



Higher Education
in Prison

PARTICIPATION & OUTCOMES

in SUNY College-in- Prison Programs

*Office of Higher Education in Prison,
State University of New York*

www.suny.edu/hep

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Colleges of the State University of New York (SUNY) have served incarcerated students at least since 1970, when Dutchess Community College began offering in-person college courses at Green Haven Correctional Facility, supported by South 40, a private foundation (Charlton 1972). Soon afterwards, in the wake of the 1971 uprising and massacre at the Attica Correctional Facility, Genesee Community College launched a full-time degree program at Attica in 1973 (Larson 2015). Other community colleges soon followed suit, and by 1976, SUNY institutions hosted nine of the 17 college-in-prison programs operating in New York, funded primarily by federal Pell grants and New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) grants.²

Nearly all these programs shut down in 1994, when Congress passed the Violent Crime Act and amended the Higher Education Act to prohibit incarcerated students from receiving Pell grants—and New York disqualified the same from TAP. However, SUNY colleges began to establish new programs at New York State prisons after 2010, relying on a variety of public and private funders and often in partnership with other universities and nonprofit organizations. As of fall 2023, 13 SUNY community colleges and one university college offer undergraduate programs in one federal prison and 23 state correctional facilities, serving half of all incarcerated students attending prison education programs in New York, a role certain to increase now that Pell and TAP grants have been restored as of this year.

SUNY's current presence in state facilities and potential for growth offer an extraordinary opportunity to extend higher education to a long-underserved group of New Yorkers. In that effort, academic goals—including **access, program choice, persistence, and completion**—are essential criteria in assessing educational services to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Studies suggest that when incarcerated students complete a college program, they are less likely to recidivate than students who participate in the program but do not graduate (Pompoco, et al. 2017; Denny and Tynes 2021; Chappell 2004); and for all individuals, incarcerated or not, the positive effects of completing college, including associate programs, on lifetime earnings and life outcomes are substantial and growing, as are different effects across areas of study (Kim and Tamborini 2019; Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2013).

Yet providing high-quality college opportunities for people in a complex statewide correctional system is not easy. Staffing and operating a degree program in a correctional facility, often many miles from an institution's main campus, is difficult enough, but the challenge of ensuring each student a opportunity to earn a degree is compounded by student transfers across facilities, the difficulties individuals face when trying to continue their education after release, and many other potential interruptions in students' educations.

Although individual campuses can address some of these difficulties, a statewide system-level perspective is needed to get a full picture of how and where incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students progress, or fail to progress, in their studies and toward graduation. Such an understanding is needed to guide improvements and collaborations among college-in-prison programs, state and federal correctional agencies, individual facilities, community reentry organizations, and college campuses—and to advance SUNY’s mission,

“to provide to the people of New York educational services of the highest quality, with the broadest possible access, fully representative of all segments of the population.”³

To see how SUNY programs serve people in New York prisons and after they leave incarceration, SUNY’s Office of Higher Education in Prison (SUNY HEP) created a longitudinal data system that links regularly collected student data from the SUNY Institutional Research Information System (SIRIS) and the National Student Clearinghouse with individual-level corrections data from DOCCS. This report, the third in a series (Gais, et al. 2019; Gais, Grace, and Wilner 2021), draws on these data to analyze incarcerated student enrollment, diversity, course subject areas, retention, and completion.

The analyses confirm the growth of incarcerated student enrollment by SUNY institutions between 2015 and 2019, followed by a contraction during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and a partial recovery in the 2021-2022 academic year. The decline was steeper, and the recovery was weaker, for student engagement, indicated by credits earned and the proportion of students attending full-time. However, SUNY programs that had partnerships with nonprofit organizations or other higher education institutions showed

stronger enrollment growth and resilience when compared to SUNY prison education programs that operated on their own.

As found in previous reports, incarcerated SUNY students are extremely diverse in age, race, ethnicity, and community, as well as the length of the sentences they are serving. The students also differ in some ways from all people in DOCCS facilities. The classes they take skew heavily toward the humanities, though social science and business courses are also common. Except for mathematics, few STEM courses are taken by incarcerated SUNY students, nor do they enroll in many courses with a specific occupational or vocational focus.

Although large majorities of students complete classes and receive excellent grades, student retention drops rapidly after the first year of enrollment, and graduation rates rise slowly. While reasons for the weak retention rates are uncertain, the long time for completion may be affected by the part-time attendance of most incarcerated students. Completion rates may also be depressed by the small number of students who enroll in college after they leave prison. Nearly all degrees are earned by students while they are incarcerated. As a result, graduation rates are higher among people serving long sentences.

These findings guide discussions with program administrators, faculty, and formerly incarcerated students on how to improve student access, curriculum choice, retention, and completion. They indicate the need to support academic reentry for formerly incarcerated students and raise resources that augment the administrative capacities of SUNY college-in-prison programs. Finally, they underline the importance for SUNY and DOCCS to work regularly and cooperatively—at both the state level and the level of individual campuses and correctional facilities—to consider, implement, and assess changes designed to improve student access and success.

SUNY AND COLLEGE-IN-PRISON PROGRAMMING IN NEW YORK STATE

Fourteen SUNY institutions now have a presence in 23 of the State's 44 correctional facilities (Table 1). Seven programs operate independently. These stand-alone programs include the community colleges of Adirondack, Corning, Jamestown, Jefferson, Mohawk Valley, and North Country, plus the university college of Potsdam, which offers a baccalaureate program at the Riverview correctional facility. Eight institutions partner with other institutions. Cornell University's Prison Education Program (CPEP), partners with Cayuga Community College (and in previous years with Corning Community College) to serve students at three prisons. The University of Rochester works with Genesee Community College; Herkimer Community College collaborates with Hamilton College; and Columbia-Greene, Sullivan, and Ulster community colleges partner with Hudson Link, a nonprofit agency. Purchase College provides faculty to the Bedford Hills program for women, which is operated by Marymount Manhattan College. Except for the Bedford Hills program, SUNY colleges are the degree-granting institutions, while their partners provide administrative support, fund-raising assistance, and faculty.

In recent years, SUNY programs have relied on a variety of public and private sources of funding. Jefferson and Mohawk Valley community colleges established programs in 2017 with support from the New York District Attorney's Criminal Justice Innovation Initiative (CJII). North Country Community College was selected as a federal Second Chance Pell Experimental Site in 2016; it serves four prisons, including a federal facility in Ray Brook. Genesee Community College re-established its program at Attica with private funding in 2011, now partnering with the University of Rochester's Education Justice Initiative. Finally, two SUNY campuses—Adirondack Community College and SUNY Potsdam—were selected as Second Chance Pell sites in 2020 and began classes in the 2021-2022 academic year. Potsdam is offering the first four-year degree in-prison program in SUNY's history.



Table 1. SUNY campuses involved in college-in-prison programs, including partnerships, correctional facilities, and degrees

SUNY Institution (institutional partners)

Facility Degrees and Programs

Adirondack Community College

Washington Correctional Facility

AS & Certificate in Business
& Entrepreneurship;
AS Indiv. Studies

Corning Community College

Elmira Correctional Facility

AA Liberal Arts and Sciences

Jamestown Community College

Collins Correctional Facility

AA Lib. Arts & Science;
Lang., Lit. & Writing;
Cert. in Health Studies

Jefferson Community College

Cape Vincent, Gouverneur Correctional Facility

AA Individual Studies

Mohawk Valley Community College

Marcy Correctional Facility

AAS Business Admin;
AAS General Education

North Country Community College

*FCI Ray Brook, Bare Hill, Franklin, and
Adirondack Correctional Facilities*

AA Liberal Arts & Science;
AAS Entrep. Mgt;
AAS Indiv. Studies

SUNY Potsdam

Riverview Correctional Facility

BA Sociology

**Cayuga County Community
College (Cornell University)**

*Auburn, Cayuga, and Five Points
Correctional Facilities*

AA Liberal Arts and Sciences

Columbia Greene (Hudson Link)

Greene, Greenhaven Correctional Facilities

AAS Individual Studies

Sullivan (Hudson Link)

Sullivan Correctional Facility

AA Liberal Arts and Sciences

**Ulster County Community
College (Hudson Link)**

Shawangunk Correctional Facility

AAS Individual Studies

**Genesee Community College
(University of Rochester)**

*Attica, Groveland, and Wyoming
Correctional Facilities*

AS Liberal Arts and Science: General Studies

**Herkimer County Community
College (Hamilton College)**

Mohawk, Midstate

AA General Studies

**SUNY Purchase (Marymount
Manhattan College)**

*Bedford Hills non-degree-granting
partner to MMC*

AA and BA degrees

Source: Office of Higher Education in Prison, SUNY

SUNY's role in providing college programming to incarcerated students is large within New York, though it is only part of a diverse collection of 29 higher education institutions offering programs in 36 DOCCS facilities, including Medaille, Bennington, Bard, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Marymount Manhattan colleges as well as Cornell, Rochester, and New York universities. Nonetheless, there is still much room for expanding college enrollment in New York State prisons. In June 2022, 1,332 incarcerated individuals were enrolled in college programs in State facilities, only seven percent of the over 19,052 people in New York prisons with a high school diploma or its equivalent.⁴

