The background of the entire page is a photograph of several graduates in black academic regalia (caps and gowns). They are seen from behind, looking towards a bright, possibly outdoor setting. The focus is on the graduates in the foreground, with others slightly out of focus in the background.

Cross-Agency Collaboration for Quality Correctional Education

*How the Tennessee Prison College Coalition
Is Expanding Postsecondary Opportunities
for Justice-Impacted Students*

Introduction

In late 2020, Congress passed the FAFSA Simplification Act, restoring access to federal Pell Grants for confined and incarcerated students for the first time since 1994. Following the reversal of this nearly 30-year ban, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) established a new application process for institutions of higher education seeking to operate approved prison education programs (PEPs). This process, launched on July 1, 2023, enables incarcerated students enrolled in approved PEPs to access Pell Grants. This historic expansion builds on the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, which began in 2015 and piloted Pell Grant restoration through partnerships between select higher education institutions and correctional facilities nationwide. With Pell Grant access restored, as many as 760,000 incarcerated learners could potentially access federal need-based financial aid for postsecondary education.¹

These federal changes require institutions of higher education and state departments of corrections to collaborate effectively in operating and overseeing postsecondary programs in prison. Together, they must ensure students have access to high-quality programs and the necessary supports to persist and complete their credentials. This report highlights how one state—Tennessee—has leveraged cross-agency collaboration to expand its correctional education offerings and provide holistic support for justice-impacted students.

In the years prior to Pell Grant restoration, a need for stronger communication and shared strategy among stakeholders prompted leaders in Tennessee to form a coalition of state agencies and nonprofit partners to facilitate, support, and oversee a network of vocational and associate's degree programs in the state's correctional facilities. This effort, led by the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative (THEI), laid the foundation for the Tennessee Prison College Coalition (TPCC). With postsecondary programs now operating in 11 facilities across the state and plans underway for continued expansion, TPCC can serve as a model for how state higher education systems can collaborate across agencies to deliver quality programs and prioritize student success.

Drawing from interviews with state agency and nonprofit representatives participating in TPCC, this case study examines the relationships and strategies that have driven Tennessee's success, and highlights lessons learned to guide advocates and policymakers in other states as they work to expand access to quality credentials for justice-impacted students.

Tennessee Prison College Coalition

In 2019, Governor Bill Lee announced the Correctional Education Investment, a \$10.5 million investment over three years to expand postsecondary and career and technical education in eight state correctional facilities.² This funding provided for student costs, including tuition and materials, as well as one-time capital investments to build out classrooms, on-site physical infrastructure, and technology capabilities. The governor's financial commitment allowed community colleges and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) to expand and extend their offerings.

Following the Correctional Education Investment, THEI—a nonprofit community organization providing holistic support to incarcerated scholars as they pursue higher education in Tennessee prisons—received funding from the ECMC Foundation to establish a coalition of partners to increase communication and alignment among agencies involved in correctional education.³ THEI's leadership led to the launch of the TPCC in 2019,⁴ which seeks to increase collaboration between Tennessee state agencies, higher education institutions, and nonprofit partners building postsecondary education pathways for justice-impacted students, both in prison and the free world.⁵ TPCC brings together leaders from THEI, the Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC), Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD), and the Governor's Office to improve program quality and equity.

Prior to TPCC's launch, TDOC had partnered with THEI to coordinate associate's degree programs and student support services in some facilities. With support from Governor Lee in 2019, THEI began developing bachelor's degree programs and partnering with the state agencies through TPCC.

Guided by feedback from current and former students, TPCC seeks to expand access to postsecondary programs for increased numbers of students, build additional degree offerings and transferrable pathways to credential attainment, and extend college programs to additional prison sites. A subset of TPCC's membership also participates in the PEP Application Review Board, which evaluates applications from institutions seeking to establish approved PEPs with an eye toward program quality, robust student support services, and strong communication channels.



Tennessee's Model for Postsecondary Education in Prison

TDOC oversees 14 state prisons, 11 of which currently offer postsecondary programming in partnership with TBR. The TBR system includes both community colleges and TCATs, and each facility with postsecondary programs offers at least one vocational program and one associate's degree program through its partner TCAT and community college. TBR currently offers nine associate degree programs and 27 TCAT programs across 11 facilities.

