

**Advancing Equitable Access to Career Technical Education Programing in Illinois
Correctional Facilities**
Real-World Project Submitted by Janelle Washington
December 14, 2022

Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, approximately 1,215,800 adults were incarcerated in U.S. prisons at the end of 2020 (Klucklow & Zeng, 2022, p. 1). As of June 30, 2020, 32,167 individuals were incarcerated in the Illinois prison system (Illinois Department of Corrections, 2020, p. 95). While a large number of individuals are continuously incarcerated in U.S. prisons year after year, individuals are also constantly released from prison and should be adequately prepared to successfully return to and remain in their communities of choice.

Recidivism is commonly used to measure post-release success. Alper et al. (2018) analyzed data that represented 401,288 individuals in 30 different states upon their release from prison in 2005. Within three years of being released from prison, 68.8 percent of the individuals were re-arrested, 79 percent were re-arrested within six years, and 83 percent were re-arrested within nine years. Of the re-arrested individuals, 44 percent were arrested within their first year of release from prison (p. 1). Though recidivism occurs at a high rate in the United States, Davis et al. (2014) stated that a study conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2010 revealed:

... correctional education for incarcerated adults reduces the risk of postrelease reincarceration (by 13 percentage points) and does so cost-effectively (a savings of five dollars on reincarceration costs for every dollar spent on correctional education). And when it comes to postrelease employment for adults—another outcome key to successful reentry—researchers find that correctional education may increase such employment (iii).

In addition to its positive role in the reduction of recidivism rates, Brick and Ajinkya (2020) note that education's "comprehensive value is identified more accurately through important intermediate outcomes such as the continued education, employment, and civic engagement of students, which may improve their experience during incarceration and re-entry upon release" (p. 4). Because this statement refers to education generally further investigation is warranted to identify the impact of Career Technical Education (CTE) programming specifically on pre-release and post-release outcomes. Additionally, it is imperative to assess whether individuals incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) have equitable access to CTE programming while incarcerated.

Project Purpose

This real-world project was an effort to critically examine the existing state of the CTE programs offered in IDOC facilities and gain an understanding of current policies, procedures and data collection practices to inform strategies to advance equitable access to CTE programming for individuals incarcerated in correctional facilities. Additionally, while individuals incarcerated in correctional facilities are inherently a marginalized population, it is important to bring attention to the fact that people of color are disproportionately incarcerated in the United States, and thus it is imperative to further ensure that this sub-population has equitable access to CTE programming while incarcerated. Therefore, this project also examined barriers that impede access to CTE education for Black individuals in IDOC.

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Background

The Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) is the state coordinating board for the 48 community colleges that comprise the Illinois Community College System. Together, ICCB's Research and Analytics and Information Technology divisions manage a "Centralized Data System for the Illinois Community College System to answer critical policy questions, inform continuous student and program improvement initiatives, and ultimately, support students on pathways to success" (<http://www2.iccb.org/data/about-us/> para. 1). Additionally, ICCB's Research and Analytics division "compiles data from the ICCB Centralized Data System for state/federal accountability reporting, cross-state agency projects, and national initiatives" (<http://www2.iccb.org/data/about-us/> para. 1).

IDOC receives a federal allocation under the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) and a state allocation to fund CTE programs within correctional facilities in Illinois. For FY 2023, IDOC was allocated \$389,350 in federal Perkins funds and \$894,450 in state CTE funds, for a total of \$1,283,800. ICCB's CTE division works directly with IDOC regarding CTE programming and the administration of the Perkins and state CTE grants. The grants and CTE programs are managed through IDOC's Office of Adult Education and Vocational Services. While IDOC uses the term "vocational," this programming is recognized by ICCB as credit-bearing CTE coursework. Currently, IDOC contracts with three community colleges to provide CTE programs at 25 state correctional facilities. The Systems Rules Manual of the Illinois Community College Board provides that community colleges may apply to ICCB to provide instruction in correctional facilities if home district colleges elect not to provide instruction. This provision has allowed Lake Land College to successfully scale outside of its district to provide instruction in facilities that span the entire state. Lake Land College is currently the largest provider of CTE programming in Illinois correctional facilities, providing instruction in 23 of 28 available facilities in FY 2022 and FY 2023. Additionally, Kaskaskia College and Danville Area Community College both provide instruction at the correctional facility located within each of the colleges' respective districts.

