Second Chance Pell: Five Years of Expanding Higher Education Programs in Prisons, 2016–2021

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The Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative (SCP), launched by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in 2015, provides need-based Pell Grants to people in state and federal prisons. The initiative examines whether expanding access to financial aid increases incarcerated adults' participation in postsecondary educational opportunities. In 2016, ED selected 67 colleges in 28 states. In 2020, ED expanded Second Chance Pell to include a total of 130 colleges from 42 states and Washington, DC.[1] This report summarizes the reach of Second Chance Pell programs in the fifth year of the initiative using survey data collected from 64 of the participating colleges. Forty-eight colleges did not enroll Second Chance Pell students during the 2020–2021 financial aid year because of either pandemic-related restrictions that closed their programs or delays in initiating their programs. Eighteen colleges did not respond.

Highlights

- Even with substantial decreases in the prison population across nearly every state, student enrollment continued to increase in 2020–2021.
- Although there continue to be racial/ethnic disparities in enrollment, credential achievement is in line with the racial and ethnic demographics of the student population.
- Changes due to COVID-19 are anticipated to have a permanent impact on modes of instruction, with more colleges moving towards distance learning or hybrid models.

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) provides technical assistance to the participating colleges and corrections departments to ensure that the programs provide high-quality postsecondary education in prison and after release. The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Simplification Act, signed into law on December 27, 2020, lifted the ban on federal Pell Grants for incarcerated students, which had been in place since 1994.[2] Once it takes effect, all incarcerated people will be eligible to apply for federal aid by the 2023–2024 academic year regardless of their length of sentence or type of offense. In 2022, the Second Chance Pell Initiative will expand again, increasing the number of participating colleges and increasing opportunities for incarcerated people to enroll and earn credentials.

The positive impacts of postsecondary education in prison

Postsecondary education in prison contributes to successful reentry for people who have been incarcerated and promotes public safety.

- **Positive self-worth and development:** People who participate in postsecondary education in prison describe the experience as transformative.[3] They become positive role models in prison and develop new perspectives and goals.[4] Postsecondary education in prison is an opportunity for self-reflection and improvement and can positively influence people's future choices.[5]

- **Preparing for post-release jobs and successful reentry:** 70 percent of all jobs in 2027 will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.[6] However, only 6 percent of incarcerated people have attained an associate's degree or higher compared to 37 percent of non-incarcerated people.[7]

- **Racial equity:** Postsecondary education is a primary avenue for upward mobility—especially among people of color, who disproportionately make up the prison population.[8] Additionally, postsecondary programs during or after prison provide people with knowledge, skills, and connections they can use to benefit their children and families, multiplying the impact of a single college degree.[9]

- **Public safety:** Incarcerated people who participate in postsecondary education programs have 48 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not.[10] As incarcerated people achieve higher levels of education, their likelihood of recidivism decreases.[11]

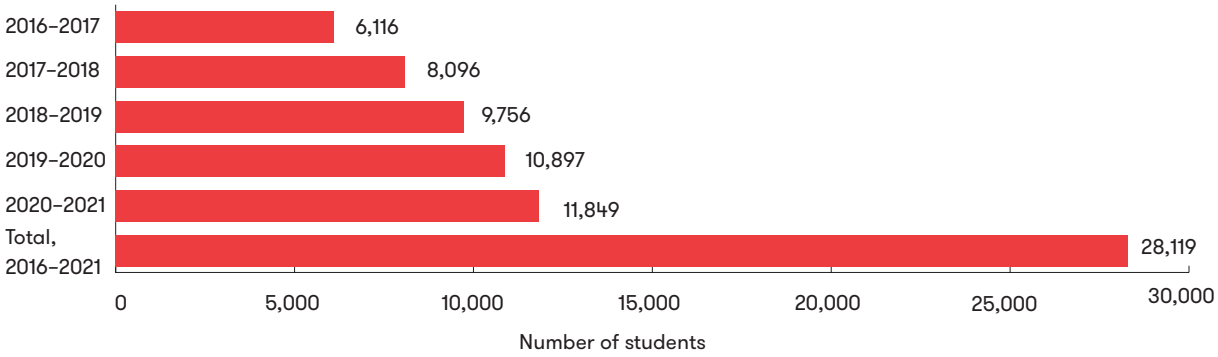
- **Safety inside prisons:** Prisons with postsecondary education programs have fewer violent incidents than prisons without them, creating safer working conditions for staff and safer living environments for incarcerated people.[12]

- **Economic savings:** Postsecondary education leads to less recidivism. This means that every dollar invested in prison-based education yields four to five dollars in taxpayer savings from reduced incarceration costs.[13]

