



Request for Applications

2027 Bridging Pathways Policy Academy

Purpose: The Bridging Pathways Policy Academy will support four to six states and territories in strengthening alignment between higher education and corrections systems to create more coordinated, sustainable, career-connected postsecondary pathways for incarcerated learners. Through intensive technical assistance, peer learning, and strategic planning, participating teams will advance governor-led systems change that connects education during incarceration to successful reentry, continued education, and employment.

Informational Webinar:

Thursday, October 8, 2026; 4:00pm ET
<https://nga-org.zoom.us/j/96476223911?from=addon>
Dial In: 1 305-224-1968; Meeting ID: 964 7622 3911

Application Opens: Wednesday, September 22, 2026

Application Closes: Friday, October 23, 2026

Selection Announcement: Friday, November 6, 2026

Virtual Kickoff Convening: Thursday, December 3, 2026

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OVERVIEW

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center), with support from the Ascendium Education Group, is launching the 2027 Bridging Pathways Policy Academy to support governors and state and territory leaders in strengthening alignment between higher education and corrections systems. This is a year-long initiative designed to bring together **four to six state and territory teams** in a collaborative cohort to develop and implement strategies that strengthen cross-agency coordination and build sustainable postsecondary pathways that connect education during incarceration to reentry, employment, and economic mobility.

The Bridging Pathways Policy Academy will support state and territory teams working on topics intended to strengthen the connection between higher education and corrections, including:

- **Strengthening cross-agency governance and collaboration** among leadership and community stakeholders, including local officials, affiliated institutions, employers, and formerly incarcerated individuals, to establish formal structures for sustained collaboration and shared accountability;
- **Enhancing statewide postsecondary education pathways post-release** to support continued education, credential attainment, and employment opportunities for students upon reentry;
- **Building and improving cross-agency data infrastructure**, including establishing shared definitions, data-sharing agreements, and approaches for tracking key metrics and outcomes;
- **Strategically leveraging funding sources**, including Pell Grant resources, federal grant funding, legislative appropriations, and investments by departments of corrections, higher education, workforce, and reentry;
- **Exploring the balance between technology, innovation, and security** to expand access to educational opportunities within correctional environments;
- **Addressing policy and administrative barriers** that can prevent justice-involved students from accessing, completing, and continuing postsecondary education.

Teams do not need to focus on all of these components to participate. The Policy Academy is designed to support teams at different stages of development that demonstrate a commitment to strengthening alignment across systems and who are prepared to use the Academy to advance a meaningful collective priority. By the conclusion of the initiative, participating teams will have taken substantive actions towards strengthening the state-level systems that support postsecondary education during incarceration and their connection to successful reentry, continued education, and employment.

BACKGROUND

Postsecondary education in correctional settings can advance multiple related priorities for governors, including improving safety in communities and correctional facilities, increasing educational attainment, supporting successful reentry, strengthening state talent pipelines, and maximizing public investments. Despite these benefits, gaps in alignment remain between higher education and corrections systems. These entities often operate under different mandates, governance structures, funding models, accountability measures, and data systems. A lack of coordination or convening opportunities for key personnel further exacerbates these challenges. As a result, even governments with strong individual postsecondary programs may lack the cross-agency infrastructure needed to support broad-scale program development, engage in comprehensive data collection, connect credentials to workforce opportunities, or sustain promising approaches over time.

The goal of the Bridging Pathways Policy Academy is to bridge this gap between higher education institutions and correctional departments to enhance the work of existing prison education programs. The Policy Academy is a governor-led initiative designed to help make postsecondary education opportunities in corrections facilities more effective, impactful, and accountable through sustained collaboration across agencies and administrations. Governors are uniquely positioned to convene leadership in corrections and higher education and establish the structures necessary to achieve this goal.

TIMELINE

The following represents a tentative timeline for the Policy Academy:

Timeline	Activity
September 8, 2026	Proposal Period Opens
October 8, 2026	Informational Webinar 4:00 p.m. ET/ 3:00 p.m. CT/ 2:00 p.m. MT/ 1:00 p.m. PT https://nga-org.zoom.us/j/96476223911?from=addon Dial In: 1 305-224-1968; Meeting ID: 964 7622 3911
October 23, 2026	Proposals Due
November 6, 2026	Team Selection Announced
December 3, 2026	Virtual Kick-off Meeting
March - June 2027	Optional In-State Site Visit
January - December 2027	Ongoing Technical Assistance, Monthly State Team Calls, Joint-Team Webinars

POLICY ACADEMY DESCRIPTION AND REQUIRED ACTIVITIES

During this Policy Academy, the NGA Center will work with four to six states and/or territories to assess their current systems and develop actionable strategies to strengthen alignment between higher education and corrections. Throughout the year long project period, teams will engage with a collaborative peer network, learn from national experts and practitioners, participation in strategic action planning, and receive tailored technical assistance based on their individual policy environments and priorities. Through the Policy Academy, the NGA Center will support teams as they assess their current systems, identify policy and implementation barriers, and develop strategies for strengthening the inter-agency connections to support the expansion and implementation of prison education programs.

Selected teams will be expected to participate consistently, engage relevant leaders and stakeholders, complete independent work between Policy Academy activities, and make meaningful progress toward their determined goals. Recognizing that each team will enter the Policy Academy at different stages of development, technical assistance will be tailored to each team's starting point, policy environment, and priorities. Success will not require teams to pursue the same strategy or adopt a single model. Instead, the NGA Center will work with each team to develop an approach that responds to its unique governance structures, correctional and higher education systems, workforce needs, and opportunities for sustainable systems change.

POLICY ACADEMY ACTIVITIES

The Policy Academy will require active participation from selected teams. Participating states and territories can expect to:

- 1. Attend the virtual Policy Academy Kick-Off Meeting on December 3, 2026.**
The NGA Center will host a virtual Kick-Off Meeting to introduce participating state and territory teams, establish shared expectations for the Policy Academy, identify goals and areas for cross-team learning, and begin the strategic planning process. *Participating*

teams will be expected to attend this Kick-off Meeting and complete any assigned pre-work activities.

- 2. Conduct a systems assessment and develop a team-specific action plan.**
During the Kick-Off Meeting, teams will begin work with the NGA Center to assess the current alignment of its higher education and corrections systems, including any existing resources, gaps, policy and administrative barriers, key partners, and opportunities for action. This assessment will be used to develop a high-level action plan identifying objectives, measurable goals, responsible partners, and an implementation timeline. Action plans will serve as living documents used throughout the Policy Academy to document progress and adjust expectations based on new opportunities or challenges.
- 3. Implement and assess progress toward team-determined goals.**
Throughout the Policy Academy, teams will engage in planning and implementation of their action plan objectives, with regular opportunities to assess progress, document challenges and lessons learned, and refine their strategies based on implementation experience. Sustainability planning, emphasizing embedded cross-agency collaboration and accountability, will also be encouraged.
- 4. Participate in strategy and technical assistance meetings.**
The NGA Center will hold monthly check-ins with each participating team to assess progress toward pre-determined goals, troubleshoot barriers, identify emerging technical assistance needs, and determine next steps. Based on these meetings, NGA will facilitate customized support which may include facilitated strategy sessions, policy research and subject-matter expertise, stakeholder engagement support, or other assistance designed to help teams overcome specific policy and implementation barriers. *Additionally, at the team's invitation, the NGA Center can facilitate one in-person site visit to advance the team's goals.*
- 5. Participate in cross-team peer-learning opportunities.**
The NGA Center will convene participating teams for facilitated peer learning focused on common challenges and emerging areas of interest. Cross-team work may also be facilitated based on complementary goals, similar challenges, or relevant experience to encourage deeper peer-to-peer problem solving and created shared learning opportunities.
- 6. Attend the summative Policy Academy convening in November 2027.**
The NGA Center will host an in-person convening for participating teams at the conclusion of the Policy Academy. Teams will assess their progress, share strategies and lessons learned, engage with national experts, and identify next steps for sustaining and advancing their work.

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

All states and territories in good standing with the National Governors Association are eligible to apply for the Bridging Pathways Policy Academy. The NGA Center anticipates selecting four to six states and/or territories to receive intensive technical assistance and state strategy planning support.

Applications should include the following components:

1. Governor's Office Endorsement*

* Please note: States and territories undergoing or anticipating a gubernatorial transition are encouraged to apply and will not be disadvantaged in the selection process. NGA recognizes that transitions may require changes to team membership or state priorities and will work with selected teams, as appropriate, to support continuity and engagement with incoming administrations.

Applications must demonstrate support from the governor's office for participation in the Policy Academy. Applicants should submit a brief letter of support signed by the governor.

The letter should:

- Describe the governor's office's interest in strengthening alignment between higher education and corrections;
- Identify the priority or desired outcome that participation in the Policy Academy would help advance;
- Affirm the state's commitment to cross-agency participation throughout the Policy Academy.

2. Application Narrative

Applicants should submit a narrative of no more than four pages addressing the following areas:

- a. **Systems-Alignment Challenge and Opportunity — 25 points:** Identify the primary systems-alignment barrier or challenge the state or territory seeks to address through the Bridging Pathways Policy Academy. Describe how the challenge affects ongoing coordination efforts between corrections and higher education, and where there are opportunities for progress to address the challenge during the Policy Academy period.
 - b. **Current Landscape and Cross-Agency Collaboration — 20 points:** Describe the current approach to postsecondary education in correctional settings and the extent to which corrections and higher education systems currently collaborate, including any relevant existing initiatives, governance structures, partnerships, policies, funding strategies, or data-sharing agreements. Identify any pre-existing support for this work and explain how participation in the Bridging Pathways Policy Academy would complement rather than duplicate those efforts.
Note: Applicants are not expected to have established cross-agency infrastructure or mature postsecondary-in-corrections systems to be competitive for the Policy Academy.
 - c. **Preliminary Goals and Desired Outcomes — 25 points:** Describe what the team hopes to accomplish through participation in the Policy Academy, including any preliminary goals and the policy, practice, partnership, or systems changes they hope to advance over the course of the initiative.
 - d. **Commitment and Readiness for Systems Change — 15 points:** Describe what meaningful progress would look like within the project period and how participation in the Policy Academy could help overcome any identified barriers or challenges. Describe why the state or territory is positioned to make meaningful progress, including the presence of relevant leadership commitment, policy opportunities, cross-agency interest, or other conditions that can support progress. NGA's selection of states and territories will focus on a state's commitment and capacity to engage in the Policy Academy and advance systems change, rather than the maturity of its existing higher education-in-corrections infrastructure.
 - e. **Policy Academy Team and Stakeholder Engagement — 15 points:** Identify the proposed core team that will participate throughout the Policy Academy and briefly describe the role each member will play in advancing the state's strategy. Core teams should include approximately four to six members and must include representation from:
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- The governor's office (e.g., governor's criminal justice, public safety, corrections, higher education, and/or reentry policy advisor);
- Corrections leadership (e.g., Head of Department of Corrections or similar agency, facility-level leadership from both rural and urban sites, prison education program managers or facilitators); and
- Higher education leadership, such as the state higher education executive office, coordinating or governing board, system leadership, or another appropriate statewide higher education entity.
- Depending on the state's identified challenge and governance structure, teams are encouraged to consider representation from: reentry leadership, postsecondary institutions, data or technology offices, employers, community-based organizations, and individuals with lived experience of incarceration and postsecondary education.

Note: Not every relevant stakeholder must serve on the core team. Applicants should identify additional partners that will be important to the state's strategy and briefly describe how those individuals or organizations will be engaged throughout the Policy Academy.

SUBMISSION INFORMATION

The scheduled deadline for the application to join the Bridging Pathways Policy Academy is 5:00 PM EST on Friday, October 23, 2026. Applications must be submitted by the governor's office. Please combine all application materials into a single PDF document and email to Maria Kearl at mkearl@nga.org. Following submission, applicants will receive a confirmation email from the NGA Center verifying receipt of your application.