Partner	TPCC Function
Tennessee Higher Education Initiative (THEI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convenes TPCC meetings. Leads committee responsible for reviewing incoming PEP applications. Works directly with students and instructors to identify and address barriers.
Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oversees TCAT and community college programs. Oversees program content and accreditation.
Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinates Reconnect Re-entry Navigator program.
Office of Reentry (OOR), Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides workforce development support to justice-impacted individuals, both in prison and during reentry.
Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oversees facility security. Makes "best interest" determination in federal PEP approval process.
Office of the Governor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiated correctional education expansion and scale. Creates alignment between statewide policy initiatives related to justice-impacted students.

Significant state-level investment, first through the Governor's Correctional Education Investment and now through the annual state appropriations process, entirely funds TCAT and community college programs in Tennessee's prisons at no cost to students. As of this writing, TBR receives \$7.65 million annually to run its certificate and associate programs.

Currently, THEI partners with colleges and universities to provide bachelor's programs at two correctional facilities. Although these bachelor's programs do not currently use Pell Grant funding, multiple Tennessee schools have submitted PEP applications, which, if approved, would allow students to receive the Pell Grant. The PEP approval process requires programs first to submit a TPCC-created application to the Coalition's PEP Application Review Board before receiving approval from TDOC, their accreditor, and ED. If these applications are ultimately approved by ED, Pell-funded bachelor's programs may soon become available to more incarcerated students in Tennessee. Under the state's current model, students who earn a certificate or associate's degree would retain full lifetime eligibility for receiving Pell Grants toward the cost of a bachelor's degree, regardless of incarceration status. Relying on state funding to finance any previous vocational and associate's level coursework ensures students' limited lifetime Pell eligibility remains available for their use in bachelor's programs, whether in a correctional facility or not.

Across nine state correctional facilities, THEC operates its on-site Navigate Reconnect program, which employs Re-entry Navigators to connect justice-impacted students with resources and support services as they transition into and through higher education.⁶ At seven sites, THEI provides an additional layer of on-the-ground support to students and faculty by facilitating six associate degree programs, two bachelor's degree programs, and one reentry services program. OOR within the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development collaborates with TDOC, TBR, and other partners to align postsecondary programming with local workforce needs and expand opportunities for pre-release work readiness training.

Given the interconnected roles each agency plays in supporting students throughout their higher education journeys, TPCC provides critical space for partners to strategize, strengthen cohesion of services, and troubleshoot when roadblocks arise. Interviews with coalition members surfaced three key practices and attitudes that have contributed to Tennessee's success in expanding quality postsecondary access in prisons, including:

- **Committing to ongoing collaboration and open communication**
- **Aligning correctional education with existing statewide higher education and workforce development initiatives**
- **Developing layered student support services that build mutual trust and help students persist and succeed**

Collectively, these priorities inform TPCC's approach to correctional education and shape how coalition members build upon the strengths of each participating agency to center student success. Additional information about the interview process is available in the Appendix.

What Works Well in TPCC's Approach

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

Colleagues, Not Competition: Building Collaborative Partnerships

TPCC members have committed to ongoing collaboration and open communication, which Lauren Rhae, former coordinator of special programs for correctional education at TBR, aptly coined the “colleagues, not competition” mindset. Rather than remaining siloed as separate agencies, each partner leverages its unique expertise, creating a system where students are guided seamlessly from one service to the next. TPCC allows state agencies to connect with THEI’s existing nonprofit infrastructure and relationships to expand their joint impact.

While this collaboration has been successful, it has required a significant amount of time and commitment. Because agencies share responsibility for the array of services that collectively create a student’s postsecondary education experience, TPPC members spent the early months of the coalition coming to an understanding of each partner agency’s role, which enables members to take a systemic approach to addressing challenges as they arise.

For example, agencies have worked together to streamline the complex transcript request process that can be challenging for incarcerated students because of limited internet access. THEC Re-entry Navigators and THEI staff assist students directly when ordering necessary documents and cover the associated costs. At the system level, TBR has taken steps to expedite the transcript ordering process across sites and alerted TDOC of the need for students and program staff to receive mailed transcripts in as timely a fashion as possible. Although the transcript ordering process remains more challenging than on campus, regular communication between partners highlights chokepoints and fosters cross-agency collaboration in addressing the barriers facing students.



