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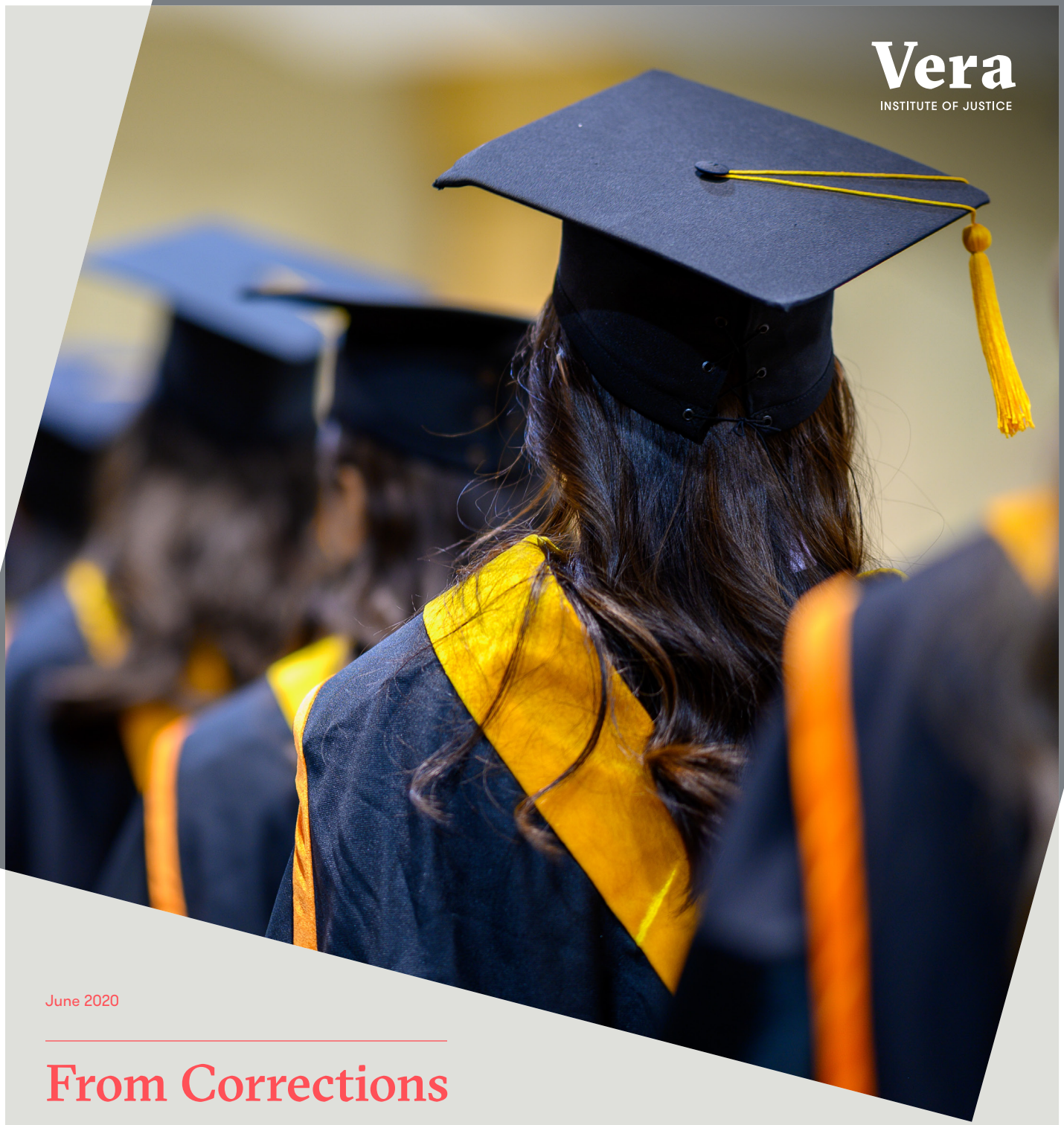

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From Corrections to College in California: An Evaluation of Student Support During and After Incarceration

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Introduction

The state of California, notorious for its tough-on-crime laws and overcrowded correctional facilities, is now a national leader in providing second chances through higher education. California has the most comprehensive college infrastructure of any state corrections system, and this investment in education has benefits for students in prison as well as formerly incarcerated students pursuing college after release. A key driver of this movement has been the Renewing Communities initiative, a joint project of the Opportunity Institute and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center that sought to expand access to higher education among justice-involved people in California, both during and after incarceration. In 2016, as part of its statewide advocacy and reform work, the initiative announced a three-year partnership with seven pilot projects, selected through a competitive request for proposals, that provide a combination of postsecondary education and student support services in 14 public colleges and universities, housed in prisons, jails, and colleges across the state. The initiative provided technical assistance to the pilot projects and infused them with a total of $6 million.[1] The pilot sites were supported in expanding the number of students they served and innovating with different program designs to meet their students' needs.

This report details an evaluation of the Renewing Communities initiative conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) between 2016 and 2019. Specifically, it gives a detailed account of program outcomes from all 14 participating sites and a more in-depth study of student experiences from a set of five community-based programs, each of which were housed at different colleges and universities across California. This report identifies core components of the programs and provides information that may assist other colleges in creating programs for formerly incarcerated students on campus.[2]

Vera's evaluation explores the perceptions of the programs held by staff and students, the challenges and unmet needs students face, and the programs' strengths and opportunities for development. These insights can inform the field of higher education programming for justice-

involved people, and this report may serve as a helpful reference for any future efforts to initiate, sustain, and expand postsecondary instruction and support for justice-involved people, both in California and beyond.

The findings of Vera's study demonstrate the overall success of the Renewing Communities initiative. The performance metrics that each of the programs submitted to Vera show growth in the number of students served by the programs and their academic achievements. The surveys and interviews revealed students' high levels of satisfaction with the programs, driven by, in large part, the staff members' passion and dedication to providing service and support to students. Furthermore, the students Vera researchers talked to described, in vivid terms, the impact that educational opportunities had upon their identities, their lives, and their hopes for a brighter future. These successes are all the more remarkable given the significant and ongoing challenges faced by the students and the program staff.

Previous research into the importance of higher education

Many studies have investigated various aspects of higher education access for justice-involved people. Recent research points to the transformative benefits of postsecondary education for people who are incarcerated, from improved safety in prisons for both incarcerated people and corrections staff, to decreased recidivism rates, increased economic prospects, and overall improved community safety and well-being.[3] One of the most widely researched impacts of postsecondary education on the lives of justice-involved people has been recidivism.[4] Studies have largely demonstrated that people who engage in college-level programming while incarcerated experience lower rates of recidivism; research has shown that receipt of educational programming can reduce rates of incarceration by 43 percent.[5]

Other studies have centered on non-justice related outcomes. Recent research demonstrates that higher education programs in prison can have transformative effects that may improve interpersonal relationships, families, and communities.[6] For example, when parents pursue their education, it increases the likelihood that their children will obtain a

higher education. Many incarcerated students also speak to the pride their academic achievements provide them and their families, as they may be the first people in their families to attend college.[7] Furthermore, studies have shown that there is significant desire for higher education among justice-involved people and a demand for programming in correctional facilities as well as in the community.[8] A recent study in California also documents the high academic achievement rates of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated college students.[9]

Research has also shown that higher educational programming, and the student experience of it, can differ in many ways, depending on the setting—whether programming is delivered in a prison or jail or on a college campus. This is especially true regarding studies of the experiences of formerly incarcerated people who enroll in college-level programs post-release.[10] There is a large degree of heterogeneity among the programs selected for the Renewing Communities initiative—including facility type and location, degree track, and student population. Because each program operates differently, this evaluation sought to gauge the particular features that impact the experience that students have with postsecondary education.

Overview of the Renewing Communities Initiative

Efforts to expand access to higher education for justice-involved people have gained momentum in California as a result of changes in the criminal justice, political, advocacy, and educational landscapes of the state.[11] This momentum has been cultivated over time through a network of support from a variety of stakeholders: the California State government, higher education institutions across the state, the residents of California, criminal justice and law enforcement actors, nonprofit organizations, and reform-seekers alike. In addition, much financial support has been steered toward this effort through capital and resource investments made by foundations.

Significant advances have been made as a result. Importantly, the public policy landscape has changed in ways that have lowered the barriers for justice-involved people to access higher education. In 2014,

California Senate Bill 1391 passed, permitting community colleges in California to begin offering in-person instruction inside of prisons within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) system.[12] The Board of Governors Fee Waiver, which provides tuition coverage for low-income students attending community colleges across California, has always been available to incarcerated students, so the 2014 policy change created the right set of circumstances for the college programs to grow in prison. Additionally, criminal justice history is not a barrier to admission for students seeking enrollment as undergraduates in California's public colleges and universities.

