

Opinion: Michigan Is Proving That College in Prison Works. Now It's Time to Build What's Next.

For too long, prison has been viewed as the end of someone's story.

Across Michigan, 12 colleges and universities are proving something different: prison can be the place where a new chapter begins.

Today, more than 1,300 incarcerated students are pursuing college degrees through Michigan's higher education in prison programs. They are studying business, theology, social work, liberal arts, and other disciplines with the same academic expectations as students on any college campus. They complete coursework, write research papers, collaborate with faculty, and prepare for careers and lives beyond incarceration.

They are not alone. More than 2,000 additional prospective students are currently waiting for the opportunity to enroll.

That demand tells us something important: higher education in prison is no longer a pilot project or a niche experiment. It has become one of Michigan's most promising investments in public safety, workforce development, and community well-being.

Michigan has spent years building this momentum. State leaders, colleges and universities, correctional partners, philanthropic organizations, and community advocates have worked together to expand access to rigorous college programs inside correctional facilities. As a result, Michigan is now recognized as one of the nation's leading states for higher education in prison.

Now, a new \$2.6 million investment from Ascendium Education Group will allow the [Michigan Consortium for Higher Education in Prison](#) (MiCHEP) to build on that foundation.

Over the next three years, this investment will help MiCHEP evolve from a coordinating consortium into a statewide support organization that strengthens every participating institution. Together, Michigan's colleges and universities will expand student supports, improve academic and reentry services, develop shared systems for measuring outcomes, create professional development opportunities for educators, share resources across campuses, amplify the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, and strengthen the state's capacity to secure additional philanthropic and public investment.

The goal is simple: to help every institution do its work better so that more students can succeed.

Success, however, is measured by far more than enrollment numbers.

It looks like students earning degrees that prepare them for meaningful careers. It looks like graduates returning to their communities with the education, confidence, and skills to become

employees, entrepreneurs, parents, mentors, and civic leaders. It looks like stronger families, safer communities, and employers gaining access to talented individuals who have demonstrated resilience, discipline, and determination.

Education changes the trajectory of a person's life. It also changes the trajectory of families and communities.

Research has consistently shown that people who participate in postsecondary education while incarcerated are significantly more likely to secure employment after release and far less likely to return to prison. Those outcomes reduce correctional costs, strengthen local economies, and create opportunities that extend well beyond the individual student.

The benefits ripple outward.

Michigan has already demonstrated what is possible when colleges, correctional institutions, state agencies, and philanthropic partners work together toward a common goal. This latest investment ensures that collaboration becomes even stronger, more sustainable, and more effective.

Perhaps the most exciting part is this: we are only beginning.

With more than 2,000 people waiting for access to college programs, demand continues to outpace capacity. Every student on that waiting list represents potential waiting to be realized not only for themselves, but also for their families, employers, and communities.

Michigan has an opportunity to show the rest of the country what is possible when higher education is viewed as a cornerstone of rehabilitation and public investment rather than a privilege reserved for a few.

The question is no longer whether college in prison works.

Michigan has already answered that.

The question now is whether we will continue building a system capable of reaching every student who is ready to learn.

This investment brings us one step closer.

Jeff Abernathy
MiCHEP President