

# RESTORING OUR COMMUNITIES



## Corrections to College— Reversing the School to Prison Pipeline



Dear Friends,

During the recent era of mass incarceration in the United States (1980-2005), California's prison population grew to over 500% (to a high of approximately 170,000 inmates in 2006). Statistically, California has the highest incarceration rate in the nation, which is overly represented by boys and young men of color (B/YMOC). In 2011, California began to acknowledge and address its prison industrial complex through realignment legislation which reduced its prison population by 29% between 2006 and 2015. Many Y/MOC begin pursuing opportunities for higher education while locked up or have emerged from prison eager to attain certificates and degrees.

Urban Strategies Council has played a major role in developing a burgeoning prison to college pipeline, intended to arm returning YMOC with credentials and skill-sets that will enable them to participate in our booming economy and obtain family sustaining wage jobs. Over the past two years, our staff has led efforts among eight public community colleges, two public four-year universities, three county jail systems, two state prisons, and one federal prison spanning three Bay Area counties, to form the East Bay Consortium of Support Programs for Formerly Incarcerated College Students (the Consortium).

This report highlights challenges and successes of the various campus programs, all of which are in various stages of development and organizational design, yet united in prioritizing post-secondary recruitment, retention, persistence, and completion for their YMOC students. We envision the Consortium moving beyond its current networking forum functions into a driver of systems change and policy development from a reentry perspective.

The Bay Area is known for its progressive approach to addressing and solving complex social challenges and this one is no different. Corrections and higher education have created silos that complicate and impede meaningful cooperation between their systems but we have our advocates and the tools to dismantle these systems for the benefit of those they intended to serve.

Thank you for your interest and we invite you to join us in replicating our model in your community to build this movement throughout our nation.

In community,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Harris".

David A. Harris  
President and CEO

The Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color is a network of national, regional, and community foundations driven by a bold vision that all boys and men of color will enjoy full opportunity and inclusion in the economic, educational, leadership, and wellness opportunities that America has to offer. The Alliance has provided support via a generous grant from the Lumina Foundation to six invited demonstration projects in the following U.S. municipalities, Buffalo, NY; Detroit, MI, Los Angeles, CA; Little Rock, AK; Newark, N.J.; and Oakland, CA; to build the capacity of nonprofits, networks, and advocacy efforts to improve post-secondary outcomes for boys and men of color.

Persistent gaps in educational attainment compelled the six sites to examine patterns and seek solutions based on a shared conviction: that systems must be aligned and policies retooled to ensure those male students graduate. We must reframe the narrative to appreciate the talents of male students of color, and critically examine how institutional systems and policies may adversely affect these students. More importantly, a greater awareness of the inherent positive traits that help these students overcome and address difficult institutional systems and policies will bolster the post-secondary sector.

Each grantee organization received a grant of approximately \$50,000 and, throughout the duration of the grant period, technical assistance from a Lumina Foundation team of national experts:

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## Introduction

Post-secondary education reduces recidivism, increases post-release employment and lifetime earnings, and improves the safety and security of the communities to which formerly incarcerated people return after release (Davis, Bozick, Stell, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Gaes, 2008). As a result, federal and state governments supported higher education in prison, until federal policymakers passed the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLA). VCCLA specified much tougher sentences than before - even for nonviolent crimes - and drastically increased funding for law enforcement. As a result, the U.S. prison population soared, with the largest increases occurring among black and brown men (Western & Wilderman, 2009). VCCLA also made incarcerated people ineligible for Pell grants, which led to reductions in higher education in prison programs. Though many states continued these programs on a much smaller scale, with the help of private philanthropy, recent participants serve shorter sentences than previous cohorts. As a result, many recent participants in these programs leave prisons and jails before completing a 2- or 4-year degree. California has reduced the number of incarcerated people more than all but two other states (Gelb, A. and Denney, J., 2018), and also has become a national leader in the development of support programs on several public college campuses to help formerly incarcerated students continue higher education after release (Mukamal, Silbert, & Taylor, 2015). Nevertheless, not enough is known about persistence and completion among students who attempt to complete their degrees in colleges in their home communities, after beginning their studies while incarcerated (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017).