Against this backdrop of progress, the Renewing Communities initiative developed as a collaborative effort that ran from 2015 to 2019. The initiative was designed to promote stronger connections between the corrections system and higher education institutions across California and increase public investment in, and access to, higher education and supportive services for both currently and formerly incarcerated people. The Renewing Communities initiative, and the corresponding website, CorrectionstoCollegeCA.org, are the result of a joint venture between two California-based organizations: The Opportunity Institute, a nonprofit organization, and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center.[13]

The Renewing Communities Mission

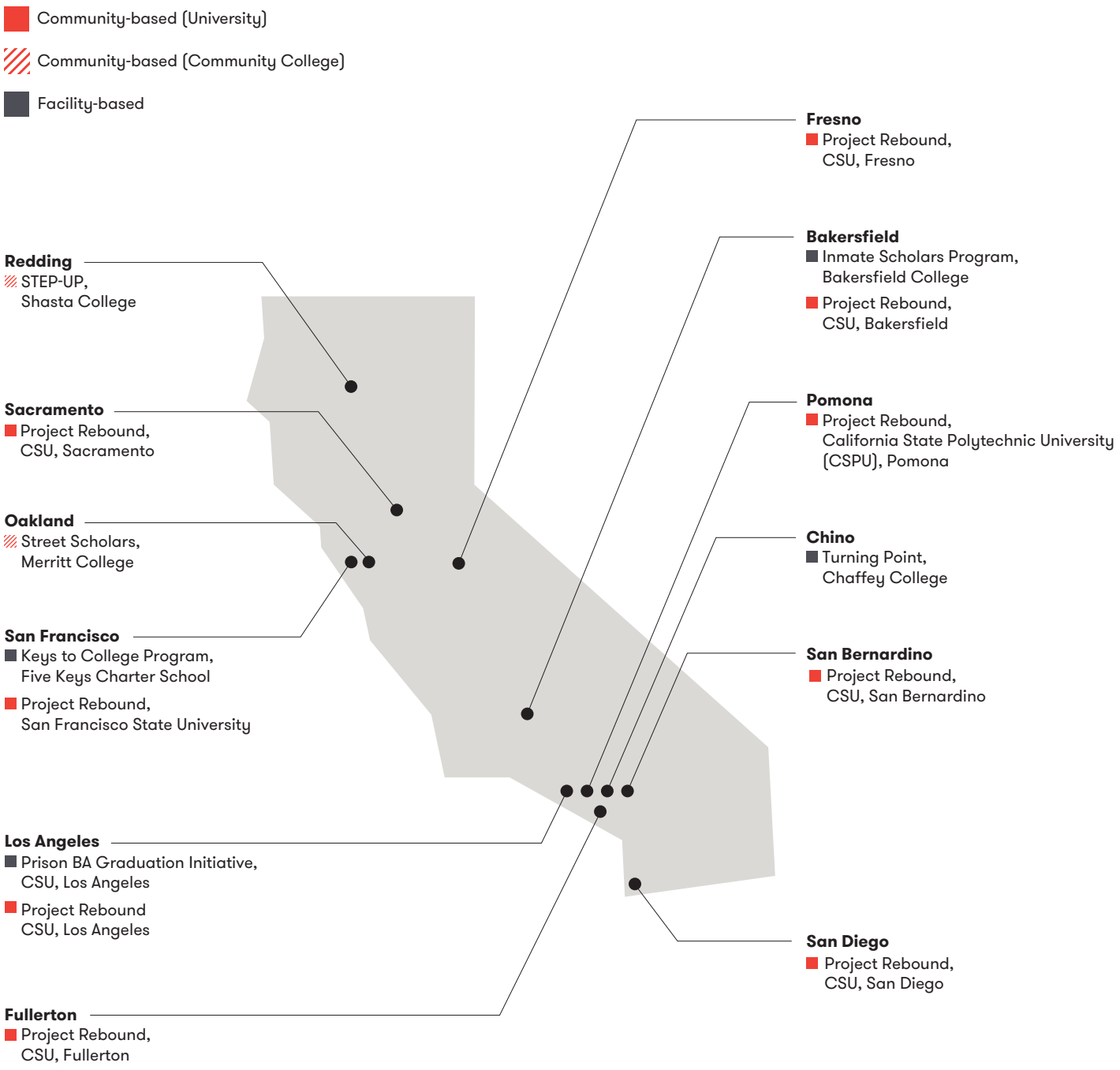
The Renewing Communities initiative envisions high-quality college programs building pathways to success for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students across California. Pursuing this vision will not only improve the lives of currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families, but also will increase the economic and social well-being of our communities.[14]

Renewing Communities pilot programs and sites

The programs selected for the Renewing Communities initiative vary in their offerings, program orientations, settings, and institutional homes. More information about each program and site can be found in the accompanying appendix.

Figure 1

Renewing Community programs and locations in California



Students… described, in vivid terms, the impact that educational opportunities had upon their identities, their lives, and their hopes for a brighter future.

The evaluation

In 2016, Vera partnered with the Opportunity Institute and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center to support the seven pilot programs through evaluation and performance monitoring. Vera worked with the programs to develop a range of key performance metrics, which were collected from the sites from fall 2016 to spring 2019. These were supplemented with surveys of students, administered at the end of each semester. In addition, Vera conducted a variety of in-depth qualitative research activities at five college campuses to learn more about formerly incarcerated students' experiences in community-based programs. (For more details of Vera's approach, see "Research methodology" at page 7.) The remainder of this report provides the findings of Vera's evaluation. After an overview of the research methods used, the report presents high-level performance measures for all sites. (More detailed information about individual program performance metrics can be found in the appendix.) This is followed by survey responses that detail the experiences of students in custody-based programs. Finally, the report describes findings from the qualitative research conducted in the community-based programs, detailing the programs' strengths and areas of challenge, and the transformative impact that education had on students' lives.

Research Methodology

Vera's evaluation of Renewing Communities comprised quantitative and qualitative research and data analysis techniques.[15] This section provides an overview of the key research activities associated with this evaluation.

Quantitative data

Vera collected quantitative data from all seven pilot programs.

Program-specific performance metrics

In the summer of 2016, Vera worked with the Opportunity Institute, the Stanford Criminal Justice Center, and the seven pilot programs to select and define a series of performance measures. The purpose of these data metrics was to measure and describe the student characteristics and to capture the various supports and programs offered to students. This information was requested from the program sites within 30 days of the conclusion of each fall and spring academic terms from fall 2016 to spring 2019.[16] The final list of data metrics that each site was asked to submit related to the following areas:

- Student demographics
- Site-level student recruitment and community engagement activities
- Student grade point averages, credits and credentials earned, and certificates and degrees conferred
- Supportive services accessed by students, both on and off campus

Student surveys

Vera developed short surveys to capture students' perceptions of the supports offered to them by their respective programs. The surveys also asked students for their views of the strengths and weaknesses of the programs, their levels of engagement with their programs, any challenges

or unmet needs that they may have, their ability to access campus-based supports, and their overall perceptions of higher education. Beginning in spring 2017, the initial round of student surveys was administered to participants in each of the community-based programs as well as to those who participated in the facility-based Five Keys program. Students who participated in facility-based programs within a California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) correctional facility were surveyed beginning in the fall 2017.

The structure of educational programming in community-based Renewing Communities programs is significantly different from that which is offered within in-custody programs. As such, different versions of the surveys were created for specific programs. Though the set of questions asked in the surveys varied between sites, the topical content was nearly identical, and each version of the survey consisted of a series of multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended items.[17]

Quantitative data collection challenges

As is common among service-delivery oriented programs, Vera encountered large variation among the participating sites with regard to the types of data they collected, the metrics that were of most value to them, and the data definitions they used to guide their data-collecting practices. This presented challenges in defining and operationalizing meaningful performance metrics that could be collected from all sites. The sites also varied with regards to their familiarity with collecting and maintaining data related to their programs and students. Some programs already had data collection procedures in place, and these sites were able to provide accurate and complete data submissions in a timely manner. Other sites did not have experience with collecting performance data and were not able to provide complete data for all semesters. Furthermore, as this research was conducted over several years, some of the program sites inevitably experienced staff turnover during the evaluation. This presented challenges to the consistent reporting of data and the administration of the student surveys. As a result, the quantitative data presented in this report is incomplete for certain time periods.

Qualitative data

Vera researchers explored the experiences of formerly incarcerated college and university students—as well as those of program staff members—at five different community-based program sites.

Three distinct research objectives guided the qualitative research activities in this study:

- To explore the impact that being enrolled in postsecondary education, generally, and in Renewing Communities-affiliated programs, specifically, had on various aspects of participating students' reentry experiences.
- To gauge program staff and student participants' perceptions of the operations, successes, and challenges of the various program models.
- To assess the structural and programmatic features of the programs, and how they may support or promote positive identity change among students.

The qualitative research activities began when Vera researchers conducted initial site visits to the five program sites during the fall 2018 academic term.

Fieldwork locations

With input from the Opportunity Institute, five community-based Renewing Communities locations were selected for the qualitative research. In choosing these sites, Vera considered the location of the program (geographically across California), the orientation of the program and types of services it offers, and the degree to which the program's design and delivery had stabilized. The sites selected were:

- Project Rebound: CSU, Fresno
- Project Rebound: CSU, Fullerton
- Project Rebound: CSU, Sacramento
- STEP-UP: Shasta College
- Street Scholars: Peralta Community College District (based at Merritt College)

Vera conducted three research activities at each site: interviews with staff and students, facilitation of student journaling, and observations of program activities.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with program administrators and students

During the fall 2018 academic term, Vera researchers conducted on-campus interviews with staff and students to learn more about their experiences on campus, in the program, and in other areas of their personal lives, and their views about themselves and their futures. The in-person fieldwork occurred at various sites during three weeks in the early part of the fall 2018 academic term.

Follow-up interviews were conducted during the spring 2019 academic term. The researchers aimed to conduct these interviews, by phone, with each of the respondents who participated in the first round of interviews in fall 2018. Vera researchers conducted these interviews to better understand the dynamic nature of students' identities and perceptions about programming, among other aspects of their reentry.[18] Follow-up interviews with staff focused on the successes and challenges of administering their programs and their concerns and ambitions for the future.

Student journaling

A smaller sample of the students Vera interviewed also volunteered to participate in a second research activity: providing monthly journal entries about their thoughts, challenges, and personal successes in the time between their first and second interviews. Journaling is a data collection technique that provides deeper insight into people's lives, especially in relation to sensitive subjects.[19] Student participants were sent journal prompts each month on various topics via the online journaling platform PlushForums. Prompts included requests that students describe experiences like "important turning points, achievements, or unforeseen circumstances…since school began," for example.

Observations of program activities

During the site visits, Vera researchers conducted program-related campus observations. This entailed tours of the campuses, including specific offices or gathering areas for program students, as well as other parts of the campus that students may encounter that are not directly tied to the programs.

Respondent sampling and recruitment

Students: In order to recruit students to participate in research interviews, Vera designed a simple, online recruitment form using Qualtrics and asked each program to email the weblink to all of its students during the first two weeks of the fall 2018 academic term. The form explained the study: the research activities involved, what was required of respondents, details about compensation, and other relevant information. Students who were interested in participating completed the form, and the responses came directly to Vera. Vera then scheduled interviews with interested students directly.