DATA

Education data used in this report come from the SUNY Institutional Research Information System (SIRIS), which regularly collects student, term section, course, degree, and financial aid data from SUNY's 64 campuses. SUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics (OIRDA) identified 2,110 SUNY students who were confined or incarcerated between the 2015-2016 and 2021-2022 academic years.⁵ Names, birth dates, and other information were then used to link the SUNY students to persons in the released and in-custody files maintained by the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS).⁶

The linking of SUNY and DOCCS data was performed by SUNY's OIRDA. Because SUNY participates in the National Student Clearinghouse, data on SUNY students' enrollment in and graduation from other U.S. colleges and universities were also merged. After linking was completed, personally identifying data (e.g., names and dates of birth) were stripped from the dataset. SUNY researchers analyzed the anonymized data, which were password protected on secure SUNY servers. The Human Research Ethics Board of SUNY New Paltz, which conducts Institutional Review Board reviews for SUNY System Administration, determined that the process of combining, maintaining, and analyzing the data complies with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) under the "audit and evaluation" exception and with federal Human Subjects Research requirements.⁷

Of SUNY students identified as taking a class while in a correction facility between fall 2015 and summer 2022, 1,715 were matched with individuals in the DOCCS files. Another 101 SUNY students were enrolled in a program at a federal prison, 54 were confined at a juvenile facility, and 81 SUNY students were not linked to any known correctional system. This report focuses on the SUNY students linked to DOCCS facilities.

ENROLLMENT, CLASSES, AND ENGAGEMENT

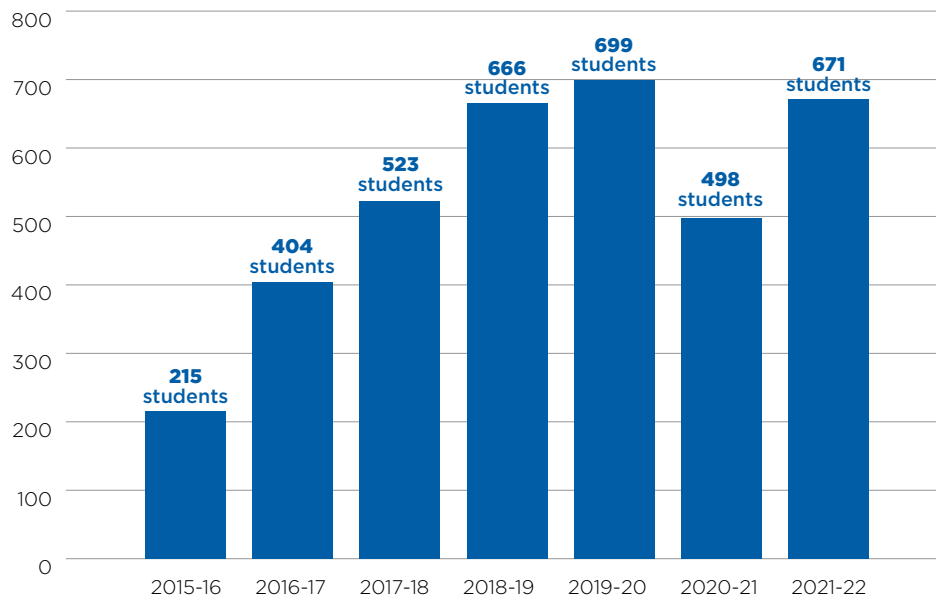
The number of SUNY students in DOCCS facilities grew rapidly between 2015-2016 and 2018-2019, as new programs were established and funding from CJII and Second Chance Pell became available (Figure 1A). Enrollment of incarcerated SUNY students, however, leveled off in 2019-20 at 699, dampened by student withdrawals in the spring of 2020, when classes were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and DOCCS's suspension of facility visits on March 14. Most college-in-prison programs shifted to correspondence education, with communications sometimes facilitated by phone calls and emails. Videoconferencing in a few programs began in the fall of 2020.

Logistical problems with these education methods were common, and many students left the programs. In the 2020-2021 academic year, enrollment dropped by 29 percent from the previous year. In-person college classes did not resume until May 24, 2021, and most programs did not reenter facilities until the fall. Yet, as Figure 1A shows, enrollment nearly reached its pre-pandemic level in 2021-2022, a rapid recovery despite difficulties in re-connecting with past students and recruiting new ones.

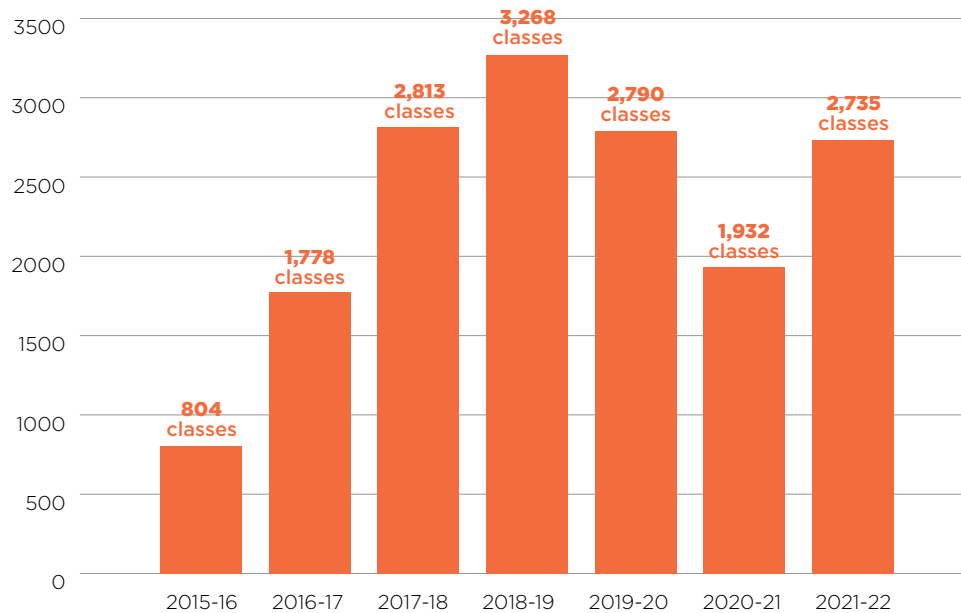
The recovery, however, was incomplete. Figure 1B shows the number of classes incarcerated students took each year. (Each observation represents a student enrolled in a class.) Like enrollment, it shows an expansion in SUNY college-in-prison programs between 2015 and 2019, but the 41 percent decline in classes between 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 occurred earlier and was steeper than the enrollment decline, and the number of classes remained much lower than at the pre-pandemic peak of 2021-2022. Credits received by incarcerated students declined even further (not shown). After falling 55 percent in 2020-2021 from their peak in 2018-2019, total credits earned by incarcerated students were 23 percent below their pre-pandemic level in 2021-2022.

FIGURE 1. INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS ENROLLED AND CLASSES TAKEN, BY ACADEMIC YEAR, 2015-2016 TO 2021-2022

1A. Students enrolled each academic year



1B. Number of classes taken by students each academic year (each observation represents a student enrolled in a class)

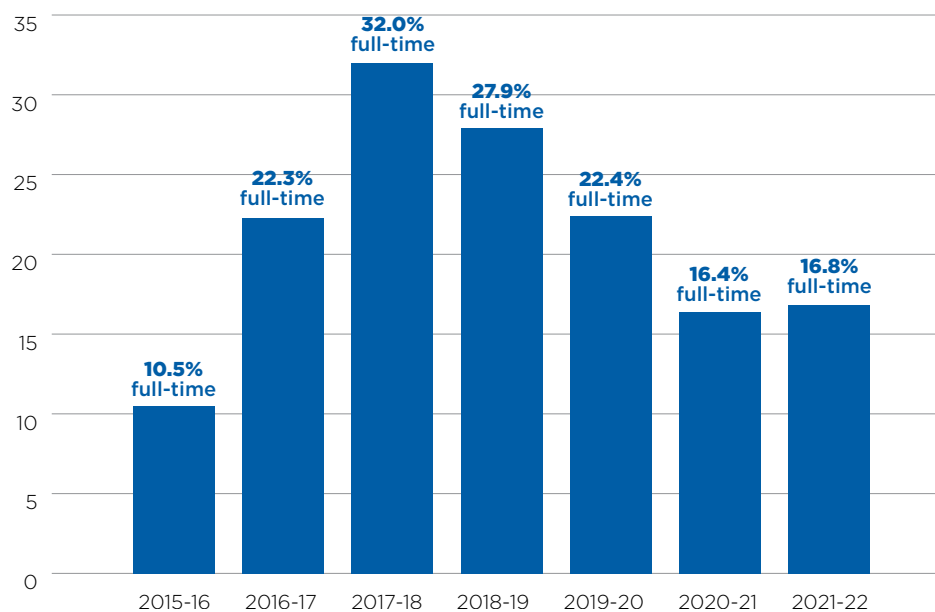


N (unique students) = 1,715; N (classes) = 16,120

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

The decline in classes taken is also evident in a decrease in full-time students. Figure 2 reveals that the share of incarcerated SUNY students attending classes full-time grew through the 2017-2018 academic year, fell in 2018-2019 through 2020-2021, and remained low in 2021-2022. Although SUNY college-in-prison programs have recouped most of their pre-pandemic enrollment, they have yet to recover the intensity of their students' participation.

