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Invisible Students: Challenges to Evaluation in Prison Higher Education

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Abstract

The challenge: This paper examines the state of knowledge and evaluation in prison higher education. Little is known about its efforts, outcomes, and impact or about the students enrolled in such efforts. Potential consequences: Incarcerated college students are a disenfranchised population with restricted autonomy. Without understanding prison higher education efforts and outcomes, colleges and universities run the risk of further marginalizing this group of students. Description/analysis/methods: Using the first comprehensive national survey of prison higher education programs, we assess whether and how data are collected on incarcerated college students and whether these data are used for student tracking and/or outcomes evaluation. We then elucidate a variety of challenges that help explain the current lack of quality data. Rationale/reflection/replication: We find that current data collection among prison higher education programs is extremely limited; most programs are unable to provide basic information about their students, instructors, or key student success metrics such as persistence and completion. We conclude with recommendations for program administrators, colleges and universities, and policymakers involved in the work of prison higher education, equity, and access to higher education.

Keywords: evaluation, prison higher education, incarceration, incarcerated students

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Introduction

In recent years, conversations over the returns to higher education for those in prison have taken on new urgency. In 2015, the Second Chance Pell experiment allowed for a select number of institutions of higher education to distribute federal student aid in the form of Pell Grants to otherwise eligible incarcerated people. By 2023, just under 200 institutions of higher education had participated in the experiment, with an estimated 40,000 incarcerated students drawing Pell Grant dollars to fund postsecondary education (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023). As of July 1, 2023, Pell was expanded further, restoring eligibility to all qualifying postsecondary students incarcerated in state or federal institutions. In this policy context, the number of programs, providers, and incarcerated students enrolled in postsecondary education has grown exponentially (Chestnut et al., 2022).

By some estimates, at least 600 prison higher education programs currently provide coursework and programming to incarcerated people (Gaskill et al., 2023). Yet, our understanding of prison higher education remains surprisingly limited. Federal reporting requirements, such as the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS), do not require institutions of higher education to disaggregate students by incarceration status. Local and state reporting requirements vary widely from state to state. As a result, the majority of colleges and universities have yet to fully integrate incarcerated students into existing data infrastructure mechanisms and requisite reporting (Kersten et al., 2024). Consequently, many of the most fundamental questions for prison higher education remain unanswerable, such as how many incarcerated college students are enrolled in postsecondary education, in which academic pathways they are enrolled, if they complete credentials, and at what rates.

These questions are especially important given that the field of prison higher education is rapidly evolving. Expanded opportunity for Pell-eligible individuals to pursue college-level study during imprisonment is an important policy reform, but it also raises serious questions about the quality of postsecondary education being provided and the importance of monitoring both implementation and outcomes (Community & College Fellowship & Formerly Incarcerated College Graduate Network, 2021). In addition, data-driven quality standards are directly implicated in equity of access to higher education in prison. Meaningful oversight of higher education in prison will require tracking data on students and programs—data that, at present, are not being systematically collected by individual programs, their sponsoring institutions, or the federal government.

In this paper, we examine the state of knowledge and evaluation for prison higher education. Using the first comprehensive national survey of prison higher education programs, we assess whether and how data are collected on incarcerated college students and if these data are being used for the purposes of student tracking and/or outcomes evaluation. We find that current data

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collection among prison higher education programs is extremely limited; most programs are unable to provide basic information about their students, instructors, or key student success metrics such as persistence and completion. Through a set of in-depth interviews, we then elucidate a variety of challenges that help to explain the current lack of reliable data, as well as discuss the types of holistic metrics that are needed for comprehensive program evaluation in the field. We conclude with recommendations for program administrators, colleges and universities, and policymakers involved in the work of prison higher education, as well as for the broader universe of those interested in equity and access to higher education.

