

Analyzing Reentry Services for Formerly Incarcerated Californians in Higher Education

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Elif Yucel
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California’s criminal legal system currently includes more than 565,000 people, with 42 percent behind bars and 58 percent under probation and parole, and an overrepresentation of Black, Native American, and Latinx people.¹ In the past decade, state and federal legislation have expanded educational opportunities for Californians affected by the criminal legal system,² yet much of this effort and research on justice-impacted people³ have focused on those currently incarcerated. Support for formerly incarcerated students has not been as robust, with a lack of attention toward reentry services and educational access for students once they are released.⁴

Research shows that formerly incarcerated students face barriers when applying to college and are rejected at rates much higher than their peers without criminal records.⁵ These students face further discrimination after enrollment because of the stigmatization of having a record. But research demonstrates the joy, strength, and knowledge formerly incarcerated students bring to their studies

¹ “State Profiles: California,” Prison Policy Initiative, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/CA.html>.

² Juan Martinez-Hill, “A Monumental Shift: Restoring Access to Pell Grants for Incarcerated Students” (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021); Tolani Britton, Elizabeth Friedmann, and Sara Adan, “Higher Learning Inside: An Exploration of the Demographic Make-Up of Incarcerated Persons Taking Postsecondary Courses in California” (Davis: University of California, Davis, Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2021); AB-417 (2021-2022): *Rising Scholars Network: Justice-Involved Students*.

³ There are many terms used to describe those who have been affected by the criminal legal system. I use the term “justice-impacted” here and model it after Cerda-Jara and coauthors’ language guidelines to mean individuals who are currently or have been previously incarcerated, who have been arrested with no convictions, or who are currently or have previously been on probation. See the Underground Scholars Language Guide for appropriate terms to use when discussing those who have been impacted by the criminal legal system at Michael Cerda-Jara, Steven Czufra, Abel Galindo, Joshua Mason, Christina Ricks, and Azadeh Zohrabi, “Language Guide for Communicating about Those Involved in the Carceral System” (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, Underground Scholars Initiative, 2019).

⁴ Debbie Mukamal, Rebecca Silbert, and Rebecca M. Taylor, *Degrees of Freedom: Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2015).

⁵ Robert Stewart and Christopher Uggen, “Criminal Records and College Admissions: A Modified Experimental Audit,” *Criminology* 58, no. 1 (February 2020): 156–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12229>.

and share with their peers and communities, while acknowledging there is a need for greater support for these students.⁶ Less than 3 percent of formerly incarcerated Californians access higher education.⁷

Given that most incarcerated adults in the United States are eventually released,⁸ there is a pressing need to provide transitional services that allow students to seamlessly begin or continue their education. I examine reentry services on higher education campuses in California and find that programming and services for formerly incarcerated students are clustered in Southern California and are primarily offered by community colleges. Additionally, colleges with reentry programs provide varied support, ranging from academic support to legal services.

A Brief History of Services for Formerly Incarcerated Californians in Higher Education

Campus-based programs serving formerly incarcerated students have existed on California university campuses since the creation of Project Rebound at San Francisco State University in the late 1960s. This program has since expanded to create the California State University (CSU) Project Rebound Consortium, which operates across much of the CSU system.⁹ The University of California system offers a similar program, Underground Scholars, which originated at the Berkeley campus and was created by formerly incarcerated students in 2013.¹⁰

Historically, there has been less formal and robust programming for formerly incarcerated students in community colleges, but momentum is developing around creating support services for these students. In October 2021, California signed into law Assembly Bill (AB) 417, which formally established the Rising Scholars Network, a network of 50 community colleges dedicated to serving justice-impacted students. The law also allocates funding for these programs, an important distinction, as college presidents have cited lack of funding as a key concern for not only colleges that have existing programs but those that are trying to create them.¹¹

⁶ Melissa Abeyta, Anacany Torres, Joe Louis Hernandez, and Oscar Duran, "Rising Scholars: A Case Study of Two Community Colleges Serving Formerly Incarcerated and System Impacted Students," *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 99–109.

⁷ Danny Murillo, *The Possibility Report: From Prison to College Degrees in California* (Los Angeles: The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021).

⁸ Monique O. Ositelu, *Equipping Individuals for Life beyond Bars: The Promise of Higher Education and Job Training in Closing the Gap in Skills for Incarcerated Adults* (Washington, DC: New America, 2019).

⁹ "Project Rebound," California State University, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/project-rebound>.