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS ENROLLED FULL-TIME, 2015-2016 TO 2021-2022



N = 1,715; *N* (classes) = 16,120

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

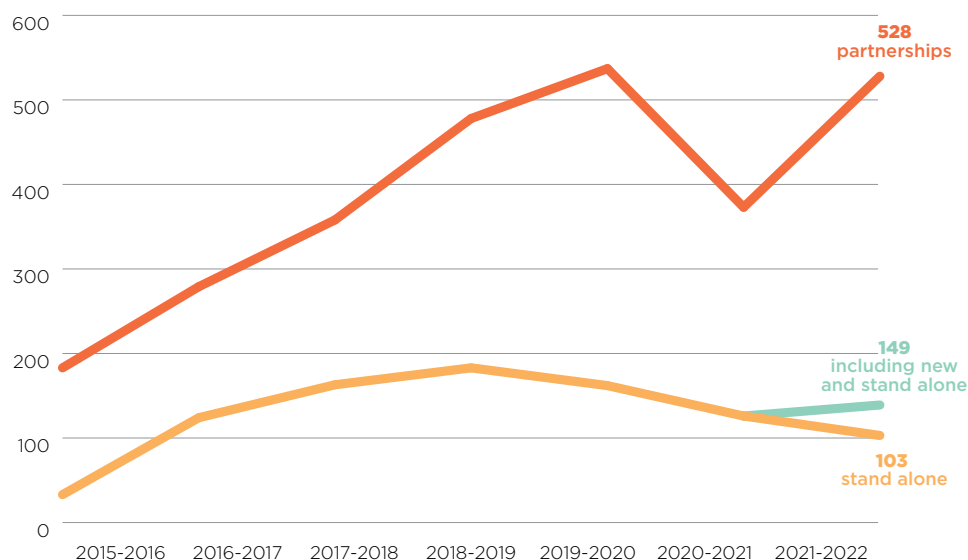
Not all SUNY programs have experienced the same changes. As noted, seven colleges offer college-in-prison degree programs in partnership with other higher education institutions or a nonprofit organization, while six operate on their own. Partners assist with program management, fund-raising, liaison with prison staff, faculty, faculty training, student advising, and reentry support, and in some cases partners provide courses, credits for which may then be transferred to the degree-granting institution to count towards a student's graduation.⁸

As Figure 3 makes clear, SUNY programs that partnered with other institutions have shown stronger growth in students and classes than stand-alone programs since 2015, as well as greater resilience after the worst of the pandemic. Enrollment increased faster and longer among partnership programs when compared to programs involving single institutions (Figure 3A). Although partnership programs saw a big dip in enrollment in 2020-2021, they nearly reached their pre-pandemic peak by 2021-2022, while stand-alone programs continued their gradual enrollment decline. Two new stand-alone programs, Adirondack and Potsdam, began operations in 2021-2022, and the effects of their inclusion are shown in the green dot.

Figure 3B makes the same comparison with respect to the number of classes taken by incarcerated students. Again, partnership programs showed stronger growth before the pandemic, and despite a big downturn in 2020-2021, they rebounded in 2021-2022. The stand-alone programs, by contrast, have experienced a gradual yet consistent decline in classes since 2017-2018. What accounts for these differences between programs is uncertain, but they suggest that institutional partnerships may be helpful in both program expansion and resilience.

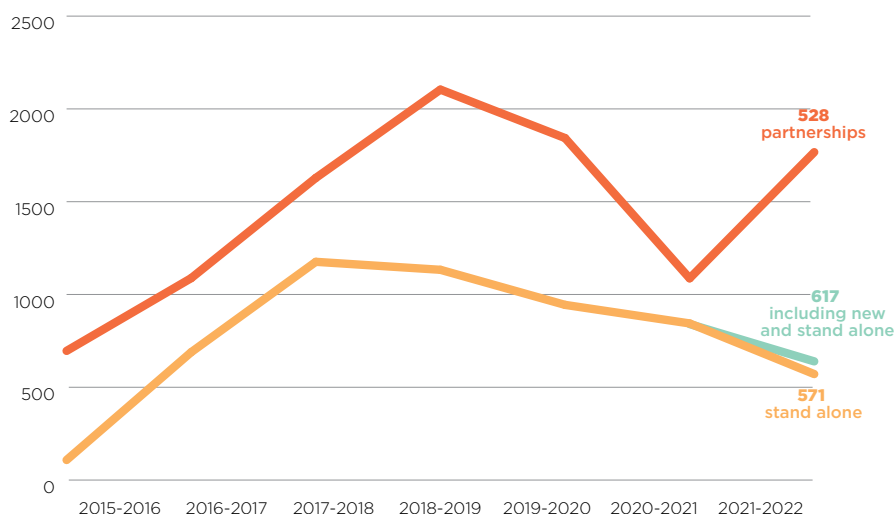
FIGURE 3. ENROLLMENT AND CLASSES TAKEN BY ACADEMIC YEAR, 2015-2016 TO 2021-2022; SUNY PROGRAMS SEPARATED BETWEEN STAND-ALONE PROGRAMS AND THOSE WITH PARTNERSHIPS

3A. Enrollment by academic year



3B. Classes taken by academic year enrolled in a class

N (unique students) = 1,715; N (classes) = 16,120



Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

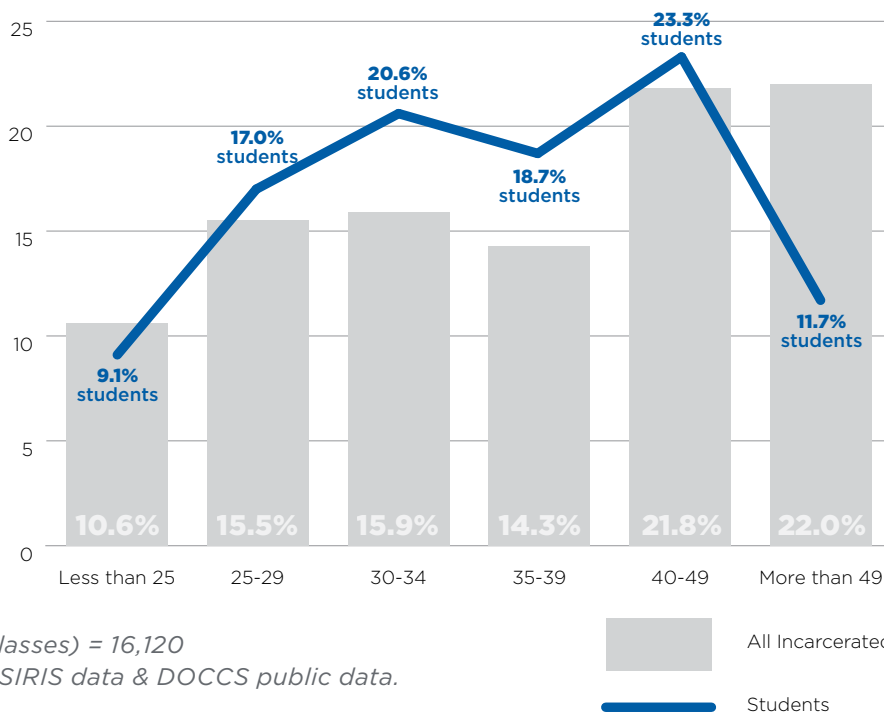
PARTICIPATION IN PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Although research suggests that many people in prison want to participate in postsecondary programs, few actually do.⁹ As already noted, only seven percent of those who meet the minimal qualification for postsecondary education, namely a verified secondary degree, are enrolled in college programs.¹⁰ Some individuals may not meet DOCCS's additional eligibility criteria for participation, such as not refusing to participate in mandated programs, not being deportable, and not having a negative disciplinary background (NYSDOCCS 2023: 8). Before the fall of 2023, individuals subject to a serious (Tier 3) disciplinary action within the past year were disqualified from college programming; now, the disqualification is no longer automatic but at the discretion of each facility. Qualified individuals may still be unable to enroll in college if they are housed at a prison that does not host a program—or if the available college program does not admit all applicants.

Despite these barriers to participation, SUNY HEP students largely reflect the diversity of incarcerated people in DOCCS facilities, at least with respect to age, race, community, and carceral condition. A major exception is sex. SUNY programs operate only in men's prisons. Although all women's prisons in New York host college programs, they are operated by private colleges and universities. SUNY Purchase faculty participate in a program at Bedford Hills, a maximum-security facility for women, but Marymount Manhattan College offers the degree.

