

## Effective Practice for Pell in Prison: Recruitment and Admission

### *Introduction*

College admission counseling professionals have for decades understood that there are commonly acknowledged best practices overall for student recruitment and admission. In addition, practitioners are also aware that advising and recruiting specific populations of students, including (but not limited to) first-generation college students, undocumented students, and students with disabilities, entails additional advisable practices due to individual, legal, systemic, cultural, and other special circumstances that add complexity to the college admission process.

Recruiting potential students who are currently incarcerated involves challenges with which most practitioners are already familiar, albeit in ways that manifest differently, and involves some less familiar challenges. Postsecondary institutions have engaged with incarcerated populations for decades, though with varying degrees of intensity and effectiveness. In 2020, Congress passed legislation to restore federal Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated students [by fall of 2023](#). This change, which restored Pell eligibility that had been removed in 1994, will inevitably increase the number of postsecondary institutions that engage with incarcerated population. The effectiveness of this engagement will rest on the ability of postsecondary recruitment and admission professionals to successfully communicate with incarcerated students and facilitate an application and enrollment process that centers the students' considerable needs based on their legal and institutional constraints.

### *Professional Standards*

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) maintains core values that serve as the collective articulation of those fundamental precepts that guide all work in the college admission counseling process, regardless of one's position in the educational landscape.

- **Education:** Educating students, their families, the public, fellow education professionals, and ourselves about the transition to and within postsecondary education. In a prison setting, postsecondary institutions can work together with prison administrators and other stakeholders to align their respective roles in promoting education as both an individual and collective benefit. Clearly articulating a commitment to education as a path to flourishing for incarcerated students will serve as an important framing mechanism in which subsequent planning, budgeting, and implementation process can be grounded.
- **Access and Equity:** We believe we should strive to increase access and eliminate from the education system bias based on race, ethnicity, religion or creed, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, political affiliation, national origin, or disability. In a prison setting, postsecondary recruiters and admission officers will need to challenge assumptions about incarcerated students, about who will and will not benefit from postsecondary education programs, and about the special needs of incarcerated populations for information that many 'traditional' students take for granted. Postsecondary

institutions that are committed to high quality prison education programs will need to translate that commitment into resources to ensure that these unique needs are met.

- **Social Responsibility:** We believe we have a duty to create a society that is free from racial and other biases for our colleagues and the students we serve. Postsecondary programs for incarcerated students are, first and foremost, opportunities for social responsibility on the part of the student and the institution. When planning a prison education program, institutions should consider ensuring that their recruitment practices are open to all prospective students who are interested and not solely to those students who have Pell grant eligibility.
- **Collaboration:** The effectiveness of the profession—college counseling, admission, and enrollment management—is enhanced when we work together to advocate for students and their best interests. Effective collaboration between postsecondary institutions and prison administrators is an essential component for successful prison education programs. When embarking on a prison education program at a postsecondary institution, college leaders and admission officers need to be intentional about working closely with prison administrators to ensure a clear understanding of what both “sides” need for programs to be successful.

Far from esoteric ideas, these core values can and should be operationalized as a design framework that ensures the commitment of institutional leaders to provide an environment in which a program that serves incarcerated students will succeed and that the students will flourish.

### *College Admission Counseling Principles*

NACAC’s [\*Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission\*](#) is a collection of practice-level standards to ensure that the interests and needs of students are centered throughout the advising, recruitment, and admission processes. In particular, the principles are constructed to assist students in making informed enrollment decisions—a particularly important consideration for incarcerated students given their likely reliance on exhaustible financial aid funding.

#### **1. Transparency**

- Accurately describe, represent, and promote their schools, institutions, organizations, and services to students and to colleagues and should not misrepresent themselves or their institutions.
- Share information about students that is relevant to the college admission process as well as accurate, up-to-date, and free from misrepresentations of fact or material omissions at the time of submission.

## **2. Counseling in Students' Best Interest**

- Provide guidance, information, and exposure to help students determine their best academic, personal, and financial college match.
- Not be compensated by commissions, bonuses, or other incentive payments, based on the number of students referred, recruited, admitted, or enrolled.

These standards can be viewed as design principles that, if properly incorporated into a program serving incarcerated students, are critical to the success of the program and the students it serves.