KEY TAKEAWAY 2

Alignment with State Goals: Integrating Workforce Development and Education

Tennessee's correctional education ecosystem—especially its focus on workforce training and high-touch support services—aligns closely with existing state higher education initiatives. TCAT programs in prison mirror those on traditional campuses, providing career training in fields that meet local labor market needs and ensuring incarcerated students can access transferrable credentials of value. OOR within the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development provides additional support for students' workforce training needs in reentry. In-prison programs reflect the focus on workforce development central to other statewide initiatives, such as the Governor's Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) grant program.⁷

THEC's Re-entry Navigator program is a subset of its broader Tennessee Reconnect initiative, which aims to reengage adult learners and increase alignment between workforce development and higher education.⁸ Reconnect Navigators provide one-on-one support services for adults returning to higher education; Re-entry Navigators serve the same mission but have expertise in working with justice-impacted individuals. Support for adult learners is a key part of Tennessee's broader higher education goals, including the Drive to 55 initiative, which aims to equip 55 percent of Tennesseans with a college degree or certificate by 2025.⁹

By extending adult student and workforce development goals to prison education, Tennessee leaders have included these students as equal participants in the state's higher education system while leaving space to address the specific enrollment and employment challenges they face through targeted support.



For the population that we serve, our goal is to get them to a job. We still have to make certain that we are identifying and leveraging resources and opportunities that are getting at those wraparound resources that are going to help them get to maintain and continue on that job and ultimately a career path.”

WILLIAM ARNOLD, DIRECTOR, TENNESSEE OOR

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

Student Support Services: Eliminating Barriers to Participation

TPCC members have taken steps to eliminate structural barriers to students' full participation in postsecondary programs, starting with TDOC's reclassification of postsecondary education to meet work requirements. The Office of the Governor and TBR have worked with TDOC to implement policies that limit interruptions to students' academic progress from disciplinary actions or population management decisions.



Equity starts before a student enters the classroom."

RACHEL ZOLENSKY, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY & IMPACT, THEI

In addition to addressing major structural barriers to program access, TPCC coordinates student support services across sites to ensure students receive assistance. Both in correctional facilities and on campuses, THEC's Re-entry Navigators work with students at all credential levels and institution types on a variety of needs, including sharing enrollment information, ordering high school transcripts, and navigating repayment plans for any existing student loans.

OOR similarly seeks to bridge the transition into reentry through ongoing efforts to open American Job Centers inside TDOC facilities to assist individuals with workforce readiness as they approach release. Leaders from THEC and OOR emphasized the importance of state agencies building relationships and credibility with justice-impacted students. As Jessica Gibson, senior director for adult learner initiatives at THEC, succinctly stated, "We are connected to TDOC for the purpose of serving you as a student, but we are not TDOC." TPCC partners strengthen students' full participation in higher education by removing structural barriers and building individual relationships.



“

To me, student success is when you pull away all those pain points and those barriers, and you just get everybody to class. Once they're in class, they're going to do fine. But it's all those little things that keep you from getting to class that impact whether or not a student is going to be successful.”

LAUREN RHAE, FORMER COORDINATOR OF SPECIAL PROGRAMS
FOR CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION, TBR



Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Other State and Institutional Leaders

In December 2024, the U.S. Department of Education approved 21 colleges with 64 programs as eligible to receive Pell funding under the 2023 PEP regulations.¹⁰ As more programs continue to apply to access federal aid dollars, states and institutions should work together to ensure incarcerated students have access to meaningful, high-quality credentials that align with their academic and career goals. TPCC offers a collaborative model that could inform approaches in other states seeking to scale postsecondary programs in prisons, whether through the federal PEP-approval process or separate state initiatives.