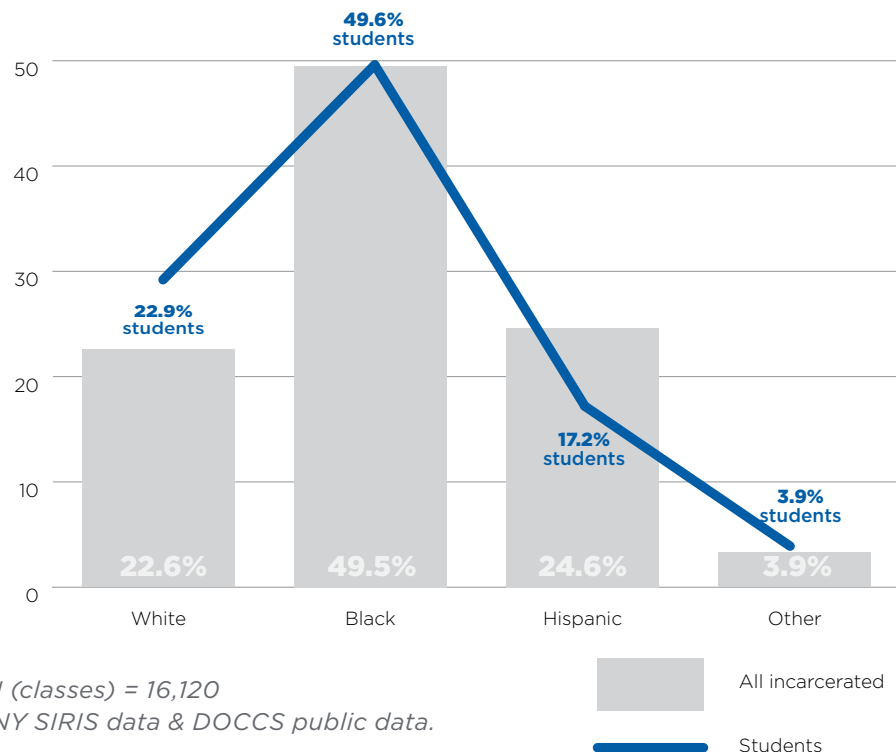
In terms of age, however, incarcerated students are quite diverse. Twenty-six percent of the students were under 30 years of age when they first enrolled in a SUNY program, while 35 percent were 40 years or older (Figure 4). When compared to all incarcerated people, students were more likely to be in their late 20s or 30s and less likely to be 50 years of age or older.

FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS BY AGE, COMPARED TO THE ANNUAL AVERAGE OF ALL STATE PRISONERS, 2015-2022



Incarcerated SUNY students are also diverse in race and ethnicity. About half of the students are non-Hispanic Black, 29 percent are non-Hispanic White, and about one out of six are Hispanic (Figure 5). A small number, less than four percent, in the “Other” category are identified mostly as Native Americans and Asian Americans. When compared to all New York State prisoners, White, non-Hispanic students are overrepresented, and Hispanic people (any race) are underrepresented. Why Hispanic people participated at a lower rate is unclear, though similar findings emerged from a nation-wide analysis of Second Chance Pell students and a study of formerly incarcerated community college students in California (Chestnut, Taber, and Quintana 2022; Silbert and Mukamal 2020).¹¹

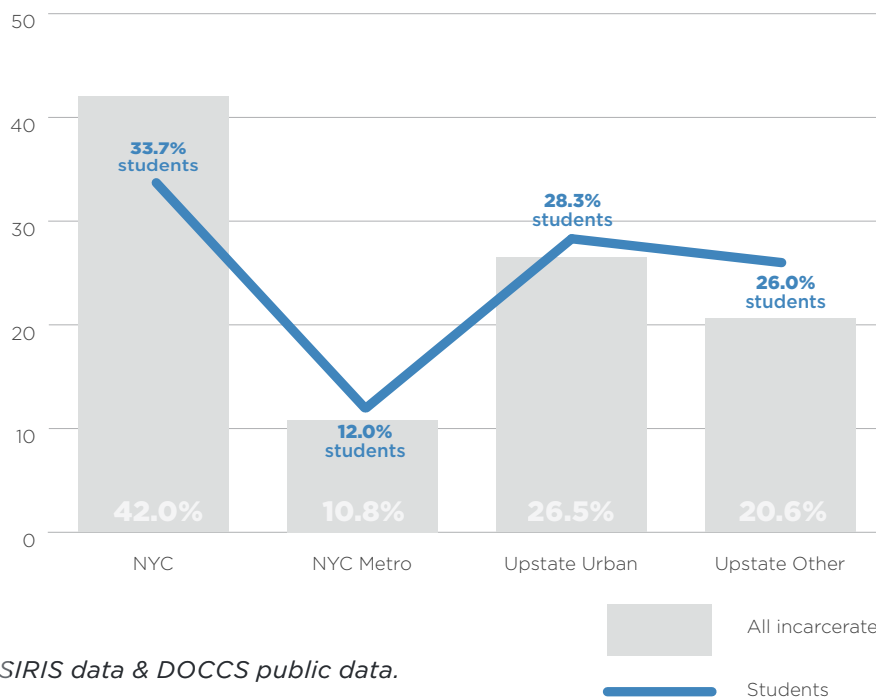
FIGURE 5. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, COMPARED TO THE ANNUAL AVERAGE OF ALL STATE PRISONERS, 2015-2022



At the national level, at least 95 percent of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point (U.S. Department of Justice 2004). When incarcerated SUNY students are released, they will return to all regions of the state. Figure 6 shows the distribution of SUNY students by their counties of commitment and compares them to all DOCCS prisoners. Counties of commitment are where an individual was convicted and committed to serve time in a correctional facility. They are also places where he or she will typically return to if and when paroled. Compared to all state prisoners, SUNY students are less likely to return to New York City: 34 percent of students will return to the city, compared to 42 percent of all persons in state prisons. Over half of incarcerated SUNY students (54 percent) have counties of commitment in upstate counties, and they are more likely to return to non-urban upstate counties than their representation among all persons in state prisons.

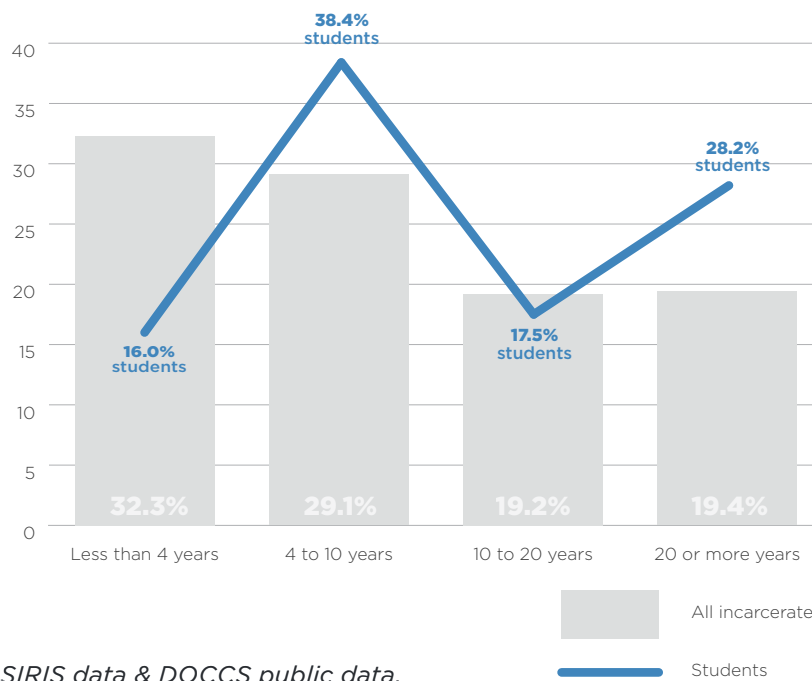
Finally, SUNY students in college-in-prison programs also vary in their carceral conditions, though they differ somewhat from all prisoners. Students are more likely than all incarcerated people to serve aggregate minimum sentences (AMSs) of 4 years or more (Figure 7). Although nearly one-third of all prisoners (32 percent) were subject to AMSs of less than four years, only about one out of six students (16 percent) had such short sentences.¹² Students were more likely than all incarcerated people to be subject to AMSs between 4 and 10 years and 20 years or more.

FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS BY COUNTY OF COMMITMENT, COMPARED TO ALL STATE PRISONERS, 2015-2016 TO 2021-2022



Incarcerated SUNY students are thus a very diverse group of individuals. They range widely in age, race, and ethnicity, and the community to which they expect to return. They also differ in their carceral conditions. These differences enrich SUNY's diversity, though they also mean that program offerings should serve a variety of educational needs and contexts, and as discussed below, those differences may affect students' educational outcomes.

FIGURE 7. AGGREGATE MINIMUM SENTENCE OF SUNY STUDENTS, COMPARED TO THE ANNUAL AVERAGE OF ALL STATE PRISONERS, 2015-2022



N = 1,715

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.