It is important to note that at programs with relatively small student enrollments (i.e., fewer than 15 students), the researchers attempted to conduct both the initial and the follow-up interviews with all students. At larger programs, only a subset of the students served as respondents. In these instances, students were selected based on certain personal characteristics to achieve diversity—not a representative sample—among the student respondents.

Program staff: Vera's goal was to interview key program staff at all five sites twice, as was done with the student interviewees. Respondents included faculty members and other personnel who played a significant role in the development and/or operations of the various programs. Vera worked directly with each program's leadership to assist in the recruitment of respondents for the staff interviews.

Table 1

Count of participants in qualitative research activities

Respondent group	Round one interviews, fall 2018	Round two interviews, spring 2019	Journaling exercise participants	Journal entries submitted, per respondent
Students	47	36	20	All five entries: 16 Four entries: 3 Three entries: 1
Program Staff	17	9	n/a	n/a

As is common in longitudinal research, this study faced respondent attrition—of students and program staff—during the qualitative portion of the research. There were several respondents who participated in the first interview of the qualitative phase but could not be reached or elected not to participate in the second interview. Similarly, just over one-third of students (n = 31) who agreed to participate in the journaling exercise at the start of the qualitative phase actually participated once the activity commenced.

Please note that all names used in this report are pseudonyms in an effort to protect respondents' anonymity.

Overview of the Renewing Communities Programs

Vera tracked a variety of performance metrics from each program in the Renewing Communities initiative during the course of the evaluation. A detailed breakdown of these numbers can be found in the appendix. However, as noted above, not all programs were able to collect and report data for all semesters. (See "Research methodology" at page 7 for more details.) Therefore, Vera was limited in its ability to aggregate data across all sites. Where possible, the findings in this section are based on spring 2019 data, as this academic term afforded each of the programs the maximum amount of time across the evaluation period to develop and stabilize their programming and services.

Complete data for the community-based Renewing Communities programs was available for the fall 2016 and spring 2019 semesters. It reveals substantial growth across this time period. (See Table 2 below.) In fall 2016, a total of 211 students were enrolled in a community-based program (59 of whom were new arrivals to the program). By spring 2019, this number had grown by 132 percent to 490 students (145 of whom were new to the program that semester). The campus-based students were performing at a high level, with 37 percent of students earning a GPA of 3.0 or higher in spring 2019. This was true for 32 percent of students enrolled in two-year college programs and 40 percent of students in four-year programs. (See Figure 2 below.)

Spring 2019 data was less complete for facility-based programs. However, the data shows significant growth between fall 2016 and the most recently available semester's metrics. (See Table 2 below for details of data availability.) The number of students enrolled in facility-based programs more than doubled from 492 in fall 2016 to 1,064 in the most recently available data.

Table 2

Renewing Communities student enrollment, by academic term and program setting

Fall 2016		**Total**	**Community-based**	**Facility-based**
Enrollment	New	422	59	363
	Returning	281	152	129
	Total	**703**	**211**	**492**
Spring 2019 (or most recent data submission)		**Total**	**Community-based**	**Facility-based**
Enrollment	New	831	145	736
	Returning	651	345	328
	Total	**1,482**	**490**	**1,064**

Note: New students are defined as students enrolled in the program for the first time within this reporting period. Returning students are defined as students returning to the program this reporting period from the previous semester. Although all community-based programs provided data for spring 2019, the figures reported here for facility-based programs include data from spring 2018 (Prison BA Graduation Initiative, CSU Los Angeles), fall 2018 (Inmate Scholars Program, Bakersfield College), and spring 2019 (Five Keys & Turning Point, Chaffey College (CIM & CIW)).

Figure 2

Spring 2019 term GPA range for students in community-based programs

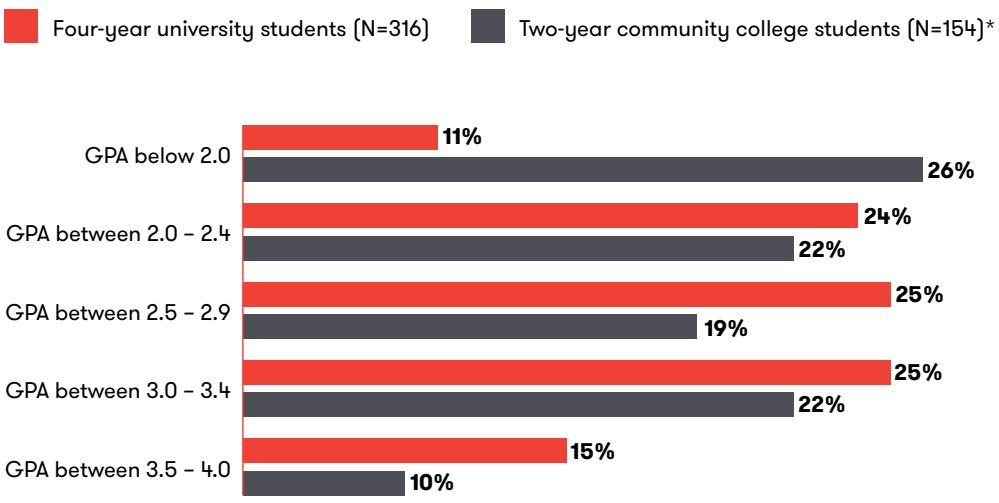
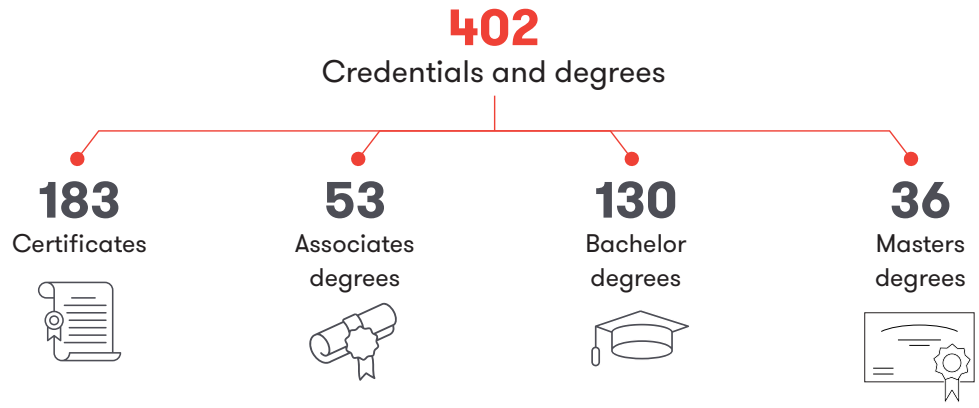


Figure 3

Cumulative credentials and degrees awarded by Renewing Communities sites, by degree type, fall 2016 to spring 2019 (or most recent reporting period)



Note: Data reported through spring 2019 for all community-based sites, Five Keys, and Turning Point, Chaffey College (CIM &CIW); though fall 2018 for Inmate Scholars Program, Bakersfield College; and through spring 2018 for Prison BA Graduation

During the time period studied, programs in the Renewing Communities initiative reported supporting students in completing 402 academic qualifications—including 124 Bachelor's degrees. (See Figure 3 above.)

A key feature of each program in the Renewing Communities initiative is ensuring that the program creates pathways for people to access the services that it provides. Performance metrics reported by the programs demonstrate the massive scale on which this task was undertaken.

Outreach Events: Program staff, sometimes with the assistance of current students, often spend time in correctional facilities, on their college or university campuses, and in the community to spread the word about the opportunities that their programs can provide. During the study period, programs reported conducting 1,227 such events.

Letters: As more people—either incarcerated or in the community—hear about the existence of the Renewing Communities programs, they commonly write letters to program staff to express interest or to ask for more information about the programs' offerings and enrollment process. During the study period, staff at the Renewing Communities programs reported receiving and responding to 6,154 such letters—a significant feat.

The Experiences of Students in Facility-Based Programs

This section details the perceptions and experiences of students who participated in facility-based programs in the Renewing Communities initiative. These are drawn from student surveys completed during academic year 2018-2019. A total of 525 surveys were completed from the programs listed in Table 3. Three-quarters of responses came from the largest in-custody program—Inmate Scholars (Bakersfield College). Of all the respondents, 86 percent were male, 23 percent identified as Black and 18 percent as white, and 39 percent identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino/a.

Educational history

For the vast majority of the incarcerated survey respondents, participation in facility-based education programs was their first experience taking college-level coursework. Just 22 percent of respondents reported taking college courses in the community prior to their current period of incarceration. Moreover, 34 percent noted that they had taken correspondence courses at some point while being incarcerated, and just 9 percent said that they had previously attended in-person college courses while in custody.

Areas of student satisfaction

Students in the facility-based programs shared similar thoughts on some of the benefits of their programs and the factors that made their participation in the classroom enjoyable. Below are a few of the most prominent findings:

Table 3

Facility-based survey respondents, by most recent survey submissions (N=525)

		Percent of survey respondents
Program	Inmate Scholars Program (Bakersfield College)	74
	Keys to College Program, Five Keys Charter School	2
	Prison Graduation Initiative, CSU, Los Angeles	7
	Turning Point, Chaffey College, CIM	8
	Turning Point, Chaffey College, CIW	9
Gender	Male	86
	Female	10
	Other	1
	Missing	4
Race	Asian	3
	Black	23
	Native American	2
	Pacific Islander	1
	White	18
	Multi-race	10
	Other	28
	Missing	14
Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino/a	39
	Non-Hispanic or non-Latino/a	39
	Missing	22

Note: The data reported for each site is derived from the spring 2019 academic term, aside from the Inmate Scholars Program at Bakersfield College. Data from this site comes from surveys administered in the fall 2018 academic term. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

"This program is the catalyst, the most important component to my growth as a human being."

Students were overall very satisfied with their instructors and their experience while in the classroom

Survey responses revealed that students felt supported and engaged in class. More than 93 percent of students agreed with the statement, *The teachers are open to students sharing their input*. Further, most students—more than 89 percent—agreed with the statement, *I feel comfortable contributing to classroom discussions*. The curricula were experienced as being well-matched to their abilities, as 84 percent of students agreed that they understood the class material offered to them.