Enrollments and credentials

Vera's survey found that over the five years of Second Chance Pell, enrollment increased at colleges every year, including during the 2020–2021 financial aid year when there were substantial decreases in the prison population nationally.[14] (See Figure 1.) Although colleges continued to increase their enrollments, that rate of increase slowed, likely because of challenges that programs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

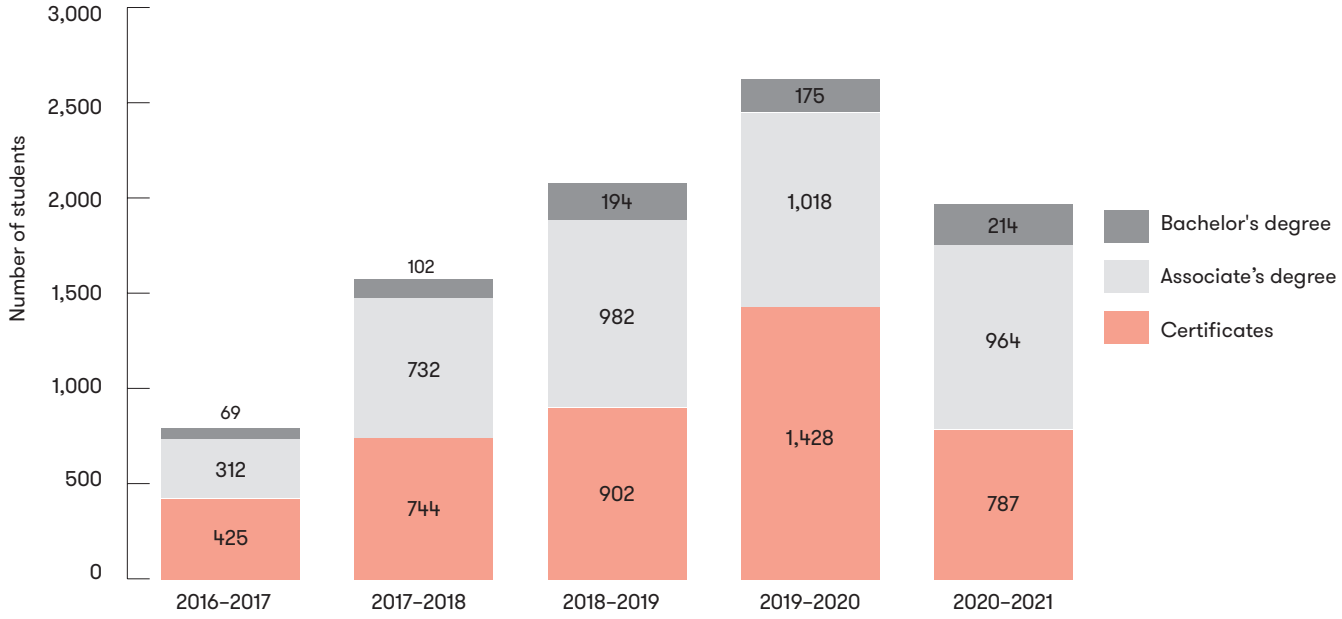
Figure 1. Unduplicated students enrolled in Second Chance Pell*



* Unduplicated students refers to the number of unique participants enrolled through Second Chance Pell over the five financial aid years reported here. (Some students participating in longer programs enrolled in multiple years.)

Over the past five years, 28,119 unique—or "unduplicated"—students have enrolled in postsecondary education through the Second Chance Pell Initiative. In that time, more than 9,000 students have earned either an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, or a certificate or diploma, including more than 1,900 credentials earned in the past year. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Credentials earned by year and by type