Between 2006 and 2015, California's prison population was reduced by

**48,000**

The Urban Strategies Council in Oakland, CA has helped lead regional work on cross-systems endeavors to engage the justice system, prisons, human services, and post-secondary institutions for men of color recently – or soon to be – released from incarceration. Between 2006 and 2015, factors including ballot initiatives, court orders and reform efforts reduced California's prison population from 163,000 to 115,000.[1] Significant numbers of men of color have pursued opportunities for higher education while locked up or have emerged from prison eager to attain certificates and degrees.

## A Coordinated Response Takes Shape



In Hayward, CA, Chabot College students, faculty and staff from the RISE and Open Gate programs gather for the start of another school year. Open Gate works inside the county jail to help transition students on to the Chabot campus. RISE supports persistence, retention and postsecondary completion for formerly incarcerated students on campus.

In the past 20 months, eight public community colleges and two public four-year universities have joined with community partners to form the East Bay Consortium of Support Programs for Formerly Incarcerated College Students. Even before their initial meeting in April 2017, these parties committed enthusiastically - even passionately - to supporting formerly incarcerated students recognized that closer networking and cooperation among emerging campus-based support programs was needed to assure their growth and sustainability, as well as their capacity to create systems change.

The geographical reach of the Consortium is regional and includes Alameda County and nearby Contra Costa and Solano Counties. Within these counties are eleven public community colleges and two large public universities, as well as three county jail systems, two state prisons and one federal prison. Support programs for formerly incarcerated students have been established on five of the campuses and several schools are in the early stages of creating programs. There was significant awareness of the challenges faced by post-release students - also known as returning citizens - and willing collaboration among the programs across the region. This shared commitment to supporting student persistence, retention and completion of Career Technical Education certificates, Associates' degrees and, in the case of UC Berkeley, and California State University, East Bay, undergraduate and graduate degrees, led to formalization. The Consortium - recognized as a model for regional networking - expects to share and refine best practices, develop funding to assure program sustainability and replicate its program model on local campuses where it does not yet exist.

**“There was not a lot of encouragement towards education while locked up, so I had to figure stuff out myself.”**

—Laney College Student

## Shared Concerns and a Common Source of Tensions



One-on-one tutoring and technology assistance is provided to students in the Street Scholar program at Merritt College in Oakland, CA. Many returning citizens are unfamiliar with basic computer use and require specialized support. Tutoring is designed to build esteem and confidence, as well as technical academic and computer skills.

### Successful bridging reverses the “school-to-prison pipeline”

To close the knowledge gap, the Urban Strategies Council, conducted a survey and a series of focus groups with formerly incarcerated male students of color at three 2-year public colleges in the East Bay Area. The survey and qualitative data reveal barriers and supports that impact student experiences inside jail and prison and on college campuses. Geography, a punitive culture and a lack of consistent policies, programming, and supports within the criminal justice system present formidable barriers to the realization of educational progress for men of color involved in that system. Qualitative research indicates little uniform support for offering vocational and academic credits during incarceration, or for the transition of formerly incarcerated persons into postsecondary education upon release. Focus group participants noted the need for more – and more accessible – college-level course offerings on the inside and for better pre-release planning and support for those who wish to continue their pursuit of higher education on the outside.

Increased, focused coordination between the criminal justice system and postsecondary institutions could facilitate the transfer of college and vocational education credits between correctional and educational systems and the willingness to translate work experience during incarceration into credits outside. Focus group participants called this process “bridging” – it starts while students are still incarcerated and continues through their post-release transition to postsecondary campuses in the community. Successful bridging reverses the “school-to-prison pipeline” by promoting cross-systems collaboration that builds fast-track pathways from jails and prisons to accredited local post-secondary campuses to assure facilitated enrollment and a warm welcome for students.

Anecdotal testimony and some data suggest that the faster formerly incarcerated students move from incarceration to enrollment registration and then through completion of high-demand required courses, the more likely they are to complete certificate and degree programs, advance to career-oriented employment, and pursue advanced degrees.

