



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Take Charge of Your Future

Get the Education and Training You Need

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Get the Education and Training You Need

Updated Version 2025

Prepared for
U.S. Department of Education
Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education

March 2025

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U.S. Department of Education

Linda McMahon
Secretary

March 2025

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABE	adult basic education
AJC	American Job Center
ASE	adult secondary education
B.A.	Bachelor of Arts (degree)
B.S.	Bachelor of Science (degree)
CTE	career and technical education
FAFSA®	Free Application for Federal Student Aid
FSA ID	Federal Student Aid identification
HiSET®	high school equivalency test or credential
HSE	high school equivalency
ID	identification
IDR	income-driven repayment
IET	Integrated Education and Training
ISIR	Institutional Student Information Record
NEDP	National External Diploma Program
Ph.D.	Doctor of Philosophy (degree)
SAR	Student Aid Report
VR	vocational rehabilitation

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U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *Take Charge of Your Future: Get the Education and Training You Need*. Washington, D.C., 2012.

Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice for the U.S. Department of Education. July. *Back to School: A Guide to Continuing Your Education After Prison*. Washington, D.C., 2010.

INTRODUCTION

About This Guide

This guide is for people who are incarcerated and for those on probation and parole. It's also for those who were previously involved with the justice system. The guide will help you get started — or continue — on your path to further education and training. Since earning education degrees and credentials is linked to lower unemployment,¹ your career pathway is important. A career pathway is steps you'll take now and, in the future, to meet your education and work goals. Earning a high school credential, getting a workforce certification or license, or earning a certificate or degree will help you move up in your career and in your life. Continuing your education and training also can better your family and community connections: Education is linked to good health,² improved well-being, and strong relationships.³ Don't just take our word for it — in this guide you can read real stories from formerly incarcerated adults about how their lives were changed by education and training. [Their complete profiles are included in Appendix A.]

“ Education is the most important pursuit anyone can begin, but for someone with a criminal past it is essential. My greatest piece of advice is not merely to say that one should pursue education both inside and outside of prison—this is a given—but to pursue education for the right reasons. Education should be pursued not just for success in the job market, but also to positively expand and transform your understanding of the world and your place in it. Aside from this, I would advise people to have realistic expectations about what can be achieved. If you have family and financial support that makes education easy, then you are blessed. For everyone else: expect to struggle but do not give up.

Brandon

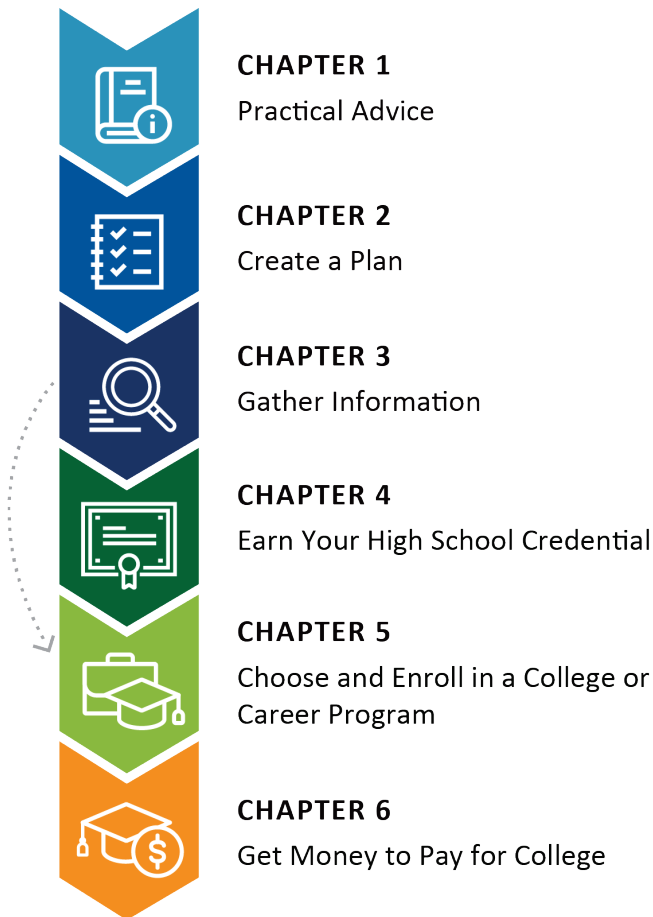
Read Brandon's story in Appendix A

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (May 2020). “Learn more, earn more: Education leads to higher wages, lower unemployment.” Career Outlook. <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2020/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>

² Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health. (2015). “Why Education Matters to Health: Exploring the Causes.” <https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/why-education-matters-to-health-exploring-the-causes.html>

³ Economic and Social Research Council. (2014). “The wellbeing effect of education.” Accessed November 6, 2020. <https://esrc.ukri.org/files/news-events-and-publications/evidence-briefings/the-wellbeing-effect-of-education/>

This guide is designed so that you can go through it from start to finish. Or you can read just the chapters you need most, depending on your education background and goals. Chapters 1–3 are meant for all readers and cover the steps for setting goals, gathering the documents you need, and getting organized to pursue your education. Chapters 4–6 describe specific steps for starting and finishing different education levels, from earning a high school credential to enrolling in a college program.

**NOTE**

The online links in this guide are up-to-date at the time of publication, but sometimes links may not work or take you to the wrong site because they are not updated regularly. If possible, look for the date the website was last updated (often found at the top or bottom of the screen) or when an online document was published. Knowing the date will tell you how current the information is. If a link is no longer working (or you cannot access it directly from this guide), you can enter the title of the webpage or resource — or a few words that describe it — into an online search engine, such as Google or Bing, to see if a new link is available.

This guide won't answer all your questions, but it will direct you to resources where you can get your questions answered and find more information.

A NOTE FOR CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION AND REENTRY PROGRAM STAFF

While this guide is designed for use by individuals, correctional education and reentry staff play an important role in supporting current and future students in identifying and pursuing their education, life, and career goals. You can use this guide in your programs by

- helping participants understand where they are in their educational journeys and pointing them to the most relevant content in the guide.
- connecting them with technology so that they can look up the online information included in the guide, search for answers to their questions, and fill out applications. Where online resources are not available, staff can download recommended resources to a secure intranet, tablet, or other location.
- guiding them through the next steps relevant to their education, life, and career goals, such as realizing they have options (Chapters 4 and 5), creating a resume (Chapter 3 and Appendix B), selecting a career pathway (Chapter 5), or applying for financial aid (Chapter 6).
- connecting participants with services to address their most pressing reentry needs, such as housing, counseling, and addiction treatment, to support their self-care and set them up to be successful in education when they're ready.
- directing participants to state and local agencies where they can gather the necessary documents to enroll in an education program (Chapters 3, 4, and 5).
- advising participants on safely storing needed education documents.
- serving as a trusted sounding board and source of support as participants navigate their education and career pathways, deal with challenges, and celebrate milestones along the way.

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CHAPTER 1.

Some Practical Advice

Throughout your reentry process, you will have to deal with forms, applications, and procedures that may be new and confusing. You may encounter people who could be helpful but don't take the time to help you. The following are some ways to remain calm and focused on your education goals.

Take care of yourself. Pursuing an education probably will not be the first step in your reentry process. It's very important to take care of the other needs that can help you create a healthy and stable lifestyle and set you up for success with your education. You will likely need to find housing, a job, and reliable transportation; reconnect with family members; seek or continue support groups; find a sponsor or mentor; and attend mental health or substance abuse counseling. Reentry coalitions and services in your local community can connect you to organizations that can help. You can locate reentry services by searching for them online.

Ask for help. Get advice and support from counselors, probation or parole officers, and other people familiar with the process of getting an education. Trust your instincts about who to ask and when to approach them; that is, try to be sure that they have the time and experience to be able to offer help. Consider seeking help from the education department, counselors, instructors, librarians, or religious programs at your correctional facility. After release, you can find help at reentry organizations, social service agencies, churches and other faith-based organizations, and other community service programs in your area.

Do your research and be prepared so you can make informed decisions. Some education programs may not be worth your time or money if they do not prepare you to meet your goals. For example, a program may not offer accredited education services or may not have easily transferable credits, which may mean that the credential you will earn may not be widely accepted by employers or colleges. You could lose money and end up with poor-quality services. Find out as much as possible about programs you're considering. Ask questions. Talk to others who know about the program. Take the time to make an informed decision.

Be patient. Keep in mind that there are many steps to complete as you figure out and work toward your goals. You will encounter challenges along the way. Stay motivated, seek support from your peers, mentors, family members, and other trusted contacts, and set realistic goals. Choosing to work on one step each day or each week can help you stay motivated and focused on your goals — and make real progress.

“ Always make sure you finish what you start. No matter the obstacles or roadblocks, just keep going forward no matter what. This semester you may have to take a part-time schedule, next semester you may be able to take a full-time schedule, the next one you may have to take off, but make sure you have a plan to return and finish. Keep going forward no matter what, and reach out for help.

James

Read James' story in Appendix A

Learn How to Use a Computer and the Internet

The internet is a huge source of information and help. Even more important, today many applications — for jobs, for services, to get important documents, and to enroll in education programs — are submitted mostly or only through the internet. You’ll see that most of the resources this guide recommends are online. To get access to them, you’ll need to use a computer, mobile phone, or tablet with internet service. To submit an application or other important documents, though, you should use a computer or tablet. The larger screen size on computers and tablets will make it easier for you to check your work. Some online applications or other documents may not open properly on a mobile phone.

If you don’t yet know how to use a computer or the internet, it’s very important to learn. Many adult education programs, public libraries, and the Department of Labor American Job Centers (AJCs — see next page) offer free classes on using computers and the internet. You also can use computers and the internet for free at your local public library as long as you have a library card (see the next section for how to get a library card). Keep in mind that you don’t need to become a “computer expert” and learn everything a computer can do. You can decide to learn more computer skills after you have figured out the basics. At a minimum, you need to create an email address so that you can communicate and receive information about education programs and jobs. You can get a free email address at websites like Google or Microsoft Outlook.

If you want to learn or improve computer skills on your own, there are free online resources that can help. You can learn basic computer skills like typing, using email, searching online, and using work-related software. Ask your education supervisor or the librarian in your facility if any resources are available in a computer lab onsite. You can also find online programs by going to the Department of Education’s LINCS Learner Center at <https://lincs.ed.gov/learner>. Click on “Get Job Skills” at the top of the screen and look for resources that mention digital learning or computer skills. For example, Digital Learn and Northstar Digital Literacy offer basic and practice courses on using technology.

Accessing the internet in correctional facilities

Depending on your facility, you may have some access to the internet to look up education or career resources. A teacher, counselor, or librarian in the facility can help you find and use online resources. If you don’t have internet access, you may need to work with a trusted facility staff person or family member on the outside to fill out applications or submit assignments for you.

KEEP IN MIND...

Digital literacy refers to the skills you need to responsibly use technology for different purposes, including for work. In addition to basic computer skills, it includes being able to search for and evaluate online information, using technology to communicate with others, and knowing when and how to use different types of technology.

Find Helpful Services in Your Community

You'll be able to find many services free or for a small charge in your own community. Some suggestions follow.

Your public library can help you find services and resources in your community. The library offers free use of computers and the internet. You also can often find adult education services (see Chapter 4, page 30) for more information about these services) or resources and government forms at the library. To get a library card, you may need a state identification document or official mail addressed to you at your home address. Librarians can help you find the information you need. To find the public library closest to you

- enter terms like “library” or “public library” and the name of your city or county into an internet search engine; or
- on the internet, go to <https://www.usa.gov/libraries>. Click on “Find your local public library” under Public Libraries.

American Job Centers

American Job Centers (AJCs) can help you prepare for and find a job. AJCs can connect you to job openings, training, and education programs related to the job you want. Most AJC services are free, but there may be a fee for some specialized education and training programs. Some of the services provided by AJCs include the following:

Skill assessment. Staff can help you identify the skills you need — and the skills you already have — as you get ready for education, training, and/or employment.

Career counseling. Counselors can help you identify jobs and occupations that you may be interested in, based on your skills, interests, and experience. They also can tell you about the types of jobs available in your local area.

Training or referral to training. Depending on your needs and interests, staff may provide training or refer you to adult education or other training programs that can help you with

- “hard skills” — the technical skills you need for a job in a specific field.
- “employability skills” — general skills needed for successful employment, such as communication, teamwork, and leadership.
- writing your resume.

Accessing job services while incarcerated

In some states, American Job Center services are offered in correctional facilities. Most facilities have staff who can help you prepare for a job search before your release. If you are still incarcerated, ask your counselor or case manager if any job services are available to you. The more you can prepare for your release, the easier your reentry will be.

- preparing for interviews.

Referrals to other resources or services. Staff can direct you to organizations that can help you with such things as transportation, childcare, welfare assistance, unemployment insurance, and veterans' services.

You can find AJCs in your area by searching online at <https://www.careeronestop.org/localhelp/americanjobcenters/find-american-job-centers.aspx>. Type in your city, state, or ZIP code in the "Find an American Job Center" box to find a location near you.

Community Organizations

Community organizations provide many kinds of services. Most are free, but some may require a fee. These organizations can help with employment, education, health care, counseling, housing, substance abuse treatment, transportation, and childcare. They also can refer you to other agencies. Here are several ways to find community organizations:

- Go to 2-1-1 Information and Referral Search at <https://www.211.org/> on the internet.
- Dial 211 on your phone. Note that this phone service is available in most, but not all, communities.
- Go to the National H.I.R.E. Network Clearinghouse website on the internet at <https://clearinghouse.lac.org>. This site lists organizations that provide services to people with criminal records. Click on the map or the name of your state to get a list of organizations, and scroll down to "Local Service Providers."
- Search for local literacy and adult education centers by going to the National Literacy Directory at <https://www.nld.org/>.
- Ask for referrals to community organizations from someone you know and trust, like a family member or friend, someone who has received similar services, or a reentry professional or case manager.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies help people with disabilities to prepare for, get, and keep a job. You will need to show that you will be able to benefit from VR services, and that you need such services for work. Disabilities may include physical and mental limitations, including learning disabilities, if the limitation impacts the person's ability to be employed.