Method of Evaluation

Various evaluation methods were used throughout the duration of the project, beginning with examining the state of CTE programming, established policies and procedures and data collection practices in Illinois. Also, desk research contributed to the understanding of existing national research, data, policies and practices related to CTE programming in correctional facilities. Site visits at seven correctional facilities provided the opportunity to observe CTE programming spaces and speak with current CTE learners, individuals in custody not enrolled in CTE programming, and CTE program instructors and staff. Attending meetings of the Illinois Higher Education in Prison Task Force provided additional information on the status of higher education in IDOC. Finally, an analysis was conducted on existing data, applying the Racial Disproportionality Index (RDI) methodology (Fuller et al., 2021) to measure racial over-representation and under-representation within the Illinois prison population and among CTE learners in correctional facilities in Illinois.

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Summary of Findings

Finding 1: Black individuals are disproportionately incarcerated in Illinois and access CTE at disproportionate rates during incarceration in IDOC.

Black individuals were over-represented among the 32,167 individuals in custody as of June 30, 2020, when compared to 2020 U.S. census data indicating that Black individuals made up 14.7 percent of Illinois' population and White individuals made up 60 percent of the state's population (census.gov). According to IDOC's Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report, the racial composition of incarcerated individuals in Illinois on June 30, 2020, was 54.9 percent Black, 31.2 percent White, 13.1 percent Latino, 0.4 percent Asian and 0.1 percent Native American. Men made up 94.7 percent of the prison population, and women made up 5.3 percent (IDOC, 2020, p. 95). In contrast, according to data obtained from the ICCB Centralized Data System, 2,894 students were enrolled in CTE programming while incarcerated during FY 2020, and the racial composition of students was 36 percent Black, 46 percent White, 11 percent Latino, less than 1 percent Asian and 1 percent Native American. Furthermore, the racial composition of students who completed CTE certificates in IDOC during 2020 was 36 percent Black, 47 percent White, 11 percent Latino, less than 1 percent Asian and 1 percent Native American.

Commonly used in the child welfare system, the RDI provides a measure of disproportionality. In the child welfare system, Fuller et al. (2021) note RDI is determined by dividing the percentage of individuals in a racial group at a specific point in the system by the percentage of the racial group in the base population. RDI values of 1.0 mean no disproportionality exists. RDI values greater than 1.0 illustrate the population is over-represented, and RDI values less than 1.0 mean the population is under-represented. Applying this methodology to the data in the previous paragraph, when dividing the percentage of Black individuals in IDOC custody by the percentage of Black individuals residing in Illinois, the RDI is 3.7, indicating the percentage of Black individuals incarcerated in Illinois in 2020 was 3.7 times higher than the percentage of Black individuals living in Illinois at the time. Using 2020 IDOC population data compared to 2020 CTE enrollment and completion data, the RDI for Black learners is 0.7 for both, which indicates an under-representation in both enrollment and completion.

Together, this data and the RDIs indicate that while Black individuals are disproportionately incarcerated at higher rates, they also enroll in and complete CTE programming at rates that differ from their population representation. Positively, the fact that both enrollment and completion rates were 36 percent for Black individuals in FY 2020 indicates that when given the opportunity to participate, this population can be successful in CTE programming.

Finding 2: Currently, no assessment methods exist to measure student outcomes or inform CTE program offerings in IDOC.

The following CTE programs are currently offered at various correctional facilities throughout Illinois: Auto Body, Automotive Technology, Construction Occupations, Cosmetology, Culinary Arts, Custodial Maintenance, Fiber Optics & Cabling, Horticulture, Horticulture Management, Manufacturing, Construction Management, Restaurant Management, Warehousing and Welding.

The Illinois Department of Corrections Postsecondary Education for Credit Bearing Programs Administrative Directive details provisions that may be used in prioritizing postsecondary offerings, including course length, the number of students that can be accommodated in a single

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course, course accessibility, course diversity, programs of study over single course, education pathways and transferability (IDOC, 2022, p. 7). However, this directive does not provide a complete assessment to adequately inform CTE programming. While methods are in place for community colleges in Illinois to use data to inform CTE program and program of study offerings, including but not limited to the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment, currently no assessments have been established by ICCB to inform CTE program offerings in IDOC.