¹⁰ "About," Berkeley Underground Scholars, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://undergroundscholars.berkeley.edu/about>.

¹¹ Keith Curry, Rebecca Silbert, and Debbie Mukamal, "Formerly Incarcerated Students at California Community Colleges" (Corrections to College California, n.d.).

Taking Stock of Current Campus-Based Reentry Programs

The Rising Scholars Network contains a directory of community colleges that provide targeted services for justice-impacted students, yet we do not have a complete and comprehensive understanding of what these programs provide, nor do we have a comparable directory for four-year institutions. To remedy this, I built a dataset tracking campus-based reentry programs in higher education institutions across California and the services they provide. I first gathered and cross-referenced institutional data from the National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator, the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal, and the California Community College Chancellor’s Office¹² to get an accurate count of higher education institutions in California, which resulted in 248 relevant institutions.¹³ After compiling institutions, I created a dataset using information from the Rising Scholars Network/Corrections to College directory,¹⁴ the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison,¹⁵ and institutional websites to denote whether institutions offer reentry programs and clubs for formerly incarcerated students and, if so, the types of services they provide. I map where institutions are located to show the geography of opportunity for formerly incarcerated individuals. I also use July 2018 to June 2019 data¹⁶ from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation¹⁷ and 2018 US Census Bureau data¹⁸ to track the number and share of parolees released per California county to provide additional context.

Reentry Programs on Higher Education Campuses

Of the 248 institutions of higher education included in this sample, 116 are two-year colleges and 132 are public and private four-year institutions. Thirty-three percent of colleges within this sample provide reentry services to formerly incarcerated students. Figure 1 illustrates where higher education reentry programs are located across the state, denoting the type of institution. Sixty-five percent of colleges providing reentry services to formerly incarcerated students are consolidated in Southern California. These colleges are geographically spread out across 47 percent of California’s 58 counties, and public institutions provide the bulk of reentry services for formerly incarcerated students in the state. Sixty-two institutions (or 72 percent of the sample) serving formerly incarcerated students are community colleges, and 23 of the 24 four-year colleges providing targeted services to formerly incarcerated students are public institutions.

¹² See the website for the California Community College Chancellor’s Office at <https://www.cccco.edu/>.

¹³ Relevant institutions included public and private four-year colleges, bachelor’s-degree-granting institutions, and two-year colleges within the California Community Colleges system.

¹⁴ “Program Directory,” California Community Colleges Rising Scholars Network, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://risingscholarsnetwork.org/program-directory/>.

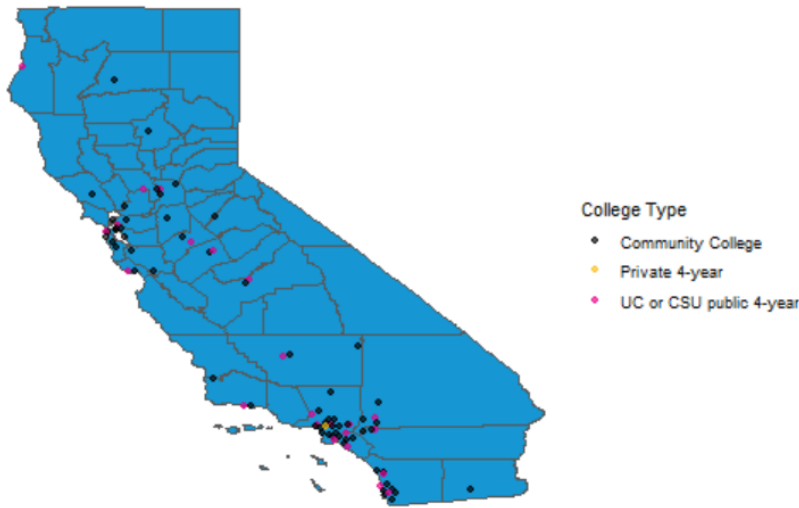
¹⁵ “National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs,” Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.higheredinprison.org/national-directory>.

¹⁶ These data are pre-pandemic data.

¹⁷ “List of Adult Institutions,” California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/adult-operations/list-of-adult-institutions/>.

¹⁸ See the Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019 section at “County Population Totals: 2010-2019,” US Census Bureau, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-counties-total.html>.

FIGURE 1
Reentry Services on College Campuses in California



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator, the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal, the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, the Rising Scholars Network, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, and institutional websites.