Keep in mind that the government uses some words in ways that may be different from how we use them in daily life. For example, you may know that you have some challenges, but you may not think you have a “disability.” Because the regulations are complicated, you should not try to guess whether or not you may qualify for VR services. If you think VR services might help you, you should apply and let the local VR office determine if you are eligible.

There is no cost to apply for VR services to see if you are eligible. If you are eligible, however, some states may require you to help pay for some services. Some states also may have a waiting list. This is referred to as an order of selection. Once you are determined eligible, you may take some tests at no cost just to figure out your specific needs for VR services.

To learn more about VR services:

- Search for the terms “vocational rehabilitation services,” “employment services,” or “disability services” along with your state’s name on the internet. Keep in mind that different states may have different names for VR agencies.
- On the internet, go to the U.S. Department of Labor Job Accommodation Network website at <https://askjan.org/resources/index.cfm>. Type “vocational rehabilitation” into the search field to get a list of state VR agencies.



CHAPTER 2.

Create a Plan: What Are Your Goals?

To get ahead in life, you must set goals and make a plan to reach those goals. But sometimes you may not know all the options that may be open. This can make it hard to picture the kinds of goals you want to reach. Start by asking yourself some questions:

- What do I like to do?
- What kind of work have I heard about or seen others do that I might want to do?
- What am I good at doing?
- What skills and experience do I already have?
- What skills would I like to learn?
- What is the highest level of education I have completed?
- Where would I like to see myself in five years?

Answering these questions can help you see what types of work you might enjoy, what kind of skills you would need to learn, and what education or training could help you. This chapter gives ideas for choosing a career pathway, a process that can start while you are still incarcerated. The chapter is organized into the following steps:

STEP 1 Explore Your Interests

STEP 2 Find More Career Information

STEP 3 Create Your Plan

“ I wanted a career – not a job – something stable that would provide for my family. Education was the key to getting that stability.”

Syrita

Read Syrita’s story in Appendix A

STEP 1

Explore Your Interests

Think of your options for education and a career like a career pathway. A career pathway is a plan that helps you map out the education and training you need to get a job and to advance in your job in a specific industry. You can think about both short-term and long-term goals and see different routes to reach them and steps along the way. A career pathway also shows different entry points, so that you can start and stop your education and training when you need to focus on other responsibilities.

First, make a list of the skills and experience you already have, including your education or training, past jobs, or just activities that you enjoy. For example:

- Do you like talking and interacting with other people? You could be in sales, teaching, marketing, journalism, or social work.
- Do you like being outside? You could be a landscaper, forester, house painter, park ranger, surveyor, or highway worker.
- Are you good with tools and mechanical items? You could be a construction worker, architect, plumber, auto mechanic, or engineer.
- Do you like math and numbers? You could work in science, technology, or finance.
- Do you like coming up with new ideas or new ways to solve common challenges? You might like to start your own business.
- Do you like sports? You could be an athletic coach or personal trainer.
- Do you like reading and writing? Do you feel comfortable working on a computer? You might think about administrative, library, government, or research work.

You can also explore your interests and learn about career pathway options online. For example:

- Visit the “My Next Move” website to answer questions about your interests and get suggestions for possible career pathways. You can find My Next Move at <https://www.mynextmove.org/>.

KEEP IN MIND...

As you think about what careers you might enjoy, it can help to talk about your options with someone you trust. It can feel overwhelming to start this process alone, and there are many people who can help. Reach out to a counselor, teacher, librarian, case manager, or friend to share your ideas and get their advice.

- Visit the CareerOneStop website to learn how your interests, skills, and values match with different career pathways. Use the career assessment tools at <https://www.careeronestop.org/ExploreCareers/Assessments/what-is-assessment.aspx>.

Once you've made a list, think about what you like best, what your strongest skills are, and what education and training you already have or may need.

STEP 2

Find More Career Information

Second, you need to know whether you can legally do any of the jobs on your list and whether your community needs employees for the jobs on your list. Sometimes the law forbids people with criminal records from working in certain jobs and occupations. But some states and the federal government have taken steps to prevent discrimination against those who were incarcerated. Restrictions differ from state to state.

You may want to consider some career pathways that are “reentry friendly” — that is, employers who welcome and encourage applicants who are reentering from the justice system. Examples include computer science, culinary arts, business administration, communications, welding, and social work.

Some states offer ways to get past these restrictions. These include Certificates of Rehabilitation, orders given by a judge or parole board in certain states that pardon a reentering citizen and restore their rights. A Certificate of Rehabilitation also removes restrictions like those on getting a license from a state industry licensing board. See the Clean Slate Clearinghouse website (<https://cleanslateclearinghouse.org/>) for state policies and information on clearing your record and links to legal services in your state.

Once you focus on specific jobs you'd like, you need to make sure that your record will not prevent you from working in that field. Some resources for finding out about these restrictions include the following:

- If you're still incarcerated, check with your correctional facility's education department, or ask your counselor or case manager.
- Information on work restrictions is available from the CareerOneStop website (see <https://www.careeronestop.org/ExOffender/ExploreCareers/LearnAboutCareers/work-restrictions.aspx>).

- The report *After Prison: Roadblocks to Reentry* describes barriers facing people with criminal records in all 50 states. It is available at https://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/publication/259864/doc/slspublic/LAC_PrintReport.pdf.
- For more information about why employers should give a fair chance to workers with records, go to <https://www.nelp.org/publication/the-business-case-becoming-a-fair-chance-employer/> and download “The Business Case: Becoming a Fair-Chance Employer.”

Once you have narrowed your list down to a few career pathways, find out as much as you can about them. For example, what jobs are available in this field? How many job openings are there in the community where I want to work? Do the jobs pay a living wage? Do they prepare me for the next steps in my career? What credentials or degrees will I need?

The Department of Labor *Occupational Outlook Handbook* is a good source of information on many jobs and careers, including

- training or education needed.
- earnings.
- typical work activities and responsibilities.
- working conditions.
- demand for workers in specific fields.

The handbook is updated every two years. You can find information from the most current handbook at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>. You also may be able to get the handbook at the library in your correctional facility, a local public library, or the local AJC.

You can also search the My Next Move website (<https://www.mynextmove.org/>) for information about specific careers and browse careers in different industries.

STEP 3

Create Your Plan

Now that you've gathered useful information and thought about your future, it's time to make a plan. Consider your interests, any previous education or training, skills and experience, and any restrictions on working in the types of jobs you are considering, and ask these questions: Which careers seem to be the best fit for you? What do you need to do next to start or continue in your chosen pathway? You can find out about the education and training you need for your career pathway by going to the resources below.

- **AJCs.** Almost every community has an AJC, sometimes also called job service centers or employment services. AJCs have many resources, all in one place, for people seeking work or further education. These include job search help, skills training, occupational licensing (such as for forklift operation, welding, or commercial driver's licenses), and referrals to support services, among others. For help in setting your goals, AJCs offer "interest inventories," a tool to help you see which kinds of jobs might be right for you, and staff who can help you set goals. To locate AJCs in your area, go to <https://www.careeronestop.org/LocalHelp/AmericanJobCenters/find-american-job-centers.aspx> or call 1-877-872-5627, Monday through Friday, from 8:30 A.M. to 8 P.M. (Eastern Time).
- **O*NET Online.** You can find tools and information to explore different occupations at O*NET Online, including the knowledge, skills and abilities, and education needed for a specific career. Visit <https://www.onetonline.org/>.
- ***The Occupational Outlook Handbook.*** This handbook gives you job search tips, information about the job market in your state, and advice on deciding if a job offer is right for you. Go to <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>.

Use this information to decide on your next step. It may be getting your high school credential, improving your basic skills, or applying for a technical or academic college program. You can use the research you did in steps 1 and 2 to make an education and career plan. Your plan should outline your goals and describe the steps you'll need to take to achieve them, including education and training programs, work experience, financial aid, and other support, such as childcare, tutoring, or transportation. Once you have a plan, read the next chapter about getting organized. Then you can jump ahead to the chapter you need to learn how to choose and apply for education and training programs.

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CHAPTER 3.

Gather Information and Get Organized

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As you plan for education, training, or to look for a job, you need to gather important documents and other materials. You must keep track of these materials carefully because you'll be using them in your job search and in applying for education or training programs. You should also learn about free resources, including those available on the internet, and how you can locate them. This chapter offers suggestions to help you get — and stay — organized and find resources that can help you. It is divided into two sections:

STEP 1 Gather Important Documents

STEP 2 Get Organized

“ I remember arriving at the detention facility where I would spend the next five years and determining in my mind that I would view the prison as a learning center. I spent time everyday learning and growing, with a goal of gaining as much education and knowledge as I could.

Jon

Read Jon's story in Appendix A

STEP 1

Gather Important Documents

You must have several documents in hand as you look for a job, apply to education or training programs, and get other services. Some of these are free; for others, you must pay. Sometimes fees are not charged if you earn below a certain level; this is called a waiver of the fee. Always ask about waivers.

These documents are very important, but the process can take a lot of time, so begin as soon as possible — even if you are still incarcerated. Gather the documents listed below and keep them in a safe place (for example, a filing cabinet, safe deposit box, or with a trusted friend or relative). You might also want to make copies of these documents and keep them in different locations.

- Birth certificate
- Social Security card
- State identification (ID) card or driver's license
- Criminal record or rap sheet
- High school credential or high school transcripts
- Resume
- Letters of reference and a list of people who will give you a good reference

Birth Certificate

Your birth certificate sometimes is needed when you apply for other forms of identification, such as a driver's license or ID card. You must pay to get a copy of your birth certificate; fees vary by state. To get a copy of your birth certificate

- write to the Bureau of Vital Records in the state where you were born to request a copy. The name of this office may differ by state. Sometimes it is called Office of Vital Records or Division of Vital Statistics or something similar. To find the address for your state office, go to <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/index.htm>.
- In your request, include your name as it appears on your birth certificate, your date of birth, the city and county where you were born, and your mother's full maiden name. You also should include your father's full name if it appeared on your birth certificate.
- You also will need to include a copy of your proof of identity, such as a driver's license or prison ID.

KEEP IN MIND...

If you have gone by other names in your life, or used an alias, remember always to use the name that appears on your birth certificate when completing forms and applications.

Social Security Card

You need your Social Security number to apply for jobs, enroll in education programs, and get access to many services. Social Security cards are free. Here's how to get your Social Security card:

- If you previously had a Social Security card but no longer do, ask for a replacement Social Security card online at <https://www.ssa.gov/myaccount/replacement-card.html>. This option is available to residents of most states, except for (as of November 2020) residents of Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, West Virginia, or those with driver's licenses or state IDs issued by a U.S. Territory.
- Contact the Social Security Administration at 1-800-772-1213, or go to your local Social Security office, and ask for an application for a Social Security card. The application is called the SS-5 form. You can find your local Social Security office by going to <https://secure.ssa.gov/ICON/main.jsp>. Type your ZIP code into the search bar. The SS-5 form is available online at <https://www.ssa.gov/forms/ss-5.pdf>.
- Fill out the SS-5 form. For a new card, you will need to provide two documents that prove your age, identity, and citizenship status, such as your birth certificate and a passport. For a replacement card, you will need to provide one document as proof of identification, such as a driver's license, passport, marriage or divorce record, or certification from your correctional facility.
- Mail the completed SS-5 form, along with a copy of your identification documents, to your local Social Security office. Be sure to make a copy of personal documents to send; don't send the original versions. You also can take the SS-5 form to your local Social Security office. Your Social Security card will be sent to you. If you do not have a permanent address, you can ask the Social Security Administration to mail the card to your local Social Security office for you to pick up; you will need to provide proof of identity to pick it up.

Applying for a Social Security card while incarcerated

If you are incarcerated, ask your counselor or case manager for help in getting your Social Security card. You can ask your counselor or case manager to receive important documents in the mail for you and keep them in your file until your release.

State ID Card or Driver's License

Procedures for how to apply for a state ID card or driver's license vary from state to state. You will need some form of identification to apply, and you may have to pay a fee. Once you get your ID, be sure to make copies of it and keep your copies in different locations.

- If you are still incarcerated, ask your counselor or case manager how to get a state ID or driver's license. In some states, you can't get a state ID or driver's license while incarcerated.
- If you are no longer incarcerated, go to the office in your state responsible for issuing driver's licenses or visit the website for more information. The name of this office can vary by state. Usually, it is called the Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Transportation, Department of Licensing, or Department of Public Safety. Search the internet using these names, along with the names of your town or community and your state. The state website usually will have a list of local offices and their addresses and phone numbers.

Criminal Record or Rap Sheet

Get a copy of your criminal record or rap sheet (record of arrest and prosecution) because you need to make sure the information on it is correct. If the details of your offense are sealed and can only be obtained with a court order or expunged (deleted altogether), make sure that the sealed or expunged information is not included. The information must be accurate because employers and landlords will see it if they conduct a criminal background check. Colleges often conduct criminal background checks as part of their application process.

You can learn how to get a copy of your criminal record or rap sheet by going to the website of the National H.I.R.E. Network Clearinghouse at <https://clearinghouse.lac.org/public>. Click on your state on the map or in the list below the map. Information about resources in your state will appear. Locate the right agency by clicking the link for "Criminal Record Repository" or scrolling down the page.

Many states have made it easier for those involved with the justice system to get a job. You can learn more at the National Employment Law Project (NELP), which describes state and local "fair-chance" hiring policies. Visit NELP's website at <https://www.nelp.org/campaign/ensuring-fair-chance-to-work/>.

High School Credential and Transcripts

You will need copies of your high school credential (diploma or GED® certificate) and transcript (list of the courses you took and your grades) when you apply for education programs and for jobs.