## Present Reality Impedes Persistence and Completion

In focus groups, formerly incarcerated students from Chabot, Laney and Merritt Colleges frequently identified basic reentry needs – housing, financial and health-related – as barriers to their education. Issues with housing included: homelessness, criminal background checks for housing approval, limited space or crowded quarters, or undefined living situations that could change or end at a moment’s notice. The high cost of living in the Bay Area contributed to uncertainty over housing and finances. Difficulties in establishing a steady income, finding job opportunities and maintaining a job with a school schedule were related challenges. Several students identified their unmet need for substance recovery services and mental health counseling and general health as compromising achievement and retention. In addition, nearly all formerly incarcerated students bring with them complex trauma histories from childhood as well as the experience of incarceration. These realities make them a uniquely vulnerable student population.

All three groups reported deficits in high school, GED and postsecondary programs – and the information about their availability – within prison or jail. The interrelated reasons, particular to incarceration, included:

- Prisoner classification systems inside jails and prisons – intended by authorities to separate and control inmates based on assessed risk for violence, race, conviction history, gang affiliation and geographic region. Moreover, inmates in protective custody cell blocks or in the highly restricted special housing units (SHUs) in California’s state prisons had no access to education programs.
- Long waits for openings in the few available programs meant that often, a person had to be incarcerated for a long time before he could gain access.
- Insufficient time to participate – said one focus group participant: “I never got to use any of the programs because I was only in Santa Rita Jail for six months.”

In addition, men in the focus groups described a culture of negativity around education within correctional institutions. One student from Laney College said, “There was not a lot of encouragement towards education while locked up, so I had to figure stuff out myself.” Students also described sometimes not understanding the utility of an education, and only wanting a GED to gain access to certain work opportunities inside the prison.

Two issues were identified with the reentry resource and postsecondary education information, if it were even given at all. The first was that it came “too late.” Participants believed they should have gotten that information long before release, so they could have a plan of action on the outside. The second was that many of the reentry organizations and services that probation and parole officers suggested as good resources were not appropriate, unresponsive to their needs, or perceived as a “run-around.” “That gap between walking out the gates and figuring out what you are going to do, that’s paramount because that is where stuff can go wrong,” said one participant from Chabot College.

**“That gap between walking out the gates and figuring out what you are going to do, that’s paramount because that is where stuff can go wrong.”**

—Chabot College Student



## Findings & Implications



Students from Underground Scholars, UC Berkeley's campus-based support program in Berkeley, CA for formerly incarcerated and justice systems impacted students.

**“At first I did not feel connected, so I dropped out, but having come back and being in the RISE program helped me to walk through this and now I have all my needs met.”**

—Chabot College Student

### Validation for Campus-based Support Programs

Students in all three focus groups expressed heartfelt appreciation for their respective support programs. Above all other program benefits, they valued most the safe and welcoming space where they could establish a sense of belonging and the opportunity to build community. They described the full support they received in navigating all aspects of campus protocols and bureaucracy involving enrollment, financial aid, course selection and registration and, as needed, remedial tutoring, disability services and general troubleshooting. Support for leadership development and opportunities to practice those skills were acknowledged.

Students in the focus groups affirmed that mentorship by non-judgmental peers with shared lived experience in the justice and corrections systems has been a key factor in their persistence and retention. Students expressed appreciation for empowering opportunities in all the programs, sometimes with stipends or as paid staff, to support program activities like student recruitment and peer mentoring. All these, they said, serve to reduce the social isolation and stigma that nearly all formerly incarcerated students bring with them when they first arrive on campus.

Support programs sometimes start as student organized clubs without dedicated space, no funding and little recognition or support from the college. For programs to gain the kind of impact and appreciation expressed by the focus group participants, they need meaningful recognition from college administrators and staff, enough funding to support some activities and dedicated space of their own. Securing their own space on campus accelerates the processes of deepening student engagement and community building that are key to program success. Another milestone in program development is engaging faculty who are motivated to welcome and teach this student population.

## Transitioning from Incarceration Back into the Community



Students speak on the benefits of their campus-based support programs at the Northern California convening of support programs for formerly incarcerated college students. The event was held on the UC Berkeley campus on November 3, 2018.