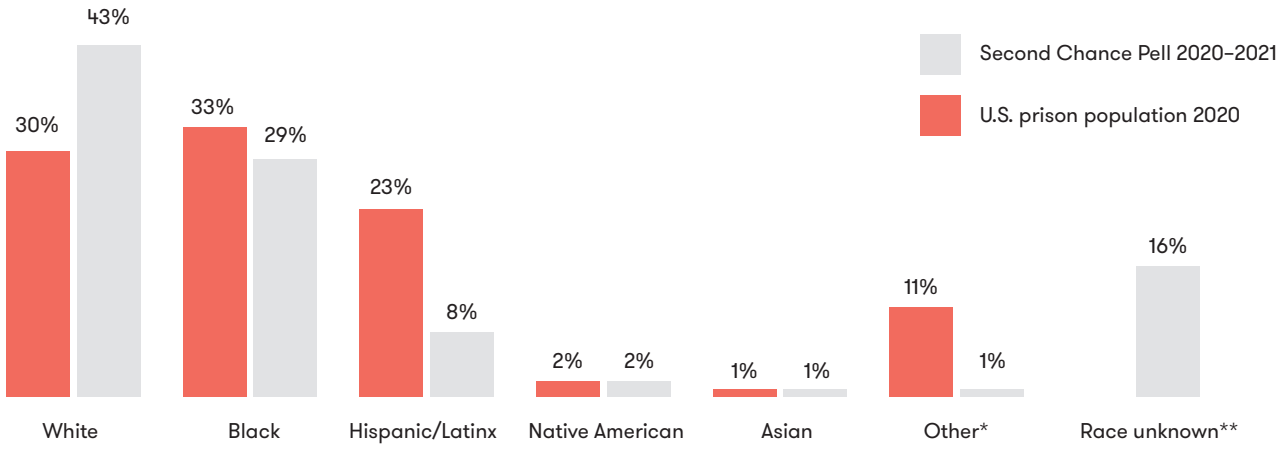


Student demographics across enrollment and credentials earned

Overall, there are some disparities in enrollment rates across race and ethnicity between Second Chance Pell students and the U.S. prison population. (See Figure 3.)

- White participants are overrepresented among Second Chance Pell students (43 percent compared to 30 percent of the prison population).
- Approximately 8 percent of Second Chance Pell students are Hispanic/Latinx compared to 23 percent of the prison population.
- Twenty-nine percent of Second Chance Pell students are Black compared to 33 percent of the prison population.[15]

Figure 3. Race and ethnicity of Second Chance Pell students and prison population[15]

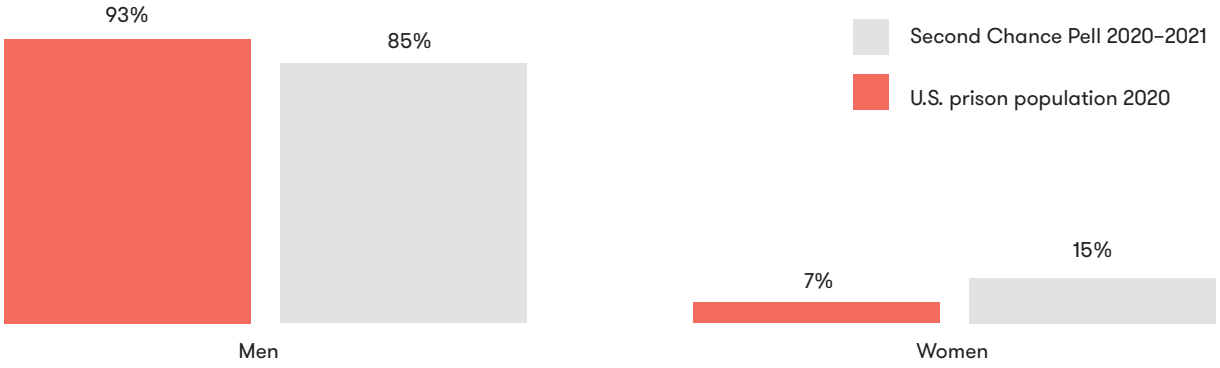


* Other includes people who identify as two or more races or another race that was not broken out in other categories.
** Race data not collected, not reported, or student refused race/ethnicity questions.
Source: For the U.S. prison population, see https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p20st.pdf.

Regarding the gender of Second Chance Pell students compared to the overall prison population, there are also disparities. (See Figure 4.)

- Eighty-five percent of Second Chance Pell students are people housed in facilities designated for men, compared to 93 percent of the overall prison population.
- Approximately 15 percent of Second Chance Pell students are in facilities designated for women, compared to 7 percent of the prison population.

Figure 4. Second Chance Pell students and prison population, by gender-designated housing facility[16]

