

Steps to Consider When Starting a College-in-Prison Program

September 2021

Creating a new college-in-prison program requires thoughtfulness. This guide is intended to alert you to important questions that we, the members of the IL-CHEP New Programs Committee, believe should be addressed early on. Much could be said about any of the bullet points below. The additional resources listed at the end of this handout will help you dig deeper.

Please consider the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (IL-CHEP) an accessible and experienced resource. Even if you're not in Illinois, reach out if you want to discuss your emerging program. Good luck!

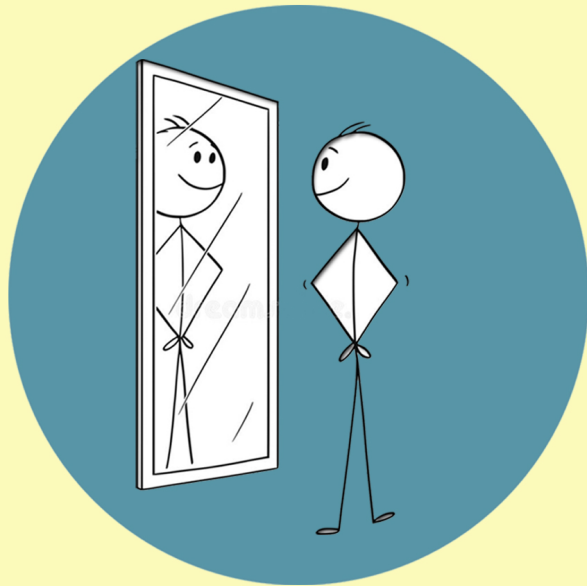
Step 1: Self-Discovery and Exploration

Step 2: Program Design

Step 3: Build Partners on Campus

Step 4: Interface with Prison

Step 5: Future Considerations

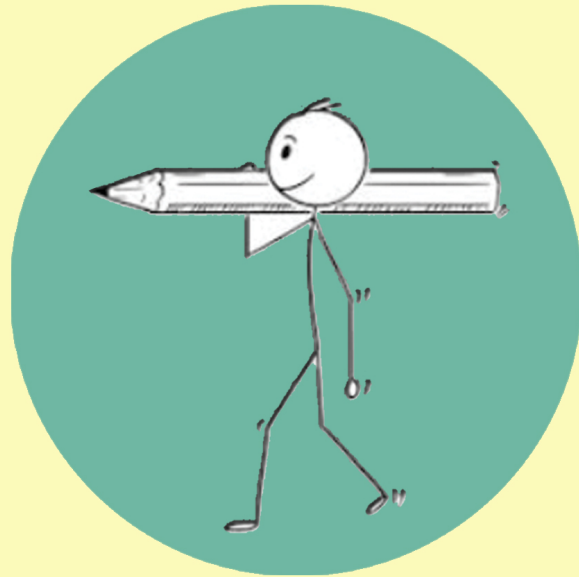


Step 1 Self-Discovery and Exploration

Step 1: Self-Discovery and Exploration

Every program needs a foundation. During this early period, talk values; clarify your aims and motivations; reach out to potential allies. All of this will take time. We urge you not to rush the process. Decide what kind of program you want to build and why.

- Build a Team
 - Who's part of your core team: faculty, staff, students, community members?
- Learn
 - Read widely -- about higher ed in prison, criminal justice, reentry, incarceration
 - Starting a reading group is a great way to educate yourselves and bond as a team
 - Learn about what's happening in the state and in your prospective facility by connecting with local activists and non-profit organizations
 - Volunteer for organizations involved with criminal justice or reentry, but understand that activism in this sphere may compromise your ability to get prison clearance
 - Take opportunities to get into prisons in your state and talk to incarcerated people
 - Attend relevant conferences and webinars



Step 2 Program Design

Step 2: Program Design

Most programs start modestly, with volunteers and slender budgets. But whether you're offering reading groups, guest lectures, for-credit courses, or other forms of academic engagement, you are gaining important experience and building social capital. Your program can build as you go.

