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# Higher Education in Prison in Illinois Frequently Asked Questions

## WHAT AND WHY

### What is higher education in prison?

Higher education in prison (HEP), or college-in-prison, refers to the provision of academic, postsecondary education to incarcerated individuals. HEP programs provide courses by or in close partnership with a regionally accredited two- or four-year college or university (public, private, or nonprofit status). HEP can include credit and not-for-credit coursework, degree and nondegree granting pathways, and extracurricular activities.

HEP is just one type of educational program available to incarcerated individuals in Illinois. Available educational offerings differ by facility and may include: Adult Basic Education, designed to provide basic math, reading, and life skills up to a 6th grade level; Pre-General Education Development, designed to improve basic math, reading, and life skills up to a 9th grade level; and, GED, designed to prepare students to earn their high school equivalency credential.

In addition to HEP, other postsecondary offerings include career and technical education (CTE) and vocational programs. These programs are offered by Illinois community colleges and provide hands-on training in areas such as auto mechanics, barbering, culinary arts, nail tech, restaurant management, welding, and more. For more information about these offerings, contact Illinois Community College Board Director for CTE, Janelle Washington, at [Janelle.Washington@illinois.gov](mailto:Janelle.Washington@illinois.gov).

### How is HEP similar to or different from the education that students receive in a university setting?

In general, HEP programs strive to provide coursework equivalent to that offered to students on campus. Incarcerated students receive the same rigorous instruction and are held to the same curricular requirements as non-incarcerated students.

There are, however, some realities of the prison environment that require modifications. For example, incarcerated students often lack access to computers and program delivery may differ slightly from other academic settings to account for this.

## Why is HEP important?

HEP has positive impacts upon incarcerated people, their families, the neighborhoods from which they come, the host institution, and society as a whole. Much of the existing research on education in prison narrowly focuses on recidivism; a 2023 meta-analysis of research published over the last 42 years found that participation in any form of education program leads to a 14.8% decrease in recidivism while participation in HEP leads to a 27.7% decrease in recidivism.<sup>i</sup>

Reducing recidivism is an important metric, but measuring recidivism alone sets a low bar for success and fails to capture the full myriad of benefits that HEP can offer. Recent research has developed a more expansive understanding of these benefits and their effects on individuals, families, communities, and systems. The following examples illustrate just a few of these effects:

- HEP increases opportunities post-release. Individuals who participate in HEP while incarcerated are 10.5% more likely to find work when released.<sup>ii</sup> Furthermore, earning a postsecondary degree while incarcerated is associated with a greater number of hours worked and higher overall wages upon release.<sup>iii</sup>
- Communities that invest in HEP benefit from taxpayer savings and improved public safety.<sup>iv</sup> A recent study estimates that Illinois' correctional costs would decrease by \$17.3 million for each year in which people released from prison had access to Pell Grants and HEP while incarcerated.<sup>v</sup>
- HEP improves the quality of life behind bars for students and others who are incarcerated or work in prisons with college programs. Students participating in HEP feel more empowered, experience increased self-confidence, and develop resilient dignity.<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, correctional facilities with HEP programs have fewer incidents of violence, creating safer working and living environments for staff and incarcerated individuals alike.<sup>vii</sup>
- HEP programs play a critical role in closing racial equity gaps in higher education and restoring a measure of educational equity for marginalized communities, primarily people of color and people from racially-segregated low-income communities, that are disproportionately represented in the prison population.<sup>viii</sup> Individuals that participate in HEP share knowledge, skills, and connections with family and their children are more likely to seek postsecondary education.<sup>ix</sup>

To learn more about how one HEP program in Illinois, the Education Justice Project, measures success, click [here](#).

## HEP in Illinois: Past and Present

### What is the history of HEP in Illinois?

Illinois emerged early on as a national leader in HEP. Illinois was the first state to offer face-to-face HEP instruction and the first to launch a full-fledged college-in-prison program. In 1952, Southern Illinois University (SIU) was invited to offer courses at Menard Correctional Center. SIU taught non-credit bearing courses for the first four years before introducing for-credit coursework in 1956 and a full-time, degree-granting college-in-prison program in 1962.