### *Research-Based Best Practices: Advising*

Findings from several research studies afford a preliminary inventory of potentially important aspects of a prison education recruitment and advising program. From a [study](#) of Latino and under-represented students, NACAC found that certain activities on the part of the “sending institution” (in the study’s case, secondary schools) can have a significant impact on postsecondary attendance.

| <b>Activity</b>                                   | <b>Prison Education Parallel</b>  |
|---|---|
| Increasing awareness of options                   | Ensuring that prospective students are aware of multiple options so as not to exhaust Pell eligibility  |
| Start planning process early                      | Incorporating educational options into processing and orientation for early awareness   |
| Individual and small group advising               | Developing capacity, whether internal or in partnership with college advising specialists, to provide individual and small group advising in the prison setting |
| “College-going culture”                           | Working with prison administration to emphasize the value of education as both an individual and institutional benefit to the prison                            |
| Comprehensive financial aid counseling            | Along with 1:1 and small group advising, including specialized advising on the unique contours of financial aid for incarcerated students                       |
| Offer family advising                             | When applicable, offer information and advising for prospective students’ families  |
| Peer-to-peer advising, particularly with “alumni” | Create a role for program “alumni” to provide peer support, advising, and perspective for incarcerated students   |

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| Communication with district leaders as to importance of advising capacity | Postsecondary institutions can play an important role in emphasizing to prison administrators |
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Note that subsequent studies affirmed many of these findings, including the importance of [early and family outreach](#), financial aid awareness, and [1:1 advising](#). An [analysis](#) of HSLs data from the US Department of Education revealed that working 1:1 with a school counselor on college advising resulted in students being seven times more likely to complete a FAFSA, four times as likely to enroll in any form of postsecondary education, and twice as likely to enroll in a four-year institution as those students who did not receive 1:1 advising.

### *Research-Based Best Practices: Recruiting and Admission*

Research into admission officer [qualifications](#) and effective recruitment practices (including the NACAC [standards](#)) provide a possible framework for structuring prison education recruitment and admissions processes. Activities and skills identified as particularly important for admission officers at all levels include:

| Activity  | Prison Education Parallel  |
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| Accurate and transparent information about institutional admission requirements | Ensuring that basic information is transmitted to incarcerated students, many of whom have never interacted with a postsecondary institution, and a manner that is clear, accurate, and flexible enough to meet prospective students' needs.   |
| Accurate and complete information about institutional program offerings         | Ensuring that information about institutional program offerings does not mislead students. As an example, offering students entry into a program leading to licensure for an occupation for which they are ineligible due to their incarcerated status might produce revenue for the institution, but does not offer the anticipated benefit for the student.  |
| Admission officer as advisor  | Promoting an institution is an important role for an admission officer, but in keeping with the core value of social responsibility, the admission officer also has a duty to the student. If a program is not a good fit (i.e., might waste valuable financial aid eligibility on a program that will not lead to desired outcomes), the admission officer has an obligation to inform the student. |
| Reduce/eliminate implicit bias  | Admission officers should be trained in cultural fluency, implicit and explicit bias, and awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion  |

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|   | principles. In the prison setting, all three of these dynamics can and likely will be a factor in recruiting.  |
| Knowledge of financial aid options  | Recruiters must be aware of financial aid program requirements and limitations, including the knowledge that prison populations can be at risk of exhausting financial aid eligibility on programs that might not lead to tangible outcomes or require additional courses/hurdles to access outcomes.  |
| Communications and listening skills   | Clear and effective communication is particularly important for incarcerated students, who often have never considered postsecondary education as a possibility and have not been exposed to the language of college admission. Such conversations require specialized communications and listening skills to ensure that basic information is conveyed effectively.   |
| Awareness of recruiting needs for special or non-traditional populations  | Recruiters and admission officers engaging with incarcerated students require specialized knowledge and training in (1) the specific guidelines, processes, and boundaries associated with prison education programs, and (2) the unique needs of incarcerated students. As an example, incarcerated students often require paper applications for college programs, which most colleges phased out in favor of online applications. |
| Center student voices   | When developing and implementing prison education programs, include prospective, current, and/or former incarcerated students in strategic discussions about recruitment and admission.  |
| Allow for sufficient time to make informed enrollment decisions, known in “traditional” admission as the May 1 national response date | In the prison context, ensure that students have sufficient time to make informed decisions, including information about cost, financial aid, program(s) of study, and time to completion  |
| Simplify the matriculation process by improving the “handoff” from admission to student affairs and other campus offices              | Identify potential barriers to participation that occur post-admission but pre-enrollment, such as “hidden box” or background checks that need to be clearly articulated or mitigated  |



This brief was prepared for the NASFAA Breaking Barriers convening. Upon completion of the convening, the brief will be revised to include additional information to assist professionals tasked with advising, recruiting, and enrolling incarcerated students.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), founded in 1937, is an organization of more than 27,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.