



Capacity Building for Higher Education in Prison Programs' Reentry Services

Request for Proposals

Summary

Led by Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, this initiative aims to enhance reentry support for currently and formerly incarcerated people pursuing higher education. With recent federal changes restoring Pell grants for incarcerated students, institutions now face the challenge of providing effective reentry services without additional funding. Hudson Link seeks to bridge this gap by selecting five programs nationwide to receive tailored technical assistance, capacity-building consulting, and direct financial support. The ultimate goal is to empower these programs to deliver comprehensive reentry services, thereby facilitating successful transitions and increasing post-release student success.

Hudson Link Introduction

During a tough-on-crime period in the mid-nineties, incarcerated people lost their eligibility for federal post-secondary education funding. As a result, college degree programs in prisons across the country began to shut down in droves; what was once a landscape of 350 programs nationally dwindled to a field of less than a dozen. In the thirty years since that legislation was passed, higher education in prison has worked to rebuild itself with varying levels of success.

Following the elimination of Pell grants, and with the understanding of the important role education played in the process of their own rehabilitation, a group of men at Sing Sing Correctional Facility approached religious and academic volunteers for help in restoring college programs. Based on the knowledge that education transforms lives and using the work already done by incarcerated women at Bedford Correctional Facility as a guide, Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison was officially founded in 1998. Hudson Link has worked to address the fundamental lack of access and opportunity available to incarcerated people, so they can use the transformative power of higher education to change their lives during and after involvement with the legal system. We do this by providing college education, life skills, and reentry support to currently and formerly incarcerated people to help them make a positive impact on their own lives, their families, and communities, resulting in lower rates of recidivism and poverty.

Hudson Link has grown from one class of sixteen men at Sing Sing to degree-granting college programs for over 500 people in five New York State prisons, having awarded over 1,200 college degrees to date, providing transitional support to more than 2,000 released alumni, and facilitating grass-roots advocacy toward systematic change for all justice-impacted people. The result of this work speaks for itself: the twenty-seven-year recidivism rate for Hudson Link graduates is under 2%. While adapting to the needs of our incarcerated students and the everchanging landscape of higher education in prison, one thing has not changed: our commitment to directly impacted leadership: 70% of Hudson Link's staff, including more than half of our leadership team, are formerly incarcerated people – most of them Hudson Link alumni.

In almost three decades of operation, we have recognized that support during the post-release period is essential to maximizing the impact of our educational work on the inside. This understanding has driven the growth of our Transitional Services department, currently offering some of the most comprehensive services of any higher education in prison program nationwide. Through this department, Hudson Link offers:

- [Finish Line](#), a degree completion program that counsels students to (re)enroll in college, vocational training, or graduate school post-release and provides financial support toward barriers to pursuing their desired credential (i.e. tuition, transportation, childcare, etc.);
- Access to [The Boutique](#), a completely free clothing shop where alumni can find professional attire, winter wear, and welcome home bags to get started on their next chapter;
- Compassionate and individualized case management, supporting everything from alumni homecomings and immediate release needs to long-term goal setting and workshops on subjects such as tax literacy, industry-specific career info sessions, and OSHA certification courses; and
- New Beginnings, a [transitional housing](#) program designed to expand the scope of our reentry support - including three homes and a dedicated case manager who works with residents to help them set and meet goals and access essential services.

We can help an alum with clothing and a laptop on the day of their release, pay their way through the last few credits needed to attain their Bachelor's degree, or host them in a safe, family-style transitional home while they save for first and last months' rent on their own apartment. Our Strategic Initiatives department actively empowers and engages our incarcerated students and released alumni to take collective action for legislative change. We push ourselves to continue innovating each year to increase the range and depth of services we can offer to college-educated people after their release from prison.

Hudson Link is a third-party facilitator, not a college or university. We work as a liaison between correctional facilities, colleges, and incarcerated students. We serve each of our accrediting college partners to the extent their capacity requires; in some cases, this means we provide full academic program coordination, while in others we may play more of a mentorship role with students and focus more of our work on fundraising and reentry services. Partnering with Hudson Link always means that 1) students can enroll with our partner colleges regardless of their crime, their time, or their dime, knowing that Hudson Link will fundraise to bridge the gap if they are not aid-eligible 2) we provide an additional level of student support delivered by credible messengers who have been in our students' shoes and who understand the intricacies of working with our corrections partners, and 3) reentry services including degree completion funding and transitional housing are available to students upon release.

