
Renewing Communities

California Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education

California's prisons and jails hold more than 200,000 people on any given day, and an estimated 8 million Californians are burdened with an arrest or conviction record. Every month more than 3,000 men and women are released from custody and told to find employment and reintegrate themselves into society. The state's unacceptably high recidivism rate, with 69% of those released from prison rearrested within 24 months, reflects the often-impossible nature of this demand. With each failure, the cycle of crime, poverty and mass incarceration continues.

Rethinking mass incarceration will require work in all sectors, from housing and public health to employment and education. All have a role to play, but our public higher education system is especially critical and effective. Research shows a 43% reduction in recidivism associated with education in custody, and 51% lower odds of recidivating for college programs. Higher education credentials and degrees reap significant economic benefits for returning individuals and their communities. Educational attainment facilitates positive social networks that mitigate the myriad effects of a criminal record and increases the odds of finding employment. Credentials and degrees also have a powerful intergenerational impact, building role models and increasing social mobility for generations to come. Using education to transform "offenders" and "inmates" into college students and graduates thus increases public safety, strengthens families, and builds the economic and social opportunities needed for vibrant communities and a strong state.

This is not an untested strategy, as there are high-quality prison-college programs at private universities scattered throughout the country, and research confirms the positive results. But these programs are largely privately funded and cannot be scaled to sustainably serve the thousands of men and women who have been affected by mass incarceration. *Renewing Communities* is working to address this gap by looking to California's vast public higher education system, and by transforming the system into one that embraces currently and formerly incarcerated students throughout the state, from incarceration to release and through degree attainment on the outside.

California is the ideal jurisdiction in which to test the theory that a large public higher education system can sustainably serve justice-involved students both inside custody and on campus. In addition to having an enormous criminal justice system and thousands of potential students, California has a well-established three-tiered public higher education system with 113 community colleges, 23 California State University (CSU) campuses, and 10 University of California campuses. Unlike many states, California offers an income-based tuition fee waiver for all students enrolled in the state's community colleges, even those who are currently or formerly incarcerated, and California does not ask about or consider the criminal history of student applicants.

Yet until recently California's criminal justice and public higher education systems operated in silos, with scant coordination between them, insufficient options for students, and little focus on student success.

This landscape is rapidly changing, and California is poised to create the strong and sustainable pathways needed for justice-involved individuals to become successful college students in our public system. In the past two years, the number of public colleges offering face-to-face courses inside prisons and jails has increased exponentially, as have the number of campuses with organized groups and support for formerly incarcerated students. Significant work remains, however, to ensure quality and long-term sustainability without private funding or external pressure.

Renewing Communities' goal is systemic public ownership of the initiative's key objective: access and success for justice-involved students in the state's public colleges and universities. This goal is accomplished via a multi-strategy approach:

Housing the initiative in higher education. *Renewing Communities* is anchored in the belief that education transforms individuals and communities. We are building a new generation of students and graduates, not creating a new criminal justice strategy. Although partnerships between education and criminal justice are critical, the leaders should be educators and the professional development should be framed within higher education pedagogy.

Working locally and statewide. Locally, we used a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process to fund pilot programs in 14 public colleges and universities in diverse jurisdictions across the state, each of which tests a theory of innovation and sustainability. Statewide, we are working bottom-up and top-down to create resources for the field, disseminate information, build networks, monitor quality, and generate public and private will.

Using a human-centered design model. The initiative and pilot sites are staffed with formerly incarcerated college graduates, and a core tenet of the initiative is our continuous outreach to currently and formerly incarcerated students as well as to the colleges and universities serving them, to ensure that we are addressing critical issues and advocating for the best solutions.

Incorporating a policy agenda. Sustainability and success require a constant focus on the policy landscape, from seemingly small administrative rules to large state statutes. We are continuously identifying policy hurdles that confront students, faculty, staff and administrators, developing solutions, and building public and private will among criminal justice and higher education stakeholders to resolve and eliminate the barriers.

Developing a broad-based corps of leaders and stakeholders. Systemic ownership cannot rely on the leadership of a single "true believer," nor can these educational programs depend on the goodwill and hard work of someone who will eventually burn out or be replaced. Using outreach, professional development, technical assistance, and network-building, we are broadening the scope of the initiative beyond the pilot sites to facilitate colleges, universities, and students statewide working towards a common goal.

Amplifying the voices of formerly incarcerated student leaders. This is core to the initiative's communication strategy, as there are no more effective voices than those directly affected.

Renewing Communities is managed by The Opportunity Institute (OI), a California-based 501(c)(3) with extensive expertise in both criminal justice and higher education. All strategic decisions are made jointly with the Stanford Criminal Justice Center. Rebecca Silbert, The Opportunity Institute: Rebecca@theopportunityinstitute.org
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