

Fostering Success for Formerly Incarcerated Students on Campus

Essential Program Elements and Services

Formerly incarcerated college students – like all students – are often managing challenges that can compromise their ability to persist through to credential or degree, but promising practices that support them in their matriculation and graduation goals can be found throughout California’s public colleges and universities. Programs supporting these students vary in their structure, funding streams, and staffing patterns, but they share a commitment to addressing students’ academic and non-academic needs, and to partnering with campus offices and/or external agencies that can lend critical support.

If your college or university is considering launching a program to assist formerly incarcerated students, consider incorporating these essential elements and services:

Key Program Elements



Staff with a program director or coordinator who has personal experience with the criminal justice system

- Ideally, the program director or coordinator will be formerly incarcerated. First person experience builds important rapport between the program and students. The person can also be a consistent voice mitigating potential concerns of college personnel about formerly incarcerated students.
- The director or coordinator should be able to devote sufficient time to ensure student and programmatic success. This usually requires it to be a full-time position.
- Programs often include a program director, administrative support, and affiliated faculty.
- All staff must be able to navigate important relationships with campus departments and external partners.



Be an officially recognized campus program with a dedicated central campus location with meeting space, mailing address, and phone number

- Having a place on campus where current and prospective students can gather and meet on a regular basis builds community and fosters informal mentoring relationships, which positively affects persistence and completion.
- The program should secure status that allows it to reserve rooms for meetings, training sessions, and other events.



Build support and competency from a broad range of college stakeholders

- Developing broad-based buy-in may take time, but it is critical to long-term success as the program will need to respond to changes in campus leadership.
- Programs should have at least one tenured faculty champion who is active in the Academic Senate. A faculty board of advisors and/or a campus team committed to advocating for the program and representing it with the President, Vice Presidents, Deans, and other administrators can also be valuable.
- Support from top administration is critical. A job of the program director and faculty champion should be to educate campus administration about the program, introduce administrators and others to student participants, and build that support.
- Programs should identify friendly staff in admissions, financial aid, counseling, and student services, and guide student participants towards those staff.

- Faculty and other staff should be provided with professional development to enable them to effectively serve formerly incarcerated students, including addressing trauma arising from incarceration and educating them about the unique barriers created by a criminal record, particularly employment and licensing bars.



Offer and make accessible a range of student supports to address academic and non-academic needs

- Programs should be intentional about their process for student advising, class planning, course registration, tutoring, and other academic needs that are critical for student success. Programs may connect students with these services rather than provide them directly, but it can be effective to establish personally tailored tutoring for students in need. Without intentionality in the program model, formerly incarcerated students may fail to seek out these services on their own, negatively impacting their persistence and completion.
- Non-academic needs such as housing, transportation and assistance in interacting with probation and parole can similarly be addressed through on- and off-campus partnerships. Formerly incarcerated students may also have mental health needs that can interfere with their academic progress. Program leadership should be aware of these potential student needs and viable partners who can assist in addressing them, and should actively engage student participants in identifying and addressing those needs.



Foster formerly incarcerated peer mentors, either through structured peer support with other formerly incarcerated students, or by creating time and space for students to connect with and support each other

- Being able to relate to and glean lessons from other formerly incarcerated students can have a much greater positive impact on the student than interactions with campus staff who do not share the student's prior experience.



Develop and maintain strong relationships with external partners

- Seek out a range of partners, including the local jail, probation department and parole agency, nearby colleges and universities, and reentry service providers that can assist students with housing, legal services, and other needs.



Leverage a range of available funding sources to support the program

- Funding could come from Student Equity, SSSP, EOPS, AEBG, and Strong Workforce Funds.



Be able to provide or connect students with direct student financial support for critical needs

- These needs include books, transportation, meals, supplies, and application and test fees.

Key Program Services

Provide services directly or partner with other campus offices to ensure that students receive the service.