Note: CSU = California State University; UC = University of California.

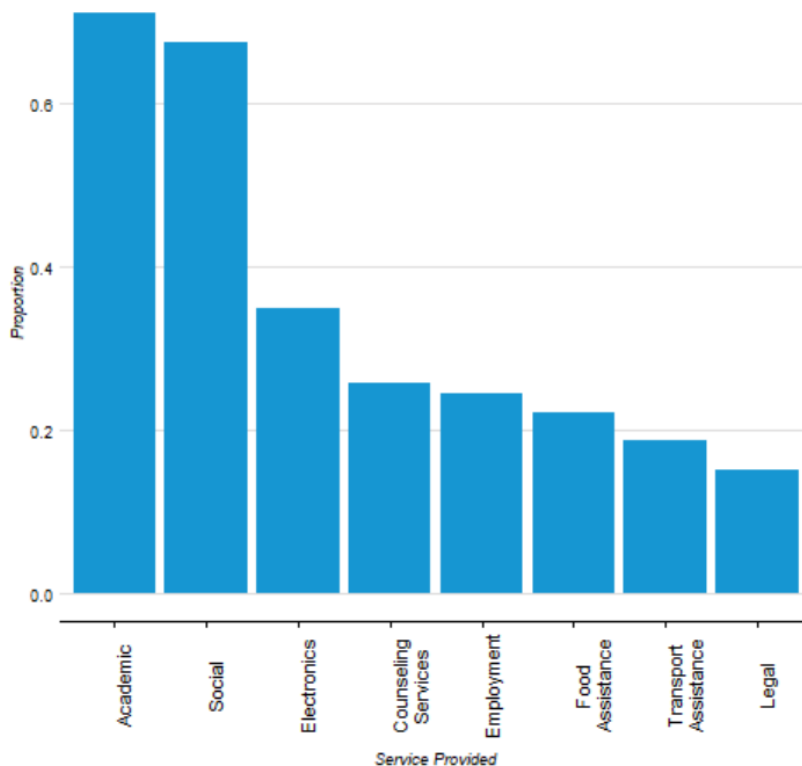
Types of Support Campus-Based Reentry Programs Provide

Formerly incarcerated individuals often leave prison with very little money because they are severely underpaid and because they often depend upon government benefits for income.¹⁹ Transportation, housing, cell phone costs, and parole fees are among the expenses many formerly incarcerated people are expected to pay. Higher education costs add to this growing list and include application and tuition fees, books, supplies, and technology. Understanding these necessities, many reentry programs on higher education campuses provide resources and support to formerly incarcerated students to help them navigate reentry and higher education.

I analyze information listed on institutional and program websites of the 86 colleges that provide reentry programming to formerly incarcerated students to take stock of the services programs provide, though this may not fully capture the types of support provided to students. I categorize these resources into six categories: academic support, social support, academic supplies, mental health counseling and employment assistance, food and transportation, and legal and housing support (figure 2).

¹⁹ Bruce Western, *Homeward: Life in the Year after Prison* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018).

FIGURE 2
Services Provided at Campus Reentry Programs



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator, the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal, the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, the Rising Scholars Network, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, and institutional websites.

Academic Support and Supplies

Most reentry programs advertise academic support as a main resource they provide to students, and 61 colleges (or 77 percent) provide some form of academic assistance. Academic support consists of a multitude of resources, most often academic advising, tutoring services, priority registration, major exploration, access to computers and printing services, transfer advising and support, fee waivers and scholarships, and assistance with admissions, financial aid, and enrollment. Some programs (35 percent) provided academic supplies to support students’ educational journeys, such as loaner or gift laptops, textbooks or textbook stipends, notebooks, pens, pencils, supply vouchers, and internet hot spots.

Social Support

Reentry programs also discussed the importance of providing social support to students. Fifty-nine colleges (or 69 percent) advertise offering social support. Such services often include weekly or monthly meetings, access to public and private social media pages and groups, peer mentoring, community events and field trips, advocacy and policy work, and community meeting spaces.

Mental Health Counseling and Employment Assistance

Reentry programs also provide mental health counseling and employment assistance. Twenty-two programs (or 26 percent) provide mental health counseling services, and 21 (or 24 percent) provide employment support. Programs connect students to on- and off-campus mental health and career counseling services, though some programs have dedicated counselors to provide these services in house. Reentry programs help students secure employment through career exploration and advising services, assistance with work-study jobs, and employment referrals.

