
NASFAA's

Breaking Barriers: Bridging Worlds in Prison Education and Student Advising

PEP Convening

Moderators and Panelists





Dr. Keyimani Alford is the associate vice president of student access & success at Madison Area Technical College. During his professional career, he has worked in multiple roles within the two and four-year public institution sectors, student loan servicing, and nonprofit fields. He has served in different leadership roles with WASFAA, MASFAA, and NASFAA. His education was earned at UW-Milwaukee, the University of Phoenix, and Capella University – all attributing insight into policy, social welfare, business administration, and higher education. He enjoys traveling the world during his downtime, fishing, music, and creating higher education opportunities for underrepresented students.

Dr. Susannah "Susie" Bannon is a formerly incarcerated, award-winning teacher, scholar, and public servant with an extensive record of success in higher education and public advocacy. As a rhetorical critic, her research examines the ways discourse constitutes identities, influences public policy, and structures the world, and also analyzes the role of communication in social movements. In addition to her academic work, Susie is a committed advocate for formerly incarcerated people and is a founding member of the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network. She joined the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison as assistant director in 2022.



Terrell A. Blount is a distinguished motivational speaker, mentor, and advocate for people affected by the justice system. He co-founded and serves as the executive director of the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (FICGN), a national nonprofit dedicated to advancing education and career opportunities for system-impacted individuals through community organizing and systemic change. His expertise spans policy reform, advocacy, program management, philanthropy, and education in prison, marking him as a comprehensive authority in the field. Terrell holds a Bachelor of Arts in communication and a Master of Public Administration from Rutgers University.

Barbi Brown joined the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative (THEI) in 2020, currently serving as the director of policy and practice. In her role, she works with and for individuals who are directly impacted by the current systems of mass incarceration and perpetual punishment, and seeks to create pathways of equitable access to higher education. In addition to Barbi's role with THEI, she is a justice policy fellow with The Education Trust and is also actively involved with The Southern HEP Collective, Tennessee Prison College Coalition, and Unlock Higher Education, where she advocates for policy change within the Higher Education in Prison field. Barbi earned a Bachelor of Professional Studies from Lipscomb University where she remains an actively engaged alumni of Lipscomb's Initiative for Education (LIFE) program.



As NCAN's senior director, policy and advocacy, **Catherine Brown** oversees the creation and execution of NCAN's nonpartisan policy agenda, priorities, and research at the federal and state levels. Brown most recently served as senior director at The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS), helping to advance affordability, equity, and college completion. Her work focused on increasing college persistence and completion. She also launched a new project to improve college affordability in Michigan. Brown received a bachelor's degree from Smith College and a master's in public policy from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Lance Byrd is the director of academic advising and counseling for Lee College Huntsville Center. Lance holds a Bachelors of Arts in kinesiology and a minor in sports management from Rice University. Lance also has a master's in school counseling from Wayland Baptist University. Lance has been employed with Lee College for seven years and has served in his current role for the past year. In Lance's spare time, he enjoys fishing, riding his horses, and roping.





Bailey Capelle, director of adult programs & services, joined College Now Greater Cleveland in 2011. During her tenure, she has worked across multiple departments as an advisor, manager, and director, providing direct services and administrative leadership. She has successfully developed, coordinated, and managed partnerships with schools and community partners; developed and managed program budgets (as high as \$6.1 million); conducted program reporting and evaluation; and led a staff of 31, supporting 21 concurrently occurring federally and locally funded programs. Today, she leads two TRIO Educational Opportunity Centers. Bailey holds an MBA from Case Western Reserve University, an MA from Cleveland State University, and a BA from The Ohio State University.

Justin Draeger is the president and CEO of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), serving as the foremost advocate and voice for student financial aid issues. In this role, he is the principal liaison between NASFAA members, the U.S. Congress, federal agencies, and the media. Dedicated to aiding underserved populations, Justin has committed most of his career to the idea that post-secondary education should be bound only by ambition and effort, not finances or background. His diverse experience includes positions as a director of financial aid, regulatory and policy analyst, and spokesperson, along with senior roles in government relations, communications, and policy development. Recognized for his expertise, Justin is a frequent source for national and trade press, appearing in the most-read newspapers, radio, and TV shows nationwide.



Dr. Cris Fanning joined the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) as the education director in 2020 and assumed the role of executive director of programs and risk reduction in 2023. She oversees statewide implementation of cognitive, substance abuse, education and employment programs, all elements of case management from intake to reentry, staff development and training, and research and behavioral analytics. Dr. Fanning has served over 20 years in higher education as an associate director at Kansas State University as well as the dean of effective learning and innovation at Manhattan Area Technical College. She earned her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction at Kansas State University with an emphasis in effective pedagogy and practice for culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and her M.S. in secondary/adult education.

David Hawkins is the chief education and policy officer for the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), based in Arlington, VA. NACAC is a nonprofit membership association that represents more than 27,000 high school counselors and college admission officers throughout the U.S. and around the world. NACAC is devoted to making the transition between high school and postsecondary education equitable, transparent, and fair. Hawkins joined NACAC as director of government relations in March 2000 and over his 24 years with the association has assumed responsibility for leading NACAC's advocacy, research, education and training, and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.