This successful partnership inspired a golden age of HEP in Illinois, characterized by new partnerships and increased energy applied to expanding existing programs. By 1992, every prison in the state of Illinois had 2-year college degree programs available, and 13 out of 24 adult facilities had 4-year college degree programs.

Unfortunately, the implementation of restrictions on state funding in 1989 and Federal Pell Grants in 1994 caused severe financial cuts to HEP programs and decreases in student enrollment that decimated what existed in IL. By the early 2000s, HEP programs collapsed and only began to reemerge in recent years. To read a more detailed account, click [here](#).

## **Which Illinois colleges and universities currently offer HEP?**

There are 14 HEP programs in Illinois. Thirteen are provided by colleges and universities and one is provided by a non-profit organization, the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project, and involves faculty from several institutions of higher education. The 13 Illinois colleges and universities offering HEP programs are Adler University, Augustana College, Danville Area Community College, DePaul University, Eastern Illinois University, Knox College, Lewis University, Millikin University, North Park University, Northeastern Illinois University, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. To learn more about these programs, click [here](#).

## **Offerings**

### **What coursework is offered?**

HEP programs offer a vast array of curricular offerings and support to students. Eight of Illinois' HEP programs offer degree-granting pathways; six of them confer bachelor's degrees, one confers associate degrees, and one confers a master's degree. Twelve HEP programs offer for-credit coursework in multiple academic disciplines, including art, applied psychology, Christian ministry, communications, creative writing, engineering, and much more. Two HEP programs offer non-credit courses in subjects ranging from printmaking and poetry to criminology and women's studies.

In addition to coursework, HEP programs in Illinois have developed in unique ways to provide additional learning opportunities, academic support, and reentry resources to their students. These extracurriculars and support services provide students with a well-rounded, supportive higher education experience that allows them to succeed in their studies and beyond.

### **How are courses delivered?**

There are three primary models for HEP program delivery: in-person, remote/e-learning, and print correspondence. All HEP programs in Illinois offer some form of in-person instruction or advising and recognize it as a crucial component of quality HEP. To learn more about the importance of in-person instruction, click [here](#).

Some HEP programs in Illinois rely heavily on e-learning to reach students in prisons far from campus, some leverage remote methods to foster collaboration between incarcerated and free students, and some lack the ability to connect with students via remote means.

Print correspondence is another form of distance learning. Correspondence courses are available to incarcerated individuals across the country for a fee, often around \$500 per course, and completed through the mail. For incarcerated individuals without access to HEP programs, print-based correspondence courses may be the only option for postsecondary, academic education.

## Availability and Admissions

### Where are HEP programs available in Illinois?

HEP is offered in 8 of the 27 Illinois correctional centers: Big Muddy River, Danville, Decatur, East Moline, Hill, Logan, Sheridan, and Stateville. Over 60% of Illinois' HEP programs (9 of 14) are concentrated in three of the state's 27 correctional facilities: Danville, Logan, and Stateville.

Historically, HEP programs in Illinois have developed out of partnerships between specific colleges or universities and the nearest correctional center. As a result, programs are concentrated in correctional centers near the state's most populous cities, where there is also a concentration of higher education institutions. A coordinated effort is needed to encourage and support higher education institutions near facilities without HEP offerings to implement new programs.

Given that there are well over 100 colleges and universities throughout Illinois, the opportunities are immense. If you want to establish a college-in-prison program inside an Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) facility, reach out to IDOC Manager of the Office of Adult Education and Vocational Services, Maria Miller, at [Maria.A.Miller@illinois.gov](mailto:Maria.A.Miller@illinois.gov).

### Who can access HEP in Illinois?

This varies by facility and program. Over 70% of IDOC facilities (19 of 27) do not offer HEP. This means that over two-thirds of individuals (20,035 of 29,470) incarcerated in IDOC correctional centers have no access to HEP programs.\* Where HEP programs are offered, enrollment is limited by varying factors, including physical space, program design, faculty capacity, and IDOC restrictions on participation. Program enrollment ranges from less than 10 to more than 200 and total enrollment as of January 2023 is approximately 615 students, only 2.1% of the total IDOC population at that time.

