the ideals set forth in the report and that its purpose is to encourage the community of stakeholders to work together to improve the quality of programs and address challenges.
8. Try to ensure participation from everyone in the room. This may mean drawing out participants who are less likely to speak out and creating space for all participants to engage.

## ***Material Requirements***

In preparation, distribute printed copies of the full *Equity and Excellence* report to students and other participants in advance of the discussion group. Printed copies can be requested 3-4 weeks in advance from the Alliance (alliance@higheredinprison.org) or can be downloaded for distribution (higheredinprison.org).

The day of the discussion group, please have the following materials on hand:

- One printed copy of the Discussion Group Sign-in Sheet (included in the Appendix).
- Printed copies of “Equity and Excellence Discussion Group: Information for Participants” (pages 17-18 of this packet, one for each participant).
- Two copies of the Student Feedback and Discussion Guide for Facilitators (this packet) for both the facilitator and the note taker.
- Printed Discussion Group Note Taking Form (pages 11-16 of this packet) and pen for the note taker.
- Refreshments, if possible.

## ***Participant Welcome***

Distribute copies of the “Equity and Excellence Discussion Group: Information for Participants” (pages 17-18 of this packet). Pass around the Sign-In sheet (people should not be required to include their names for the purposes of this activity, but should indicate their role in/engagement with higher education in prison). If the program or facility needs students to sign in, please use a separate form.

*“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this discussion group. We are very interested in your feedback and response to the Equity and Excellence report.”*

## ***Context and Background***

- *“We’re here today to discuss the Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison report, published in 2019 by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance) in collaboration with Prison University Project and with support from Lumina Foundation. The Equity and Excellence report draws on lessons learned from existing programs offering post-secondary education in prison settings. It provides a clear and specific summary of what the authors believe are the most essential components of high quality in-prison higher education programs that uphold a commitment to equity, excellence and access. The Report is intended to support programs, funders, and partners in higher education in prison to strive for equity and excellence as programs and the field at large continue to evolve and mature.”*



- *The Alliance is inviting input from programs, students, funders and partners across the nation to continually evolve and improve the Report itself, as well as leverage this report as a blueprint for the Alliance’s ongoing work to better support higher education in prison programs and the field at large.”*

## Consent to Participate

- *“We will make every effort to ensure the information you provide in today’s discussion group remains confidential. Your name will not be associated with anything you say here. The information collected today will be used directly by our program for planning and improvement purposes. As well, feedback will be conveyed to the Alliance to inform its own strategic priorities and work going forward.*
- *Participation in this discussion group is voluntary. Nothing you say in this discussion will have any impact on your personal program involvement (grades, employment, etc.). You may choose not to answer any question or remain silent during any part or all of the discussion.*
- *If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me, or I would be happy to either put you in touch with a staff member from the Alliance or convey your questions to the organization.”*

## Logistics and Ground Rules

- *“Now that you have an overview of the discussion, let’s get started!*
- *The discussion will last about 90 minutes and will include open-ended questions related to the Equity and Excellence report.*
- *We are trying to learn from you, so your participation is important. We are not trying to get everyone to agree or come to consensus—we just want to hear your perspective and feedback. Hearing a variety of perspectives will be more beneficial to our efforts to continue to improve our programming.*
- *There are a few ground rules to help us stay on task:*
  - *We want everyone to have an opportunity to participate. If you are someone who doesn’t usually speak up, you may need to step forward today to share your thoughts. If you are someone who is comfortable sharing your thoughts broadly, you may need to self-monitor and allow space for everyone’s voice to be heard.*
  - *Please keep information shared by everyone today confidential.*
  - *Stay with the group conversation; please avoid side conversations.*
  - *Value everyone’s contribution; there are no right or wrong answers here today.*
- *Any questions before we begin? Any other ground rules to add?*

# Discussion Worksheet: Individual and Small Group Activity

We recommend having time for individuals to write responses to questions and then break out into small groups. After the small group, we recommend a discussion with the entire group. All three are useful as they produce different types of responses and information. If you have 90 minutes, we recommend engaging in all three types of discussions (individual, small group and large group).

Use the discussion worksheet below in advance of the broader group conversation. Identify one facilitator (and ask him/her/they to follow the protocol outlined in the section above) and at least one note taker (to follow the protocol outlined in the following section). If your group does not have time to engage in individual and/or small group conversations, you can simply use the discussion questions as a large group and skip the individual and small group conversations.

