Beyond the Box
2023

This document was produced by the U.S. Department of Education under the direction of Sean Addie, Director, Correctional Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. The document contains resources that are provided for the reader's convenience. The inclusion of these materials is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products, commodities, services, or enterprise. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses, and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials.

U.S. Department of Education
Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.
Secretary

Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education
Amy Loyd, Ed.L.D.
Assistant Secretary

April 2023

Availability of Alternate Formats
On request, this document is available in alternate formats, such as Braille, large print, or computer diskette. For more information, please contact the Department's Alternate Format Center at 202-260-0852 or contact the 504 coordinator via email at om_eeos@ed.gov.

Notice of Language Assistance
If you have difficulty understanding English, you may request language assistance services for Department information that is available to the public. These language assistance services are available free of charge. If you need more information about interpretation or translation services, please call 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327) (TTY: 1-800-877-8339), email us at Ed.Language.Assistance@ed.gov or write to U.S. Department of Education, Information Resource Center, 400 Maryland Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20202.

Content Contact: Sean Addie at Sean.Addie@ed.gov or at 202-245-7374.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With almost 2 million Americans currently incarcerated and almost 80 million Americans living with a criminal record, the criminal justice system directly impacts nearly a third of the American population.[1] The criminal justice system has a disproportionate impact on people of color and people living in poverty.[2] While White Americans make up 60 percent of the American population, they comprise only 38 percent of the incarcerated population.[3] In 2014, incarcerated men in state prisons had average annual incomes pre-incarceration that were half that of men who were not incarcerated.[4] For justice system-involved individuals, education offers a pathway to reenter society successfully, with the knowledge, skills, and credentials to get a good job and engage in their community. American postsecondary institutions can provide programs that are inclusive to formerly incarcerated students and recognize the important role such institutions play in paving the way for system-involved students to achieve their educational and career goals.

1 in 3 Americans are directly impacted by the criminal justice system

Over the past decade, our nation has made significant progress in the field of education for system involved students. Fair and nondiscriminatory admissions processes have been adopted by many colleges and universities, and seven states have banned the use of criminal justice history questions during the college application process. In 2020, the Common Application, used by more than 900 colleges, removed the criminal justice history question from the common portion of the common application, thereby banning the box that had to be checked on the application. In 2016, the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative was launched, granting access to Pell Grants, a form of federal student financial aid, which opened the doors to higher education for tens of thousands of currently incarcerated students in a pilot program. The success of that program has led to forthcoming broad Pell reinstatement for all currently incarcerated students who qualify for federal financial aid and are enrolled in eligible prison education programs, starting in July 2023. These college in prison programs will increase the number of formerly incarcerated students seeking to continue their education post-release, and the institutions that serve them should be prepared to support them in their journey.

1   Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2022," March 14, 2022, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html.
2   Ibid.
3   Ibid.
4   Ibid.

PURPOSE

Persistent barriers to accessing high-quality, affordable postsecondary education remain for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. This guide was developed by the U.S. Department of Education to assist colleges and universities in mitigating those barriers, moving beyond the check box on admissions applications, and providing support for these students. The original Beyond the Box report was published in 2016, and this version builds upon that by incorporating the learning and experience of the past 7 years. This guide incorporates input from a variety of stakeholders, including formerly incarcerated students, leaders of organizations and institutions that work with formerly incarcerated students, and advocates of criminal justice reform, as well as research and analysis of promising practices.

Who should read this guide?

- College and university presidents, admissions personnel, enrollment management staff, academic deans, student services personnel, professors, and counselors
  - ▸ Note: While this guide is relevant for all institutions of higher education, recommendations around the admissions process are geared toward 4-year institutions rather than 2-year community and technical colleges, due to the open admissions processes that are prevalent in community and technical colleges.
- Organizations that work with system-involved individuals

What does this guide offer?

- An overview of education and criminal justice in the United States, with a focus on the importance of increasing access to higher education for system-involved individuals
- Data on the barriers that formerly incarcerated students face both during the admissions process and while enrolled
- Recommendations to mitigate barriers to enrollment and ensure persistence and completion
- Resources for further exploration, including organizations that are currently doing this work

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Before starting or expanding a program serving students who were formerly incarcerated, institutions should start with and continuously return to the following overarching principles:

Engage openly with students, directly impacted people, and the community to understand their unique needs and priorities.

Be honest about your institution's strengths and weaknesses to determine whether to modify an existing program, develop a new one, or partner with a community organization to meet a stated need.

Embrace the role of serving as an anchor for students by developing the capacity to evaluate individual needs and refer to services.

Commit to providing the services needed by being prepared to invest the time and resources to listen and respond to student needs.

With those in mind, the below recommendations are specific to barriers that currently and formerly incarcerated students face in the student journey.

Figure 1. Mitigating Barriers and Ensuring Postsecondary Persistence and Completion.

Mitigating Barriers to Higher Education

Provide full and transparent information on education opportunities

- Connect with individuals prior to release to develop a game plan.
- Consider developing or partnering with an education in prison program.
- Counsel students on career opportunities available to them, noting where there may be licensing restrictions

Support students through the application process

- Refrain from collecting criminal justice information (CJI) in admissions
- If collecting CJI, establish an evidence-based, fair, and transparent process
- Ensure that admissions staff have training specific to system involved students

Recognize and prioritize human needs

- Support multiple housing options, including on-campus housing
- Understand and accommodate difficulty in obtaining required documents, including IDs and transcripts
- Provide guidance on financial aid, Pell Grant, and otherwise

Ensuring Postsecondary Persistence and Completion for Admitted Students

Continue prioritizing human needs as a prerequisite to success

- Understand food insecurity; proactively provide food resources to students
- Ensure students have access to employment opportunities
- Accommodate parole and probation requirements
- Appreciate students' need for legal services
- Support childcare needs

Develop an inclusive culture with dedicated community supports

- Facilitate the creation of a campus culture that welcomes students of diverse backgrounds
- Create a dedicated space for system-impacted students to gather and build community
- Offer mental health services to meet the needs of system impacted students

Provide individualized academic and career supports

- Offer academic support to formerly incarcerated students through transitional programing and ongoing counseling
- Ensure that career services are equipped to help system involved students

▷ STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

As a teenager growing up in New Jersey, Terrell Blount looked for opportunities to earn an income for himself—just like any other high schooler. He worked a few service jobs and tried his hand at entrepreneurship by selling candy and CDs at the high school he attended. He says that while at school he "frequently tried to pursue ways to make an honest income, [but] he was always stopped and threatened with discipline by school staff." In retrospect, he wishes that an adult had stepped in and said, "You're going about this the wrong way, let us teach you the best way to do this." However, due to a lack of a support network, role models, and job opportunities, he began engaging in illegal activity to supplement his income and ultimately found himself incarcerated.

While incarcerated, Terrell began to think about where he wanted to be post-incarceration. Others around him were talking about working in various service and construction jobs, but he envisioned himself wearing a suit working in a white-collar job. When he expressed this to his friends during incarceration, they expressed disbelief, saying that he wouldn't be able to get a white-collar job with a criminal record. But steadfast in his goals, Terrell set the stage to pursue this while incarcerated by working as an office assistant in the education center inside the prison and enrolling in college courses. A counselor in the education center later gave him pamphlets for local universities. Even before he left incarceration, he was determined to earn a postsecondary degree.

Post-release, Terrell lived at a halfway house. Just as he was planning to enroll in a community college program for residents of the halfway house, he heard from another resident about taking classes at Rutgers University. He quickly applied and was accepted as a part of a small cohort— the beginnings of the NJ-Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prison (STEP) program. In his first semesters, the cohort took classes together and formed a support system for each other—leaning on each other to help navigate the university. Living in the halfway house provided its own barriers. Terrell had to make phone calls back to the halfway house and abide by a strict curfew. At one point, the halfway house threatened to take his laptop away. He was in fear of any small violation, such as missing a phone call or curfew, which would have resulted in further incarceration. These restrictions made fully engaging with campus life challenging.

Despite these challenges, at Rutgers, Terrell found a supportive community of classmates, professors, and staff. Federal Work Study and other on-campus student jobs kept him immersed in the college environment and reduced the potential job discrimination he might face due to his conviction history. He feels that student support services, especially academic coaches and deans, acted as his personal champions – helping him throughout his time at Rutgers. Terrell credits his success to his personal goal setting, hard work, and the resources available to him at Rutgers. He went on to earn a BA in Communication and a master's in Public Administration from Rutgers.

Terrell is now the director of the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (FIGCN), which is a nonprofit that aims to create social and professional networks for formerly incarcerated people, promote education for justice system impacted people, and advocate for criminal justice reform. He is an expert on education for system involved people and has served in various roles at nonprofits, advocacy, and nonprofit organizations in the space.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Mass Incarceration

Almost 2 million people are currently incarcerated in the United States—a staggering figure that dwarfs the incarcerated population of any other nation in the world.[5] America's prison population represents more than 20 percent of the world's prison population, even though only 5 percent of the global population lives in the United States.[6] America's high rate of incarceration has resulted in more than 79 million people with criminal records facing almost 50,000 regulations at the federal, state, and local levels that make it difficult to reintegrate into society post-prison.[7] Black and Latino U.S. residents are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, e.g., Black Americans make up 12 percent of the American population, but represent 38 percent of people in prisons.[8]

America's prison population represents more than 20% of the WORLD'S prison population

While poverty is not a predictor of criminality, poverty is inextricably linked to the criminal justice system. People in jail have a median pre-incarceration income that is 54 percent less than non-incarcerated people.[9] Poverty is an important factor both at the entry and exit points of the criminal justice system in the United States.[10] People are imprisoned for offenses that are linked to their inability to support themselves economically, and formerly incarcerated people face challenges in earning income and building wealth post-incarceration due to restrictions on their ability to secure gainful employment.[11]

Mass incarceration represents a great cost to our nation—both in the number of productive individuals captured in the web of the criminal justice system and in the cost to the taxpayer to fund the prisons that hold incarcerated people. American taxpayers fund prisons at a cost of $80 billion per year, and prisons spend between $20,000 and $50,000 per incarcerated person

5   Ibid.
6   "Mass Incarceration," American Civil Liberties Union, February 15, 2022, https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration.
7   Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2022," March 14, 2022, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html.
8   Ibid.
9   Ibid.
10   Adam Looney and Nicholas Turner, "Work and opportunity before and after incarceration." March 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/es_20180314_looneyincarceration_final.pdf
11   Ibid.

per year.[12] For a point of comparison, taxpayers spend between $8,000 and $25,000 per year per pupil for students educated in public K–12 schools.[13] Funds used for mass incarceration reduce available funding for building communities, preventing poverty, and increasing educational opportunities for both youth and adults.

Education and Mass Incarceration

Education begets opportunity. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated in 2020 that people with less than a high school diploma are likely to earn an average yearly salary of $30,784 and have an average unemployment rate of 5.4 percent.[14] Increased educational attainment leads to increased earnings: on average, people with an associate degree earn more than $15,000 more annually than those with a high school diploma, and people with a bachelor's degree earn almost $20,000 more annually than those with an associate degree. When these earnings are compounded over a lifetime, those with bachelor's degrees earn about $1 million more than those with only a high school diploma.[15] People with postsecondary degrees have an average unemployment rate between 1.1-2.7 percent.[16] This divide was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. People with less than a high school diploma had an 8.3 percent unemployment rate in 2021, compared to 4.6 percent for those with an associate degree and 3.5 percent for those with a bachelor's.[17] With increased educational attainment, Americans have greater opportunities both to support themselves and their families, and to improve the country's economic outlook. Any adversarial interactions with the criminal justice system makes educational attainment more challenging—whether due to the lack of educational opportunities for incarcerated people or the formal and informal restrictions put on formerly incarcerated people post-release.