PROGRAMS AND COURSES

All SUNY college-in-prison programs are credit-bearing and transferable; both criteria are DOCCS requirements. The department does not require programs to offer degrees, but all of SUNY's in-prison programs do so. SUNY's community college programs offer open admission. Entrance is formally available to all students who meet basic requirements, such as high-school equivalency, though most of the colleges require entrance exams for placement purposes.

The most common degree programs offered by SUNY colleges are within the Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) category of Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies, and Humanities—and about four of five incarcerated students are enrolled in such programs.¹³ Most of the remaining community college students participate in Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services programs, including entrepreneurship programs offered by North Country, Adirondack, and Mohawk Valley colleges. SUNY Potsdam's baccalaureate program offers a degree in Sociology.

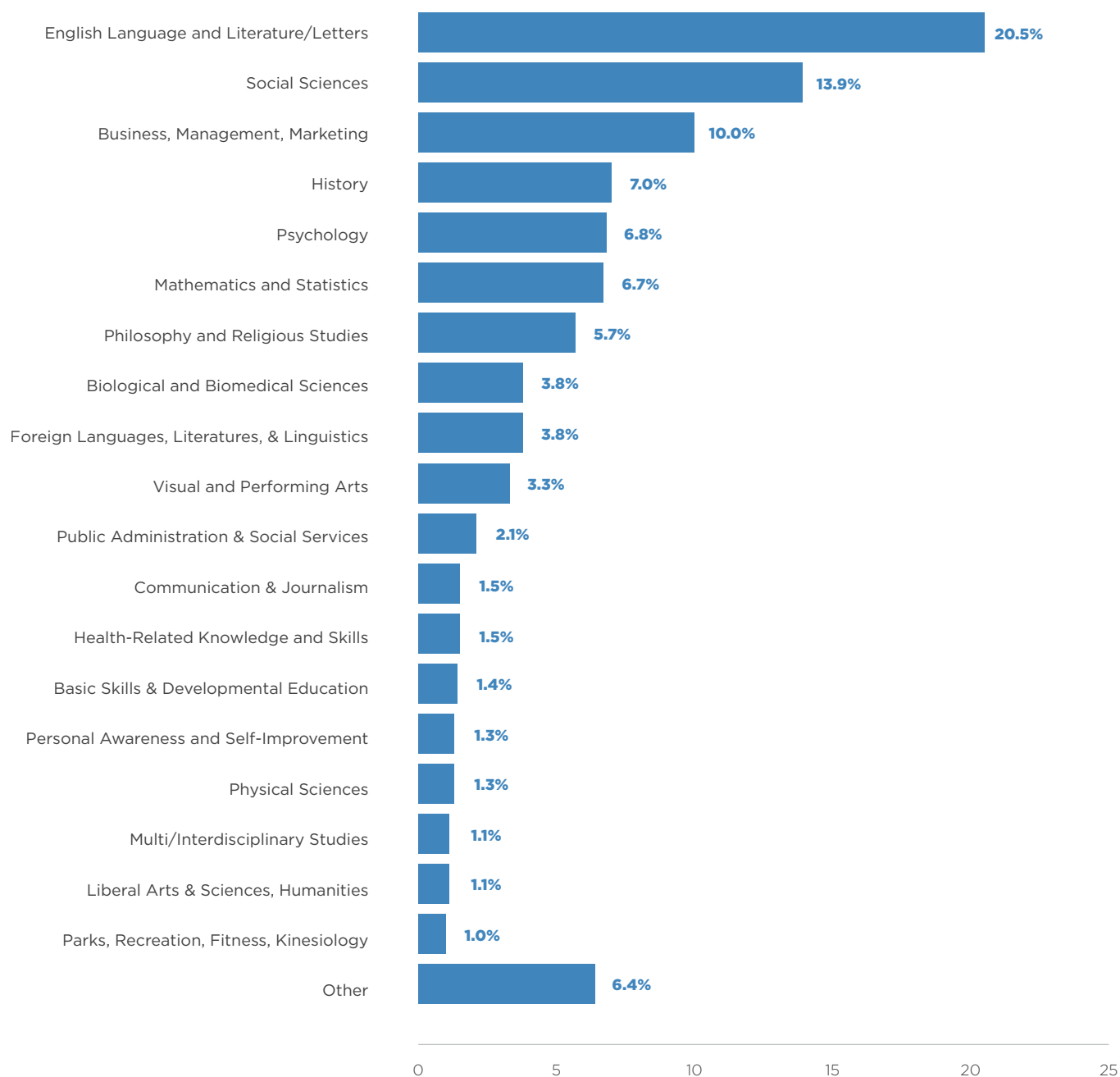
These degree programs are reflected in the types of classes incarcerated SUNY students took between the 2015-16 and 2021-22 academic years. Figure 8 shows the distribution of courses taken by the students according to CIP subject area codes. Each observation represents a student enrolled in a class. English language and literature (21 percent) classes are the largest category. Other liberal arts and humanities classes include history (7 percent), philosophy and religious studies (6 percent), foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics (4 percent), and visual and performing arts (3 percent). Taken together, about two of five classes students took are in the humanities.

Social sciences (14 percent) and psychology (7 percent) are also among the top classes students took, as are classes in business, management, marketing, and related services (10 percent). Of STEM courses, only classes in mathematics and statistics (7 percent) and biological and biomedical sciences (4 percent) exceed more than 2 percent of all those taken by incarcerated students. Courses with a specific occupational focus were also uncommon. Some students enrolled in classes in parks and recreation, law enforcement, mechanic and repair technologies, precision production, and culinary services. But the total number of classes students took in all of these classifications—most of which are combined in the “Other” category in Figure 7—add up to only one percent of all classes.

SUCCESS, PERSISTENCE, AND COMPLETION

Incarcerated students earn very good grades. Between 2015 and 2022, 41 percent of the 16,120 grades recorded were A or A+, and 12 percent were A-. Another 20 percent ranged between B- and B+, five percent were Cs, less than one percent were Ds, and only two percent of the grades were F or Unsatisfactory. As one SUNY professor said, the men and women in prison “really think education is liberation . . . They come, they’ve done all the reading, they want to talk about it, they’re concerned about their grades. They see this as something of a lifeline to them.” In discussions with administrators and instructors, we heard no evidence of grade inflation in prison-based programs when compared to on-campus classes.¹⁴

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF CLASSES TAKEN BY INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS, BY CLASSIFICATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS CODES, 2015-2022

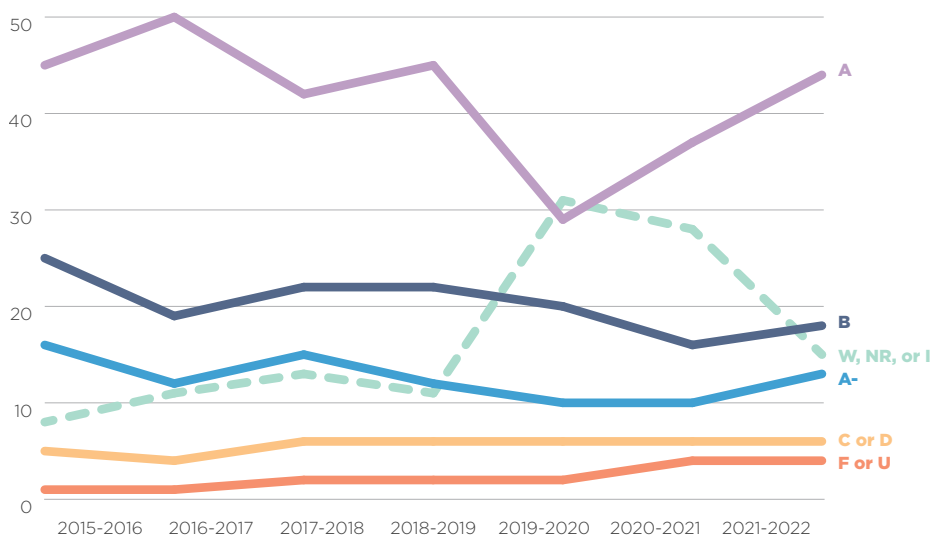


N = 16,120

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

As with many other students, however, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on student performance. Although A grades fell sharply in 2019-2020 and 2021, they recovered quickly and approached pre-pandemic levels in 2021-2022 (Figure 9). A- and B grades, however, declined during the pandemic and made only a slight recovery. Lower grades, especially grades of F and Unsatisfactory, increased and remained higher, albeit at very low levels. As the dashed line indicates, many students struggled during the pandemic, especially in the 2019-2020 academic year, when instructors were shut out of the facilities. Nearly a third of the students withdrew from classes or took incompletes, and sometimes grades were simply not reported. Such outcomes, however, fell quickly by 2021-2022.