Data, Evaluation, and Prison Higher Education

Since their inception, prison education programs have primarily been valued and evaluated according to their effects on criminological outcomes (Castro & Gould, 2018). On this question, the research is clear: available evidence demonstrates that providing educational opportunities in prison is consequential for crime-related outcomes, substantially reducing recidivism rates (Bozick, Steele, Davis, & Turner, 2018). In reviewing extant literature, our research team reviewed 101 studies evaluating "correctional education" programs offered in U.S. prisons (Higher Education in Prison Education Database, n.d.). The studies spanned 95 penal facilities and 95 institutions of higher education. Of the 21 studies in the sample that employed a quasi-experimental design and inferential statistics, the majority (n=15) showed positive effects of postsecondary education programs. Specifically, in-person college prison programs positively influenced post-release employment and negatively affected misconduct among incarcerated people and rates of recidivism for this population. Another four studies yielded both positive and neutral findings, and one found neutral or no effect.

However, a narrow focus on recidivism rates as the primary evaluative criterion for prison higher education can be both limiting and dehumanizing (Castro, 2018; Castro & Brawn, 2017) and miss the many critical psychological, contextual, and community-level factors that shape a range of both short-- and longer-term outcomes (National Academies 2022; Maruna, 2020). In particular, focusing solely on criminological outcomes ignores a much wider range of critical programmatic outcomes, such as those related to quality and equity, and can miss and misidentify educational aims, experiences, and impacts. More broadly, a narrow focus on prison education as correctional intervention rather than academic opportunity makes it difficult to situate this type of program within the broader discussion of postsecondary educational pedagogy and outcomes.

Empirical evidence examining impacts of prison education from educational perspectives are sparse, but slowly emerging (e.g., Moore & Erzen, 2021; Castro, Royer, Aguilar Padilla & Gaskill, 2022. Notably, a new scholarly journal, the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison*, was recently launched to encourage and elevate empirical work drawing on educational paradigms in

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the prison education space. However, much more work is needed to build a credible and paradigmatic evidence base. Just a handful of the studies we reviewed had a focus on student- and academic program-centered outcomes. While few in number, they draw from theories of identity (Lerman & Sadin, 2023a).), self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000), self-actualization (Rogers, 1961), as well as broader frameworks of narrative (Maruna, 2001), and liberation psychology (Martin-Baro, 1994).

This evidence is promising but also makes clear that there are important limitations to existing knowledge. First, most studies of prison higher education are limited to assessing one or just a small number of programs within a particular state correctional system. In our analysis, for instance, 43 of the reviewed studies focused on a single program, while 26 evaluated multiple programs. Of the 26 multi-program studies, 18 (69%) were in single states, 6 (23%) were across multiple states, and only 1 was a national program. (The remaining study did not specify the program's reach.) Thus, the existing body of research can make only limited comparisons between different types of programs and cannot generate descriptions of or conclusions about the field as a whole. Moreover, evidence of variation in student engagement or particularly high-impact practices and whether students have equitable and meaningful access to these experiences is unknown.

Second, extant studies of prison higher education employ mostly descriptive, as opposed to experimental, methodologies. The three most commonly used study methodologies were quantitative (n = 69), qualitative (n = 26), and survey (n = 27). For the 69 quantitative studies, 40 (58%) used inferential statistics, including regression analysis, 16 (23%) used descriptive statistics, 11 (16%) used two or more of these analytical methods, and 2 (3%) used thematic analysis. This makes it difficult to establish the causal effect of participating in prison higher education on students and program outcomes of interest.

Finally, key performance metrics for evaluation used throughout higher education, such as enrollment, persistence, completion, and time-to-credential, are infrequently employed in studies of incarcerated students, leaving unknown how these students compare to non-incarcerated college students in the aggregate. Of the studies in our review, 39 focused on correctional-centered metrics (e.g., recidivism, student behavior/conduct), 18 focused on student-centered metrics (e.g., academic achievement, psychosocial development), and just 4 focused on academic program-centered metrics (e.g., persistence/retention, cost-benefit analysis).