Average Earning Potential by Education

+$20k annually

+$15k annually

high school diploma   associate's degree   bachelor's degree
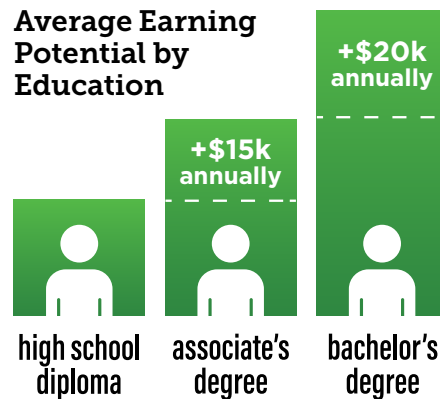
Only 6 percent of people who were incarcerated in 2014 had a postsecondary degree.[18] In contrast, 37 percent of the non-incarcerated population had a postsecondary degree in 2014.[19] However, 64 percent of people who were incarcerated in 2014 had achieved a high school credential, implying that many incarcerated students would be eligible for further postsecondary education.[20]

---

12   "Fiscal Cost of Mass Incarceration," American Civil Liberties Union, February 15, 2022, https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration/fiscal-cost-mass-incarceration.

13   "Public School Spending Per Pupil Increases by Largest Amount in 11 Years," U.S. Census Bureau, May 18, 2021, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/public-school-spending-per-pupil.html.

14   "Learn more, earn more: Education leads to higher wages, lower unemployment." Career Outlook, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2020, https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2020/data-on-display/education-pays.htm

15   Anthony P. Carnevale, Stephen J. Rose, and Ban Cheah, "The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings," August 2011, https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/.

16   "Learn more, earn more: Education leads to higher wages, lower unemployment." Career Outlook, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2020, https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2020/data-on-display/education-pays.htm

17   "Education pays, 2021," Career Outlook, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2022.

18   Patrick Oakford et al., "Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison" (Vera Institute of Justice, January 2019), https://www.vera.org/publications/investing-in-futures-education-in-prison.

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid.

Once in prison, people who are incarcerated do not always have access to or funding for the academic programming that they desire; 70 percent of people express interest in academic programming while in prison, but only 42 percent of people complete an educational program during incarceration.[21] With more resources devoted to education in prison, more people would leave prisons with an opportunity to make their future lives markedly better through increased educational attainment.

When people leave incarceration, they continue to face barriers to achieving a postsecondary degree. Postsecondary institutions make it more difficult for system involved students to apply, to matriculate, and to graduate than for non-incarcerated students. Barriers for system involved students are varied and wide-ranging, from college application check-boxes that require students to detail any criminal justice system involvement, to the challenges of transferring transcripts and diplomas from correctional to educational systems, to restrictions on both on-campus and off-campus housing.

Better funding and access to education for people in prisons and for criminal justice system involved students on the outside would have significant positive impacts for formerly incarcerated individuals, taxpayers, and society at large.

- Investment in education for system involved individuals is a direct path to increasing racial equity. More than half of the students enrolled in college courses via Second Chance Pell identify as non-White.[22]
- Supporting incarcerated individuals in obtaining postsecondary degrees directly contributes to their future success upon reentry. They are better positioned to obtain gainful employment, support their families, and contribute positively to the community.[23]
- Education has been shown to reduce recidivism by 48 percent, increasing public safety and reducing incarceration costs.[24] By some estimates, every dollar invested in education in prison saves four to five dollars in taxpayer dollars.[25]

> ❝ **Education has been shown to reduce recidivism by 48 percent."**

21 Ibid.
22 Kelsie Chesnut, Niloufer Taber, and Jasmine Quintana, "Second Chance Pell: Five Years of Expanding Higher Education Programs in Prisons, 2016–2021" (Vera Institute of Justice, May 2022), https://www.vera.org/publications/second-chance-pell-five-years-of-expanding-access-to-education-in-prison.
23 Patrick Oakford et al., "Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison" (Vera Institute of Justice, January 2019), https://www.vera.org/publications/investing-in-futures-education-in-prison.
24 Ibid.
25 Patrick Oakford et al., "Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison" (Vera Institute of Justice, January 2019), https://www.vera.org/publications/investing-in-futures-education-in-prison.

Figure 2. Timeline of Education Availability for Criminal Justice System Involved Students.[26]

Timeline

1965 — Congress enacts Title IV of the Higher Education Act, allowing all incarcerated people to ise federal Pell Grants to pay for college classes.

1990s — Number of college-in-prison programs peaks at 772 in 1,287 correctional facilities.

1990 — Clery Act or Jeanne Clery Discolsure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act requires school that participate in federal financial aid collect information about crime near or on campuses.

1994 — Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act bans all incarcerated people from receiving Pell aid.

1997 — Number of college-in-prison programs drops to eight.

2006 — The Common App adds criminal justice history questions to the common portion of the common application.

2015 — Obama administration announces Second Chance Pell Experiment, which allows incarcerated people at selected federal and state prisons to receive federal Pell Grants.

2016 — 67 postsecondary institutions selected to work with more than 100 correctional facilities to enroll 12,000 people who are incarcerated in the Second Chance Pell Experiment.

2017 — Louisiana and Maryland pass "ban the box" legislation to prohibit colleges and universities from asking about criminal history on applications. Washington and Colorado follow suit in 2018 and 2019, respectively. California passes "ban the box" legislation; Oregon and Virginia in 2021, bringing the total to seven states.

2020 — Consolidated Appropriations Act allows incarcerated individuals to access Federal Pell Grant Funds.

2020 — The Common App removes the criminal justice history question from the common portion of the common application.

2022 — Second Chance Pell expanded for a third time, adding 73 institutions for a total of 200 participating schools.

26 Gerald Robinson and Elizabeth English, "The Second Chance Pell Pilot Program: A Historical Overview" (American Enterprise Institute, September 18, 2017), https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-second-chance-pell-pilot-program-a-historical-overview/.; "Issue Paper: Prison Education Programs" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, October 4, 2021), https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/reg/hearulemaking/2021/pellforprisoneducation.pdf.; Scott Jaschik, "Innocent (Applicant) Until Proven Guilty," Inside Higher Ed, March 6, 2007, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/03/06/innocent-applicant-until-proven-guilty.; "Ban the Box in Higher Education," Operation Restoration, accessed July 25, 2022, https://www.or-nola.org/btb.

SECOND CHANCE PELL AND IMPACT OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN PRISON

The Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative was launched to expand access to higher education for currently incarcerated students by providing access to Federal Pell Grants. The experiment initially launched with 67 postsecondary institutions and was expanded twice, reaffirming the federal government's commitment to supporting incarcerated individuals and recognition of the benefits of education to public safety, equity, and empowerment.

In the years since Second Chance Pell was first launched, it has served tens of thousands of students and led to the completion of thousands of degrees and certificates. From 2016–2021, 28,119 students received help in enrolling in postsecondary education through Second Chance Pell, and more than 9,000 have earned a certificate or diploma, associate degree, or bachelor's degree.[27] Student enrollment and degree attainment have continued to increase every year, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating the desire and commitment of incarcerated students to pursue their education. This program has increased access and engagement for incarcerated individuals, and also created a pipeline of students leaving incarceration and continuing their education in the community.

> **From 2016—2021, 28,119 students received help in enrolling in postsecondary education through Second Chance Pell."**

---

27   Kelsie Chesnut, Niloufer Taber, and Jasmine Quintana, "Second Chance Pell: Five Years of Expanding Higher Education Programs in Prisons, 2016–2021" (Vera Institute of Justice, May 2022), https://www.vera.org/publications/second-chance-pell-five-years-of-expanding-access-to-education-in-prison.

THREE MODELS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED STUDENTS[28]

There are numerous postsecondary education programs for formerly incarcerated students. We have characterized them into one of three models based on the state of origin. Each model has its benefits and can serve as a starting point for institutions and organizations looking to develop a program for formerly incarcerated students.

Figure 3. Three Models of Postsecondary Education for Formerly Incarcerated Students.

Three Models of Postsecondary Education for Formerly Incarcerated Students

State-organized, campus managed ←→ Ad-hoc organization and management

California

Campus-based programs on campus at both public university systems in California

- Act as a liason between the campus, students, and community resources
- Assist with basic needs and advocate for system-impacted students
- State- and grant-funded thanks to efforts by directly impacted people

Washington

State-funded reentry organizations and post-prison education programs

- Connect students to community colleges through state-run, reentry navigators
- Provide wraparound services for students at high-risk of recidivism through nonprofit organizations

New York

Independent academic institutions and nonprofit service providers create individualized programs

- Serve students dependent on the program developed by a nonprofit or academic institution
- Guide students based on the academic programming and socal services at a specific campus

---

28   Omari Amili, "After Prison: Christopher Beasley Is a Scholar and a Mentor." (UW Magazine — University of Washington Magazine, December 2020), https://magazine.washington.edu/feature/after-prison-christopher-beasley-is-a-scholar-and-a-mentor/.

3. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Before delving into recommendations pertaining to specific points in the student journey, organizations should first consider a few overarching recommendations that apply throughout a student's trajectory in higher education. Any institution or organization working with formerly incarcerated students should start with and continuously return to the following:

Engage openly with students, directly impacted people, and the community: The most important voices to elevate will always be those that are directly impacted by the criminal justice system. This includes not only students but their family or support system. The formerly incarcerated population is not homogenous, and the students that each institution serves may differ significantly in their needs and priorities. Develop strong relationships and open communication with students to ensure the right supports and measures of success are prioritized.

Be honest about your organization's strengths and weaknesses: There are many areas where an institution of higher education may be well-positioned to support students, but others where it may not be. Before starting a new program, evaluate existing offerings and conduct a gap analysis to decide whether:

a. An existing program has the capacity and resources (including the right training and talent) to meet the need;

b. The institution has the right experience and skills to develop a new program; or

c. If neither of the above are true, there are organizations in the community well-positioned to meet this need—in this case, refer to the below Community Partnerships Matrix

Embrace the role of an anchor for students: An institution is in the best position to act as the line of first defense for students. This means developing the capacity to evaluate individual student needs and refer them to either an on-campus service or community partner.

Commit to providing the services needed: Be prepared to invest the time and resources necessary to provide services for formerly incarcerated students. This does not mean that the institution needs to develop all support structures in-house. However, it must be willing to dedicate time and resources to listening and responding to student needs. When students continuously voice a need, the institution should commit to providing the service, either through modifying existing programs, developing a new one, or partnering.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Addressing the needs of formerly incarcerated students requires a variety of services that may or may not be available on the campus of a postsecondary institution. When services are not available on campus, it is often helpful to look to community organizations or government programs that are best suited to meet the needs of students.

Figure 4. Useful Resources for Formerly Incarcerated Students.

