

# UNLOCKING COLLEGE:

Strengthening Massachusetts'  
Commitment  
to College in Prison

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# **UNLOCKING COLLEGE:**

## **Strengthening Massachusetts' Commitment to College in Prison**

A POSITION PAPER  
FROM THE  
BOSTON FOUNDATION

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# INTRODUCTION

**A**s long as incarceration remains a central component of our approach to law enforcement in Massachusetts, it is urgent that our prison systems advance public safety and improve the welfare of citizens, communities, and families in the Commonwealth, rather than just deliver punishment.

Incarceration is a measure that has severe consequences extending far beyond the individual who is imprisoned, and for many decades incarceration has not been imposed evenly. Across this state and across the country, those residing in Black and Latino communities are incarcerated at dramatically higher rates than their White<sup>1</sup> counterparts. In order to address public safety, individual welfare, or the racial disparities inherent in United States (US) prison systems, there is no better first step than the expansion of educational opportunity, particularly college education.

In neighboring states and around the country, with bipartisan support, correctional systems are restoring education to its rightful place in US prisons—the position that it had held until its programs were decimated at the peak of the tough-on-crime frenzy of the 1990s.

Today five small degree-granting programs operate within the Massachusetts Department of Correction (MA DOC, referred to throughout as DOC), with the majority relying on private funding sources. To thrive, they need consistent access to students, space, and resources. Such programs face systemic challenges in doing their work and need support from administrators inside and outside of DOC.

The stakes are high. When people recidivate, they continue costing the state money for their supervision and they deprive their families and communities of stable economic and socio-emotional contributors.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, college in prison is an extraordinary opportunity for our universities to engage members of precisely the communities it most frequently fails to serve. Massachusetts is famous for its abundance of stellar colleges and universities, yet we are not a leader in college in prison. We should be.

In the interest of public safety, reconciliation, justice, and our shared future, Massachusetts should join conservative and liberal states nationwide and make genuine, transformative, ambitious college education a central component within its prison system.

# THE PRISON SYSTEM IN MASSACHUSETTS

In recent years, the Commonwealth has been successful in reducing some of the worst and most harmful features of mass incarceration. Overall, the number of people incarcerated in Massachusetts has been in decline, with 11,403 people behind DOC bars in 2012, down to 6,236 in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Rates of recidivism and the number of young people incarcerated in our state have also gone down. There is considerable progress to be proud of.

However, Massachusetts continues to lag when it comes to two critical indicators of the health of its justice system. First, the starkness of the racial and ethnic disparity reflected in our prison system suggests that much of our very worst history is, in fact, not yet behind us. In a dataset from 2013–2014, Black and Latino residents convicted of crimes were three times more likely to receive DOC sentences than their White counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Though some progress has been made, disparities remain severe, particularly for young adults. Black and Latino individuals currently make up nearly 70 percent of people incarcerated by DOC ages 18 to 24, compared to 54 percent of the DOC-incarcerated population age 25 and over. Overall, Black and Latino men are disproportionately represented in custody.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, for those incarcerated in Massachusetts, the state has room to better prioritize activities that are likely to lead to a brighter future. We urgently need more investment in the individuals under Massachusetts state supervision, 95 percent of whom will return to the community.<sup>6</sup> Recent findings by the Correctional Expenditure Commission show DOC devoted just 2 percent of its \$732 million annual operating budget for fiscal year 2020 to programs.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the commission found DOC cannot account for how these resources are utilized or the outcomes they produce.

Allowing college-in-prison programs to grow within MA DOC would be the first, best step in addressing these urgent concerns. As we will show, prioritizing education will not cost taxpayers. In fact, it is proven to save the state money. Furthermore, college in prison is common now in states across the country, none of which has nearly the potential or legacy in higher education that we are accustomed to in Massachusetts.