### Do HEP programs have admission requirements?

Yes. Admission requirements vary by program. Most programs require a high school diploma or GED. Some programs require credit hours. For example, the Education Justice Project requires 40 credit hours of lower-division academic work.

## Costs and Funding

### What are the costs associated with offering HEP programs?

The correctional center bears the cost of hosting programs in their buildings, primarily costs related to space, utilities, and staffing. Program costs are borne by the university or program provider. Those costs may include staff salaries, instructional materials and supports, and travel reimbursements for instructors and volunteers. These costs vary significantly based on a given HEP program's size and offerings. In Illinois, program operating budgets range from less than \$5,000 to greater than \$500,000.

### Do students pay tuition or other fees?

All 14 HEP programs in Illinois are offered at no cost to students.

## How are HEP programs funded?

Over 70% of HEP programs in Illinois (10 of 14) are funded entirely through a combination of support from higher education institutions, foundation grants, and individual donors. The other four HEP programs in Illinois are partially funded by state or federal funds – two receive funding through state contracts and two receive federal Pell Grant dollars.

Illinois has yet to fully leverage federal funding streams, including Perkins funds, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds, and Pell funding. Moreover, Illinois prevents HEP programs from leveraging state aid. The Illinois Higher Education Student Assistance Act explicitly bars HEP programs from receiving support from several existing state financial aid programs, including Illinois' primary need-based grant program, the Monetary Award Program.<sup>xi</sup> If Illinois were to address these challenges, additional HEP programs could benefit from federal and state aid and increase access to HEP statewide.

## Learn More and Get Involved

### How can I learn more about HEP?

In recent years, there has been growing coverage of and dialogue about HEP. New programs, avenues of research, and opportunities for collaboration are advancing the field in important ways. To learn more about these efforts and innovations across the country, check out the Alliance for Higher in Prison [here](#). To learn more about what's happening in Illinois, check out the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison website [here](#) and the Illinois Higher Education in Prison Task Force Final Report [here](#).

### How can I support HEP in Illinois?

- **Donate.** As mentioned above, several HEP programs in Illinois depend on individual donors as a critical source of funding. The following nine HEP programs accept monetary donations: Augustana Prison Education Project, Eastern Illinois University, Knox College, Lewis University Prison Education Program, Milken University Shakespeare Corrected, North Park School of Restorative Arts, Northwestern Prison Education Program, the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project, and the Education Justice Project. Click [here](#) to access detailed information on each of these programs and how to donate.
- **Participate.** Many HEP programs in Illinois welcome volunteers, interns, coordinators, and/or instructors. Contact the program you are interested in getting involved with to find out more about what opportunities are available. Those who want to support the Education Justice Project can visit our “Get Involved” page [here](#) to learn more about volunteer opportunities, internships, coordinator positions, and several other ways to join our work.
- **Advocate.** The Freedom to Learn Campaign of Illinois (FTL), led by advocates and educators, calls for clear and fair legislation that allows higher ed in prison programs to flourish. You can learn more about FTL and how to join the campaign [here](#).

## References:

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- <sup>vii</sup> Ross, J., & Gangi, R. (2009). *Education from the Inside, Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison*. Correctional Association of New York. <https://perma.cc/678G-979E>
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- <sup>ix</sup> Delaney, R., Subramanian, R., & Patrick, F. (2016). *Making the Grade: Developing Quality Postsecondary Education Programs in Prison*. Vera Institute of Justice. <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/making-the-grade-postsecondary-education-programs-in-prison.pdf>
- <sup>x</sup> Illinois Department of Corrections, *March 2023 Prison Population Data Set*. <https://idoc.illinois.gov/reportsandstatistics/prison-population-data-sets.html>
- <sup>xi</sup> 110 ILCS 947/10.