These issues in existing evaluations are especially critical in this moment of unprecedented growth in prison higher education. In the last five years, hundreds of colleges and universities began enrolling incarcerated people for the first time (Gaskill et al., 2023). But this rapid expansion of prison higher education is occurring amid a remarkable dearth of empirical knowledge and understanding about both the practice and outcomes of prison education. Without

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much understanding of effective practices nor how their efforts fit within the broader sphere of prison higher education, program staff are in a difficult position as they attempt to manage and grow successful programs. Now is, therefore, a critical time to create an evaluative paradigm for prison higher education that assists postsecondary education leaders and program directors in both the theoretical work of valuing and values (Schwandt & Gates, 2021) and in the technical work of assessment. To do this, however, we must first understand what data are (and are not) currently available and what barriers exist to more comprehensive efforts around data collection and evaluation in the prison setting.

Data and Methods

In this study, we use data from the *2020 Understanding the Landscape of Higher Education in Prison Survey* to examine the state of data in the field of prison higher education. The *Landscape Survey* was distributed to the universe of known leaders of prison higher education programs across the county using information gathered from the *National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs* and descriptive research conducted by the Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison. Criteria for inclusion were that a program 1) was formally affiliated with an institution of higher education and 2) provided postsecondary education to currently incarcerated people. The survey contained 93 questions that collected both closed- and open-ended responses from participants about their college-in-prison programs during the 2018 - 2019 academic year. The survey had a response rate of 45.8% (60 respondents out of a total of 131 programs).

A majority of responding programs were higher education in prison programs within a single college or university (n = 46, 76.7%) and provided in-person, on-site instruction at an average of 3.2 prisons (SD = 5.5). Six participating programs offered primarily remote instruction, with those programs operating at an average of 26.3 facilities (SD = 19.2). Among the 60 survey participants, 27 offered credit-bearing certificates to students, and 39 offered at least one degree pathway. To the best of our knowledge, these data represent the only source of broad-based descriptive information on the landscape of prison higher education programs in the country.

In addition to these quantitative data, we also conducted a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a diverse group of 12 prison higher education program leaders. These individuals were recruited as part of an annual co-learning cohort program run by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, and the selected leaders' respective programs were broadly representative of the field. Interviews were conducted via Zoom during the Summer of 2020 and were transcribed and coded by the research team.

Results

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We begin by assessing the current state of prison higher education data collection and evaluation. From information gathered at the start of the admissions process to student outcomes collected following degree completion, we find significant variation in the extent of data collected and the methods of data collection.

Starting with program admissions, we see that different entities (programs, colleges/universities, and Departments of Corrections) collect different materials and information for incarcerated students seeking to matriculate (see Table 1). Specifically, of the 60 responding prison higher education programs, the most common information collected as a criterion for admission was a form of secondary credential, including a high school diploma, a GED, or a HiSET credential (n = 55, 91.7%). Of the programs using this criterion in the admissions process, it was most frequently required by college/university entities (72.7%) and/or the program itself (52.7%), followed by the Department of Corrections (29.1%). Other criteria considered in admissions by at least some programs varied widely, including written application forms and essays, transcripts, and interviews, as well as information relevant to criminal history and correctional status (e.g., gang affiliations and crime of conviction). The lack of alignment in admissions requirements across entities and programs contributes to the challenge of rigorous program evaluation across prison higher education programs, as it makes it difficult to know whether programs are enrolling comparable populations.

Additionally, some programs relying on paper admissions and enrollment processes cited difficulties with obtaining documentation for applicants, such as transcripts, placement tests, birth certificates, or financial aid forms (18.2% of 55 responding programs). While an electronic or online process can ease administrative burdens and increase data accuracy, setting programs up to more easily collect ongoing data, many prison facilities restrict or significantly limit digital access for incarcerated students. Likewise, there is a sizable variation in whether incarcerated students can access computers while inside or whether such technology is functional (Castro et al., 2024).