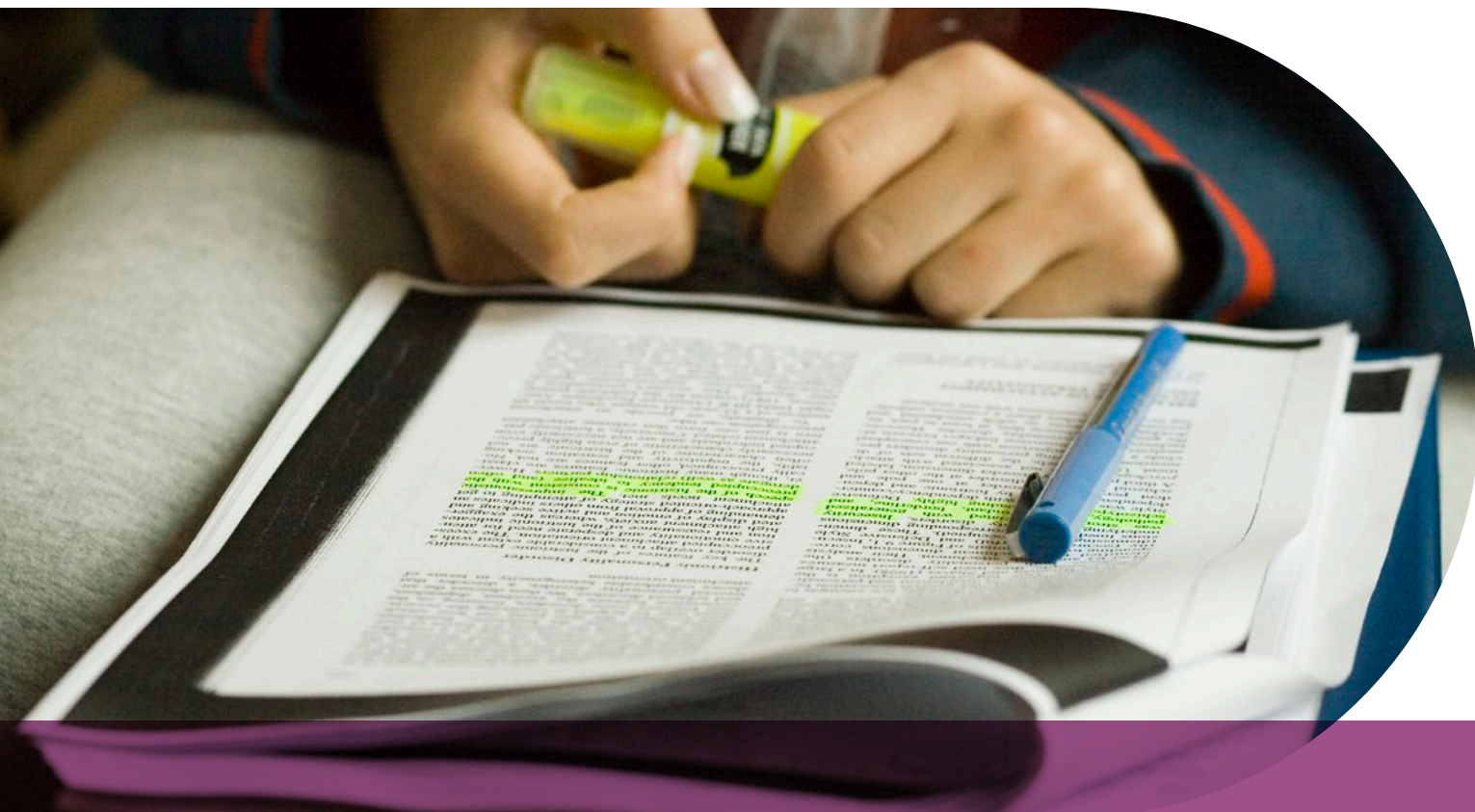
1. Leverage state-level investment, policymaker priorities, and existing higher education priorities.

- A key ingredient in TPCC's success has been strong support from Governor Lee, whose investment provided the initial push to bring members to the discussion table and offered a vision around which different agencies could coalesce. The initial TCAT programs demonstrated the demand for and success of postsecondary programs in prison, allowing for further expansion of community college programs and better positioning TBR to receive state funding following the governor's initial investment. By prioritizing expanding access to higher education for incarcerated individuals, the Governor created a shared sense of accountability, and TPCC participants have each remained committed to working together to achieve this goal.
- Tennessee has also effectively included incarcerated students in its existing higher education and workforce development goals. TCAT programs reflect local labor market needs and align with statewide initiatives to strengthen workforce participation. TPCC members provide targeted support to students, mirroring on-campus services aimed at adult learners.



2. Commit to ongoing partnership between engaged state agencies (especially leaders of higher education systems, labor and workforce development, and corrections) and nonprofit partners.

