



RESEARCH BRIEFS

“These People Really Rooted for Me”: An Exploration of Formerly Incarcerated Students’ Advising Experiences

Elif Yucel and Jaymon Ortega
University of Southern California

Summary:

As open access institutions, community colleges play an important role in democratizing access to education for formerly incarcerated (FI) students. In particular, colleges offer reentry programs (CCRPs) that help connect students to resources to smooth the transition back into society and the education system (Murillo, 2021). Drawing on interviews with 11 FI community college students, we examined the support networks of students in campus-based reentry programs as they navigate reentry into higher education. We find that CCRPs play a key role in helping students access campus and community resources. Reentry program advisors were focal actors in developing programs to be communal spaces where students could interact and learn from others who were system-impacted.

Background:

Almost 70% of adults in U.S. federal and state prisons aspire to pursue a postsecondary credential, yet fewer than 10% complete a postsecondary degree or certificate while incarcerated (Ositelu, 2019). While education has typically been framed as a path for social mobility, discriminatory and punitive policies, such as bans on Pell Grants for incarcerated students, have systemically limited generations of system-impacted students, including both currently and formerly incarcerated (FI) students, the ability to gain a college degree (Ositelu, 2019). Community colleges, with their open-access admissions policies, are important spaces for democratizing access to education for FI students; moreover, a growing number of colleges offer programs and supports dedicated to serving FI students, including community college reentry programs (CCRPs) (Murillo, 2021).



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CCRPs serve as critical hubs of support for FI students, offering targeted resources adapted to their specific needs. These programs provide services for students to help them adjust upon release from incarceration. This support is significant, as FI individuals often exit prison with accounts of a few hundred dollars or less and typically depend upon government benefits for income (Western, 2018). Transportation, cell phone costs, and parole/probation fees also enumerate the list of expenses for which many FI are expected to pay. Understanding these necessities, many CCRPs provide students metro passes, gas cards, book stipends, refurbished cellphones, among other key essentials (Mukamal et al., 2015).

In addition to tangible support, CCRPs also provide community. They serve as critical counterspaces by providing students a safe and welcoming environment that honors their lived experiences. These caring spaces can contribute to students' success and reduced recidivism rates (Huerta et al., 2018; Murillo, 2019). Further, connections with and support from others who share similar experiences has been shown to help FI students transition into education (Huerta et al., 2018). Despite their benefits, reentry programs in community colleges have largely been understudied, and much is unknown about students' experiences within them. As such, our study examined formerly incarcerated community colleges students' relationships with advisors in CCRPs and how these programs helped students access support. The following research question guided our study:

1. How do CCRPs support FI community colleges in navigating their academic and reentry trajectories?

Methods:

We conducted in-depth interviews with 11 FI students in CCRPs who attended one of six public community college districts located in varying regions of California. East Cove Community College District (ECCCD) is located in the Northern California region; Luther County Community College District (LCCCD) and Lake Forest Community College District (LFCCD) are located in the North/East Bay region; Barton Springs Community College District (BSCCD) is located in the Inland Empire region; Central City Community College District (CCCCD) is located in the Los Angeles/Orange County region; and West Coast Community College District (WCCCD) is located in the San Diego/Imperial Valley region. The ages of students in our study, ranged from 34-62, with the median age being 43. Seven students identified as male, while four students identified as female. Five students identified as White; one student identified as Asian/Vietnamese; three students identified as Latinx, one student identified as Native American/Latinx, and one student identified as Black/Latinx. During interviews, we focused on students' college experiences, as well during the reentry process. We asked questions about who students turned to for support and what types of support they sought as they navigated their educational journey, honing in on their relationships with advisors.

Findings:

We found that CCRPs served as principal sites of support for students. Most students were returning to education after a long period of time, and only a couple of students had access to higher education coursework while incarcerated. Thus, upon release, students were transitioning not only back into their life post-incarceration, but also back into the education system. CCRPs connected formerly incarcerated students to financial, academic, and social resources that aided them in both their educational and reentry journeys.

Financial and Tangible Resources from CCRPs Help Offset Post-Incarceration Expenses:

Financial and tangible forms of aid, such as gas cards and book stipends, were an impactful component of the manifold resources students received from their CCRP. Financial support was often provided in ways beyond the direct transfer of money. Instead, programs offered services to offset expected costs of living and school related expenses, offering metro passes, t-shirts, loaner laptops, food, refurbished iPhones, school supplies, among others. Abraham, a white student studying mechanical engineering at ECCCD, discussed how important these forms of resources were for his transition out of incarceration. Describing what he owned after checking-in to a transitional living facility the day of his release, he said,

I had no transportation, no clothes, no internet access, no phone, nothing. So, you get there, and I mean, they might give you a couple of bus passes to help you get around a little bit at the beginning, but you're just on your own.

With little material possessions or financial capital, Abraham was referred to his CCRP to assist with enrollment. There, he was welcomed with financial support and academic guidance. Students like Abraham are eager to begin college as soon as possible, and CCRPs recognize their students need as much financial assistance as possible to enroll and persist throughout their academic careers.

Academic Support and Mentorship from CCRPs Empower Students:

Providing academic services and resources to students is a core function of community college reentry programs. Students expressed that staff members in their CCRP were the primary actors in their social networks assisting them with their academic needs. For example, CCRPs offered advising support, tutoring services, and faculty and peer mentoring programs. Claire, a Native American student studying social work at LCCCD, spoke about the role that her CCRP advisor, Sharon, played in her academic support:

Sharon's my go to. She's there for us. You know what I mean? We all know that. There might be different departments...they'll get you priority registration... but Sharon, as a formerly incarcerated advisor for our type of student, she has extra pull...Her stamp of approval on stuff kind of supersedes me meeting [sic] back to a counselor.

Claire valued Sharon's advice because she felt it was more personalized due to the connection they had established by regularly interacting through the CCRP. Moreover, Claire trusted Sharon more compared to other staff because Sharon also identified as formerly incarcerated. Students appreciated their CCRP services because they received more personalized advising experiences and a "point stop" advisor, as Nicole put it, to whom they could turn. Nicole, a white student studying pre-law at WCCCD, said of her reentry advisor:

Having a point-stop reentry counselor specified for you like as an academic assistant helping you to navigate your way through your first time back in a school environment, it's profoundly empowering. Because you're like, "You know what? I can do this; I can do this." It takes the stress off your shoulders, where I would've thrown out the towel if I wasn't able to do it, became insecure, and just given up on myself. These people really rooted for me.

Nicole's comment highlights how many FI students have not been in a formal education setting in a long time, so knowing that they had a dedicated advisor who was attuned to their needs as FI students was instrumental.

CCRP's Provide a Supportive Community:

CCRP's also functioned as key sites for social interaction among both students and staff. Among the more tangible and informational forms of resources students received, social support emerged as one of the most important. CCRP staff often held weekly meetings or "check-ins" where students and staff gathered at a set time to catch up with one another and reflect on different events or issues happening in students' lives. Maria, a Latina student pursuing a degree in psychology and child development at LCCCD, found the community aspect of her CCRP the "most rewarding part" of being in the program. She elaborated: "Check-in is probably my favorite. I go in on every Tuesday...They ask you how your week's been, depending on how long it's been. And it just feels really homey, like comfortable. I'm able to speak to them without feeling weird." Maria felt she could be herself around her program and appreciated having the weekly check-in to catch up with friends. Students spoke about how CCRP's provided a sense of community for students who had endured similar circumstances and events, which helped ease the transition back into education and society at-large after incarceration. Having a community of people with similar backgrounds made students feel safe and welcome. It also helped reduce the stigma around incarceration and being

a formerly incarcerated student on a college campus. Many students who were older already felt uncomfortable being an older student on campus and some expressed shame and worry about having a criminal record. Abraham's CCRP gave him a stronger sense-of-belonging both to campus and to returning to education in general. He elaborated saying,

You know, coming from my background, I really didn't feel like I belonged there. And I'm old. I just turned 49 this month. I'm not a kid anymore. It was awkward for me and they really made me feel welcomed and like made me feel that was where I belonged, and I was doing something good and that was what I should be doing.

Abraham sometimes felt uncomfortable on campus as both an older and a FI student, and his program provided a judgement-free and safe space where he found support from his peers and program staff.

Conclusion and Implications:

Education plays a key role in FI students' experiences transitioning back into society after periods of incarceration (Leverentz, 2014). FI students face unique added challenges compared to their peers, and as such, require additional tailored services to help combat institutional barriers and help them succeed in college. Students' CCRP program advisors were salient in their educational and personal networks. Students appreciated the genuine care their advisors demonstrated, which helped them build stronger and more trusting relationships with them. For many students, this type of trust was "the most valuable resource," as Claire described, as many students had been burned by inauthentic connections with institutional agents in the past. Knowing they had a dedicated person on their team supporting and guiding them affirmed students' confidence and inspired them to continue pursuing their educational journey.

For advisors and other campus leaders, our findings demonstrate the exigent value of campus reentry programs. Below we offer suggestions for research and practice:

- Colleges should establish formal programs on their campus for FI students. Doing so not only provides a safe environment for students to connect with one another and gain access to key resources, but it also works to establish a positive and unstigmatized culture towards system-impacted students. Within these programs, there are often multiple advisors working solely with students in the program. This allows students to have dedicated and individualized assistance for their academic and reentry needs. Colleges can also build on existing support structures, such as Equal Opportunity Programs (EOPS) and related services, to cater more specifically to the needs of FI students. That being said, support services for FI students cannot be siloed to CCRP's or EOPS

Offices. Colleges must embed services for FI students within all organizations and offices on campuses and provide an interwoven web of support for students. As colleges work to strengthen the resources they provide, administrators must be intentional about better incorporating and cultivating asset-based approaches when working with FI students in their professional development (PD) opportunities offered to staff. FI students may feel stigmatized on college campuses (Huerta et al., 2018), and such PD should be attuned to the history of mass incarceration and challenging deficit narratives of those impacted by the legal system.

- Finally, colleges should reevaluate their hiring practices on-campus to ensure they are not discriminating against FI individuals and students, given that they face such significant barriers to employment. Although many states have instituted “ban the box” policies that prevent them from asking about a person’s arrest history and record, this does not end discrimination in employers’ hiring practices (Hanks, 2017). For example, colleges should evaluate when and why they implement fingerprinting background checks as part of the employment application process, as these procedures result in discriminatorily screening out FI individuals seeking employment. Finally, colleges should be intentional about creating more formal employment opportunities, such as work-study positions on campus for FI students. In order to be committed to repairing inequities and reducing the barriers that exist for FI students, intentional support for these learners must extend beyond the classroom.

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Author Information:

Elif Yucel, *University of Southern California*
yucel@usc.edu

Jaymon Ortega, *University of Southern California*
jortega@usc.edu

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