

Notes from the Field

By Danny Murillo

Formerly incarcerated people are looking towards higher education as a resource to help rebuild their lives after incarceration. Obtaining a diploma from a post-secondary institution, however, is not a guarantee that a person with an arrest and conviction history will find employment. In California, there are licensing boards and bureaus, each with their own legal barriers for people with arrest and conviction histories. Colleges and universities need to train faculty and staff to understand how these legal barriers impact the academic and career decisions of formerly incarcerated students. Also, colleges and universities need to provide resources and opportunities for formerly incarcerated students to navigate their academic and career paths.

In general, formerly incarcerated people understand that an arrest and conviction history is a barrier towards finding employment. What is not commonly known is the role that higher education can have in helping them shape and reach their academic and career aspirations. There are resources on college and university campuses that can help formerly incarcerated students navigate their educational and career paths. Institutions of higher learning offer formerly incarcerated students the opportunity to build a network with faculty and staff; these networks can open doors to different opportunities that can help formerly incarcerated students. For instance, faculty and staff can become potential employers through the Federal Work Studies program, and they can also provide letters of reference for fellowship opportunities.

Fellowships come in two forms, non-funded or funded opportunities, to create or implement a specific project. Fellowships range from entry-level to senior-level status. Each fellowship application will indicate requirements for eligibility. These opportunities fall into a broad range of topic areas, from education to tackling issues around poverty. Fellowships open doors. These opportunities give students access to different forms of social capital; such as leadership and professional development, research opportunities, graduate school, career preparation, alumni, and professional networks. The [California Criminal Justice Funders \(CCJF\)](#) and [ProFellow](#) are two resources with information about fellowship opportunities. The [CCJF report](#) is specifically for formerly incarcerated people in California.

To build social capital on college and university campuses, formerly incarcerated students have to develop relationships with faculty, staff, and other students. Having a support system will play a crucial role in one's academic success and career preparation. Historically, formerly incarcerated people have demonstrated their ability to foster new talents to survive the daily struggles of incarceration and reentry. Institutions of higher learning are a resource that allows them to transform those talents into tools that will enable them to thrive in academia and their future careers.