

USC Race and
Equity Center

HOW CAN COLLEGES BUILD AND EXPAND PARTNERSHIPS WITH COUNTY JAILS?

Kellie Nadler

***Supporting Justice-
System Impacted
Students***

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BIOGRAPHY



Kellie Nadler (they/them)

Expanding College in County Jails

Kellie Nadler is a higher education consultant who works in service to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office as a Rising Scholars Regional Coordinator. In their role, they partner with college practitioners from more than 30 community colleges, formerly incarcerated students and advocates, correctional staff, and community organizations throughout the greater Bay Area, Northern California, the Salinas Valley, and Bakersfield to design and implement programs for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. Their areas of specialty include building resilient

statewide networks, expanding college in jail and college in youth detention facility programs, providing professional development to colleges and correctional agencies, and using human-centered design to place the voices of those most impacted at the center of statewide decision-making processes. Kellie played a collaborative role in the creation of the Rising Scholars Network, and has contributed to many of the structures, policies, and funding streams that comprise the collective work. Prior to working for the Chancellor's Office, they Deputy-Directed a statewide non-profit at a national think tank, served as a governing board member of a global gender equity organization, taught in the English Department at Eastern Michigan University, taught poetry in a women's prison, and worked as a literacy tutor for young adults. They hold a BA from Miami University and a MA from Eastern Michigan University. They've completed more than 40 days of silent meditation retreat and, when not working, can be found cooking elaborate meals, reading, or doing yoga. This brief was edited by Tibby VB, their partner in thought and life.

ARTICULATING A NEED

I keep getting calls and emails from people who have loved ones in county jails where there are no college opportunities offered. People want to know when college is coming, how they can get their loved ones into college courses like students in state prisons have, and why some jails have college and others do not. They are frustrated and looking for a lifeline.

Over the last six years, I've received calls from Sheriff's Departments who want to work with a college to bring in college classes. Sometimes the college is interested, and we build a program. Sometimes the college does not have the capacity to do so, and the jail goes unserved. I've also received calls from colleges who want to go into their local jails to offer college classes. Sometimes the Sheriff's Department is welcoming and accommodating, and sometimes the Department shows little or no interest and conversations about college go nowhere. To form a college in jail partnership, colleges and jails are currently at the whim of one another.

College in jail programs are crucial for communities and students. Access to college while incarcerated is one of the most effective tools for interrupting cycles of incarceration at the prison level. In our effective college in jail programs, we are beginning to see higher levels of students transferring from the jail to the college campus upon release. Providing this programming in jails is a critical matter of equity. We know racial disparities run rampant in all realms of the criminal legal system, and jails are no exception. California currently has 60,000 people incarcerated in county jails, the majority of whom are people of color. For example, in 2015 Black Californians were 6% of all residents, but constituted 20% of the total jail population.

Of the 58 county jail systems in California, 29 have some kind of partnership with their local community college through the [Rising Scholars Network](#). This number has grown steadily over the last decade, and while this growth is good, it's not nearly enough. This is because "some kind of partnership" means colleges are offering a wide range of services, and many are not robust enough to interrupt cycles of incarceration.

Under our current definition, a college and jail partnership could, on the one hand, mean a college goes into a county jail once a semester to provide information on how to connect with the college upon release. On the other hand, it could mean a college that offers multiple courses, and provides transitional support for students as they release and rejoin the college on campus. Students in these two examples are served very differently, depending on where they are incarcerated. "Some kind of partnership" means there is no equitable statewide access to college classes and transitional support for Californians incarcerated in county jails.

I've worked with roughly two-thirds of the participating counties in some capacity, either by helping to build the programs or by providing technical and organizing support. With certainty, I can say far too few Californians in jails have access to college. Under realignment (AB109), more people are serving longer sentences in county jails, and these individuals are stuck serving multiple year sentences in facilities originally designed to hold someone for a maximum of a year. If we know access to college has been one of the most effective tools for breaking the cycle of incarceration, then why don't we have more actual college in jail programs?