Food and Transportation

Nineteen colleges (or 22 percent) provide food to students via access to food pantries, in-kind food services, or food vouchers, and 16 colleges (or 19 percent) offer transportation support to students through metro and bus passes, transportation vouchers, or gas cards. Programs also emphasize their connection and referral to other campus and community resources, such as welfare assistance, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, and CalWORKS offices.

Legal and Housing Support

Although less common, 13 colleges (or 15 percent) offer legal services, and 10 (or 12 percent) offer housing support services. Legal services include expungement clinics, letters of support, referrals to public defenders, and assistance with probation and parole officers. Housing assistance primarily includes referrals to housing programs and shelters and assistance with applying for housing vouchers and below-market-rate housing.

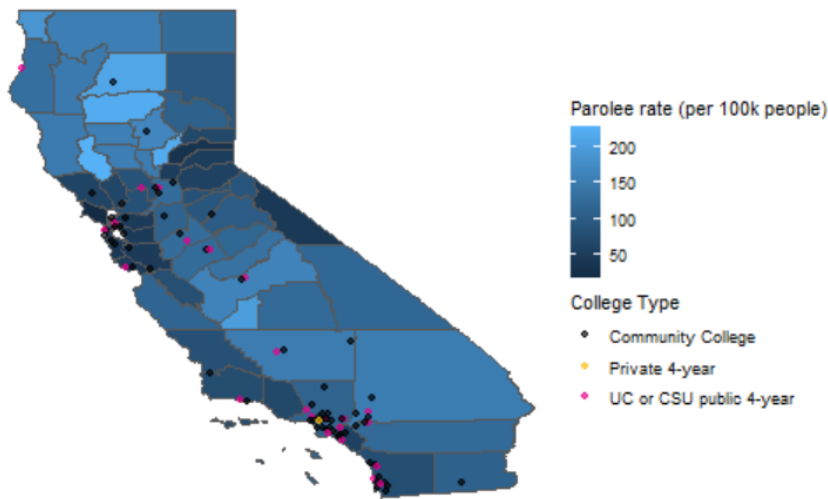
The Role of Community Colleges in the Postsecondary Landscape for Formerly Incarcerated Students

Community colleges are the primary providers of reentry support on higher education campuses. They often serve as first points of contact to higher education for justice-impacted students, and nationwide, they provide most higher education coursework in prisons and jails, whether through in-person or correspondence classes.²⁰ Community colleges are considered open-access institutions that typically admit anyone who applies, unlike four-year institutions, which may require essays, a certain grade point average, and standardized test scores as part of their application requirements. As such, community colleges play an important role in providing affordable and accessible pathways to higher education for formerly incarcerated students, and it is essential for colleges to provide substantive resources and support for students transitioning back into education upon release from incarceration.

²⁰ Erin L. Castro, Rebecca K. Hunter, Tara Hardison, and Vanessa Johnson-Ojeda, “The Landscape of Postsecondary Education in Prison and the Influence of Second Chance Pell: An Analysis of Transferability, Credit-Bearing Status, and Accreditation,” *The Prison Journal* 98, no. 4 (2018), 405–26.

From July 2018 to June 2019, more than 37,000 people were released on parole or Post Release Community Supervision.²¹ Seventy-three percent of Californians released on parole were released in Southern California. Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties have the highest number of California parolee releases, together producing almost 40 percent of people on parole. Figure 3 illustrates where community college reentry programs are located across the state in conjunction with each county's parolee release rate.