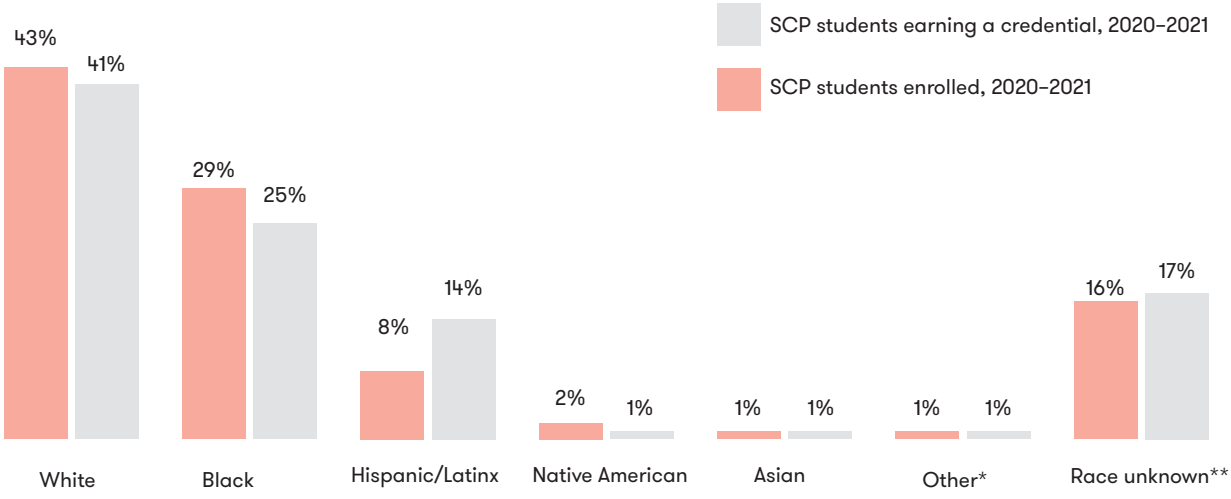


Source: For the U.S. prison population, see https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p20st.pdf.

Vera also surveyed programs about the race and ethnicity of students earning credentials. (See Figure 5.) Overall, the students who earned credentials in the last year were relatively proportionate with Second Chance Pell student enrollment by race and ethnicity. A notable exception was Hispanic/Latinx students, who earned credentials at nearly double their participation rate.

- White students comprised 43 percent of enrolled Second Chance Pell students and 41 percent of those earning credentials.
- Black students comprised 29 percent of enrolled Second Chance Pell students and 25 percent of those earning credentials.
- Hispanic/Latinx students earned credentials at nearly twice their enrollment rate, earning 14 percent of credentials and comprising 8 percent of students.

Figure 5. Second Chance Pell enrollment and earned credentials, by race and ethnicity of students, 2020–2021



* Other includes people who identify as two or more races or another race that was not broken out in other categories.
** Race data not collected, not reported, or student refused race/ethnicity questions.

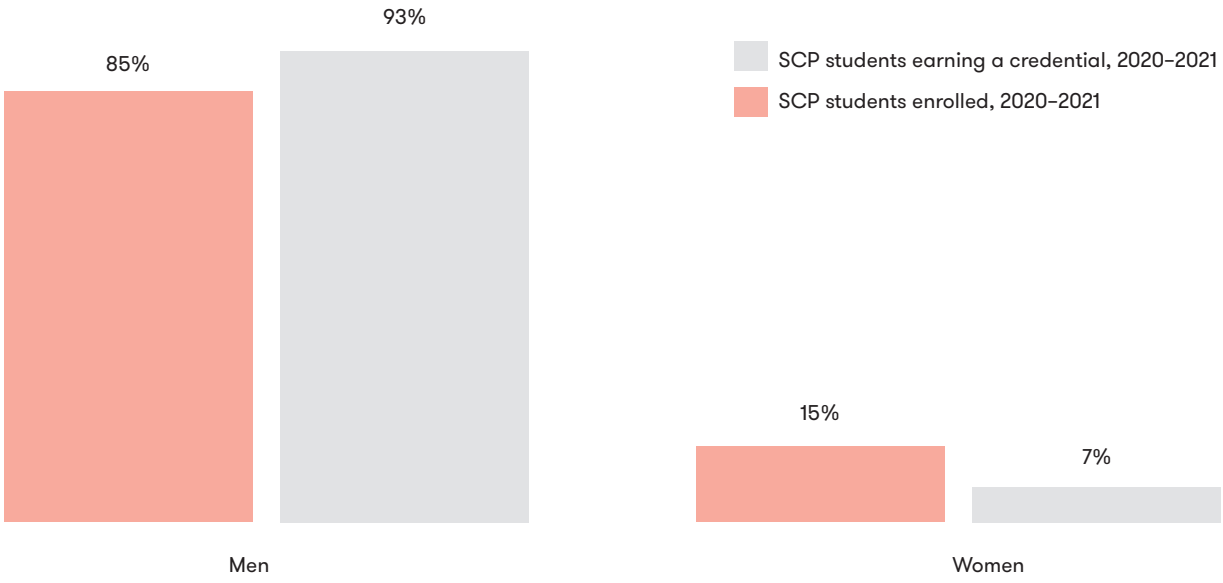
Source: For the U.S. prison population, see https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p20st.pdf.

Regarding earned credentials and gender, Vera's survey of programs showed an opposite relationship between SCP students who earned credentials and gender compared to that of enrollments and gender. (See Figure 6.)

