

Benefits of Higher Education for Formerly Incarcerated People



Introduction

Access to higher education is less prevalent amongst incarcerated and formerly incarcerated (FI) people compared to the general population. These disparities are vastly caused by institutional barriers preventing FI people from accessing higher education. Yet, we know that there are specific benefits to higher education for FI individuals including increased civic engagement, economic opportunity, and supportive social networks. In order to increase higher education opportunities for FI people, policies are needed to eliminate college application barriers, expand and establish support programs for FI people on campus, establish transitional programs for FI individuals, and increase secondary education funding.

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Access to higher education while in prison and as formerly incarcerated

Throughout the prison system, close to six out of ten incarcerated persons do not attain a higher level of education during their incarceration. Out of those who do, the most common program completed is a high school equivalent or GED. Only 9% of people in prison are able to successfully finish a postsecondary education while incarcerated, 2% complete an associate degree, and just 7% receive a certificate from a college or trade school.¹

Given the low rates of higher education completion amongst previously incarcerated individuals, there are many reasons to enroll in post-secondary education after release and luckily, more resources are becoming available for the formerly incarcerated (FI) student community. Nevertheless, the barriers that formerly incarcerated people face in order to access education are overwhelming and generate wide disparities in educational attainment between them and the general population.

“Enrolling in college was particularly hard for me due to my incarceration. One of the biggest challenges I faced was finding a community college that still offered courses that were 100% correspondence based. Because I was incarcerated and had no access to the internet, finding a school that didn’t have at least some online components was near impossible, and certainly so for any program other than basic general education courses.

Once I was enrolled, before I could even get my books, I was sent to the segregation unit for a situation outside of my control. I was told I wouldn’t have a way to have my exams proctored through the library. My incarcerated educational experience was over before it even started. I didn’t give up, however, and I enrolled in my local community college within a month of my release to a halfway house. I relied on a friend of mine who was also formerly incarcerated for support until we found out that we were not alone.

There are organizations such as Berkeley Underground Scholars, Project Rebound, and their California community college equivalents aimed at providing support for my people. By finding our community of other formerly incarcerated and system impacted students, we were made aware of much of the “hidden curriculum” of attending college, such as how to get support from school health centers or disabled students programs, as well as help in applying for scholarships and expanding my network of allies. The best part was knowing that I didn’t have to go through this alone.”

— Dustin

Educational disparities between formerly incarcerated people and the general population

There are major disparities between the general public and FI people’s access to education. In our era of mass incarceration, the United States holds more than 2.2 million people in state and federal prisons; of those who are incarcerated, 700,000 will experience re-entry each year.² However, most people who are released from prison are not on a pathway towards receiving a higher education degree. According to a study done by the Prison Policy Initiative in 2018, about a quarter of FI people have less than a high school or GED diploma, in contrast to the 90% of the general public who have completed high school.^{3,4} Further, the disparities in education between FI people and the general public widen as levels of education rise. In 2008, less than 4% of FI individuals received a college degree compared to 29% of the general population.⁵ The reality is that FI people rarely have the opportunity to pursue higher education.

When released from prison, FI people face many barriers to accessing education, such as financial aid restrictions,

discriminatory college admission practices, and criminal background checks.⁶ These barriers first prevent FI people from receiving a post-secondary degree and then signal to them that they do not belong in college. However, for those FI individuals who are able to overcome these barriers, there are compelling benefits to accessing higher education.⁷

Benefits of higher education for formerly incarcerated people

Civic engagement

Increased civic engagement occurs when FI people receive access to higher education. By participating in post-secondary education, FI people become critically aware of incarceration’s oppressive systems (e.g., the prison-industrial-complex, income inequality, school-to-prison-pipeline).⁸ In addition to recognizing these oppressive systems, FI people develop the skills needed to target their efforts towards addressing discriminatory practices and policies that negatively impact people who have been incarcerated.⁹ For instance, in 2016, a group of UC Berkeley Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) students engaged in social justice activism by advocat-

ing for California’s proposition 57 and the Ban the Box campaign. The majority of the USI members involved were FI students and, with the knowledge acquired through their education, advocated for policy reform.^{10,11}

Following the completion of higher education, FI people further engage civically through voting – if given the right, which is not always the case. In the United States of America, 48 states allow people with felony convictions to vote with restrictions, except Vermont and Maine, whose citizens never lose the right to vote even while in custody. In 2019, the governor of Florida approved proposition 7066, which restored voting rights for people with felony convictions, but with the incapacitating conditions of having completed probation or parole supervision, court orders and sentences, and having paid off all mandated restitution, court fees, fines, and costs.¹²

Voting allows FI to participate in their community civically but also challenges the stigma that FI people are “morally incompetent, unredeemable, and likely to recidivate.”¹³ We believe that voting enables FI people to reclaim their voices, which were taken away while in the prison system. Further, if FI people were given more support to further their education or obtain a college degree, it would increase their likelihood of becoming more civically engaged through voting.