Significant differences exist in the postsecondary landscape between the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's (CDCR) state prisons and the realities inside fifty-eight county jail systems. Although much progress is needed, the centrally managed CDCR system is making incremental advances in offering more educational programming, ranging from GED and high school diplomas to postsecondary opportunities.

However, focus group participants complained that the staff cultures in most of the state's thirty-four prisons often conveyed indifference and a lack of support toward inmate involvement in educational programming. The East Bay region's county jails offer GED and high school diploma opportunities to a limited number of inmates. Typically, county jails offer no postsecondary programming. Focus group participants noted that prison and jail staff took no responsibility for “bridging” inmates to post-release educational programs in the community. The only support mentioned in that context came from contracted providers working inside with a limited number of inmates and outside organizations and volunteers who work inside some jails and prisons.

Most in-custody college programs are in the state prisons based on legislation and CDCR policy. The jails, operated by county sheriffs, maintain varying standards and policies for educational programming and access to that programming. In the CDCR system different challenges exist for transferring vocational training and academic program credits into two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions. Good progress has been made in this area for academic credits from accredited institutions, but many obstacles persist for translating vocational training and work experience inside prisons to Career Technical Education credits on community college campuses.

**“Parole has never done much for me except give me a \$40 gift card. They do host a few things for finding out about services or things they offer, but it didn't really feel supportive.”**

—Student

## Recommendations/Next Steps

### Governance, Staffing and Fund Development

#### ICON

The Consortium is organizing its strong cross-sector participant base for the challenge of creating postsecondary systems change. It is developing organizational governance while continuing to build a diverse participant base. This process involves reviewing and updating the original mission, vision and objectives in order to determine organizational structure, decision making protocols, and overall governance.

The Consortium is seeking public and philanthropic funds for its participating programs. A major objective at the state level is categorical funding, similar to that provided to former foster youth, for formerly incarcerated postsecondary students in public institutions. In building its own capacity, the Consortium is developing a funding plan to support staffing, future activities and convenings.

### Technical Assistance for Regional Program Replication

#### ICON

The Consortium is prioritizing building capacity to offer technical assistance to campuses where support programs do not yet exist or are in early stages of development. The Opportunity Institute, based in Berkeley, CA, has developed a tool kit to assist students and campus partners in starting and developing support programs. Consortium participants from successful programs can complement this tool kit with mentoring and sharing their lessons learned and emerging best practices.

### Extend the Consortium's Networking to Bridge Corrections & Higher Education Silos

#### ICON

Corrections and higher education have created silos that complicate and impede meaningful cooperation between their systems. Locally, better utilization and strengthening of existing inside/outside links with San Quentin and Solano State Prisons would help bridge more students seamlessly into local public community colleges and universities. This networking needs to be extended to build relationships with the sheriffs who operate the jails and with appropriate contacts within the CDCR prison administration.

### Further Research to Inform Policy Priorities and Strategies

#### ICON

Further participatory research can significantly increase capacity to work for change, especially related to resolving on-campus barriers. Three more populations need to be engaged:

1. A focus group with students who are at imminent risk of dropping out and individual interviews with students who have dropped out
2. A focus group with program staff who effectively support students by constantly intervening behind the scenes to problem solve bureaucratic barriers on the students behalf
3. A focus group with prison staff and higher education leaders

### Action for Systems Change to Increase Postsecondary Completion Rates

#### ICON

Lumina grant activities have advanced the Consortium's capacity building for policy advocacy. The focus groups have raised awareness among formerly incarcerated male student leaders of color at three community colleges regarding what public policy is and its role in improving their college experience and outcomes. Among the students and Consortium participants more broadly, the grant activities have increased awareness and inspired conversations about the importance of evolving the Consortium beyond a networking forum to become a driver of systems change. In order for the Consortium to become that change agent, expert consultation is needed on postsecondary policy development, from a reentry perspective, and on strategies for high impact policy initiatives and campaigns. Fortunately, a source for that consultation has been and continues to be available through the participation in the Consortium of The Opportunity Institute.