- As one student stated in the open-ended comment section, "I like the overall experience of having the teachers teach and explain the material."
- Another student said, "I loved the professors that worked with the program. They were extremely helpful, supportive, and rolled with all of my hang-ups effortlessly."

The majority of students surveyed were satisfied with their program

Eighty-two percent of student respondents stated that they were satisfied with their program, and many made comments that illustrated a high level of gratitude for the opportunity to take college classes:

- "The program has given me an opportunity to change my life for the good."
- "This program is a great opportunity, and it is a big contribution in giving my life meaning."
- "Although my age is a factor [in] my personal growth, and where I will go from here, this is a good program, and I would do all that I can to support and help the administration to make this program a success."

Most students in facility-based programs planned to continue their education in the future—whether during their incarceration or upon their release

Education was reported as being deeply important to the students. When last surveyed, 94 percent of the students agreed with the statement, *Education is a high priority to me.* As one student remarked in an open-ended section of the survey, "This program is the catalyst, the most important component to my growth as a human being." The vast majority—97 percent of respondents—said that they intended to pursue their education beyond the current academic term. As one student wrote, "I'm just happy to be in college…It means a lot to have the opportunity to better myself as well as obtain a degree to help me become successful when I parole."

Areas of challenge for students

In addition to the positive sentiments and comments students made about their experiences in their respective programs, they expressed a number of areas of concern.

The lack of technology was a widespread concern and a source of frustration among students

Approximately 50 percent of students disagreed with the statement, *I have sufficient access to computers to complete my schoolwork*, whereas only 15 percent agreed with the statement (the remaining respondents being neutral). Further, when asked to rank a set of items in the order in which they pose a challenge to their academic work, lack of technology was most commonly chosen as the primary challenge students faced.

Many students in the survey wrote in comments similar to the two below:

- "Need more access to computers to complete assignments and resource materials."
- "We need technology including limited internet access to research."

A lack of access to supplies and other resources to support their learning was common and problematic for many students

Slightly more than half of respondents, 52 percent, agreed with the statement: *Overall, I have the supplies (e.g., pen, paper) that I need to complete my school work.*

- As one student commented: "I am blessed to be in this program, but more lab time is needed as well as supplies."

The correctional setting is seen as a significant challenge to program delivery

Another source of consternation among students in the facility-based programs was the high degree of interference that the conditions and policies of the prison or jail had with students' ability to learn. For example, *Facility constraints* received the second highest rank, behind *Lack of technology*, in a list of challenges in students' pursuit of higher education. Students' survey comments revealed that specific issues include a lack of classroom space and little time to work on assignments outside of the classroom. As one student stated in their written remarks, "The prison's physical structure is designed for punishment, not rehabilitation, so there is a lack of class space. We share computer time, and there is never enough time or access."

Summary

In general, students participating in in-custody programs were satisfied with their programs, their instructors, and the opportunity to advance their education while incarcerated. Moreover, the vast majority of the students noted that they planned to continue pursuing their education in the future.

That said, these students also noted several challenging aspects of their program participation related to the constraints and limitations of receiving instruction in a correctional facility—such as a lack of adequate time and space to complete coursework outside of the class, conflicts with other obligations, such as work duty, and perhaps the most significant challenge and obstacle for facility-based students: the lack of adequate technology (primarily computers and internet access) to fully engage with and complete their coursework.

The Experiences of Students and Staff in Community-Based Programs

This section provides an overview of how students and program staff experienced the various aspects of the community-based programs in the Renewing Communities initiative. The findings in this section were informed by data collected through student surveys, interviews with students and staff members, and student respondents' online journal entries. To start, this section draws upon the survey of students participating in community-based programs to provide context to the narratives that follow.

Personal background

The student survey collected information on a series of background characteristics. Respondents to the student survey administered in spring 2019 were located across the state of California, studying at various colleges. Most respondents who reported their gender identified as male (61 percent). Twenty-nine percent identified as white and 24 percent as Black. (See Table 4 below.)

Table 4

Community-based survey respondent demographics, spring 2019 (N=160)

		Percent
Program	Street Scholars: Merritt College	14
	STEP-UP: Shasta College	17
	Project Rebound: CSU Bakersfield, CSU Fresno, CSU Fullerton, CSU Los Angeles, CSPU Pomona, CSU Sacramento, CSU San Bernardino, and San Francisco State University	70
Gender	Male	53
	Female	34
	Missing	13
Race/Ethnicity	White	29
	Black	24
	Asian	2
	Multi-race	10
	Other	16
	Missing	19
Hispanic/Latino	Hispanic/Latino/a	28
	Non-Hispanic or non-Latino/a	57
	Missing	15

As the figures below illustrate, students juggled significant responsibilities and other life circumstances while also attending college. The majority of students (64 percent) were employed, either full- or part-time, and 14 percent were actively seeking employment. Nearly one third of respondents—30 percent—indicated that they were caretakers of children under the age of 18. Notably, three-quarters of respondents indicated that they were the first college students within their families. Also, students lived in an assortment of housing arrangements—most of them lived with family members, and although they were not directly asked, a number of students and staff referenced the challenges for homeless students, which may have been captured in the statistic that 12 percent of them lived in "Other" arrangements beyond the categories that were provided.

Figure 4

Current employment status, community-based students, spring 2019 (N=155)

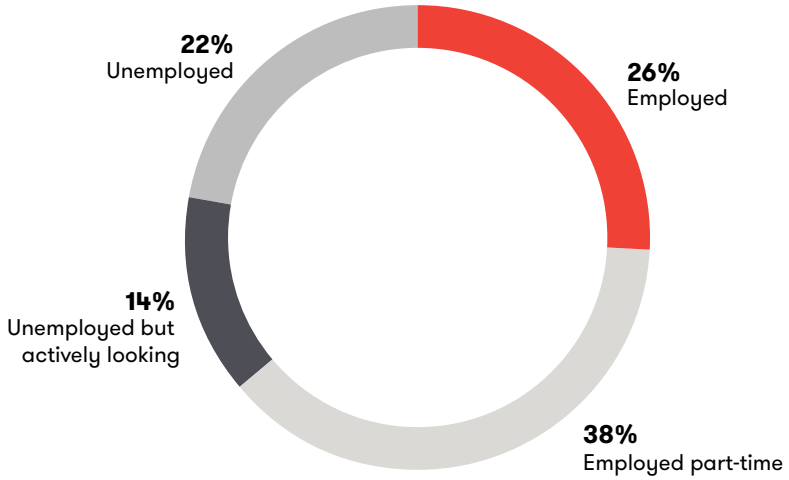


Figure 5

Parent/guardian status, community-based students, spring 2019 (N=155)

In custody of children under age 18

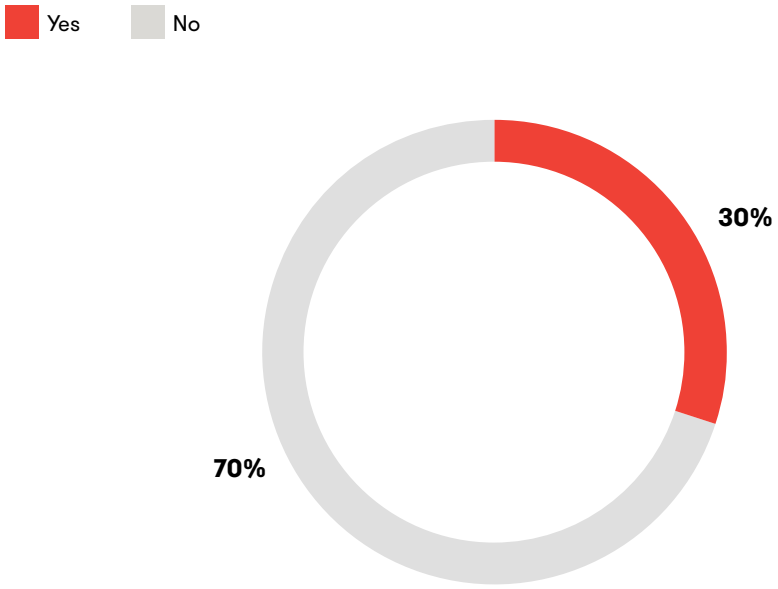


Figure 6

Students whose parents also attended college, spring 2019 (N=155)

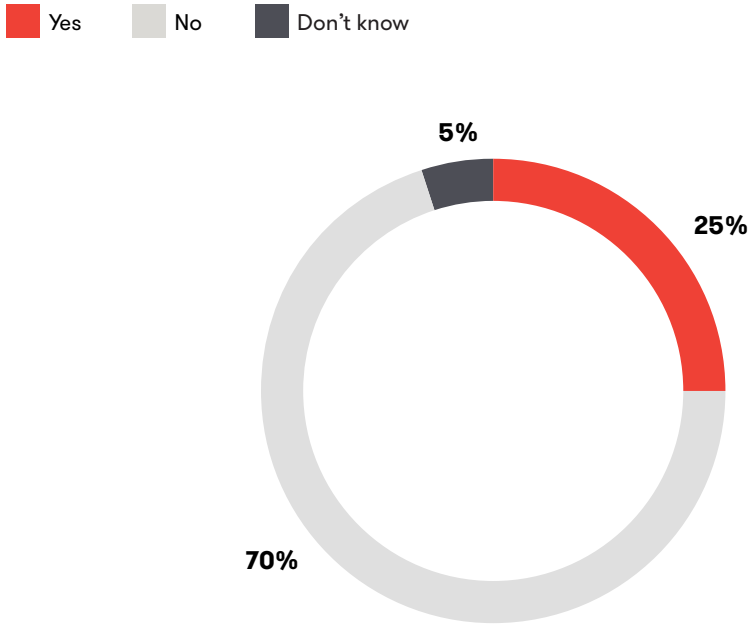
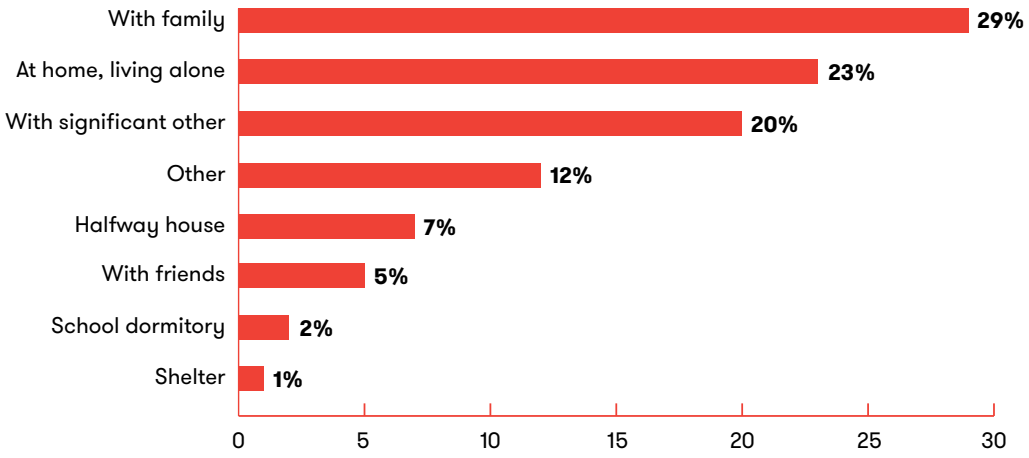


