ADMISSIONS AND ENROLLMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON PROGRAMS

The Understanding the Landscape of Higher Education in Prison Programs (Landscape Survey) was launched in December 2020 as a confidential survey asking programs for detailed information about the program’s funding, staff, students and other aspects of their program during the 2018-2019 academic year. The survey was completed by program leaders at 60 programs. The data briefs for the Landscape Survey offer in-depth glimpses into the functioning of higher education in prison programs across the United States, but interpretation and extrapolation of the data should be approached carefully due to the limited sample size.


This data brief includes information about admissions and enrollment in participating programs, including insight into the following questions:

- What was the admissions process like for higher education in prison programs?
- What changes would participants like to make to the admissions process?
- What was enrollment like for higher education in prison programs?
- What was attrition like for higher education in prison programs?
- What was enrollment in higher education like for former students upon reentry?
- What are some suggested takeaways for these data on admission and enrollment in higher education in prison programs?

Additional data briefs from the survey can be found at: https://www.higheredinprison.org/publications/understanding-the-landscape-of-higher-education-in-prison-survey-2018-2019

What was the admissions process like for higher education in prison programs?

The admissions and enrollment process to a higher education in prison program can be run through the program itself or through the affiliated college or university. This means that upon admission, a student could be enrolled only in the program, only at the academic institution, or both. For the majority of programs that participated in the Landscape Survey (N=60), enrollment to the program guaranteed students admission to the affiliated academic institution, either exclusively (n = 33, 55.0% of 60 answering programs) or in addition to admission to the higher

---

1 The Landscape Survey was distributed to all 131 respondents of the Annual Survey of Higher Education in Prison and had a response rate of 33.1%.
education in prison program (n = 13, 21.7%). For some programs, students were enrolled in the university as non-matriculating or pre-matriculating students, which means that students were enrolled in the university but not in a degree program (n = 10, 16.7%). The admissions process in only a small percentage of programs did not involve admission, either exclusively or in addition to the program, to an affiliated college or university (n = 4, 6.7%).

Participating programs reported using a variety of admissions criteria. These results are listed in Table 1. The most common criterion for admission was a form of secondary credential, including a high school diploma, a GED, or HiSET credential (n = 55, 91.7% of 60 answering programs). When included in the admissions process, this credential was most frequently required by the affiliated academic institution (n = 40, 72.7%) or the program itself (n = 29, 52.7%), as opposed to the department of corrections. Other common admissions requirements included written application forms (n = 47, 78.3%) and written essay(s) (n = 31, 51.7%). Interviews with applicants were required by a third of programs (n = 20, 33.3%).

Table 1. Admissions Criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Admissions Criteria</th>
<th>Collected by Number of Programs (N = 60)</th>
<th>Percent of Programs</th>
<th>Among programs that require each criterion, the entity requiring it (can sum to &gt;100% where criterion is required by more than one entity)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GED/HiSet, high school diploma, or equivalent credential</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>29 (52.7%) 40 (72.7%) 16 (29.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written application form</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>30 (62.8%) 31 (66.0%) 7 (14.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>15 (42.9%) 29 (82.9%) 6 (17.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written essay(s)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>23 (74.2%) 10 (32.3%) 1 (3.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcript(s)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>11 (40.7%) 24 (89.9%) 2 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of sentence</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>16 (66.7%) 6 (25.0%) 10 (41.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type or frequency of disciplinary infractions</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>5 (21.7%) 2 (8.7%) 20 (87.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement testing (e.g., ACCUPLACER)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>12 (57.1%) 13 (61.9%) 3 (14.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview performance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>16 (80.0%) 6 (30.0%) 4 (20.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade point average</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>6 (40.0%) 11 (73.3%) 3 (20.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED/HiSet score</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>9 (64.3%) 10 (71.4%) 4 (28.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to variances in responses to the survey, not all questions had the same response size. This report uses the capital "N" to refer to the total number of responses to a particular question and the lowercase "n" to refer to the number of respondents who indicated a particular response to that specific question.
Admissions Criteria | Collected by Number of Programs (N = 60) | Percent of Programs | Program | College or University | Department of Corrections
---|---|---|---|---|---
Housing unit or security level | 14 | 23.3% | 5 (35.7%) | 4 (26.6%) | 10 (71.4%)
Crime of conviction | 10 | 16.7% | 2 (20.0%) | 1 (10.0%) | 7 (70.0%)
Restricted movement | 9 | 15.0% | 1 (11.1%) | 1 (11.1%) | 7 (77.8%)
Designated gang affiliation status | 6 | 10.0% | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (16.7%) | 5 (83.3%)
Drug test results | 5 | 8.3% | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (20.0%) | 4 (80.0%)
Other* | 6 | 10.0% | 2 (33.3%) | 5 (83.3%) | 0 (0.0%)