Haja Kamara is a programs director at the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (FICGN) and a former Prison Education Program (PEP) Academic Advisor. During her eight years implementing Second Chance Pell programs within the state of New Jersey, she used best practices in non-traditional advising to help students in prison reach associate and bachelor's degree completion. Haja continuously advocates for expanded access to PEPs that offer high-impact academic experiences to students inside. Currently, she is developing FICGN's Center for Academic Programs and Student Success where she explores strategies to connect impacted students with PEPs in their community.

Melissa Kunes is the assistant vice president for enrollment management and the executive director for student aid at Penn State. She is a graduate of Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, where she received her undergraduate degree, and an alum of Penn State, where she obtained her master's degree. Melissa has been with the Office of Financial Aid for almost 29 years. Melissa is actively involved in many national organizations in support of our students and the student aid profession. She is passionate in her commitment to helping our students fund their education, as she believes an educated society is the best way to ensure the success of our communities and their futures.





Steven Ladwig, director of the Transformative and Restorative Education Center (TREC), is the point of contact for all co-curricular components of the bachelor's program with the university, the prison, accreditation, and other elements. Steven is also responsible for administering applications to the university and FAFSA for all students in the program and connecting students to services on campus. Steven works with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to identify students in other maximum-security prisons who want to transfer to Pelican Bay to pursue a BA program.

Molly Lasagna is a senior program officer at Ascendium. She is responsible for strategic grantmaking in support of Ascendium's Expand Postsecondary Education in Prison focus area, which seeks to identify and scale effective strategies for ensuring that incarcerated learners have access to, and success in high-quality postsecondary education. She joined the organization in 2022. Raised in New England, she earned a Master of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt University, a Master of Arts degree in urban education policy from Brown University, a Master of Teaching degree in secondary English education from the University of Virginia, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English literature from Columbia University.



Kristy Laschober is the event logistics administrative assistant with the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA). She has been a fierce advocate for re-entry and higher education since her release from a five-year prison sentence in 2017, advocating for bold opportunities and second chances. Kristy earned her Bachelor of Science in innovation and leadership at Southern Oregon University and has dedicated her life to freeing other women from the invisible chains that bind them. Kristy led a successful fight to remove the criminal history box on all college applications in Oregon in 2021. Kristy is the author of the best-selling book, "Perfectly Flawed - Uncovering Your Greatest Purpose," a raw, interactive, reflective reading experience.

Felipe Leal is the director of financial aid at Lee College in Baytown, Texas. He administers federal, state and institutional aid for all students, including the Second Chance Pell Experimental project for students at the Huntsville Center. He has a bachelor's degree in business management and a master's degree in Education from Texas A&M University Kingsville, Texas. Felipe has over 25 years in assisting students achieve educational and career goals in financial aid, enrollment management, and as a technical consultant. He has worked at Texas A&M Kingsville, South Texas College in McAllen, Texas, Coastal Bend College in Beeville, Texas, and at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas.



Taffany Lim is the executive director of Cal State LA's Center for Engagement, Service, and the Public Good and the co-founder of the Prison Graduation Initiative (PGI), the first face-to-face BA degree completion program for incarcerated students in the state of California. PGI was included in the initial pilot of the Second Chance Pell program, and also receives generous funding from the Mellon Foundation, Bureau of Justice Administration, and the Renewing Communities Initiative. Taffany is also the executive director of Project Rebound at Cal State LA, a program designed to support the academic, personal, and professional success of formerly incarcerated college students.

Efraín Marimón, Esq., is an associate teaching professor in the College of Education and the founder and director of the restorative justice initiative (RJI) at Penn State. In his capacity as RJI's director, he is dedicated to promoting liberatory pedagogy and transformative education while overseeing the development, administration, and long-term sustainability of educational, collaborative, and community engagement initiatives for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals in Pennsylvania. Additionally, Efraín is the co-founder and chair of the PA Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (PA CHEP), where he co-leads statewide efforts to eliminate barriers to state aid for incarcerated students. He is also a co-founder and head of Penn State's Rising Scholars Pathways to College Program, which provides support to formerly incarcerated individuals seeking higher education opportunities post-release.





Lila McDowell became interested in the relationship between education and incarceration when she read that urban planners use current third grade reading level as a metric to predict demand for prison cells ten years from now. As deputy director of Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, Lila oversees programs, development, finance, and operations for one of the oldest and largest college in prison programs in the United States. She holds a doctorate in Education from Oxford University, a Master's of Science in educational research methodology, also from Oxford, and a bachelor's in public policy from the University of Chicago.

Sheila Meiman is an experienced advocate, practitioner, consultant, and analyst in the field of higher education in prison. She has expertise in a range of topics in her field, including STEM education, financial aid, program creation and expansion, student and academic support, data, transfer and direct-to-work credentials, and technology. She has over a dozen years of experience as a program administrator, managed a first-round Second Chance Pell site, and has served as a mathematics professor for both campus and system-impacted students. She currently serves as the prison education specialist at the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA).