Figure 7

Housing status, community-based students, spring 2019 (N=155)



In addition to the housing, employment, and childcare challenges students faced, data collected from the program sites shows that a substantial portion of students were subject to the conditions of community supervision. Among the programs that reported this data in spring 2019—accounting for 472 students—83 people were identified as being on parole and 117 on probation. Assuming that no individual student was on both parole and probation simultaneously, this means that 42 percent of students were under active community supervision while enrolled in college. This figure is likely a conservative estimate; the stigma attached to criminal justice involvement may deter students from disclosing their community supervision status, and program staff may choose not to ask.

The power to change: Insights from campus-based programs

This section takes a closer look at the experiences of students and staff in five of the community-based programs that were part of the Renewing Communities initiative. The findings include information gathered from end-of-semester student surveys, one-on-one interviews, and the narratives of the students who participated in the online journaling exercise. The data reveals the practical and emotional challenges that formerly incarcerated people face as students and the necessity of the support the Renewing Communities programs provide.

Almost universally, respondents expressed appreciation for their programs and reported positive experiences, with many describing

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I felt like I didn’t have any access to positive programs, and I didn’t have any access to positive people. But for some reason in [this facility] there were people that had been at it for longer, positive programming. And so, just being exposed to them and realizing like, ‘Wait a minute, these guys have life sentences, but they are actually living differently. They are actually living positively.’ That had a big impact on me.

their participation in the programs as life-changing. The vast majority of students effusively praised their programs—especially their relationships with program staff and other students—for being instrumental in helping them navigate college life and reentry and in reducing the isolation and stigma that many formerly incarcerated people face. Students described their programs as being safe spaces, where similar experiences are shared and understood, and as providing them with a community of reliable and unconditionally supportive peers. Nevertheless, staff and students alike identified many remaining challenges and obstacles. However, participants provided valuable information about program success and sustainability that can be used not only to strengthen the programs but also to act as an important guide for other programs that seek to assist people on this transformational journey.

The process of becoming a college student

Students' descriptions of the process that led them to pursue higher education were noteworthy and highlight the need and desire for postsecondary programming among incarcerated people.

Increased educational interest while incarcerated

For many students, the prospect of participating in college classes while in prison became a guiding light during their incarceration. Many students reported that, while in prison, they came to the realization that education may serve as the best pathway towards having a life that was more purposeful and positive than what they had previously experienced. However, the pathways to the classroom while incarcerated differed among the students.

In one case, Tonya, a student at a four-year program, discussed her experience with discovering an interest in education.[20] In her first interview, she spoke of how she detested school when she was young, as academic achievement was not encouraged in her household. While incarcerated, however, she learned to read by studying the Bible and described this as a turning point: "I think learning to read did it. Once I could string those words together…I was like, 'Oh wow, I know what this means. This is a sentence, and I know exactly what I just read.' That's when it was like,

'I need more, I need more,' so I asked for those classes [while incarcerated]."

Some students took up college as a result of being presented with the opportunity to do so while in prison—especially when peers were present to demonstrate its transformative power. Clyde, a student at a four-year college, described being transferred from one prison, which had limited educational opportunities, to another, which presented many more: "I felt like I didn't have any access to positive programs, and I didn't have any access to positive people. But for some reason in [this facility] there were people that had been at it for longer, positive programming. And so, just being exposed to them and realizing like, 'Wait a minute, these guys have life sentences, but they are actually living differently. They are actually living positively.' That had a big impact on me." Clyde's narrative illustrates how people may be drawn to education through their interaction with others who are involved in programming.

Fulfilling a long-term goal

A number of the students Vera interviewed also noted that being offered educational programming while incarcerated was an avenue for them to realize their long-standing goal of academic achievement. Generally, these were students who said they had always had an interest in education and/or historically achieved at a high level prior to their justice system involvement.

In one such case, Jeremy, a student at one of the four-year programs, described how his successes in secondary-level education while incarcerated provided him an opportunity not only to access higher education coursework, but also to be the catalyst for higher education programming becoming available in the correctional facility where he was incarcerated. "After you finish your GED their thing is just to lock you in your cell for the rest of the day. And, I took offense to that…I felt like I was being punished at 17 because I finished the GED…So I kind of pushed the issue in juvenile hall. Like…why do we not offer college courses? You know, we are still students. I should not be penalized for completing a GED. And, so one of the staff members helped me draft a proposal, and I shot that up through the channels, and they started a college program."

The pathways by which students rediscovered their passion for education were varied. For some students, being incarcerated provided their first positive experience with education (e.g., through success and/or encouragement from others), leading them to seek out further

Table 5

Top-ranked benefits to academic success among community-based students, spring 2019 (n=122)

Benefits to program participation	Percent of responses receiving #1 rank
The people who work in my college program (i.e., staff affiliated with Project Rebound, STEP-UP, Street Scholars)	30
Getting tutoring	23
Book vouchers	15
The people who work at my college who are not staff in my program	11
Being able to connect with other formerly incarcerated students	10
Being in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) or Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS)	6
Getting transportation assistance	3
The bridge/transition program before starting school	2

opportunities. Other respondents noted that prison-based programming provided them with the opportunity to focus on their longstanding desire to obtain an education. Prison-based college classes were, for many, a catalyst to pursuing postsecondary education upon release.

Programs' areas of strength

The programs in the Renewing Communities initiative vary in structure and the supports they are able to offer students. In general, students felt well-supported by the programs; 94 percent of surveyed students agreed (or somewhat agreed) with the statement, *This program is offering what I need for success in college*. The various ways in which students felt supported are detailed below. Students described staff as playing a pivotal role in their success and the success of the programs more generally. Indeed, when survey participants were asked to identify what they believed to be the most valuable aspects of their program, "the people who work in my college program" was the top-rated item among respondents. (See Table 5.)

Assistance onboarding on campus and navigating the academic maze

One common feature of the campus-based programs is that they offer help to students as they acclimate to campus life. Staff at nearly all of the community-based programs in this evaluation reported that a main feature of their program is to assist students—who were, in most cases, on a college campus for the first time when they enrolled in their college program—to successfully attend to all of the requirements of enrollment, such as their application, financial aid, and registration. For many respondents, this assistance in adjusting to the financial and practical demands of student life was greatly appreciated. As Felix explained in his journal entry, "[the program staff] keep me accountable and on top of school deadlines. They also have given me access to all resources that they have available to them. To me, what has helped me the most [are] the food vouchers. Free food at school has been helping me a lot!"

Helping to quell feelings of apprehension

Several students discussed how program staff help relieve the feelings of anxiety and confusion associated with being a non-traditional student on a college campus. This was common, despite the fact that many of the students had previous experience with college-level coursework—either prior to or during periods of incarceration. As Felix noted, "college can be intimidating, but having someone in your corner makes it less intimidating."

Beyond the anxieties of figuring out the logistics of starting college, some students also struggled with the stigma associated with being a non-traditional student. Students often attributed this to self-consciousness about their justice involvement, social class and position, and age. It is important to note that a large percentage of the students in community-based programs were first-generation college students. When they were surveyed in spring 2019, only slightly more than 25 percent of students reported having a parent or guardian who had graduated from college.

Further, feelings of stigma appeared to be more prominent among students at more traditional, four-year colleges than on community college campuses. This could be attributed to the fact that community colleges tend to have more non-traditional students, are commuter schools, have fewer activities associated with traditional undergraduate students (such

as Greek and athletic culture), and are generally places where students will invest less time in extra-curricular activities. Thus, students at two-year colleges generally reported feeling less like outsiders on their campuses—and less stigmatized—than those enrolled at four-year colleges.

One respondent, Elaine, spoke of her general fear that other members of the campus community would find out about her criminal justice history, citing, in particular, the relative ease with which members of the general public can access this information on the internet:

> "Like the other day someone shared...we were having a partner discussion. He said, 'You know, you never know about people's experiences. You never know if they've been to jail or if they are a robber or you know, if they have a disability.' And so, when he said, 'Went to jail,' that kind of like, it took me back a little bit. Because I was thinking, 'What does he know?' What does he know, you know? And, all it takes is for someone to look up the class roster and enter it in Google and there it is. And that's always, it's always a fear."

However, students often credited their respective programs for alleviating these feelings of anxiety. One student, Lennon—who also struggled to feel that he belonged on campus—noted the impact that his program had on helping to address those concerns: "...just the stigma of not knowing where exactly to sleep every night and people see that, and you're just classified as a homeless bum, I guess. Then at school, I don't think that really showed, but the one thing is I didn't really want to get close to people because if they found out I was an ex-felon, I don't think it would be good, and with [the program], they knew, and so I didn't have a problem going there and that just took that extra burden off of my thought process."

Clyde described a similar experience in a journal entry. "The stigma that surrounds being a formerly incarcerated person takes an emotional toll...because the reactions from people can be depressing when they are in shock, concerned, or judgmental. I have found that having a support network and some opportunity to participate in meaningful activity has helped me cope with that stigma and push forward." In another journal entry, Flora succinctly described the power of having access to an

understanding community in reducing her sense of shame: "I have had more positive experiences after joining [my program] because I am not so ashamed and there is so much power in telling the truth without fear."