Useful Campus, Community, and State/Federal Resources for Formerly Incarcerated Students

	Campus	**Community**	**State/Federal**
Food	Meal donation programs, on-campus food pantries, structured financial aid packages	Food pantries, food banks, religious organizations	SNAP, child nutrition programs, WIC programs
Housing	On-campus housing, learning community, or adult learner housing	Halfway house, living with families	Shelters
Transportation	Campus bus, rideshare	Community-based organization with rideshare or car service	Subsidized public transit cards
Employment	Work-study, research assistantships, teaching fellows, tutoring, fellowships	Reentry organizations, job placement geared towards formerly incarcerated people	Department of Labor REO program
Legal Aid	Law school services or pro-bono law student support	Community organizations focused on legal aid	Access to Justice Program
Childcare	Campus-based childcare center	Community-based childcare, family or friends	Childcare subsidies, public school programs
Technology	Internet or device discount or loan programs, campus libraries and computer labs, digital skills training, and technical support	Nonprofit device refurbishers, community libraries, community-based digital skills training and technical support	Federal Communications Commission Lifeline and Affordable Connectivity Program

4. MITIGATING BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Pursuing and obtaining a higher education degree is one of the clearest paths for economic mobility.[29] This is particularly true for formerly incarcerated individuals who face significant barriers to employment and social reintegration. As noted earlier, most incarcerated people are interested in education, but it is very challenging for them to enroll in a college or university.[30] There are both structural barriers, such as when formerly incarcerated individuals are unable to provide the necessary documents required in applications, as well as societal and cultural barriers, such as the inherent biases that admissions officers may have against an applicant with a criminal history.[31] To overcome both barriers, institutions and organizations seeking to expand access for formerly incarcerated students can support them in more easily applying for, enrolling in, and completing higher education.

It is important that the institution or organization work directly with the formerly incarcerated individual to understand their own unique needs and context. Each individual will be facing barriers that are specific to themselves and should receive personalized guidance. The below recommendations are meant to act as general guidance for an institution or organization that seeks to increase access for formerly incarcerated students but will not capture the full breadth of barriers that formerly incarcerated students face in accessing higher education. However, these will act as an important starting point. There are three primary recommendations for mitigating barriers to higher education for formerly incarcerated students. These are:

Provide full and transparent information on education opportunities.

Support students through the application process.

Recognize and prioritize human needs.

---

29 Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, and Danny Yagan "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility" 2017, http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/papers/coll_mrc_paper.pdf

30 Rosenthal, A., NaPier, E., Warth, P., & Weissman, M. (2015). Boxed Out: Criminal History Screening and College Application Attrition. Brooklyn, NY: Center for Community Alternatives.

31 Ibid.

PROVIDE FULL AND TRANSPARENT INFORMATION ON EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

"I didn't know what education was. I stumbled into understanding what is the role of education, what is the role of a particular degree, where do you get it, how do you get it … While inside [prison], the message I had was 'the world doesn't trust you and you won't be accepted anywhere.'"
—Angel Sanchez, Department of Justice Fellow

As of 2016, more than half of the individuals in state and federal prison had not completed high school (excluding GED attainment).[32] As a result, prior to entering prison, few were given guidance on accessing higher education. Incarcerated individuals have limited exposure to different education and career opportunities. A social justice advocate who himself was formerly incarcerated explained that the only way he learned about various education programs while in prison was through friends who were enrolled. This lack of transparency and availability of information hinders individuals from being able to make informed decisions upon reentry. In addition to working with correctional authorities to provide information, institutions and organizations can consider the following practices to communicate with potential applicants.

> **As of 2016, more than half of the individuals in state and federal prison had not completed high school."**

---

32   Lauren G. Beatty and Tracy L. Snell, "Profile of Prison Inmates, 2016" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2021), https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/ppi16.pdf.

Connect With Individuals Prior to Release to Develop a Game Plan

"If I don't go in there and give my contact information, they will leave the prison and they won't know who to call. … When they leave the prison, I usually get a call from folks within the first day or two. A lot of them go to parole and then they call me, I'm their first phone call."
—*Regina Diamond-Rodriguez, Director of Transitions at NJ-STEP*

Reentry begins on the first day of incarceration. Postsecondary institutions and reentry organizations should aim to connect with individuals prior to their release to share information about education programs and career pathways. This is important to ensure that potential applicants are aware of any necessary first steps and are able to create a plan. There are reentry organizations that will conduct workshops anywhere from 1 to 2 years prior to release. The goal of these workshops is to prepare participants for, or at least ensure they are aware of, the many options they will face immediately upon release. As such, it may include information about educational pathways, but also housing and employment options. Importantly, a workshop should provide a vision for what the future post-release can look like and include success stories of formerly incarcerated students. The Director of Transitions for an education in prison and reentry initiative explained that, while incarcerated, there is not much that they can actually do, but the workshops are still important morale boosters and create a much smoother transition upon release.

CASE STUDY: BARD PRISON INITIATIVE REENTRY AND TRANSITIONAL WORKSHOPS

The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) is part of Bard College, located in the Hudson Valley region of New York. It was founded in 1999 and currently enrolls more than 300 incarcerated students.[33] One key program they offer outside of the core college coursework is reentry workshops. Students attend reentry workshops approximately one year prior to their release, and then are invited to enroll in a 6-week Transitional Workshop series post-release. These workshops are comprehensive and go beyond just educational opportunities. There are five key components:

1. **Continuing Education:** transfer to the Bard main campus or other schools in New York City and surrounding states

2. **Career Development:** professional development and employment culture

3. **Technology:** technical and cultural components of technology

4. **Health, Wellness, and Social Services:** holistic approach to self-care awareness and well-being, navigating social services, and obtaining identification

5. **Housing Support:** support in obtaining transitional and permanent housing

The support goes beyond information sharing. Upon release, students who request a laptop are provided one and are shown how to login and set it up. Alumni of BPI also have access to reentry and alumni affairs staff who assist in hands-on and step-by-step career development, continuing education, housing, and other acute reentry support and facilitating ongoing engagement between and amongst the alumni community and the college. The alumni affairs staff of BPI are predominantly formerly incarcerated themselves.

As a result of this type of support, BPI students are better positioned for successful reentry upon release. Alumni of the program have continued their education at Bard and more than 40 other colleges and universities across the tri-state area and beyond.[34]

---

33 Bard Prison Initiative, July 14, 2022, https://bpi.bard.edu/.
34 "BPI: Reentry & Alumni Affairs," Bard Prison Initiative, November 7, 2019, https://bpi.bard.edu/our-work/reentry-alumni-affairs/.

Consider Developing or Partnering with an Education in Prison Program to Provide Continuity for Students

One of the best ways to provide a seamless experience for justice system involved students is to move them directly from an education in prison program supported by an institution of higher learning onto that institution's main campus upon release.[35] This significantly reduces the barriers in application and transcripts (that will be discussed later in this report). An institution with the capacity and opportunity to do so should investigate developing an educational program for currently incarcerated individuals.

However, there may be instances where a school has the desire to serve students in prison but may not be best positioned to directly provide a prison education program (for example, if the school is not located within a reasonable commute of a prison). In those instances, the school should look to partner with schools with prison education programs and develop transfer pathways so that students can easily enroll and transfer their credits upon release.

Counsel Students on Career Opportunities Available to Them, Noting Where There May Be Licensing Restrictions

"We were often finding that if someone wanted to be a nurse, for example, it wasn't actually that the licensing was the problem, it was that schools weren't admitting [formerly incarcerated] people into the nursing program because they assumed licensing would be a barrier. Sometimes schools can unwittingly be gatekeepers and overestimate the extent of the barrier."
—Jessica Neptune, Director of National Engagement at Bard Prison Institute and Former Policy Analyst at Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

Many assume that licensing restrictions will prevent students with a criminal record from pursuing certain careers like nursing. As a result, well-intentioned advisors may counsel formerly incarcerated students away from entering those education programs and careers entirely. However, there are often processes to work around these barriers. For example, the State of New York allows people with felony convictions to obtain a Certificate of Relief or Certificate of Good

---

35   According to interviews with The Education Trust Justice Policy Fellows

> **Currently, at least 44 states have adopted fair chance licensing legislation to reduce barriers for individuals with criminal records."**

Conduct, restoring the right to apply for and be considered for employment or a license.[36] Currently, at least 44 states have adopted fair chance licensing legislation to reduce barriers for individuals with criminal records.[37]

In addition, the landscape of collateral consequences for conviction is constantly evolving, and there are several resources to stay informed on the latest reforms. The National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction is a database of all restrictions on employment, licensing, and other benefits for individuals with criminal records. In addition, the Council of State Governments Justice Center launched the Fair Chance Licensing Project to track reforms across all 50 states. Both resources can be used to understand specific restrictions and considerations at a state and conviction level and provide both students and advisors with the information to make informed decisions about a career, and thus educational, path.

Rather than acting as gatekeepers, institutions should advise students on potential barriers and guide them towards these and other resources. Ultimately, it is up to the student, not the institution, to decide whether to pursue education in a particular field.

SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Applying to college is stressful and complex for any student. Formerly incarcerated students face additional complexities that make the application process particularly challenging. The Ban the Box movement has made great strides in generating awareness about the debilitating impact of collecting criminal justice information. In recent years, as outlined above, many schools and the Common Application have chosen to remove the question asking about criminal justice involvement from their application. However, nearly 72 percent of institutions still require applicants to disclose criminal history information.[38] Despite the progress made, this still represents a significant barrier for formerly incarcerated individuals seeking to enroll in higher education.

36   "Certificate of Relief / Good Conduct & Restoration of Rights," Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, accessed July 25, 2022, https://doccs.ny.gov/certificate-relief-good-conduct-restoration-rights.

37   "How States Are Expanding Access to Work," CSG Justice Center, November 10, 2021, https://csgjusticecenter.org/projects/fair-chance-licensing/how-states-are-expanding-access-to-work/.

38   Karen Bussey et al., "Ch 6: Eliminating the Use of Criminal Justice Information," accessed July 25, 2022, https://www.ihep.org/publication/mostimportantdoor/.

Higher Education Institutions Should Refrain from Collecting and Using Criminal Justice Information in the Admissions Process

"I felt like I was being set up to fail. I could never be able to complete the supplemental requirements. These tasks seemed impossible to me—kind of like the twelve labors of Hercules."
—Formerly incarcerated State University of New York applicant[39]

One common reason cited for collecting criminal justice information is to maintain campus safety. While on its face this appears to be a rational argument, no evidence has established a direct causal link between students with criminal records and an increase in campus crime rates. To begin with, violent crime on campus is already a rare occurrence. Between 2009 and 2019, the rate of on-campus reported crimes has been declining (from 23 per 10,000 students to 18.7 per 10,000 students).[40] In general, college students are at lower risk for violent crime relative to nonstudents (with the main exception being rape and sexual assault).[41]

> **No evidence has established a direct causal link between students with criminal records and an increase in campus crime rates."**

For the crimes that are committed, there is very little research linking individuals with criminal records to campus crimes. The studies that have been done are generally unable to find a connection —for example, one examination of graduating college seniors found that less than 5 percent of students who engaged in misconduct while on campus had a criminal history.[42] An additional study surveyed college admissions directors on their practices of requesting disciplinary history and compared those results with campus crime rates. It found statistically no difference in crime rates between those schools that review disciplinary history with those that do not.[43]

Less than 5% of students engaged in misconduct while on campus had a criminal history.