### Create a Reentry/Restorative Justice CTE or AA Curriculum

#### ICON

The Consortium is interested in the possibility for developing a Career Technical Education/Associate's degree curriculum on one of its participating campuses. Such a program would respond to the increasing regional workforce needs for better trained employees in both private and public sector reentry work. Such a curriculum would encourage enrollment by formerly incarcerated students and justice system impacted individuals who want to improve reentry outcomes and reduce mass incarceration. Such a credential for formerly incarcerated students could increase their employment prospects for jobs with livable wages and provide a pathway to real career opportunities. At the state level the Consortium wants to advance conversations for hiring more formerly incarcerated people in public higher education institutions.



## Appendix

### Resources

- Degrees of Freedom, Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians (2015)  
[https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/DegreesofFreedom2015\\_FullReport.pdf](https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/DegreesofFreedom2015_FullReport.pdf)
- Don't Stop Now, California leads the nation in using public higher education to address mass incarceration. Will we continue? (2018)  
<https://correctionstocollegeca.org/resources/dont-stop-now>
- College in Jail Toolkit (2018)  
<https://correctionstocollegeca.org/assets/general/College-in-Jail-Toolkit-March-2018.pdf>. The Opportunity Institute.
- Corrections to College California (online statewide program directory)  
<https://correctionstocollegeca.org/program-directory>. The Opportunity Institute.
- East Bay Campus-based Support Programs for Formerly Incarcerated College Students (Directory produced by Urban Strategies Council and available on request)



“Safe Space” mural inside the Laney College Restoring Our Communities (ROC) student room and office in Oakland, CA. ROC creates a sense of belonging with many support services for formerly incarcerated and justice systems impacted students.

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- Troy Williams - videography and audio recording
- Ryan Guerrero - data collection, analysis and reporting
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- Dieudonné Brou - support program alumni & regional organizer

### Project Leadership

- Urban Strategies Council
  - David Harris, Chief Executive Officer
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- Laney College
  - Roger Chung, Ethnic Studies Department Faculty and Director, Restoring Our Communities
- Chabot College
  - Dr. Stacy Thompson, Vice President, Academic Services
  - Troy Williams - RISE Program Coordinator and Soros Justice Fellow
- Merritt College
  - Ron Moss - The Gamble Institute, Executive Director & COSER, Faculty Instructor
- UC Berkeley
  - Violeta Alvarez, Underground Scholars, Director
  - Shalita Williams, student
- California State University, East Bay
  - Dr. Sanjay Marwah, Assistant Professor, Criminal Justice Administration Department
- The Opportunity Institute
  - Kellie Nadler, Deputy Director, Corrections to College
- Five keys Schools and Programs
  - Dorick Scarpelli, Director of College Pathways and Workforce Development
- Alameda County Probation Department
  - Neola Crosby, Reentry Coordinator

### All Participating Partners

#### COLLEGES

##### *Campus-based Support Programs*

- Merritt College - Street Scholars: Ron Moss, Earthy Young, Drew Gabriel
- Chabot College - RISE & Open Gate: Troy Williams, Dr. Stacy Thompson, Abdul Muhammad, Dr. Jamal Cooks, Charles Reed
- Laney College - Restoring Our Communities (ROC): Roger Chung, Alejandra Landin, Vince Garrett, Lamar Bursey
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- San Francisco State University - Project Rebound: Jenna Tomsy

##### *Participating Colleges with programs in formation or under consideration*

- Contra Costa College - Demetria Lawrence
- Diablo Valley College - Lindsay Kong, Nicole Gomes
- Los Medanos College - Catherine Fonseca
- Solano Community College - Dr. Damany Fisher, Dr. Shirley Lewis, Eric Gentry

#### COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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- Urban Strategies Council - David Harris, Charles Eddy, Hilary Crowley
- Five Keys Schools and Programs - Dorick Scarpelli, Joe Durant, Gabriel Navarrete
- The Opportunity Institute - Kellie Nadler, Danny Murillo
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- Alameda County Probation Department - Neola Crosby, Chief Wendy Still
- Contra Costa County Adult Education Consortium - Darryl Coachman