- Students in housing designated for men accounted for 93 percent of earned credentials but only 85 percent of enrollment.
- However, students in housing designated for women accounted for 15 percent of student enrollment but only 7 percent of earned credentials.

Women are enrolling and participating at twice the rate as their presence in the prison population, but they are underperforming in earning credentials. Challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic may have disproportionately impacted students in facilities designated for women. (See next section "Ongoing impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on Second Chance Pell programs.") It is important to note that these are likely underestimations of total earned credentials by SCP students because very few programs track higher education enrollment following release from prison.

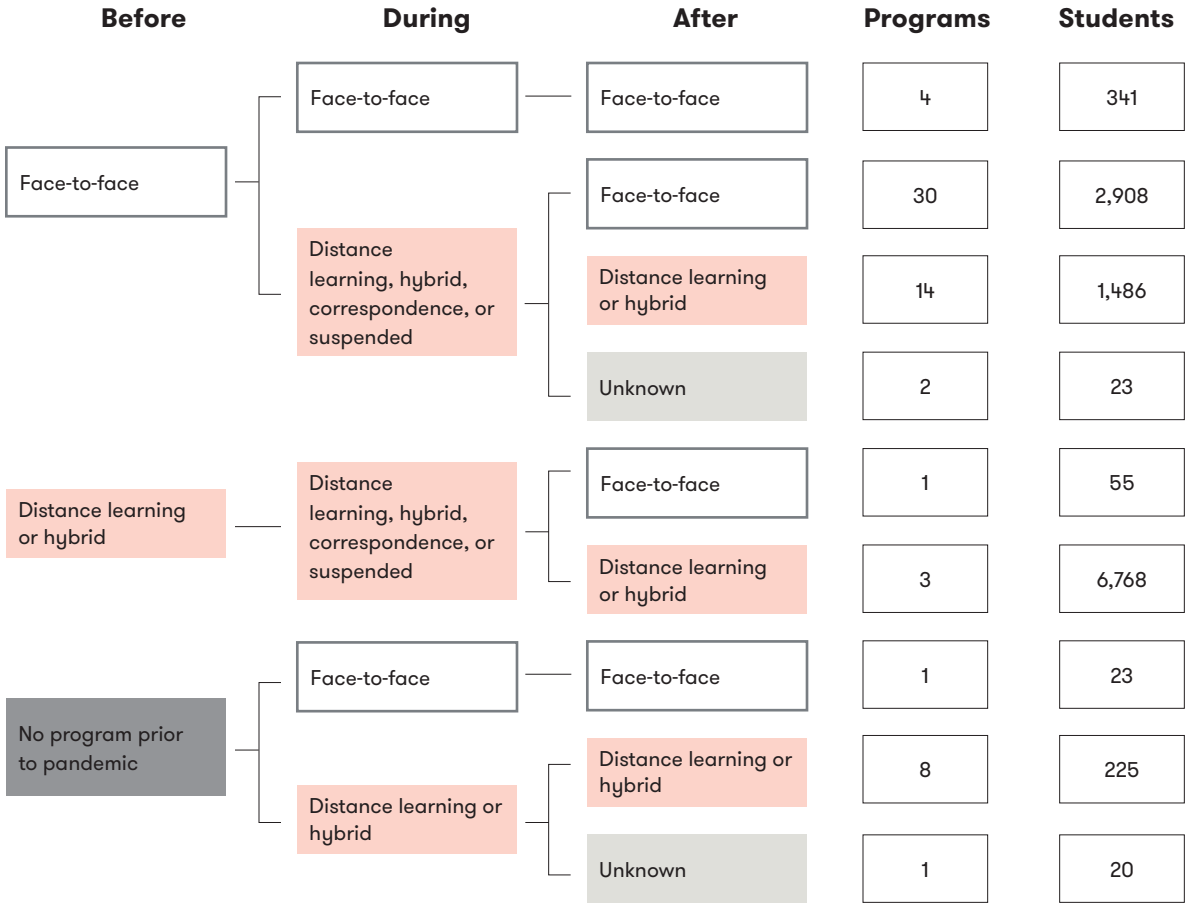
Figure 6. Second Chance Pell enrollment and earned credentials, by gender-designated housing facility, 2020–2021



Ongoing impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on Second Chance Pell programs

Second Chance Pell programs and students continued to experience serious disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning of 2020 through 2021. During the 2019–2020 financial aid year, between 14 and 33 percent of programs had to suspend their programs depending on the semester or quarter. During the 2020–2021 financial aid year, as noted earlier, 48 out of 130 colleges (37 percent) in the Second Chance Pell Initiative were unable to either start or continue due to the pandemic.

