Education for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Program

ACTIONS

1. Establish Transcript-Sharing for Incarcerated Students

Incarcerated students’ transcripts can be difficult to obtain, often requiring requests sent by mail and often include fees. Therefore, California community colleges seek to amend Title V to allow students in custody to request official transcripts from California community colleges free of charge and allow an institution to request official transcripts from previous institutions on behalf of the incarcerated student with a release form. Such legislation would further increase college success rates for incarcerated students.

2. Fund Instructional Technology in Prison

As nonincarcerated students transitioned to online distance learning due to COVID-19, incarcerated students suffered long lags in communication with professors. COVID-19 highlighted that incarcerated students lack access to basic technology, with only a handful of PCs with Word processing software available to students in each prison and in many cases no internet access.

CDCR has prepared a technology infrastructure plan for each prison. The plan allows access to laptops at seven institutions (including the CRC) beginning in the spring of 2022. California community colleges educating incarcerated students supported the approval of a budget item that would provide an incarcerated student with a laptop approved by CDCR.

3. Staff Community College-Juvenile Hall Partnerships

SB 716 (2019) gave community colleges the opportunity to offer comprehensive courses in juvenile correctional facilities. RCCD’s experience with bringing college to prisons demonstrated that programs require specialized personnel who can navigate institutional obstacles, providing appropriate social, emotional and educational support. Therefore, RCCD requests funding for personnel to partner with Riverside County Probation at the Youth Treatment Educational Center to create a program for youth, similar to the successful program for adults at CRC-Norco.

4. Fund Justice-Involved Mentorships and Apprenticeships

Formerly justice-involved students are a vulnerable population. These individuals have the added pressure of securing housing, food, and even a job as a condition of their parole. We believe justice-involved students are best supported by former justice-involved individuals – individuals who do not stigmatize their past, who empathize with their situation and who can ultimately serve as a role model. Throughout the state, former justice-involved students are successfully mentoring in informal clubs at community colleges. These students deserve institutional support, training and compensation.

The lack of employment and access to financial aid resources can be one of the greatest barriers to obtaining a certificate, degree, or even reoffending. California can advance the hard work of formerly incarcerated students by developing a program to train and compensate justice-involved mentors. Additionally, creating formal pipelines between California community colleges and second-chance friendly industries through apprenticeships will enable justice-involved students to turn their academic experiences into career success. Therefore, RCCD supports the Governor’s January Budget Proposal of $10 million for the Rising Scholars Network to support mentorship and apprenticeship education opportunities.

5. Establish Process for Issuing State Identification for Incarcerated Students

Obtaining state-issued identification for the purposes of applying for financial aid can be challenging for many incarcerated students. Often original identification
documents have been lost over time and physically leaving a detention facility in order to apply for new identification utilizing current processes is not an option for many in custody. Without financial aid, justice-involved students are disenfranchised and blocked from pursuing their higher education goals. Such legislation would further increase access to college and success rates for incarcerated students.

ISSUE

In the last seven years, California community colleges have raised up to meet voter mandates to restore justice-involved individuals into their communities through rehabilitative programming. Since the passage of SB 1391 (2014), thousands of students have matriculated to face-to-face Associate Degree for Transfer programs offered within state prisons. And, community college justice-involved students have access to targeted support programs; many of these programs were built upon on-campus networks through the Rising Scholars Network with linked support to the UC Underground Scholars Program and CSU Project Rebound. These programs achieved phenomenal successes while exposing institutional gaps in support for this vulnerable student population. In October 2021, the Governor signed AB 417 (2021) which formally establishes the Rising Scholars Network as a categorical program at up to 50 community colleges, providing support services for justice-involved students. To better serve incarcerated students, community college leadership will continue to push to remove limited access to technology and bring support programs inside institutions.

BACKGROUND

Since fall 2017, Norco College has partnered with the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco (CRC-Norco) to offer the Associate Degree for Transfer program to incarcerated individuals. CRC-Norco is a Level-II, medium-security institution with a bed capacity of 2,500. Norco College is serving 300-plus students per term and has awarded 88 associate degrees and ADTs. Currently 30-plus courses that meet IGETC requirements, ADT in Business and ADT in Sociology are offered at CRC-Norco.

While COVID-19 protocols interrupted face-to-face courses at CRC-Norco, Norco College persisted with correspondence courses to keep students on track. Because of the success of the Associate Degree for Transfer program, Pitzer College launched a bachelor’s degree completion program in fall of 2020, furthering educational opportunities for justice-involved student success.

As Norco College developed its prison program, Moreno Valley College and Riverside City College established programs to serve justice-involved students. Riverside County is home to approximately 6% of the state’s parole population. Each of the Riverside Community College District colleges are engaged in serving the justice-involved population – by supporting those attending classes and by reaching out to individuals who may have never considered college. Each campus has a club for justice-involved students (Transitioning Minds at Riverside City and Moreno Valley college, and Liberated Scholars at Norco College). Riverside City College hosts Parole and Community Team meetings (PACT) on campus; offers a Reintegration Academy in partnership with the Prison Education Project at Cal Poly Pomona; provides a College Connection program in juvenile hall (this program was funded until June 2019 by the Riverside County Office of Education); and serves on the planning committee of RESTOAR (Restoring Opportunities After Rehabilitation), an initiative to support the workforce integration of formerly incarcerated people in the region.

This extensive experience developing programs to support current and former justice-involved students has given the District a critical insight into the urgent needs of these individuals, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.