
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

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“Education is freedom.” -Freire.

In 1994 Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act which amended the Higher Education Act of 1965. In doing so, all incarcerated people were banned from receiving Pell grants or financial aid for higher education. Four years later Congress extended the ban to any student with a state or federal drug conviction. Even though less than 1% of federal education funding went to incarcerated students, the “tough on crime” mantra of the day led to the elimination of most prison education programs originally developed in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 2015 a pilot program allowing Pell grants for incarcerated students began at a select group of facilities and institutions. When the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Simplification Act was passed in 2020, the success of the pilot programs gave way to Congress reauthorizing access to Pell grants to students incarcerated in federal or state penal institutions and students who are subject to involuntary commitments. As of July 2023, all provisions of the Act relating to incarcerated students are active, meaning that for the first time in almost 30 years, individuals enrolled in approved prison education programs (PEPs) are eligible for federal student aid. Provisions of the FAFSA Simplification Act also changed the definition of prison education program and now requires approval, oversight, and various other procedures.

Under the FAFSA Simplification Act all PEPs must be accredited and offer the same quality of education in prison as they do outside of prison. So, readers, why am I giving you this information? As this is my inaugural issue as Editor-in-Chief, I would like to not only share this critical development but also leave you with a call to action. As a criminologist, I’ve spent the better part of the last 15 years working with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. In the incarceration capital of the world, I have witnessed the potential lost to incarceration and its collateral consequences. Yet, one thing we have known for decades is that education not only reduces recidivism in the individual learner, it increases public safety, and impacts families for generations¹. It can transform the lives of over 5 million children with incarcerated parents, while strengthening the communities in which they live. Data also shows that for every dollar spent on education while individuals are incarcerated, taxpayers ultimately save five dollars in the future. Furthermore, current estimates indicate lifting the financial aid ban will allow almost 800,000 incarcerated individuals access to PEPs, amounting to a less than 1% increase in the programs budget.

As more schools open their classrooms to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, we must, not only, create a welcoming learning environment, but also encourage and support undergraduate research and scholarly creative endeavors. Historically, few educational programs or PEPs have offered courses or programs that allow incarcerated students to conduct undergraduate research. Often students have limited access to technology and research materials, with the Vera Institute reporting less than 20% of PEP students having access to academic research material.¹ Engaging in scientific inquiry, evaluating sources, and critical thinking are all fundamental to undergraduate education. It is crucial that colleges developing PEPs, not only provide quality academics, but also include intellectual inquiry through undergraduate research with access to meaningful resources.

When given the opportunity, these students will thrive. I’ve seen the hunger for knowledge and transformative power of education. Therefore, my call to you, readers, is to do what we do best, teach, research, and serve all individuals who seek to learn. As U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona stated, education creates “meaningful opportunities for redemption and rehabilitation that improve lives, strengthen communities, and reflect America’s ideal as a nation of second chances and limitless possibilities.”²

Alesa Liles, Ph.D., MSW
Editor-in-Chief

¹ <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/second-chance-pell-five-years-of-expanding-access-to-education-in-prison-2016-2021.pdf>

² <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-launch-application-process-expand-federal-pell-grant-access-individuals-who-are-confined-or-incarcerated>

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About Georgia College & State University:

Georgia College & State University is the state's designated public liberal arts university — where practical education meets life-altering, real-world experiences. For us, a liberal arts education goes beyond simply memorizing facts and philosophies. A liberal arts curriculum teaches students how to navigate the complexities of life, assess the world around them, and become critical thinkers. Our skills-infused approach provides our students with an advantage that employers are looking for and expands the personal and professional lives of our graduates.

The university offers undergraduate and graduate education, and serves more than 7,000 students in the following colleges: the College of Arts and Sciences, the J. Whitney Bunting College of Business and Technology, the John H. Lounsbury College of Education, the College of Health Sciences, and the newly-established John E. Sallstrom Honors College. With its sprawling idyllic campus paired with talented faculty and staff, GCSU stands at the forefront of offering a holistic liberal arts education. Our students are engaged citizens who are encouraged to think independently and lead creatively as they acquire the skills to navigate life-long challenges.

GCSU is one of 26 institutions in the University System of Georgia, and we consistently rank among the top three universities in terms of student retention and graduation rates. GCSU also ranks 6th on the U.S. News & World Report's Best Public Regional Universities (South), and is recognized as a top university in the nation by the Princeton Review, Forbes Higher Education, and Kiplinger's.

GCSU won the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) AURA award recognizing top undergraduate research universities (2020) and was the first university in Georgia to win this distinction.



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