---

39 "Boxed Out: Criminal History Screening and College Application Attrition" (Center for Community Alternatives, March 2015), https://communityalternatives.org/boxed-out/.

40 National Center for Education Statistics, "Criminal Incidents at Postsecondary Institutions" (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2022), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/a21.

41 Katrina Baum and Patsy Klaus, "Violent Victimization of College Students, 1995-2002" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 2005), https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/vvcs02.pdf.

42 Carol W Runyan et al., "Can Student-Perpetrated College Crime Be Predicted Based on Precollege Misconduct?," Injury Prevention 19, no. 6 (2013): pp. 405-411, https://doi.org/10.1136/injuryprev-2012-040644.

43 Malgorzata J. V. Olszewska, "Undergraduate Admission Application as a Campus Crime Mitigation Measure: Disclosure of Applicants' Disciplinary Background Information and Its Relation to Campus Crime" (dissertation, ProQuest, 2007).

Conversely, there is notable evidence to suggest that even just asking for criminal history on a college application is a significant barrier to admission for formerly incarcerated students. According to a 2015 Center for Community Alternatives study, two out of three State University of New York (SUNY) applicants who disclosed felony convictions ended up "dropping out" of the process and never submitting a complete application.[44] This is compared to the overall population, where the average attrition rate is only 21 percent.[45] There are a variety of reasons for the increase in attrition. One significant reason is the additional paperwork required. Applicants who check "yes" to the felony question receive a follow-up letter asking for more specific information. The information required can be wide-reaching and invasive, requiring individuals to obtain their full criminal record and statements from various correctional officers, as well as appear in front of an admissions review committee. Obtaining and submitting these documents can be burdensome, particularly when this information does not impact campus crimes rates.[46]

Overarching all of this is simply the stigma associated with having a criminal record. Many formerly incarcerated individuals may choose to not complete their application simply due to the fear and resignation that they would be denied admission regardless of their qualifications. Being confronted with the need to supply detailed information about their justice system involvement may be re-traumatizing and disheartening.

Removing the question of criminal history ("banning the box") will significantly lower barriers to admission for formerly incarcerated students.

If Collecting Criminal Justice Information, Establish an Evidence-based, Fair, and Transparent Process for what Information is Requested and How It Will Be Used

If a college has reviewed the above information and still finds it necessary to collect criminal justice information, it should do so in a way that is evidence-based, fair, and transparent.

44 "Boxed Out: Criminal History Screening and College Application Attrition" (Center for Community Alternatives, March 2015), https://communityalternatives.org/boxed-out/.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.

EVIDENCE-BASED

Colleges should establish a specific policy about which convictions require disclosure. As seen above, there is little evidence linking criminal records to campus crime. A college that continues to inquire about criminal justice information should identify which convictions they are interested in and for what reason.

There are a few commonly accepted guidelines limiting the type of criminal history colleges should ask about on their application. The following are recommendations for what should be asked:

- Convictions only, not arrests
- Felony convictions only, not misdemeanors or infractions
- Offenses that occurred in the past five years and only after the age of 19 (juvenile and youth offenses should not be disclosed)

These guidelines are based on evidence establishing the range of convictions that are most relevant for campus safety. For example, limiting the question to only convictions in the past five years is based on research establishing that the odds of re-offense decline significantly over time, such that by 4 to 8 years after the original offense, these individuals have the same rates of crime as first-time offenders.[47]

> **The odds of re-offense decline significantly over time, such that by 4 to 8 years after the original offense, these individuals have the same rates of crime as first-time offenders."**

Further, the school should take care to evaluate each criminal record individually, considering the specific circumstances and how they will impact campus life. It is not enough to broadly conclude that any criminal record reflects poor moral character; instead, admissions should weigh the specific crime and circumstances against the positive impact of campus diversity, increasing access to education, and supporting rehabilitation and overall public safety.

FAIRNESS

Once the school has established the specific information it is collecting, it should take care to develop a process that limits the bias in admissions.

First, the request for criminal history should be made after conditional acceptance. Making the request after review of the initial application ensures that potential applicants are considered for admission with the same criteria and process as

---

47 Megan C. Kurlychek, Robert Brame, and Shawn D. Bushway, "Scarlet Letters and Recidivism: Does an Old Criminal Record Predict Future Offending?," Criminology & Public Policy 5, no. 3 (August 2006): pp. 483-504, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2006.00397.x; Alfred Blumstein and Kiminori Nakamura, "Redemption in the Presence of Widespread Criminal Background Checks," Criminology 47, no. 2 (2009): pp. 327-359, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2009.00155.x.

all applicants. It would also increase the number of completed applications, by moving the question of criminal history to after the initial application. Furthermore, reducing the number of records that admissions staff must review allows them to spend more time with each to carefully evaluate and weigh the individual circumstances of system involved applicants.

Second, individuals should not be required to supply their "official" record of criminal history. While the process differs state to state, in many cases it is expensive and complicated; for example, in New York, it can only be obtained by the individual in question (third parties are not authorized to obtain this information) and requires individuals to submit their fingerprints and wait three to four weeks for their record to be sent by mail.[48] Moreover, the record obtained by the individual will include information on all arrests, convictions, and sentences. Some versions will even include sealed or dismissed charges. This level of information is detailed far beyond what admissions officers need to know or, in some cases, are trained to understand and can unfairly bias them against applicants with a criminal record.

Finally, the applicant should be given free space to explain the circumstances of the conviction and personal growth since then. Instead of requiring the applicant to provide official records and statements about their conviction, consider requesting (but not requiring) documentation of their rehabilitation. This can include letters of recommendation, participation in programming, and personal statements.

TRANSPARENCY

Finally, the university should provide clear and detailed instructions to applicants on how to answer the question of criminal history and what that information will be used for. This will provide applicants with greater clarity on what documentation they need to provide and make it easier for admissions staff to review responses.

The question(s) on the applications should avoid ambiguous language and provide detailed guidance on which convictions should be disclosed. For example, there is a significant difference between asking, "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" and "Have you been convicted of or pleaded guilty to a felony in the past five years? Do not check 'yes' if the conviction occurred before the age of 19, if you were arrested but not convicted, or if your conviction was sealed, expunged, or overturned."

---

48 "Requesting Your New York State Criminal History," New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, accessed July 25, 2022, https://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/ojis/recordreview.htm.

A survey of SUNY campuses found that only one out of sixty had correct instructions informing applicants to check "no" to the question of criminal history if they were a Juvenile or Youthful Offender.[49] This leads many applicants to disclose information that they are not required to, overburdening both the applicant and admissions staff.

If schools choose to withdraw an offer of admission due to someone's criminal record, they should provide a written letter stating so with details as to the admissions staff's deliberation. This will provide the applicant with transparency on their application, allowing them to correct mistakes in their record and serve as the basis for appeal, if they so desire. In addition, this type of record keeping will help a school to periodically review their admissions decisions and process to reevaluate whether it is serving their goals.

Ensure That Admissions Counselors and Other Staff Involved in the Application Review Process Have Training Specific to System Involved Students

The use of criminal justice information is very different from the traditional information reviewed in a college application. Properly trained admissions staff are key to ensuring that a criminal record does not unfairly bias the admission decision and that formerly incarcerated applicants are treated with dignity. Training for admissions staff should include the following:

> **Properly trained admissions staff are key to ensuring that a criminal record does not unfairly bias the admission decision."**

- History and context of incarceration in the United States, particularly the disproportionate impact on low-income and people of color
- Awareness of barriers that formerly incarcerated individuals face upon reentry, particularly those that affect their ability to complete an application (see below section on Human Needs for greater detail)—this is a great opportunity to highlight the stories of those directly impacted and ground the process in the people behind the application
- How to use and interpret criminal justice information, particularly where multiple documents are required that may be burdensome to obtain
- A clear understanding of why the school is requesting criminal justice information and the specific circumstances under which it may prevent admission

---

49 "Boxed Out: Criminal History Screening and College Application Attrition" (Center for Community Alternatives, March 2015), https://communityalternatives.org/boxed-out/.

One important goal of this training is to break the stigma and disprove assumptions about formerly incarcerated individuals. For example, evidence shows that people convicted of violent offenses have the lowest rates of reoffending.[50] This runs counter to traditional thinking that those with a record of violent offenses are the most necessary to keep off campus. This type of evidence, coupled with human stories, will be critical for supporting an admissions process that is fair and equitable.

RECOGNIZE AND PRIORITIZE HUMAN NEEDS

For many formerly incarcerated individuals, human needs such as housing, food, and transportation are challenging to maintain. They face significant financial and logistical barriers to accessing affordable housing, gainful employment, and obtaining documents. This is especially relevant for individuals pursuing higher education. Not only does attending class limit the time an individual can work and earn an income, but the lack of resources to meet basic needs such as food and housing hinders someone from being able to fully participate in campus life and excel in their studies. Colleges and organizations can support formerly incarcerated students for success by recognizing the challenge they face in meeting those basic needs and helping to provide support and services.

The below section focuses on a few key needs that are of highest priority for formerly incarcerated students to have in place prior to matriculation. These and other needs will continue to be addressed later in the report as ongoing support for students during their time on campus. As always, institutions and organizations should engage directly with admitted students to support them in their unique circumstances.

Support Multiple Housing Options, Including On-campus Housing

"One of my big challenges was if I went back to my old neighborhood, I was walking into a revolving door right back into prison. … So the first challenge was 'where can I go to stay so that I could be successful and get away from the place that led me to prison?'."
—Angel Sanchez, Department of Justice Fellow

Housing is one of the greatest burdens for any individual upon release. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2008, formerly incarcerated people experienced homelessness at a rate nearly ten times that of the public, with the highest rates

---

50   Leonardo Antenangeli and Matthew R. Durose, "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008: A 10-Year Follow-Up Period (2008–2018)" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, September 2021), https://bjs.ojp.gov/BJS_PUB/rpr24s0810yfup0818/Web%20content/508%20compliant%20PDFs.

among those that had been released for less than a year.[51] Each year since 2015, more than 40 percent of people released from state prisons to New York City were released to a shelter or another placement for homeless adults.[52] There are many reentry organizations focused on providing housing, and colleges should work to identify and partner with them in addition to the steps below.

PROVIDE ON-CAMPUS HOUSING OPTIONS WHERE POSSIBLE

Colleges and universities have an important opportunity to support formerly incarcerated students by leveraging their own campus housing. Here are a few considerations schools should keep in mind when determining what housing they could provide that would meet the unique circumstances of formerly incarcerated students:

- Unlike traditional students, they may not have alternative housing during holiday and summer break. Housing should be available year-round.
- They may be more comfortable in an environment for adult learners and/ or other non-traditional students (for example, apartments or houses for graduate students versus dorms).
- Traditional college housing may feature regular substance and alcohol use, which may be damaging for students that are in recovery. Providing housing options, such as housing for students in recovery or wellness-focused housing, can be helpful.
- Students on parole may be subject to home visits by their parole officer. This may put other students living there at risk of criminal justice interaction. On-campus housing would mitigate this effect.

Formerly incarcerated students are not a monolith. They represent a wide range of ages, backgrounds, and preferences, and housing options for one may not work for all. It is important to consider the specific circumstances of students and be creative in housing options. NJ-STEP has piloted a few programs in on-campus housing for formerly incarcerated students that have shown the possibilities.