TABLE 1. Prison higher education admissions criteria

	Number of Programs Requiring (N = 60)	**Percent of Programs Requiring**	**Required by Each Entity (Number and (%))**		
			Prison Program	College or University	Department of Corrections
GED/HiSet, high school diploma, or equivalent	55	92	29 (52.7%)	40 (72.7%)	16 (29.1%)
Written application form	47	78	30 (62.8%)	31 (66.0%)	7 (14.9%)
Age	35	58	15 (42.9%)	29 (82.9%)	6 (17.1%)

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Written essay(s)	31	52	23 (74.2%)	10 (32.3%)	1 (3.2%)
Transcript(s)	27	45	11 (40.7%)	24 (89.9%)	2 (7.4%)
Length of sentence	24	40	16 (66.7%)	6 (25.0%)	10 (41.7%)
Type or frequency of disciplinary infractions	23	38	5 (21.7%)	2 (8.7%)	20 (87.0%)
Interview performance	20	33	16 (80.0%)	6 (30.0%)	4 (20.0%)
Placement testing (e.g., ACCUPLACER)	29	32	10 (52.6%)	13 (68.4%)	3 (15.8%)
Grade point average	15	25	6 (40.0%)	11 (73.3%)	3 (20.0%)
GED/HiSet score	14	23	9 (64.3%)	10 (71.4%)	4 (28.6%)
Housing unit or security level	14	23	5 (35.7%)	4 (28.6%)	10 (71.4%)
Crime of conviction	10	17	2 (20.0%)	1 (10.0%)	7 (70.0%)
Restricted movement	9	15	1 (11.1%)	1 (11.1%)	7 (77.8%)
Designated gang affiliation status	6	10	0 (0.0%)	1 (16.7%)	5 (83.3%)
Drug test results	5	8	0 (0.0%)	1 (20.0%)	4 (80.0%)
Other*	8	13	3 (37.5%)	5 (62.5%)	1 (12.5%)

*Includes race/ethnicity, 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 the application process.

When information about students is readily available and accessible, it can be used for program evaluation, strategic planning, and tracking student outcomes. However, even when program staff do have access to these data, the information may not be accurate or reliable (see Table 2). When asked for the number of students enrolled, for instance, less than half of programs were able to report the exact number (43.86%). Slightly more reported a close estimate (49.12% of 57 responding programs). In comparison, when asked to report more detailed information about enrolled students, such as their demographics, the vast majority of programs were unable to report exact numbers. Responses differed based on the demographic category, with some demographic categories (e.g., race/ethnicity) more frequently collected by programs than others (e.g., sexual orientation, family background, disability status). On no demographic questions,

however, were all programs able to provide even estimated numbers—and on some questions, the majority of programs could not provide any data.

TABLE 2. Availability and accuracy of incarcerated student demographic data

	# of Programs (%) Responding in the Following Ways:		
	I cannot provide this information.	This is an estimate.	This is an exact number.
Number of Students	3 (5.26%)	29 (50.87%)	25 (43.86%)
Student Race/Ethnicity			
Asian, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander	9 (34.62%)	12 (46.15%)	5 (19.23%)
Black, African American, Caribbean, Afro-Latino	10 (30.3%)	17 (51.52%)	6 (18.18%)
Latina/o/x, Hispanic, Chicana/o/x	10 (35.71%)	13 (46.43%)	5 (17.86%)
Native American, Indigenous	10 (41.67%)	7 (29.17%)	7 (29.17%)
White, European	10 (31.25%)	17 (53.13%)	5 (15.63%)
Multiethnic, Multiracial	11 (61.11%)	3 (16.67%)	4 (22.22%)
Additional racial identities not listed here	11 (68.75%)	2 (12.5%)	3 18.75%)
Unknown	11 (73.33%)	1 (6.67%)	3 (20%)

Accurate and complete data on program staff and instructors was similarly difficult for program staff to report. In the survey, "instructors" referred to anyone who led or provided primary instruction for a course, either paid or unpaid. This excluded teaching assistants, tutors, and speakers at a lecture series. Again, we find that even when programs have data on instructors, the information may not always be accurate or reliable (see Table 3). When asked for the number of instructors who taught during the previous academic year, roughly half of responding programs

(52%) reported knowing the exact number, while about a third (38%) provided an estimate or educated guess.

