

Policy Brief

The College-In-Prison Reentry Initiative: A Smart Investment for New York

Goals & Achievements

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Introduction

The College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP)—a \$73 million partnership between Governor Andrew Cuomo, Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), and the CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG)—has significantly expanded access to postsecondary programs in prisons across New York State since it was established in 2017. The Initiative has expanded the number of courses and degrees available to people in prison and expanded the number of college-in-prison programs. The Initiative has created infrastructure to ensure continuity of learning so that more students can successfully finish their degrees if they are transferred or after release. The CIP Reentry Initiative has also led to more robust reentry efforts that support continuation of academic programs and finding well-suited employment opportunities.

Through the CIP Reentry Initiative, seven education providers have been funded to deliver college programming across 17 prisons in New York State, serving 748 students from the Fall 2017 through Spring 2021 semesters, and in so doing, helped increase DOCCS' college enrollment capacity 50%, to around 1,500 students today.¹ Currently, 31 New York State prisons offer some form of in-person college programming.²

Background

New York State has gradually scaled up its college-in-prison programming with support from private foundations and public investments in recent years, including the CIP Reentry Initiative.³ The CIP Reentry Initiative has helped address a void that was the culmination of decades of Federal and State policy. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, emerging from the 1980s and 90s “tough-on-crime” era, went into effect in 1995.⁴ This Act set into motion a

26-year ban that prohibited incarcerated people from receiving federal financial aid to take college classes in prison.⁵ Not only did the law revoke federal financial aid (known as Pell Grants) for incarcerated students, but it also paved the way for many states, including New York State, to make these students ineligible for equivalent state financial aid programs.⁶ Prior to the 1994 bill, Pell Grants were the primary source of funding for college-in-prison programs.⁷ Nearly all states offer some type of higher education financial aid program to supplement Pell Grants because federal aid alone is not sufficient for supporting all low-income students.⁸ As a result of removing incarcerated students from consideration for funding, college-in-prison programs across the United States were substantially disrupted; within three years of the new legislation, more than two-thirds of correctional systems that continued to offer college in prison reported a significant reduction in students due to federal and state funding cuts.⁹

Because so many college-in-prison programs relied on a combination of Pell Grants and state financial support, this dramatic reduction in funding led to an immediate drop in the number of prison systems offering these programs. Nationwide, the number of incarcerated students receiving postsecondary education fell from around 38,000 to 21,000.¹⁰

College-in-prison programs historically have relied on diversified funding streams to thrive because a combination of funds from federal, state, and private sources makes programs more robust and less vulnerable to budget cuts in any one program.¹¹ These streams also allow programs to meet needs not covered by any particular source of funding (e.g., with regard to tuition, books/materials, and other expenses). Currently, 16 states—including New York—do not allow people in prison to access state assistance because of their incarceration status.¹² The New York State equivalent of Pell

Grants is the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP);¹³ New York made incarcerated students ineligible for TAP one year after the 1994 removal of federal financial aid for these students.¹⁴ The state’s college-in-prison landscape shrunk from 25 programs enrolling 3,445 students in 1995 to only four programs enrolling 256 students the following year.¹⁵

In more recent years, as both state and federal leaders have begun to reconsider mass incarceration, their focus has shifted toward “smart-on-crime” (evidence-based) criminal justice strategies. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education created the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative (Second Chance Pell), a pilot program that worked with colleges and universities to provide grants to a maximum of 12,000 incarcerated students per year across 28 states—including students served by several colleges in New York State¹⁶—with the goal of reducing recidivism by better preparing students for employment following release.¹⁷ Although Second Chance Pell covered only a fraction of those who would be served if Pell eligibility were fully restored, its success eventually contributed to the full reinstatement of Pell eligibility for incarcerated students through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Simplification Act, lifting the 26-year ban on federal financial aid eligibility for incarcerated college students.¹⁸ The momentous legislation, which will go into effect by July 1, 2023, reverses the portion of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that excluded these students from federal financial aid, specifically Pell Grants.