---

51 Lucius Couloute, "Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among Formerly Incarcerated People" (Prison Policy Initiative, August 2018), https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html.
52 Jacquelyn Simone, "State of the Homeless 2022: New York at a Crossroads" (Coalition for the Homeless, March 2022), https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/StateofThe-Homeless2022.pdf.

CASE STUDY: NJ-STEP HOUSING

The New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP) is an association of higher education institutions that works in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Corrections to provide education in prison courses and support reentry upon release. Rutgers University is one of their main partner colleges and has worked in conjunction with NJ-STEP to house formerly incarcerated students on-campus. Most commonly they will utilize existing housing for non-traditional students, such as recovery dorms or family housing.

One initiative piloted in 2016 was to house formerly incarcerated students at the Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC). HLLC is a social justice community with a mission of delivering "equitable, intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and transformative curricular experiences that seamlessly blend classroom and community."[53] Students who apply and are accepted to the program receive a full residential scholarship.

By starting with a few smaller pilots, NJ-STEP was able to successfully show how formerly incarcerated students can integrate into on-campus housing. As a result, Rutgers has been less concerned with liability questions and is opening more on-campus options to formerly incarcerated students.

NJ

---
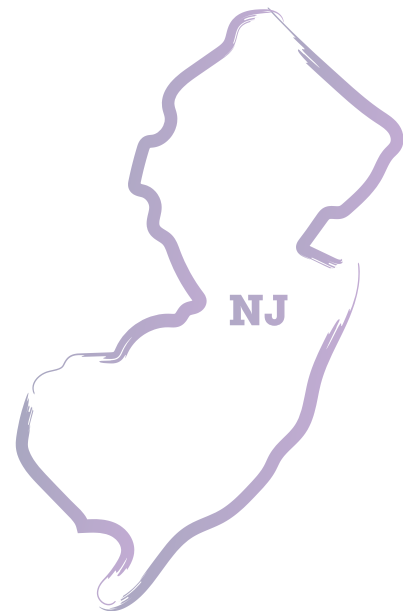
53 "About HLLC," Honors Living-Learning Community (Rutgers-Newark University), accessed July 25, 2022, https://live-ru-hllc-newark.pantheonsite.io/about-hllc/.

ACCOMMODATE THE POTENTIAL RESTRICTIONS OF OFF-CAMPUS HOUSING

Formerly incarcerated students who do not live on-campus have relatively limited options. In most cases, they do not have the means to afford their own stable housing. As a result, many will live in halfway homes or shelters that restrict their movement and ability to participate fully in campus life. Schools should be aware of these potential conflicts and accommodate students as much as possible.

Halfway house: Halfway houses are a common option for recently released individuals. However, many of these have programming and work requirements that may conflict with a class schedule. In addition, students living in a halfway house may require an accountability partner on campus to be allowed to attend class. Schools that are unaware of these requirements can unknowingly create more barriers for students.

Shelters: Many formerly incarcerated individuals will live in a shelter post-release. Each year since 2015, more than 40 percent of people released from state prisons to New York City were released to a shelter or another placement for homeless adults.[54] Shelters are not a stable, long-term solution for student housing because they often have curfews and movement restrictions that limit a student's ability to get to and from campus and attend campus events, and the living environment is not conducive to a regular sleep schedule, healthy study habits, and a focus on educational goals.

With family: Finally, many formerly incarcerated individuals will move in with family. In some cases, this may represent the best-case housing scenario. For others, it will be little more than a couch in an already overcrowded house. Living at home can also be emotionally and psychologically toxic because it can bring an individual back to the same environment they were in prior to incarceration. Family members may also not fully understand or support the individual's educational goals and pressure students to go back to work instead.

PROVIDE TRANSPORTATION TO CAMPUS

In conjunction with housing, transportation can be a key barrier to education. Many schools already offer transportation benefits for all students, most commonly subsidized public transit cards. These benefits should be extended to formerly incarcerated students. In many areas, however, public transit is not readily available. The Urban Innovation Lab at University of Texas assessed 52 U.S. cities for transit deserts (areas where the demand for transit outstrips supply) and found that all 52 cities reviewed contained transit deserts; in the most severely

---

54   Jacquelyn Simone, "State of the Homeless 2022: New York at a Crossroads" (Coalition for the Homeless, March 2022), https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/StateofThe-Homeless2022.pdf.

affected cities, as many as one in eight residents lived in a transit desert.[55] As this tends to affect low-income neighborhoods most adversely, institutions should think carefully about whether public transit alone will be enough for its students. In particular, if institutions are unwilling or unable to provide housing for students, the need for affordable and convenient transportation increases.

Creative solutions to the transportation problem do exist. Some organizations have developed their own "rideshares" by purchasing vehicles and providing shared rides either on demand or via a set schedule. Many schools have their own transportation services (both buses and on demand rides) and should marry their services with existing solutions in the community.

Understand and Accommodate Difficulty in Obtaining Required Documents, Including IDs and Transcripts

Formerly incarcerated individuals may have difficulty obtaining required documents for enrollment, including identification and prior education records. Many do not have access to documents, such as a birth certificate, needed to get a state ID. There are several organizations that work with incarcerated people to obtain IDs prior to their release. Currently, 17 states have in place laws to help incarcerated people get IDs either at release or immediately following.[56] While this is progress, circumstances differ, and schools should recognize and accommodate individuals who may not be able to provide all the necessary documents. Alternative documentation should be considered to at least start the enrollment process, such as expired identification from prior to incarceration or correctional IDs.

In addition, formerly incarcerated students will often have difficulty obtaining transcripts from other programs. If they took any classes while in prison, they may have a medley of records from different institutions (both prior to and during incarceration). This barrier can be mitigated by schools partnering with education in prison providers to create transfer agreements, where records from one school can be automatically transferred to the other. In general, it should not fall on the student alone to obtain and provide all their individual records. Schools should support them in reaching out to other institutions and be flexible in what documentation is required.

---

55   Junfeng Jiao and Chris Bischak, "Dozens of U.S. Cities Have 'Transit Deserts' Where People Get Stranded," Smithsonian Magazine, March 16, 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/dozens-us-cities-have-transit-deserts-where-people-get-stranded-180968463/.

56   "Providing Identification for Those Released from Incarceration" (National Conference of State Legislatures, April 7, 2022), https://www.ncsl.org/research/civil-and-criminal-justice/providing-identification-for-those-released-from-incarceration.aspx.

In Connecticut, education in prison programs take advantage of several existing partnerships and programs to seamlessly transfer credits upon release. A few of these include:

▶ **Public university system:** Existing transfer articulation agreements enable automatic transfer of credits from community college to four-year institutions.

▶ **Private institutions:** Quinnipiac University and Trinity College have a memorandum of understanding to facilitate transfer of credits for students that enroll in one school but transfer to another. The two universities also work collaboratively with Charter Oak State College (a public college) to provide a 2-year credential.

▶ **Out-of-state:** Southern New Hampshire University has lowered its barriers to transfer students, and in many cases, allows for automatic transfer of credits upon release. One way that they enable this is using digital badges and other stackable, workforce recognized credentials, in conjunction with credit hours.

CT
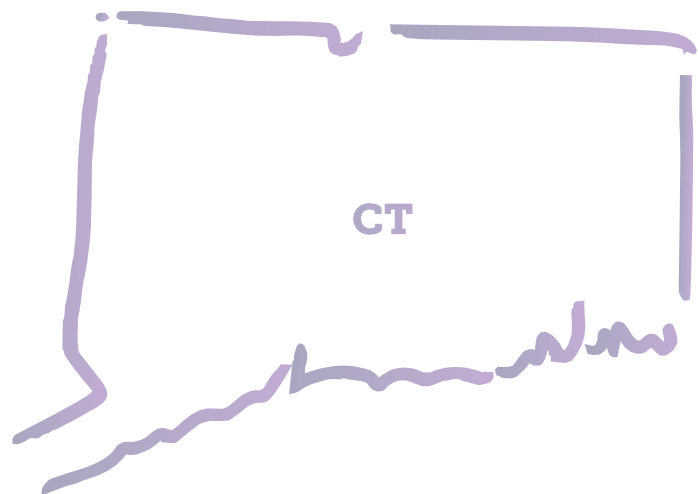
Provide Guidance on Financial Aid, Pell Grants and Otherwise

Financial aid, or the lack thereof, is a critical component of a students' ability to attend higher education. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) can be complicated for any individual to complete, particularly for formerly incarcerated students who may not have access to certain documentation. The Vera Institute of Justice has released Lessons from Second Chance Pell: A Toolkit for Helping Incarcerated Students Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. While this is geared towards currently incarcerated students, much of it applies to formerly incarcerated students as well.

A common hurdle that many formerly incarcerated students face when applying for federal financial aid is overcoming loan default. In some facilities, it is effectively impossible for an incarcerated borrower to manage their loans (for example, even picking up the phone to call their loan servicer is expensive and restricted). By some estimates, incarcerated individuals interested in enrolling in programs that are part of the Second Chance Pell experiment were twice as likely as the general population to be declined financial aid because of defaulted loans.[57] There are some existing processes to get out of loan default:

- **Loan rehabilitation:** Make nine monthly payments within a period of ten months. The repayment amount takes into account the borrower's annual income and expenses.
- **Loan consolidation:** Consolidate multiple loans into one, which allows the borrower to make only one payment each month and may extend the repayment time.

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Education announced the Fresh Start program, which will give borrowers with defaulted loans the opportunity to get their loans out of default. This will help provide a more supportive environment for system involved individuals to fairly access federal student financial aid. It will support individuals to be in a better financial position upon release.

Institutions and organizations working with formerly incarcerated students should be aware of these resources and provide specific, individualized guidance. While finances are a significant barrier to higher education, it is not insurmountable with the right guidance and support.

---

57   "U.S. Department of Education Announces Expansion of Second Chance Pell Experiment and Actions to Help Incarcerated Individuals Resume Educational Journeys and Reduce Recidivism," April 26, 2022. U.S. Department of Education. https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-expansion-second-chance-pell-program-and-actions-help-incarcerated-individuals-resume-educational-journeys-and-reduce-recidivism.

CASE STUDY: UNDERGROUND SCHOLARS INITIATIVE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA (UC), BERKELEY

The Underground Scholars Initiative was started by formerly incarcerated and system impacted students at UC Berkeley in 2013. The students led an initiative to gain funding from UC Berkeley student services fees that supported the hiring of a director, a transfer coordinator, and five formerly incarcerated students to manage the program in a small office within the university. The students continue to work to expand the program, and there are now Underground Scholars chapters at eight additional UC campuses.

Currently the Underground Scholars chapter at UC Berkeley is staffed by a full-time director and assistant director, along with several program coordinators. The program is funded via student services fees and private foundation grants. There are three prongs to the Underground Scholars model: Recruitment, Retention, and Advocacy.

Recruitment (Pre-enrollment Services)

▶ **Transfer Support:** Transfer advising and one-on-one support to currently and formerly incarcerated community college students. Services include transcript analysis, counseling, and application completion support. Over 90 percent of students that receive Underground Scholars transfer support are accepted to a school in the University of California system.

- **Transfer Coordinators:** A current student in a paid work-study position that receives special training from the admissions office on how to give advice and motivation to currently incarcerated students looking to transfer and enroll in the UC system post-release.