FIGURE 3
Parolee Frequencies and Prisoner Reentry Services

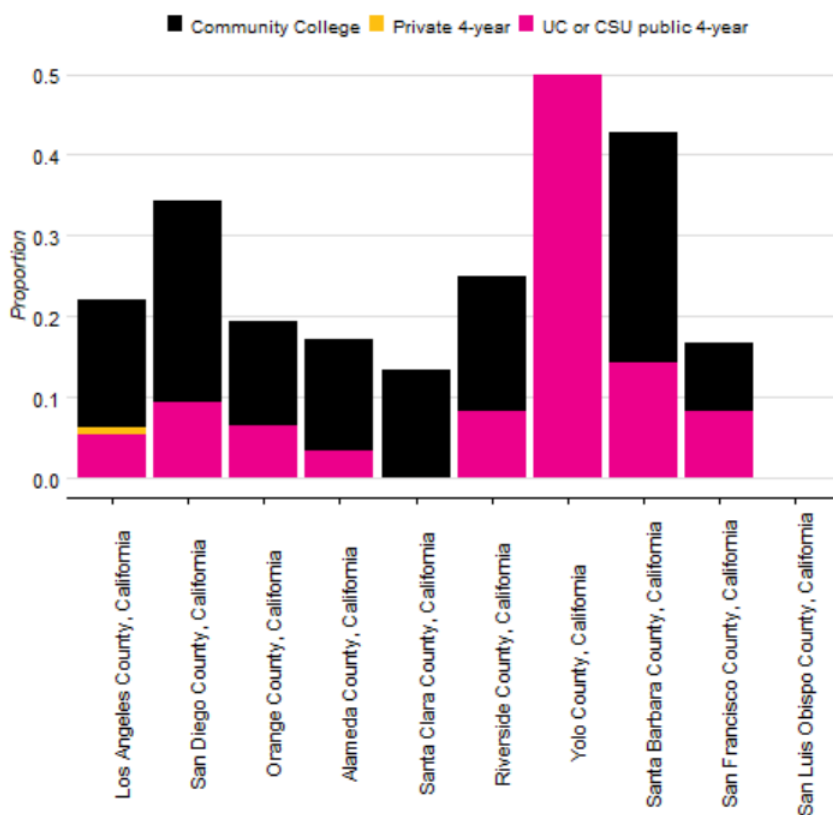


Sources: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Offender Data Points Report, 2018–19 data.
 Note: CSU = California State University; UC = University of California.

Figure 4 illustrates the share of community colleges with reentry services on campus per county. Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties have the highest number of California parolee releases (more than 14,000 individuals), but only 67 percent of the colleges in these counties have programs serving formerly incarcerated students. Riverside County has the third-highest number of individuals released on parole, yet only 33 percent of the county's community colleges have reentry services. Meanwhile, San Diego County has the fourth-highest number of parolees in the state, and all eight of its community colleges provide reentry services for formerly incarcerated students. Other counties can look to San Diego as a resource to learn how they communicate across their institutions and work together to serve formerly incarcerated students in the area.

²¹ "Post Release Community Supervision," California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/law-enforcement-resources/home/prcs/>.

FIGURE 4
Share of Institutions That Have Campus Reentry Programs, by County



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator, the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal, the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, the Rising Scholars Network, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, and institutional websites.

Note: CSU = California State University; UC = University of California.

Implications and Best Practices for Serving Formerly Incarcerated Students

Ninety-four percent of people incarcerated in prisons will eventually be released. Transitioning back into society after incarceration is challenging, as individuals must navigate complex laws and institutional barriers. Policymakers and higher education institutions can consider the following suggestions to better ensure formerly incarcerated people have the resources and supports they need during this transition.

State and local governments could prioritize funding streams for colleges to develop reentry programs. Legislation like AB 417 in California can set a powerful precedent for serving students affected by the criminal legal system. Dedicated and sustained funding would allow colleges to establish formal programs on their campuses for formerly incarcerated students and for existing programs to expand. Research has shown that these programs—like the Prisoner Reentry Institute at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City or the Break It to Make it Program in Los Angeles City

College—provide a safe environment for students to connect with their peers and access important resources and can help establish a positive and unstigmatized culture toward formerly incarcerated students.²²

Institutions with on-campus reentry programs should hire formerly incarcerated people to run these programs. Such individuals have lived experience of involvement with the criminal legal system. This experiential knowledge allows them to be stronger advisers and mentors and better establish trust with students.²³ Securing stable employment is one of the greatest challenges for those affected by the legal system. By hiring formerly incarcerated program directors and staff members, colleges can affirm that they are dedicated to holistically serving those affected by the system. In California, the Community College Chancellor’s Office has provided legal advisory support to help colleges navigate the myriad and complex laws governing the use of criminal records in hiring decisions and prevent discrimination against formerly incarcerated individuals,²⁴ which other institutions can model.

Reentry programs should avoid operating through race-neutral frames. The criminal legal system has always been rooted in and defined by racism—specifically anti-Black racism. Indeed, racial disproportionality throughout all access points to and exits from the criminal legal system reveals “an intentional form of structural violence.”²⁵ Scholars examining community reentry programs caution against race-neutral and color-evasive programming, as it reinforces meritocratic notions of reentry and shifts responsibility solely onto the individual, rather than the racialized systems and policies inducing recidivism.²⁶ As such, colleges should design and implement programs that explicitly name and seek to dismantle the structural policies and practices within their colleges and communities that oppress and criminalize people of color. Otherwise, they run the risk of merely replicating inequities within the criminal legal system.

