

Bringing the BA to California's Incarcerated Students

By Rebecca Silbert

Every time I visit a prison classroom, I am asked the same question: When is the BA coming? The demand is real, and we owe it to the students to make it happen. The challenges, however, are equally real.

Challenge number one is security and yard designation. We could just allow BA programs to pop up anywhere there's a willing four-year partner, but does that serve CDCR students? California has a phenomenal BA completion program offered by Cal State LA at Lancaster prison, and CDCR has shown commendable commitment and leadership by offering to transfer students to Lancaster for the purpose of BA completion. Unfortunately, security designations prevent many students from transferring. In order to be truly student-centered and meet the needs of as many students as possible, we must first learn more about the 4,500 CDCR students on face-to-face transfer pathways. If large numbers of AA students are (hypothetically) level III SNY (sensitive needs yard), it doesn't make sense to build out a BA completion program in a level II GP (general population) yard.

Challenge number two is space. The California Community Colleges and the Prison University Project are serving thousands of students face-to-face in 32 of our 35 prisons, and they have worked incredibly hard to build these partnerships. Many of them already have to beg, steal and borrow to find available CDCR classroom space, and many of them have waiting lists of students who would jump at the chance to take more classes if only more classrooms were available. To build the BA fairly, we have to find prison yards with sufficient available classrooms (at the right security level) to serve incoming BA completion students without kicking out existing face-to-face colleges offering the AA pathways.

Challenge number three is cost. California leads the nation in offering any income-eligible community college student, including incarcerated students, a tuition fee waiver called the Promise Grant. Our CSUs have no such grant – and indeed, Cal Grants are explicitly unavailable for incarcerated students, a shameful situation that must be remedied. Even when Cal Grants are made available, however, California does not fully fund Cal Grants so many incarcerated students (just as on-campus students) will be unable to access them. Removing Pell's restriction on incarcerated students will help, but finding a way to cover tuition is just a necessary first step. Cal State LA's experience is that the cost of providing face-to-face high-quality higher education far exceeds the cost of tuition. We cannot compromise on quality, so we have to find a way to cover the cost.

There are more challenges --- for example, it is more cost-effective to rely on the state's community colleges to meet lower division requirements, but not all of the community colleges are offering the necessary courses. And, not all the community colleges are on the same AA pathways, which makes it challenging to consider transferring graduates from different prisons onto the same BA pathway. But if we don't try, we won't even get started.

Last March, along with CDCR and Cal State LA, we convened more than ten four-year universities interested in offering courses to CDCR students. CDCR has set a goal of this summer to identify yards where space and security designation most optimally support the potential BA students. And we continue to work with the Office of the Community Colleges Chancellor in coordinating the 17 face-to-face community colleges teaching

inside CDCR as they implement a student-centered approach that serves all CDCR students statewide, not just those who happen to be in a particular prison next to a particular college at a particular moment in time. It takes a village, as they say, but the village is ready.