*Other includes: Race (e.g., to maintain the same racial breakdown within the program as the facility); student’s work schedule; financial aid eligibility; state residency status; reentry date; vocational certifications necessary for enrollment; student not simultaneously enrolled in another college/university; and persistence in application process.

What changes would participants like to make to the admissions process?

In considering the current admissions process for their higher education in prison programs, 47 participants described changes they would like to make to the process while just eight reported they would not want to make any changes (14.5%, N = 55 responding programs). The most commonly suggested change by participants was for the admissions and enrollment process to become electronic or online (n=10). Participants believed that an online or electronic process would also make it easier for programs to obtain documentation for applicants, including transcripts, placement tests, birth certificates, or financial aid forms. Another commonly desired change from participants was for the removal of certain eligibility restrictions on admission, including crime of conviction, length of sentence, work and other programming schedules, and in-state residency (n = 6). Other desired changes included:

- Less interference from the Department of Corrections (n = 4);
- Supplementary academic support for students prior to enrollment and additional support for applicants throughout the application process (n = 2);
- Revising or removing placement tests (n = 2);
- More communication among higher education in prison programs, including sharing transcripts of students and working together when students are transferred to new facilities (n=2);
- Reentry support to begin during the admissions process (n = 1);
- More advertisement at the prison for the program (n = 1);
- More physical space for the application process (n = 1);
- Reconsideration of in-state residency requirements, for example by agreeing to accept prison identification cards as proof of residency (n = 1); and
- Beginning to track demographics of interested students to compare to accepted and enrolled student demographics (n=1).

Participating programs also described the barriers to making their desired changes to the admissions process. The most common barrier was that the Department of Corrections would need to be the entity that initiated the changes and therefore the changes were beyond the control of the program (n = 20). Examples of changes within the purview of the Department of Corrections included access to the Internet, allowing the program to enroll more students, restrictions on communication with students, agreeing to a Memorandum of Understanding, and prioritizing the program. Other barriers included the university’s admissions process, state law (e.g., barring Internet, restrictions on in-state residency), funding needs, and restrictions due to Pell grants or other financial aid. Three programs cited the largest barriers as the bureaucracy of working within the prison system or the mass industrial prison and higher education complexes.

What was enrollment like for higher education in prison programs?

Within the Landscape Survey, 51 programs provided information about their enrollment. Enrollment during the 2018-2019 academic year ranged from 0 students to 25,317 students, which highlights the variety of programs who participated in the study. The median enrollment was 80 students, and the average enrollment was 723 students. For 84.3% of programs, students were enrolled as degree-seeking, meaning that they were admitted into a degree program (n = 43). Students were enrolled as non-degree-seeking or non-matriculating in 35.3% of programs (n = 18) and as community members or continuing education students in 11.8% of programs (n = 6). These results are reported in Table 2.