# THE ECONOMICS OF INCARCERATION, RECIDIVISM, AND COLLEGE IN PRISON IN MASSACHUSETTS

**C**ontemporary Massachusetts corrections practices have been shaped by worst-case scenarios exemplified by the “Willie Horton” attack advertisement during the 1988 presidential campaign. Massachusetts voters heard the message that punishment is necessary to keep us safe. Yet recent efforts at corrections reforms, especially through the 2018 criminal justice reform legislation, demonstrate that change is possible. Across many coalitions, the state is addressing issues such as sentencing reform, the elimination of fines and fees for state supervision, data transparency, and medication-assisted treatment: efforts that are resulting in lower recidivism.<sup>8</sup>

In Massachusetts, recidivism data varies depending on inclusion of variables such as gender and the type of incarceration facility in question.<sup>9</sup> Recidivism in Massachusetts DOC ranges roughly from just over 30 percent (when based on new convictions within three years of release) to 50 percent (when measuring new arraignments within three years).<sup>10</sup>

Multiple studies have made clear that change is needed to facilitate more successful reentry, and that access to higher education in prison is part of that change.<sup>11</sup> In a 2013 study, Rand Corporation researchers found that those who receive education in prison are 28 percent less likely to recidivate, all else being equal. The impact is largest among those provided with postsecondary education. According to Rand, college in prison reduces the likelihood of recidivating by nearly half (48 percent).<sup>12</sup> Yet in Massachusetts, discussion of recidivism reduction through education access is still almost exclusively focused at the

**“For every dollar invested in prison education programs, you’re saving taxpayers between \$4 to \$5 in re-incarceration costs, and that’s a conservative estimate. The fact that these programs are so effective and don’t cost that much makes it clear long term where you want to be investing at the community level and at the state level.”<sup>13</sup>**

—Lois M. Davis, Senior Policy Researcher,  
RAND Corporation

level of high school credentials.<sup>14</sup> Expanding the prioritization of college-in-prison programs is a method with a proven track record, and it should be part of MA DOC's strategy to address recidivism.

The Rand analysis estimates prison education's return on public investment (ROI) as approximately \$5 to \$1. However, this figure significantly understates the ROI for Massachusetts, which may have a higher-than-national ROI on recidivism reduction given the state economy's reliance on college educated workers, and the expense of incarceration in the state. Rand assumes a year of reincarceration costs taxpayers \$29,500. In Massachusetts, the average annual cost to incarcerate someone in a DOC facility is \$92,000, significantly higher than a year of even the most expensive college program in the state—and significantly higher than the cost of incarceration in states that provide more and broader services to incarcerated people, including college. The ROI finding also assumed the mean sentence length is 2.4 years. In Massachusetts, the average time served at the DOC is 3.6 years.<sup>15</sup>

More importantly, the Rand benefit calculation does not represent the full power of postsecondary prison education. It is based on the average reduction in recidivism across all forms of education in prison including general education development (GED) and adult basic education (ABE). Nor does the Rand study account for the very significant monetary and non-monetary public benefits associated with postsecondary education, including higher tax revenues, reduction in social safety net costs, and improvements to public health. Recent research by MassINC finds an associate degree yields \$130,000 in net public benefits, when appropriately valuing both the monetary and non-monetary returns.<sup>16</sup>

A more complete accounting for the costs and benefits of postsecondary education in prison by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) suggests the ROI is \$20 to \$1. Among the 54 adult criminal justice interventions with sufficient evidence to complete cost-benefit analysis that WISPP has examined, college in prison generated the highest ROI.<sup>17</sup>

Giving people a reason to invest in themselves—an opportunity many in the prison population have not had before—can alter the value they put on their own life and the lives of others. It is also smart economics.

“For every dollar invested in prison education programs, you're saving taxpayers between \$4 to \$5 in re-incarceration costs, and that's a conservative estimate. The fact that these programs are so effective and don't cost that much makes it clear long term where you want to be investing at the community level and at the state level.”