- Laura Ferguson Mimms, executive director of THEI, described successful relationship building as “calling in” rather than “calling out.” By inviting all involved parties to the table, especially the state departments of corrections that play a central role in shaping incarcerated students’ experience, partners can work together to address the barriers students face in a mutually positive way.
- As Tennessee expands its correctional education footprint, TPCC positions its participants to leverage their individual expertise for the benefit of the entire system. Led by THEI, a subset of TPCC members serve on the Tennessee PEP Application Review Board, which developed Tennessee’s application for incoming PEPs and is now tasked with reviewing applications and making recommendations for approval to TDOC. The application and review process builds on the positive relationship between partners and TDOC, and it requires prospective programs to provide equitable academic pathways and transparent communication for students.



3. Center student experience and equity when measuring short- and long-term program success.

Shared willingness to learn from students' experiences is critical to addressing the ongoing challenge of what William Arnold, director of OOR, called "changing hearts and minds" about the importance of investing in justice-impacted individuals.

Building on their ongoing commitment to this work, TPCC partners have adopted a holistic view of student success. In alignment with research showing that access to postsecondary education in prison reduces recidivism rates,¹¹ TDOC recently reported its lowest recidivism rates in over a decade, a change they attribute in part to rehabilitation-focused services like education programs.¹² TPCC continues to consider how to measure long-term student success beyond recidivism and traditional higher education metrics. Are students able to transfer seamlessly from a TCAT program to an associate's degree program? Are students at different facilities receiving the same level of support? Are students able to secure quality employment and housing after release? If the answers to those questions are "no," TPCC partners are positioned to address challenges together.



We can't use failure as a metric for success... Let's not measure how many people fail. Let's measure how people succeed. Are they being released? Are they securing housing? Are they providing for their family? Do they have agency? What are they doing for workforce opportunity? Starting to look prospectively, like 'How far can we help people go?' rather than, 'Can we just help keep them from falling down?' really changed the culture of the way that everybody involved in this, including the Department of Corrections, engaged in the work."

ABIGALE JASINSKY, FORMER DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF POLICY
FOR GOVERNOR BILL LEE

Conclusion

The ongoing work of the TPCC highlights how state agencies and partner organizations can unify around a shared vision of student success when scaling postsecondary programs in prisons. As states and institutions continue to expand these programs, now with the possibility of accessing Pell Grants, Tennessee offers a compelling example of how higher education leaders, corrections officials, agency staff, and students can collaborate to address challenges and maintain consistency.

Quality postsecondary education programs in prison can provide a significant opportunity to strengthen public safety and invest in justice-impacted individuals as members of families and communities, as well as the U.S. labor force. Nearly 450,000 people return from prison each year, rejoining their communities and local workforces.¹³ Access to postsecondary training and credentials can better prepare these individuals to secure quality jobs, support their families, and end the cycle of incarceration.

Pell Grant restoration for incarcerated students received bipartisan support at the federal level.¹⁴ Now that states must choose how to build their own correctional education networks, policymakers and advocates should maintain this bipartisan commitment to students. Key lessons from Tennessee, particularly the necessity of cross-agency cooperation and attention to student experience, can inform other state efforts to scale postsecondary programs in prison and align state higher education, workforce development, and public safety goals.



Appendix

To inform this case study, the primary author conducted semi-structured interviews from April 2024 to August 2024 with leaders from THEI, TBR, THEC, TDLWD, and the Office of the Governor who currently participate or previously participated in TPCC. Representatives from TDOC declined to be interviewed. The following individuals were selected as interview subjects because of their firsthand involvement in efforts to scale prison education programming following the Correctional Education Investment or because they have served as their agency's representative to TPCC. TICAS would like to thank all participants for the generous contributions of their time and expertise to inform this report.

Interview participants included:

Tennessee Higher Education Initiative

- Barbi Brown, Director of Policy and Practice
- Laura Ferguson Mimms, Executive Director
- Rachel Zolensky, Vice President of Strategy and Impact

Tennessee Board of Regents

- Russ Deaton, Executive Vice Chancellor for Policy and Strategy
- Lauren Rhae, former Coordinator of Special Programs for Correctional Education

Tennessee Higher Education Commission

- Jessica Gibson, Senior Director of Adult Learner Initiatives

Tennessee Office of Reentry, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development

- William Arnold, Director, Tennessee Office of Reentry

Office of the Governor

- Abigale Jasinsky, former Deputy Director of Policy for Governor Lee

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