

Formerly Incarcerated Peer Mentors in California Community Colleges

By Danny Murillo

Since 2014, the rise of support service programs and student clubs for formerly incarcerated people emerged throughout California Community Colleges. Five years ago, less than five community colleges offered support systems for formerly incarcerated students. Today, over 40 campuses are providing some form of student support. The California Community Chancellors Office recently announced that 44 colleges would receive a portion of a \$5 million grant for implementing or scale-up existing programs for currently and formerly incarcerated students. This funding will increase access to a guided pathway model for a larger population of students in prisons, jails, and community colleges across California.

As the enrollment of currently and formerly incarcerated students continue to grow, community colleges receiving the Chancellor's Reentry Grant can allocate funds to develop peer-to-peer support and mentoring services. This is an opportunity for community colleges to develop communication, navigational, and leadership skills among its students. Mentor-mentee relationships among formerly incarcerated students go beyond social, cultural, intellectual, and campus knowledge. These relationships can empower and transform the lives of students by increasing academic and employment opportunities. These opportunities can break the cycle of recidivism and reintegrates formerly incarcerated people into society and becomes transformative for their respective families and communities.

Also, peer-mentor relationships provide essential leadership and professional development opportunities that benefit both the mentors and mentees' academic and career pathways. Formerly incarcerated peer mentors are trained to give peer-mentees the same institutional knowledge as traditional mentors; however, having shared backgrounds and developing personal connections make formerly incarcerated peer mentors an asset to the campus and community. Leading by example, allows mentors and mentees to engage sensitive topics, work through trauma, and support healing.

The role of formerly incarcerated peer mentors is a crucial one as community colleges continue to expand and scale-up prison education and on-campus programs. Community colleges with prison education programs should establish connections with other campus entities and student organizations. Offering a constellation of supports will make it easier for formerly incarcerated students to navigate the prison-to-college pipeline.