A. Distribute the Discussion Worksheet with the following instructions:

1. *We will use this worksheet as a way to structure some of our conversation and to give each person time to think individually about the Equity and Excellence report, as well as in small groups.*
2. *Following the individual and small group work sessions, we will get back together as a larger group and discuss these questions together.*
3. *Please do not include your name at the top of the worksheet.*

B. Distribute the Worksheet with the following instructions:

1. *Individually, think about how you would answer the questions marked “individual feedback”. You can write your answers directly into the worksheet.*

Give the group ~10 minutes to answer the questions.

C. Once 10-15 minutes has passed, ask everyone in the group to find two-three other people near them and provide the following instructions:

1. *As a small group, work together to answer the questions marked “small group discussion”. Each member of the group can track the responses in their own worksheet.*

Give the small groups another 10-15 minutes to answer the questions.

Once 10-15 minutes has passed, reconvene the full group and discuss the responses to the questions as a group. Try to give each group (and individuals) an opportunity to provide feedback and join the conversation.







## Discussion Questions Worksheet: Small Group Questions

In a group of 3-4 people, discuss your answers to the following questions and have each person individually make notes on his/her/their own worksheet. When you have completed the worksheet return to the larger group for a full discussion of all of the questions.

1. Based on the recommendations in the report, what feedback would you have for your own higher education in prison program? What elements of the report, if any, would you encourage your program to prioritize?
2. What, if anything, stood out to you as missing from the report?
3. Who do you think is the most important audience for the report and why?
4. Do you have any additional feedback to share?



## Full Group Discussion Questions

1. What were your general reactions to reading the report?
2. What questions did the report raise for you?
3. Based upon your reading of the report, which sections or ideas do you think would be particularly useful for each of the following groups and why:
  - a. Instructors and faculty
  - b. Program directors
  - c. DOC officials
  - d. Funders, donors and/or grant makers
  - e. General public
4. Based on the recommendations in the report, what feedback would you have for your own higher education in prison program? What elements of the report, if any, would you encourage your program to prioritize?
5. What if anything stood out as missing from the report?
6. Who do you think is the most important audience for the report and why?
7. Do you have additional feedback to share?

# Instructions for Note Takers

Please ensure a dedicated note taker is available to record the discussion using the form below. Note the following suggestions:

1. Clarity and consistency are key. Remember that you and others who were not part of the group will reference these notes weeks after the discussion is over.
2. If you hear an idea or receive feedback that seems inconsistent or confusing during the discussion, ask for clarification before the group moves on.
3. Review notes immediately after the discussion group for clarity and thoroughness.
4. If possible, try to verify quotes with participants before the end of the session.
5. Please type discussion group notes into the Note Taking Form (next page).
6. Submit completed, typed notes, along with copies of the individual student worksheets, to the Alliance at [alliance@prisonhighered.org](mailto:alliance@prisonhighered.org).

## *Types of information to include in the notes:*

1. Quotes – These are well-stated sentences or phrases that illustrate an important point of view because they are enlightening or eloquently expressed.
2. Key points and themes for each question – These will likely be identified by several different participants, or by a single participant in such a manner that deserves attention.
3. Non-verbal cues from participants – Note any non-verbal cues such as head nodding, laughter, discomfort or pauses.
4. Big ideas, hunches or thoughts of the note taker – As the note taker, if you have a realization, idea, insight, question or ah-hah moment, include that in the notes.



# Discussion Group Note Taking Form

Q1. What were your general reactions to reading the report?

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

Q2. What questions did the report raise for you?

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

Q3. Based on your reading of the report, which sections or ideas do you think would be particularly useful for each of the following groups and why:

a. Instructors and faculty

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

b. Program directors

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes



c. DOC officials

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

d. Philanthropic donors and grant makers

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

e. General public

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

Q4. Based on the report, what feedback would you have for your own higher education in prison program? What elements of the report, if any, would you encourage your program to prioritize?

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes





Q5. What if anything stood out as missing from the report?

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

Q6. Who do you think is the most important audience for the report and why?

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes

Q7. Do you have additional feedback to share?