Institutions without capacity to create programs can build on existing student services support structures. Research has demonstrated formerly incarcerated students use several student support services on campus, such as the Veterans Center, disability support services, and programs for low-

²² Alexis Halkovic, Michelle Fine, John Bae, Leslie Campbell, Desheen Evans, Chaka Gary, Andrew Greene, Marc Ramirez, Robert Riggs, Michael Taylor, Ray Tebout, and Aenora Tejawi, *Higher Education and Reentry: The Gifts They Bring* (New York: John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2013); Adrian Huerta, Kristan Venegas, and Joey Estrada, “Break It to Make It Program Evaluation.”

²³ Elif Yucel and Jaymon Ortega, “‘These People Really Rooted for Me’: An Exploration of Formerly Incarcerated Students’ Advising Experiences” (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2021).

²⁴ Marc LeForestier, letter to California Community College District human resources officers, December 31, 2018, <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/About-Us/Divisions/Office-of-the-General-Counsel/Legal-Advisories/2018-12-31-Legal-Advisory-re-Use-of-Criminal-History-in-Hiring-Final.ashx?la=en&hash=6C4754B916DF42371F3FBAAC314D58E8E637A579>.

²⁵ Jennifer M. Ortiz and Hayley Jackey, “The System Is Not Broken, It Is Intentional: The Prisoner Reentry Industry as Deliberate Structural Violence,” *The Prison Journal* 99, no. 4 (September 2019): 484–503, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885519852090>.

²⁶ L. Couloute, “Organizing Reentry: How Race Structures the Post-imprisonment Terrain” (Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing, 2019).

income students, youth in foster care, and first-generation students.²⁷ Colleges can expand offerings of other student services programs by catering to the needs of formerly incarcerated students. Although many of these programs often unknowingly serve these students already, program staff members can be trained to be knowledgeable of local and state policies affecting their students so they can better attune program services and advising.

Four-year colleges—especially private ones—must play a larger role in serving formerly incarcerated students. Community colleges play a large role in the educational trajectory of justice-impacted students. But nationally, more than 80 percent of entering community students aspire to transfer to a four-year institution.²⁸ Students need stability in the support they receive throughout their educational journey, and four-year institutions (especially those teaching in prison) should take this role seriously. In California, the Underground Scholars and Project Rebound programs have strong partnerships with community college reentry programs. Such connections can aid formerly incarcerated students in navigating the transfer process and foster a greater sense of belonging on campus. Private colleges are more likely to ask criminal history questions on their admissions applications.²⁹ The inclusion of such questions can deter formerly incarcerated students from applying³⁰ or lead to their rejection because of discrimination.³¹ This is concerning, given that nationwide, private colleges compose more than half of four-year institutions providing in-prison education. As such, private colleges must also provide seamless postsecondary education pathways for students once they are released if they are to serve students affected by the legal system.

Across the nation, both two- and four-year colleges and universities provide in-prison education programs, yet it is equally essential that these institutions provide continuity in their services and support for students once they are released from prison or jail. If an institution provides an in-prison program, it should also provide programming or dedicated services to formerly incarcerated students on campus. To better serve students, policymakers and institutional leaders should consider ways to expand their offerings geographically and across institution type, as well as in the types of services of they provide.

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²⁷ Annike Yvette Anderson, Paul Andrew Jones, and Carolyn Anne McAllister, “Reentry in the Inland Empire” (New York: Routledge, 2020).

²⁸ Doug Shapiro, Afet Dundar, Faye Huie, Phoebe Khasiala Wakhungu, Xin Yuan, Angel Nathan, and Youngsik Hwang, *Tracking Transfer: Measures of Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students to Complete Bachelor’s Degrees* (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017).

²⁹ Marsha Weissman, Alan Rosenthal, Patricia Warth, Elaine Wolf, and Michael Messina-Yauchzy, *The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions: Reconsidered* (New York: Center for Community Alternatives, n.d.).

³⁰ Alan Rosenthal, Emily NaPier, Patricia Warth, and Marsha Weissman, *Boxed Out: Criminal History Screening and College Application Attrition* (New York: Center for Community Alternatives, 2015).

³¹ Stewart and Uggen, “Criminal Records and College Admissions.”

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