"...IN 2015 BLACK CALIFORNIANS WERE 6% OF ALL RESIDENTS, BUT CONSTITUTED 20% OF THE TOTAL JAIL POPULATION."

OFFERING CLARITY

Hundreds of conversations with colleges, Sheriff's Departments, and current and former students have highlighted a few consistent answers to this question. For one, college in jail programs are notoriously difficult to get

off the ground. These partnerships can currently take months, if not years, of planning meetings, and the logistics are not particularly easy to figure out.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, both the college and the Sheriff's Department are at each other's whim. If, as I've seen happen multiple times, after significant planning for multiple college classes, a Sheriff's Department decides they actually only want to offer one class a semester, there's not much a college can do to push back. Similarly, if a college doesn't have the staffing to coordinate the program or they can't find faculty willing to teach in the jail, then the students in the jail go unserved.

There are also complicating factors involving community college district lines, where the 72 community college districts do not line up with the 58 counties. If a jail located in one community college's district asks to work with that college, and the college says no or that they can only offer a class or two, the jail does not necessarily have the right to work with another college. We do have an emerging model to solve this problem in Santa Clara County, where the Sheriff's Department has a cross-district MOU with five colleges from four college districts. All five colleges collaborate to offer complimentary programming in the jail, and the students have more choice about college pathways than in any other jail in the state. It is a promising model, worthy of replicating statewide.

“...COLLEGE IN JAIL PROGRAMS ARE NOTORIOUSLY DIFFICULT TO GET OFF THE GROUND.”

Another big factor in what makes it challenging to get these programs off the ground is that there are no statewide standards for what constitutes a college in jail program. In part, this is because counties are so different in scope, infrastructure, and resources: what works in Los Angeles likely won't work exactly in Yuba County. While best practices do exist, no one is beholden to them.

The logistics of college in jail programs require dedicated staffing to figure out and running this type of program warrants a full-time college employee. Classes in jails run on shortened semesters that are out of sync with the rest of the college campus, and someone must coordinate the courses and the faculty. These programs face lockdowns, where incarcerated people are confined and movement in and out of the jail is restricted. On the other hand, jails also have high levels of movement amongst incarcerated people, as people in jails may be awaiting trial, arraignment, or even transfer to a state prison.

In many counties, colleges and Sheriff's Departments are doing what they can, given the current difficulties associated with these partnerships. This is not to say there are no model programs in the state or that there are not dedicated people working to improve access to college in jail, but it is to say that we have a long way to go in California to ensure equitable access to college for adults incarcerated in county jails.

NO REQUIREMENT TO PARTICIPATE

More and more, I run into Sheriff's Departments who know that they are not

required to offer college in jails and are therefore busy ensuring they're in compliance with all the programs they *are* required to run. College can fall to the bottom of a long list of priorities, and in well over half of our 58 counties, college is deprioritized.

Furthermore, colleges also aren't required to offer classes in local jails. From the college's perspective, though this work may be worthwhile, it is an expensive and time-consuming endeavor. The burden of responsibility tends to fall most heavily on the

colleges in these partnerships (there are exceptions), and I often see colleges struggle to find dollars for staff positions. With some frequency, I've seen colleges attempt to run an in-jail program with a part-time employee, and when this inevitably does not work, the part-time employee is let go and the college in jail program falls under a dean who is already responsible for a lengthy list of other programs and is not connected to the day-to-day of the actual program. These programs do not tend to survive, or they continue with minimal offerings in the jail and low rates of students who transition from jail to on-campus classes.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE PERFECT PARTNERS FOR COUNTY JAILS

I am tough on the current college in jail landscape because I know it can be so much better, and I know community colleges are the perfect partners for county jails. Here's why:

- 1.** Community college tuition is free for nearly all students incarcerated in jails.
- 2.** Nearly 90% of all California jails are within 10 miles of a community college.
- 3.** Serving “the top 100%” of students is already built into the mission of the community college system. Community colleges are designed to support students with diverse backgrounds and varying educational experiences.
- 4.** Community colleges can offer Career Technical Education in county jails, which they cannot offer in state prisons. Community colleges and jails can effectively build a pipeline from jail to college and well-earning local careers.
- 5.** The community college system already has the [Rising Scholars Network](#) infrastructure built. Rising Scholars provides funding, technical assistance, professional development, and regulations to community colleges who serve incarcerated and formerly

incarcerated students. The Network already funds some college in jail programs and provides statewide professional development, as well as local technical assistance to colleges seeking to develop, grow, or strengthen these partnerships.