Project Introduction and Overview

In the Fall of 2023, new federal legislation restored Pell grant funding to incarcerated people pursuing undergraduate degrees through approved Prison Education Providers (PEPs). The legislation requires institutions of higher education looking to offer Pell-funded college programs to lay out a plan not just for delivering credit-bearing college coursework, but also for providing reentry services and support to participating students once they are released. The reality is that this legislation requires institutions of higher education to provide post-release student support they don't necessarily have the experience to provide – without providing additional funding to develop that capacity. Third-party stakeholders that may be highly capable of offering these services are not being provided additional federal funding to meet the need this expanded access will create.

As we have watched this unfold, Hudson Link has wondered how these institutions will meet the challenge of providing reentry support, at the same time knowing that without reentry support, many students funded by aid will not reach the benchmarks required – degree completion, stable housing, employment with a living wage – to call this Pell experiment a success. This is especially relevant given potential changes at the federal level, and within the HEP technical assistance landscape, both of which could disproportionately impact programs that are just getting off the ground.

To meet this need we saw growing in the field, Hudson Link sought and received grants to provide technical assistance and build national capacity in reentry support for reentering citizens participating in higher education in prison programs. As part of this initiative, Hudson Link will select five programs from across the country and match each with senior staff, experienced alumni, and/or community members whose expertise aligns with their capacity-building needs. In addition to consulting hours over the course of a year on a co-constructed capacity-building project, these five programs will receive direct cash support to bring services to life. The exact topic and scope that Hudson Link and grantee organizations work on together will be determined during the initial phase of the project. Programs will be selected based on how well their goals and challenges align with the strengths of our team, and where we believe our support can have the greatest impact.

For more information on Hudson Link's past work providing technical assistance to other programs across the country, [check out this video on our YouTube channel](#). More about Hudson Link's history and current services can be found on [our website](#).

Opportunity Details

Five selected programs will receive the following as part of their participation in this initiative.

- A series of discovery calls to help Hudson Link understand program operations, capacity gaps, and areas of greatest need that can be addressed during the grant period;
- Matching with a lead consultant from Hudson Link's staff, alumni, or broader community who is best suited to help meet the needs;
- At least three in-person visits from lead Hudson Link consultant to work together on the ground;
- Bi-monthly check-in calls during the grant year to talk through and troubleshoot challenges;
- A grant of \$50,000, delivered in two installments, to fund capacity-building expenses and help address gaps in reentry services;
- Introduction to any funders in Hudson Link's existing portfolio who could be a good fit for the selected applicant; and
- At least two calls during the grant year between selected applicants and the Hudson Link development team to strategize on fundraising and provide support.

The \$50,000 grant that comes with participation in this initiative can be used for a wide range of expenses, including but not limited to wages/stipends, supplies, event costs, establishment of physical program space, computer equipment and/or software, tuition or other direct cash support for returning students, and other items not listed here. If proposing to support wages/stipends with the grant money, applicants should indicate whether and how they plan to maintain those costs once the grant period ends. The amount of the payment installments can be structured to meet the needs of each grantee.

Eligibility Criteria

Higher education in prison program applicants, or programs with which the applicant is affiliated:

- Must be, or be fiscally sponsored by, a 501(c)3 organization;

- Must be a college, university, or third-party organization;
- Must be serving students in the United States and/or its territories;
- Must use 100% of subgrant for program-related expenses (i.e. no portion of this grant may go toward indirect costs);
- Must currently deliver accredited courses to incarcerated students at the post-secondary level
- Must be in, or preparing to be in, the process of applying for federally approved PEP status (either the applicant organization or its college partner, in the case of a third-party organization);
- Must be currently providing reentry services or planning to provide reentry services in the future;
- Must have regular and meaningful in-person interaction with students, even if some of the program's academic content is delivered via a virtual or digital format; and
- Strong preference will be given to programs with directly impacted leadership, staff, and/or that have been designed by directly impacted people.

Ineligibility Criteria

Anyone meeting any of the following criteria is ineligible for consideration for this project:

- Any program screening students based on their crime, length of sentence, or time to release;
- Any program that excludes students based on immigration status, if not restricted by federal or state funding requirements; and
- Any program that is not gender-affirming in its work with students.