# STATE OF THE COLLEGE-IN-PRISON LANDSCAPE

**F**or over a generation, college in prison was standard practice in state and federal prisons in the United States, including in Massachusetts. The national system of college in prison was eviscerated in 1994 with the passage of the Clinton Crime Bill, which made incarcerated people ineligible for federal Pell Grants.

The change was counterproductive and devastating. It eliminated the greatest outlet for hope, transformation, and healing in departments of correction nationwide. Furthermore, college in prison was well documented to dramatically reduce prison recidivism, increase connection between an incarcerated person and their family, improve the likelihood of employment after release, and reduce violence within the prison itself.<sup>18</sup> College in prison was inexpensive as compared to almost any other meaningful intervention in US systems of incarceration.

In fact, college in prison has consistently proven to save taxpayers money by reducing rates of incarceration and increasing the number of taxpaying citizens.<sup>19</sup> In addition, college in prison was and is a proven, successful way of spreading the benefits of higher education among those communities least represented in our colleges and universities.

Since the destruction of the national system of college in prison 25 years ago, the field has been populated only by pilot efforts and small boutique programs that offer college and remind us of what is possible. The field shifted in 2015, when President Barack Obama instituted a limited return of federal investment in this field, known as Second Chance Pell. That pilot was continued and, in 2020, expanded and made permanent by President Donald Trump, delivering a

rare and hopeful bipartisan success in our era of division and hostility.

Decades of advocacy on the part of colleges and religious communities; incarcerated people and their families; and leaders in corrections, business, and government led at last to the return of Pell restoration, which will be fully implemented in 2023.

The impact of Pell restoration has yet to be seen, as the quality control on how it is implemented, through what types of programs, and with what oversight, is forthcoming. This is the context for college in prison in Massachusetts.

## COLLEGE IN PRISON IN MASSACHUSETTS

Colleges in Massachusetts have been offering programs in correctional facilities since at least 1972. Five institutions—Boston College, Boston University, Emerson College, Mt. Wachusett Community College, and Tufts University—offer degree-granting programs for people incarcerated at DOC facilities across the state. Several others offer coursework without credit or a degree pathway.

Since the 1970s, Massachusetts higher education institutions have awarded 487 degrees or certificates to incarcerated people in the Commonwealth, with the majority of those awarded by Boston University from the 1970s onward at just two DOC facilities.

There are currently 213 incarcerated people enrolled in tertiary education, ranging from certificate to BA pathways across six DOC facilities. Of those 213 students, 77 are working towards a BA through Boston College, Boston University, Emerson College, and Tufts University.

For most students, access to college is life-changing. However, support at various levels of DOC administration, government, and the colleges and universities themselves can wax and wane with changing personnel. Clarifying a state-wide commitment to college in prison could help reduce uncertainty and ensure the prioritization of college-in-prison programming within each of these bureaucracies.

## PROGRAM SNAPSHOTS

### Boston College

Boston College Prison Education Program (BCPEP) is a college-in-prison program within MCI-Shirley.<sup>20</sup> The first cohort of 16 was admitted in summer 2019 and began accruing credits toward bachelor of arts degrees in the fall 2019 semester. A second cohort of 16 students was admitted in the summer of 2021, and a third cohort of 16 students is set to be admitted in summer 2022. Additionally, BCPEP has developed support—both academic and financial—to better ensure the successful transition for students released from MCI-Shirley to continue their coursework on BC’s main campus in Chestnut Hill. The expected graduation date for students in the first BA cohort is spring 2025. BCPEP students begin their studies in Core Curriculum courses which, as on campus, establish a common foundation and provide a breadth of knowledge in the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. Courses are taught by Boston College faculty and the transferable credits are granted through the University.