Figure 7. Mode of instruction: Trajectory from before, during, and projected after the COVID-19 pandemic



Before the pandemic, the majority of responding programs used face-to-face instruction (50 out of the 54 programs that had courses before the pandemic, or 93 percent). (See Figure 7.) Only four out of those 50 programs were able to maintain face-to-face instruction during the 2021 calendar year. Forty-six programs out of the 50 that were face-to-face before the pandemic experienced disruptions to their mode of instruction, having to move to an asynchronous distance, synchronous distance, hybrid, or correspondence model, or had to suspend their program entirely.[a] Moving to a correspondence model required programs to suspend their participation in SCP, as Pell Grants cannot be used for correspondence teaching. Of those programs that experienced these disruptions, a little less than one-third (14 programs) plan to incorporate some element of distance learning into their mode of instruction following the pandemic when they may be able to return to their preferred mode of instruction. Ten surveyed programs started during the pandemic. Of these, eight plan to use some form of distance learning (synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid) in their mode of instruction following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

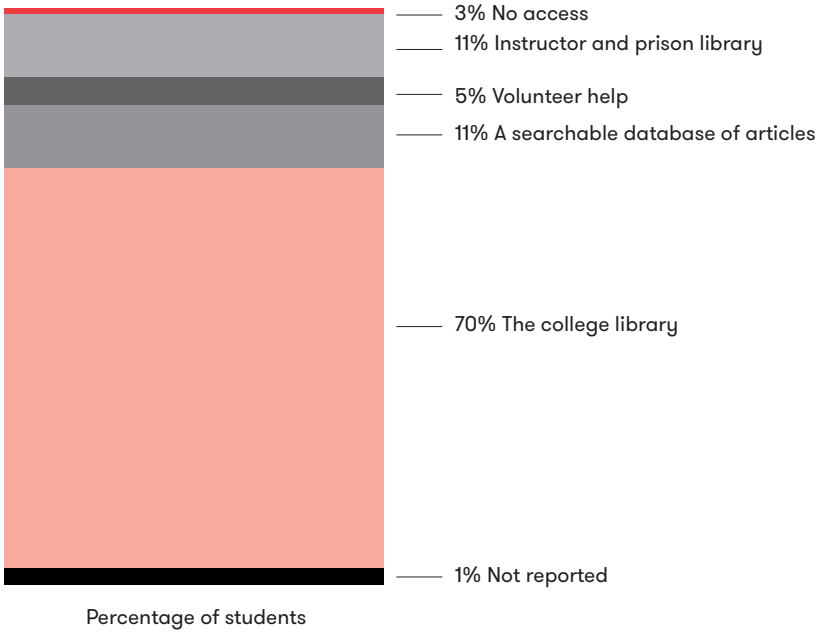
Ten programs changed their degree programs for the 2020–2021 financial aid year. Of these, six expanded their offerings by adding new majors or concentrations, new degrees or certificates, or both. However, four programs reduced or changed their offerings in response to pandemic-related constraints, including a lack of instructors or the inability to offer all relevant coursework for a degree.

a. The U.S. Department of Education defines distance education as education that uses certain technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor. The interaction may be synchronous (student and instructor are in communication at the same time) or asynchronous. See 34 CFR § 600.2. Hybrid refers to a blend of digital and in-person instruction.

Student services and academic supports

Postsecondary programs vary in the types and the extent of academic supports and student services that they offer, including access to research materials and library resources (see Figure 8) and academic counseling (see Figure 9).