To fill in funding gaps, prison-based college programs have depended on private foundations, in-kind funding, or student self-pay to run their programs.¹⁹ Through a combination of these funding sources, there has been a gradual resurgence in college-in-prison program availability; a recent study found that 47 states offer some type of postsecondary program in at least one facility, even while the Pell ban has been in place.²⁰

As educators and correctional systems begin to plan for Pell reinstatement, we do not yet know the full impact of this legislation on prison education. Considerable demand remains for college in prison in New York State; of all incarcerated people eligible for postsecondary education, only about 10% are enrolled, and in New York State specifically, DOCCS has reported that waiting lists are widespread.²¹ And while the reinstatement of Pell eligibility provides an ideal opportunity to expand access to incarcerated students, federal support alone will not be sufficient for this effort. Increasing access to college-in-prison programs in New York State will require the reinstatement of TAP eligibility for incarcerated students, and proposed New York State legislation as well as Governor Kathy Hochul’s proposed executive budget would restore this eligibility.²²

Restored TAP funding could significantly increase incarcerated student enrollment.²³ With the exception of support from Second Chance Pell and the CIP Reentry Initiative, New York State college-in-prison programs have primarily relied on private funding in the decades since incarcerated students were made ineligible for Pell Grants and TAP.²⁴ Together with the reinstatement of Pell Grants, renewed access to TAP can help scale existing college-in-prison programming into a cohesive statewide prison education system with a variety of two- and four-year programs and could serve as a blueprint for other states nationwide. As well, extending TAP eligibility to part-time students, and expanding early release opportunities for higher education enrollment, would further facilitate college credentials and aid reentry for people incarcerated in NYS prisons.

Why College in Prison is a Smart Criminal Justice Investment

Education in prison (including postsecondary as well as vocational, high school, and basic skills programs) offers many benefits to incarcerated individuals. These programs provide opportunities to build community in prisons, lead to a reduction in violence, can offer participants a greater sense of empowerment and motivation, and more.²⁵

Increased employment opportunities. Correctional education helps prepare people for navigating life, and particularly employment, upon release—a majority of jobs require some type of education credential.²⁶ Indeed, studies show that incarcerated people who participate in education programs are more likely to find employment upon release than those who do not participate.²⁷ A 2013 meta-analysis found participation in academic and vocational correctional education programs to increase the odds of obtaining post-release employment by 13%, relative to non-participants.²⁸

Reduced recidivism. Research has also consistently demonstrated a relationship between correctional education and reduced recidivism. The 2013 meta-analysis found that people who participated in educational programs had 43% lower odds of recidivating than those who did not participate.²⁹ A more recent meta-analysis found educational program participants 48% less likely to recidivate.³⁰ Analyses of prison education programs also demonstrate public safety cost-savings due to reduced recidivism. An analysis by RAND Corporation found that every dollar spent on correctional education corresponds to four to five dollars in savings on reincarceration costs.³¹

Improved educational and racial equity. College-in-prison programs also present opportunities for educational and racial equity. A 2014 survey of a nationally representative sample of incarcerated adults found that, while only 6% of incarcerated adults had some type of postsecondary degree (compared to 37% of the general population), 70% reported wanting to enroll in an academic class or program.³² The majority of people in prison had incomes low enough to qualify for financial aid prior to incarceration, and they generally remain eligible during their prison terms.³³ Providing financial support for college-in-prison programs thus offers access to postsecondary education to people who are generally excluded from this opportunity. Additionally, Black and Latinx people are overrepresented among the incarcerated population, which means they are disproportionately impacted by the limited educational opportunities available in prisons.³⁴

Moreover, many people enter prison undereducated due to systemic disinvestment in their schools over the past 50 years.³⁵ In New York State in particular, Black and Latinx people respectively make up 48% and 24% of the prison population despite comprising only 15% and 19% of the state population.³⁶ Expanding access to educational opportunities can help to address these disparate impacts. Of the incarcerated students that CIP has served thus far, 48% identified as Black and 17% identified as Latinx.

Achievements of the College-in-Prison Initiative to Date

The College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative can serve as a model for providing access to college in prison across New York State. The goals of the CIP Reentry Initiative were to: (1) expand access to postsecondary programs in New York State prisons by providing funding to local colleges and universities;³⁷ (2) ensure academic quality and develop transfer and articulation agreements among institutions within the initiative; (3) enhance academic reentry support services for incarcerated students; and (4) develop opportunities to share best practices among CIP providers.