6. It works. We have model programs successfully running college in jail programs that offer robust classes, transitions support, and on-campus programming. We see students in these programs continuing their education on college campuses with successful outcomes.

There is enormous opportunity here for the community college system to better organize and support the expansion of college for people in jails. The current hurdles to building college in jail programs are just too high, and we need new solutions for reducing these barriers.

VETTING SOLUTIONS

In systems change work, we often pursue multiple solutions to a problem at once and watch the ways each solution interacts with the systems to see what's actually viable and implementable. Here, I

will propose one such solution, but hope that this brief sparks conversations about a variety of solutions to expanding access to college for people incarcerated in jails.

In working on a new Youth Justice Initiative, I have become intimately familiar with a piece of legislation called SB716. SB716 mandates that county juvenile detention facilities must provide access to college for detained youth who have completed high school. SB716 has only been in action for a few years, but its impact is profound. Juvenile Probation Departments are mandated to provide college access, and in response many have staffed positions dedicated, at least in part, to ensuring young people can take college classes online. Since SB716 went into effect, I've received dozens of phone calls and emails from Juvenile Probation Departments wanting to learn how to better partner with their local community colleges. The uptick in participation from the Juvenile Probation Departments was notable.

MANDATING COLLEGE ACCESS

Is it possible to introduce a similar piece of legislation for adults incarcerated in county jails, mandating Sheriff's Departments to provide college access to an incarcerated person who has completed high school?

In framing this question, we also need to ask where this mandate would legislatively live, if it is a legally viable approach, and how the mandate could potentially be tied to funding. We also need to keep in mind how this mandate would impact potential students, colleges responsible for providing this education, and Sheriff's Departments who may or may not currently have facilities that can accommodate college classes.

Let's pause and consider the potential here. If our community members experiencing incarceration are mandated fair and just access to higher education, a network of peer and institutional support as they go through the notoriously difficult transition from incarceration back to the community, and support on college campuses that address basic needs, what's possible for these individuals? We know that college participation in prisons is an incredibly effective tool people can use to break free from the carceral system, and we deserve to demonstrate the same outcomes in county jails. California has gotten or is getting college programming off the ground and running in our other systems of incarceration (prisons and juvenile halls), but the work in county jails is lagging. If college access was a core component of the services jails were required to provide, wouldn't we see an expansion of these programs like we've seen in prisons and are seeing in juvenile halls?

From the community college's perspective, serving incarcerated students is a critical matter of equity that directly aligns with its Vision for Success. The criminal legal system is rife with racist policies and practices that disproportionately impact people of color, which means most Rising Scholars students. By providing robust programming in county jails, the college is reaching more of its community members and reducing historic equity gaps.

LOGISTICS OF A MANDATE

Here are some logistical considerations the state would want to work out ahead of mandating college access to adults who have completed high school in county jails.