The program is a "home" on campus

Staff and students alike noted that their programs provide a proverbial home to students. Students cited a family-like atmosphere and the separation from the larger campus community as features that make the program feel like a respite from the rest of campus.

Through his journal entry, Marc explained, "I do experience episodes of alienation, even this far into my collegiate career. But, when I meet with my fellow [program] scholars, I can relate to them, and I have the feeling that there are others who share my experiences…[The program] feels more like a family rather than an organization. We are all very comfortable with one another and share our accomplishments as well as obstacles that we face. If this program were not here I am not sure that I would have had the will to finish my undergraduate school career."

Interview participants also noted that the program office was a safe space on campus where students could be themselves and discuss pressing issues and concerns. Importantly, several program staff members had themselves experienced incarceration. This created a shared sense of community among program students and staff, fostering a high degree of comradery, trust, and interdependence among the students in the programs. As one student shared,

> "I like that [the program] provides a safe place where I can share my concerns and speak freely of my history without judgment. I appreciate that when I entered [the program], I was accepted and welcomed. [The program] gives me hope. Before I was introduced to [the program], I often felt alone because I didn't think there was anyone else who was like me. It was after the fact that I came to know a group of awesome people who are all out to achieve the same goals as me. I value the friendship and support that I have found."

Moreover, respondents also discussed the physical space the program occupies as central to its home-like feel. In most cases, the programs each

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[The program] feels more like a family rather than an organization...If this program were not here I am not sure that I would have had the will to finish my undergraduate school career.

had a dedicated space on campus. For some students, this was especially critical because the space was said to be a getaway, often from other spaces on campus that are typically occupied by traditional students.

As Clyde described in a journal entry, "I attended peer-to-peer meetings with other students in the program on campus...These were beneficial for me because they allowed me to share what I was experiencing and connect with others. I attended Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings for the program, which was nice for my family to meet everyone and participate in something nice for the holidays. It had a family feeling to it and was warm." Another student, Gus, in his journal entry, agreed: "[the program] keeps me involved with the community at-large. Period. Without the sense of a safe place to be, I would be more of a recluse than I am."

Furthermore, program spaces provide students with access to the resources needed to complete their academic assignments—such as computers, tutors, and the ability to print free of charge, which was not a trivial issue for the students. As Marcel, a student who was in his first few weeks in the program when interviewed, stated, "[The program] is always there to help us out to reach our goals...Even at midnight, if I wanted to come here and print something, early morning, and I texted somebody, they'd say, 'Okay, just come, we will help you out.'"

Interviews with program staff affirmed that the creation of a welcoming, resource-filled atmosphere was an intentional and critical facet of the programs' design. "So when students come to the office we allow them to study in there. We have a little refrigerator and a coffee maker and a microwave. And places for them to plug in their laptops and their phones. And we just really want it to be a space for our very special students to feel like they belong. It is their own space on campus. It is a safe space for them. And that, I think, is the biggest function that that space can and does provide for our students," said Fiona, a staff member from one of the four-year programs. This sentiment was echoed by one of the students surveyed in spring 2019: "This program eases the fear of not being good enough. I feel comfortable in the office, a safe place to be myself."

Providing guidance on using various modes of technology

Another important support the programs provided was assistance and guidance on the different types of technology commonly used in higher education settings. Interestingly, many of the students who commented on this theme said that learning how to use email was particularly challenging. For instance, one student mentioned not knowing what an attachment was or how to use this feature when sending emails. Technology use is a significant challenge for students who served long sentences in prison. When asked about any other challenges students faced beyond those listed in the survey, one respondent noted difficulty with learning new technology, saying, "...using technology such as the Internet. I was confined in prison for over 25 years, and technology has changed drastically."

A student interview respondent, Kel, heard about his campus program by inquiring elsewhere on campus about how to get assistance using computers and other forms of technology that he was not familiar with. "I got my books and stuff, and I was talking to the counselor, and I said, 'Look. I have big problem. I don't know how to use the computer. I don't know how to use a cell phone." She said, 'I have good news for you. There is [the program] in so-and-so building. Just go down. They're going to help you.'"

Helping students to reframe their personal narratives

Many students demonstrated that, although they may continue to face obstacles due to their justice involvement, they have transformed their personal narratives to reflect a sense of empowerment, agency, and resilience. Students acknowledged that program staff were instrumental in helping them reassess how they view themselves and guided them in reframing their personal narratives. Specifically, the program staff helped students view their justice involvement not as the defining characteristic of their lives, but instead as one of many experiences that led to personal growth and change. Also, as one student noted in the spring 2019 survey, "I think this program is amazing. It is a beacon of hope to let people know that you can progress in life and make something of yourself no matter what your past looks like. This program means the world to me. That is why I work so hard to make it look good and to show people that second

chances should be taken serious. This program gives you all the tools to succeed, you just have to put in the work and prepare for your new life! Don't change a thing!"

Similarly, a spring 2019 survey respondent claimed, "The program means a chance to prove I'm more than just my record. That my addiction is what led to my bad decisions and won't define me for the rest of my life. It's helped me to respect myself again and have confidence in my abilities."

Many students reported experiencing a noticeable and positive impact on their own growth and transformation as members of these programs. Students credited their programs with helping them to increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy and to find purpose and direction in their lives. As one spring 2019 survey respondent noted, "What I like is everyone can relate to being incarcerated and overcoming that with higher education. I get motivated seeing others achieve their goals because it gives me hope."

Gregory, a student at one of the four-year colleges, said of the program,

> "It helps with self-esteem. It does. I think being a student and doing well in it helps. It makes me feel confident and optimistic about the future. You know, it was overwhelming thinking about how I was. I've always been good at selling drugs. But I know where that gets me…So I need to find something else, and now that I've succeeded in academia, I'm like, 'Man, I can actually do this. I can earn a Master's degree. I can maybe earn a doctorate degree or a JD or what,' and you know, it's possible, all these possibilities. It just gives me some hope and optimism about the future, for sure."

Another student, Chance, noted, "It feels great. Just because I never thought I would be able to get out of prison and then go to a university. There was a time in my life where I never thought that was possible. So, being able to do it…changes how I view myself, how I view my worth and possibilities in life. It's huge."

As Mario, a student at a four-year university, noted, this focus on narrative change is central to much of the behavioral change among many of his peers. He believes it has led to change in the mindset of the general public about formerly incarcerated people. To this point, Mario offered, "…the fact that we're using higher education as a tool to change

these narratives is amazing. To my recollection…nobody has messed up …They depicted us as monsters that need to be caged up. They depicted us as incorrigibles who cannot function within society, but guess what? When they started releasing us in large numbers, we haven't disappointed anybody yet and you know, since 2012, 2013."

Given the profound impact that college appears to have on students' lives and self-identities, it is not surprising that 97 percent of survey respondents reported that education was a high priority in their lives. As Ed explained in a journal entry, "the hardships I've encountered along the way will not defeat me. I will overcome a set back with a greater bounce back. Walking across that [graduation] stage, shaking the many hands that I will shake, and posing for the picture at the end with all my loved ones; a desired goal to reach is truly within reach now."

Opportunities to change people's perceptions of justice-involved people

Participating in new activities and having new experiences were among the benefits that students named when discussing their programs. Students described several ways the programs helped them share their personal narratives—attending events, meeting key community stakeholders (including those in the criminal justice system), and speaking to groups of other students who were not justice system-involved, among other opportunities for civic engagement. Through these experiences, students were able to educate people about the transformation that formerly incarcerated students could make through gaining an education. For example, in some programs, a significant component of being an active participant in the program is to educate members of the community on the positive qualities and successes of justice-involved people. Importantly, students are able to share their academic and post-release successes with audiences they traditionally do not get to speak with. Gregory, a student who was on the verge of graduating, said "I think it's good for those students that are probably future law enforcement parole officers or correctional officers that hear our narratives of someone whose been incarcerated and that's turned their life around. So, I think unfortunately a lot of people in those positions just have the real negative view of anybody

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My former lifestyle and the status I held has made it possible for me to have a huge positive influence over those still on drugs and involved with gangs. When they see me getting good grades and making the Dean’s list, it gives them hope and they tell themselves that if I can do it, then so can they. When I do positive things in the community and help others who are trying to better their lives, it gives me a great sense of accomplishment.

who's been in the criminal justice system. To see a firsthand account of someone that's kind of used that time to better themselves and is out doing positive things, I think it's a good narrative for the students to hear."

A.J., a student at a different four-year program, similarly identified the benefits of working as a student assistant: he is able to interact in a positive way with the more traditional student population. "A lot of the individuals that are actually students are in [the] criminology department and their main emphasis is law enforcement. So, they're going to be future corrections officers, police officers, probation officers, people that are dealing with the criminal aspect. So, this gives them that inside view of what actually does happen and how people do want to change. I believe that it actually provides a different viewpoint of what people really are. Not all criminals are bad people. They just make bad choices."

Paying it forward

Many students described how their education, and the support they had received through their programs, had resulted in them wanting to give back to society and help others who have faced challenges similar to their own. Vinny, a student on a four-year campus, offered this: "I thought I was just gonna work for the rest of my life and just continue working... [but] after being more involved and going to school and, and knowing that hey... I should give the same amount of time for myself not only myself, but also for bigger causes. Being a pillar of light and being a leader and have positive influence towards...the younger generation that's, you know, struggling with their own experiences, too."

Another student, Xavier, expressed a similar wish in his journal entry: "My former lifestyle and the status I held has made it possible for me to have a huge positive influence over those still on drugs and involved with gangs. When they see me getting good grades and making the Dean's list, it gives them hope and they tell themselves that if I can do it, then so can they. When I do positive things in the community and help others who are trying to better their lives, it gives me a great sense of accomplishment." Helping others could take the form of direct service, outreach to prospective students, or seeking policy change at a higher level. In his journal entry, Ed shared, "Being a part of a program that has a voice in this movement leaves my heart feeling full. I feel a part of the frontline that is advocating for men and women who will deserve their chance at life once they are released."

