COVID-19 AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON PROGRAMS

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Introduction

This report offers information about the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on higher education in prison programs. The data used for this report come from two sources: 1) the 2020 Annual Survey of Higher Education in Prison Programs, and 2) the Understanding the Landscape of Higher Education in Prison Programs Survey. These findings are part of an ongoing time-series data collection process that will continue through semi-annual surveys distributed to higher education in prison programs through the United States.

The 2020 Annual Survey of Higher Education in Prison (Annual Survey) was launched in March 2020, with data collection ending in May 2020. The survey consisted of 77 questions, gathering descriptive program information for the 2018-2019 academic year (July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019) and was completed by participants at 131 higher education in prison programs. Right before the launch of the survey, lockdowns due to COVID-19 were spreading across the United States. Three questions were added to the survey to assess the needs and experiences of these programs as they adapted to the rapidly changing landscape in the face of the pandemic.

The same COVID-19 questions were then included in the Understanding the Landscape of Higher Education in Prison Programs Survey (Landscape Survey) in order to measure how the field's response to COVID-19 had shifted in the interim nine months. The Landscape Survey was launched in December 2020, with data collection ending in January 2021. The survey was distributed to all participants of the 2020 Annual Survey (131 programs) and closed for participants in February 2021. The response rate for the survey was 45.8% (60 programs).

What did participants want the public, funders, and/or other supporters to know about the current state of COVID-19 inside prisons, jails, or detention centers in March 2020?

As reported in the Annual Survey in March 2020, participants’ experiences with the COVID-19 crisis varied dramatically during the early stages of the pandemic. For one participant, prisons and jails within their state had not yet experienced any COVID-19 cases and operation of their program was continuing normally. For many others, though, programs had already been forced to close for the semester and the future of the program was uncertain. One participant described the process of trying to adjust to COVID as heading “into a black hole” due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the inability to effectively plan ahead. Several participants also expressed concern that the economic downturn caused by the pandemic would lead to a de-prioritization of prison education by their state or academic institution, which could threaten future funding for their programs.

The pandemic caused many prisons to limit visitor access and also movement of incarcerated people within the prison. Many prisons entered into 24/7 lockdowns. These restrictions made it difficult or impossible for higher education in prison programs to continue their work, leading to the suspension of coursework and minimal communication.

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1 Time-series data collection involves asking identical questions to participants at multiple time points. This type of data collection project is helpful to track changes over a period of time. This project is specifically interested in changes in the effect of COVID-19 on higher education in prison programs.
between programs and their students. Participants discussed the importance of educational programming during this scary time. One survey participant said, “It was always so important to be with our students in the same space to create our community and doing so without being able to interact with them directly is incredibly challenging, nearly debilitating.” Yet at the time of the survey (March – May 2020), one participant mentioned that classes were already cancelled for Fall 2020 as well as for the spring and summer. When possible, programs used a variety of methods to adapt their programs to the lockdowns. The lack of access to the internet inside of most prisons made the transition to remote learning difficult. Some programs were able to switch to packet-based or correspondence learning instead.

Several participants were concerned that the public was overlooking the threat of COVID-19 to people in prisons. Even early in the pandemic, participants understood the vulnerability of incarcerated people to the crisis. As one participant said, “We are terrified for our students, most of whom are people of Color and have a disproportionate rate of conditions affecting their resiliency to infection, and many of whom are also over 60.” Participants described a need for the government and the public to prioritize the prison population and expressed that not doing so would serve to highlight systemic inequalities and racism. One participant said that the response to the pandemic “highlights the way we have dehumanized those we have imprisoned.” There were also calls from participants for “concrete steps to protect the health of everyone who lives and works inside,” which included a need for more transparency about how the pandemic was spreading within correctional institutions.