- ***How can we tie funding for college in jail partnerships to this mandate?***
 - How much funding per year would a community college need to operationalize the model program?
 - If this mandate were pursued while the economy is not strong, could existing dollars be repurposed to cover these costs?
 - If so, where could those dollars be pulled from?
- ***Should participating students be a certain number of days from release, say more than 60, to qualify for the college program?***
- ***What course delivery modalities would the mandate prioritize?***
 - Can face-to-face education be prioritized while accommodating space limitations at the jails?
 - Should a college be required to offer some in-person education, and then pair these in-person classes with either online courses or correspondence packet education?
 - How do we prevent colleges from solely offering correspondent packet education? This is a form of course distribution that serves thousands of students in our state prisons and while it works, it is less ideal for learning than in-person classes. In-person classes allow students to build skills by discussing new ideas and provide access to professors who can give feedback on ideas and work in real time.
- ***What happens when a jail doesn't have computers or WIFI?***
- ***What happens when a jail can't move enough people to constitute a viable community college class size into a single classroom, due to security designation differences?***
- ***How do we ensure women and men have equitable access to college programming?***
- ***How can we implement anti-racist policies, such as policies that remove arbitrary discretion by jail staff over who in the jail is eligible to participate in college?***
- ***Should Sheriff's Departments be allowed to waive community college district lines and work with multiple colleges to piece together a robust college in jail program?***
 - If so, should the home college have the right to choose their offerings first, and then surrounding colleges are welcomed in to offer complimentary courses and support?
- ***Where would the mandate live, legislatively?***
 - Would it amend an existing law, be placed somewhere in Title 15, the Penal Code, or somewhere else completely?

The questions above can be worked out. The Rising Scholars Network gone through these negotiations in our state prison programs and are actively going through them in our juvenile detention facility programs. Resolution and coordination on all the above points is achievable.

TYING FUNDING TO A MANDATE

If California is serious about leveraging community college education to interrupt the cycles of incarceration in jails, we need college programs built to support students all the way from incarceration to campus through

to graduation. Students who begin their college journeys inside jails should have the opportunity to be supported in continuing their education upon release, and this support costs money.

If funding were to be tied to this mandate, one option would be to provide funding to the colleges through grants overseen by the Rising Scholars Network. The Network currently provides grants to community colleges offering programs for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, some of which teach in jails, but would need additional dollars to expand these programs to jails statewide. The funds could be specifically designated for college in jail programs, like the dollars in our Youth Justice Initiative are to juvenile hall programs, or they could be added to the preexisting \$10 million in on-going dollars for colleges who serve incarcerated and formerly incarcerated adults. All the \$10 million in on-going funds is currently accounted for mid-way through 2025, and there are already more colleges who would like funding than there are funded spots.

The funding itself could go to staffing the college programs and to providing direct supports to students. These supports could be in the form of paid peer mentors, tutors, textbook loaner libraries, to name a few. The staffing would cover a person whose full-time job is to coordinate the college courses in the jail, transitional support for students who are released, and on-campus support for students as they seek degree or certificate completion. This individual would be responsible for navigating the challenging logistical elements of these partnerships, some of which were described earlier in the brief. The staff person would streamline an enrollment process, work with different college departments to find and recruit qualified faculty to teach inside, assist in designing certificate or degree pathways, coordinate with the Sheriff's Department on classroom

space and size and timing, liaison with local community-based organizations who can help students with housing assistance or free legal record clearance opportunities, relationship build with Probation to ensure students' reporting requirements do not interfere with their classes, and so much more.

CONCLUSION

California can invest in racial justice by expanding college access to people incarcerated in county jails. In California, decades of overreliance on

prisons and jails have created vicious cycles of incarceration that devastate lives and communities, mostly those of color. Access to college increases a person's ability to resist these cycles, and California is investing in providing equitable college access

statewide in its prisons and

county-run juvenile

detention facilities. The

same kind of equitable

access should be made

available in county jails. Our

Community Colleges

already serve thousands of

incarcerated students and

are the perfect partners for

county jails. We now need a

push, either through

mandated access,

increased funding, or

another not yet identified

solution, to ensure Sheriff's

Departments and colleges

work together to serve

those incarcerated in jails.


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CONTEXT FOR EXPANDING COLLEGE IN JAILS

BACKGROUND: HIGHER EDUCATION AND MASS INCARCERATION IN CALIFORNIA

The rise of mass incarceration in the United States coincided with the removal of Pell Grant access in prisons under the Clinton administration's tough on crime policies. In the 1990s, prisons saw college programs decimated and equitable access to college for incarcerated students effectively put on pause.

Over the last decade, hundreds of California educators, students, lawmakers, advocates, and community leaders coalesced around a shared mission to expand college opportunities for both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. This zeitgeist arose during a time of strong economic growth and was catapulted into a movement, in part, by the passing of SB1391 (2014), which allowed




community colleges to be compensated for teaching courses inside prisons. Today, all state prisons in California are served by a community college.