FIGURE 9. GRADES RECEIVED BY INCARCERATED SUNY STUDENTS, 2015-16 TO 2021-22



N = 16,120

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Although incarcerated SUNY students performed well in classes, student retention and graduation rates in college-in-prison programs show a more complex picture. To see how students progress through their programs, Figure 10 traces four annual student cohorts enrolled in associate degree programs over time. The first calendar year of enrollment for each student in a SUNY college-in-prison program was identified between 2017 and 2020.¹⁵ The number of students who were still enrolled in or who had graduated from an associate degree program was tracked in each subsequent year.¹⁶ Students did not need to be continuously enrolled; a small number skipped a year and were counted when they reappeared. Nor did students need to be enrolled in the same college program they started with; transfers to other college-in-prison programs were included in counts.

This analysis does not tell us why a student left a program without graduating. Students may leave college coursework if they are released from prison, lose eligibility due to behavioral sanctions, find that their financial assistance ends, transfer to facilities that do not have college programs, or voluntarily withdraw.

Figure 10A shows, for each cohort, the percentage of students who were enrolled or who had graduated five years from their initial enrollment—in other words, the share of students who had not left the program before completing it. For example, of the 140 students who began a SUNY college-in-prison program in 2017, 115 (82 percent) were still enrolled in or had graduated from college in 2018. In the same cohort's third year (2019), only 50 students (36 percent) were still enrolled or had graduated, and by 2020, the number of students dropped to 14 (10 percent of the original cohort). Later cohorts showed fewer years of data as they bumped against the end of our data series in 2022.

All cohorts showed rapid enrollment drops in the second and third years, though cohort experiences varied. Student retention was greater for the 2017 cohort in the second year, while retention fell quickly for the 2020 cohort. The curves level off after the third year, and though only the 2017 cohort supplied data for the sixth year, enrollment fell to 4 percent by then. A curve indicating the average for students in all available cohorts is shown in black.

Figure 10B shows the cumulative percentage of students who graduated with associate degrees after starting SUNY college-in-prison program.¹⁷ Just as in Figure 10A, rates are shown separately for each cohort of students, beginning in 2017 and continuing through 2020. The black line shows the average graduation rate for all students for which data are available.

Completion rates typically rose most rapidly in the third year of enrollment, when the average rate reached 12 percent. After the third year, graduations continued to rise albeit more slowly. Both the 2017 and 2018 cohorts appeared to plateau in the fourth and fifth years, attaining an average completion rate of 27 percent by the fifth year. Again, data are only available for the 2017 cohort in the sixth year, when the rate reached 33 percent.

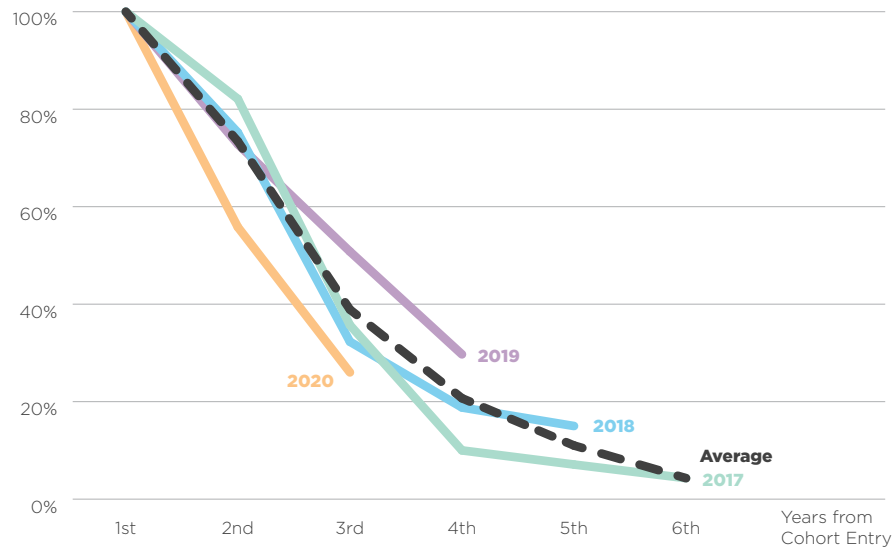
The averages are somewhat misleading, however, as the differences between cohorts are large. The 2019 and 2020 cohorts showed slower increases in associate degree graduation rates than the two prior cohorts. Only 3 percent of students in the 2019 cohort graduated in the third year, i.e., by the end of the summer of 2022. The 2020 cohort fared better, reaching a 10 percent completion rate in its third year. But both rates were well below those reached by the 2017 and 2018 cohorts. The pandemic surely had some depressive effect on the completion rates of the latter cohorts—and perhaps in the latter years of the earlier cohorts. Yet the sizeable differences between all cohorts suggests that completion rates may be subject to other influences, such as program changes or other carceral events.



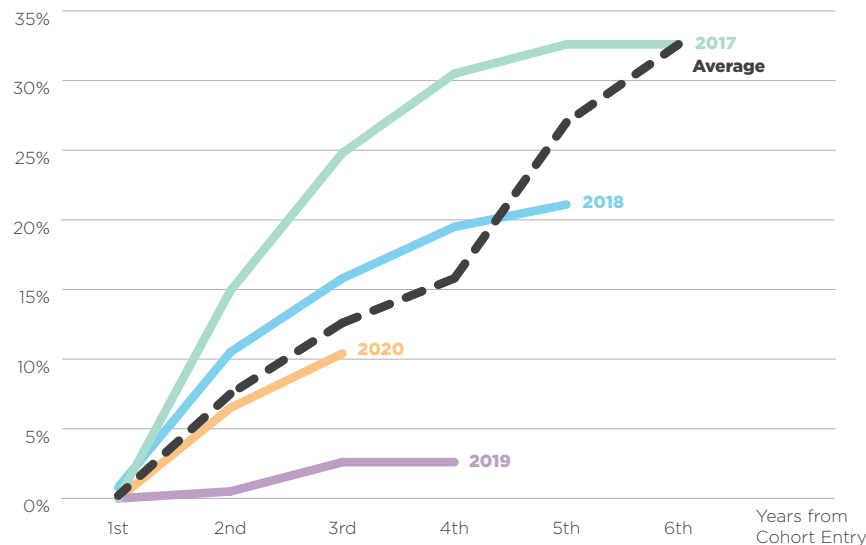
FIGURE 10. STUDENT ENROLLMENT AND CUMULATIVE GRADUATIONS IN SUNY COLLEGE-IN-PRISON ASSOCIATE DEGREE PROGRAMS, BY ANNUAL COHORTS

Data show enrollment and cumulative graduation percentages for cohorts starting associate degree programs between 2015 and 2020. Enrollment and graduations are traced between 2015 and 2022.

10A. Enrollment



10B. Graduation



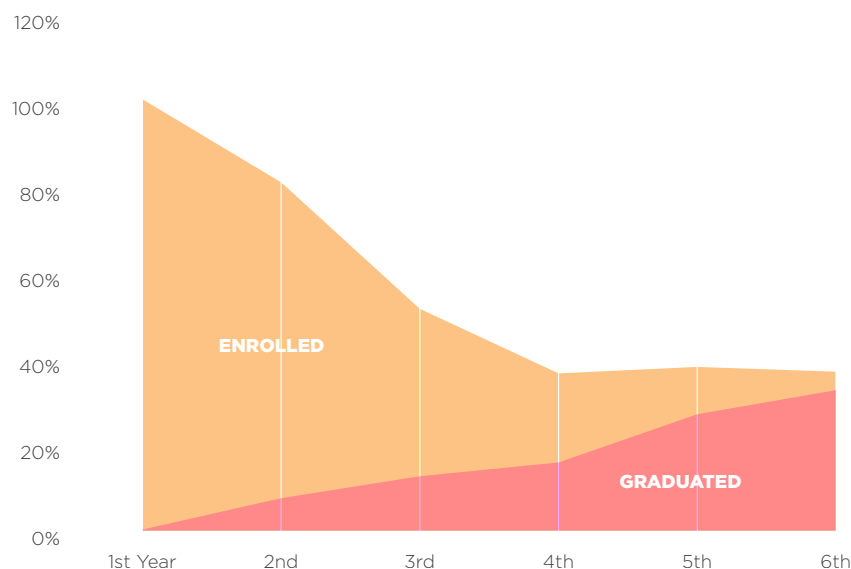
Total N = 546. By cohort: 2017 (141); 2018 (133); 2019 (195); 2020 (77).

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Figure 11 combines the average-curves from Figures 10A and 10B to trace the overall patterns of retention and graduation over time. The two curves differ markedly. Enrollment drops rapidly in the first three to four years, while graduation rates rise slowly throughout the period. By the fourth year, the graduation rate has reached 16 percent, yet only 21 percent of the original cohort is still enrolled and potentially able to boost that rate in later years. By the fifth and sixth years, more than one out of four students completed their programs: 27 percent in the fifth year and 33 percent in the sixth year. However, as data from only two cohorts were available for the fifth year, and only one in the sixth year, these estimates are subject to considerable uncertainty. What is clear, however, is that, if completion rates are to improve, either the time-to-degree needs to be shortened (the graduation curve needs to be steeper) or the drop in enrollment needs to be slowed (maintaining a larger pool of potential graduates)—or both.