Your program design might address the following:

- Content-delivery model, e.g. in-person, video, tablet, correspondence
 - We strongly advise in-person instruction wherever possible
- Certification students will receive, e.g. course, certificate, degree
 - Even if you can't start by offering credit, we advise you to aim for that
- Will students move through the program as a cohort?
- Consider whether and how you might include students from your main campus
- Support components, e.g. academic advising, library services, peer mentoring
- Minimum requirements for students to enroll, e.g. GED or high school diploma
- Student application and orientation process
- Student transfers
 - How will students continue their education if they transfer to another prison?
 - How will students continue their education after release?
- Application, orientation, training, and ongoing support for instructors and administrators
- Evaluation. Determine how you will assess your program and incorporate improvements on an ongoing basis



Step 3 Build Partners on Campus

Step 3: Build Partners on Campus

Conversations with college administration and the Department of Corrections (DOC) will likely happen simultaneously, but we'll start with campus because that's probably your "home base." We encourage you not to fall into the trap of seeing your program through the lens of potential tuition dollars. Here's where it's useful to have your values and your 'why' in place. You need to speak the language of your administration, but be true to your vision of the emerging program.

Your campus climate and preexisting relationships will inform whether you start, for example, with the president's office, office of public engagement, or your department head. Talk to everyone, build connections and allies. Support may come from surprising places. You'll learn early on that running a college-in-prison program involves more than simply teaching. You'll likely find yourself discussing things like compensation for instructors (e.g. off-load or on-load for faculty?), whether a degree can be offered, and the terms of the Memo of Understanding with the Department of Corrections. See whether your university can offer modest start-up grants. Those can support attendance at the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison's annual conference, your participation in a grant-writing professional workshop, or hiring a student to offer administrative assistance.



Step 3

Build Partners on Campus

Step 3: Build Partners on Campus

Here are some of the campus units with which you may want to build relationships:.

- Financial Aid
- Registrar
- Dean/Provost/President
- Careers Office
- Admissions
- Campus Legal
- Advancement and Foundation Relations
 - Connect you with alumni donors and granting organizations
 - Facilitate donations to your program
- Communications
- Faculty Senate
- Graduate Employees Union and faculty union
- Office of Public Engagement
- Undergraduate organizations concerned with criminal justice



Step 4 Interface with Prison

Step 4: Interface with Prison

You need to develop a college-prison partnership. Institutions of higher education are fundamentally different from DOCs in organizational culture, language, and -- well, in most respects. Be prepared for culture shock. Chances are the DOC will be delighted to hear from you. A free program! However, it's wise to expect some level of frustration as you navigate its bureaucracy and occasionally encounter those hostile to the very idea of education in prison. Exercise patience. Stay committed.

Seek to understand the security protocols, clearance check process, gate pass process, dress code, any restrictions on bringing books and materials into the prison, and other security measures. The facility might have restrictions on who can enroll (e.g. sentence length, time to release). What are your non-negotiables? How will you address such restrictions?

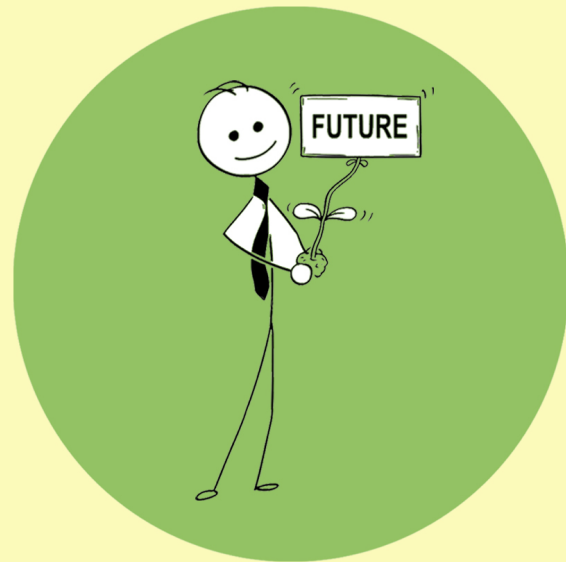
What is the history of higher education in prison in the facility you plan to work in - both on paper and in practice? What educational programs currently are available and how many people are able to gain access? How will your program fit in? Ask other prison education programs in your state for counsel, to learn about un-written codes and procedures.