Figure 8. Whether and how students have access to academic research materials*

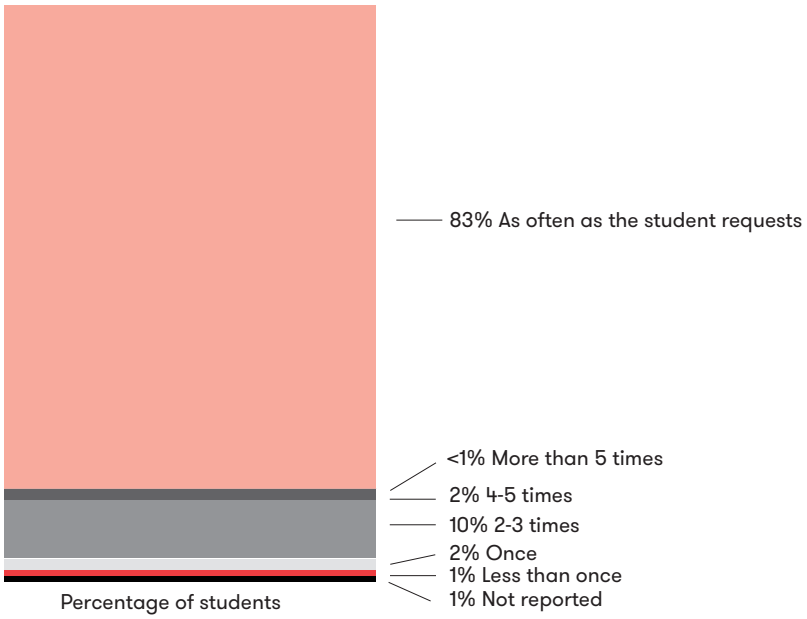


* Percentages do not total to 100 because of rounding.

Most students had access to academic research materials through the college library (70 percent). Smaller proportions of students had access through a searchable database of academic literature (11 percent) or a combination of literature provided by instructors and access to a prison library (11 percent). Five percent of students had access to academic research materials and library resources through the help of volunteers associated with the college's main campus who run searches and deliver articles to students in prison.

Most students in Second Chance Pell programs could access academic counseling as often as they requested (83 percent). Academic advising was most frequently provided by the program's coordinator, director, or administrator, and next most commonly by an assigned faculty advisor. Advising was provided in a variety of ways, including in-person, via web conferencing software such as Zoom or WebEx, over email, or through proprietary secure messaging systems operated by corrections telecommunications vendors. Only 1 percent of schools did not offer students academic counseling at least once per semester or two quarters: Most of these schools offered such counseling sporadically, once a year, or once at the program's start. One school did not offer academic counseling.

Figure 9. How frequently students have access to academic counseling per semester or two quarters



Forty-one programs provided students with academic counseling at least once per semester and provided access to research materials through the college library, a searchable database, or volunteer help. Notably, programs that offered more extensive student services and academic supports were mostly larger programs. Although 64 percent of programs offered these more extensive services and supports, these programs reached 10,025 students, or 85 percent of students.

Accreditation

Program accreditation is a tool for quality assurance and is required for colleges to receive financial aid.[17] In most cases, if an educational institution intends to offer more than 50 percent of an educational program at a location separate from the main campus, the college must complete a "substantive change—additional location" application with its accreditor. Out of 64 programs, 41 have completed the accreditation process to add their in-prison programs as additional locations, covering approximately 90 percent of students (10,703).

Programs and students by state and jurisdiction

By the end of the 2020–2021 financial aid year, Second Chance Pell programs were operating or launching in 42 states, Washington, DC, and the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). During the 2020–2021 financial aid year, 11,849 students enrolled in Second Chance Pell. Throughout the initiative from 2016–2021, Second Chance Pell programs had enrolled 28,119 total unduplicated students. (See Figure 10.) Most students have been in programs held in state prisons.

For 2020–2021, the states with the most programs were New York (13), Texas (9), Kansas (8), California (6), and Maryland (6), while Texas, Ohio, Arizona, Georgia, and Missouri had the most students. (See Figure 11.) Institutions with programs in multiple states are counted in each state where they have a program.

Figure 10. Unduplicated students enrolled in Second Chance Pell, by state or federal jurisdiction*

