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.1 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 the instructors of participating programs, including insight into the following questions:

- What types of data are collected by higher education in prison programs?
- What data and information would help programs advance their work?
- How did programs define student success?
- What are the strategic priorities of higher education in prison programs over the next three years?
- What are some key takeaways from these data on data collection and evaluation?

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 types of data are collected by higher education in prison programs?

Programs collect and use a variety of data relevant to their courses, students, and programming. This information can be helpful for program evaluation, strategic planning, and tracking student success. The most common types of data collected by programs included course completion (n = 44, 93.6% of 47 responding programs), student GPA or grades (n = 37, 78.7%), and graduation rates (n = 26, 55.3%).2 Fewer programs collected information about recidivism rates (n = 9, 1

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%.
2 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.
19.1%), time-to-credential rates (n = 8, 17.0%), or data about students after graduation (e.g., job placement) (n = 6, 12.8%). This information is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Collected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data Collection</th>
<th>Number of Programs (N = 47)</th>
<th>Percent of Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course completion</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course GPA and/or grades</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rates</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of admission applications</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student demographics</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition rates</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention rates</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student transfers out of facility</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of accepted and declined students</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff, volunteer, or instructor demographics</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recidivism rates</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-to-credential</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduation information</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other includes: Loan defaults, withdrawals, Accuplacer scores, marital status, and the number of applicants denied by the department of corrections.

Respondents from eight programs described the challenges their programs faced in the effort to collect data, complete program evaluations, or do research. These challenges included:

- Access from the Department of Corrections was required in order to collect data (n = 1);
- Difficulty collecting data because the Department of Corrections had not approved a program evaluation research proposal (n = 1);
- Some types of data were particularly difficult for programs to collect, including recidivism records or demographic data (n = 2); and
- Data were often recorded and/or stored differently between different institutions, including student ID numbers, state ID numbers, race categorization, student names, and the truncation of dates (n = 1).

What data would help programs advance their work?

Participants from 22 programs described the types of research, support, and information that would help the advancement of their programs and the field. Most frequently, participants
wanted opportunities to share resources with other programs, including curriculum, funding resources, guides for accessing Internet or other technology in the prisons, evaluation and assessment guides, and reentry support. Participants especially wanted a way to network with similar programs, such as programs that were facing similar challenges or had similar goals.

Other types of information or evaluation-related resources mentioned by programs as being potentially valuable included:

- Better technology for students, including systems that would allow students to access research materials or other academic resources;
- Research on the benefits of higher education in prison;
- Information about state-specific rules, including changes in state law;
- Information about other programs, including what technology is accessed, recidivism rates, job placement rates;
- Information specifically about women’s facilities; and
- More funding or capacity to conduct program evaluations or collect data.

How did programs define student success?

Participants from 30 programs described the top three ways their programs defined student success. Answers varied across programs. The most commonly listed metric for success was completion of the program or graduation (n = 15 programs). Other measures of success included:

- Continued enrollment in education after completion of the program (n = 8);
- The development of new skills, including writing, speaking, creativity, intellectual curiosity, collaboration, critical thinking, and empathy (n = 7);
- Student satisfaction (n = 7);
- Course performance (n = 6);
- Employment upon release (n = 6);
- Improved sense of self-confidence or self-worth (n = 5);
- Persistence in the program (n = 5);
- Reduced recidivism (n = 4) or behavioral violations, including violence (n = 3);
- Course completion (n = 3);
- Meaningful engagement in the course (n = 2) or the program (n = 2); and
- Successful reentry or resentencing (n = 2).

What are the strategic priorities of higher education in prison programs over the next three years?

Participants were asked to list the top three priorities for their programs over the next three years. The most commonly listed priority was expansion of the program (n = 14), including expansion of the program’s access to technology (n = 9). This included desire for internet access, computers, learning management systems, tablets, and email. Beyond technology, participants
also wanted to expand the degree pathways offered by the program, offer additional courses, hire new staff, provide courses at more prisons, and develop new curriculum or courses. Other common priorities were to find additional sources of funding (n = 8) and to expand enrollment (n = 8). Additional priorities mentioned by participating programs included:

- Offering additional student support, including education plans, pre-enrollment support, student handbooks, and library access (n = 4);
- Offering reentry support (n = 4);
- Enrolling in Second Chance Pell (n = 4);
- Successfully navigating COVID-19 (n = 3);
- Forming new partnerships (n = 3) and improving the program's status with departments of corrections (n = 2);
- Increasing student persistence in the program (n = 2);
- Increasing student success in the program (n = 2); and
- Changing in-state residency policies (n = 1).

**What are some suggested takeaways from these data on data collection and evaluation?**

Due to the small sample size, the 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.

Despite significant barriers to data collection for many programs, programs do collect and use a variety of data relevant to their courses, students, and programming. The most common types of data collected are relevant to programming, including course completion and grades. Survey participants recognized that additional data would be helpful for their programs, including the ability to share resources and research across programs.

Participating programs described student success in many differing ways, with the most common measure of success being completion of or continued enrollment in the program. The goals of programs reflect these standards, with most programs hoping to continue to expand over the next several years and find new resources to support their students.
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