- If you are still incarcerated, ask the education staff or case manager at your facility or a trusted family member or friend for help in getting these documents.
- If you graduated from high school, contact the central office of your high school. To find your high school's central office, search the internet using the school's name and city. Once you have found your high school's website, look for the contact information. Your high school should be able to give you a copy of your diploma and your transcript.
- If you earned a high school equivalency credential, for example, a GED® certificate, contact the office where you took the test. In some cases, credentials and transcripts are only available online. For more information about these credentials and how to locate the correct office, see Chapter 4.

Resume

A resume lists your work experience, education, and any special skills you have that would help you get a job. It also includes your contact information: address, phone number, and email address. Your local AJC or adult education program can help you create a resume. You also can find tips for creating resumes and applying for jobs online at your local public library, in the education department or library of your correctional facility, or for purchase in bookstores. Sample resumes and resume forms are also available on the internet. For example, LinkedIn is an online site that lets you build and post your resume online; connect with and contact other professionals; and look for jobs. A basic membership is free, but you can pay for additional services like recruitment or learning materials.

Your resume should include the following (see Appendix B for a sample resume and cover letter):

- Work experience, including work experience while you were incarcerated
- Volunteer or community service experience
- Education, including diplomas or certificates you have received
- Licenses or certifications that you hold

- Special skills, such as using specific computer software (for example, Microsoft Word and Excel)
- A summary of your skills related to the job you want
- Keywords. Employers increasingly use computer programs to sort and choose resumes using keywords, which are important terms in the job description for the job you are seeking. For example, keywords might include “teamwork” or “quality control,” depending on the job you are applying to. If you include keywords in your resume to describe your skills and experiences, there’s a better chance that a hiring manager will see it.

Most applications for jobs are online, so you may be asked to “attach” or “upload” your resume with the application. To do this, create and save your resume in a word processing application like Microsoft Word, and follow the instructions in the job application. Some email services also have help centers that give instructions for attaching or uploading documents. You can ask for help from your case manager or counselor as well. See a sample of typical job application questions at

<https://app.eduportal.com/share/0bf2f7fc-3d9a-11e8-b33e-00155d645900>.

For more help with job applications, you can contact an AJC or an adult education program.

Cover Letter

I include a cover letter with your resume when you apply for a job. Its purpose is to introduce yourself to the employer, explain your interest in the job, and show how your personal and professional experiences prepare you for it. The letter also explains why you are the best choice for the job. Do not repeat everything in your resume in your cover letter. Just highlight what is most important to the job you're applying for. The cover letter should be tailored to each job that you apply for. A cover letter typically includes the following:

1. A **heading** with your contact information.
2. A **greeting**. Address the hiring manager by name, if possible. If not, address your letter "Dear Hiring Manager."
3. An **introduction** paragraph, where you introduce yourself, state the job you're seeking and how you learned about it, and give a short summary of why you are a good match for the job.
4. A paragraph describing your **work history and skills**. Use a few examples from your work history to show your experience with specific job requirements.
5. A paragraph discussing your **values and goals**. You may want to acknowledge your criminal history here and explain the steps you have taken to rejoin society.⁴
6. Finally, end with a **summary and next steps**. Say again why you are interested in the job and that you plan to discuss it in additional detail during an interview, and thank the hiring manager for their consideration.
7. Use a professional closing phrase (e.g., "Sincerely," "Best Regards," or "Respectfully") and your **signature** or typed name to end your letter.

KEEP IN MIND...

Potential employers may ask about any gaps in your employment history during the time you were incarcerated. Honesty about your incarceration is the best policy. Your cover letter is a good place to explain your personal situation and growth. If you had a job while incarcerated, you should mention it in your resume and cover letter. Highlight the skills you used in the job and explain how they would help you in future jobs. See Appendix B for a sample cover letter to see how you might describe your criminal history to employers.

⁴ See Treadwell, L. "How to Write a Cover Letter When You Have a Felony."
<https://work.chron.com/write-cover-letter-felony-16606.html>

See Appendix B for a sample resume and cover letter. You also can find helpful resources on how to write a cover letter on the internet. For example:

- The CareerOneStop website includes a template for writing cover letters at <https://www.careeronestop.org/JobSearch/Resumes/cover-letters-sample.aspx>.
- See Indeed.com for more information on how to prepare a successful cover letter. Go to <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/parts-of-cover-letter>.
- For suggestions on how to describe your criminal history and any gaps in employment, see the “Employment Information Handbook For Ex-Offenders,” from the U.S. Department of Labor at <https://www.doc.state.nc.us/Publications/DOL.Exoffender.Handbook.pdf>.

Reference Lists and Letters

References are people who can speak positively about your abilities, skills, and experience. You may be asked for the names of references when you apply for a job or to a college program. References should be people who know you well, such as former employers, teachers, religious leaders, or mentors. You should not use family members as references.

Make a list of references that includes names, titles, and contact information (such as phone numbers and email addresses). Always ask permission first from someone you want to use as a reference. This is polite, and it helps to make sure that your references don't ignore calls or delete emails from hiring managers asking about you.

Some potential employers may ask for letters of recommendation from your references. Be sure that you ask them to do this as early as possible before the letters are needed. Give your references information about the job or program you're applying for and the name and address where the letter should be sent.

For Males Only: Register for Selective Service to Get State and Federal Assistance

If you are a male between the ages of 18 and 25 living in the United States, you **must** register for Selective Service. The federal government uses Selective Service registration to draft people for military service when needed. If you do not register for Selective Service, you may not be eligible to get some federal and state services. If you have already registered, you can verify your registration by going to <https://www.sss.gov/verify/> or calling 1-847-688-6888. Enter your last name, Social Security number, and date of birth to verify your registration online. A 2021 change to the law removed the requirement that male students register with the Selective Service before the age of 26 to be eligible for federal student aid under *Title IV of the Higher Education Act*. While the Selective Service question will still appear on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) until the 2023–24 version, if you do not register for Selected Service, it will no longer impact your eligibility for federal student aid.

Registering for Selective Service

You can register for the Selective Service on the internet and by mail.

- **On the internet:** Go to <https://www.sss.gov>. Click “Register Online.” Fill out the form that appears on the page, and then click “Submit Registration” at the bottom.
- **By mail:** Get a “mail-back form” from your local post office. Complete the card and mail it to

Selective Service System
Registration Information Office
P.O. Box 94638
Palatine, IL 60094-4638

Requesting an Application for Appeal

If you are over age 25 and haven’t registered for Selective Service, you may be able to appeal to gain access to federal programs and benefits. You can request an application for appeal on the internet or by phone:

- **On the internet:** Go to <https://www.sss.gov> and then scroll down to the section labeled “Men 26 and older.” You will need to attach proof that you were incarcerated during the time you should have registered for Selective Service. You can use your release papers for documentation.
- **By phone:** Call 847-688-6888 to request a Status Information Letter form. In the form, describe in detail what prevented you from registering and provide

copies of documents showing any periods between your 18th and 26th birthdays when you were hospitalized, institutionalized, or incarcerated. You can use your release papers to document your incarceration.

STEP 2

Get Organized

Getting organized, wherever you are, means keeping documents safe, setting up your space, and organizing your time. You'll need your personal documents as you look for jobs, change jobs, and pursue your education or training goals. It's important to keep them in a safe place where you can easily find them. Keep track of the documents in large envelopes or file folders and put them in a place where they won't be disturbed. If you save files electronically, be sure to create back-up versions.

If you are currently incarcerated, ask trusted family members or friends to keep important documents for you. Before release, check in with your case manager or transition coordinator to make sure you have all the documents you need, such as your transcript for any courses you took while incarcerated, to continue your education after release.

Set up a space where you will be able to store your documents, books, and other materials for your job search, work, or education plans. When you enroll in an education program, you can use this space for doing homework, so it should be a place where you can focus. If you prefer quiet, for example, set up your space away from the television, radio, and other people. While incarcerated, setting up your space may mean keeping a box of books under your bed, posting notes or reminders on your cell wall, or storing learning materials in the classroom. To find a quiet space, visit your facility's library when allowed.

Organizing your time is important, whether you are looking for work, applying for education programs, or enrolled in college or a training program. Setting and keeping a schedule is especially important if you are trying to balance work, education, and family responsibilities. Set up a weekly or monthly schedule for yourself. Find blocks of time that you can focus on your job search, on learning about more education or training, or on your homework. If you know you have difficulty focusing for long periods of time, set aside shorter periods, like 20 minutes or so. If you know that you are more focused in the morning, use that time for your job search or for homework.

**CHAPTER 4.**

Earn Your High School Credential

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You already may have earned some high school credits or taken courses while incarcerated. If so, now you can build on that experience by getting a credential that will open doors to work, training, and further education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a high school graduate earns about \$6,000 more a year, on average, than someone without a diploma.⁵

Earning a credential — and keeping your skills current — is a necessary step on the path to a more stable, secure life. This chapter describes different options for earning a high school credential. It includes the following steps:

STEP 1 Know Where to Start

STEP 2 Find the Education Services You Need

STEP 3 Earn a Credential

“ I enrolled in GED classes and had an instructor who encouraged me and saw my potential. After passing the GED test, I just kept going. Education opens up so many doors. I earned my associate degree and was chosen as the ‘student of the year’ and the commencement speaker. Standing on that stage in my cap and gown, sharing my life story, and getting a standing ovation, was such a momentous occasion for me and for people like me.

Freda

Read Freda’s story in Appendix A

⁵ Education Attainment. American Community Survey. (2019). Subject Table S1501. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=S1501&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1501>

STEP 1

Know Where to Start

You have several options to earn your high school diploma:

- An adult high school diploma
- A high school equivalency (HSE) credential
- The National External Diploma Program (NEDP)
- State-sponsored high school diploma options

An adult high school diploma program allows you to complete high school credits. You may be able to study for and earn this diploma online. An HSE credential involves taking and passing a test such as GED® or High School Equivalency Test (HiSET®). Your teacher can help you figure out which HSE test options are offered in your state and how to prepare for the test. The NEDP asks you to complete a series of life-skill and academic tasks to demonstrate your high-school-level skills. A state-sponsored option — in states such as California, Minnesota, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin — allows you to earn a high school credential by completing college credits or meeting other requirements.

If you already have some high school credits toward a diploma, it may be faster to keep working toward earning that diploma, rather than choosing another option. If you don't have many high school credits, other options may take less time. Even if you already got a high school credential a while ago, you may need to refresh your skills in reading or math.

In any case, the first step is finding out which skills you need to improve. You don't want to waste time learning things you already know or taking classes that you are not prepared for. The way to do this is through an education assessment.

Education Assessments

Several agencies give education assessments. An education assessment is a way to find out what your basic skills are in reading, writing, and math. You may be asked a series of questions about your experience and abilities on a form or in an interview. You also may take a placement test to determine which level of classes you need and to keep track of your progress over time. If you are incarcerated now, you can check with your facility's education program, a librarian, or a counselor about taking an education assessment.

The following will help you find agencies offering assessments in your community.

- Most adult education programs offer assessments, and some offer placement tests. To find a program near you, go to the National Literacy Directory at <https://www.nld.org/>.
- Community colleges usually offer both assessments and placement tests. Search for your local community college on the Community College Finder from the American Association of Community Colleges at <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/college-finder/>. Once you find the website for your local college, search for “assessments” or “placement test.” Other community organizations also may provide help. For information about how to locate these other organizations, go to Chapter 1, page 8.
- Check with the front desk at your local public library for information on local agencies offering assessments.

Preparing for HSE testing while incarcerated

If you are incarcerated and taking HSE preparation classes, ask your teacher about getting a “progress report” before your release. This report will show where you are in the process of preparing for an HSE test. From this, you can figure out what kind of services you’ll need after release. Keep your progress report and any other information related to your education while incarcerated in a safe place (for example, you can ask your teacher or counselor to hold it for you in a filing cabinet).

To figure out your education level, you may take a standard assessment, such as the Test of Adult Basic Skills (TABE) and the Comprehensive Student Assessment System (CASAS) tests. Other assessments may also be available, some of which charge fees. Contact a local adult education program, community college, or library to learn more about the types of assessments offered in your state and their costs.

Learning Challenges

Everyone feels challenged by some parts of education and learning. Many people have learning differences — also known as “learning disabilities” — that can affect their ability to read, write, speak, use math, and reason. They also can affect a person’s ability to pay attention, memory, coordination, social skills, and emotions. Some common learning differences include ADHD, dyslexia (difficulty with reading), and dyscalculia (difficulty with math). Maybe you have a disability that was identified during your schooling. But, if not, and if you think you have a learning difference, you can learn ways to manage these differences. The first step is to get assessed by a qualified person who can identify your learning challenges and services to help you.

Here’s how to find agencies that help with these types of assessments:

- Find your local community mental health center by going to <https://www.samhsa.gov/>. Scroll down and click on “Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator,” and search for a center near you. Health services often are available at low or no cost.

- Search for local literacy and adult education centers by going to the National Literacy Directory at <https://www.nld.org/>.
- Visit the American Association of Community Colleges website at <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/college-finder/>, and then search for the student services office or department at that college.
- Find a VR office near you by following the instructions in Chapter 1, page 10. If you are looking for a job, VR offices may be able to help with costs for taking an assessment to identify a learning disability or other disability.
- Search on the internet using terms like “learning disability assessment” and including the name of your town.

Once you complete an assessment, you will receive a diagnosis, which is a description of your learning differences. The person providing the diagnosis will tell you about support services and suggest appropriate jobs and education or training. Education programs often provide what are called “accommodations” if you have a learning difference. These accommodations will help you participate in education activities, including testing, at a level similar to adults without learning differences. Testing accommodations, for example, might give you more time to take the test or a private room for testing. Other types of accommodations include counseling or help with reading and writing.