For many, the love they felt for their programs led them to seek out ways to support their program in return. Gretchen, in her journal entry, wrote, "I agreed to be a part of the student club for the program next semester in order to help the organization grow since it is fairly new. I participated as a panelist in a few presentation[s] at [my institution]. I plan to continue getting involved with [my program] and learn how I can contribute in building awareness with my community about the challenges previously incarcerated individuals face." Similarly, Ed reported, "I feel it is my time to put in work for [people in prison] and help to increase their chances for success once released. I make an effort to attend outreach events for [my program] to help get our program out there to those that have never heard about it and...will also greatly benefit from what it has to offer."

Kel, a student at one of the community-college programs, described how, prior to his incarceration, he was a businessman whose main focus was financial gain. However, during his second interview, he described how his motivation had shifted towards wanting to give back to other people who are struggling: "So, what that means to me is that life is not to just be selfish...I don't want to [go] back in that line of [work]...I want to work to maybe change some lives [however] I can."

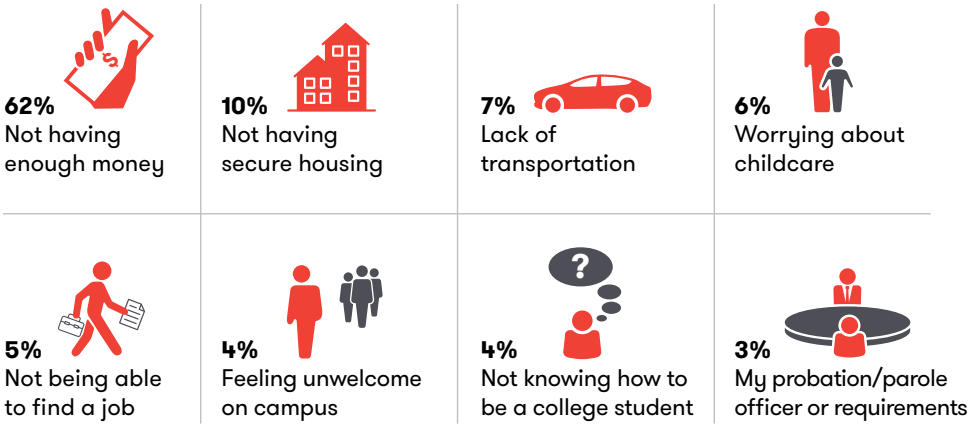
For many, the desire to help others related to their belief in the power of education. "My long-term goals are to become a college counselor. I realized that all you need is that one person in your academic life to make an impression on you and it will carry you through a long way. I want to be that catalyst in a person's life to make him strive and reach higher for what he wants," Marc wrote in his journal entry. For others, this desire to support people extended to other areas of social justice: "my long-term goals have changed. I want to create a system where people fleeing third-world countries can come here legally and have housing and work," wrote Lynn in a journal entry.

Challenges to graduating, and life after

Staff and students interviewed by Vera repeatedly underscored the challenges that students face in completing and transitioning out of their programs. The challenges that respondents identified were numerous and far-reaching and often related to the many responsibilities that students

Figure 8

Top-ranked challenges to academic attainment among community-based students, spring 2019 (n=114)



had to juggle. Of the students Vera surveyed, 30 percent reported caring for at least one child under the age of 18, and 64 percent were holding down jobs while attending college. Indeed, 62 percent of survey respondents reported that they struggle to balance college with other aspects of their lives.

Above, in Figure 8, are some common challenges that students face, based on the student survey. Student respondents were asked to rank the items that may hinder their ability to succeed academically. Students overwhelmingly were concerned about their lack of financial resources, followed by a dearth of secure housing and lack of reliable transportation.

A past survey similarly found that basic need insecurity (food and housing) is common among students at California community colleges generally, and especially among students with histories of incarceration.[21] The study found that 60 percent of students reported experiencing housing insecurity during the previous year; this was true for 83 percent of people who identified as having been convicted of a crime in the past.[22] Two-thirds of students who identified as justice-involved also reported experiencing food insecurity in the previous year.[23]

Anxiety over departing the program

Inherently, the primary goal of each program included in Vera's study is to equip students with the resources and guidance needed to graduate from their academic programs. Many of the student participants were on the verge of graduating or had recently graduated at the time of their second interview. Although these students were universally elated by their academic accomplishments, some were anxious about leaving the campus community and their program. After devoting years to pursuing their academic goals, participating in their campus-based programs, and building close relationships with program staff and peers, some students had a sense of anxiety and trepidation about the future.

One problem that many students face is being restricted from working in certain occupations or fields due to policies that bar people with specific criminal convictions.

Barriers to students' aspirations

Although some of the students Vera interviewed were high achievers at their institutions, many of those who would soon be graduating were keenly aware of the barriers that remained in fulfilling their visions for their future.

One problem that many students face is being restricted from working in certain occupations or fields due to policies that bar people with specific criminal convictions. In one journal entry, Lynn noted, "I would have loved to [be in the medical field], but I will never have that opportunity. My employment will always be limited and I have dreams

that will never become a reality." As Tonya reported, "You are literally judged on whether you've been convicted of a crime or not, and there's just no way around that...I feel like I absolutely qualified for [a graduate] program. I'm not a bad student. I've got a 3.47 GPA. There's no reason I shouldn't have gotten into that program except for that extensive paperwork that I had to go back and forth with them about because of my criminal history. It's still a problem. It's still there."

Another student offered thoughts on the challenges of having a criminal history, including some that may prevent access to the resources needed to fulfill academic requirements: "Securing a practicum site. Many suitable places have a mandatory background check policy. Due to my former incarceration, I will never have a clean [criminal background check]; a problem that will never cease." One of the collateral consequences of having a criminal history is being barred from certain licenses, permits, and other types of certifications needed for specific occupations. Often, no amount of education can help a person overcome this barrier. The issue, however, extends further. A student described the realities of having a criminal record, saying that, "One of my challenges right now is being able to move up in my field. I can gain employment at companies with a background that do not pay very much and do not offer many benefits and will not benefit me in the long run. Even if I am qualified for a better position and even sought after, once they learn of my background I am turned down." Nolan, in his journal, agreed, explaining that, no matter hard he worked now, some barriers may be insurmountable: "Although I have shown stability, a non-threat to public safety, [that I am] a friend, a successful intern, ...a volunteer, an advocate to show that change is possible and trust is earned, I continue to be shunned from meaningful employment with meaningful pay."

Opportunities for program development

In addition to asking interviewees about the qualities that make their programs beneficial and the challenges that students face, participants in Vera's study were asked about the ways in which the programs could be improved. Many of the students acknowledged that there are a variety of needs that their programs do not currently provide assistance for,

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For those of us who have been incarcerated for a substantial amount of time, I have begun to wonder if we might suffer from a form a PTSD…Half of my life was spent inside…that is a substantial amount of your life.

including housing assistance, transportation to and from campus, and parking passes for drivers.

Although these challenges are well-known impediments to many marginalized students, a comment made in an interview with a program staff member at one of the community college-based programs illustrated the unique predicament that justice-involved students face, as many of them face multiple challenges that compound over time. During this interview, Niles, a program staff member at a two-year program in a more rural part of the state, discussed the challenges posed by living without reliable transportation. He also provided a suggestion for tackling this issue: "Transportation is a very major hurdle, and that's where my idea about the transportation could come in. If there was some sort of van that could take the [program's] students from here to their other obligations, because it's not just on campus. They…go test, they go to probation, they have court hearings, they have mental health [appointments], they have custody issues, they have to go talk with their landlord, they have so many things that they're juggling, and transportation and how infrequent the buses are here, the students say it's a bad fit."

Counseling support specific for needs of reentering students

Though counseling services were available at each of the evaluated campuses, it was evident that most students struggled with the stigma associated with their justice system-involvement. Some explicitly noted that they would benefit from having access to counseling services that would help address the unique struggles that they experience—the ones that are tied to their justice-involvement, reentry, and being a non-traditional student. This, they reported, would also help as they contend with the ongoing impact of their former incarceration on their personal wellness and well-being.

One student, Felix, noted in his journal, "This school semester has been hard for me. I've noticed a lot of issues from prison have [begun] to surface. Flashbacks, smells, and little things that trigger my mind. For example, I was sitting in my…class and somebody was walking by with their keys jingling on [their] key chain. I instantly shoved my phone in my pocket and felt my heart begin to race. It literally smelt like prison in that moment, and I felt so embarrassed when I realized I was just in class listening to a lecture." This experience was echoed by Gus: "For those of us who have been incarcerated for a substantial amount of time, I have

begun to wonder if we might suffer from a form a PTSD…Half of my life was spent inside…that is a substantial amount of your life." Support in managing this lasting pain could greatly benefit students. "I would like to start seeing someone so that I can begin healing from the trauma that I have been through," wrote Xavier in a journal entry.

Students attested to having persistent feelings of anxiety and being an outsider on campus—even after several semesters. Tonya, who had been in her program for multiple years when she was first interviewed, described an intense level of trepidation when she began coursework on-site at her four-year institution and that, despite being on the cusp of graduation, those feelings of anxiety remained: "Oh my God, I feel like an alien, I feel like I've got 'criminal' and 'drug addict' and 'old lady,' still to this day. I don't feel like I fit in on this campus at all whatsoever. I feel like…all these young kids and they're coming from, a lot of them, from their money backgrounds or they're just different than me. Their bad day and my bad day have nothing in common, right, and so…I feel like an alien here, still to this day."

On this subject, Gregory said, "For someone who, like me, that's been through long-term incarceration, it's almost like maybe…behavioral health, mental health, pairing us up with that. Because I'm doing therapy now, and I should have done it from the day I got out because I was so—I mean, it was almost a surreal experience, just walking out after that long."

Sufficient staff capacity

It was clear from discussions with staff members that they are personally and professionally very committed to their roles and that they work tirelessly to support the students and maintain the operation of their programs. However, staff were clear in saying that their programs would be enhanced and could serve more students—and do so more effectively and efficiently—if they were able to increase their staff size.