Reach out to and respond to prospective students, particularly those in jail or prison

- Respond to letters and other inquiries.
- Share information about the program with local prisons, jails, community corrections centers, juvenile facilities, and reentry organizations so staff can distribute it to potential students.
- Visit prisons, jails, and detention centers for "Introduction to College" and similar presentations.



Help students apply and matriculate

- Review transcripts and provide feedback about missing requirements and educational pathways. Students may have taken courses while incarcerated and may need to retrieve transcripts from multiple colleges.
- Help students apply for admission.
- Help students apply for financial aid and programs like EOPS that can provide financial assistance and foster student success.
- Help students enroll and register for courses.
- Offer a "bridge" program introducing students to each other, walking through admission and registration, providing financial planning, honing time management and study skills, and developing familiarity with the campus.
 - If possible, introduce the students to specific friendly contacts across campus including in financial aid and student services.
 - Bridge programs can be two or three days, but successful programs have run up to eight weeks.



Support students to graduation

- Build a community with social gatherings, organized events or excursions, and opportunities to connect.
- Publicize the program to reach potential student participants already enrolled on campus.
- Foster the transformative student identity by integrating student participants into campus, including encouraging them to attend sports events, health fairs, speaker presentations, social activities, and campus meetings.
- For students who are interested, encourage them to amplify their voices on campus through student panels and other events.
 - Consider encouraging students to reach out to an organization such as JustLeadershipUSA or the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) or to get involved in California's formerly incarcerated student network, to develop leadership and speaking skills regarding when and how to tell the story of their incarceration.
 - Encourage students to pursue opportunities for student representation in campus governance or other on-campus groups.
- Help students understand course requirements, especially in their first semester.
- Help students develop study skills and other "soft" skills needed to succeed.
- Connect students to tutoring services.
- Check in with faculty and with parole or probation officers who may be aware of difficulties that a student is facing; advocate for the student if possible and where appropriate.
- Actively reach out to any student participant who has missed class or stopped participating in the program; attempt to find out why the student is struggling and search for a solution.

- Provide connections and referrals to community-based organizations that can assist students with housing, employment, legal and other needs.



Celebrate success of students and staff, and amplify the positive experiences of student participants

- Host recognition and celebration events.
- Highlight student success on campus website and in publications.



Be aware of academic and career barriers

- Make students aware of potential occupational restrictions before they begin their educational path. Students may face occupational restrictions from having a criminal record that can affect their academic and career options. Certain jobs have categorical bans for some kinds of convictions, and others have barriers that can be waived but legal help is generally needed for the waiver process. Forge a strong connection with a legal resource that can provide more specific information to the student.
- Encourage students to obtain copies of their rap sheet so they can clean up mistakes, apply to seal, and expunge or purge the record where possible. Students should know what is on their record when applying for internships, jobs, certificates, or licenses. Students should also know the dates and specifics of prior convictions so they can adequately answer questions on a job or licensing application. A local legal services provider may be able to help.

Fostering Success for Formerly Incarcerated Students on Campus

▶ Informal Strategies for Student Success

A fully staffed and supported program for formerly incarcerated students is the most effective way to achieve student success.¹ While that program is being built, however, there are ways for faculty, staff, and administrators to create a more supportive campus environment and contribute positively to the academic success of formerly incarcerated students.



Sponsor or Organize a Student Group

- A formerly incarcerated student group fosters a peer mentor community, which contributes to student persistence and retention. It can also amplify the students' presence on campus, raising awareness amongst leadership.
- The group should seek funds available to campus-based student groups, which generally requires a faculty sponsor and formal registration. The group should also network with faculty, staff and other student groups to learn how additional funds can be accessed.
- A faculty sponsor can assist in navigating administrative procedures and developing campus connections.
- With the students, advocate for the group to have access to a dedicated space on campus where current and prospective students can gather and meet on a regular basis.
- Develop group bylaws; examples can be found in the "Resources" section of CorrectionsToCollegeCA.org.
- Encourage the student group to join the statewide network of formerly incarcerated students. Contact: Danny Murillo, Soros Justice Advocacy Fellow, danny@theopportunityinstitute.org.
- Ask potential student participants about issues that might impact the success of a student group, such as conflicts between certain neighborhoods in your community. If these issues exist, the students may prefer to have an informal network, rather than a formal student group.