STEP 2

Find the Education Services You Need

Depending on your assessment results, you may qualify for one of several services offered by adult education programs. Typically, a counselor or case manager will help you figure out which adult education service is the best fit. In some states, local programs teach through group classes, and others offer one-on-one tutoring, small-group learning, or distance learning. Available services vary from state to state. These services may include adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), NEDP, English literacy instruction, and Integrated Education and Training (IET):

- **ABE:** These services help adults learn the basic skills needed in everyday life, such as reading, writing, math, problem solving, financial planning, and computer skills. If your assessment results show that you do not have these skills or need to refresh these skills, you are eligible for adult education, even if you already have a credential.

- **ASE:** These services help adults prepare for HSE tests or earn an adult high school diploma through either online or in-person instruction. Although there are different tests used to measure high school skills, you will earn a similar credential. The test you take will depend on your state. Some states offer two or three HSE tests. HSE tests are usually taken on a computer, but some are paper-and-pencil tests. A fee is charged for HSE tests, and some ASE programs can help you cover the test costs.
- **NEDP:** In some states, you can earn the NEDP by completing life-skill and academic tasks at the high school level. Instructors review your reading, writing, math, and work-readiness skills as you compile examples of your skills and life experiences.
- **English literacy:** These services help people improve their skills in speaking, reading, and writing in English.
- **Dual enrollment or IET:** In dual enrollment or IET programs, adult education services are combined with career, technical, or occupational training. That is, you will work on basic skills, English literacy, a credential, or a diploma at the same time as you get training for a job. Instructors from both adult education and workforce training work together to help you learn both sets of skills at the same time. You will also learn important skills for work, such as good communication and teamwork. Programs will vary based on the types of jobs needing employees in your local area. Some IET programs offer college credit for training, and others provide non-credit training.

If you are incarcerated, you can check with your facility's education program, a librarian, or a counselor to find out how to get adult education services.

To locate these services in your community:

- Search the National Literacy Directory at <https://www.nld.org/>.
- Ask your local reentry program or supervising officer about education services.
- Visit your local public library or AJC for information on adult education programs in your area.

Enrolling in adult education programs while incarcerated

If you are incarcerated, adult education services may be available at your correctional facility. These programs are free but may have a waiting list. Check with your education department or case manager to see if these classes are available in your facility and how to find adult education services in your community after your release.

- Find courses at your local community or technical college through the Community College Finder on the American Association of Community Colleges website at <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/college-finder/>. Once you find the website for your local college, search for “adult education program,” “HSE,” or “IET.”

KEEP IN MIND...

Be patient. Sometimes programs may have waiting lists or enroll students only at certain times of the year. You may not be able to start services the first time you visit a program.

Prepare on your own. If you can't sign up for services right away or if your schedule doesn't allow you to go to class, you can prepare for a high school diploma or an HSE test or refresh your skills online or on your own. Adult high school diplomas can be earned through online high school programs. Before enrolling, though, be sure the program is accredited (see Chapter 5, page 39, to learn more about accredited programs). You also can find books or software to help you prepare for an HSE test at your public library. Preparation materials usually include practice HSE tests. You also can find sample HSE tests online.

Work with others. Getting together with others who are working toward a high school credential can motivate you and give support through the process. Think about joining or forming a study group. If you are on a waiting list with a program, ask the program if you can join an existing study group or if they can help you form a group.

STEP 3

Earn a Credential: Take an HSE Test

An HSE test allows you to show that you have gained the knowledge and skills needed to earn a state high school equivalency diploma. As of 2022, two HSE tests can lead to an HSE credential: GED® and HiSET®. Different HSE tests are available depending on the state you live in; few states offer both tests.

To find information about the GED test, or preparing to take the test, visit <https://ged.com/>. To find a place where you can take the GED test:

- Go online to https://ged.com/about_test/scheduling/. Then scroll down and click “See where I can test.” Then type your ZIP code in the search bar, and click “search.”
- Keep in mind that the GED test usually cannot be taken online; it must be taken through a testing center. If you see information about taking the GED test online, it may be a scam. Always check <https://ged.com/take-the-ged-test-online/> before signing up for an online GED test.

- To find information about the HiSET, or preparing to take the test, visit <https://hiset.ets.org/>. To find a place where you can take the HiSET, go online to <https://hiset.ets.org/requirements/schedule/>. Then click on the “Requirements” tab and select “State Requirements.” If your state is not listed, you cannot take the HiSET in your state and must choose another HSE option.

Earn an Adult High School Diploma

You may prefer to get an adult high school diploma rather than take an HSE test. This option will be more like a traditional high school, where you earn your diploma by taking courses. Many adult high school programs are available online and offer programs through distance learning (see page 40 in Chapter 5 for more information about online programs). Some adult high school diploma programs charge tuition and may require you to have some high school credits to enroll.

If you decide to enroll in an adult high school diploma program, check to see if the program is “accredited.” Accredited programs are those that meet certain requirements, have been approved by the U.S. Department of Education, and generally offer better services. Diplomas from unaccredited programs may not be accepted by other education programs, colleges, or employers. For more information about accreditation, see page 39 in Chapter 5.

To find an adult high school diploma program:

- Search the internet using terms like “adult high school diploma program” and include the name of your town, neighborhood, or school district in the search box.
- Search for local literacy and adult education centers by going to the National Literacy Directory at <https://www.nld.org/>.
- Visit your local public library and ask the staff at the front desk for information on adult high school diploma programs.

To find an NEDP location:

- Visit: <https://www.casas.org/nedp/locations>. Click on the link to your state. If your state is not listed, you cannot earn an NEDP credential in your state and must choose another adult high school diploma or HSE option.

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CHAPTER 5.

Choose and Enroll in a College or Career Program

As you look beyond high school, what do you see happening next? Many options are open to you, and everyone needs to continue learning across their lifetime. Learning is not only about getting ready for a career. You can learn new skills, or strengthen the skills you already have, to help your children learn or for your own personal interest and growth.

This chapter discusses options for education and training after high school and how to choose a program that meets your needs. There are many programs available, and you'll need to think about your goals and what type of education or training can help you reach them. This chapter also includes information about applying to college or training programs, organized into the following steps:

STEP 1 Some Important Things to Consider

STEP 2 Choose a College Program

“ Learning alongside college students in the community exposed me to my own intelligence and untapped potential. My fellow incarcerated classmates and I supported each other throughout that 16-week experience not only in our intellectual pursuits but also in “becoming” our true authentic selves.

Adam

Read Adam's story in Appendix A

STEP 1

Some Important Things to Consider

Most adults have many education, work, and family responsibilities. It can be hard to handle all of these responsibilities, so you need to find a college or career program that works well for you. Pick a program that you can fit in with your other responsibilities and that matches your learning style, interests, finances, and career goals. To help you pick the right program, here are some things to think about.

Options for Career and Technical Training

Pre-apprenticeships and Apprenticeships: Apprenticeships pay you a salary while you learn a specific trade or profession. These programs allow you to gain knowledge and hands-on experience in your chosen field, under the guidance of more experienced employees. Pre-apprenticeship programs help you learn ABE, ASE, or English literacy skills (see Chapter 4) as you prepare for an apprenticeship. For more information on apprenticeship programs, go to <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/>. Another resource is the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Apprenticeship at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/apprenticeship>. Second Chance Job Center offers apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs — see <https://secondchancejobcenter.com/>. You also should ask your counselor or case manager for information about apprenticeships in your community.

Internships: Becoming an intern can help you learn whether or not you will enjoy working in a certain field. Internships are part-time jobs (usually between five to 15 hours a week) that give you real-world experience in a field. Some internships are paid, but others are unpaid or will earn you school credit. If you want to work at a specific company or organization, an internship can help you “get your foot in the door.” Internships are good to include on your resume because they show experience in your field. To find internships, look at job boards or search internship websites like InternJobs.com or idealist.org. You can also look at national and local companies that interest you. Make a list of the companies where you’d like to be an intern, and then visit each company’s website. Look for a careers or employment page on the website, and check to see if there is a section for internships.

Vocational Rehabilitation: VR programs help people with physical or mental disabilities prepare for, get, keep, or regain employment. Substance addiction may qualify as a disability. VR services can include counseling, job training,

healthcare services, and others. If additional education is necessary for an individual's career goal, VR services can pay education expenses under certain circumstances. To learn more about VR programs, see Chapter 1, page 10.

Job Corps: Job Corps offers young people aged 16–24 the chance to get a free education and training while being paid a monthly allowance. Usually, Job Corps participants live at a Job Corps residence while getting their training. To learn more about Job Corps and find the Job Corps center near you, call 1-800-733-5627 or go to <https://www.jobcorps.gov/>.

College Options

College is another option for gaining skills and knowledge. College programs include both career-technical and academic options (see Step 2 for descriptions of these options). Research shows that people with a college education earn more money than those without one, and they are more likely to stay employed.⁶

If no one in your family has been to college. You may be the first person in your family to go to college or university. You are not alone — one in six college students is a first-generation college student (that is, their parents did not go to college). Most, but not all, colleges require you to have a high school diploma or HSE (see Chapter 4 if you did not finish high school) to enroll. College is different from high school and from adult education. Learning how to navigate the college experience takes time and practice. Some colleges offer services for first-generation college students, such as a TRIO program.⁷ These services include finding financial aid, advice on choosing courses, getting help with writing or other skills, and working with a mentor or a support group who can show you the ropes and encourage you to keep going.

In college, you will take courses, a series of classes for a specific length of time (for example, 12 to 16 weeks, which is called a semester). You may take classes online or in person. Typically, you will earn three or four college credits for each course, with each credit representing an hour of class time per week. For every hour of class you take, you can expect to put in two to three hours of study time each week. During your study time, you can read assigned materials, complete written assignments, prepare for tests, and work with classmates on a group project. Some college programs are short-term,

⁶ Torpey, E. (2020). Education pays. *Career Outlook*.
<https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2020/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>

⁷ For more information on TRIO programs, visit
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>.

requiring 18 or 24 credits, and can be completed in several months to a year. Others are longer term, such as an associate degree program, requiring about 60 credits and at least two years to complete, or a bachelor's degree, 120 to 130 credits and taking at least four years to complete.

Full-time or part-time enrollment. Many colleges allow students to attend either full-time or part-time. Full-time students usually take four or more courses (a minimum of 12 credit hours) at the same time, while part-time students take fewer courses. Part-time enrollment is often the best option for students who must work and take care of their families. It is an important decision because part-time students pay for each course they take. Full-time students pay full tuition, which is typically a set amount for an entire semester or a year.

Many colleges offer classes in the evening and on weekends, and almost all colleges offer courses — sometimes even entire programs — completely online. These schedule options allow students to work full-time and still be able to attend college. Keep in mind that to get financial aid (discussed in Chapter 6), you must be enrolled at least half-time (typically at least six credit hours) each semester.⁸ Some colleges may offer campus jobs (often called work-study) as part of a financial aid plan. If you can work in a job related to your program of study, you may learn more by combining classroom and hands-on experiences. You also may want to do an internship while you study.

Large or small colleges. Colleges can range in size from fewer than 400 students to more than 40,000. Small and large colleges each have advantages and drawbacks. In general, small colleges have smaller class sizes, making it easier for you to get to know your professors and other students. Small colleges offer fewer types of classes, however. Large colleges usually offer a wide selection of classes, but class sizes often are large as well, so getting to know your professors and other students may take more time.

Public or private colleges. A public college or university is one funded by a state or local government, while a private college relies on funding from non-governmental sources. In general, public colleges and universities will be less expensive than private schools. Some private colleges are for-profit colleges — that is, the college is a business designed to make money — and others are not-for-profit. Community colleges, also called technical or junior colleges,

⁸ U.S. Department of Education (2020). 2020–2021 *Federal Student Aid Handbook: Volume 1 – Student Eligibility*. https://ifap.ed.gov/ilibrary/document-types/federal-student-aid-handbook?award_year=2020-2021.

are typically funded by government and usually the least expensive option. Many have an open admissions policy, meaning that anyone can attend classes there without having to meet competitive admission requirements. Costs can be offset by student financial aid, as described in Chapter 6.

Accreditation. If a college or university is accredited, it meets certain standards for the quality of education and services it provides. Accreditation is important to ensure that students get a good education that will be recognized by employers and other education programs. Both public and private colleges may be accredited. Accredited schools must be approved by an organization (called “an accrediting organization”) recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Some colleges may say they are accredited, but they don’t actually meet this standard. Many college programs offer a degree or certificate, but not all are of high quality, and some predatory for-profit colleges are scams. Some even offer degrees without requiring you to take any courses! While that may sound tempting, in the end, that degree will be worthless to employers, to any future colleges you may want to attend, and to you. Here’s why accreditation is important:

- You must attend an accredited college to be eligible for government financial aid.
- Employers generally value credentials from an accredited institution with a good reputation, and they view job seekers with such credentials more favorably.
- If you earn credits from an unaccredited college, you can’t transfer those credits to an accredited college and will have to pay to take the same courses over again.

To learn more about accreditation and find out if the college you are interested in is accredited, visit the following websites:

- The Council for Higher Education Accreditation at <https://www.chea.org>.
- The U.S. Department of Education at <https://www.ed.gov/accreditation?src=accred>. You can also call for information: 202-453-7615 or send an email to aslrecordsmanager@ed.gov.
- The Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs at <https://ope.ed.gov/dapip/#/home/> provides a searchable database of accredited programs.

Online courses and degrees: Most colleges offer classes and degree programs through the internet. This is called “distance learning,” and these “virtual classes” can make it easier to attend if you have difficulty attending in person. To take these classes, you need access to high-speed internet and a computer or tablet that can get and use the software and media required for courses. You need to plan your time carefully to view or download class content regularly and to meet all course requirements.

In some online programs, classes are offered “synchronously” — that is, where the instructor and students meet online at the same time, perhaps through a computer program like Zoom, Google Classroom, or Big Blue Button. In other programs, recorded instructor lectures, course materials, and other resources are “asynchronous” — that is, you can get and use them any time of day or night. Online courses and degrees often are offered by unaccredited colleges, as well as accredited colleges, so be sure to check the college accreditation before you enroll. The quality of online courses and degrees can also differ. You may want to check the National Standards for Quality Online Learning (<https://www.nsqol.org/>) to see if the program you plan to enroll in meets the quality criteria.