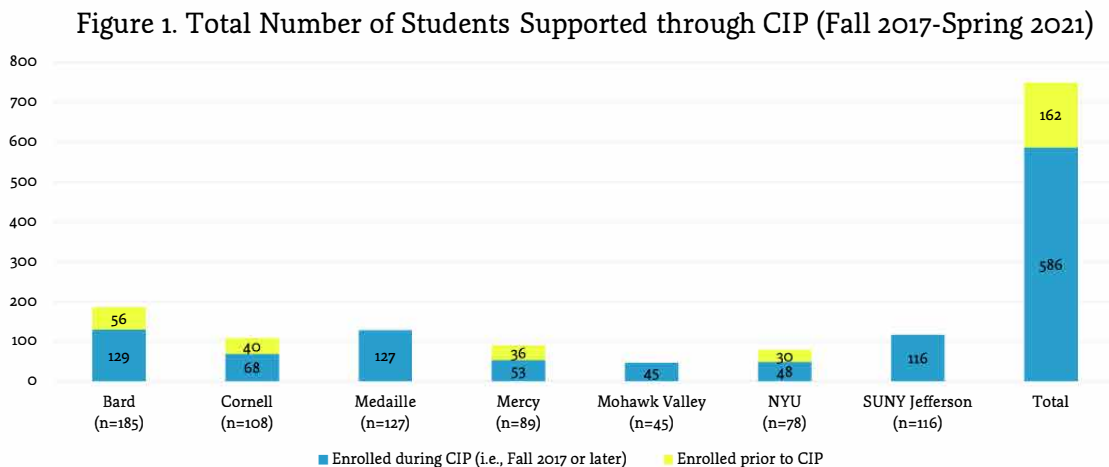
The John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity and the State University of New York (SUNY) together serve as the Education and Reentry Coordinators and were responsible for goals 2, 3, and 4. ISLG, alongside DANY, coordinate and manage the CIP Reentry Initiative. Ultimately, CIP enhances the landscape of education programs across prisons in New York State and establishes a blueprint for scaling programming quickly and effectively following Pell reinstatement and possible TAP reinstatement.

Goal 1: Increase the availability of college-level educational programming in selected NYS prisons.

The CIP Reentry Initiative considerably expanded college-in-prison programming in New York State, and the Initiative can serve as a model for further expansion under Pell Grant funding. The CIP Reentry Initiative expanded college-in-prison in New York State in several areas:

CIP expanded the number of students served.

Through the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative, all education providers were able to cover tuition costs for more incarcerated students than they had previously; one institution said they were able to double the number of enrolled students. A few colleges used CIP funds to hire additional faculty and administrative staff to support these new students. Prior to the CIP Reentry Initiative, just over 1,000 incarcerated individuals in New York State received college-level instruction in any given year, and the long waitlists for existing



programs demonstrated the demand for additional program capacity. Through its first four full academic years (Fall 2017 through Spring 2021 semesters), the CIP Reentry Initiative supported 748 students,³⁸ significantly expanding program capacity within DOCCS facilities (see Figure 1).

CIP instituted entirely new college-in-prison programs.

Of the seven postsecondary institutions participating in the CIP Reentry Initiative, one started a college-in-prison program for the first time thanks to the initiative. Five of the seven institutions already awarded postsecondary degrees when CIP was launched, and one was returning to this work after an earlier program in a different facility. Overall, the CIP Reentry Initiative increased the number of postsecondary institutions offering college-in-prison programs statewide from 29 to 30.

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CIP established programs in four additional facilities.

In an effort to expand access to college-in-prison for students overall, the CIP Reentry Initiative encouraged providers to establish programs in facilities without them and expand programs in existing facilities. While CIP has been in place,

college-in-prison programs were introduced in four facilities that previously lacked programs, bringing the total number of New York State prisons offering postsecondary education from 26 to 30.

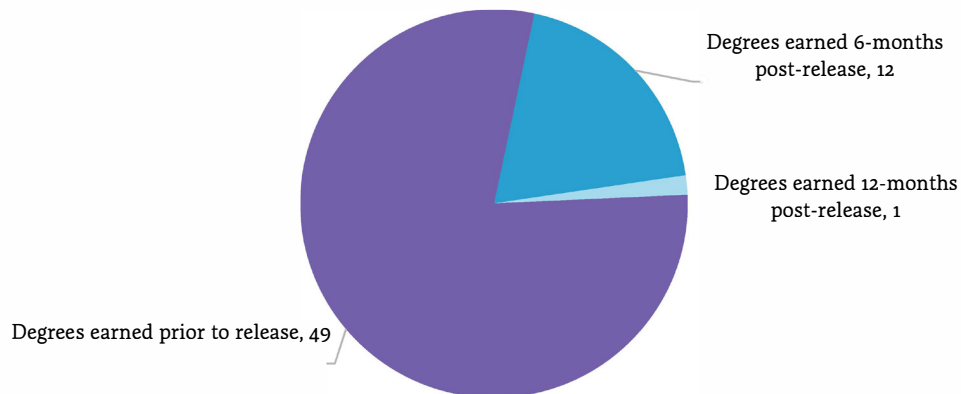
CIP increased the number of courses offered.

Education providers offered 300 different courses (see Appendix) during the first four years of the Initiative, and the majority noted they were able to offer more courses than in previous semesters thanks to CIP funding. For example, one provider noted increasing its course offerings from two to seven courses per semester as a result of CIP funding. Providers most frequently offered courses related to social science, literature, and writing mechanics, in keeping with courses most frequently offered by these liberal arts institutions on campus. Six of the seven colleges offered mathematics courses. See Appendix for more details about course offerings. As a result of expanded course offerings, at least 62 students have completed their degree programs through the CIP program (see Figure 2).

CIP added new degree program offerings.

The majority of students (78%) are enrolled in Associate's degree programs, which can be typically completed in 2.5 to 5 years, whereas 15% are enrolled in Bachelor's degree programs, and the remaining 6% in specialization programs (e.g., Public Health Certification). Two of the seven postsecondary institutions involved in the CIP Reentry Initiative proposed to develop new degree/certificate programs: three new degree programs have been implemented, and one is still expected to be offered in the future. The other ten existing degree programs continue to be offered as part of CIP. In total, the number of degree programs offered through the CIP Reentry Initiative has increased from 10 to 13.

Figure 2. Number of Degrees Earned Pre- and Post-Release by CIP Students (Fall 2017-Spring 2021; N=62)*



*Note: The number of degrees earned pre- and post-release through CIP are conservative estimates.

Goal 2: Develop standards for prison education curricula & establish transfer/articulation agreements between funded colleges to support program completion/continuation.

Prior to the CIP Reentry Initiative, college-in-prison programs operated somewhat independently, and, as a result, students could not efficiently transfer credits between programs when they moved between facilities or to external postsecondary institutions upon release. This presented significant barriers to degree completion for incarcerated students because of requirements to repeat similar classes already taken at another program, for example. To allow more students to successfully complete their degrees while incarcerated or following their release, SUNY, as part of its role in the CIP Reentry Initiative, has worked to align curricula for equivalent degree programs and develop articulation agreements that enable students to transfer credits across facilities and educational institutions.

To recognize courses and credits across college-in-prison programs and programs in communities in a way that facilitates efficient credit transfer, the CIP Reentry Initiative is working with CJII providers to align their general education requirements with the requirements of public universities in New York State (City University of New York and State University of New York), as well as with those of the 10 general education categories determined by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, which has jurisdiction in New York State. As of the publication of this brief, five of the seven Providers have signed Statements of Support (i.e., Transfer and Articulation Agreements), agreeing to accept general education courses for students transferring to other CJII programs within DOCCS or to their community campus and the process is ongoing with the remaining providers. SUNY also intends to build an online community of campus stakeholders to keep the Statements of Support updated beyond the CIP Reentry Initiative.

The CIP Reentry Initiative also requires that programs be of similar rigor to providers' community campuses. These standards are expected to apply to faculty, course content, and academic supports. To develop these quality standards, CIP Providers have gathered resources for ensuring quality higher education in prison. These resources include JSTOR's³⁹ programs for use in correctional facilities, which do not require the internet as well as the Institute for Higher Education Policy's Key Performance Indicators framework,

which helps college-in-prison practitioners assess the impact of their programs and processes. Additionally, SUNY developed a [guide](#) of standards and best practices related to faculty recruitment, training, and retention practices in CIP programs to support program and pedagogical quality and a [guide](#) to cultivating relationship with community stakeholders to help build and maintain student centered programs.⁴⁰

Goal 3: Build capacity of education providers to support students with reentry.

Students often face barriers to employment, education, and meeting basic needs when returning home, particularly without individualized reentry plans to assist them. Although preparing individuals for release has been core to DOCCS' mission for many years, the reentry support landscape across the state has historically been fragmented and focused in New York's downstate regions; many education providers played a limited role in providing reentry assistance prior to the CIP Reentry Initiative. Prior to the CIP Reentry Initiative, most education providers had neither implemented nor formalized academic reentry plans. Through a requirement that providers create an individualized academic reentry plans for continuing their education, accessing necessary social services, and/or finding employment opportunities tied to their course of study in the community, the Initiative helps to improve long-term education, employment, and socioeconomic outcomes for alumni, decrease recidivism, and increase public safety. The CIP Reentry Initiative, through the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity, has also created resources to help colleges meet this need, including [the New York State Back-to-School Guide](#), a statewide resource directory of community-based services to assist returning students, and a labor market study to help college providers assist students and graduates to identify a career path related to their educational goals and achievements.⁴¹

All seven postsecondary institutions have begun offering or enhancing reentry supports to students nearing release. Supports include offering academic advising and facilitation to enrolling on campus programs, reentry workshops focused on life skills, and holding events and programming for students on campus. A few institutions noted using CIP

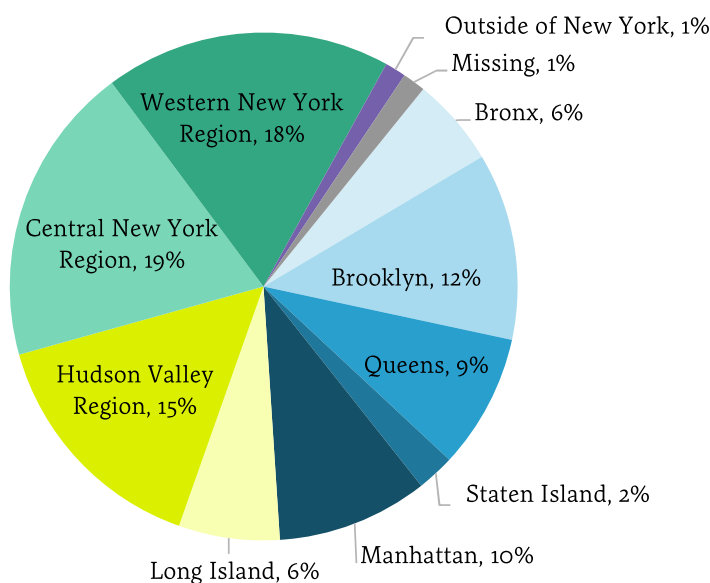
Through Spring 2021, 167 students had been released from DOCCS custody, including 49 who completed their degrees around the time of release and 118 who had not completed at the time of release. These students return to various areas within the New York State region and as such, reentry resources and services must be available to students across the state.

funding for direct financial support, such as food, gift cards, and transportation passes for students approaching release. Through Spring 2021, 167 students had been released from DOCCS custody, including 49 who completed their degrees around the time of release and 118 who had not completed at the time of release. These students return to various areas within the New York State region and as such, reentry resources and services must be available to students across the state (see Figure 3 on next page). Among these students, 52% were reported to have academic reentry plans at the time of release, leading to an additional 13 degrees awarded within 12-months post-release.

Goal 4: Develop in-person and online learning opportunities and information sharing.

The Initiative has advanced research and best practices in college-in-prison more broadly through intentional performance measurement,

Figure 3. Total Students Supported by CIP, by County of Commitment (Fall 2017-Spring 2021)



evaluation, and the exchange of best practices and lessons learned among providers and DOCCS. The John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity has hosted both in-person and online learning exchanges to convene education providers and other CIP stakeholders to share best practices. The John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity also established an online platform of resources curated by the CIP Reentry Initiative as well as tools to facilitate communication and collaboration among the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity, SUNY, ISLG and education providers including those involved in the CIP Reentry Initiative as well as additional college-in-prison providers that are active in the New York Consortium of Higher Education in Prison (NYCHEP).

The Initiative, through the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity's work, has also developed a [guide](#) to building a partnership

with key DOCCS partners in their facilities to strengthen CIP programs. This guide details programming policies and procedures, including information on how a student's time is scheduled throughout the day (i.e., information on mandatory programming, work requirements, modules), protocols for student call-outs, facility staff roles and responsibilities and how they support education programming, enhancing partnerships between provider and facility staff, and other issues essential to successful programming.

Throughout the Initiative, all providers regularly report performance data to ISLG, which allows ISLG to monitor the success of the Initiative and resolve program challenges. At annual learning exchanges, CIP stakeholders convene and share their learnings, adjust implementation, and work to develop best practices and standards for college-in-prison and reentry programming in New York State.

Conclusion

The College-in-Prison Initiative has significantly expanded access to postsecondary programs across New York State, with many providers serving students at volumes near, or even exceeding, their targets. To date, thanks to CIP as well as Second Chance Pell and private philanthropy, there are now 31 degree/certificate programs across more than 30 institutions of higher education operating across 31 of the 50 state prisons.⁴² The Initiative has also created the necessary infrastructure, through curriculum alignment and articulation and transfer agreements, to facilitate greater continuity of learning such that more students can successfully finish their degrees if they are transferred or after release. The CIP Reentry Initiative has also led to more robust reentry supports through the creation of tools and resources to help colleges provide incarcerated students with individualized academic reentry plans that support the continuation of academic programs.