Judith Negron is a criminal justice reform advocate with a master's in mental health counseling, and over 25 years experience as an educator, mentor, and counselor to a diverse population in the mental health sector. Founder and CEO of The Freedom Glow, LLC, her mission is to empower others and guide them upon their reentry process; and her passion is to give a voice to those left behind, through education, mentorship and tutoring. Judith is also a managing partner at Reentry Innovations, the Unlock Higher Education Coalition Policy Team Lead, and The Ladies of Hope Ministries Partnership Lead.

Dr. Paula Pitcher, director of holistic student supports at Achieving the Dream, is dedicated to implementing comprehensive student support programs that prioritize the overall well-being of students. She leads initiatives such as advising redesign, “Knowing Our Students” workshops, opportunity assessments, and personalized support services tailored to meet the unique needs of students. With a background in higher education spanning over twenty-five years, Paula has held various executive and administrative positions, including serving as an Aspen presidential fellow in 2017–18. Paula’s true passion is working directly with students, gaining valuable insights into their current struggles, and providing effective solutions that foster their success.



Norma Robinson is a compliance generalist and NASFAA U instructor with NASFAA’s Training and Regulatory Assistance team. After starting in admissions and advising, she has worked in financial aid since 2005. Prior to joining NASFAA in 2022, Norma worked at Barry University, serving undergraduate, graduate, and professional students as a financial aid counselor, assistant director, and finally as senior associate director. A near-lifelong Florida resident, Norma has lived all over the state, but settled in South Florida in 2007 where she lives with her husband and Chinese Crested dog.

Jamie Santiago is the director of financial aid at University of Maine - Augusta and has more than 20 years of experience in higher education and many of those years in financial aid. She holds multiple undergraduate degrees from Mount Ida College in MA and earned a master’s degree in Higher Education Administration from New England College in 2010. Jamie is also the President-elect of the Maine Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.





Victoria Scott is a currently incarcerated Justice Studies student at the University of Maine Augusta (UMA), who will be receiving her baccalaureate in an interdisciplinary degree for soft-infrastructural social engineering, a self-designed major that blends justice studies & public policy; business administration; integrated sciences; and education. It is her intention to apply her education to the synergistic innovation of soft-infrastructural social systems to create cohesive models that are self-sustaining. Victoria is also minoring in psychology and has received her paralegal certificate from The Blackstone Career Institute in April 2022. In addition to her studies, Victoria serves as a teaching assistant to Dr. Lee Perlman of MIT.

Nahlee Suvanvej, director of Portland State University's Higher Education in Prison Program (PSU HEP), draws upon lived expertise with the justice system to inform her approach to practice. In her previous role as college navigator, Nahlee developed and implemented best practices in preparation of Pell reinstatement for incarcerated students. She experienced higher education as a key element in reducing collateral consequences experienced by system-impacted women. As a PSU alumni holding a B.S. in child, youth, and family Studies, Nahlee believes in the transformational power of higher education, and strives to foster agency and community among students while incarcerated, and post-release.



Wendy G. Troxel is the director of the NACADA Center for Research at Kansas State University, conducting research and scholarly professional development within academic advising. As an associate professor in the Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs (SECSA), she teaches graduate level classes in research methods, assessment, and relational academic advising. She also supports the scholarly work of students, by serving as the coordinator of the Ph.D. in Leadership in Academic Advising program at K-State. She earned her doctorate in educational leadership at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, with emphasis in educational research and education law.

Robert Tynes, Ph.D. is a political scientist who researches child soldiers, African politics, online extremism and college-in-prison. He is the director of college-in-prison operations for the Bard Prison Initiative.



Sharon Varallo is the executive director of the Augustana Prison Education Program (APEP), a full-time in-person BA degree program for Augustana students incarcerated in the East Moline Correctional Center, a minimum-security Illinois state prison for men. APEP was launched in fall semester 2021 and is funded by the Austin E. Knowlton Foundation and numerous community foundations, faith-based organizations, alumni and friends. In 2022, APEP became the first college-in-prison program in the state of Illinois whose students were able to utilize Pell funding from the Second Chance Pell initiative. In May 2024, APEP celebrated its first graduate.

Allan Wachendorfer is a program manager with the Vera Institute of Justice's Unlocking Potential initiative, working to expand access to high-quality postsecondary programs in prisons. Allan helps lead the initiative's technical assistance to colleges, corrections departments, and organizations, offering postsecondary education and reentry programs to incarcerated people. In 2019, he co-authored "Lessons from Second Chance Pell: A Toolkit for Helping Incarcerated Students Complete the FAFSA." Allan also co-leads the initiative's equity work, which is highlighted in a recent report called "Beyond Access: Advancing Racial Equity and Inclusion in Prison Education Programs."





Latiqua Washington has over 12 years of experience providing college access and retention programming for NYC youth and adults. She has previously worked for the City University of New York (CUNY) and several non-profit organizations, including serving on the executive board of directors for the College Access Consortium of New York (CACNY) Inc. Latiqua is passionate about providing practitioners with professional development training, as well as advocating for policy changes that remove systemic and institutional barriers, and assist students to achieve their post-secondary goals.

*This event is generously sponsored by a grant
from Ascendium Education Group.*