When asked about the type of instructors who taught during the most recent academic year (e.g., adjunct faculty, community members, correctional personnel, full-time program staff, graduate and undergraduate students, and/or faculty at a college or university), again less than half of programs reported knowing the exact number (44.9% of 49 responding programs) and again the second most common response was knowing a close estimate (28.57%). Finally, when asked about how instructors who taught during the last academic year were compensated (e.g., through adjunct rates, adjunct replacement pay, course credit, stipends, teaching assistantships, or as an offset to other teaching loads), half of the programs reported knowing the exact number of instructors who were compensated in different ways (50% of 46 responding programs) and about a quarter (26.09%) gave a close estimate.

TABLE 3. Availability and accuracy of data on prison higher education program instructors

	Number of Programs (N = 50)	Percent of Total Responses
Number of instructors		
Yes, I know the exact number.	26	52%
Yes, I know a close estimate.	19	38%
No, but I can provide an educated guess.	3	6%
No, I cannot provide this information.	2	4%
Type of Instructors		
Yes, I know the exact number.	22	44.9%
Yes, I know a close estimate.	14	28.57%
No, but I can provide an educated guess.	4	8.16%
No, I cannot provide this information.	9	18.37%
Compensation of Instructors		
Yes, I know the exact number.	23	50%
Yes, I know a close estimate.	12	26.09%
No, but I can provide an educated guess.	6	13.04%
No, I cannot provide this information.	5	10.87%

Program Evaluation and Defining Success

In addition to descriptive information about their programs, the landscape survey asked a set of questions specifically related to program evaluation and outcomes. When participants were asked to describe the top three ways their programs defined student success, the most commonly listed metric for success was completion of the program. However, when asked for the number of

students who earned credentials (i.e., certificates, licensures, associates, bachelors, masters, doctorate, or other professional degrees) during the previous academic year, only about half of programs reported knowing the exact number (54.76% of responding programs) (see Table 4), other data collected by programs to assess outcomes included course completion (93.6% of 47 responding programs) and course GPA and/or grades (78.7%).

TABLE 4. Student outcome metrics collected by prison higher education programs

Type of Data Collected	Number of Programs (N = 47)	Percent of Programs
Course completion	44	93.6%
Course GPA and/or grades	37	78.7%
Attrition rates	21	44.7%
Retention rates	16	34.0%
Student transfers out of facility	15	31.9%
Recidivism rates	9	19.1%
Time-to-credential	8	17.0%
Post-graduation information	6	12.8%
Other*	4	8.5%

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

Fewer respondents were able to reliably report metrics related to attrition, such as the number of students lost due to transfer, stop-out, or other forms of attrition (see Table 5). On this question, about a quarter could provide an exact number, and another third were able to offer a close estimate, but almost 20% of programs were unable to provide any relevant information. A related metric for success mentioned by programs was persistence with education after release from prison. When asked for the number of students now enrolled at a postsecondary institution outside prison, the majority (62.75% of 51 responding programs) could not provide this information (see Table 5).

TABLE 5. Availability and accuracy of student attrition data in prison higher education

	Number of Programs (N = 56)	Percent of Total Responses
Number of students program lost due to transfer, stop-out, or other forms of attrition		
Yes, I know the exact number.	13	23.21%
Yes, I know a close estimate.	19	33.93%

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No, but I can provide an educated guess.	13	23.21%
No, I cannot provide this information.	11	19.64%

Number of former students enrolled at a postsecondary institution outside prison	**Number of Programs (N = 51)**	**Percent of Total Responses**
Yes, I know the exact number.	8	15.69%
Yes, I know a close estimate.	7	13.73%
No, but I can provide an educated guess.	4	7.84%
No, I cannot provide this information.	32	62.75%

Challenges and Opportunities for Data Evaluation in Prison Higher Education

Data from the 2020 Landscape Survey provide a bleak picture of existing information related to prison higher education. Despite this, program leaders who participated in interviews and focus groups were eager to discuss the kinds of data and methods that might be most useful in assessing the impact of their programs. In fact, program leaders mentioned wanting access to a range of data—recidivism rates, employment data, information on whether students enroll in higher education upon release and other outcome metrics.