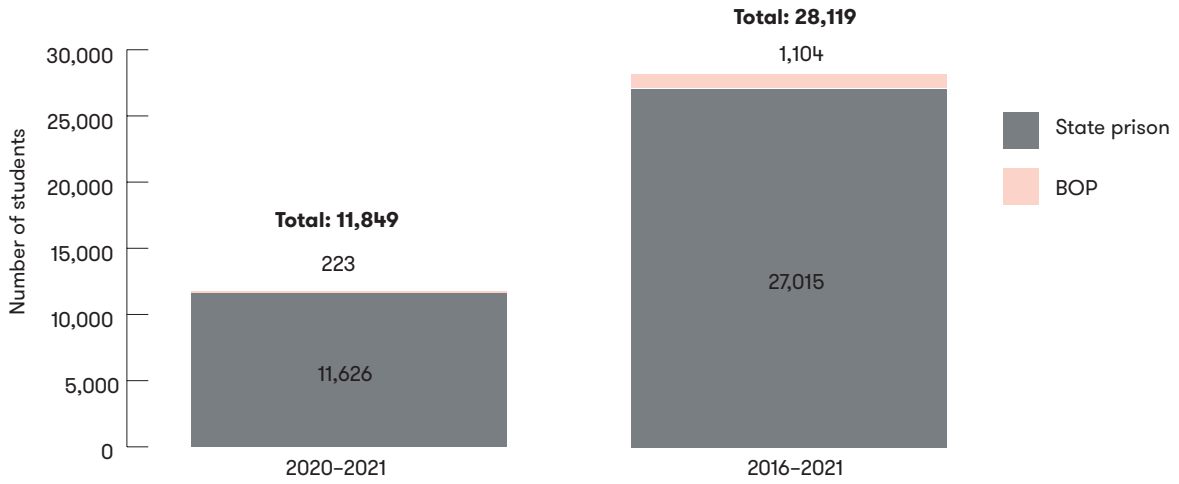


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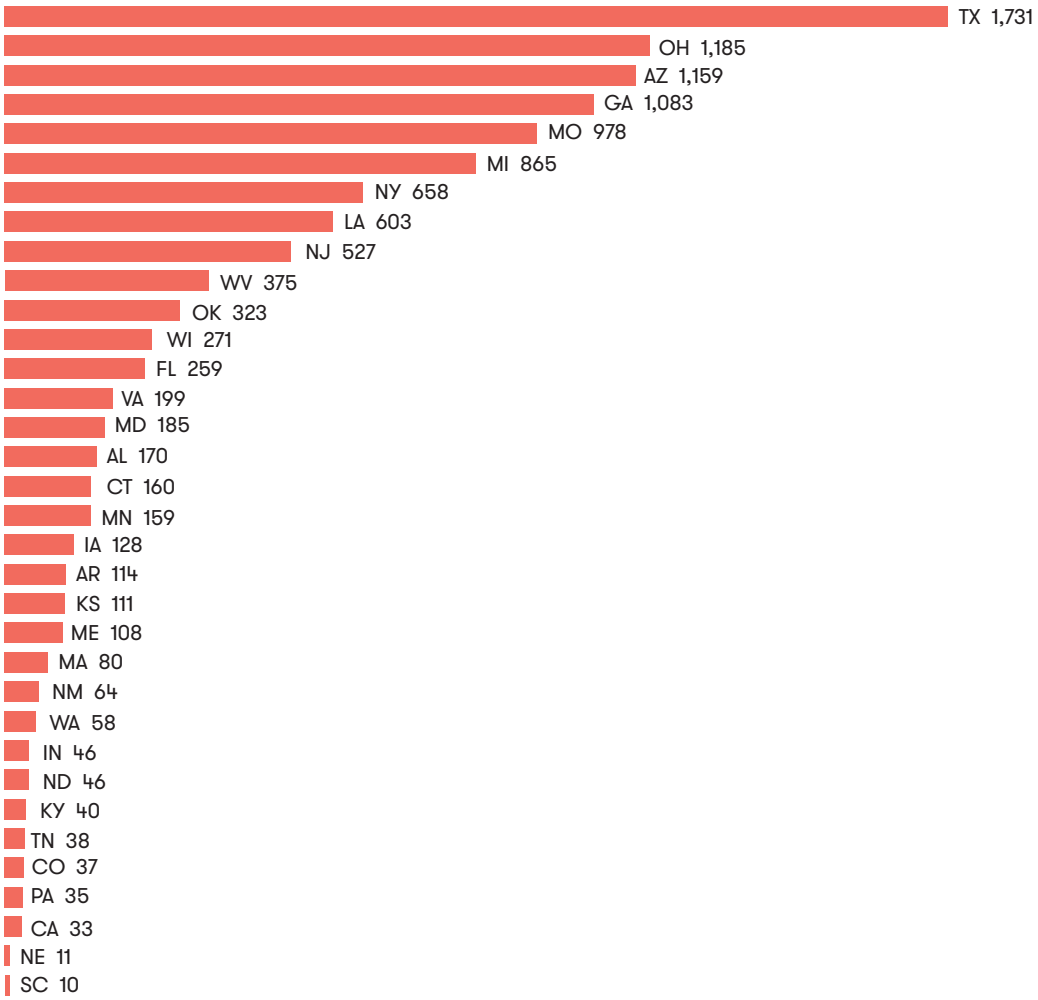
Figure 11. Second Chance Pell students 2020–2021, by state



Endnotes

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11. Ibid.
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13. Oakford, Brumfield, Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures*, 2019.
14. For the U.S. prison population, see E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2020 – Statistical Tables," December 2021, https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p20st.pdf.
15. Second Chance Pell Initiative data for the financial aid year 2020–2021 (from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021) is compared to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data for people incarcerated in U.S. prisons during the calendar year 2020 (January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020). As the financial aid year and the calendar year do not fully overlap, they are compared as the BJS 2020 data reflects the number of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons at the start of the financial aid year and is the most recent data available as of the publication of this report.
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Acknowledgments

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