### Boston University

The Boston University Prison Education Program (PEP) offered its first credit-bearing college courses at MCI-Norfolk in 1972. In 1989, the Prison Education Program expanded to a second medium-security prison for men (MCI-Bay State), and by 1991 included MCI-Framingham—Massachusetts’ only penal institution for women. In the 1980s and early 1990s, a number of Massachusetts colleges offered courses

within the prison system. Students who had earned 30 to 60 credits through these colleges could apply the credits towards a Boston University bachelor’s degree and could even go on to pursue a master’s degree. However, with the Crime Control and Prevention Act of 1994, Pell Grants for prisoners were eliminated. Boston University PEP continued to operate, focusing exclusively on undergraduate courses since 1998. From the program’s inception through September 2018, 353 students have earned bachelor’s degrees and another 28 received master’s degrees.

### Emerson College

The Emerson Prison Initiative (EPI) provides students incarcerated at MCI-Concord with a pathway to earn a bachelor of arts degree in media, literature, and culture from Emerson College. EPI admitted its first cohort of 20 students in 2017. A second cohort was admitted in summer 2021. Applicants complete a rigorous admissions process that includes an essay exam and in-person interviews; acceptance rates are between 22 and 40 percent. EPI conferred its first BA degrees in September 2022, and the second cohort will complete the BA degree in 2025. Former EPI students who had not yet graduated upon leaving prison have enrolled at Emerson College’s Boston campus to work toward degree completion. In 2022 EPI expanded to offer classes at Northeastern Correctional Center as a way to continue working with students who are transferred to minimum security from medium-security MCI-Concord and created the Reentry and College Outside Program (RECOUP) to support formerly incarcerated students as they leave prison. EPI also partners with Partakers Inc. on reentry support and with Clark University, which has faculty teaching in EPI and runs its own credit-bearing Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens program. Additionally, EPI collaborates with the Brandeis Educational Justice Initiative at Brandeis University, which provides instructors for EPI classes as well as a reentry program to support students with critical needs post-incarceration.

### Mount Wachusett Community College

As a Second Chance Pell Pilot program, Mount Wachusett Community College offers the business administration certificate at Massachusetts Correctional Institution (MCI)-Shirley (medium-security) and North Central Correctional Institution (NCCI)-Gardner (medium/minimum-security). Students who meet the eligibility requirements by passing an entrance exam and interview have an opportunity to achieve a business administration certificate from Mount Wachusett Community College.

### Tufts University and Bunker Hill Community College

The Tufts University Prison Initiative of the Tisch College of Civic Life (TUPIT) provides college courses for two cohorts of students taught primarily by Tufts professors toward two degrees offered at MCI-Concord—the associate degree in the liberal arts from Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) followed by a possible bachelor’s degree in civic studies from Tufts University’s School of Arts and Sciences. In December 2021, the first cohort of 12 students earned their associate degree and are now continuing coursework toward a possible bachelor’s degree from Tufts. In spring 2022, TUPIT admitted a new cohort of 19 in the associate degree program. All courses are included in MassTransfer, which facilitates continued education at any state university toward the BA—with no application fees or essays required. TUPIT provides robust post-release reentry resources through the Tufts Educational Reentry Network (TERN) and in partnership with numerous local reentry organizations in Massachusetts. This nine-month, 12-credit program, MyTERN, welcomes all students who have participated in any college-in-prison programming, in addition to other formerly incarcerated people who did not have the advantage of college in prison but want support with higher educational pursuits through a community-based, restorative justice-informed program.

## CHALLENGES

The host of challenges facing college-in-prison programs provide Massachusetts with an opportunity to be innovative and creative. Prison is by definition a place of restrictions and limited access—and this adversely affects the learning environments they provide. For example, college programs have operated for years without even offline computers, which means many students write assignments by hand. There is room to modernize technology and academic content policies in the effort to value learning, as many other states with college in prison have already done.

Even more fundamental than the lack of technology is the absence of a dedicated space for students to learn and study, away from the general din of prison activity. Colleges need consistent dedicated physical space for classrooms, libraries, computer labs, and office hours within facilities to create a successful learning environment. Such innovations would be possible if the link between college and public safety was seen more clearly, and college-in-prison programs were deemed a higher priority in Massachusetts. More education would lead to better outcomes for people both under and after Massachusetts carceral supervision.