In particular, many programs hoped to find more systematic ways to assess the quality of their programs and their students' progress. As one leader put it, "Where I am really lacking is program learning outcomes assessment. I need a really cohesive, coherent system of assessing learning outcomes above and beyond what students get for grades… I would like to have institutional data… And I would also love to have like educational history… Would be interesting to get some family-related data too, you know." Another concurred, saying: "I'd like to be able to say, well, this is the percentage of completers we've had and, you know, this is how many courses we've run and this is how many credit hours we've completed. And it would be nice if we could do a real zeroed-in evaluation of processes that are wasting time or processes that maybe could be eliminated to make it run more smoothly."

Others expressed their sense that improving access to information was necessary to enable them to assess and improve their programs, but they were unsure what metrics to prioritize or how to begin efforts at data collection. "I just wish I knew what kinds of data would be beneficial for me to keep," said one program leader. "Or, you know, would help me to run a better program." Noted another: "I would love to know if the college prep program—if the curriculum as it is now—is truly effective in someone persisting with the college program. [What] I'm really curious to see is if it is actually helpful or not. Because if it isn't—if it's not benefiting the students and we need to make changes—then we shouldn't have to wait, you know, years later to reflect back."

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Beyond wanting to use data to improve content and curriculum, program leaders shared other ways data collection and evaluation could improve their programs. Ideas included enabling comparisons across higher education in prison programs, collecting longitudinal data to understand long-term impacts, using data-driven processes to streamline day-to-day operations, and leveraging data to inform their community members. "I would like to do a comparison basically between our program and another correspondence program, and between our program and face-to-face programs—what are they getting, the success rates. How do they vary? Are your students more successful or less?... We have some very successful students, but is there something else that we can be doing differently?"

However, despite nearly all of the program leaders we spoke to acknowledging the importance of data collection and evaluation, many also lacked the time, staff, and institutional support to make this possible. They reported that staff "have very little time to allocate to collection and analysis of data which would help our work—unfortunately," due to the fact that their programs (and prison systems) were often overburdened with other, more immediate activities and concerns. In this respect, program leaders described a range of challenges collecting data, noting that some types of data, such as recidivism records or student demographic data, were especially difficult to collect. These challenges included difficulties gaining access to data from the Department of Corrections, needing approval for program evaluation research from Departments of Corrections, and data being stored differently across institutions.

In many localities, Department of Corrections security protocols made it arduous and time intensive to collect and access data, and sometimes data collection was directly prohibited and programs required specific approvals to carry out program evaluations. In turn, limited access to data made it hard for programs to evaluate short and long-term outcomes. In particular, interviewees expressed a desire to collect data on students who had completed the education programs, but cited difficulties in doing this. Describing these challenges, one leader told us, "We can't have any lines of communication with students." Program leaders noted that they do not get notified when students are released and have no way to get in contact with students who have left prison. Summing up the issue, one leader said: "We don't know where they go [once they are released], so we don't have that information and they [the DOC] don't always tell us in there. The facility is not required to let us know that. So, if they [the students] don't volunteer that information, we can't get it." Describing the pervasiveness of this issue within the field of higher education in prison, another noted that, "All of us have been really trying to think of ways to reach out to those on the outside…The thing with us is, once they are out of the system, we just don't know where they are."