Online courses have both benefits and drawbacks:

- An online course does not require you to go anywhere. You can take online courses wherever you are, as long as you can get online.
- You can set your own pace in taking online courses, by registering for one course at a time or for full-time enrollment, which may reduce the time it takes you to complete your program.
- Though being able to use online devices (such as a computer or tablet), web browsers, email, online platforms, and word processing software is helpful, quality programs will support students learning to navigate online education platforms and processes. Motivation, self-direction, flexibility, and a willingness to learn are important in online learning as well.
- Asynchronous courses allow you a lot of flexibility to “attend class,” meet with fellow students, or contact the instructor for help in the early morning, after work, or on weekends.
- You may miss some of the benefits of in-person attendance, such as getting to know the instructor and other students, asking and getting answers to questions during class time, and being able to discuss your views and opinions with other class members.

STEP 2

Choose a College Program

As part of choosing a college program, make sure to do your research. One place to start is the U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>, where you can find information about accredited colleges, such as costs, programs offered, enrollments, graduation rates, and more. If a college is not accredited, you may spend a lot of money — your own or your financial aid funds — for very little result, and you will not be able to access federal financial aid for the school. Read more about this in Chapter 6. Many colleges, especially community colleges, offer both career and technical programs and academic programs. *Career and technical education (CTE) programs* teach you specific skills needed for specific jobs, for example, automotive repair or medical technician. Some of these programs also are called “workforce,” “technical,” or “vocational” training. They combine classroom learning with hands-on training. *Academic programs* generally don’t prepare you for a specific job or profession. Instead, they provide you with broad knowledge and skills that can help you succeed in many different jobs or careers.

Enrolling in college courses while incarcerated

You may be able to take college courses while incarcerated. To pay for these courses, you can apply for a Federal Pell Grant, which does not need to be repaid. To do this, you must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and enroll in an eligible prison education program (PEP). You can find a list of approved PEPs here: <https://studentaid.gov/data-center/school/pep>. You can learn more about PEPs here: <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/ConfinedIncarceratedStudentFactSheet.pdf>.

Many CTE options

CTE is offered in the following areas, among others:

Arts, media, and communication; business, management, and finance; consumer services, hospitality, and tourism; construction and development; environmental, agricultural, and natural resource systems; healthcare and biosciences; human resource services; information technology; manufacturing, engineering, and technology; and transportation technologies.

CTE Programs

CTE programs combine technical and academic training to prepare you for a job. They are offered by public community and technical colleges and private trade schools. Depending on the program, you can enroll for several months to a year to earn a certificate, or up to two years to earn an Associate of Arts (A.A.) or Associate of Sciences (A.S.) degree. Some programs will prepare you to earn a state or national certificate or license, such as a license to be a

registered nurse or a construction contractor. Costs for CTE programs vary widely, depending on the location, school, and program. Community and technical colleges usually are the least expensive option.

If you want to learn skills for a specific job and don't yet meet the requirements for a CTE program, you can consider an Integrated Education and Training (IET) program instead. In IET programs, adult education services (see Chapter 4) are combined with career, technical, or occupational training. You work on basic skills, English literacy, a credential, or a diploma at the same time as you get training for an occupation, such as welding, nursing, or office technician. Some IET programs offer college credit for the occupational training, and others provide non-credit training.

Finding CTE or IET Programs

Here are some ways to find out about programs offering CTE certificates and degrees:

- To find out more about CTE, go to the Advance CTE website at <https://careertech.org/career-clusters>. Click on one of the career clusters for more information.
- Search for training programs, colleges, or major fields of study at the CareerOneStop site for reentering adults: <https://www.careeronestop.org/ExOffender/Toolkit/find-local-training.aspx>.
- Search for your local community college at <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/college-finder/>. Once you find the website for your local community college, search for CTE programs offered there.
- To find an IET program, search the National Literacy Directory for your local adult education program at <https://www.nld.org/>.
- Search on the internet using terms like “career and technical education” and the field you are interested in studying, such as “plumbing” or “computer repair.” Be sure to include the name of your town or state in the search box.

Finding CTE and IET programs while you are incarcerated

If you are incarcerated, CTE and IET programs may be available at your correctional facility. Some CTE programs require students to have a high school credential or be fluent in English, and many have waiting lists. IET programs do not require a high school credential or English fluency. Check with your education department, counselor, case manager, or librarian to see if these programs are available in your facility. Or ask how to find these programs in your community after your release.

Academic Programs

Academic programs are offered by community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities. These programs help you learn broad knowledge and skills that can apply to many types of careers. You can earn an associate degree (usually two years of full-time course work, or about 60 credits) or a bachelor's degree (usually four years of full-time course work, or 120 to 130 credits).

Many options for academic study

You can find academic programs in many fields. Some of the most common are (in alphabetical order): accounting, biology, business administration, chemistry, economics, education, English literature, ethnic studies, history, legal studies, music, philosophy, physics, political science, psychology, religion, sociology, urban studies, art, women's studies, and gender studies.

Colleges Offering Academic Programs

Community Colleges

Many students, especially those who haven't been in school for a while, begin their academic study at community colleges. Community colleges offer a low-cost option and wide variety of programs. Costs vary by state. In the 2020–21 school year, for example, the average tuition and fees for a full school year at community colleges was \$3,770.^{9, 10} Generally, they are among the least expensive options for higher education, and they offer many courses for students needing extra study in the basics or those with learning disabilities. Many community colleges allow you to earn a high school diploma or HSE credential at the same time you are earning college credits.

⁹ Ma, J., Pender, M., & Libassi, C.J. (2020). *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2020*. The College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-college-pricing-student-aid-2020.pdf>

¹⁰ Note that these amounts are just for tuition and fees, and they don't include other costs to attend college, like housing, books, or transportation. If you receive financial aid, you may not have to pay the full tuition and fees on your own.

Community colleges offer both academic and CTE programs. You can earn an associate degree at a community college and then transfer to a four-year college to earn a bachelor's degree. Some community colleges have agreements with four-year colleges and universities guaranteeing that you can transfer credits to those schools (see Transferring Credit on page 48). You will need to check *before* beginning an associate program, however, to make sure the credits will transfer to a four-year college.

Search for your local community college at <https://www.aacc.nche.edu> by clicking on “Search our Community College Finder” near the middle of the page.

Many academic programs at community colleges require you to have a high school credential to enroll. Community colleges generally have “open admissions,” meaning that if you meet the education requirements, you will be admitted automatically if space is available in your chosen program. You need to fill out an application for admission, which you can usually find on the college's website. You also can contact the college admissions office and ask them to send you an application by regular mail or email. Most colleges charge a nonrefundable fee for your application, but if you do not have enough money, check to see if you qualify for a waiver of this fee. Keep a copy of your completed application and any related paperwork in a safe place.

KEEP IN MIND...

Even if you have an HSE credential or high school diploma, you may need to take **placement tests** before entering community college. A placement test determines your basic skill levels and ensures that you enroll in the right classes. Based on your test scores, you may have to enroll in developmental courses to improve your skills in English and math. These courses can take time and cost money, but don't be discouraged if you have to take them. They will help get you ready for college-level courses. Some community colleges allow students to take developmental courses and college-level courses at the same time. Ask your academic counselor or staff at the college about this option.

Four-Year Colleges and Universities

Four-year colleges and universities are both public and private institutions offering Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) and Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degrees. Costs vary by school, with private colleges and universities generally being more expensive than public colleges and universities. In public four-year colleges, for example, tuition and fees averaged \$10,560 in 2020–21, and in private four-year colleges, the average yearly cost was approximately \$37,650 per year. Note that these amounts are just for tuition and fees, and they don't include other costs to attend college, like housing, books, or transportation. If you receive financial aid, you may not have to pay the full tuition and fees on your own.¹¹ Getting accepted at a private four-year college can be more difficult because many students are competing for a limited number of places. Public colleges and universities usually have a guaranteed number of openings for students transferring from community colleges. You may have a better chance of getting into one of these colleges if you transfer from a community college.

For a list of four-year colleges and universities near you, go to <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search> and then search for a college by type of school, location, support services, and other criteria.

College Support Services

At both community colleges and four-year universities, you will find support services on campus for first-generation or formerly incarcerated students. Support services may include advising, tutoring, counseling, peer support groups, mentoring, on-campus childcare, and disability services.

For example, peer support groups are made up of students that help each other learn the ropes, share ideas on coping with the responsibilities of college, and receive social and emotional support. Some campuses may have peer groups specifically for formerly incarcerated students. Another example is a mentoring program. A mentor may be a college staff member, a former student, or longtime current student who can offer guidance and encouragement. The mentor meets with you one-on-one to talk about your questions about college and offer advice and suggestions for services or strategies that may be helpful. Additionally, on-campus childcare may be

KEEP IN MIND...

If you are applying to a four-year college or university as a regular first-year student (not transferring from a community college), you may need to submit test scores for **college entrance tests**. These tests include the SAT and ACT. You will need to take these tests before you apply for admission. You can find more information on the SAT at <https://www.collegeboard.org> and on the ACT at <https://www.act.org>.

¹¹ Ma, J., Pender, M., & Libassi, C.J. (2020). *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2020*. The College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-college-pricing-student-aid-2020.pdf>

available in some colleges, allowing your children to be cared for nearby while you are in class. These programs will vary by college, so be sure to check with the student services department to see what's available.

While every campus provides disability services, some colleges offer many more types of services than others. If you have learning challenges (see Chapter 4, page 29), you may want to consider colleges with a lot of services for students with disabilities.

Enrolling in a Program and Registering for Classes

You can enroll in CTE and academic programs at community and technical colleges and four-year colleges. You may be able to enroll in a CTE program at a community or technical college without a high school credential (see Finding CTE or IET Programs on page 42). Even if IET is not yet available in your town or neighborhood, most community and technical colleges will offer classes and support to help you earn your high school credential or learn English. You'll be required to do that to complete some CTE programs.

To enroll in a program at a community or technical college, you usually need to fill out an application, be admitted to the program, and register for classes. These programs generally have "open admissions," meaning that if you meet the education requirements, you will be admitted automatically if space is available. For programs that are very popular, like nursing, you also may have to apply for admission to the program itself. To learn more about program requirements and enrollment policies, call the college program department that interests you or go to its website.

If the program you want is offered at a four-year college or university, you usually need to have a high school credential to apply. These colleges generally require you to apply for admission and be accepted before you can register for classes. Applications often are available online (and can be submitted online), or you can call the school's admissions office and ask them to send you an application by regular mail or email. There is usually a nonrefundable fee for applying, but, if you do not have enough money, check with the college's admissions office to see if you qualify for a waiver of this fee.

Along with your application, you may be required to submit

- an official copy of your high school or HSE transcript (that is, a record of the courses or HSE test you took and the grades or HSE scores you received).

- a personal statement about what you want to study and why.
- letters of recommendation.
- immunization records (papers signed by your doctor showing that you have received vaccinations required by the college where you are applying).

Keep a copy of your completed application and all related paperwork in a safe place.

After you find a college and apply for the program you want, the college will contact you to tell you if you have been admitted to the program. The college will also assign you to an advisor, who can answer your questions about which courses you need and the best order for taking courses. You can make an appointment with the advisor by phone or online.

The next step is to register for courses. Check several weeks ahead of time to make sure a course you want is available that semester. Not all courses are available every semester, and some popular courses can get filled up early. Again, your advisor can help you with course questions for your program.

The college registration website may ask you to choose your degree level and course of study. After that, you'll get access to a list of courses. Look for the course you want and follow the instructions to register for it. Keep in mind that there might be multiple "sections" of a course, meaning that the same course is taught by different instructors in different settings or at different times. Some sections may be for online classes only. If you can't enroll in a course section, it may be full, so you will need to choose a different section. The course also may be open only to students who have passed previous required courses, called "prerequisites." If so, look for a similar course or one in another area that meets the requirements for your particular program.

Transferring Credit

Credit for prior education. Some colleges will give you credit toward your CTE or academic degree for credit you earned while incarcerated. Each college has different policies about applying these types of credit to your degree program, so you need to check with the college registrar's office. Generally, however, you must have earned a grade of C or better in the course for credit to be transferred. Further, you cannot transfer credits from an unaccredited program to an accredited program (see Chapter 5, page 39, for more information on accreditation).

The college you are applying to will ask you for your official transcripts — a list of the courses taken, and grades received — from colleges you attended in the past. Contact the admissions or records office of your previous college to ask for an official transcript. Colleges usually charge a small fee (\$2–\$20) to provide transcripts. Keep copies of your transcripts in a safe place (for example, in a filing cabinet). You can get an unofficial transcript — usually free — to keep for your own records from the registrar's office of the colleges you attended.

KEEP IN MIND...

If you have taken some college courses or are planning to transfer to another college, you may not know which courses will be accepted for credit by the college to which you are applying. It's best, therefore, to send all **official transcripts** for them to review. If you owe any money to your previous college, they will not send your transcripts until you have paid what you owe. Contact the admissions or records office at your previous college to see if you owe money, how much, and if you can set up a payment plan.

Credit for life experience. Some colleges also grant credit for your experience outside the classroom, such as employment, volunteer work, or specific skills you have. For example, people with prior workforce experience can take a test to get credit for what they already know without taking a course. The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) Credit-By-Exam are tests that allow certain college requirements to be waived.

- You can find information on CLEP at <https://clep.collegeboard.org/>. A list of available exams is at <https://clep.collegeboard.org/exams>.
- Information on DANTES is available at <https://www.dantes.mil/dsst/>.

Some colleges will allow you to demonstrate life accomplishments through a portfolio. A portfolio is a collection of documents and other evidence of activities and experiences related to your degree program. Contact your college's advising office to find out about these types of credit.