California has 148 public colleges and universities. A decade ago, around 10 of these 148 had a program for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students. Today, more than 100 of the 148 public colleges and universities have programs for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students. Most of these programs (80 in total) are located at California Community Colleges and are funded through the [Rising Scholars Network](#). Rising Scholars is the official categorical program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students within the community college system. At the university level, 14 California State University campuses have [Project Rebound](#) programs, and 9 University of California campuses have [Underground Scholars](#) programs for formerly incarcerated students.

This means, in less than a decade, California grew college programming for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students by 900%. This expansion is profound and reflects the efficacy of the model. Higher education interrupts cycles of incarceration, and California leads the nation in leveraging access to higher education to combat the impacts of the carceral system. The state has invested in these programs because we know they work, and the legislature has devoted on-going dollars to Rising Scholars, Project Rebound, and Underground Scholars.

THE RISING SCHOLARS NETWORK

California Community colleges are serving more than 15,000 Rising Scholars students a semester, nearly two-thirds of whom are Black or Latinx/a/o. These are students taking courses in state and federal prisons, county jails and juvenile detention facilities, and on community college campuses. In the 2021-2022 school year alone, Rising Scholars students earned 2,481 degrees and certificates.




In every state prison, nearly 9,000 Rising Scholars students take college classes each semester. Hundreds of these students reach graduation while in prison and many continue their education, either on a college campus after release or in one of the growing bachelor's programs in our state prisons.

In juvenile detention facilities, young people are seeing more access to college than ever. Detained students are in traditional and dual enrollment courses, and these programs are soon to expand as the Rising Scholars Network rolls out grants from the \$15 million in on-going funds awarded by the legislature in the 2022-2023 state budget. This new Rising Scholars Youth Justice Initiative will provide funding for up to 45 community colleges to partner with juvenile detention facilities to offer courses and support in detainment, in transition from detainment to the community, and on the community college campus.

On more than 60 community college campuses across California, formerly incarcerated students receive support and guidance as they navigate college. These programs, often staffed by formerly incarcerated leaders, provide essential mentorship (peer or otherwise), connections to resources to cover students' basic needs, and supportive pathways toward meaningful careers or more education.

In county jails, community colleges partner with Sheriff's Departments from nearly half of California's counties to offer some kind of college programming or college on-boarding support. These programs have grown over the last decade, but they are not yet as widely robust or as well funded as their counterparts in prisons and juvenile detention facilities. Progress has been made, but there is still much work to be done.





COUNTY JAILS 101

While Pell grant access was never revoked from students in county jails, college in jail programs were few and far between in California until more

recently. While “jail” and “prison” are often used interchangeably, they’re different systems of incarceration. California’s jails generally hold people for shorter periods of time than our prisons, though since the passing of Public Safety Realignment (AB109) in 2011, more Californians are serving multi-year sentences in county jails. State prisons are run by the state (CDCR) while jails are run by each county’s Sheriff’s Department and county executive leadership. This means jails have local control over budgets, staffing, and programming. People incarcerated in state prisons have been transported to them, sometimes from far away, which means they are likely to return home to a different community upon release. People incarcerated in county jails are mostly members of the surrounding communities. They are your past and future neighbors, and your kids may go to school together.

In California, each of the 58 counties has a jail system. This means a county could have a single jail, or it could have multiple jails. Small and less populated counties tend to have fewer jails than larger, more populated counties. There are different types of jails in these county jail systems, including long-term facilities, temporary holding facilities, and court holding facilities. California counties operate 115 long-term facilities.

Model college in jail programs can be thought of as having three distinct phases: education inside jails, transitional support as students near release and are released, and on-campus support.

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CONTACT

Dr. Adrián Trinidad

Associate Director for Community College Partnerships

altrinidad@usc.edu

Dr. Minh Tran

Director of Racial Equity Research Partnerships

mctran@usc.edu