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) Juvenile Justice Reentry Education Program publication indicates “CTE programs need to build the competencies and offer credentials that ultimately prepare young people for jobs — preferably jobs with career advancement opportunities and a family-supporting wage — that are available in the communities where they live” (Juvenile Justice Reentry Education Program, p. 50). While this publication is geared toward individuals adjudicated in the juvenile justice system (Juvenile Justice Reentry Education Program, p. 35), the same applies for individuals convicted in the adult system and incarcerated in adult correctional facilities. To positively affect post-release outcomes, CTE programs offered in correctional facilities must lead to jobs that provide family-supporting wages, as Lichtenberger et al. (2009) found in a study that examined the impact of CTE on post-release outcomes. The study found “those who completed a CTE program while incarcerated were more likely to gain better paying jobs and more stable post-release employment and that type of employment, in turn leads to a decreased likelihood of recidivism” (p. 28). Lichtenberger et al. (2009) further noted completing a CTE program while incarcerated without securing employment upon release does not reduce the probability of recidivism (p. 28).

In September 2020, the Institute for Higher Education Policy published Supporting Success: The Higher Education in Prison Key Performance Indicator Framework, which emphasizes the need for holistic and disaggregated data with standardized metrics for higher education in prison programs. IDOC is not currently required to report data on the postsecondary indicators of performance defined in the Perkins law, and no other performance indicators have been identified to measure the success of learners participating in CTE programming in IDOC. However, performance indicators are critical to evaluating the extent to which CTE has an impact on learner success. Additionally, the absence of an assessment method to inform program offerings may further perpetuate the tracking of marginalized individuals into CTE programs that do not lead to high-skill, high-wage or in-demand employment upon release.

Finding 3: Established policies create barriers to accessing CTE programming in IDOC.

The Illinois Department of Corrections Postsecondary Education for Credit Bearing Programs Administrative Directive indicates that to be eligible to enroll in postsecondary education courses, individuals in custody must have obtained a high school diploma or high school equivalency, score a 8.0 or higher on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE), and have sufficient sentence time remaining to substantially benefit from or complete postsecondary programs (IDOC, 2022, p. 6). Further, IDOC’s Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report states “since January 1, 1987, all men/women in custody committed to the Illinois Department of Corrections for two or more years, except those serving life sentences, take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to determine their academic level” (IDOC, 2020, p. 19). The report also notes that of the 8,115 individuals in custody who took the TABE at intake during FY 2020, 5,140 scored under

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the sixth-grade level (IDOC, 2020, p. 19). For individuals in custody that score under 6.0 on the TABE, IDOC requires that they enroll in Adult Basic Education for a minimum of 90 days (IDOC, 2020, p. 19).

Requiring individuals in custody to have obtained a high school diploma or high school equivalency and score an 8.0 or higher on the TABE to be eligible to enroll in postsecondary education creates a barrier to accessing CTE programming for a large number of individuals incarcerated in IDOC. First, many individuals in custody have not obtained a high school diploma or high school equivalency. According to data derived from self-reported educational level at admission, of the 32,167 individuals incarcerated in Illinois as of June 2020, 14.1 percent had graduated from high school, and 13.8 percent had earned a GED (IDOC, 2020, p. 98). Additionally, requiring a score of 8.0 or higher on the TABE further reduces the number of eligible individuals, as in 2020, approximately 63 percent of individuals scored under the sixth-grade level on the TABE at intake. In Piccone's (2006) study, the TABE was administered first at intake and again within one year after intake. But it was administered prior to participating in any education programming. The study found that Black individuals scored lower than White individuals on the initial TABE at intake and the scores of White individuals improved more than the scores of Black individuals the second time taking the TABE.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: An equity audit should be conducted to further identify and mitigate factors leading to Black individuals' enrollment in and completion of CTE programming at rates disproportionate to their incarceration rates in IDOC.