Criteria for Currently Incarcerated Applicants

Incarcerated individuals or groups **are eligible and encouraged to apply** for this initiative. For incarcerated individuals to apply, they should be current or former members of a higher education in prison program, and must be willing to partner with that program or another local organization on the ground who can provide administrative and logistical support to the project. This partnership does not have to be in place prior to application. To account for the time and access challenges presented by incarceration, Hudson Link will assess applications from incarcerated persons or groups without requiring an existing partnership, and will use the interview period to explore local partnerships that could facilitate project participation. Hard copy proposals from incarcerated applicants can be mailed to Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, Attn: Lila McDowell, P.O. Box 862, Ossining NY 10562, and must be postmarked no later than September 1, 2025.

FAQs

1. What is the primary goal of this initiative?

The initiative aims to build national capacity in reentry support for higher education in prison programs, ensuring that incarcerated individuals have the necessary resources and guidance to successfully reintegrate into society.

2. Who is eligible to [apply](#)?

Eligible applicants include higher education in prison programs that are, or are fiscally sponsored by, a 501(c)(3) organization, serving students in the U.S., currently delivering accredited post-secondary courses, and provide or plan to provide reentry services. Incarcerated individuals affiliated with a program meeting these criteria are also eligible to apply.

3. What support will select programs receive?
Selected programs will receive consulting services and technical assistance from Hudson Link, a \$50,000 grant for capacity-building expenses, and introductions to potential funders from Hudson Link's network.
4. How can the grant funds be used?
The funds can be used for a variety of expenses, such as wages, supplies, event costs, computer equipment, and tuition support for returning students. Applicants should plan for sustainability beyond the grant period. No indirect costs are allowable.
5. What is the timeline for the application process?
[Applications](#) are due by September 1, 2025, with selected applicants notified by October 17, 2025. The project kicks off in November 2025 and concludes in November 2026.
6. How will Hudson Link assist incarcerated applicants?
Incarcerated individuals can apply with the understanding that Hudson Link will help explore local partnership opportunities during the interview period to facilitate project participation.
7. Where can I direct questions?
Any questions related to this solicitation can be sent to consulting@hudsonlink.org.

Project Timeline

- September 1, 2025, 11:59PM EDT: [Application due via form submission](#), project budgets must be emailed to consulting@hudsonlink.org; postmark deadline for hard copy applications (see below for full list of application questions)
- September 19, 2025: Round 1 review complete, finalist interviews scheduled
- October 10, 2025: Finalist interviews complete
- October 17, 2025: Selected applicants notified; grant agreements sent
- October 31, 2025: Deadline for grant signatures
- November 3, 2025: Project kickoff
- November 2025: Discovery calls
- December 2025: Initial grantee visits
- January 2026: First grant payment
- January – October 2026: Project work, up to two follow-up visits, and bi-monthly check-ins
- July 2026: Second grant payment
- November 2026: Project completion
- December 31, 2026: Final report due to Hudson Link

Application

Applicant Information

Program Name:

Host Institution/Fiscal Sponsor (if applicable):

Program Phone Number:

Program Address:

Contact Name and Title:

Contact Email Address:

Contact Phone Number:

Note: Incarcerated applications can include the name of a prison administrator with whom Hudson Link is authorized to communicate regarding your application.

Narrative Questions

Program Mission and History (250 words max)

Current Program Overview (1,000 words max)

Current Reentry Services Offered (if any) (1,000 words max)

Who are the primary thought leaders in your program, and what is their background/experience in higher education in prison and/or reentry services? (1,000 words max)

How have directly impacted people contributed to current academic or reentry offerings? (750 words max)

To what extent do you include the voices of directly impacted people in program decisions and leadership? (750 words max)

With which other organizations do you currently partner to offer the services described above (both academic and reentry)? (750 words max)

Desired Reentry Services (1,500 words max)

In a fully funded world, what reentry services do you envision your program providing?

Area of Greatest Need for Support (1,500 words max)

The exact topic and scope of the consulting project will be determined together during discovery between Hudson Link and the selected applicants. That said, please share the challenges your program is currently facing in building out or delivering its reentry services, and what you hope to gain from participation in this initiative.

Planned Use of Funds (1,500 words max)

How do you plan to use the \$50,000 sub-grant? What amounts would you like paid out in January and July 2026 respectively, and for what expenses?

Plan for Sustainability Beyond the Grant Period (750 words max)

What capacity does the applicant have to build support that will sustain any improvements or innovations past the grant period?

Budget

Please include a budget and budget narrative for how the \$50,000 will be spent, and share any other financial support you currently have or are applying for that would contribute to reentry work. Rather than have applicants rework their budget into a new format, please submit the clearest budget you already have, ensuring that the narrative provides adequate information to help us read it.