Concern about the impending effect of COVID-19 on prisons spurred several participants to advocate for early release of older and chronically ill people, arguing that the pandemic was an opportunity for reducing the prisoner population. One participant said, “we should be thinking about ways in which we can keep pushing for decarceration, demanding transparency on communication from [departments of corrections] and holding the state accountable at all times.”

Finally, participants believed that prisons were either unable or unwilling to adequately address the crisis. Both students and programs had limited access to information about the virus or how prisons were managing it. For example, several participants did not know if students had access to hand sanitizer or masks and said students had limited contact with anyone on the outside. In other places, students reported that officers did not wear masks or sanitize their hands, even when coming from quarantined areas of the prison. Participants described the watering down of soap and cleaning supplies. The pandemic also had a substantial impact on the ability of incarcerated people to access supplies, including sanitation equipment but also more mundane things like new reading glasses. One participant described the situation in the following way:

People need to know just how badly-equipped these institutions are, not only to deal with this crisis, but to provide medical care in general. They should know prisons are underfunded, that they inevitably prioritize security over well-being. . . . They should know the toll that incarceration takes on people’s health, and the way the system heightens existing inequities in the distribution of wellness and vulnerability that have an especially dramatic impact on poor communities of color.
What did participants want the public, funders, and/or other supporters to know about the current state of COVID-19 and prisons, jails, or detention centers in December 2020?

By December 2020, prison higher education programs had made varied efforts to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic’s continued effect on prisons, as evidenced by their responses to the Landscape Survey. Programming continued to be disrupted, with many programs still unable to return to the prison and some shifting to remote learning approaches. One common need expressed by participants was increased access to technology, including Zoom, learning management systems, or other interactive services. One participant said this technology was necessary to keep students “engaged in something interesting and meaningful,” which was otherwise absent during lockdowns. Another participant said, “Without online access to education, we cannot serve our students in the current circumstances.” These changes to coursework led to the delay of certificate and degree completions.

Beyond the impact on programs, the pandemic devastated prisons and incarcerated people. Many participants described prison-wide lockdowns that lasted for longer than 14 days, which prevented incarcerated people from moving around, making phone calls, and even accessing medication, commissary, or food. As described by one participant, “Food is reduced to peanut butter and bologna sandwiches daily, sometimes twice, for grown men. No access to sunshine.” Beyond the lockdowns, many prisons suspended family visitation, programming, and religious services at the beginning of the pandemic, and most of these critical services had not yet returned by December 2020.

These on-going restrictions had harmful effects on incarcerated people. Participants said that morale was incredibly low. Students were scared of getting sick and were also scared that others might suspect they were sick, which created a disincentive for self-reporting and testing. One participant described that the “resumption of visiting and programming is contingent on the number of positive tests, thus there is self- and peer-pressure to conceal illness.” Regardless, many were ill and even more suffered emotional impacts. As described by one participant, “Students are suffering and isolated, families are suffering, prison staff are stressed and anxious and ill.” Another participant explained the situation as follows:

> COVID has lain bare how cruel prisons are. To keep people safe from COVID, incarcerated individuals are spending enormous amounts of time in lockdown, without access to family, books, games, etc. Months without seeing family. Many of them could be supervised safely in the community or released for compassionate reasons (ie. age). If the “cure” is essentially cruel, then perhaps the whole enterprise of confinement should be revisited.

Participants again described prisons as ill-equipped to deal with the crisis. Crowded prisons offered limited space for quarantine and health care provision. A few participants continued to describe a lack of compliance from officers with the most minimal prescribed public health precautions, such as wearing masks or washing hands. One participant expressed
concern that departments of corrections were using the lockdown as an excuse to eliminate existing programs and transfer students in order to limit participation. Another participant said, “The welfare of people within our prisons and jails is not being protected enough.” This lack of care is highlighted by the stark contrast between how students on the inside and students outside prison were treated, as described by one participant:

Students inside need the same resources that students on the outside would have, and it is shocking that the community college programs have continued in person throughout the pandemic or else they would lose their money. It creates a tension for our program because our students wonder why we are not in person, but we see that as a huge safety risk.