Even data from online student learning platforms, which can lend insight into student engagement, could be difficult for program staff to obtain and use. As one program director

shared, “we use [a digital] learning management system, but we don’t actually pull and collect any of their [student] data because we don't have authorization to do that.” Likewise, when a program seeks external support with data collection and evaluation, they can encounter institutional barriers that make it difficult for researchers to gain access to students. As one leader noted, “One of the things that could be a challenge is that if we want to bring a person who is collecting data that doesn't have a background check, that person cannot enter the prison whenever they want. We have limited time during which DOC provides those trainings.” Another barrier described by leaders was the incompatibility of data between institutions. For example, each college in a consortium might categorize race differently, and different organizations that collect data might code it differently (e.g., the correctional department does not keep student ID numbers, colleges don't keep state prison ID numbers and prison locations, incarcerated names are often different than matriculating names, dates are stored with different masking, or numbers that begin with 0s are truncated and need to be manually corrected).

Finally, the social context of students presented particular challenges for many respondents when it came to tracking their longer-term outcomes. Relative to standard college students, those released from prison were more likely to be homeless or have unstable housing, making it difficult to maintain contact for follow-up data collection. Reflecting on this issue, some program leaders described ways they might hope to keep in touch with students who had left. For example, **“**I’d like to keep family contact information. So, if they’re transferred or if they’re released, we have some kind of way to maybe check in with them a year from now and find out, you know, what happened to them. And where are they, you know, have they continued their education, are they interested in continuing their education? But those are things that I’d like to do, [that we’re] not necessarily actively doing.”

Similarly, some former students work multiple or transient jobs once they leave prison, or have informal working arrangements that do not show up in administrative records. “The one thing that we’re trying to do now, and it’s proven a little bit challenging, that we’re working on, is employment data,” described one leader. “Which is a little bit tough because that involves legal privacy releases and reporting to the EDD [Employment Development Department]. And the tough thing about data for that is we have some students that frankly are working under the table…especially when you’re working construction or something like that, which a lot of our students train for, they’re working for family members and things like that.” This makes it difficult to collect systematic and reliable employment data for the student population.

Overcoming Challenges and Building the Field

Despite these many obstacles, though, nearly all of those with whom we spoke had clear aspirations and ideas for improving data collection and implementing meaningful evaluations of their programs. Most strikingly, their approaches to thinking about evaluation were frequently

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expansive and positioned education as being potentially transformative for many students. Many program leaders were especially adamant that success within prison higher education programs should not be evaluated only using recidivism and other criminal justice metrics. But many also did not believe that higher education in prison should be evaluated using traditional academic measures alone. Instead, they argued for a holistic evaluation framework that adequately captured the multidimensional effects of higher education in prison.

In this regard, one promising set of outcome metrics that many leaders pointed to was related to the social and psychological aspects of education; as one leader put it, "thinking about education as a process of learning and curiosity and community." The same leader went on to say: "I think people having the sense of success of, 'I did not just receive a degree or get a good grade, but I actually did something that was really difficult, and I pushed through, and I actually relied on other people to help me, and I learned how to ask other people for help and support.' To me, that's a measure of success." Developing a sense of "grit" and determination was one of many perceived effects on people's psycho-social orientations: "I think it's a success when the light goes on, you know, when they get excited about learning, when they see something new that they've never seen before."

Another, related set of outcomes was tied to critical thinking and a more robust sense of self. "They perceive that their quality of life has improved, that they understand themselves better, they understand their place in the world better, that they can think more critically." For those in prison, higher education was described by many program leaders as a process that fundamentally changes students' sense of self and, in turn, their path forward. "College education is really beneficial to our population and that's not just in terms of finding a job or higher paying job opportunities, but just the development of the person himself and [education's ability to] help them rebuild their lives. I believe that education really is a tool for individuals to have a better future."