At the core, maintaining student enrollment is a baseline need for college in prison to be successful. Students in college programs can be reclassified and relocated—moved to different facilities—very rapidly. This sometimes occurs with little or no advance notice, and usually with no possibility of continuing their education once moved. This is highly disruptive for the student, for the program, which has already invested significant time and resources into that student, and for fellow students, who may have lost a project partner, study buddy, or mentor.



M. was successfully participating in a BA program and was working toward completion of his degree when he was transferred mid-semester to another facility. The time, money, and energy invested in supporting M.'s educational pathway was not able to culminate in his finishing that semester's credits. He felt despondent about not being able to see his commitments through, and his classmates were also thrown off, as the class had been in the middle of a group project that M. was involved in. When not a safety-driven relocation, considering educational calendars in relation to inmate movement would substantially assist college programs in their success.

In addition, although sometimes college is only viewed as a recidivism reduction tool, it is important to keep in mind that college is also valuable for those with very long sentences and even those who might never go home. The Commonwealth should support college programs that opt to enroll students irrespective of release dates as a strategy for contributing to the stability of the college program and to foster a community of healing within prisons.

A liberal arts education helps people develop critical thinking and communications skills that are applicable to a wide range of careers. For incarcerated people as well as traditional students, such college education is a guided space to explore one's interests and discover what kind of contribution one can make in the world. Finding meaning in work through a cultivation of the life of the mind has a wide-reaching impact on one's self-esteem and well-being. Such experiences stay with people long after completing a college degree.

On the whole, fostering a sense of collaboration and innovation to address the challenges faced by college-in-prison programs will benefit the Commonwealth in the long term. Luckily, we are not alone in addressing such issues and can learn from other states.

## COLLEGE IN PRISON IN OTHER STATES

Massachusetts is not yet a leader in higher education in prison, although it is poised to be. In neighboring states and state legislatures across the country, support for the reestablishment of college in prison is increasingly treated as a strategic priority among corrections leaders.

In New York, more than 1,400 incarcerated people enroll in college—in person, mostly full time, and working toward a degree—through a diverse group of two dozen independent college programs across the state.<sup>21</sup> New York's programs represent an array of colleges that reflect the breadth of higher education in New York. Operating autonomously, protecting



H. came to prison angry, and stayed that way for years while serving a long sentence. After he started college in prison, he began analyzing his own life situation with academic tools, and realized he could channel his frustration over his life circumstances in other ways. H. became a mentor to several other incarcerated college students, and his grasp of the course material over a wide range of disciplines led to top grades in classes. As H. prepares to leave prison, he has a whole different vision of what he wants to do with his life than what he came in with, and he has the skills and credentials to achieve it.

academic integrity, mirroring rigor and expectations from main campuses, those programs have benefited from the longstanding support of New York’s Department of Corrections and Community Supervision commissioner, central office leadership, and facility-level leadership and staff. This year, New York Governor Kathy Hochul restored state investment in college in prison that had been abolished in 1995.<sup>22</sup>

In Connecticut, the Department of Correction has worked with the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) system and with private institutions of higher education to expand college across the state prison system. Nine state prisons offer access to college-in-prison programming through public CSCU institutions and through private universities such as Yale, University of New Haven, Quinnipiac University, and Trinity College. College-in-prison programs in Connecticut have access to provided classroom technology when in-person programming is unavailable. In Connecticut, incarcerated students have access to state financial aid.

California has also been innovative, with strong individual programs and a state-supported community college participation available for all incarcerated people. Other west coast states are active in the field, and interest is growing in New England states including New Hampshire and Maine. Notable college-in-prison programs are already serving incarcerated people in Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas and Wisconsin.

Higher education’s potential is still underutilized in Massachusetts prisons. It is time for the Commonwealth to build on recent advances and reclaim its legacy as a leader in prioritizing education as a route to a healthier society.

