Lessons from Formerly Incarcerated Students and Allies During COVID-19

- Submitted by: SF State AS Project Rebound and affiliated faculty

Formerly incarcerated students are one of the most successful populations on college campuses nation-wide. In the California State University system, Formerly Incarcerated students show persistence and graduation rates anywhere from 5% to 20% higher than those of the student body as a whole. Once they arrive on campus, their GPAs are above average and their time to degree is shorter. They are so successful, in fact, that it is easy to forget they face challenges. COVID-19 has been a stark reminder.

At San Francisco State, the changes to learning created by COVID-19 have added novel struggles for formerly incarcerated students to ones they already faced. After conducting several short interviews and participating in virtual community meetings, we have identified a set of challenges with remote learning that complicate formerly-incarcerated students’ ability to maintain their academic success. Even with the ebbing of the pandemic at some point in the future, some of these challenges are unlikely to abate, especially as social distancing procedures are likely to affect learning for many years to come.

To best support formerly incarcerated students, we urge universities to act now to build the infrastructure necessary to ensure all students have access to education. We provide just a few recommendations as to how the struggles of formerly incarcerated students during pandemic learning can be used to foreground inclusive learning for all:

**Engage in outreach and train faculty on social justice implications of digital learning.**
There are considerable differences among students in access to technology and space, and digital learning often takes us into their private spaces. To protect student privacy, Rebecca Barret-Fox reminds us we should not engage in practices that insist on students sharing images of their personal lives, for example by requiring that students turn on their camera in meetings or record exams. Students may live in places where video meetings are a breach of security. As a result, students are forced to travel to public spaces to participate in video meetings, which puts them and other people at risk. Faculty should be encouraged to prioritize learning over evaluation and assessment. Don’t allow concerns about cheating occupy too much of your time or energy. Formerly incarcerated students, like the vast majority of students, are solely focused on their education and do not tend to cheat.

**Engage in outreach and train faculty about the psychological impacts of sheltering in place for students.** Lockdowns may force formerly incarcerated students to relive the past and Keri Blakinger’s extensive discussion of isolation notes that many students are simply “trying not to freak out.” While sheltering in place is not incarceration, the sudden restriction in mobility can trigger anxiety, rooted in trauma often associated with isolation. Although some formerly incarcerated individuals draw upon their history to help them cope, as Kenyatta Leal noted recently, others may not have the same experience. As one student succinctly put it, “This feels like being incarcerated again.”
Engage in outreach and train faculty about the impact of the digital divide on education completed in carceral facilities. Postsecondary education experiences for formerly incarcerated students are often located in carceral facilities. Technologies standard to university campuses are not routinely used (e.g. LMS, email or other electronic communication, basic word processing and spreadsheet software). COVID-19 exacerbates a digital divide, where proficiency in electronic tools is a necessary starting point for a successful education. Moreover, formerly incarcerated students tend to have poor access to appropriate technologies (e.g. home internet connection, reasonably up-to-date computers, etc.), especially early in their educational careers.

Create a coalition of formerly incarcerated and allied students and faculty to advance initiatives of concern, including economic insecurity. Our economy, in a good time, is already precarious for so many, including formerly incarcerated people. With COVID-19, economic precarity will only deepen. Unemployment is likely to skyrocket among college students in the coming year. Formerly incarcerated individuals, facing a variety of barriers to employment, are disproportionately self-employed. Current federal proposals for relief do not address this precarity because many of these are designed to exclude those with felony convictions. The cascade of problems that follow unemployment -- loss of medical insurance, inability to pay for school, increased indebtedness, etc. -- are already issues for the formerly incarcerated and will likely be far more serious and deepen as a result of the economic restructuring wrought by COVID-19.

Bolster campus support networks for formerly incarcerated students; if you do not have a campus support organization, like Project Rebound, establish one. The support net we provide to formerly incarcerated students on campus, even with a program explicitly designed to address these issues, is dangerously thin. On our campus, formerly incarcerated students are the primary advisors to their more junior peers. Those within the community understand best how these students experience academic barriers that are oftentimes embarrassing to voice -- uncommunicative instructors, bureaucratic confusions, a bewildering array of requirements, and so on. Peer support is necessary as incarceration suppresses students' willingness to proactively advocate for themselves. Without personal interaction, it is difficult to deliver peer support. As an example, when students first arrive, Project Rebound advisors know it is important to walk with them to meetings with professors. Otherwise, students will likely encounter a closed door and simply go away. As one student put it, “Why would I knock if the door is closed?” Peer advising resocializes students, getting them to slowly abandon normative behavior during incarceration in favor of the normative behaviors at universities. That simple but intimate peer support has been badly hobbled by COVID-19. Education reduces recidivism within the prison and jail population and should be encouraged and widely accepted as a common means of reintegration and rehabilitation practice in our nation’s massive prison and jail complex. Universities can support this by facilitating pathways onto campus through a peer-based program that recognizes the assets and value that formerly incarcerated students bring to our classrooms.

We must emerge from this crisis stronger than we entered it, and our recommendations lay the necessary groundwork for a stronger and more inclusive community to emerge. Every campus with significant numbers of formerly incarcerated students should work immediately to begin the coalition-building and institutional advocacy necessary to support these students. These supports will also advance the learning security of all students, who face many of the same issues as those who were formerly incarcerated. In our quest to continue learning -- whether remotely or face-to-face -- we must also remember that the capacity for engagement is not
equitable, and that very real structural inequalities prevent many students, formerly incarcerated or not, from transitioning effectively, safely, or practically to remote modalities. Our teaching styles and approaches must take account of this. In these times where enforced isolation makes us all feel the need for community, we must band together to support the learning of all, whether primed for the digital age or not.