How has COVID-19 changed access to technology?

The Landscape Survey asked participants to describe whether the pandemic changed their program’s access to technology within the prisons. Some programs gained access to technology during the pandemic, including access to computers within the housing unit, access to tablets, use of JPay, funding to buy new technology like Smartboards and internet hotspots, and learning management systems.

For other programs, the pandemic curtailed or even eliminated access to technology. For many, this was because computers or internet use was limited to classrooms or other programming spaces that students did not have access to during lockdown. Because lockdowns were so frequent or extended during the COVID-19 crisis, this essentially meant students could not utilize any technology. Other participants reported that their programs were fully shut down or were forced to use a correspondence method of instruction, and therefore were not using technology.

Prioritization of Resources

Survey participants were asked to rank how their programs prioritized their needs for the following twelve resources: 1) technical assistance related to communication and public relations, 2) technical assistance related to fundraising and development, 3) wellness support for staff, 4) technical assistance related to strategic planning, 5) funding for supplies for current students, 6) community support, 7) funding for direct aid to alumni or former students, 8) funding to adapt programming, 9) advocacy efforts on behalf of people currently incarcerated, 10) funding for general operating, 11) wellness support for students, and 12) access to information and resources.

Of these options, programs overall noted the need for access to information and resources as especially important in both March 2020 and December 2020. Also important to many programs was advocacy efforts on behalf of incarcerated people, and the proportion of programs ranking this as their first or second priority increased over the year (from March 2020 to December 2020). Wellness support and funding (for staff and students) were also consistently ranked as high priority by many programs during this period. Funding for direct aid to students was ranked higher in March 2020 than it was in December 2020.
COVID-19 and Higher Education in Prison Programs

Prioritization of Resources during March 2020 and December 2020.
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What are some key takeaways from these data about how COVID-19 affected higher education in prison programs?

Due to the relatively small sample of respondents, data from this report should be cautiously interpreted and should not be generalized to the entire field of higher education in prison. Nevertheless, these data provide important insights that can help inform the conversation surrounding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education in prison programs.

At the beginning of the pandemic, participants were largely concerned about the immediate impact of COVID-19 on their students and program, and there was a great deal of uncertainty around the suspension of programming, what students were experiencing on the inside, and the future of programs. By December 2020, these concerns had shifted slightly to thinking about longer-term impacts, including the need for advocacy and wellness support.

In large part, this is likely due to the particularly traumatic experiences for incarcerated populations due to the pandemic and, over time, programs were able to receive more communication and information from students about their experiences. Those inside prisons were—and in many places still are—at increased risk of illness due to residing in shared living facilities, lacking access to quality healthcare and nutrition and lacking immediate access to vaccinations. In addition, many prisons have used isolation as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the virus, and many incarcerated people have been unable to participate in programming or receive visitors. Many programs have struggled to remain in contact with their students, much less continue to offer in-person classes.

Unlike colleges on the outside, the absence of access to technology has meant that some college programs have completely ceased offering classes to incarcerated students or were only able to engage in correspondence programming. For many students, this has resulted in the loss of a year or more of progress towards a certificate or degree. It might also have
affected the ability of incarcerated students to earn good-time credits during this period, in states where time off is rewarded for college participation.

The pandemic will also have long-term impacts on many programs. Like colleges on the outside, college programs in prison will need to plan for remediation once classes resume, in order to support students in gaining back lost educational time. Likewise, college programs will need to address mental and physical wellness of students returning to the classroom after what has been an extraordinary difficult year, rife with crisis and trauma.

The data presented here are part of an ongoing data collection process, which will continue through annual surveys in the coming years. The ramifications of the pandemic will continue to be felt far into the future, and it will be important to continue monitoring the effects of the crisis on programs and their students, and the field of higher education in prison, more broadly.