Summary/Main Points/General Themes	Notable Quotes



# Equity and Excellence Discussion Group: Information for Participants

## *About the Equity and Excellence Report*

*Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison* is the first comprehensive report written by practitioners to share recommendations for higher education in prison programs. Published in 2019 by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance) in collaboration with Prison University Project and with support from Lumina Foundation, the report draws on lessons learned from existing programs offering post-secondary education in prison settings. It provides a clear and specific summary of what the authors believe are the most essential components of high quality in-prison higher education programs that uphold a commitment to equity, excellence and access and presents many of the challenges that higher education in prison programs face each day. As such, the report aspires to:

- Present a conceptual foundation for the eventual creation of norms of excellence, equity and access, guidelines for best practices, and systems for safeguarding the quality of in-prison higher education programs.
- Cultivate a professional culture of trust, collaboration and transparency that encourages practitioners to reflect critically on their own practices and strive for continuous improvement.
- Inform and inspire a diverse range of stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty, DOC partners, students (whether incarcerated or not), funders, policymakers, and advocates.
- Increase public awareness of higher education in prison as a specialized field with positive effects for individuals, communities and society as a whole.
- Expand the community of professionals in education, corrections, media, government and philanthropy who understand the field's complex needs, risks and opportunities, so that they may more easily communicate and collaborate with practitioners, and do not harm programs, students or the field as a whole.

While the specific material and cultural context of prisons is unique, the values and practices in this report can be widely applied to the field of higher education generally. Acknowledging that no single program currently fulfills all of the ideals articulated in the report, the authors believe that *all* programs have the potential to continually improve, and to benefit from increased material and financial support, ongoing engagement and resource-sharing among practitioners, and formal opportunities for professional development. In this spirit, the report seeks to foster thoughtful and collaborative engagement by program leaders, university and college faculty and administrators, funders, correctional staff, government officials, advocates and students. It is the hope of the authors that the report will be a resource that evolves over time and with input from a wide range of stakeholders.

The enormous challenges facing the field of higher education in prison—the lack of oversight and accountability within the prison setting; the complex needs of students; and the material scarcity that pervades the field—are all microcosms of the most broken and vulnerable edges of the society as a whole. Yet while expanding access to excellent educational programs in prisons presents formidable challenges, it also provides an extraordinary opportunity to overcome pervasive inequities in society by increasing access to high quality higher education for all.

The Alliance intends to use the *Equity and Excellence* report as a blueprint for its future work. As the organization matures, it plans to provide more extensive support to new and existing programs and to the field as a whole. To this end, the Alliance is inviting program leaders, students, partners and supporters throughout the United States to engage in structured discussions about the report itself, inviting new voices and perspectives to the ongoing evolution of the report and its recommendations, with a goal of growing the field of higher education in prison and improving the quality of existing and emerging programs.

The full report is available to download from the Alliance website: [higheredinprison.org](http://higheredinprison.org)

### *Consent to Participate*

- The information you provide in today’s discussion group will be kept confidential. Your name will not be associated with anything you say here. The information collected today will be used to inform our program for planning and improvement purposes. As well, feedback will be conveyed to the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison to inform its own strategic priorities as it works to support other higher education in prison programs and the field more broadly.
- Please respect the other participants in today’s discussion group by keeping anything said in this discussion confidential.
- Participation in this discussion group is completely voluntary. Nothing you say in this discussion group will have any impact on your personal program involvement (grades, employment, etc.). You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the discussion at anytime.
- If you have any questions about the report or this discussion guide, ask your discussion group leader, or ask to be put in touch with a staff member from the Alliance.



# Discussion Group Sign-In Sheet

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_ Higher Education in Prison Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Discussion Group Leader Name and Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Which best describes your engagement with higher education in prison?

Participant #	Current Student	Alumni Student	Program Staff	Instructor or Volunteer	Board Member	Community Partner	Other (describe)
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							
12							
13							
14							
15							
16							
17							
18							
19							
20							

# Returning Feedback to the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison

Thank you for taking the time to lead a discussion group about *Equity and Excellence in Practice!*

The Alliance invites programs participating in discussion groups of the *Equity and Excellence in Practice* report to share their feedback with us. Your insights and recommendations will help us improve this discussion guide and shape our future priorities and programs. Your input will help us learn how we can better support practitioners and improve outcomes for students.

Please send a copy of the Discussion Notes as well as any individual/small group worksheets that you would like to share. This information will not be made public. The Alliance will use this information only to inform our future work.

Either send the material via US Mail or scanned via email to:

Mailing Address:

Alliance for Higher Education in Prison  
1801 N. Broadway, Suite 417  
Denver, CO 80202  
(720) 738-9220

Email Address:

[alliance@higheredinprison.org](mailto:alliance@higheredinprison.org) (subject: E+E Report Discussion Feedback)

Thank you in advance for sharing your feedback with us!



Mary Gould  
Director, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison

