

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/new-report-highlights-californias-success-in-expanding-access-to-college-for-incarcerated-people>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

California is different. We could never do that here.

This is what I hear most often from college and corrections staff across the country when I share information about California's efforts to expand access to college for incarcerated students. But a new report from the Opportunity Institute and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center suggests that other states *can* follow California's model thus paving the way for increased opportunity both during incarceration and after release for students granted access to college education.

The report, titled [*Dont Stop Now: California leads the nation in using public higher education to address mass incarceration. Will we continue?*](#) offers a call to action for continuing California's commitment to postsecondary education in the state's corrections system. This appeal is important, as studies indicate that people who have access to education while incarcerated are less likely to recidivate after their release. Education thus holds promise as a disruptor both to over-crowding and to high recidivism rates—two issues that have plagued the state's prison system for years.

The report describes California's significant progress in increasing college access for incarcerated students over the last four years. According to the report, in 2014, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) focused primarily on delivering career and technical classes and to ushering students through the acquisition of the GED or high school equivalency program. At that time, there were only two programs offering any quality postsecondary coursework within the state's 35 prisons: the San Quentin Prison University Project, and a degree program run through Chaffey College serving students at the California Institute for Women. These two programs combined to serve only a few hundred students out of the more than 125,000 men and women who were incarcerated on any given day.

Today, California has more in-person postsecondary education programs offered in 34 out of the state's 35 prisons than any other state in the nation. CDCR is offering higher education to nearly 4,500 incarcerated students. Programs that meet students outside the prison walls have expanded in correlation to inside programs, as more people who started their education in prison are released with an appetite to continue and with the support on campus to succeed. This support includes [*Project Rebound*](#), which began on the campuses of San Francisco State University, is now spread across nine California State University campuses. The University of California's [*Underground Scholars*](#) program has expanded from its origins at Berkeley across the University of California system.

This growth is changing common experiences of stigma on campus and challenging established stereotypes about formerly incarcerated people. These programs spur conversations about incarceration among students and faculty and encourage those formerly incarcerated students to step into leadership roles on campus and in their communities.

The report further outlines several legislative and policy changes that allowed for the expansion of these successful programs and the establishment of the amazing collaboration between CDCR and California's system of higher education. In 2014 Senate Bill 1391 removed barriers preventing the Chaffey College program and others from compensating community colleges for teaching face-to-face courses in prison and from offering the same services to incarcerated students as were offered to students on campus, such as tutoring and academic advising. This legislative change opened the door for community colleges to reach the nearly 4,500 postsecondary education students now learning within state prisons. At the same time, California community college students have always been able to access the California College Promise Grant (formerly known as the Board of Governors fee waiver). This grant provides tuition coverage for all students enrolled in a California community college who qualify as low-income, regardless of whether they are incarcerated or not. This removes one of the primary barriers to affordability statewide, especially for students in prison. California also re-emphasized that state colleges and universities do not now, nor have they ever, requested criminal conviction information from applicants. This eases the transition for students who want to continue their education after prison.

The strategic implementation of these important policies has resulted in the highest enrollment rates of incarcerated students in any state. These types of policies can and should be replicated in other regions across the country.

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