While you're likely to reach out to your campus administration and the prison system at around the same time, be aware that they'll move forward towards approving your program at different paces. It's a little like a dance.

If you have a particular prison in mind, we suggest you reach out directly to one of its administrators: warden, assistant warden for programs, chaplain, or volunteer coordinator.

If you do not have a particular prison in mind, the Chief of Programs at the Illinois Department of Corrections is a good place to start. In other states, you may want to address the director, adult education administrator, or volunteer coordinator.

Discuss how to build in input from students at the prospective facility about their educational interests and needs. We suggest surveys, focus groups, and in-person discussions.



Step 5 Future Considerations

Step 5: Future Considerations

At some point, you'll likely want to

- Reach out to state and local officials to make them aware of your program
- Purchase software such as a student management database and donor database create a website
- Let local media know about your program, though this is not immediately necessary or even wise

In the future, will you engage in grassroots fundraising? Create a volunteer handbook? Print t-shirts? Create a program logo? Will your program get involved in state-level policy work? Seek to publish a book of student writing?

Other programs can help. Reach out. If your area doesn't already have a coalition of prison education programs, consider starting one. Keep perspective. Building a college-in-prison program is not easy, but it is doable. We're there for you!

Resources

Alliance for Higher Education in Prison. AHEP is the national network of American higher education in prison programs. Its website has resources and tools related to HEP. You can connect to other practitioners and formerly incarcerated students through its social media platforms.

Website: <https://www.higheredinprison.org/resources-and-publications>

FB: <https://www.facebook.com/AllianceforHEP/>

Twitter: [https://twitter.com/AllianceforHEP?ref_](https://twitter.com/AllianceforHEP?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)

[src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/AllianceforHEP?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)

Brick Michael Scott and Julie Ajinkya. "Supporting Success: The Higher Education in Prison Key Performance Indicator Framework." Institute for Higher Education Policy (Sept 2020).

<https://www.ihep.org/publication/supporting-success-the-higher-education-in-prison-key-performance-indicator-framework/>

Burke, Lilah. "Blackboard Behind Bars." Inside Higher Ed (December 10, 2019).

<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/12/10/online-education-comes-prisons>

Correctional Education Association. Its website includes lists of online resources.

<https://ceanational.org/resources/>

Davis, Lori. "Higher Education Programs in Prison: What We Know Now and What We Should Focus On Going Forward." Rand Corporation (August 2019).

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE342.html>

Education Justice Project. Website has reading lists, fact sheets for in-prison programs, and other resources.

<https://educationjustice.net/resources/>

Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (IL-CHEP). This coalition of Illinois programs and individuals is dedicated to providing quality higher education opportunities for people who are incarcerated in Illinois.

Website: <https://ilchep.org/>

FB: <https://www.facebook.com/ILprisoned/>

Jamii Sisterhood. The website of this professional development community of Black women in prison higher education contains useful resources. They also offer consulting services.

<https://jamiisisterhood.com/>

Mt. Tamalpais College. Its website contains multiple useful resources.

<https://www.mttamcollege.org/resources>

TBS Staff. "Prison Education: Guide to College Degrees for Inmates and Ex-Offenders."

The Best Schools (April 22, 2021).

<https://thebestschools.org/magazine/prison-inmate-education-guide/>

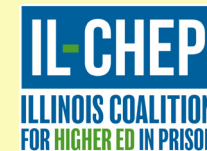
US Department of Education. List of online resources related to prison education..

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/correctional-education.html#1>

Vera Institute of Justice. Its website includes multiple resources and publications related to HEP; Vera also offers technical assistance.

<https://www.vera.org/projects/college-in-prison>

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