Host a Professional Development or Training Day

- Organize an event to discuss the importance of supporting formerly incarcerated students and to identify concrete actions that can be taken by attendees to increase student success.
- Open the event to all college faculty, classified staff, and administrators including President and Vice Presidents, EOP/EOPS counselors, adjunct faculty, CTE programs, financial aid, SSSP, Student Equity, AEBG staff.
- Include a student panel to highlight the first-person needs, experiences, and successes of formerly incarcerated students. Include students currently enrolled at the college, along with students who have transitioned into employment or further education.
- Set a goal of creating a to-do list; attendees should leave with a concrete task for themselves or their office.
- Consider using Student Equity and SSSP funds to support the professional development or training day.
- In addition to identifying concrete actions that will support formerly incarcerated students, consider inviting speakers who can educate attendees about issues that may interfere with the students' academic goals, such as past trauma.



Build a Campus Network

- Identify other campus colleagues who are interested in supporting the success of formerly incarcerated students. The professional development or training day can be a way to meet and network with these allies.

- Reach out to EOP/EOPS counselors and AEBG staff, who can be very helpful in connecting students to a range of resources and who may already be working with formerly incarcerated students.
- Create a working group or regular meeting for the on-campus network to coordinate activities, to ensure that the work is distributed among staff, and to jointly advocate for campus funding to create a full program with permanent staff.



Advocate to Include Formerly Incarcerated Students in the Student Equity Plan

- The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office clarified in February 2017 that Student Equity funds can be used to support currently and formerly incarcerated students; see the "Resources" section of CorrectionsToCollegeCA.org.
- As of February 2017, only seven community colleges mention incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students in their equity plans.
- Begin a discussion with the Student Equity Office and campus administration to add formerly incarcerated students to the school's plan.



Publicly Identify Allies of Formerly Incarcerated Students

- Faculty can indicate their support by making a notation on syllabi such as "My classes and office are safe spaces for formerly incarcerated students."
- Staff members and others can place a "safe space for formerly incarcerated students" sign outside of their office doors.



Build a Network of Off-Campus Partners

- Identify nearby community colleges and four-year colleges that are already serving formerly incarcerated students.
- Reach out to “feeder” education organizations such as adult schools.
- Connect with criminal justice agencies in the area. This could include the jail, which is run by the county Sheriff and which should have a deputy in charge of programming. It could also include juvenile camps, halls, or detention facilities.
- Connect with community-based organizations that assist formerly incarcerated community members with housing, job placement, and other services.
- These partners can provide resources for formerly incarcerated college students. They can also build pathways to the college and increase student presence and visibility, which may assist with advocacy efforts to secure funding for a fully staffed program.
- A monthly or quarterly meeting to build the network and identify and work towards shared goals can be useful.



Develop a Resource List

- Develop a document highlighting resources available on campus and in the community for formerly incarcerated students, such as tutoring centers, food banks, housing agencies, and physical and mental health clinics.
- Provide locations and phone numbers for relevant offices on campus and in the community.

- Disseminate the document broadly on campus and to the student group, including in student centers, libraries, main offices, and eateries.
- It may be easier to develop this document in cooperation with the off-campus network, as many of the off-campus partners may already be familiar with the available resources. The student group may also be able to help develop the document.