In 2016, people with some college or associate degree and those with at least a bachelor’s degree made up about 70% of the voting population.¹⁴ Voters with some college or an associate degree outnumbered voters with a high school diploma by 6.2% and voters with at least a bachelor’s degree outnumbered voters with only a high school diploma by 15 percent. In other words, people with a higher education degree are more likely to vote than those with a high school diploma or less.¹⁵

Economic opportunities

One of the most important benefits of post-secondary education is economic security. While research on formerly incarcerated college graduates is scarce (something Berkeley Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) is keen on changing through its various community-led research teams), a study using Internal Revenue Service data found that only half of those released from incarceration gained employment within one year of release. Out of the FI people who did gain employment, their average income was \$13,900 that year, less than full-time at minimum wage.¹⁶ According to research by UC

Berkeley USI students Michael Cera and Aminah Elster, the callback rate for fictitious job applicants with criminal records was 50% lower when compared to college educated men without a background.¹⁷

According to a report by the Vera Institute of Justice, studies from Minnesota and Florida have shown a positive correlation between pursuing a degree (or taking adult basic education courses) while incarcerated and gaining employment.¹⁸ That study showed increased earnings, increased number of hours worked, and a 48% decrease in recidivism.¹⁹ Although FI individuals will still face barriers to employment even after receiving a degree, having a degree has been shown to raise the chances of a person getting employment and higher pay.²⁰

Overall, further research is necessary to understand whether postsecondary education will eliminate the hiring disparities or the disparities in wages between FI workers and those who have never experienced incarceration.

Social networks

Along with higher education comes access to a network of people who can guide and support students in their endeavor to better their lives, find careers, and help them get access to more resources.²¹ Finding community and social support is an important benefit of higher education for FI individuals.²² When pursuing higher education, FI individuals have the potential to create transformative change in their personal lives and in their communities, and the network they build during their academic career can have a great influence on encouraging these changes. Many FI students describe building relationships on campus as a central part of both getting through their academic career and overcoming adversity in their own personal life.²³ Through mentoring programs, internships, student organizations, research projects, and more, FI students gain access to mentors and allies that can empower them and ultimately help them open doors to ideas and opportunities that would have otherwise been closed.

Policy recommendations

To support FI in obtaining a secondary education, policymakers should focus their efforts on:

- **Eliminating application barriers**

The Ban the Box campaign has made significant advances in making education accessible to FI people by removing questions about prior arrests and convictions in their University application process. In 2018, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) study found that 65% of private higher educational institutions and 42% of public higher education institutions asked applicants about their criminal history. The applicant's admission process is scrutinized; failure to disclose (or forget to disclose) any arrests or convictions can affect applicants' admission. Besides, a study of 2,924 people found that 2/3 of college applicants with criminal convictions never complete their admission process, while attrition for all applicants is 12 percent.²⁴ All state laws should require public and private educational institutions to remove any arrest and conviction questions from their application to make education equitable for people with conviction histories.

- **Expanding and establishing support programs for FI on campus**

[Berkeley Underground Scholars](#) (BUS) is an organization at UC Berkeley where FI students and systems impacted people can find support to navigate higher education. BUS creates and fosters a welcoming environment for FI students on campus by focusing on recruitment, retention, advocacy, and policy. The work to initiate programs such as BUS has been student-led and FI students have established their own BUS models at several UC campuses. Funding for these programs should be a priority. Programs such as BUS are needed for the underserved group of FI people and should be an established program in all schools, just like the Disabled Students Program (DSP), Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), and the Student Parent Center.

- **Creating a transitional education program for FI**

Establish a transition program within the prison system for currently incarcerated and soon to be released people, who need support in their education. Reentry programs like the [Insight Garden Program](#) work with currently incarcerated students, assisting them in their transition from their prison-based program into society, and minimizing everyday struggles of securing basic necessities such as housing, transportation, and employment.²⁵ Establishing an education-based program should include but not be limited to help in registering

for school, finding student housing, academic mentoring, and connecting them with established campus programs. Thus, ensuring that people released from imprisonment have the proper guidance, support, and resources to continue their education.

- **Funding for secondary education within the carceral system**

Provide continuous funding to make secondary education more accessible within the carceral system. By providing more educational opportunities for incarcerated people to obtain a bachelor's degree, they will be prepared and better equipped to continue college upon release.²⁶ [The University of California, Irvine](#) (UCI), is a prime example, soon to be offering a bachelor's degree program inside Donovan state prison. Students who take part in the UCI bachelor's program can either obtain their B. A. while incarcerated or complete their studies at UCI post-incarceration.

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