### Table 2. Student Enrollment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How are students in the program enrolled at the academic institution?</th>
<th>Number of Programs (N = 51)</th>
<th>Percent of Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As degree-seeking students (i.e., accepted into a major)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As non-degree-seeking and/or non-matriculating students</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As community members and/or continuing education students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am unable to answer this question</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participating programs also reported information about the types of coursework and credentials they offered. These results are listed in Table 3. Forty-three participants reported information on the number of credits taken by their students over the full academic year. The average number of credits earned by students in these programs ranged from 0 – 40, with a median of 9 credits and a mean of 13.1 credits. Information about the number of credentials earned within programs is described in Table 4.
What was attrition like for higher education in prison programs?

Participating programs also answered questions about student attrition from their programs. Forty-three participants were able to report the number of students who left their program during the academic year. The number of students who left programs ranged from 0 – 400, with a median of eight students and a mean of 32.6 students. The most common reason for attrition occurred when a student was transferred to a different facility (n = 35, 62.5% of 56 responding programs). The other two common reasons for attrition included disciplinary incidents (n = 32, 57.1%) and student release (n = 30, 53.6%). These results are reported in Table 5.
What was enrollment in higher education like for former students upon reentry?

Most participating programs were unable to report the number of former students from their programs who were currently enrolled in postsecondary education on an outside campus during the 2018-2019 academic year. Of the 19 programs who reported an exact or estimated number (36.5% of 52 total respondents), the number of students enrolled in higher education following reentry ranged from 0 – 119 students, with a median of 3 and a mean of 13.7.

Participants reported a variety of barriers faced by their former students pursuing educational opportunities on the outside. The most mentioned obstacle was finances (n = 19), including lack of access to financial aid due to prior drug convictions and unsettled tuition defaults that occurred prior to incarceration. Other common barriers were the need to prioritize employment (n = 12) and housing (n =12), both of which are frequently required stipulations of parole. Participants less frequently described the following barriers:

- Relationship and family obligations (n = 7);
- Transportation (n = 5);
- The need to acclimate upon reentry (n = 4);
- Lack of access to technology (n = 4);
- Questions about criminal records during the admissions process (n = 4);
- Feeling like college does not fit self-image or that they do not belong in college (n = 3);
- Lack of access to educational opportunities (n = 2);
- Lack of support, including difficulty navigating the admissions process (n = 2);
- Level of proficiency, including with technology (n = 2);
- Need for permission from case managers, parole officers, or halfway houses (n = 2);
- Level of academic proficiency and ability to handle the workload (n = 2);
- Difficulty obtaining transcripts (n = 1); and
- Medical needs (n = 1).

What are some suggested takeaways for these data on admission and enrollment in higher education in prison programs?

Due to the small sample size, data from this report should be cautiously interpreted and should not be generalized to the entire field of higher education in prison programs. Nevertheless, there are some general trends that can help inform the conversation surrounding higher education in prison and highlight the landscape of prison education during the 2018-2019 academic year.

Within this sample of programs, the admissions process to the program frequently involved enrollment at an academic institution rather than solely to an independent program. Admissions
criteria differed across programs, but most required at least some kind of written application form and completion of a secondary credential, such as a high school diploma or a GED. The requirements for the admissions process were shaped by multiple units, including the program, the academic institution, and the Department of Corrections. Most participants wanted more control over their program’s admissions process, which was difficult because of influence from other invested parties, in most cases this was the Department of Corrections.

Students from participating programs were successful at earning both credits and credentials, including certificates, Associate's degrees, and Bachelor's degrees. Licensure and graduate degrees were less commonly earned among participating programs. Student attrition was a common experience for most programs. The most common reasons for student attrition were because students were transferred to another facility, were removed from programming due to disciplinary incidents, or were released from prison. Upon reentry, former students and alumni of programs faced numerous challenges in continuing enrollment in higher education. The most common barriers noted were limited finances and post-custody requirements to secure housing and employment.

AUTHORS:
Caisa E. Royer, Erin L. Castro, Amy E. Lerman, Mary R. Gould

SUGGESTED CITATION: