Corrections to College—Reversing the School to Prison Pipeline

A product of the Postsecondary Success for Men of Color Project
Spring 2019
Dear Friends,

During the recent era of mass incarceration in the United States (1980-2005), California’s prison population grew by over 500 percent to a high of approximately 170,000 inmates in 2006. Statistically, California has the highest incarceration rate in the nation, a rate in which boys and young men of color are overly represented. In 2011, California began to acknowledge and address its prison industrial complex through realignment legislation, which reduced its prison population by 29 percent between 2006 and 2015. Many young men of color begin pursuing opportunities for higher education while incarcerated, or have emerged from incarceration eager to attain certificates and degrees.

Urban Strategies Council has played a major role in developing a burgeoning prison-to-college pipeline, intended to equip returning young men of color with credentials and skillsets that will enable them to participate in our booming economy and obtain family-sustaining wage jobs. Over the past two years, our staff has led efforts among eight public community colleges, two public four-year universities, three county jail systems, two state prisons, and one federal prison spanning three Bay Area counties to form the East Bay Consortium of Support Programs for Formerly Incarcerated College Students (the Consortium).

This report highlights challenges and successes of the various campus programs, all of which are in various stages of development and organizational design yet are united in prioritizing postsecondary recruitment, retention, persistence, and completion for their young male students of color. We envision the Consortium moving beyond its current networking forum functions to become a driver of systems change and policy development from a reentry perspective.

The Bay Area is known for its progressive approach to addressing and solving complex social challenges, and this one is no different. Corrections and higher education have created silos that complicate and impede meaningful cooperation between their systems, but we have the advocates and tools to dismantle these systems for the benefit of those they intended to serve.

Thank you for your interest. We invite you to join us in replicating our model in your community to build this movement throughout our nation.

In community,

David A. Harris
President and CEO
Introduction

Significant numbers of men of color have pursued opportunities for higher education while incarcerated or have emerged from prison eager to attain certificates and degrees. Postsecondary education reduces recidivism, increases post-release employment and lifetime earnings, and improves the safety and security of the communities to which formerly incarcerated people return after release. As a result, federal and state governments supported higher education in prison until federal policymakers passed the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLA). VCCLA specified much tougher sentences than before - even for nonviolent crimes - and drastically increased funding for law enforcement. As a result, the U.S. prison population soared, with the largest increases occurring among Black and Latino men. VCCLA also made incarcerated people ineligible for Pell grants, which led to reductions in prison higher education programs. Though many states continued these programs on a much smaller scale with the help of private philanthropy, recent participants serve shorter sentences than previous cohorts. As a result, many recent participants in these programs leave prisons and jails before completing two- or four-year degrees.

California has reduced its number of incarcerated people further than have all but two other states. Between 2006 and 2015, factors including ballot initiatives, court orders, and reform efforts reduced California's prison population from 163,000 to 115,000. California has also become a national leader in the development of support programs on public college campuses to help formerly incarcerated students continue higher education after release. The Urban Strategies Council in Oakland, CA has helped lead regional work on cross-systems endeavors to engage the justice system, jails, prisons, human services, and postsecondary institutions for men of color recently or soon-to-be released from incarceration. Nevertheless, not enough is known about persistence and completion among students who attempt to begin and complete their degrees in colleges in their home communities after incarceration.

A Coordinated Response Takes Shape

Over the past two years, eight public community colleges and two public four-year universities have joined with community partners to form the East Bay Consortium of Support Programs for Formerly Incarcerated College Students. Even before their initial meeting in April 2017, these parties committed enthusiastically — even passionately — to supporting formerly incarcerated students. Partners recognized that closer networking and cooperation among emerging campus-based support programs was needed to assure their growth and sustainability, as well as their capacity to create systems change.

The geographical reach of the Consortium is regional and includes Alameda County and nearby Contra Costa and Solano counties. Within these counties are eleven public community colleges and two large public universities, as well as three county jail systems, two state prisons, and one federal prison. Support programs for formerly incarcerated students have been established on five of the campuses, and several schools are in the early stages of creating programs. The postsecondary objectives of students served include career technical education certificates, associate’s degrees and, in the case of UC Berkeley and California State University, bachelor’s degrees. Whatever the educational objective, forward-thinking staff, faculty, and students were aware of the challenges faced by post-release students — also known as returning citizens — and were willing to collaborate among programs across the region. This shared commitment to supporting persistence, retention, and completion among post-release students led the programs to formalize their collaboration.

In Hayward, CA, Chabot College students, faculty, and staff from the RISE and Open Gate programs gather for the start of another school year. Open Gate works inside the Alameda county jail to help transition students on to the Chabot campus. RISE supports persistence, retention, and postsecondary completion for formerly incarcerated students on campus.

“There was not a lot of encouragement towards education while locked up, so I had to figure stuff out myself.”
—Laney College Student
Successful bridging reverses the “school-to-prison pipeline”.

Shared Concerns and a Common Sense of Purpose

The Urban Strategies Council conducted a survey and a series of focus groups with formerly incarcerated male students of color at three two-year public colleges in the East Bay Area in the interest of bringing an authentic perspective to the work. This qualitative data reveals barriers and supports that impact student experiences inside jails and prisons and on college campuses. Geography, a punitive culture, and a lack of consistent policies, programming, and supports within the criminal justice system present formidable barriers to the realization of educational progress for men of color involved in that system. Qualitative research indicates another critical barrier, namely little uniform support for instruction leading to vocational and academic credits during incarceration or for the transition of formerly incarcerated persons into postsecondary education upon release. Focus group participants noted the need for more—and more accessible—college-level course offerings on the inside and for better pre-release planning and support for those who wish to continue their pursuit of higher education on the outside. Quotes from the focus groups and surveys appear as sidebars throughout this report.

More, and more focused, coordination between the criminal justice system and postsecondary institutions could facilitate the transfer of college and vocational education credits between correctional and educational systems and encourage institutional willingness to translate work experience during incarceration into credits outside. Focus group participants called this process “bridging”—cross-systems collaboration that starts while students are still incarcerated and continues through their post-release transition to postsecondary campuses in the community. By facilitating enrollment and providing a warm welcome for returning students on campuses in the community, bridging could help to reverse the school-to-prison pipeline.

Anecdotal testimony and some data suggest that the more quickly formerly incarcerated students move from incarceration to enrollment, registration, and completion of high-demand required courses, the more likely they are to complete certificate and degree programs, advance to career-oriented employment, and pursue advanced degrees.

Present Reality Impedes Persistence and Completion

In focus groups, formerly incarcerated students from Chabot, Laney, and Merritt Colleges frequently identified basic reentry needs—housing, financial, and health-related—as barriers to their education. Issues with housing included: homelessness, criminal background checks for housing approval, limited space or crowded quarters, or undefined living situations that could change or end at a moment’s notice. The high cost of living in the Bay Area contributed to uncertainty over housing and finances. Difficulties in establishing a steady income, finding job opportunities, and maintaining a job with a school schedule were related challenges. Several students indicated that their educational attainment was compromised by their unmet needs for health, mental health, and substance recovery services. In addition, nearly all formerly incarcerated students experience complex trauma histories from childhood as well as the experience of incarceration. These realities make them a uniquely vulnerable student population.

Focus Group Findings

All three groups reported deficits in high school, GED and postsecondary programs—and the information about their availability—within prison or jail. The interrelated reasons particular to incarceration included:

• Prisoner classification systems inside jails and prisons—intended by authorities to separate and control inmates based on race, conviction history, gang affiliation, geographic region, and assessed risk for violence. Moreover, inmates in protective custody cell blocks or in the highly restricted special housing units (SHUs) in California’s state prisons had no access to education programs.

• Long waits for openings in the few available programs meant that often a person had to be incarcerated for a long time before gaining access.

• Insufficient time to participate. One focus group participant said: “I never got to use any of the programs because I was only in Santa Rita jail for six months.”

In addition, men in the focus groups described a culture of negativity around education within correctional institutions. One student from Laney College said, “There was not a lot of encouragement towards education while locked up, so I had to figure stuff out myself.” Students also described sometimes not understanding the utility of an education and only wanting a GED to gain access to certain work opportunities inside the prison.