**“Instead of having a swinging door coming in and going out [of prison] and coming back, I want this to be an educational opportunity. So, when you leave prison, you’re going to have a job, a meaningful job, and be able to go on and make your way.”<sup>23</sup>**

— *Former governor and University of Wisconsin System Interim President Tommy Thompson*

# REENTRY

**“When we get lawmakers proximate to college-in-prison grads, you can watch hearts and minds change. You don’t even have to say it: The graduate is no longer a threat.”**

— Vivian Nixon, Executive Director, College and Community Fellowship at Columbia University

The challenges of reentry for anyone leaving prison are well documented.<sup>24</sup> In Massachusetts and elsewhere, poverty, racial inequality, and failures of social support trap many formerly incarcerated people in a cycle of vulnerability despite their efforts to rejoin society. Lack of economic opportunities, cultures of violence, drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, and family instability all contribute to recidivism. Additionally, recidivism perpetuates the very culture of violence—including gun violence—that presents grave challenges to short- and long-term community safety and well-being.

Access to college while in prison sets people up for greater success in reentry. College-in-prison programs in Massachusetts create communities within prison that are centered around learning and personal transformation that continue and expand after release.

Many college-in-prison programs across the country find that providing reentry and alumni support, a service in keeping with the kinds of networking and career advancement support that colleges and universities typically offer to all students and alumni, is crucial for student success post-release. Indeed, initial drafts of US Department of Education regulations indicate that reentry and alumni services will be a required component of Pell eligibility evaluation of college-in-prison programs.

While DOC administrators have interpreted its reentry volunteer policy narrowly in the past, there is an opportunity to facilitate positive reentry outcomes by ensuring that college-in-prison programs are allowed latitude to support former students once they leave prison, in line with college and university professional norms.

# CONCLUSION

The working group behind this position paper embodies the power and appeal of college in prison. We are Republicans and Democrats, educators and businesspeople, government officials, philanthropists, and practitioners. Some of us have worked in law enforcement, others among us are formerly incarcerated. In other words, we are precisely the kind of coalition that has advocated for college in prison in states all across this country for a generation. We are people who believe our prison system can do more than simply punish. The high cost of incarceration should, at minimum, yield a positive outcome for taxpayers. We believe that education is still the most important pathway for anyone seeking something better for themselves and their community.

As Massachusetts prepares for an election and a new government, our group asks the incoming governor—whoever they may be and whatever party they represent—to help Massachusetts become a leader, once again, in the field of college in prison.

We will ask the new governor, first, to make college in prison a priority—as a component of their criminal justice agenda and on the ground in correctional facilities across the state. Second, we will ask the governor to ensure that some physical space within those facilities be dedicated to college-in-prison programs so that they can grow and thrive in MA DOC. Lastly, we will ask the new governor to ensure that colleges dedicating resources to work in our prisons have adequate access to their incarcerated students. Our prison system in Massachusetts can and should honor education equally, on par with other factors that take up the time and determine the location and classification of people incarcerated in our state.

This is a modest list. It articulates policy that already exists in prison systems in neighboring states.

Furthermore, none of these changes will incur any cost to the taxpayer or MA DOC. Of course we hope that Massachusetts, like its neighbors, will decide to restore funding to support college in prison.

However, these three steps are imperative to take now if we hope to restore education to its former position in our prison system, and if Massachusetts hopes to take advantage of the restoration of federal funding that will arrive in 2023.

A better system of college in prison will save taxpayer money and increase public safety. Even more, it will help our government in Massachusetts reflect our most cherished values.

# SIGNATORIES

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Ruth Zakarin, *Executive Director, Massachusetts Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence*



# ENDNOTES

1. See [Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity - MacArthur Foundation](#) for why it is important to also capitalize White.
2. The cost of recidivism for Massachusetts for FY 2013 was calculated at \$450 million. See Massachusetts Department of Correction. “Frequently Asked Questions about the DOC.” MassINC analysis of “Survey of Sentencing Practices: FY 2013.” (Boston, MA: Executive Office of the Trial Court, 2014).
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