Although staffing levels varied widely among the programs Vera visited, it was apparent that staff capacity remains a major impediment with many implications. Some programs faced a strain on their staffing resources, particularly as student enrollment in these programs was steadily rising. One program staff member, Abraham, discussed this problem and offered his suggestion for how to "get [our program] back on track." He said, "My job would be easier if I was full-time…what's asked of me being a part of the [state-wide program committee], and

all the other grant obligations, it's very challenging. I can't do this in the 19-and-a-half hours I'm allotted a week. I just can't."

Students noted specific areas where staff need is greatest. The tutoring services that are a feature of many programs were among the most popular services provided by the programs, but interview participants noted that there was a lack of tutors to assists students on various subjects. As Imani said of tutoring support in her program, the demand exceeds the supply—which can lead to a host of issues: "If one's... teaching me English, they know about the computer, too. That means he has to stop what he's doing with me to help this person, which I don't expect him to give me all their time, but he had to stop to do that. So, that throws them off too. They need more help down there, they do, but they're good. They do try, you know?"

Recommendations from students and staff on creating successful programs

Program staff described their experiences in developing their respective programs and the key features they feel have led to success. These features are presented below with the hope that the Renewing Communities programs' success in fostering student enrollment, engagement, retention, and academic achievement can be sustained and can inform future program efforts.

Acquiring strong institutional support and commitment

Program staff universally believed that gaining strong support from their host institution and its leadership is critical for program sustainability and to provide optimal service delivery to their students. Although most program staff felt that their respective programs received support from the institution's administration, some reported that this support was not provided when the programs were initially established—they have had to work hard to gain this support. Program staff cited inviting institutional administrators and faculty to program events and sharing the scholastic achievements and other successes of their students as a primary way they garnered support.

Being relatable and reliable for students

Through Vera's interviews and surveys, students repeatedly pointed to the power and importance of their relationships with program staff in supporting their success. Staff similarly noted that students must view them as being available to assist with the various challenges and circumstances they face, both academically and personally. Connected to this sentiment, program staff respondents reported that the staff must be dedicated to the program's mission for it to succeed.

Program outreach efforts

Program staff cited the importance of having a robust mechanism for reaching out to prospective students—who may be incarcerated or in the community—to support program sustainability. Staff identified the inclusion of current students in promoting and advertising the programs as a particularly effective tactic in making connections with future students. This approach also provides students with opportunities to herald the program and recruit future participants. In addition to outreach efforts, some programs—most notably Project Rebound—respond to a large number of letters they receive from people who are interested in joining the programs upon release.

Beyond reaching prospective students, staff described the importance of conducting outreach to inform the general public and relevant stakeholders about their offerings. Program staff viewed this as critical for relationship building, fundraising, and developing buy-in from people who may be skeptical of their mission or anxious about the presence of justice-involved people on campus.

Responding to the specific needs of justice-involved students

The students Vera interviewed noted the importance of being supported both practically and emotionally as they transitioned into college. This was provided through offerings such as tutoring, vouchers for books and meals, and assistance with mastering technology, but also through the provision of an inviting, safe space where they could be themselves and find understanding from peers. Staff identified onboarding sessions (sometimes referred to "bridge programs"), which introduce students to campus life prior to the academic term, as a key component of this effort. Though the content and structure of these programs may differ, they all

aim to familiarize students with the physical landscape, key buildings and offices, and general operations of the campus, and to start the process of making students feel that they belong in college.

Lobbying and advocacy

Driven by concerns about their program's financial outlook, many of the staff and students Vera interviewed reported actively advocating for increased funding for educational programming at the state level. This was viewed as a critical task because many of the programs do not receive significant funding from their host institutions, even those that enjoy a high level of support for their mission and purpose.

The fruits of these lobbying efforts were clear for the Project Rebound sites. Most notably, California Governor Gavin Newsom approved a line item within the state budget that will provide ongoing financial support to the existing network of Project Rebound programs and for the expansion of the program to additional CSU campuses in the future. A staff member at a Project Rebound program, Jane, anticipated that the new funding from the state will allow for additional staffing. This can be used to support an increase in student enrollment. As Jane said, "With the new funding, we anticipate being able to bring at least one more student assistant onboard, which would give us definitely enough to be able to handle what's coming in next, but as the program goes, we're definitely going to need more [staff]."

Summary

Overall, community-based students greatly valued the Renewing Communities programs. They welcomed the program staff's assistance with enrollment and navigating the campuses' physical and bureaucratic landscapes. They also spoke of the constant support and encouragement they received from staff. Students appreciated the staff members' ability to relate to their life circumstances and the challenges that they face academically and personally. This relatability was supported by the inclusion of formerly incarcerated people among the program staff.

Students described a variety of important material supports—such as the provision of book vouchers, parking passes, and food vouchers, among others. They also benefited from a strong sense of community

and comradery among staff and students. In these ways and others, the programs provided a safe space in which students could explore a new identity and chart a new future.

There are areas of improvement that students and staff alike indicated could further the programs' impact—including more human and financial resources and the addition of housing and counseling support, as well as help with transitioning out of the programs.

Lastly, staff provided their thoughts on which program elements are necessary for success. These key features include fostering a healthy relationship with the program's host institution, having staff that are dedicated to the mission of serving justice-involved students, continued promotion of the programs' existence and success to a wide variety of audiences, and advocating for public policy that will lead to the sustainability and expansion of these programs.

Conclusion

This evaluation assessed a variety of processes and outcomes related to the Renewing Communities initiative—a large-scale collection of seven programs, across 14 different sites, providing education and support to currently and formerly incarcerated college students in California. The results demonstrate that the investment of resources and technical assistance from the Opportunity Institute and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center, among others, to aid the programs' expansion and sustainability has paid dividends on many levels: more students have enrolled in these programs, and many of those have become high achievers in the classroom, successfully graduating with honors. Indeed, it is clear that these programs are effective in achieving their missions. Students reported that their programs helped them with reentry and onboarding into college and campus life, assisted them with personal obstacles to academic achievement, and increased their feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Student participants in this study reported a wide range of social, practical, and psychological benefits of enrolling in the Renewing Communities programs. As such, the students surveyed and interviewed by Vera were highly motivated to succeed. The pursuit of educational attainment was important to them and, in facility-based programs, the vast majority of respondents intend to continue education while in prison or when they return to the community.

Vera's study found that a significant amount of the programs' success can be attributed to the high levels of dedication found among the programs' staff. The programs are led by staff who often go above and beyond to ensure that their students have the tools, resources, and support they need to overcome challenging personal histories and become successful college students. The students Vera interviewed commonly noted that the relationships they had forged with the program staff allowed them to navigate the process of applying to and enrolling in college and assisted them with the numerous challenges that they faced in all areas of life. The impact of this support was profound. Many students described the transformative power of education, enabling them to first imagine, then create, new futures for themselves.

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These positive results have been aided by investments from a variety of stakeholders with a shared interest in increasing access to higher education for justice-involved people in California. These investments include the strong commitment made by the Stanford Criminal Justice Center and the Opportunity Institute, the progressive policy changes by the state's government and higher education agencies, the efforts of dedicated program staff, and the hard work of the students who have overcome many obstacles to academic success. Staff and students alike have worked tirelessly to produce positive and measurable results that can be used as evidence of the programs' worth in lobbying and advocacy efforts. One outgrowth of this initiative has been the fresh look that the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office took at the agency's hiring practices.[24] By amending its policies regarding the hiring of people with conviction histories, the Chancellor's Office has demonstrated a commitment to advancing social equity within the institution by creating new opportunities for a traditionally marginalized population. Now, the California Community Colleges, across its 115 campuses, will be better positioned to hire more faculty and staff who have lived experience in the justice system—something that was important for the success of formerly incarcerated students on campus and will likely have similar benefits for incarcerated students as well.

The success of the Renewing Communities initiative is not the only example of how California has become a leader in advancing education equity. Beyond providing a significant investment in funding programs for justice-involved people—as in the case of Project Rebound—other state-level agencies have committed to expanding opportunities to access higher education to marginalized populations. For example,

the Chancellor's Office of California Community Colleges is now requiring that each of its 115 campuses creates site-specific plans for boosting achievement for all students, with an emphasis on eliminating achievement gaps for students from traditionally underrepresented groups.[25] Momentum towards change has also been growing outside of California, with several states removing barriers to state financial aid for incarcerated students and with bipartisan and bicameral legislation being introduced to remove the ban on federal Pell Grants for people in state and federal prisons.[26] Together, the collaborative work and concerted efforts of the Renewing Communities initiative, program staff, and students in providing quality and accessible educational opportunities for justice-involved people can serve as an exemplar for colleges in California and across the country to follow.

Endnotes

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15 The structure and design of this research study and this report were guided in large part by the principles and framework provided by a National Science Foundation manuscript that focuses on evaluations that occur across multiple sites. See Joy Frechtling, Melvin M. Mark, Deborah J. Rog et al., *The 2010 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation*, (Washington, DC: The National Science Foundation, 2010), https://perma.cc/6H7R-Q69J.

16 To standardize the data collection and submission processes, Vera developed program-specific instructional guidebooks to outline and define the requested performance measures and to explain

how the data collection instruments should be used. Once the data collection materials were finalized and distributed prior to the initial data request after the fall 2016 term, Vera conducted remote training sessions with each program site on how to properly collect and report the requested information. Additional follow-up calls and other correspondence between Vera and some of the programs occurred on an as-needed basis in the subsequent rounds of performance measures submissions.

17 For the students in the community, the survey was administered online via the web-based survey platform Qualtrics. Vera sent a common web link to each program's administrator, who then forwarded it to the students via email. By using this method, the identities of the students were protected, and their responses were anonymous. Students in the facility-based programs were given a paper-and-pencil version of the survey. The surveys, when possible, were administered during a class session, using a designated student to serve as the proctor to reduce the involvement of course instructors and program staff. Prior to being administered to students, the survey was approved by Vera's institutional review board (IRB) as well as other IRBs (or other oversight committees) in state agencies and at host institutions, as required.

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