Fostering Success for Formerly Incarcerated Students on Campus

Essential Program Elements and Services

Formerly incarcerated college students – like all students – are often managing challenges that can compromise their ability to persist through to credential or degree, but promising practices that support them in their matriculation and graduation goals can be found throughout California’s public colleges and universities. Programs supporting these students vary in their structure, funding streams, and staffing patterns, but they share a commitment to addressing students’ academic and non-academic needs, and to partnering with campus offices and/or external agencies that can lend critical support.

If your college or university is considering launching a program to assist formerly incarcerated students, consider incorporating these essential elements and services:

Key Program Elements

- Staff with a program director or coordinator who has personal experience with the criminal justice system
  - Ideally, the program director or coordinator will be formerly incarcerated. First person experience builds important rapport between the program and prospective and current students. The person can also be a consistent voice mitigating potential concerns of college personnel about formerly incarcerated students.
  - The director or coordinator should be able to devote sufficient time to ensure student and programmatic success. This usually requires it to be a full-time position.
  - Programs often include both a program director and administrative support, as well as affiliated faculty.
  - All staff must be able to navigate important relationships with campus departments (particularly with admissions if the college has a competitive admissions process) and external partners.
Be an officially recognized campus program with a dedicated central campus location with meeting space, mailing address, and phone number

- Having a place on campus where current and prospective students can gather and meet on a regular basis builds a sense of community and fosters informal mentoring relationships, which positively affects persistence and completion.
- The program should secure status that allows it to reserve rooms for meetings, training sessions, and other events.

Build support and competency from a broad range of college stakeholders

- Developing broad-based buy-in may take time, but it is critical to long-term success as the program will need to respond to changes in campus leadership.
- Programs should have at least one tenured faculty champion who is active in the Academic Senate. A faculty board of advisors and/or a campus team committed to advocating for the program and representing it with the President, Vice Presidents, Deans, and other administrators can also be valuable.
- It can be difficult for programs to succeed without support from top administration. A job of the program director and faculty champion should be to educate campus administration about the program, introduce administrators and others to student participants, and build that support.
- Programs should identify friendly staff in admissions, financial aid, counseling, and student services, and guide student participants towards those staff.

- Faculty and other staff should be provided with professional development to enable them to effectively serve formerly incarcerated students, including addressing trauma arising from incarceration and educating them about the unique barriers created by a criminal record.

Offer and make accessible a range of student supports to address academic and non-academic needs

- Programs should be intentional about their process for student advising, class planning, course registration, tutoring, and other academic needs that are critical for student success. Programs may connect students with these services rather than provide them directly, but it can be effective to establish personally tailored tutoring for students in need. Without intentionality in the program model, formerly incarcerated students may fail to seek out these services on their own, negatively impacting their persistence and completion.
- Non-academic needs such as housing, transportation and assistance in interacting with criminal justice agencies such as probation and parole can similarly be addressed through on- and off-campus partnerships. Formerly incarcerated students may also have mental health needs that can interfere with their academic progress. Program leadership should be aware of these potential student needs and viable partners who can assist in addressing them, and should actively engage student participants in identifying and addressing those needs.
Foster formerly incarcerated peer mentors, either through structured peer support with other formerly incarcerated students, or by creating time and space for students to connect with and support each other

- Being able to relate to and glean lessons from other formerly incarcerated students can have a much greater positive impact on the student than interactions with campus staff who do not share the student’s prior experience.

Develop and maintain strong relationships with external partners

- Seek out a range of partners, including the local jail, probation department and parole agency, nearby colleges and universities, and reentry service providers that can assist students with housing, legal services, and other needs.

Leverage a range of available funding sources to support the program

- Funding could come from Student Equity, SSSP, EOPS, AEBG, and Strong Workforce Funds.

Be able to provide or connect students with direct student financial support for critical needs

- These needs include books, transportation, meals, supplies, and application and test fees.

Key Program Services

The program may decide to provide these services directly or to partner with other offices on campus to ensure that these services are available and that students are taking advantage of them.

Reach out to and respond to prospective students, particularly those in jail or prison

- Respond to letters and written inquiries.
- Communicate with potential applicants regarding admissions requirements and processes.
- Share information about the program with staff working in local prisons, jails, community corrections centers, juvenile facilities, and reentry organizations so they can distribute it to potential students.
- Consider visiting local prisons, jails, and detention centers for “Introduction to College” and other similar presentations.

Help prospective students prepare, apply, and matriculate

- Ensure that prospective student transcripts are reviewed and that feedback is provided about missing requirements and academic and transfer pathways. Some students may have taken courses while incarcerated and may need to retrieve transcripts from multiple colleges.
- Help students develop an admissions plan if the college utilizes a competitive application process.
- Help students apply for admission.
- Help students apply for financial aid and programs like EOPS that can provide financial assistance and foster student success.

CorrectionsToCollegeCA.org
• Help students complete the steps needed to enroll and register for courses.

• Offer a targeted “bridge” program introducing students to each other and to the campus, walking them through the admission and registration processes, introducing them to financial planning, honing their time management and study skills, and developing their familiarity with the campus.
  • If possible, introduce the students to specific friendly contacts across campus including in financial aid and student services.
  • Bridge programs can be short, covering two or three full days, but successful programs have built in longer bridge programs that can run six or eight weeks.

Support enrolled students to persist and graduate

• Build a program community with social gatherings, organized events or excursions, and other opportunities to connect.

• Publicize the program to reach potential student participants already enrolled on campus.

• Foster the transformative student identity by integrating student participants into the full campus, including encouraging them to attend sports events, health fairs, speaker presentations, social activities, and campus meetings.

• For students who are interested, encourage them to amplify their voices on campus through student panels and other events.
  • Consider encouraging students to reach out to an organization such as JustLeadershipUSA or the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) or to get involved in California’s formerly incarcerated student network, to develop leadership and speaking skills regarding how and when to tell the story of their incarceration.

• Encourage students to pursue opportunities for student representation in campus governance or other on-campus groups.

• Help students understand course requirements and register for courses, especially in their first semester.

• Help students develop study skills and other “soft” skills needed to succeed.

• Connect students to tutoring services or provide tutoring.

• Check in with faculty and with parole or probation officers who may be aware of difficulties that a student is facing; advocate for the student if possible and where appropriate.

• Actively reach out to any student participant who has missed class or stopped participating in the program; attempt to find out why the student is struggling and search for a solution to the challenge.

• Provide connections and direct referrals to community-based organizations that can assist students with their housing, employment, legal and other needs.
  • A resources brochure can identify campus and community-based services.

Celebrate success of students and staff, and amplify the positive experiences of student participants

• Host recognition and celebration events.

• Highlight student success on campus website and in publications.