Raise Awareness with Campus and District Administrators and District Trustees

- Facilitate meetings between students and senior campus administrators, especially CEOs.
- Draft and present a resolution to regional leadership, the Trustees, the district, and/or the college urging the college to develop a plan to support formerly incarcerated students in reaching their academic goals. In the resolution, identify who should take leadership of the plan. Leadership will differ by college and district but the Chief Student Services Officer is often appropriate.
- If in a district with multiple community colleges, identify a point of contact at the district level.
 - There may be more than one college reaching out to formerly incarcerated students or the organizations working with those students.
 - A key point of contact at the district level can organize and coordinate activities amongst the colleges, often through a quarterly meeting.
 - The combined voice of multiple colleges may more successfully result in financial support for a campus-based staff person who can run a program for formerly incarcerated students.



Amplify the Student Voice

- Sponsor student panels or events with formerly incarcerated student speakers, to educate the campus and community at large about the educational needs and accomplishments of formerly incarcerated students and graduates.
- Host discussions or other events on issues that affect formerly incarcerated students, such as mass incarceration, social justice policy, or racial justice. Include students in the planning and as speakers, where possible and appropriate.
- Help students learn how and when to tell their stories. Encourage students to reach out to organizations such as the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) or to become involved with California's formerly incarcerated student network, where they can develop leadership skills and learn how and when to share their story of incarceration.

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1. See *Essential Program Elements and Services* for examples of key program elements and key program services.

Fostering Success for Formerly Incarcerated Students on Campus

The Student Perspective

Formerly incarcerated college students and graduates across California have shared perspectives about their success on college campuses. **Students want:**

To see themselves as part of the campus community

- Form a recognized student group
- Be part of the associated student body
- Engage in community service and volunteer work
- Join student cohorts such as Punte, Umoja, and First Year Experience

To receive support for their transition to work

- Learn and develop work skills
- Create a resume
- Obtain letters of reference
- Think creatively about how to find employment with a limited work history
- Develop financial planning skills

To work with faculty and staff who understand their hurdles, which may include:

- The need to report to a probation or parole officer
- Probation or parole conditions that may limit their ability to do certain things or go certain places at certain times
- Their need to address the trauma of prior incarceration
- Potentially unsupportive family members or probation or parole officers
- The need for a safe way to share personal information about their criminal history
- Their lack of experience with financial planning
- Struggles with basic needs like housing and transportation that are compounded by barriers arising from having a criminal record
- Debt that likely requires them to work in addition to attending college

To become knowledgeable about specific academic processes that can help or hurt them

- Students highlight the drop deadline and the “W” as issues they did not fully appreciate until it was too late
- Students express great appreciation for tutoring centers but note that they were often unaware of them when they began their education
- Students identify office hours as an extremely helpful academic resource but many hesitate to utilize them
- Students often lack financial literacy and have difficulty managing their spending after receiving financial aid
- Students lack familiarity with scholarships and transfer processes, including the Golden Four, Blue & Gold scholarships, T.A.G. Transfer Agreement Guarantee, T.A.P. Transfer Agreement Program, and Transfer Student Program

▶ Advice from Students, to Students

When asked what advice they would give to new students who are formerly incarcerated, current students and graduates say:

- Remember that information is gold
- Educate yourself about the resources available on your campus and in your community
- Attend office hours
- Visit professors in your field of study or desired career
- Find at least one mentor
- Create an academic plan and stay focused
- Find a counselor who builds you up
- Resist getting tracked
- Join organizations like Puente and Umoja
- Enter an honors program
- Get involved with your campus and community
- Build your network
- Utilize the tutoring center
- Ask for help, especially for mental health needs
- Build your financial planning skills, learn to budget
- Find work study jobs to create a work history
- Be proactive
- Have a game plan
- Plan ahead or suffer later
- Keep a copy of all important documents including copies of letters of recommendation and transcripts

Become informed about and connected to campus resources such as:

- EOPS / CARE
- Learning Centers for support with math, reading and writing tutoring
- Career Services
- Academic Counseling Services
- Disabled Student Program and Services
- Early Success Program
- Financial Aid
- LINC
- Puente/Umoja
- Reentry Programs for adults returning to college after a gap
- Associated Students
- Student Health Services
- Transfer Center
- Honors Program
- Phi Theta Kappa