- **The Transfer Program** begins recruiting community college students in the spring to participate in transfer workshops and receive support and feedback on their application.

▶ **Incarcerated Scholars Program:** A work-study role for current students to answer letters from currently incarcerated people on how to apply to the Underground Scholars program.

- ▶ **Ambassador Program:** The Ambassador Program hires and trains over a dozen ambassadors at community colleges throughout the state. Ambassadors serve as a touchpoint to the Underground Scholars program, support and engage formerly incarcerated community college students, and connect them to useful resources regarding transferring to the UC system. The Ambassador Program runs from August to May each year.

- ▶ **Cross-enrollment:** Underground Scholars facilitates cross-enrollment into a UC Berkeley course for community college students to experience UC Berkeley life and improve their transfer application.

Retention (On-campus Services)

- ▶ **Space on Campus:** One former student described the office as, "A place I could go for anything, not just to talk to the staff but also to hang out with other students and get informal advice."

- ▶ **Tutors:** Underground Scholars connects students with tutors—often grad student volunteers - to help with coursework. This is one way Underground Scholars leverages allies in the student community.

- ▶ **Recovery Programming:** Partnerships with community-based organizations to provide these services to students to add to the existing UC Berkeley mental health services. Alumni also volunteer to come to campus weekly to hold Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. It has also begun to partner with the Collegiate Recovery Program on campus.

- ▶ **Financial Aid:** Underground Scholars provides direct employment for some students (for example, as Transfer Coordinators) and connects students to internship opportunities. It also provides stipends for books and other human needs.

Advocacy (Ongoing through the pipeline)

- ▶ **Policy Fellowship:** Six Underground Scholars are selected for a year-long policy training institute to learn about the policy process and engage in policy efforts at the state level.

- ▶ **Individual and System Advocacy:** Program staff provides advocacy and support for individual students who are facing barriers to education or employment or are on parole and probation. Underground Scholars advocates within the UC system to make UC campuses safer and more accessible for system involved students.

5. ENSURING POSTSECONDARY PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION FOR ADMITTED STUDENTS

As community colleges, colleges, and universities seek to build pathways from incarceration to degree attainment for formerly incarcerated students, they should consider the unique needs of system involved students attending their institutions. Many existing campus supports, like academic advising, mental health services, financial aid, mentorship programs, writing centers, and career services are crucial to the success of all students—including formerly incarcerated students. However, institutions should be aware that these existing supports may need to be modified or expanded to serve the specific needs of this student population. Institutions should look at their existing programming and see where they can meet the needs of formerly incarcerated students and where they may need to expand their programming or partner with an outside organization with a specific mission and area of expertise. Institutions can and should look at the support they provide to students with other marginalized identities on their campuses in the process of developing or expanding programming targeted to formerly incarcerated students.

For any institution, the first step in identifying the specific needs of system involved students should be asking the students themselves. The following support strategies are meant to illustrate some of the services that are specific to the needs of formerly incarcerated students and should be used in conjunction with discussions with students and directly impacted individuals to strengthen the on-campus supports and community partnerships that serve this student population. The three broad categories of student support detailed below are:

Continue prioritizing human needs as a prerequisite to education success

Develop an inclusive culture with dedicated community supports for formerly incarcerated students

Provide individualized academic and career supports

CONTINUE PRIORITIZING HUMAN NEEDS AS A PREREQUISITE TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

> *"You're not going to school if you don't have a place to sleep. You can't focus if you're not eating. So, you start there. I think it is fair to say in working with any students on campus, you have to take care of basic needs and resources before considering anything else. The problem with basic needs and resources is that colleges are not typically oriented to provide them, especially to students who have additional considerations like: family responsibilities, histories of trauma and/or addiction, parole supervision, etc."*
> —*Christopher J. Agans, Executive Director at NJ-STEP*

Without meeting basic human needs such as food, safe and secure housing, and employment or means to be financially secure, it is difficult for any student to be successful in the classroom. This is, of course, true for formerly incarcerated students as well. Stable housing and transportation are ongoing and dynamic issues that continue as students matriculate into institutions of higher education, so the previously suggested strategies for housing and transportation pre-enrollment remain pertinent and should continue to be referenced throughout a student's academic career. Another emerging basic need is broadband and technology access and support.[58] Formerly incarcerated students rarely have access to digital literacy training opportunities while incarcerated, but they require these skills when they reenter communities.[59] Without digital literacy skills, these learners often struggle to demonstrate evidence of or obtain transcripts for learning that took place while incarcerated. When looking to start or expand any learning program for formerly incarcerated students, ensuring that students' human needs are met should be the first consideration.

Be Aware of Food Insecurity and Proactively Provide Food Resources to Students

Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to adequate, nutritionally balanced, and safe foods that can be obtained in socially acceptable ways, is a growing problem at institutions of higher education.[60] Studies suggest that between

---

58 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, Advancing Digital Equity for All: Community-Based Recommendations for Developing Effective Digital Equity Plans to Close the Digital Divide and Enable Technology-Empowered Learning, Washington, DC, 2022.

59 Ibid.

60 "Definitions of Food Security" (USDA Economic Research Service), accessed July 25, 2022, https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/.

10 and 50 percent of American students in higher education are food insecure.[61] Issues of food security are especially salient with student populations who are low-income, are first-generation college students, lack adequate housing, or receive Pell Grants—characteristics that are also common among formerly incarcerated students.[62,63] While this need is not specific to only formerly incarcerated students, consistent and safe access to adequate food is fundamental to student success and basic livelihood. To address food insecurity, college campuses should take a three-pronged approach as outlined in the U.S. Government Accountability Office's 2018 report on food insecurity among U.S. college students: educating faculty, staff, and students about the issue, providing students with free food and/or access to food resources, and coordinating student services to help students apply to federal and state benefits.[64]

Between 10% and 50% of American students in higher education are food insecure.

EDUCATING FACULTY, STAFF, AND STUDENTS

Faculty, staff, and students must be aware that food insecurity is a common concern among some students—institutions of higher education have addressed this through education during student orientations, staff and faculty trainings, distribution of resources about food insecurity and the food resources available on and around campus, and the inclusion of short notes about food insecurity and resources in course syllabuses. Faculty, staff, and students should be educated about the stigma associated with accessing food resources along with an overview of the issue. Schools can also offer courses on both food and financial literacy to educate students about preparing healthy meals at a low cost.

PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH FREE FOOD AND/OR ACCESS TO FOOD RESOURCES

- **Including Food in Financial Aid Packages:** Colleges should consider offering subsidized or free food as part of financial aid packages for formerly incarcerated students. This solution ensures convenient, consistent access to quality food in a way that partnerships with food pantries and meal donation services cannot. Also, this option helps to remove any stigmas associated with being food insecure as many students use the cafeteria and there would be no indication that one student was getting free food while another was paying.

---

61 "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits" (U.S. Government Accountability Office, December 2018), https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-95.pdf.
62 Ibid.
63 Aseel El Zein et al., "Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity among U.S. College Students: A Multi-Institutional Study," BMC Public Health 19, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6943-6.
64 "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits" (U.S. Government Accountability Office, December 2018), https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-95.pdf.

- **Cash Assistance:** Emergency funds set aside for students through small grants, loans, or grocery gift cards that are available to students for one-time food emergencies.
- **Food Pantries:** Schools that have existing food pantries on campus should make them easily accessible to all students. Schools can also partner with local food banks and food pantries to provide this service on campus in an easily identifiable location. Schools can also provide information about local food pantries and soup kitchens to students during enrollment.
- **Meal Donation Programs:** Students who are food secure can donate or share any additional "meal swipes" at institutions of higher education that have food services on campus.

COORDINATING SERVICES TO HELP STUDENTS APPLY TO FEDERAL AND STATE BENEFITS

Campuses can use schools of social work, student services, or partnerships with nonprofit organizations to help students navigate the process for applying for government benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Institutions should be aware that eligibility for SNAP for formerly incarcerated students varies state-by-state. More information about state availability can be found at https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-directory.

Ensure Students Have Access to a Variety of Employment Opportunities

Obtaining gainful employment post-release is incredibly important both in satisfying parole and probation requirements and in ensuring that a student can support themselves throughout their educational journey. For many formerly incarcerated students, finding and maintaining employment is a part of their probation and parole requirements and is necessary to achieve before matriculation. Beyond parole and probation requirements, students need employment to pay for their living expenses. Work experience related to a student's field of study can also ease the transition into that field post-graduation—and offering credits for academic related work can help with retention and graduation.

PART-TIME WORK

In many states, reentry providers are a first step toward finding part-time employment. Institutions can and should look to partner with these organizations to provide students help with finding employment. In addition, institutions can look for and partner with nongovernmental organizations and community-based organizations that specialize in employment for system involved individuals. There

are also employers that specifically recruit formerly incarcerated individuals and these employers both offer jobs to prospective students and help with satisfying other release requirements.

FEDERAL WORK-STUDY (FWS)

Institutions of higher education must make FWS jobs reasonably available to all eligible students at the school including formerly incarcerated students. For students, work-study jobs are often the most flexible with academic requirements. They have the added benefit of being located on or near campus, and they can provide students with another way to be a part of the campus community. For institutions planning to provide a designated space for formerly incarcerated students to gather and meet, which is recommended by this report, the space can be partially staffed by formerly incarcerated students through work-study. Just like any other student with work-study, formerly incarcerated students must have the opportunity to pick the employment that is best suited to their personal and professional goals.

FELLOWSHIPS/SCHOLARSHIPS

Students should also be aware of fellowships, scholarships, and other opportunities that can help offset the cost of their education and their daily expenses. Institutions can offer scholarships geared toward formerly incarcerated students, but students should also be encouraged to apply to other relevant scholarships based on their interests, backgrounds, or needs. Organizations that work specifically with formerly incarcerated individuals may offer fellowships to this student population that both offer payment and work experience at the organizations. In listing on-campus opportunities such as research assistants, teaching fellows, and tutoring roles, institutions should make clear that these opportunities are available to all students regardless of background. Some formerly incarcerated students have also reported making money through awareness campaigns and speaking engagements, which institutions can look to sponsor and support.

