

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

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Fact Sheet

California is a national leader in providing higher education to justice-involved people. 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, the initiative announced a three-year partnership with seven pilot projects, selected through a competitive request for proposals, which provide postsecondary education and student support services in 14 public colleges and universities, housed in prisons, jails, and colleges across the state.

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conducted an evaluation of the Renewing Communities initiative between 2016 and 2019. The findings of Vera's study, summarized here, draw on program data from, and student surveys administered at, all 14 sites. In-depth qualitative research was conducted at five of the community-based programs, housed at different colleges and universities across California.

The findings of Vera's study demonstrate the overall success of the Renewing Communities initiative. More students have enrolled in the programs, and many of those have become high achievers in the classroom, successfully graduating with honors. The surveys and interviews revealed students' high levels of satisfaction with the programs, driven in large part by staff members' passion and dedication. Students described 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 challenges faced by the students and the program staff.

## Facility-based programs

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 (up to spring 2019). For the vast majority of the incarcerated survey respondents, participation in facility-based education programs was their first time taking college-level coursework.

Students felt supported and engaged in class and expressed high levels of satisfaction with their programs. The vast majority—97 percent of survey respondents—said that they intended to pursue their education beyond the current academic term.

## Challenges for incarcerated students

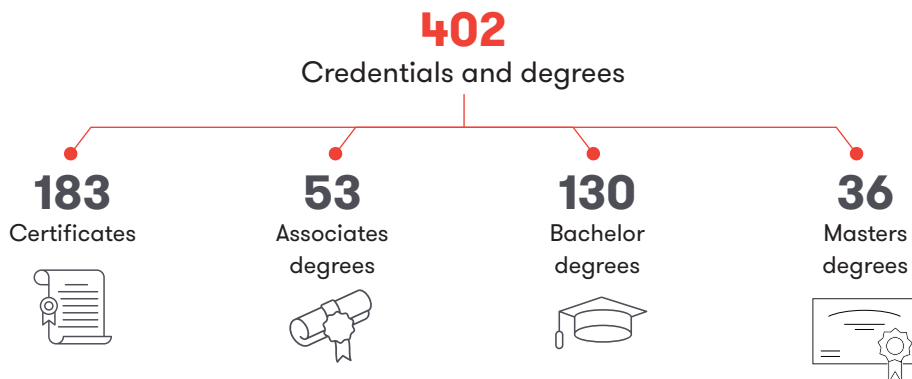
Student participants reported a lack of adequate time and space to complete coursework outside of the class and conflicts with other obligations, such as work duty. Perhaps the most significant challenge for facility-based students was a lack of computers and internet access to complete their coursework.

## Community-based programs

The number of students enrolled in the community-based programs grew by 132 percent, from 211 students in fall 2016 to 490 in spring 2019. Student performance was high; 37 percent earned a GPA of 3.0 or higher in spring 2019. Notably, three-quarters of respondents indicated that they were the first college students within their families.

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## 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 Initiative, CSU Los Angeles.

### Needs of justice-involved students

Justice-involved students faced multiple challenges in pursuing higher education. Sixty-two percent of community-based program respondents reported that they struggle to balance college with other aspects of their lives, including childcare, job responsibilities, and meeting basic needs such as food and housing.

Of the students 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. A number of students and staff referenced challenges for students experiencing homelessness.

### The impact of postsecondary education

Programs in the Renewing Communities initiative shared common elements in their success. For example, students

described their programs as being a safe space where similar experiences are shared and understood providing them with a community of reliable and unconditionally supportive peers. Students reported that their programs helped them with reentry and onboarding into campus life, assisted them with personal obstacles, and increased their feelings of self-efficacy and self-worth. Student participants reported a wide range of social, practical, and psychological benefits of enrolling in their programs.

The impact of the support that students received was profound. Many students described the transformative power of education, enabling them to first imagine, then create, new futures for themselves. 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.

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#### For more information

To read the full report, visit [www.vera.org/from-corrections-to-college-california](http://www.vera.org/from-corrections-to-college-california). For more information about this report, contact Lionel Smith, research associate, at [lsmith@vera.org](mailto:lsmith@vera.org). This project was supported by the Opportunity Institute and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center.

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The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org).