Earning an Advanced Degree

Some careers, such as social work, require a degree beyond a bachelor's degree. These degrees include a master's degree (MSW) or doctorate (for example, a Ph.D.). Graduate degree programs are offered in many fields by universities. If you want further education beyond your bachelor's degree or a career in a field requiring an advanced degree, you can find more information about these programs online, such as The Princeton Review at <https://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school>.

KEEP IN MIND...

If you earned college credit while incarcerated, make sure to ask for a copy of your transcript. You will need this transcript when applying to colleges after your release.

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**CHAPTER 6.**

Get Money to Pay for College

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A college education can be expensive, so you need to look carefully at your options for paying for college. Costs should be one important factor in choosing where you'd like to study. Most students combine money from several sources to pay for college. These include your own funds (wages from work, savings, or family assistance) and several types of financial aid. In some fields, employers will help pay for college study or training. Keep in mind that on top of the tuition and fees, there are other costs with attending college, like housing, books, transportation, and other personal costs.

Financial aid can include grants (which do not need to be repaid), loans (which must be repaid), and work-study (part-time work, often at your college). Applying for federal student financial aid is free.

Be aware that grants, loans, or scholarships that sound “too good to be true” can be scams. There are companies that take advantage of students seeking money for college, so do very careful research on this.

This chapter provides an overview on ways to pay for college. It is divided into the following five steps:

- STEP 1** Be Smart About Paying for College
- STEP 2** Apply for Federal Student Aid
- STEP 3** Get and Complete the FAFSA®
- STEP 4** Review Your Student Aid Report
- STEP 5** Seek Other Financial Aid

“ I was motivated to pursue higher learning both because I found it personally rewarding and because I wanted to be viewed differently in society. It was my way of escaping 20 years of incarceration and proving that my life didn't go to waste.

Adrian

Read Adrian's story in Appendix A

STEP 1

Be Smart About Paying for College

Unfortunately, not all schools and colleges are what they seem to be, especially some offering CTE or training. Some schools do not have quality indicators or meet program accreditation requirements and may be more interested in taking your money than in providing a good education. Online education programs can be unaccredited, too, though many are legitimate. The same is true for colleges or schools based in foreign countries but offering education in the United States. Some are legitimate; some do not offer quality or accredited programs.

Do your research to be sure the school you want to attend is an accredited institution. One place to start is the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>, where you can find information about accredited colleges, such as costs, programs offered, enrollments, graduation rates, and more. If a college is not accredited, you may spend a lot of money — your own or your financial aid funds — for very little result. According to the U.S. Department of Education (<https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/higher-education-laws-and-policy/college-accreditation/diploma-mills-and>), the following should be considered “red flags” for colleges that do not offer quality programs:

- Offering degrees that can be earned very quickly, for example, a bachelor's degree that you can earn in a few months
- Offering programs that place too much emphasis on providing credit for “real-world experience” or that require very little work from students
- Requiring tuition payments on a per-degree basis or offering discounts for enrolling in several degree programs. Accredited institutions charge by credit hours, course, or semester.
- Allowing little or no interaction with professors

KEEP IN MIND...

Don't assume that your criminal record or credit history will prevent you from getting financial aid. Students who are currently incarcerated, as well as those on parole and probation, can sometimes qualify for federal Pell Grants, state grants, work-study, and loans. The amount of financial aid you can get depends on your needs.

Students also are eligible for financial aid if they have settled any loans they have defaulted on in the past. The process to settle defaulted loans can take nine months to complete. You can find more information from the Office of Federal Student Aid's website at <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/topics/prison-education-programs>.

- Using names similar to those of well-known reputable universities
- Having addresses that are box numbers or suites. The “campus” may very well be a mail-drop box or someone’s attic.

Some organizations also run scholarship scams — promising scholarship money that never arrives; guaranteeing a scholarship in exchange for your bank or credit card information; or charging money to provide a scholarship. As with diploma mills, the goal of these organizations is simply to cheat you. The Federal Trade Commission website has information on avoiding scholarship scams. Go to <https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/how-avoid-scholarship-financial-aid-scams>.

STEP 2

Prepare to Apply for Federal Student Aid

Applying for financial aid can seem complicated. You’ll need to pay attention to many details. Take your time in filling out forms carefully and ask for help from someone who knows about the financial aid process, such as your college’s financial aid office. To qualify for federal student aid, you must

- demonstrate financial need (for most programs).
- be a U.S. citizen or an eligible noncitizen.
- have a valid Social Security number (with the exception of students from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, or the Republic of Palau) or Alien Registration Number, a unique number assigned to noncitizens by the Department of Homeland Security. This number, also called the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) number, can be found on the front of your Permanent Resident Card (Form 1-551).

KEEP IN MIND...

If you do not have a high school diploma or the recognized equivalent (such as a GED certificate), you still may be eligible for federal financial aid under the ability-to-benefit (ATB) provisions. You must be enrolled in an eligible career pathway program — such as IET — in order to qualify for ATB. You also will need to pass an approved ATB test or complete six credit hours that count toward a degree or certificate. Learn more about ATB at <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/requirements> or by talking with your school’s financial aid office.

- be enrolled or accepted for enrollment as a regular student in an eligible degree or certificate program. Note that you can apply for financial aid before you have been accepted to a college program. On the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* form, called the FAFSA, you need to list all colleges to which you might apply.
- be enrolled at least half-time to be eligible for Direct Loan program funds (loans handled by the U.S. Department of Education directly, rather than through a bank or other organization).
- make satisfactory academic progress in college or career school (generally, you must maintain a C average and take enough courses to complete your program within a specific amount of time).
- sign statements on the FAFSA certifying that you are not in default on a federal student loan, do not owe money back on a federal student grant, and will use federal student aid only for educational purposes.
- show that you're qualified for college or career and technical education by having a high school diploma or equivalent, by completing a high school education in a home-school setting approved by your state, or by completing an ability-to-benefit alternative and enrolling in an eligible career pathway program.

Financial aid is intended to help you pay the cost of attending your college. This includes tuition and student fees; room and board; transportation, books, and supplies; and expenses related to your education, as determined by the college. Money from grants and loans first goes directly to your college. Then, if money is left over after your school bill has been paid, you may get that remaining money to cover other education costs. Avoid using that money to pay for anything other than costs related to school. It's not free money, and you usually have to pay it back, especially with loans.

KEEP IN MIND...

Your incarceration history and any past convictions for drug-related offenses do not disqualify you from receiving federal student aid. You can apply and receive federal student aid for enrollment in college programs while you are incarcerated or for after your release. The application process, described in this section of the guide, will vary depending on whether you are applying for financial aid to attend a college in the community after your release or to attend a PEP while you are incarcerated. If you want to receive student aid while incarcerated, you must (1) apply for and enroll in an eligible PEP and (2) complete the FAFSA. If you want to receive student aid after release, you must (1) apply for and then enroll in any eligible program (does not need to be a PEP) and (2) complete the FAFSA.

The FAFSA® and Types of Aid

The starting point for applying for financial aid is the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid*, called the FAFSA. You use the FAFSA to apply for several types of federal student aid (for a complete list of types of student aid, go to <https://www.studentaid.gov/resources>):

- Pell Grants for low-income students who do not already have a bachelor's degree. In 2024–25, students could receive a maximum Pell Grant of \$7,395.
- Direct Loans, low-interest loans that can be taken out by students or their parents. These loans can be subsidized, which means they are available to students with financial need, or unsubsidized, which do not depend on financial need. Students can take out up to a maximum of \$5,500–\$12,500 of Direct Loans per year, depending on what year you are in school and whether you are a dependent. If you are incarcerated, you cannot take out a Direct Loan.
- Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (FSEOG), need-based (meaning that they are awarded by financial aid offices to students with the most financial need) grants for low-income undergraduate students. These grants are given out directly by the college you will be attending and range in amounts from \$100–\$4000 a year.
- Federal work-study, part-time work available to full- and part-time students with financial need, sometimes at the college or university. Work-study jobs pay at least the federal minimum wage, with the maximum amount of federal work-study that you can earn set in your financial aid package.

The amount of federal student aid you can get depends on whether you are considered “dependent,” meaning that your parents support you financially, or “independent,” meaning that you support yourself. The FAFSA will ask several questions to determine whether you are dependent or independent. If you are dependent, you must provide the information listed in the box on this page for your parents as well.

You can find out whether you are considered dependent or independent by going to <https://studentaid.gov/apply-for-aid/fafsa/filling-out/dependency> and answering the questions. You also can call 1-800-433-3243 for help or discuss this with someone at your college’s financial aid office.

KEEP IN MIND...

You’ll need to gather a lot of **personal information** for the FAFSA®. Depending on your circumstances (for instance, what tax form you filed or when you filed taxes), you might need the information or documents listed below.

- Your Social Security number (be sure you enter it correctly on the FAFSA)
- Your parents’ Social Security numbers if you are a dependent student
- Your driver’s license number if you have one
- Your Alien Registration Number if you are not a U.S. citizen (in addition to your Social Security number)
- Federal tax information from two years before you fill out the FAFSA. This information will come from your tax returns, including IRS W-2 form information for you (and your spouse, if you are married) and for your parents if you are a dependent student:
 - IRS Form 1040, 1040A, or 1040 EZ
 - Foreign tax return
 - Tax return for Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Federal States of Micronesia, or the Republic of Palau
 - Records of your untaxed income, such as child support received, interest income, and veterans’ noneducation benefits, for you and for your parents if you are a dependent student
 - Information on cash; savings and checking account balances; investments, including stocks and bonds and real estate, but not the home where you live; and business and farm assets for you and for your parents if you are a dependent student
 - If you do not file taxes, you may need to request a tax transcript from the IRS (form 2506_T) and/or complete a verification of non-filing form

STEP 3

Get and Complete the FAFSA®

You can fill out the FAFSA in English or Spanish online or on paper. There are two different versions of the FAFSA, depending on whether or not you are currently incarcerated. The two application forms are almost the same, except that the one for students who are incarcerated is marked as such and is sent to a separate address for processing. If you are not currently incarcerated, you can fill out the FAFSA online at <https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>. If you are currently incarcerated and can access the internet, the printable FAFSA form (in English) is available at <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/FAFSA2425IncarceratedEN.pdf>. For a paper copy, call the U.S. Department of Education at 1-800-433-3243 or find a printable form at <https://studentaid.gov/resources#fafsa>. Click on the FAFSA for the year you are applying under “FAFSA Information.” If you need help with the FAFSA in another language, information about language assistance services is available from 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327) (TTY for the deaf or hard of hearing: 1-800-730-8913) or ed.language.assistance@ed.gov.

Submit the FAFSA®

On the internet. If possible, it’s best to fill out and submit the FAFSA online. Your FAFSA will be processed more quickly, and you are much less likely to make mistakes, because the FAFSA website will not let you continue if it identifies a mistake.

Go to <https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>. Click on “Log In To Start,” and follow the instructions. Before you fill out the application, you will be required to create a StudentAid.gov account (username and password), which you’ll use to sign your FAFSA electronically before you submit it. To create a StudentAid.gov account, you need to provide your Social Security number, full name, date of birth, and either your phone number or email address.

By mail. You also can submit a paper FAFSA by mail. Request a printout of the FAFSA form by calling 1-800-4-FED-AID (1-800-433-3243) or 334-523-2691. When you have filled out the form, sign the form to show that your information is accurate to the best of your knowledge. If you are considered a dependent student, one parent also must sign this form. Make and keep a copy of all the forms you are submitting and send the original application by first-class mail to the address on the FAFSA.

KEEP IN MIND...

Your **FSA ID** is important, so keep it in a safe place. You can use your FSA ID to correct your FAFSA® information online, file a renewal FAFSA next year, and gain access to other U.S. Department of Education websites. For more information about the FSA ID, go to <https://studentaid.gov/resources/prepare-for-college/creating-your-account>.

Deadlines for Submitting the FAFSA®

You can submit your FAFSA any time between October 1 and June 30 before the academic year when you'll be enrolling in college. An academic year runs from July 1 of one year to June 30 of the next. For example, if you are planning to enroll in college for the 2025–26 school year, submit your FAFSA between October 1, 2024, and June 30, 2026. Remember that you need to file a FAFSA each year you want to apply for federal student aid. Some financial aid funds are “first come, first served,” so you should submit your FAFSA as early as possible after October 1.

Deadlines for filing the FAFSA can vary across colleges and states, so you may need to submit the form much earlier than the federal deadline above. States often use the FAFSA to determine college and state financial aid, and state deadlines are listed on the FAFSA. To find out your college's FAFSA deadline, check the college website or call the school's financial aid office.

KEEP IN MIND...

Check your **FAFSA**® carefully before submitting it to be sure the information is accurate. There are serious consequences, including substantial fines and/or a prison sentence, for intentionally providing inaccurate information on the FAFSA. If your financial situation changes after you have submitted the FAFSA, because of unemployment, injury, marriage or divorce, or a natural disaster, contact your college's financial aid administrator. They may be able to increase the amount of financial aid you get. If your financial situation improves because of a scholarship or other financial resource, your financial aid package may be lowered to avoid awarding you more than you need or have to pay to attend college.. If you transfer to a new college in the middle of the school year, have your FAFSA information sent to the new school and tell financial aid administrators at both schools that you are transferring. You do not have to resubmit the FAFSA.

STEP 4

Review Your Student Aid Report

Within one to three days after you file your FAFSA online, you can access your FAFSA Submission Summary by logging into your StudentAid.gov account. If you file your FAFSA by mail, you can check the status of your FAFSA Submission Summary within 7 to 10 days from the date you mailed it. The FAFSA Submission Summary lists the information you provided on your FAFSA and gives instructions if additional information is needed. Review the summary to be sure that all your information is accurate. You can make any corrections to your FAFSA Submission Summary online or by updating the paper version and mailing it back.

The colleges that you list on your FAFSA will have electronic access to your FAFSA Submission Summary within a day after it is ready. The colleges will use the FAFSA Submission Summary to determine how much financial aid you get; this total amount is usually called your “financial aid package.” Colleges listed on your FAFSA may contact you to verify information on your FAFSA, such as your income. If you were incarcerated, you can use your prison release papers to show why your income was low during previous years.