Two issues were identified with the reentry resource and postsecondary education information, if it were available at all. The first was that it came “too late.” Participants believed they should have received that information long before release, so that they could have a plan of action on the outside. The second was that many of the reentry organizations and services that probation and parole officers suggested as good resources were not appropriate, unresponsive to their needs, or perceived as a “run-around.” “That gap between walking out the gates and figuring out what you are going to do, that’s paramount because that is where stuff can go wrong,” said one participant from Chabot College.

“One-on-one tutoring and technology assistance are provided to students in the Street Scholar program at Merritt College in Oakland, CA. Many returning citizens are unfamiliar with basic computer use and require specialized support. Tutoring is designed to build esteem and confidence, as well as technical, academic, and computer skills.

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Findings and Implications

Validation for Campus-based Support Programs

Students in all three focus groups expressed heartfelt appreciation for their respective support programs. Above all other program benefits, they most valued the safe and welcoming space where they could establish a sense of belonging and the opportunity to build community. They described the full support they received in navigating all aspects of campus protocols and bureaucracy involving enrollment, financial aid, course selection and registration, and, as needed, remedial tutoring, disability services, and general troubleshooting. Support for leadership development and opportunities to practice those skills were also acknowledged.

Students in the focus groups affirmed that mentorship by non-judgmental peers with shared lived experience in the justice and corrections systems has been a key factor in their persistence and retention. Students expressed appreciation for empowering opportunities in all the programs, sometimes with stipends or as paid staff, to support program activities like student recruitment and peer mentoring. All these, they said, serve to reduce the social isolation and stigma that nearly all formerly incarcerated students bring with them when they first arrive on campus.

Support programs sometimes start as student-organized clubs without dedicated space or funding and little recognition or support from the college. For programs to gain the kind of impact and appreciation expressed by the focus group participants, they need meaningful recognition from college administrators and staff, enough funding to support some activities, and dedicated space of their own. Securing their own space on campus accelerates the processes of deepening student engagement and building community that are key to program success. Another milestone in program development is engaging faculty who are motivated to welcome and teach this student population.

Postsecondary Education and Incarceration Landscape

Significant differences exist in the postsecondary landscape between the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation’s (CDCR) state prisons and the realities inside 58 county jail systems. Although much progress is needed, the centrally managed CDCR system is making incremental advances in its course offerings, ranging from GED and high school diplomas to postsecondary opportunities.

However, focus group participants complained that the staff cultures in most of the state’s 34 prisons often conveyed indifference and lack of support for inmate involvement in educational programming. The East Bay region’s county jails offer GED and high school diploma opportunities to a limited number of inmates. Typically, county jails offer no postsecondary programming. Focus group participants noted that prison and jail staff took no responsibility for “bridging” inmates to post-release educational programs in the community. The only support mentioned in that context came from contracted providers working inside with a limited number of inmates and outside organizations and volunteers who work inside some jails and prisons.

Most in-custody college programs are in the state prisons based on legislation and CDCR policy. The jails, operated by county sheriffs, maintain varying standards and policies for educational programming and access to that programming. In the CDCR system different challenges impede the transfer of vocational training and academic program credits into two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions. Good progress has been made in this area for transferring academic credits from accredited institutions, but many obstacles persist for translating vocational training and work experience inside prisons to career technical education credits on community college campuses.

“Parole has never done much for me except give me a $40 gift card. They do host a few things for finding out about services or things they offer, but it didn’t really feel supportive.”
—Student
NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Inward-facing Next Steps

Governance to Impact Systems Change

The Consortium is evolving from an informal networking forum to a well-organized cross-sector coalition that works effectively to a) increase rates of postsecondary success for reentry students and b) advance systems change to promote strong collaboration between the historically siloed systems of postsecondary education and criminal justice. It is developing a framework for governance while continuing to build a diverse constituent base. This process involves updating the original mission statement, creating a board of directors, formalizing a membership structure, prioritizing systems change objectives, and developing campaign strategies to achieve those objectives.

