

ED expands Second Chance Pell pilot program

By Matthew Dembicki April 26, 2020

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The U.S. Education Department (ED) is expanding a pilot program to allow certain inmates to use Pell grants for their postsecondary education. It is inviting another 45 public two-year institutions to participate.

On Friday, the department announced that it is inviting an [additional 67 postsecondary institutions](#) — two-thirds of which are public two-year colleges — to participate in its Second Chance Pell program. The list includes only institutions that submitted a letter of interest and questionnaire and were approved by ED to participate. Eight schools plan to deliver instruction through innovative and distance delivery methods, and 18 other schools proposed hybrid models of instruction, the department said.

The invitation does not obligate the colleges to participate, the department said. It will later publish a list of institutions that agree to do so.

The expansion could more than double the size of the pilot program, allowing incarcerated students to use Pell grants at 130 colleges and universities in 42 states and the District of Columbia.

U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said that expanding the program will provide “a meaningful opportunity for more students to set themselves up for future success in the workforce.”

“The stories I’ve heard from students and institutions engaged in the experiment are very encouraging, and we look forward to seeing how this expansion will help even more students achieve a better future,” she said in a press release.

Results so far

ED created Second Chance Pell in 2015 through its [Experimental Sites Initiative](#) (ESI), a program authorized by the Higher Education Act that allows the department to waive certain federal student aid statutory or regulatory requirements. Through it, the department can evaluate whether to apply new policy ideas more broadly.

In the first two years of the pilot, participating institutions received \$36.2 million in Pell grants. Nearly 5,000 incarcerated students — eligible individuals in federal and state prisons — received Pell grants in the 2016–17 award year and 6,750 in the 2017–2018 award years, according to ED.

Over the past three years, Second Chance Pell students have earned more than 4,000 credentials, including postsecondary certificates, associate degrees and bachelor’s degrees.

Support to restore eligibility

In 1994, Congress dropped Pell eligibility for incarcerated individuals, causing a significant decrease in the number of education programs in prisons. Over the past several years — and especially more recently as Congress looks to reauthorize the Higher Education Act — lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have indicated that they would support reinstating prisoners' Pell eligibility. The [American Association of Community Colleges](#) and other higher education, workforce and human services organizations also would back the move.

Restoring eligibility would reduce recidivism and incarceration costs by increasing access to higher education, according to supporters. About 65 percent of the 1.5 million people in prison are Pell-eligible but cannot access federal tuition assistance because of the ban, according to [findings](#) by the Vera Institute of Justice and the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequity.

In an effort to reduce the number of incarcerated individuals and related costs, federal lawmakers have tried to rework criminal justice laws. In December 2018, President Trump signed a bipartisan reform bill that, among other things, allows eligible prisoners to earn and count