However, despite renewed investments and interest in postsecondary education in prison, the New York State's college-in-prison landscape remains smaller than before federal and state financial aid was first eliminated. With momentum behind the reinstatement of TAP and the forthcoming reinstatement of Pell Grants along with the support of NYCHEP, the State has the opportunity to provide high quality, postsecondary education across the entire DOCCS system in a more coordinated, comprehensive way. In particular, this expansion would support new programming in Northern and Western New York State where most DOCCS facilities are located. Reentry providers will need to expand their supports in these areas as well. Indeed, college in prison is approaching a watershed moment and may soon be able to deliver on the promise of making high quality, post-secondary education accessible for the first time in many of these students' lives, rectifying a decades-long disparity in educational access while contributing to more successful reentry and safer communities for all New Yorkers.

This brief was authored by ISLG staff members Kristen Parsons, Pavithra Nagarajan, Neal Palmer, and Jennifer Ferone.

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Appendix

Variety of Courses Offered by CIP Providers from Fall 2017 – Spring 2021

Discipline	Total Number of Courses, by Level						Total number of the 7 providers offering any course within discipline/subtopic
	90	100	200	300	400	Total	
Art, Music, & Physical Education	0	9	3	1	0	13	2
Dance	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Drawing	0	1	1	0	0	2	2
Film/Acting	0	1	1	0	0	2	2
Music	0	4	0	0	0	4	2
Physical Education	0	3	0	0	0	3	2
Other	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
Humanities	0	15	13	10	0	38	7
Art History	0	2	5	1	0	8	3
History	0	12	6	8	0	26	7
Religious Studies	0	1	2	1	0	4	3
Social Science	0	28	69	24	4	125	7
Anthropology	0	2	0	4	0	6	3
Criminal Justice	0	1	2	0	0	3	1
Economics	0	6	4	0	0	10	5
Education	0	1	0	0	1*	2	1
Environmental & Urban Studies	0	1	2	0	0	3	3
Human Services	0	2	0	0	0	2	2
Interdisciplinary Studies	0	1	1	1	0	3	1
Media & Culture	0	1	3	0	0	4	2
Philosophy	0	3	6	3	0	12	3
Political Science	0	4	21	4	0	29	5
Psychology	0	2	19	6	2	29	7
Sociology	0	3	9	1	0	13	7
Other	0	1	2	5	1	9	3
Language & Literature	0	24	41	5	2	72	7
Literature	0	11	32	3	2	48	5
Foreign Language	0	2	1	2	0	5	3
Writing Mechanics	0	10	8	0	0	18	7
Other	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
Science, Technology & Mathematics	2	26	14	6	4	52	7
Biology	0	7	5	1	2	15	6
Computer Science	0	6	1	0	0	7	2
Environmental Science	0	2	2	0	0	4	1
Mathematics	2	9	6	5	2	24	7
Physics	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
Other	0	1	0	0	0	1	1
Total Number of Courses Offered to Date:						300	
*Note: This Education course was offered at the graduate level but is listed as a 400-level course for parsimony in this table.							

Endnotes

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Endnotes

37. Seven Education Providers were funded vis-à-vis the CIP Reentry Initiative. These Providers are: Bard College, Cornell University, Medaille College, Mercy College, Mohawk Valley Community College, New York University, and SUNY Jefferson.
38. Of these 748 students, with respect to age, 15% of CIP students are under the age of 30, and more than half of students served are under the age of 40. This largely aligns with the age breakdown of incarcerated people throughout all DOCCS facilities. Black students comprise 48% of this student population, followed by White (30%) and Hispanic students (16%). Additionally, male students outnumber female students in the program; male students comprise 79% of the population whereas females reflect 21% of CIP students. Female students, however, are overrepresented in the CIP population given the availability of college programming at women's facilities.
39. JSTOR, which stands for Journal Storage, is a digital database that provides access to a variety of academic texts and resources.
40. The full guidance is accessible here: <https://www.suny.edu/impact/education/heji/transfer-and-articulation/>
41. The full guide entitled, "New York State Back to School Guide: Pursuing College After Incarceration" is accessible on the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity's website. See here: https://justiceandopportunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NYS-Back-To-School-Guide_virtual.pdf
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