Fund Development to Advance the Work

The Consortium will create a fund development plan to seek philanthropic and governmental funds to assure greater sustainability for its participating campus-based programs and to build its own capacity through staffing, student-centered activities, and future regional convenings. Research that demonstrates models of advancing through postsecondary education with lowering recidivism rates creates favorable funding prospects in the current bipartisan climate for ending mass incarceration.

Quality Data to Build Evidenced-Based Practice Program Models Across Jurisdictions and Silos

Common protocols are being developed to collect, analyze, and utilize student outcome data. Quality data is essential in this evidence-based policy climate to move from emerging campus-based promising practices to establish empirically informed evidence-based practice models. Sparse quality data protocols currently exist for measuring student outcomes across the Consortium's three-county region. The task is complicated by three distinct systems of public postsecondary education, eleven community colleges, a California State University campus and a University of California campus, in the Consortium's geographic area of focus.

II. Outward-facing Policy Recommendations

Crack the Corrections and Higher Education Silos

Corrections and postsecondary education bureaucracies function within silos that become barriers to collaboration between their systems. Strengthening existing inside/outside links with San Quentin and Solano state prisons will help facilitate the seamless transition of students to local public community colleges and universities. Similar efforts are needed to build relationships with the sheriffs who operate the county jails to develop more educational opportunities during incarceration and to support transitions to postsecondary campuses upon release. The Consortium will advocate for more resources inside jails and prisons to assure educational opportunities for all who seek them and to facilitate seamless transitions to community campuses upon release. Additional work is needed to validate vocational training and work experience acquired while incarcerated to recognized academic credits in community college career technical education certificate programs upon release.

Systems Change at the Local Level

Sustained student-led advocacy and mentoring is needed at all the colleges to expand structures and practices that increase the persistence, retention, and completion rates of formerly incarcerated students. Engaging college administrators and faculty as allies is critical for creating a welcoming atmosphere for these students and for developing effective support programs with adequate funding, stipended peer mentors, and dedicated space. Outreach to prospective students while incarcerated will help to facilitate post-release enrollment and success. Expedited protocols are needed for enrolling students and assisting them with financial aid, developmental education, and requisite disability, mental health, and health services. On-campus wellness services to address trauma histories and justice system stigma are essential. Priority registration for high-demand required courses accelerates the velocity of student progress toward certificate and degree completion, thwarts reentry challenges, and increases persistence and retention.

Systems Change at the State Level

The major policy objective at the state level is to achieve a legislative mandate for categorical funding, similar to that already provided to former foster youth in California, for formerly incarcerated students in public two and four-year postsecondary institutions. This mandate would include students' college-related expenses, funding for campus-based support systems that address students' complex trauma histories and wellness needs, and funding for community-building to reduce isolation and promote a sense of belonging. Important policy work is also required with the executive offices of the prison and postsecondary education systems to promote collaboration to increase academic credit opportunities during incarceration and for building pathways for smooth transitions and recognition of academic credits across regional campuses upon release.
Resources

• Degrees of Freedom, Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians (2015)

• Don’t stop now, California leads the nation in using public higher education to address mass incarceration. Will we continue? (2018)
  https://correctionstocollegeca.org/resources/dont-stop-now

• College in Jail Toolkit (2018)

• East Bay Campus-based Support Programs for Formerly Incarcerated College Students (Directory produced by Urban Strategies Council and available on request)

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• Solano Community College
  • Dr. Danamy Fisher, Interim Dean, Research & Planning

• UC Berkeley
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All Participating Partners

COLLEGES

• Chabot College - RISE & Open Gate
• College of Alameda - New Dream
• Laney College - Restoring Our Communities (ROC)
• Merritt College - Street Scholars
• California State University, East Bay - Level V
• UC Berkeley - Underground Scholars
• San Francisco State University - Project Rebound

Participating Colleges with programs in formation or under consideration
• Contra Costa College
• Diablo Valley College
• Los Medanos College
• Solano Community College

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Private Sector
• Urban Strategies Council
• Five Keys Schools and Programs
• The Opportunity Institute
• EASTBAY Works

Public Sector
• Alameda County Probation Department
• Alameda County Public Defender’s Office
• Alameda County Office of Education
• Contra Costa County Adult Education Consortium

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