If you haven’t received your FAFSA Submission Summary within 10 days (for an online FAFSA) or within 10 days after mailing your hardcopy FAFSA, you can check on your application by logging on to StudentAid.gov, selecting the “My Activity” page, and clicking on “View FAFSA Submission Summary.”

STEP 5

Seek Non-Federal Financial Aid

States, colleges, and other organizations also offer student financial aid. This aid usually can be combined with federal student aid, so take the time to see if you can qualify. Be careful to check their deadline dates, however, since many of these applications are due earlier than the FAFSA. Again, beware of offers that sound too good to be true or that ask you to pay a fee to apply.

State Financial Aid

States often provide financial assistance to students living in the state and need help to pay for college. Because state financial aid is so varied and requirements can change, this guide cannot cover the application process for every state. To find out more about state financial aid in your state, visit the

KEEP IN MIND...

If you submit the FAFSA® by mail while incarcerated and use your facility’s mailing address, be sure to include your prison ID number on the address line to make sure you receive the FAFSA Submission Summary.

National Association of State Financial Aid Administrators webpage at [https://www.nasfaa.org/State Financial Aid Programs](https://www.nasfaa.org/State_Financial_Aid_Programs), and click on your state. You also can find more information about restrictions on state financial aid in *A Piece of the Puzzle: State Financial Aid for Incarcerated Students*, a report by the Vera Institute of Justice. You can get it at <https://www.vera.org/publications/a-piece-of-the-puzzle-state-financial-aid-for-incarcerated-students>; click on “Full Report.” See, for example, the chart on pages 10–12 of the report, which compares barriers to state financial aid across states.

Financial Aid From Colleges and Universities

Many colleges and universities offer their own financial aid in the form of scholarships, grants, loans, and work-study programs, including athletic scholarships. Eligibility requirements for this type of financial aid vary by school. Some aid is based on need, and some is not. For more information on financial aid offered by the schools to which you are applying, contact each school’s financial aid office.

If you are applying to private colleges, ask the schools whether you should complete the College Board CSS/Financial Aid Profile application. Many private colleges use this form to determine eligibility for private financial aid. You can get this form by creating a free account at <https://cssprofile.collegeboard.org>.

Private or External Financial Aid

Private organizations and agencies also offer scholarships and other types of financial aid, usually to students meeting certain qualifications or having certain characteristics. For example, the United Negro College Fund provides scholarships to qualified African American students, and qualified Hispanic students may receive scholarships from the Hispanic Scholarship Fund. The financial aid office at your college can help you search for these types of scholarships. Unlike some other forms of financial aid, scholarships do not need to be repaid.

Other sources of information on scholarships include

- catalogs, such as *Scholarships, Fellowships, and Loans* (37th edition published in 2020), which can be found at your public library.
- the following websites, which offer information on many types of scholarships:
 - College Board: <https://www.collegeboard.org>

- Fastweb: <https://www.fastweb.com>
 - Finaid: <https://www.finaid.org>
 - Sallie Mae Scholarship Service: <https://www.salliemae.com/college-planning/tools/scholarship-search/>
 - Peterson’s “15 Scholarships Designed for Adult Learners” blog: <https://www.petersons.com/blog/15-scholarships-designed-for-adult-learners/>
 - Prison Education Foundation: <https://www.prisonedu.org/scholarship-qualifications/>
 - Shawn Carter Foundation Scholarship Fund: <https://shawncartersf.com/scholarship/>
 - Scholarships.com: <https://www.scholarships.com>
 - Unigo: <https://www.unigo.com/scholarships>
- websites offering information on scholarships for specific populations or purposes, such as ASPIRA, the Bureau of Indian Education, National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development, the Jackie Robinson Foundation, League of United Latin American Citizens, United Negro College Fund, and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. You can look up scholarship opportunities from these organizations by searching for them online.

Student Loan Forgiveness Programs

In some circumstances, your federal loans might be forgiven, meaning that they are cancelled, or you don’t need to repay them in full. These circumstances include working for a government or nonprofit organization and may depend on your income level. Information about student loan forgiveness can be found at <https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/forgiveness-cancellation>. Some states also have student loan forgiveness programs, so be sure to search online for information for your state.

You also might qualify for an income-driven repayment (IDR) plan, which offers lower monthly repayment plans depending on your income. For information on IDR plans, including how to apply for them, see <https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/repayment/plans#income-driven>.

Free Resources

The following free resources give more details about applying for federal student aid and offer tools to help you through the process:

- Get comprehensive information on student aid from the U.S. Department of Education in *Do You Need Money for College or Career/Trade School? Apply for Federal Student Aid*. You can get this guide at <https://studentaid.gov/sites/default/files/do-you-need-money.pdf>.
- Get help filling out the FAFSA on the FAFSA website (<https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>), which includes help screens and live chats, or by calling 1-800-4-FED-AID. You also can get help at <https://studentaid.gov/apply-for-aid/fafsa/filling-out/help>.
- Understand how to apply for financial aid while incarcerated by seeing the *Lessons from Second Chance Pell* toolkit from the Vera Institute of Justice. The toolkit, along with videos showing how to complete the FAFSA, can be found at <https://www.vera.org/publications/lessons-from-second-chance-pell>.
- Find general information on paying for college and a pre-application worksheet for the FAFSA at the U.S. Department of Education at <https://studentaid.gov/> or by calling 1-800-433-3243.

GLOSSARY

Academic program: A degree program in a college or university that prepares you to succeed in many types of jobs or careers.

Courses in this type of program offer broad knowledge and skills.

Accreditation: Schools and colleges receive accreditation when they meet certain requirements (see <https://ope.ed.gov/dapip/#/home/>) and have been reviewed by an accrediting organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

American Job Centers: Almost every community has an American Job Center, sometimes also called OneStop Centers, Job Service Centers, or Employment Services (see <https://www.careeronestop.org/LocalHelp/AmericanJobCenters/find-american-job-centers.aspx>). These centers have many resources, all in one place, for people seeking work, adult education services, or further education and training. These include job search assistance, skills training, occupational licensing, and referrals to support services, among others. Most services are free, but there may be a fee for some specialized services.

Associate degree: A degree earned by successfully completing a two-year college or university program. Common associate degrees are Associate of Arts (A.A.), Associate of Science (A.S.), and Associate in Nursing (A.N.).

Bachelor's degree: A degree earned by successfully completing a four-year college or university program. Common bachelor's degrees are Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) and Bachelor of Science (B.S.).

Career and technical education (CTE): A series of technical courses that prepare you for specific jobs and careers. They combine classroom learning with practical, hands-on training. These courses are offered in middle schools, high schools, community and technical colleges, and other colleges.

Career pathway: A series of connected education and training programs and services that prepare you for employment and career advancement within a specific industry.

Credit hours: The number of weekly class hours for a course. For example, a three-credit-hour course requires you to participate in three hours of class time each week.

Default: Failing to meet an obligation, such as repaying a student loan.

Distance learning: Educational or instructional programming offered via technology, usually by computer and the internet, to students in different locations.

Federal Perkins Loan Program: A low-interest loan provided by schools and available to undergraduate and graduate students (see <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans/perkins>). Perkins loans must be repaid to the school.

Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG): Federal grants to help low-income undergraduates pay for the costs of their education (see <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/grants/fseog>).

Four-year college: A public or private institution that offers bachelor's degrees.

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®): An application that must be completed to receive federal student aid (see <https://studentaid.gov/>). States and colleges also use the FAFSA® to award financial aid.

Grants: Money available for college from public and private sources that does not need to be repaid.

HSE: A high school equivalency test or credential. An HSE test allows adults who did not finish high school to show that they have gained the knowledge and skills needed for a traditional high school diploma.

Letter of reference: A letter describing your qualifications and behavior as an employee or student and recommending your acceptance to a school, college, university, or job.

Pell Grants: The largest federal grant program in the United States, which provides money for college that does not have to be repaid (see <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/grants/pell>). Eligibility and award amounts are set by the college based on federal guidelines. Individuals on parole or probation can qualify for these grants. With few exceptions, Pell Grants are available only to undergraduate students.

Postsecondary education: Education beyond a high school credential, including vocational certificates and degrees, academic degrees, and advanced or graduate degrees.

References: See “letter of reference.”

Scholarships: Awards given to students based on academic performance (merit-based) or financial need. These awards are provided by public and private organizations and do not have to be repaid.

Selective Service registration: Males between the ages of 18 and 25 living in the United States are required to register for Selective Service (see <https://www.sss.gov/register/>). The federal government uses Selective Service registration to draft people for service in the military, when needed. Males who have not registered for Selective Service may be prevented from getting some federal and state services, including federal student financial aid.

Stafford loans: Low-interest loans available to undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in an accredited college or university at least part-time (see <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans/subsidized-unsubsidized>). Stafford loans are the most common form of financial aid and must be repaid.

Student loans: Money that students can borrow for college. Loans are legal obligations that must be repaid with interest. Loan programs available depend on the college.

TRIO: A federal program that provides support for first-generation college students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (see <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>). Types of support include academic tutoring, assistance with choosing courses, information on financial aid, and career counseling.

Tuition: A fee charged for instruction by a school, college, or university.

Two-year college: A public or private college or university that offers associate degrees.

Undergraduate student: A student working toward an associate or bachelor's degree at a college or university.

University: An institution of higher education that has multiple colleges and that grants bachelor's, master, and doctoral degrees.

Work-study: A federal student aid program that gives part-time or full-time students the opportunity to work up to 20 hours per week while enrolled in college.

APPENDIX A

LEARNER PROFILES



Adam

Age at reentry: 44

Facility name and state: FCI McKean
in Bradford, Pennsylvania

**Credentials earned while
incarcerated:**

- Certified life coach through the Institute for Life Coach Training
- Offender workforce development specialist through the National Institute of Corrections and State University of New York at Fredonia
- Certified personal trainer through the National Council for Certified Personal Trainers
- Wellness coach
- Certified indoor cycling instructor

Current profession/job:

Owner/Director of Apex Alternative Solutions, LLC (a training and consulting company)

What types of educational programming did you participate in while incarcerated?

My experience in federal prison was quite unique. I got both the education and the opportunity to serve my incarcerated community as a mentor, coach, facilitator, and trainer. All of my education and training was funded exclusively by non-governmental sources. I received a mixture of scholarships, grants, and personal donations. Thanks to the extreme generosity of the University of Pittsburgh, the Institute for Life Coach Training, the State University of New York at Fredonia, and numerous private contributors, including my family, I was able to begin living my full potential despite the fact I was still serving a sentence of 213 years.

The director of the University of Pittsburgh's Prison Education Project offered me and 14 of my incarcerated peers the opportunity to participate in the first-ever "Inside Out Project" for federal inmates. The experience forever altered the trajectory of my life. At the end of the course, the director offered me and two of my classmates the opportunity to co-lead another course with him, which we then offered to a larger segment of the general population. It was through that experience that I discovered my passion for teaching and facilitating.

How did those programs help you after release?

On Aug. 12, 2020, I was granted "compassionate relief" from my 213-year mandatory minimum prison term because of my "extraordinary and compelling" achievements. Since my release, I have had the opportunity to use the knowledge and skills I attained in prison while working as a trainer and facilitator for HOPE for Prisoners. I have seen my mentor's success, and this has inspired me to continue learning and evolving toward my best self while I transition into the next stage of my life.



Adrian

Age at reentry: 39

Facility name and state: Donovan State Prison, California

Credentials earned while incarcerated: Associate of Arts in general education (with honors); Associate of Arts in social and behavioral science (with honors); certificate in business

Credentials earned after release: Bachelor of Arts in sociology: concentration in deviance and social control

Current profession/job: Program associate for a community foundation

What types of educational programming did you participate in while incarcerated?

When I was incarcerated at age 19, I had completed two years of college at California State University at Long Beach. But then I was given a life sentence and lost hope and motivation. At some point during my incarceration, I realized that I wanted to be with my family again and knew that I had to make changes in my personal life for that to happen. After transferring to a new facility, I met some inmates who were taking classes through Coastline Community College (CCC). The program's director, a fellow Long Beach State alum, helped me to enroll in CCC by sending out for my college transcript. Essentially, I started college over then. I took an astronomy class, which fascinated me, and an introduction to college course, and did well in both. Attending class gave me something to do with my time and made me feel empowered over my future. After additional facility transfers, I enrolled in as many education programs as I could. I attained two associate degrees and a certificate of business administration. I was the first inmate at my facility to achieve two associate degrees! Not only was education important to me personally, but it also helped me demonstrate to the parole board that I was improving myself. In 2013, at my fourth parole hearing, I was finally granted parole and released.

What was the first step you took once you decided to continue your education after release?

I knew that I wanted to go back to Long Beach State to finish the chapter that I had left open, but a lot had changed there while I had been away. I didn't know where to start. My brothers graduated from the university and introduced me to the director of the criminal justice program. She encouraged me to complete the courses at a community college that I would need to transfer into the university. So, I enrolled in the local community college and completed the required coursework, with a GPA of 3.6. I then applied to Long Beach State as a transfer student and was accepted. In 2018, I completed my bachelor's degree in sociology and am now focused on getting into law school. I want to help people like me who are incarcerated by providing them with meaningful legal representation. I was recently selected for a fellowship that will help me prepare and pay for the LSAT.

Did you have an education and career plan prior to release?

Because of my life sentence, I was required to have an education/career plan that I would get drilled on at parole board hearings. But it's really hard to create a plan from within the prison system without really knowing the barriers that you will face outside. So much of my plan had to change when I was released, from selecting a new career path to learning how to write a resume and prepare for job interviews.

What advice would you give to someone who is thinking about pursuing an education, either while incarcerated or after release?

You do belong in institutions of higher education. Be inspired, be motivated, find yourself something useful to do. It's never too late to go back to school. The feeling of being on a college campus is indescribable; it's better than going to Disneyland! There will be endless nights and stress, but is that stress so bad compared to being in a cell? Embrace it and enjoy it. That stress is a blessing in its own.