FIGURE 11. RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES OF SUNY COLLEGE-IN-PRISON STUDENTS, BY YEAR FROM INITIAL ENROLLMENT, 2015-2020 STUDENT COHORTS COMBINED.

Graduation and enrollment rates traced through September 2022.



N = 546

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

Finally, when incarcerated SUNY students do graduate, they nearly always do so while in prison. Of the 107 students in the four cohorts who completed associate degree programs anytime between 2015 and 2022, 94 percent did so while they were incarcerated. That rate implies that students' carceral conditions can have a large impact on their educational outcomes. It also indicates that many students return to their communities without completing college programs, thus constituting a group of people who might be open to and benefit from efforts to assist them with re-enrolling in a local college or university.

VARIATION IN OUTCOMES

Because completion takes so long for incarcerated students, who typically attend classes part-time, and because so few finish their degree requirements after their release, their time in prison may affect their probability of graduating—and that effect may influence other characteristics of graduates.

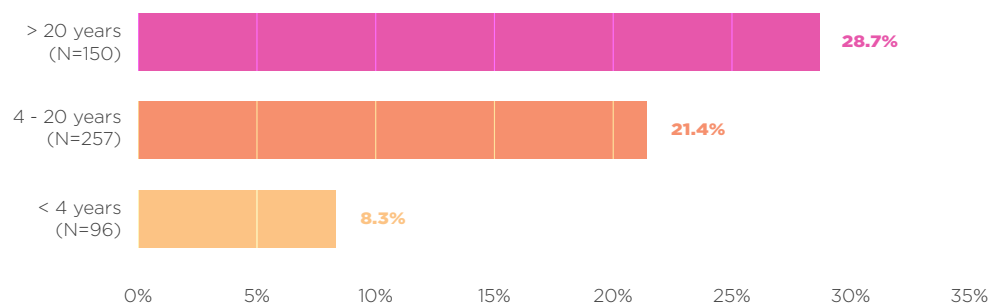
To see how students vary in their completion rates, we restrict the analyses to students who began their studies between 2015 and 2019. As the data on graduations are complete through September 2022, students who started college in 2019 would have nearly three years to finish their programs, while those who began in 2015 would have seven years. Analyses in this section thus show the graduation rates of the 503 students who first enrolled in a SUNY college-in-prison program anytime in the five-year period between 2015 and 2019.

Figure 12 shows the graduation rates of incarcerated SUNY students by carceral conditions and personal characteristics. As expected, graduation rates are much higher among individuals serving long sentences (as measured by aggregate minimum sentence, or AMS) when compared to those serving relatively short sentences (Figure 12A). Only 8 percent of students serving AMS's of less than 48 months graduated, while nearly 29 percent of students serving sentences of at least 20 years (240 months) completed their associate degree programs.

Differences in education outcomes by carceral conditions may partly account for other differences in graduation rates. Figure 12B shows that Black and Hispanic students were more likely to graduate than White, non-Hispanic students; and Figure 12C indicates that students in their 40s and late 30s, at the time of their initial enrollment in SUNY college-in-prison programs, were also more likely to complete associate degree programs. Both patterns may be related to the effects of sentence length. Those serving longer sentences in DOCCS facilities, especially those with sentences of 240 months (20 years) or more, were more likely to be over 35 and Black.¹⁸

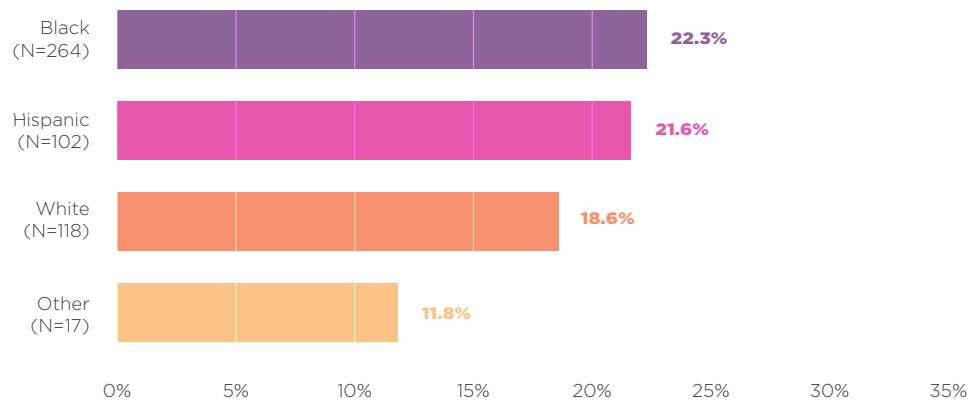
FIGURE 12. GRADUATION RATES OF STUDENTS BY STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND AGGREGATE MINIMUM SENTENCE, 2015-2019 STUDENT COHORTS

12A. Aggregate minimum sentence



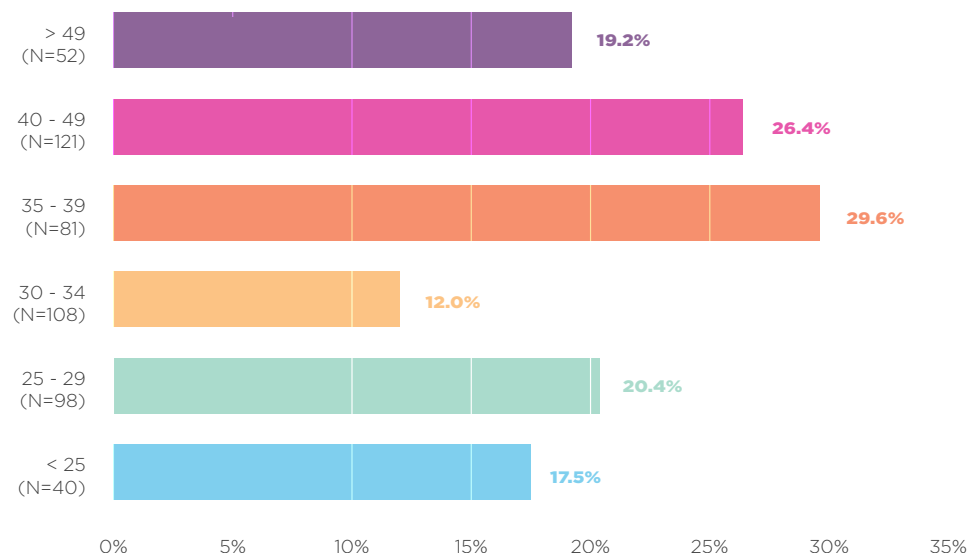
N = 503

12B. Race and ethnicity



N = 501

12C. Age at initial enrollment



N = 504

Source: SUNY SIRIS data & DOCCS public data.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

SUNY institutions, especially its community colleges, have greatly increased their services to incarcerated people in New York State prisons. Expanded public and private funding for higher education programs in prison helped to triple enrollment between 2015-2016 and 2019-2020, to a point where SUNY colleges now serve over half of all incarcerated college students in state facilities. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted this growth, but enrollment largely rebounded by 2021-2022, including the establishment of two new SUNY programs. Although the intensity of student engagement, measured by the number of classes taken and the proportion of full-time students, has not yet attained pre-pandemic levels, it has increased substantially from 2020-2021 lows.

Incarcerated SUNY students are diverse. They range widely in age, though people in their 30s are more likely to take college classes than their proportion among all persons in state prisons. Half of incarcerated SUNY students are Black, less than one-third are White, and one out of six are Hispanic. Students come from all regions of New York State, based on their counties of commitment, with a majority from upstate communities. They also differ in their carceral conditions. Although few have aggregate minimum sentences of less than four years, students vary widely among those with longer sentences.

Most incarcerated students earn excellent grades; the vast majority complete their classes, and more than half receive A's or A-'s. They enroll in a wide range of courses. Humanities are particularly well represented among the classes students take, while social science and business courses have increased their enrollments in recent years. Until recently, all of the programs offered associate degrees or certificates, but beginning in 2021-2022, SUNY Potsdam launched a baccalaureate program in Sociology.

Our findings point to at least three challenges for SUNY in its efforts to improve educational

services and outcomes for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. First, incarcerated students need more complete educational pathways. As already noted, while any college participation is valuable, earning a degree is more consistently associated with post-release employment, wages, hours worked, and lower recidivism among formerly incarcerated people. Yet only about one of five incarcerated SUNY students complete college programs—and less than one of ten among those serving short sentences.

One impediment is the low proportion of incarcerated SUNY students who attend classes full-time. Facility schedules, classroom space, faculty availability, and administrative capacity can all limit student courseloads. But these barriers may be mitigated with better understanding, additional resources, and good working relationships between college and prison personnel. One promising idea is piloted by North Country Community College, which uses video connections to share a course across three prisons using video connections, an arrangement that allows the college to offer courses with low enrollments in any one facility but needed by some students for graduation.