The disproportionate incarceration of Black individuals in Illinois and the disproportionate access to CTE programming during incarceration are implications of the school-to-prison pipeline, which is the "growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via zero tolerance policies, and tracking them directly and/or indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems" (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 1). The fact that Black individuals are largely affected by the school-to-prison pipeline is one factor that contributes to the challenge these individuals face in meeting IDOC's requirements to enroll in postsecondary education. However, an equity audit should be conducted to further analyze "policies and processes at the state or institution level that historically and systemically, intentionally or unintentionally, put barriers in place for certain learners due to racism or other forms of discrimination" (Advance CTE, p. 6). This analysis is vital to further uncover existing barriers to accessing CTE programming for marginalized individuals in correctional facilities. Moreover, quantitative and qualitative data must be used, and ultimately strategies must be developed to remove barriers to access and success (Advance CTE, p. 6).

Recommendation 2: Assessment methods should be created to measure performance outcomes and to inform CTE program offerings in IDOC.

The indicators of performance defined in the Perkins law are not easily applicable to learners in correctional environments. Therefore, more appropriate metrics from established frameworks should be adopted to effectively measure outcomes for this population of learners. For example, the Institute for Higher Education Policy published Supporting Success: The Higher Education in

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Prison Key Performance Indicator Framework, which allows higher education in prison programs to “measure the impact they have on students, institutions, facilities, and communities by including indicators that help measure student success outcomes, academic quality, civic engagement, and soft skill development” (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020, p. 4). Additionally, OCTAE offers that CTE programs that are available in correctional facilities should align with the local labor market (Juvenile Justice Reentry Education Program, p. 50). This alignment may be difficult to assess using the local labor market of the correctional facility, considering that individuals incarcerated in correctional facilities return home to various regions of the state. However, the ICCB, in collaboration with professional development partners, should develop guidelines for IDOC to assess and inform CTE program offerings using statewide labor market data as well evaluate equity and access to CTE programming by individuals in custody comparable to the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment required of the community college recipients of Perkins funding.

Recommendation 3: The requirement of earning an 8.0 on the TABE should be waived for individuals who have completed a high school diploma or high school equivalency and desire to enroll in CTE coursework while incarcerated in IDOC, as consistent with the requirements for individuals seeking to enroll in CTE coursework at the community college campus.

As written, the policy requiring individuals who have completed a high school diploma or high school equivalency to additionally take the TABE and score an 8.0 or higher creates a barrier to accessing CTE programming. Piccone (2006) found that “TABE scores at intake are not indicative of an offender’s true academic ability” (p. 246). Cognitive function is negatively affected during the intake process, as this proves to be a difficult transition for individuals in custody (Piccone, 2006, p. 246). Furthermore, the colleges currently providing CTE instruction in Illinois correctional facilities do not require the TABE for admission or placement in certificate programs on campus.

Recommendation 4: Acceleration strategies should be used to allow more individuals to access CTE programming while incarcerated.

To reduce the barrier to accessing CTE programing while incarcerated for individuals who have not yet earned a high school diploma or high school equivalency, the ICCB CTE staff should work with ICCB Adult Education staff, IDOC staff and community college staff to expand Integrated Career & Academic Preparation System (ICAPS) programs in correctional facilities. ICAPS is Illinois’ implementation of Integrated Education and Training, an acceleration strategy that allows individuals to work to obtain a high school equivalency while being co-enrolled in credit-bearing CTE courses. ICAPS programs are supplemented by support courses, student support services, and team teaching by CTE and Adult Education instructors that help to facilitate student success (ICAPS Illinois).

Recommendation 5: IDOC should discontinue using the term “vocational.”

Efforts to rebrand vocational education as CTE began in the 1990s, culminating in the codification of the term “career and technical education” to replace “vocational education” in the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Hodge et al., 2020, p. 9). Hodge et al. (2020) state that “the name change was a step away from a system that had been chastised for

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evidence of tracking and racial and socioeconomic segregation, as well as a way to acknowledge the purposeful focus on re-coupling education and preparation for work and career” (p. 9). To eliminate the stigma attached to the term “vocational education” and accurately reflect the programming being offered, IDOC should begin using the term “career and technical education” when referring to the credit-bearing postsecondary CTE coursework and programs offered in correctional facilities using Perkins funding.

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