

Colleges Teaching in Prison Tackle Burnout

By Kellie Nadler

Prisons are traumatic environments, especially for those who are incarcerated. But research shows that working in traumatic environments also impacts practitioners, increasing their risk of burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. In California, no statewide resources exist to support the wellbeing of college educators as they navigate increasing course loads in correctional facilities. Faculty and staff are passionate and dedicated, but often underprepared for the impacts of serving students who are dehumanized by our incarceration system.

The state has shown impressive commitment to serving justice-involved students. Last semester alone, California's public higher education system offered more than 270 face-to-face courses to more than 4,000 incarcerated students in our state prisons.

The scale of our college in-prison programs is unprecedented. But if we don't beat the burnout, the future of these programs – and the students they serve – are in jeopardy. Trauma-informed and resiliency-based professional development is an essential part of a sustainable and healthy education system.

Sustaining Futures is a Trauma-Informed and Resiliency-Based Community of Practice for College Faculty and Staff Teaching in State Prisons. In February and March, representatives from 14 California colleges embarked on a year-long journey to better serve incarcerated students and better support the faculty and staff teaching in our state prisons. Participants are gaining foundational knowledge on trauma and resilience, skills to address trauma and resilience in and out of the classroom, and techniques for responding to the prevalence of trauma in the prison environment.

This project is a collaboration with a team of social workers and psychologists from NYU's McSilver Institute.