Brandon

Age at reentry: 24

Facility name and state: Hutchins State Jail, Hightower Unit, Texas

Credentials earned while incarcerated: Associate of Arts in humanities; certification in horticulture/landscaping; certification in heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration.

Credentials earned after release: Bachelor of Science in Biblical counseling; Master of Divinity, philosophy of religion; doctor of education in ethical leadership (May 2021); Master of Arts, philosophy (December 2021)

Current profession/job: Transition (reentry) specialist, adjunct professor of philosophy

What types of educational programming did you participate in while incarcerated? How did those programs help you after release?

I earned a GED and a certification in construction carpentry. I then enrolled in Lee College, a community college, and earned 128 college hours, with credentials in horticulture and landscaping; heating, air conditioning and refrigeration (HVAC), and an Associate of Arts in humanities. Just having the credentials on a resume helped to get my foot in the door for most entry-level jobs. I ultimately chose to work for a nonprofit that served the community with a thrift store, food pantry, and domestic abuse shelter. I have been employed in the nonprofit sector since release: first with community-based charities, then a charity for special needs adults, and now for two different accredited college-in-prison programs, including the one that I graduated from while incarcerated.

What resources or support were most helpful in pursuing your education after release?

I had a stable place to live, reliable transportation, and a steady job that enabled me to enroll in school. But there were no university, parole, charitable resources, or supports for my education. I was unaware of any help specifically for students in my situation. I applied for and received student loans like most college students, held a full-time job, managed parole requirements, and eventually started a family while pursuing my education. No part of my educational journey was easy.

How would you describe the benefits of continuing your education?

The alignment of my education with career choices always enabled me to remain employed. In the 16 years since release from prison, I have never been more than two weeks without a job, even though I have several violent felonies on my adult record. This is because my professional and educational network has been very supportive. In addition, the kind of education I pursued in psychology, theology, and philosophy helped me better understand the world, my environment, and my place in all of it.



Freda

Age at reentry: n/a

Facility name and state: n/a

Credentials earned during incarceration: n/a (note that Freda's education experience described below began after incarceration)

Credentials earned after release: Associate of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Master of Science, and certified addiction professional

Current profession/job: project director, Jail Re-Entry Network for the DISC Village, Inc., and adjunct professor, Tallahassee Community College

What was the first step you took once you decided to continue your education?

It took more than 20 years for me to realize my potential and ability to overcome all odds, which included a 20-year addiction, living a criminal lifestyle, severe trauma, and a lack of education. After moving to Tallahassee at age 34 and getting a job in the governor's office, I began a journey of recovery that included returning to my education. I enrolled in GED classes at Tallahassee Community College (TCC), where I had an instructor who encouraged me and saw my potential. After passing the GED test, I just kept going. Education opens up so many doors. I earned my associate degree and was chosen as the TCC "student of the year" and the commencement speaker. I then went on to earn my bachelor's degree, and I became a certified addiction professional. At age 53, I earned my master's degree in criminal justice, and now I am an instructor at the same place (TCC) where I first started my journey.

What resources or support were most helpful in pursuing your education after release?

Aftercare is key and has to go hand in hand with academics. Aftercare must be considered holistically; what works for one person won't necessarily work for everyone. People need to feel safe to start sharing parts of their journey and begin to heal. For me, my faith started me on my healing journey, and I found help through a faith-based organization. But whether it is residential treatment, substance abuse counseling, or another type of support, it is important that people choose a safe place because they are going to need to revisit their pain in order to heal.

Once I started sharing my journey, I got connected to so many resources that supported my education. I joined the Returning Adult Citizens Organization on campus and learned how to access grants and scholarships to pay for my classes. I also learned about a book loan program and received a computer, after the organization found out that I was going into my workplace on the weekends to complete and print my assignments. I would never have received this support if I hadn't been open about my challenges. I took advantage of any resources that I could at TCC and in the community. I applied for and received a community scholarship that I learned about by reading the newspaper. When I was earning my master's degree, I used resources available from my employer, including receiving college credits for supervising FSU interns.

How would you describe the benefits of continuing your education?

The restoration of my family was the most important benefit. My children were taken away from me because of my interaction with the criminal justice system, my addiction, and homelessness. Once I was sober and enrolled in GED classes, I was able to see my children again. I even remarried my husband after 17 years.

Another benefit was the economic stability that I gained as I continued my education. As I earned degrees, I was able to make more money and as I made more money, I was able to rebuild my credit. This allowed me to buy a home as part of Florida's first-time home-buyers program. Buying a home was an incredible milestone — after experiencing homelessness, I would now always have a stable place to live. Pursuing my education also helped with my career growth, as each step in my academic journey led to salary raises and promotions. This allowed me finally to be independent.



James

Age at reentry: 40

Facility name and state: Baltimore
Maryland Penitentiary

**Credentials earned while
incarcerated:** GED and associate
degree in psychology with honors

Credentials earned after release:
Bachelor's degree with honors

Current profession/job: Founder/CEO
of the Reentry Campus Program

What types of educational programming did you participate in while incarcerated? How did those programs help you after release?

I obtained my GED and associate degree while incarcerated. No college programs were offered in the prison at the time, so I registered for an online associate program as if I wasn't incarcerated. I got my girlfriend to help by calling her collect on the prison phone and giving her my log-in to the college's system. She would submit the answers that I would give to her over the phone. I submitted other required writing assignments and papers through the mail. When it came time for midterms and finals, I got help from the GED teacher, who would put me in a room by myself and proctor my exams. As a result, I was able to obtain my associate degree in 2.5 years behind the walls and go straight into a bachelor's degree program upon release.

What challenges did you experience in pursuing your education and how did you address those challenges?

Challenges that I faced were having to provide for myself and my family. I had gotten married pretty quickly upon release and ended up having a baby girl, all while in school full time and working full-time and part-time jobs. I was able to finish my bachelor's degree in a year-and-a-half after release, but I had very little time outside of work and school to be present in other ways for my family and for myself. The things that I had depended on to get me through my time in prison with my sanity intact, such as prayer, meditation, exercise, and diet, ended up taking a back seat and, for a while, I had no balance or life outside of work and school.

What resources or support were most helpful in pursuing your education after release?

I met up with a childhood friend who was now the head of a financial aid department for a community college. He was someone I went to middle school with, played basketball with, and who previously was incarcerated. He came from the same type of background and humble beginnings that I did. Now here he was, in a suit and a tie, and in a position that obviously paid him well and allowed him to provide legitimately for himself and a family. I was amazed with how he could turn his circumstances around and be in that position. He mentored me, helped me to get the financing I needed to go back to school, and supported me along the way.



Jon

Age at reentry: 44

Facility name and state: USP
Allenwood, Pennsylvania and FCI
Sheridan, Oregon

Current profession/job: Founder and
CEO, HOPE for Prisoners, Inc.

What types of educational programming did you participate in while incarcerated? How did those programs help you after release?

After serving several state prison sentences, I was sentenced to federal prison in 2005. I knew that, in order to improve how I was going to live the rest of my life, education was a critical part of my journey. I read every book that I could get my hands on and aggressively studied human behavior, psychology, and business management. My extensive learning prepared me for when I came home and established HOPE for Prisoners, a 501c3 nonprofit in Nevada that provides comprehensive reentry services to other men and women who are returning home.

What made you decide to continue your education after release?

Once I returned home and was in the beginning stages of building and growing my business, I continued to seek out educational opportunities. I attribute my success to my pursuit of education and gaining knowledge. I enrolled in nonprofit management courses through the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, graduated from Leadership Las Vegas, and received an honorary degree from the College of Southern Nevada. I am honored to have received both state and presidential pardons for my convictions, and I believe that I would not be where I am today if I had not made the choice many years ago to spend my time focused on education and learning.

What advice would you give to someone who is thinking about pursuing an education, either while incarcerated or after release?

Pursuing education both during and after incarceration is critical to continuing success and opens many doors for those with criminal backgrounds. One such door for me is the pleasure that I have of serving as a commissioner with the Nevada State Sentencing Commission. If I could turn back time, I would have strongly pursued furthering my higher education long before I did and encourage others to take advantage of the resources that are available to them.



Syrita

Age at reentry: 29

Facility name and state: Federal Correctional Institute at Tallahassee, Florida

Credentials earned when incarcerated:

- Business management certification
- Landscape/horticulture certification
- Apprenticeship in food services/cooking

Credentials earned after release:

Bachelor's degree in clinical laboratory science from Louisiana State University Health and Science Center New Orleans (LSUHSCNO); certification as clinical laboratory scientist (both national certification and state licensure)

Current profession/job: Founder and Executive Director, Operation Restoration

What types of educational programming did you participate in while incarcerated? How did those programs help you after release?

I had a high school diploma and a year of college prior to incarceration. The certifications that I earned while incarcerated were the ones available at the federal prison system. The business management certification allowed me to transfer 30 hours toward my prerequisites at the University of New Orleans (UNO) to complete my degree at LSUHSCNO. Having these credits allowed me to finish my bachelor's degree after I was released in 3.5 years rather than 4 years. UNO accepted my transfer credits by reviewing the course syllabi.

What made you decide to continue your education after release?

I always felt like education was super important to a successful reentry. When I was pregnant and had my son, I knew what the statistics were for the children of someone who had gone to prison. I wanted to make sure my son wasn't a statistic. I also wanted a career — not a job — but something stable that would provide for my family. Education was the key to getting that stability.

What challenges did you experience in pursuing your education and how did you address those challenges?

My past still would come up. To get licensed in Louisiana, I had to go through a disciplinary board. Even though I didn't have a drug violation, I still had to pay for regular drug testing because that was the only thing the board had set up. I also had to pay probation fees. Before paying rent, I had to pay fees for parole/supervision, restitution, an annual licensure, and drug testing. That was extremely difficult, because I wasn't working at the time and ended up having to take out a loan. Fortunately, I received scholarships and grants to pay for some of my education.

What resources or support were most helpful in pursuing your education after release?

I was released 3.5 years after Hurricane Katrina with no documentation. There were two women incarcerated with me who showed up for me after release. One friend helped me get documentation and complete the FAFSA® application for financial aid. Another friend helped me find a place to live and bought me a phone. It was the other formerly incarcerated women who helped me transition. We were always in contact. One came with my mom to pick me up when I was released. From the first day I was released, they held my hand.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE RESUME AND COVER LETTER

Kenyatta Serrano

532 North Main Street

Liberty, NY 12754

Telephone: (845) 555-1111 E-mail: Kenyatta.Serrano133@gmail.com

Summary

Results-based **Facilitator and Leader** in human services. Highly experienced in leading support groups, collaborating with staff and volunteers, and organizing support services for clients.

Work Experience

- 2017 – 2020 **Substance Abuse Program Facilitator**
NYS Office of Alcohol and Substances Abuse, Naponach, NY
Facilitated daily group sessions. Held clients accountable for program requirements. Oversaw weekly meetings of group leaders.
- 2000 – 2017 **Inventory Clerk/Textile Issue**
Corcraft Industries, Plattsburgh, NY
Received and counted stock items and recorded data. Stored items in an orderly and accessible manner. Issued textile material to workers.

Volunteer Experience

- 2004 – 2007 **HIV / AIDS Peer Educator**
AIDS Council of Northeastern New York, Plattsburgh, NY
Gave presentations on the perils of the disease, with an emphasis on prevention and risk reduction
- 2002 – 2003 **Tutor**
Literacy of Douglas County, Westchester, NY
Tutored adults in basic reading, writing, and mathematics.

Education

- 2015 – 2018 **Clinton Community College (SUNY), Plattsburgh, NY**
Associate in Science degree, Social Sciences / Humanities
- 2013 **Clinton Adult School, Plattsburgh, NY – NY State High School Equivalency Diploma**

Certifications

- 2004 **AIDS Council of Northeastern New York, Albany, NY**
HIV/AIDS Peer Education, 120 Hours
- 2002 **ProLiteracy Tutor Training, Syracuse, NY**
Basic Reading/Math/Writing workshops and quarterly trainings

Additional Skills

Computer Skills

Knowledge of Microsoft Office programs, including Word and Excel

Fluent in Spanish and Swahili

Kenyatta Serrano

532 North Main Street

Liberty, NY 12754

Telephone: (845)555-1111 Email: Kenyatta.Serrano133@gmail.com

Empire State Family Services

3520 Mermaid Avenue

Brooklyn, NY 11224

Re: Case Manager Position #11236

Dear Hiring Manager:

Thank you for the opportunity to apply for the position of case manager with Empire State Family Services. I learned about this opportunity from the job posting on Indeed.com. My experience as a substance abuse program facilitator has given me the knowledge and skills to provide compassionate group and individual support, and I would welcome the opportunity to serve your clients.

For more than four years, I have worked as a substance abuse program facilitator. Leading group sessions has given me firsthand experience in supporting and advising clients who are struggling with addiction and related challenges. Managing weekly meetings with group session leaders has given me a broader perspective on the challenges our clients face, and the techniques other coaches have used to help their clients. As the person who held clients accountable for program requirements, I learned the value of tough love as well as compassion and empathy. My personal, professional, and academic experiences have prepared me to serve others. Serving as a volunteer peer educator with the AIDS Council of Northeastern New York helped me to appreciate the difference that a caring mentor can make in a person's life.

In the interest of transparency, I want to disclose that I served a 17-year sentence in the New York State Penitentiary from February 2000 to October 2017. While I deeply regret the choices that led me there, I am grateful for the opportunities available to me in prison to recommit to my education and career goals and find ways to contribute positively to my community. While there, I completed an HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program, which helped me realize how much I enjoy working with clients. In 2015, I also began an associate degree program in social sciences and humanities at Clinton Community College that I continued upon my release and completed in May 2018.

I would love the opportunity to discuss how my skills and professional and personal experience can help to make a positive difference in the lives of your clients. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Kenyatta Serrano

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