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# Renewing Communities

## California Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education

On any given day California holds 200,000 people in its prisons and jails, and it is estimated that 8 million Californians are living in the community with an arrest or conviction record. Every month the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation releases more than 3,000 men and women, each of whom returns to their family and community and all of whom must re-build their lives. The number of releases is expected to increase exponentially in 2017 due to the implementation of Proposition 57, which passed in November 2016.

Life upon release is challenging. Finding employment can be extremely difficult, and many formerly incarcerated community members lack the advanced reading, writing and critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in today's job market. Families and communities struggle to support returning family members, causing harm far beyond that felt by the returning individual. For these reasons and more, the state's recidivism rate is unacceptably high. Yet, research shows a 43 percent reduction in recidivism associated with education in custody, and 51 percent lower odds of recidivating for in-custody students in college programs.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, access to higher education credentials and degrees can reap significant economic benefits for returning individuals and their communities. Credentials and degrees facilitate positive social networks and connections that mitigate the myriad effects of a criminal record, increasing the odds that a returning individual will find employment. They also have a powerful intergenerational impact, building role models and increasing social mobility for generations to come.

California has a well-established public higher education system, with 113 community colleges, 23 California State Universities (CSU), and 10 University of California campuses (UC). About four of every five undergraduate students in the state are enrolled in one of those three systems. Unlike most other 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 incoming students when making admission decisions. Yet despite the evidence and obvious benefits, California's criminal justice and higher education systems have traditionally operated in silos, with scant coordination between them. Until 2015, college courses inside custody were barely accessible and the opportunities, where they existed, were almost exclusively low-quality non-interactive correspondence courses. Outside custody, formerly incarcerated Californians had little to no presence on college campuses; almost no prisons or jails had on-ramps to the higher education institutions in their communities, and virtually no probation and parole departments had connections with their local colleges. Amongst all 146 public colleges in the state, fewer than 10 offered targeted support for formerly incarcerated students, and those programs that did exist were unable to serve all potential students due to funding and staffing constraints.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html)

*Renewing Communities* is a multi-year initiative designed to build sustainable pathways from criminal justice to higher education in California. The initiative uses a human-centered design model, with strategy based on 18 months of stakeholder input and research conducted by the Stanford Criminal Justice Center and the Warren Institute at Berkeley Law, as well as existing staffing that includes formerly incarcerated college graduates and continuous outreach to currently and formerly incarcerated students as well as the colleges and universities serving them.

At its core, *Renewing Communities* seeks to forge the systems change necessary for California's public higher education institutions to fully incorporate the needs of currently and formerly incarcerated students. To accomplish this goal, *Renewing Communities* relies on both a local and a statewide strategy. At the local level, *Renewing Communities* used a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process to identify and fund 7 pilot sites working in 14 different public colleges and universities. Each pilot site tests a theory for sustainable program expansion or replication. Applicants for the funds were accredited higher education institutions or 501(c)(3) organizations working with accredited institutions of higher education, not criminal justice organizations, although each applicant was required to partner with local criminal justice entities. To build sustainability, applicants provided matching public resources constituting at least 25 percent of their budgets. Over 30 proposals were submitted and the selected pilot sites represent both on-campus and in-custody programs, geographically dispersed throughout the state.

At the statewide level, *Renewing Communities* is working both bottom-up and top-down to identify and address policy hurdles and opportunities, create resources for the field, disseminate information about promising practices, monitor statewide quality, generate public and private will, build regional and statewide networks, and lay the groundwork for financial sustainability after the cessation of private funding in 2019. The statewide campaign will broaden the impact of the initiative by educating and fostering a corps of committed and knowledgeable stakeholders beyond the pilot sites. It will also remove obstacles and strengthen policy supports that will allow for sustainability and expansion into the future. The statewide campaign includes technical support for in-custody and on-campus programs that were not funded through the RFP, so that colleges, universities, and students statewide are working together towards a common goal.

*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 including the *Renewing Communities* staff from the Warren Institute at Berkeley Law. All strategic decisions are made jointly with the Stanford Criminal Justice Center.

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