Consider and Accommodate Parole and Probation Requirements

"Once you're out, you want to stay connected to the pursuit of education[,] but you can easily get lost in the shuffle of life—parole and probation and staying out of prison come into play. It is important to have a program model that helps students meet their needs."
—Terrence Coffie, Adjunct Lecturer at New York University, Silver School of Social Work

In 2020, almost 4 million American adults were under community supervision, a term that describes people on probation or parole, making up almost two percent of the American population.[65] At the time of release from prison, an estimated 80 percent of the formerly incarcerated are under a period of supervision.[66] While intended to support the formerly incarcerated in their successful transition back into society, these programs often have strict stipulations that, when violated, can be a ticket straight back to prison.[67] Therefore, any organization that is working with formerly incarcerated individuals must be aware of the stipulations of community supervision and take them very seriously. For institutions of higher education, this can mean writing letters of support to parole or probation officers detailing a student's academic schedule and the times the student is required to be on campus. On campuses where alcohol and drug use are common, formerly incarcerated students are at risk of violating community supervision when in the presence of students using these substances, even if they themselves are not, so campuses should work to ensure they have access to substance-free spaces. Some common parole or probation stipulations that would impact formerly incarcerated students include: reporting in person to probation or parole officers, staying within a designated location area, getting and keeping a job, maintaining the same housing location or employment, refraining from drug or alcohol use, staying away from weapons, paying fees, taking blood or urine tests, and generally obeying all state and local laws.[68]

Appreciate the Need for Legal Services for System Involved Students

"Justice involved students need access to a lawyer to get advice on legal issues like expunging their record or having landlord issues due to their conviction history. You can't replace legal services with anything else – you can't ask your student activities office or your dean of students to step in and help with legal issues. It just has to be a lawyer."
—Dr. Bradley D. Custer, Senior Policy Analyst, Center for American Progress

The need for legal aid for system involved students may arise due to continued interactions with the criminal justice system through community supervision programs and their history of conviction. On many campuses, legal aid is not provided. Formerly incarcerated students may be interested in obtaining legal aid

65   Danielle Kaeble, "Probation and Parole in the United States, 2020" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2021), https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/ppus20.pdf.
66   "Max Out: The Rise in Prison Inmates Released Without Supervision" (Pew Charitable Trusts, June 4, 2014), https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2014/06/04/max-out.
67   Jake Horowitz, "1 In 55 U.S. Adults Is on Probation or Parole," The Pew Charitable Trusts, October 31, 2018, https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2018/10/31/1-in-55-us-adults-is-on-probation-or-parole.
68   "Probation and Parole Requirements," Prison Fellowship, August 28, 2018, https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/reentry-ministry/ministry-basics/probation-and-parole-requirements/.

to learn about expungement or exiting community supervision requirements. In this arena, institutions should look to partner with outside organizations or legal services that are interested in providing this to students. Institutions with law schools can also partner with legal scholars, law school professors, and law student groups to provide legal aid to formerly incarcerated students.

Support and Understand Students' Childcare Needs

Childcare is another area of support that may be helpful to some formerly incarcerated students. Institutions of higher education should leverage existing support for nontraditional students to help with childcare needs. The most successful models of childcare for nontraditional students include offering childcare on campus to watch children while their parents or guardians are in class, but this is not available on every campus; less than 50 percent of community colleges and public four-year colleges offer campus childcare centers.[69] As a promising practice, institutions should offer childcare or partner with an organization that does offer childcare. At the very least, institutions, faculty, staff, and students should be aware of and flexible to the needs of student-parents.

LESS THAN 50%
of community colleges
and public 4Y colleges

offer campus
childcare
centers

DEVELOP AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE WITH DEDICATED COMMUNITY SUPPORTS FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED STUDENTS

A warm, welcoming, supportive campus community is a helpful steppingstone to success for students of all backgrounds and experiences, and formerly incarcerated students are no exception. Institutions should have mission statements and programming that demonstrates that they believe diversity adds value to their campus. As formerly incarcerated students may face additional stigmas beyond that of other students, institutions should proactively educate staff, faculty, and the student body about the benefits of having formerly incarcerated students on campus. Institutions should also establish support systems for the challenges that formerly incarcerated students face once enrolled. To build the most inclusive and welcoming campus possible, institutions should engage with enrolled students who are system involved and be responsive to the needs of the students represented on their campuses.

---

69 Eleanor Eckerson et al., "Child Care for Parents in College: A State-by-State Assessment" (Institute for Women's Policy Research, September 2016), https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/child-care-for-parents-in-college.pdf.

Facilitate the Creation of a Campus Culture that Welcomes Students of Diverse Backgrounds

Students who are system involved report feeling marginalized on campus due to existing stigmas among the faculty, staff, and student body. Campus members may have internalized false or incomplete narratives about the lives of people who have been imprisoned. If a campus wants to create a welcoming environment for formerly incarcerated students, it is the job of the institution to educate people. To do so, an institution may consider partnering with an organization that has expertise in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; collaborating with an organization that deeply understands the experience of system involved individuals; or looking to departments that have faculty with expertise in this area.

SHOWCASE WRITTEN COMMITMENTS ON DIVERSITY

"First and foremost, campuses should have an inclusivity statement right on their door that says, 'we welcome everyone.' It should be apparent that the campus values formerly incarcerated students."

—*Dr. Noel Vest, Instructor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science, Stanford University School of Medicine*

Institutions of higher learning often have inclusivity statements as part of their mission and values. These statements serve as some of the first materials that a student receives before enrollment and are often visibly displayed on the campus. Whether an inclusivity statement is broad, outlining the value of a diverse campus, or detailed, specifically calling for inclusion and respect for named marginalized groups on campus, such as system involved students, it is a welcoming sight for underrepresented students. Institutions of higher education should also encourage faculty to include diversity statements on their syllabi especially those that show that the faculty member understands that some student identity groups face additional challenges in accessing the material or completing work.

DEVELOP OUTREACH AND AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

Institutions should create awareness and outreach campaigns for the student body, staff, faculty, and surrounding community to educate the campus about using an asset-based lens to think about system involved people. It must be clear that these efforts have the full backing of the university and its leadership. When the University of Washington- Tacoma was in the beginning phases of launching a program for formerly incarcerated students on campus, they held a film screening showcasing the potential of formerly incarcerated people. It was widely publicized by the university, open to the public, and culminated in a panel discussion led by system involved people. Institutions should be responsive to their community and student body and build awareness campaigns according to the needs of those they serve.

CASE STUDY: THE PETEY GREENE PROGRAM TUTOR TRAINING

The Petey Greene Program offers free tutoring support to currently and formerly incarcerated students. It is the largest tutoring program of its kind and has served more than 16,000 students with more than 3,200 volunteer tutors since its founding in 2008. To prepare the volunteer tutors for their roles, the Petey Greene Program offers training to help volunteers understand the criminal justice system and address their own biases. There are three types of training.

- ▶ **Pre-service training includes:**
  - Historical background of the modern criminal justice system and models of prison education;
  - How to avoid using a punitive lens to solve social problems and to understand the theory of change as it applies to the criminal justice system;
  - Information on reentry and the collateral impacts of incarceration;
  - Training on the role of the tutor and the use of educational technology; and
  - Training on being an ethical and intentional, trauma-responsive volunteer.
- ▶ **In-Service training** gives volunteers the skills and content to enhance the tutoring practice.
- ▶ **Justice Education Series** in which volunteers learn about how system involved people are advocating for systemic change.

Create a Dedicated Space for System Involved Students to Gather and Build Community

"Physical space is really crucial because being formerly incarcerated is an invisible, stigmatized identity. People often hide this part of their identity in public because of the pejorative characteristics that are attached to the identity. People need a space where they can identify with one another and explore identity together especially during the first year transition to campus culture."

—Dr. Christopher Beasley, Assistant Professor, University of Washington Tacoma, School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences

On-campus, system involved students should have a place to gather to develop peer-to-peer networks, gain cultural and academic support, and feel comfortable to be themselves. System involved students often report relying on each other for information, guidance, and motivation. There are a few elements that are common across successful programs: space on campus, at least one full-time staff member, peer-to-peer groups, a mentorship program, and a bank of resources that are useful to system involved students.

Space on Campus: A space to gather is key to student success—it does not have to be large, but it should have enough room for students to sit together and complete work. The space should act as both a formal gathering place for resources and important meetings and an informal space where students are able to share experiences and ask important questions.

Staff Member: A staff member who works with formerly incarcerated students can act as a liaison between students and the university, connect students with support on campus, and facilitate community amongst students. This person acts as a trusted ear and confidante for many students. In some of the most successful programs, spaces on campus for formerly incarcerated students are staffed by students who have recently graduated and are formerly incarcerated themselves.

Peer-to-Peer Groups: Similar to other underrepresented groups on campus, system involved students should be encouraged to form clubs and support groups to help their members navigate the sometimes complex and challenging systems in place in institutions of higher education. Depending on the campus, this may even be an opportunity to invite allies who may be system impacted and/or are passionate about justice reform.

Mentorship Program: Institutions should look to develop a mentorship program to showcase the wealth of opportunities for formerly incarcerated people in higher education and beyond. System involved mentors can also connect people to broader social networks that can be helpful in the future.
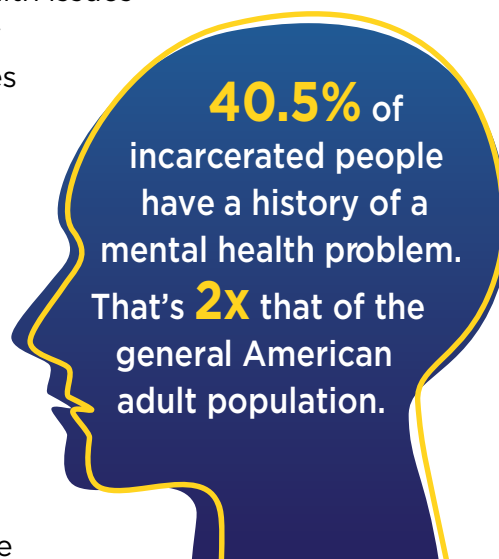
Resource Bank: Students need access to many different types of resources as demonstrated by this guide, and these resources should be listed and easily located within a dedicated space on campus.

Offer Mental Health Services to Meet the Needs of System Involved Students

"Most people coming home from prison have experienced trauma, trauma before going to prison that was only exacerbated by being in prison. There is also, unfortunately, a level of distrust of mental health services. The way mental health services are implemented in prison is very different from how they are implemented in the community. Once students use mental health services on campus and understand the confidentiality agreements, they find them really helpful."

—Regina Diamond-Rodriguez, Director of Transitions at NJ-STEP

Individuals who have interacted with the criminal justice system are disproportionately more likely to suffer from mental illness and substance use disorders. According to a study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics done in 2016, 40.5 percent of incarcerated people have a history of a mental health problem, twice that of the general American adult population.[70] The Bureau of Justice Statistics' most recent report on substance use disorder, conducted in 2007, states that 63 percent of incarcerated people have substance use disorders related to illicit drugs, ten times that of all Americans aged 12 or older.[71,72] Substance use disorders and mental health issues can also be co-occurring, so there is likely overlap between people with mental health issues and people with substance use disorders. Without any doubt, substance use disorder and mental health issues are significantly more prevalent within the criminal justice system than outside of it. In the United States, for many people, incarceration is related to mental illness and substance use disorders— and American correction systems do not provide adequate care to incarcerated people suffering from these health issues.[73] In addition to substance use disorders and mental health problems existing before incarceration, people who are incarcerated experience traumas throughout their time interacting with the criminal justice system. Institutions of higher education must be aware of the significant mental health and substance use

40.5% of incarcerated people have a history of a mental health problem.

That's **2x** that of the general American adult population.

---

70 Laura M. Maruschak, Jennifer Bronson, and Mariel Alper, "Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 2021), https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/imhprpspi16st.pdf.

71 Jennifer Bronson et al., "Drug Use, Dependence, and Abuse Among State Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2007-2009" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2020), https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/dudaspji0709.pdf.

72 "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), October 2021), https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt35325/NSDUHFFRPDFWHTMLFiles2020/2020NSDUHFFR1PDFW102121.pdf.

73 Jennifer Bronson et al., "Drug Use, Dependence, and Abuse Among State Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2007-2009" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2020), https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/dudaspji0709.pdf.

challenges that formerly incarcerated people face and be prepared to offer services to support them and should proactively work with the mental health service providers on campus, community-based services, and formerly incarcerated student groups to make these services available to students.

