Education for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Program

ISSUE

In the last five years, the California Community College (CCC) system has stepped up to meet voter mandates to restore incarcerated people to their communities through rehabilitative programming. Thanks to SB 1381 (2014), thousands of currently incarcerated students matriculated to rigorous face-to-face associate degree for transfer programs offered across the state prisons. At the same time, the colleges looked to assist similar students who were already on their own campuses, building support networks for formerly incarcerated students on campus in a “Rising Scholars Network” with linked support to the UC Underground Scholars Program and CSU Project Rebound. These programs achieved phenomenal successes while also exposing institutional gaps in support for a highly vulnerable student population. And then COVID-19 hit, resulting in large-scale early releases from prison, forcing face-to-face programs to rely on outdated correspondence methods of teaching, and leaving formerly incarcerated students especially vulnerable to attrition. Political action is needed to enable the continued success of currently and formerly incarcerated students in the community colleges.

BACKGROUND

Since fall 2017, Norco College (NC) has partnered with the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco (CRC-Norco) to offer a robust Associate Degree for Transfer program to incarcerated students. CRC-Norco is a Level-II, medium-security institution with a bed capacity of 2500. In 2019-20, NC served 250+ individual students with 70 face-to-face course sections, and 40 students earned Associate degrees. COVID-19 protocols interrupted face-to-face courses at CRC-Norco, but NC persisted with correspondence courses to keep our students on track even though an outbreak has so far affected over 80% of the prison population. Thanks to the success of the program in providing students with the Associate Degree for Transfer, Pitzer College was able to launch a Bachelor’s degree completion program in fall of 2020, enhancing opportunities for incarcerated student success.

As NC developed its prison program, Moreno Valley College (MVC) and Riverside City College (RCC) also established programs to serve formerly incarcerated students. Riverside county is home to approximately 6% of the state’s parole population and these Riverside Community College District (RCCD) colleges are all engaged in serving formerly incarcerated people – both by supporting those students already in attendance and by reaching out to those who may have never before considered college as a possibility. Each campus has a club for formerly incarcerated students – (Transitioning Minds at RCC and MVC, and Liberated Scholars at NC. RCC in particular has taken the lead in outreach and access for formerly incarcerated students: Hosting Parole and Community Team Meetings (PACT) on campus; offering a Reintegration Academy in partnership with the Prison Education Project at Cal Poly Pomona; providing a College Connection program in the local juvenile hall; and serving 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 currently and formerly incarcerated students has given RCCD critical insights into the urgent needs of such programs, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
ACTION 1:
Establish Transcript-Sharing for Incarcerated Students
Incarcerated students’ college education histories typically involve a patchwork of courses from various colleges operating in various prisons. Transcripts can be very hard for students to obtain, requiring requests sent by mail and the payment of fees, even for indigent inmates. Students face significant trouble establishing the grades needed to meet pre-requisites, graduate and apply to transfer while in prison and upon parole. California should amend Title V to allow all incarcerated students to access official transcripts of courses taken at the California Community Colleges free of charge and to authorize California Community College personnel at the college where the student is currently enrolled to request official transcripts on their behalf with a release form. This measure will dramatically increase college success rates for currently incarcerated students.

ACTION 2:
Fund Instructional Technology in Prison
Incarcerated students confront a huge technology gap. As their non-incarcerated peers transitioned to online distance learning with COVID-19, incarcerated students faced weeks- or months-long lags in communication with their professors via correspondence. At the best of times, incarcerated students have extremely limited access to even the most basic technology, with only a handful of PCs with Word processing software available to students in each prison and no Internet access whatsoever. Under COVID-19 quarantine protocols, students have had no Word processing access at all. These problems must be remedied. CDCR has already prepared a technology infrastructure in each prison that would allow incarcerated students to learn online like any other community college student; California should respond by supporting a budget item to provide every incarcerated student at the level of basic education through college with a laptop approved by CDCR.

ACTION 3:
Staff Community College-Juvenile Hall Partnerships
SB 716 (2019) provided community colleges with the opportunity to offer comprehensive coursework in juvenile correctional facilities. But RCCD’s experience with college in prisons clearly demonstrates that to succeed, such programs require specialized personnel who can navigate institutional obstacles while the student is on the inside and provide appropriate social, emotional and educational supports to help students succeed on the outside. RCCD requests funding for personnel to partner with Riverside county Probation at the Youth Treatment Educational Center (YTEC) to create a robust program for youth, similar to the successful program for adults at CRC-Norco.

ACTION 4:
Fund Formerly Incarcerated Mentors
Formerly incarcerated students are a uniquely vulnerable population. Most of these students have long histories of shaming experiences in school; most of these students experienced trauma in their personal histories and in their incarceration histories; most of these students have added pressure to secure housing, food and jobs as the conditions of their parole. Because of their unique experiences, formerly incarcerated students are best supported by other formerly incarcerated individuals – people who do not stigmatize their past, who empathize with their present situation and who can serve as role models of a bright future. At community colleges throughout the state, successful formerly incarcerated students are already voluntarily doing the good work of mentoring to other students in informal clubs, but these students deserve institutional support, training and compensation. California can greatly improve the success of formerly incarcerated students by creating a program to train and pay formerly incarcerated mentors on community college campuses. RCCD asks for increased funding to the Rising Scholars network that can be used to support student mentors.