Many program leaders emphasized that these sorts of holistic outcomes were equally important—or indeed, even more so—for students who were not getting out of prison. Where the traditional metrics of employment and recidivism often focus attention on effects of education following release from incarceration, several leaders were quick to note that, "everyone in society is capable of change if given the right resources and support. And just because someone is incarcerated does not mean they do not have the capacity to learn and want more for their lives." One program leader told us: "The impact education has had on their attitude, on how they interact with others, I think that's the value, regardless of whether or not they get out. … Even if they don't get released. I mean, we have students who are in there for life, but they still go [to school]. They're not getting out and when they're sharing their story, the impact education has had on their attitude, on how they interact with others, I think that's the value. Regardless of whether or not they get out."

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By focusing on the inherent value of education, program leaders proposed a broad framework for conceptualizing (and ultimately measuring) outcomes. To many, success meant that students could "flourish also, in all parts of their life" and "feel connected to other people." One leader described her own program's definition as, "We think about success, if the students have what they need… in order to be emotionally, physically, psychologically, spiritually, and educationally successful, then I think we're doing what we're supposed to be doing. …Personally, I would say I would want it [the measure of success] to be liberation… It doesn't matter if all of our students are coming to class and they have A's…because the other part of program success is the mission of the program, which is for them [students] to not just get a four-year degree, but also to be able to use that four-year degree to then go out and serve and work and create… Those are the ways that we're measuring success. Not just because they got an A."

Discussion

Information on the availability and reliability of prison higher education data suggest significant challenges associated with current evaluation efforts, and reveal critical gaps in our ability to understand outcomes and impacts for the field. The programs represented in the *2020 Landscape Survey*—which constitute nearly half of all programs known to be operating in the U.S. as of that year—reported limited available data regarding student metrics of success, demographics of student participation, faculty demographic diversity, student attrition, and educational persistence following release from prison. These are worthy areas of data collection and reporting and can be critical for internal implementation, evaluation, and process improvements. But many prison higher education programs are considerably strained in their ability to collect reliable information. Restrictions imposed by Departments of Corrections, combined with limited resources and capacity, can make evaluation efforts difficult to both implement and sustain.

These findings have important practical and policy implications. At present, the dearth of available and reliable data means it is difficult to evaluate prison education programs, understand differences across programs, or track the state of the field. Policymakers, as well as college and university administrators, must allocate greater resources towards the meaningful evaluation of prison education—and this necessarily starts with a greater focus on data collection. The recent growth of prison higher education programs means that these initiatives may not yet be part of the formal data infrastructure of their sponsoring college or university. In more politically conservative environments, for example, prison education programs have needed to exist independently from colleges and universities to remain viable, and these programs built independent data collection infrastructure for internal and external purposes. As the policy landscape pivots toward greater inclusion of incarcerated people in postsecondary education, many prison higher education programs are just now moving toward expanded institutional integration in key areas of data collection and reporting (Kersten et al., 2024).

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In addition, practitioners need time and support to think about the aims of their programs and how, specifically, the programs can accomplish those aims (e.g., building a theory of change). The basics of evaluation theory (e.g., Schwandt, 2014) can guide high quality evaluation practices, but require intellectual investment in the identification of shared values and overall design. At the same time, though, prison education programs do not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to evaluation; rather, they can look to similar efforts across higher education for metrics of impact and outcomes. For example, TRiO programs, transfer student programs, veterans' programs, and related efforts around non-traditional student populations may help prison education practitioners design program evaluations that are grounded in their specific context. Many colleges and universities have program evaluation templates available through their undergraduate education office or affiliated units that could serve as an additional resource.

In sum, the current state of knowledge and evaluation for prison higher education is limited. Practitioners are unable to provide basic information about their students and instructors or key student success metrics such as completion and time-to-credential. The lack of quality information about prison higher education programs is, in part, a function of working with students who are incarcerated and therefore difficult to track. Consequently, it is difficult for practitioners to use these data for the purposes of student tracking, implementation, and/or outcomes evaluation. Policymakers and higher education leaders must make greater investments in the evaluation of prison education programs, both for program improvement and to meet their responsibility to this important and growing student population.

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