Building the Partnerships Behind a Campus Inside

What it takes to align campus offices, corrections, and university leadership around one program.

> The goal is to give students inside an experience as close as possible to the one students have on campus. But a university and a prison system are two different entities, and everybody underestimates that at first. Because nothing off campus is easy, collaboration cannot be an add-on. It has to be baked into the process.

KEY CONCEPTS

1 Two entities, two languages

A university and a corrections system bring different languages, backgrounds, presumptions, assumptions, and skills to the table. In the beginning, everybody underestimates this gap, and bridging it is the real founding work of a program.

2 Collaboration is baked in, not bolted on

Because the program is unique and not on campus, nothing is easy; everything requires extra effort. Collaboration is essential to all campus work, but here its necessity rises to another level.

3 Collaboration happens on two levels

The institutional level gets you in the door: campus offices, degree approvals, corrections oversight. The day-to-day level sustains students in a unique situation. Both must work for the program to work.

4 Flexibility runs both ways

Partnerships work best with flexibility on both sides. No particular skill set belongs to one partner, and a program cannot arrive announcing, "Here is my program, take it."

5 Standard processes will not fit everyone

Many students inside were failed by earlier schooling. Some do not fit the university's processes and policies, often because they need more flexibility than those policies assume.

WHAT YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

- Different vocabularies and assumptions on each side
- Degree-approval questions from academic affairs
- Many offices touching a single program
- Corrections approval required before entry
- Routine tasks demanding extra effort
- Students who don't fit standard policies

STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE

Map the campus offices early

Get the finance component running and engage the office of the provost, academic affairs, and enrollment. Clarify how students' degrees will be approved, and find a key champion in every area. It takes a lot of people.

Bring the oversight entity in early

The state or federal Department of Corrections has to approve the program and play a part in it. That level of collaboration is required just to get your foot in the door.

Lead with flexibility, not a finished program

Do not arrive with a fixed program and ask the prison to take it. Expect adaptation on both sides, and design the program with your partners rather than for them.

Secure leadership buy-in, then flex policies

For anyone starting a program, buy-in from university leadership is essential. Use it to create the flexibility students need when standard processes and policies do not fit their situation.

QUICK CHECKLIST

- ☐ Identify champions in finance, academic affairs, and enrollment
- ☐ Confirm early how degrees will be approved
- ☐ Engage the corrections oversight entity from the start
- ☐ Expect extra effort for tasks that are easy on campus
- ☐ Adapt the program to the setting, not the reverse
- ☐ Confirm buy-in from university leadership