Academic progression hits an even more formidable barrier upon release, as few students continue their education after reentry. Reentry is no doubt difficult, as individuals struggle with housing, employment, family relationships, and mental and physical health, among many other needs. But education should remain a viable option for those who want to continue. Some SUNY partners, notably Hudson Link, assist reentering students, including housing, while SUNY Potsdam has begun offerings housing to formerly incarcerated students who want to complete their academic programs on campus.

However, most colleges have little capacity to help their students return to communities far from their campuses. To create viable education pathways for formerly incarcerated SUNY students, a statewide navigation and support system may be needed, one that advises individuals regarding educational and career options, guides them to key contacts in their communities, and provides critical

resources. With affordable institutions in nearly all New York State communities, SUNY has enormous potential to help formerly incarcerated individuals access a wide range of higher education programs, but much needs to be done to realize this potential.

Second, college programming must recognize the diversity of incarcerated students, who differ in age, race, ethnicity, community, and carceral conditions. While many students serving short sentences need assistance with reentry, people with long sentences are more likely to seek baccalaureate and even graduate programs while in prison. Students also differ in the communities they return to, communities with different economies and workforce needs. If college programs are to help students deal with local labor conditions and opportunities, they need to expand the range of programs and courses available. Incarcerated SUNY students surely vary in their intellectual and career interests; the lack of courses and programs in natural and computer science and engineering, as well as the absence of programs with a clear occupational focus, mean that many students may not get the educational opportunities they want and need.

Third, college-in-prison programs are challenging to implement, especially for public institutions operating on their own. SUNY programs working in partnership with other institutions are better able to expand their enrollment and retain students, perhaps because of the partners' administrative support, the additional faculty they bring, or their capacity to raise funding. Whatever the reason, extending the college experience inside a prison is not an easy task, and resource-strapped public colleges can manage the difficulties much better when they combine their efforts with institutional partners.

The analyses also have implications for national policy. The restoration of federal Pell Grants for incarcerated college students—which went into effect in July 2023—has the potential to greatly expand access to college-in-prison programming. But the FAFSA Simplification Act establishing eligibility, along with the U.S. Department of Education's rule interpreting

the Act, created new procedures and criteria for qualifying “prison education programs” (PEPs) able to offer Pell Grants to their students (U.S. Department of Education 2022). Before PEPs may apply to the Department of Education, they must get approvals from their institutions' accreditors as well as “oversight entities,” i.e., state correctional agencies for state prison systems or the Bureau of Prisons for federal prisons.

After an oversight entity gives its two-year probationary approval to offer Pell Grants, it must determine whether the PEP has operated in the “best interest of the students” if the program is to continue to provide Pell assistance. The four mandatory criteria in determining students' “best interest” involve program characteristics, including faculty qualifications and turnover, the transferability of credits toward degrees, students' post-release access to the college's on-campus programs, and student advising. Optional criteria include post-release outcomes, namely, graduations, continuing education, job placement, earnings, and recidivism.

Although it may be feasible to apply the mandatory criteria within a two-year window, the optional criteria are likely to be difficult to use within such a short period. As we have seen, program completion, if and when it occurs, often requires several years. Two years are unlikely to reveal most of the graduations that eventually happen. Also, many of the incarcerated students serve long sentences. Most will not have any post-release outcomes to show within two years. Indeed, one of the key challenges for oversight entities will be to develop standards and benchmarks for PEPs adjusted for the enormous diversity of the students—adjustments in expectations regarding education and workforce outcomes for incarcerated students with different backgrounds, in different programs, and in different carceral conditions.

More generally, accurate and responsible accountability requires a basic understanding of how prison education programs operate, how the policies and practices of prisons affect student access and program performance, what backgrounds and aspirations students bring to the programs, and how the students

move (or do not move) across different programs within the correctional system and out into the communities. Unfortunately, most of the past research on prison education programs has focused only on their impacts on recidivism and, to much lesser extent, employment—and offer little information on program operations or student participation (Bozick, et al. 2018: 408-409). If higher education is to be extended equitably to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, more research is needed, and in more states and settings, to understand the properties and dynamics of prison education programs as systems of educational opportunities.



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Other members of the OHEP team contributed in many ways to this work, including Rachel Sander, Jose Pineda, Klarisse Torriente, and Katie Zuber. Thanks also to the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision for sharing their data and answering many questions. The research is supported by a grant from the Mellon Foundation.
- 2 The SUNY institutions included the community colleges of Broome, Cayuga, Clinton, Corning, Dutchess, Genesee, Ulster, and Westchester as well as the four-year college at New Paltz (Emmert 1976). Five CUNY institutions offered programs (LaGuardia, Hostos, New York City, and Staten Island community colleges, plus John Jay College of Criminal Justice), as did three private colleges (Marist, Skidmore, and [Sage] Junior College of Albany). From Emmert 1976.
- 3 State University of New York, “Mission Statement,” <https://www.suny.edu/about/mission/>.
- 4 College enrollment in DOCCS facilities obtained from email to author from the Department’s Division of Program Planning, Research & Evaluation, June 13, 2022. Persons in State prisons with high school equivalency is from DOCCS, “Incarcerated Profile Report,” https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2022/08/2022_06_01-uc-profile.pdf.
- 5 Before the 2021-2022 academic year, confined or incarcerated SUNY students were identified as having taken classes located in a correction facility, and who did not take classes on the main campus in the same semester. SIRIS’s “Term Section Data Dictionary” includes a “Location Type” element (TT160), which includes a code for “Correction Facility: Instructional activity occurs at a correctional facility.” Starting in 2021, SIRIS included a direct field in which institutions were asked whether the student was incarcerated at the time of enrollment. The two measures showed a high degree of agreement since fall 2021, so both are used in the following analyses.
- 6 The “release” and “in custody” files supplied to SUNY by DOCCS are the same data available on the DOCCS “Inmate Lookup” website, at <http://DOCCSlookup.doccs.ny.gov/>. The files are complete as of November 1, 2020. We thank DOCCS for providing us the publicly available data in a user-friendly format.
- 7 See Privacy Technical Assistance Center, “FERPA Exceptions—Summary,” https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/FERPA%20Exceptions_HANDOUT_horizontal_0.pdf; and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protections, “Prisoner Involvement in Research (2003),” <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance/prisoner-research-ohrp-guidance-2003/index.html>.
- 8 For this reason, the SUNY data may not show a complete picture of all the classes incarcerated students took. However, discussions with the partner institutions suggest that the under-counting of classes is not large, and if the additional classes were added, they would not show different trends.
- 9 In a survey of Pennsylvania state prisoners, Tahamont, et al. (2020) found that about 80 percent of respondents wanted to participate in the Second Chance Pell college program. CUNY’s Institute for Justice and Opportunity indicated in a 2019 report that only 4 percent of the people in DOCCS custody with a high school diploma or its equivalent were currently enrolled in a college program (Prisoner Reentry Institute 2019).
- 10 See endnote 4.
- 11 In a recent report by DOCCS on postsecondary programs in its facilities, Black and Hispanic individuals were more likely to participate in college programs than their representation among all incarcerated persons eligible for postsecondary programs, while White people were less likely (NYSDOCCS 2023: 16). That finding would suggest that our finding of lower Hispanic participation compared to their overall presence in DOCCS prisons may be affected by postsecondary eligibility criteria. Unfortunately, however, we did not have eligibility data for this study.
- 12 Aggregate minimum sentences are calculated by DOCCS and represent the total amount of time a person must serve in prison. Individuals with indeterminate sentences are typically imprisoned between a certain minimum and maximum amount of time set by the court. The Sentencing Reform Act of 1995 established determinate sentences for repeat offenders convicted of violent felonies. Determinate sentences have no minimum sentence, only a maximum. Such individuals must serve at least 6/7 of the determinate term before he or she is eligible for release. Figure 5A uses DOCCS’s estimates of aggregate minimum sentence for

people with indeterminate sentences and 6/7 of the maximum sentence for those with determinate sentences. See New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, "Inmate Information Data Definitions," <https://publicapps.doccs.ny.gov/lookup/fpmsdoc.html>.

13 For a description of the CIP taxonomy, see <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cipcode/default.aspx?y=55>.

14 Silbert and Mukama (2020) also found that incarcerated students earned strong grades in their analyses of programs at six community colleges in California.

15 The 2015 and 2016 entry cohorts were small and excluded from the analysis. Cohorts 2021 and 2022 were excluded due to the brief time they had after their entry.

16 Eight percent of the credentials earned by incarcerated SUNY students were undergraduate certificates. These are not included in the analyses.

17 A small number of students graduated with an undergraduate certificate, but they are not included in these counts.

18 Authors' analysis of DOCCS data of persons in custody as of September 1, 2022. Of persons serving AMSs of 20 years or more, 87 percent were over the age of 35, 58 percent were Black, and 18 percent were White. Of those serving AMSs of four years or less, only 49 percent were over the age of 35, 41 percent were Black, and 35 percent were White. The number of complete cases was 30,544 for the age data and 30,333 for the race and ethnicity data.

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