COUNSELING

Many campuses strive to offer robust mental health resources for students in need – and this is a critical area of support for formerly incarcerated individuals who are interested in pursuing higher education.[74] System involved students report that these existing services can be extremely helpful. At campus mental health centers, formerly incarcerated students report that they are treated and viewed as students first.[75] They report that this stands in contrast to many mental health supports offered in and outside of prison by corrections support staff, where students feel that they are treated through a criminogenic lens.[76] While formerly incarcerated students may be reluctant to try the mental health services on campus due to historical lack of trust of mental health providers in prison, they should be encouraged to avail themselves of these resources and be informed about privacy protections for students seeking counseling.

There are some challenges to utilizing existing campus mental health resources. On some campuses, existing counseling services may not be equipped to handle the level of trauma that formerly incarcerated students have experienced. On others, the campus may provide only a few free counseling sessions per student per year, which may not be enough to serve students with higher needs. In these instances, on-campus counselors should be aware of providers that would better serve formerly incarcerated students and connect students to these providers.

SUPPORT GROUPS

Like counseling resources, student support groups or community support groups can be helpful to system involved students seeking mental health services. For students in recovery, these supports can be especially helpful in creating a community of support on campuses where drug and alcohol use is prevalent. Many campuses have existing support groups for students looking to share stories, experiences, and common challenges related to a particular topic and prevent students from struggling alone. For certain topics, students may need to look outside the campus community for support. On-campus mental health services should be ready to refer students to support groups both on-campus and in the community depending on any given student's need. Support groups are often offered by nonprofits, community organizations, clinics, and hospitals.

---

74   Vernisa Donaldson and Christopher Viera, "College After Prison: A Review of the Literature on Barriers and Supports to Postsecondary Education for Formerly Incarcerated College Students." (City University of New York Office of Research, Evaluation, and Program Support, September 2021)
75   Interviews with formerly incarcerated students (2022, June-July).
76   Ibid.

PROVIDE INDIVIDUALIZED ACADEMIC AND CAREER SUPPORTS

For many students, the ultimate goal of a postsecondary education is academic success leading to full employment in an industry and role of a student's choice. Once a student's basic human needs are met and they are welcomed by a supportive community on campus, the foundation is set for future success. However, formerly incarcerated students have often had interrupted schooling experiences due to incarceration at a young age, prison transfers, frequent changes within prison educational programs, and a lack of consistency in program delivery in prison. These factors mean they may benefit from additional academic and career guidance. Many institutions of higher learning already have programming in place meant to ease students' transition to postsecondary education, especially for students whose backgrounds may make their prior academic, social, and cultural experiences different from most of the student body. Institutions of higher learning should look to existing academic support services on campus first, and then determine if there is additional programming necessary to support the unique needs of system involved students.

Offer Academic Support to Formerly Incarcerated Students through Transitional Programing and Ongoing Counseling

"I've spoken to formerly incarcerated people who say, 'I was inside when everything went online and suddenly that's how I was expected to do everything. We need our own orientation, because I need to know everything about how to use Blackboard and I feel like a fool asking in front of other people.' You need a safe space for people to ask questions about things they're not familiar with."
—Stephanie Bazell, Director of Policy and Advocacy, College & Community Fellowship

Schools that have successfully supported formerly incarcerated students in the past have used transitional programming, academic advising, and peer-to-peer networks to assist students in meeting their academic goals. Transitional programming is typically a few weeks of courses meant to acclimate a student to campus life. Even if this is not possible for all institutions, the courses and workshops offered during transitional programming can be offered during orientation or as one-off courses throughout the school year. Typical programs may include:

- Goal Setting workshops
- Psychosocial workshops to prepare for college entry
- Degree options and associated careers
- Coursework information for various majors and minors
- Digital skills and literacy development opportunities
- Tutorials on course registration, educational software, and other common programs and applications
- Course selection help
- Programming on licensing requirements that may preclude them from certain career paths, dependent on state-specific legislations (as discussed in a previous section)

Postsecondary institutions should also be cognizant of the different types of academic programming available during incarceration and be willing to adapt their credit system to give formerly incarcerated students credit for the academic coursework they completed pre-release. By awarding credit for learning opportunities that students took advantage of while incarcerated, schools will help students move toward degree attainment more quickly.

Ensure that Career Services are Equipped to Help System Involved Students

Formerly incarcerated students benefit from career services just as any other student working toward a postsecondary degree, but they may need tailored support because of resume gaps, background checks, and state-by-state regulations. Students who have spent time within the criminal justice system may have long, unexplained gaps on their resumes and would benefit from working with a career advisor that specializes in advice for nontraditional students. Depending on state regulations, formerly incarcerated students may also need training in how to answer questions on background checks and criminal history, and which careers may have additional barriers in place for formerly incarcerated people. Career services can also be helpful in providing helpful suggestions around how to use an asset-based approach to discussing time in prison during an interview. Finally, formerly incarcerated students may benefit from workshops on workplace essentials and typical etiquette to help them succeed once they are in the workplace.

6. CONCLUSION AND WHAT'S NEXT

Education can have a transformative effect on individuals who are able to take advantage of it. A university environment can greatly enrich an individual's life, exposing them to new ways of thinking and opening doors to opportunities for economic mobility and societal contribution. Not only are these important and necessary opportunities to provide for system involved students, but formerly incarcerated students also bring a unique and diverse perspective that enriches campus life for all students.

Higher education institutions and organizations that work with formerly incarcerated students have an important role to play in increasing access to higher education for system involved students and ensuring they have the necessary support to complete their degree. Doing so facilitates successful reentry, strengthens communities, and promotes equity and equal opportunity. While there has been progress made to expand higher education opportunities for formerly incarcerated students, analysis of today's landscape reveals that there are still significant barriers in place.

The U.S. Department of Education encourages college and university officials to look beyond the box. While the first step is refraining from collecting and using criminal justice information, it is important to go beyond that and recognize the significant barriers that students still face. Colleges and universities must work to build inclusive and welcoming cultures, prioritize human needs, and ensure that their academic, career, and student services are equipped to work with system involved students. This is the first step to building a more equitable society for all justice system involved individuals.

Moving forward, there are several areas where more work, thought, or research is needed.

1. Placing Beyond the Box within a continuum, starting with education in prison, through education post-release (the current scope of Beyond the Box), and into employment and career opportunities.

2. The role of government and policy. The focus of this report is on what education institutions and organizations can do, but less so on the crucial role that the federal government has to play. Similar to the Underground Scholars three-prong approach (Recruitment, Retention, Advocacy), what are the policies that will make the biggest difference, and what support could the federal government and the Department be providing?

3. Incorporating metrics and goals. Data is crucial to understand program success and collecting student outcome data for programs that serve formerly incarcerated students is essential for analyzing successes and opportunities for improvement.

7. RESOURCES

This list of resources is non-exhaustive but provides additional guidance and support for formerly incarcerated students and the postsecondary institutions and organizations working with them.

FEDERAL RESOURCES

National Reentry Resource Center

https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/

A website funded and administered by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance that acts as the primary source of information and guidance in reentry. It supports the Clean Slate Clearinghouse and the National Inventory of Collateral Consequences linked below:

Clean Slate Clearinghouse

https://cleanslateclearinghouse.org/

Provides information on juvenile and adult criminal record clearance policies in all U.S. states and territories. Designed for use by people with criminal records, legal service providers, reentry providers, and state policymakers.

National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction

https://niccc.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/

Database that identifies and categorizes the statutes and regulations that impose collateral consequences in all 50 states and the federal system.

Reentry Education Toolkit

https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/reentryedtoolkit

A toolkit created by the U.S. Department of Education to support education providers in implementing the Reentry Education Framework.

NONFEDERAL RESOURCES

Center for American Progress

https://www.americanprogress.org/

The Center for American Progress is a public policy research and advocacy institute headquartered in Washington, DC. The higher education team has an arm that studies barriers to postsecondary degree attainment for system involved students.

College and Community Fellowship

https://www.collegeandcommunity.org/

The College and Community Fellowship, located in New York, addresses barriers to re-entry for system involved women and supports their successful transition to postsecondary education.

Council of State Governments Justice Center

https://csgjusticecenter.org/

The Council of State Governments Justice Center is a national nonprofit that focuses on public safety and strengthening communities. The Corrections and Reentry team works to improve reentry services by offering technical assistance to local governments and nonprofits, developing legislative reforms, and research issues related to the criminal justice system.

Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network

http://www.ficgn.org/

The Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network works to create a community and social network for formerly incarcerated people, advocate for criminal justice policy, and support educational opportunities for system involved individuals.

Foundation for California Community Colleges

https://foundationccc.org/

The Foundation for California Community Colleges supports the California Community College System. The Rising Scholars Network, now housed within the foundation, specifically works with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students within the California Community College System

Jobs For the Future

https://www.jff.org/

Jobs for the Future works to support economic mobility for the American workforce. The organization provides technical training and develops community partnerships to help system involved people access education and workforce development.

Michelson 20MM

https://20mm.org/

The Michelson 20MM foundation is focused on increasing education access and success in higher education. The smart justice initiative supports currently and formerly incarcerated students as they enter higher education.

New America

https://www.newamerica.org/

New America is a public policy research and advocacy institute headquartered in Washington, DC, and Oakland, CA. The higher education team conducts policy research to promote college access for historically underserved students.

Operation Restoration

https://www.or-nola.org/

Operation Restoration supports women impacted by incarceration. They pioneered the advocacy that led to Louisiana's passing of Ban the Box legislation that prohibited public colleges in the state from asking criminal history questions. The organization also supported partners in other states to pass similar legislation.

Second Chance Educational Alliance

https://scea-inc.org/

The Second Chance Educational Alliance is an education-based reentry program located in Connecticut with a focus on expanded postsecondary opportunities for system involved students.

The Doe Fund

https://www.doe.org/

The Doe Fund is an organization that works to prevent homelessness and recidivism for formerly incarcerated men in New York.

The Education Trust

https://edtrust.org/

The Education Trust is a national nonprofit that works to support educational attainment for students of color and students from low-income families through research and advocacy. The organization's Justice Fellows Policy Program provides fellowships to formerly incarcerated graduates to engage in state legislative advocacy efforts and publish reports.

The Petey Greene Program

https://www.peteygreene.org/

The Petey Greene Program provides tutoring to currently and formerly incarcerated students through a volunteer tutoring program.

Vera Institute of Justice

https://www.vera.org/

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit national research and policy organization in the United States, with a focus on criminal justice reform. It provides technical assistance to stakeholders, incubates pilot programs, and publishes resources and analysis.

INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAMS

This list does not encompass all programs for system involved students. This is meant to provide a sample of programs for reference and further exploration.

Bard Prison Initiative
Bard College, New York
https://bpi.bard.edu/

Institute for Justice and Opportunity
John Jay College, New York
https://justiceandopportunity.org/

Jesuit Social Research Institute
Loyola University New Orleans, Louisiana
https://jsri.loyno.edu/

New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP)
Rutgers University, Princeton University, Drew University, and Raritan Valley Community College
https://njstep.newark.rutgers.edu/

Project Rebound
California State University (CSU) system, currently at 14 campuses
https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/project-rebound
(website varies)

Underground Scholars
University of California (UC) system, currently at 9 campuses
https://undergroundscholars.berkeley.edu/ (website varies based on UC campus)