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DEGREES OF FREEDOM:
Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians

Executive Summary

Degrees of Freedom challenges California to include currently and formerly incarcerated students in the vision set by the state's 1964 Master Plan for Higher Education – a vision of college access for all, for the benefit of the entire state. A college education strengthens economies, changes lives and renews communities. And yet, for Californians involved with the criminal justice system, the state's commitment to their education has often stopped at a GED or high school diploma. This is an expensive and unsustainable oversight that does a disservice to thousands of potential students, their families and all our communities.

California Cannot Afford to Overlook These New Students

It is estimated that over 50,000 individuals will be released from California's prisons in the next two years, and thousands more will be released from county jails. This estimate does not include thousands more who are suddenly nearing release as a result of Proposition 47, currently being implemented throughout the state. Between regular scheduled releases and Proposition 47, the state anticipates a flood of individuals in need of reentry services and support over the next few years. Without intervention, many of them will return to custody, at our communities' and taxpayers' expense, in a repeat cycle of incarceration. **College can stop the revolving door**: a recent RAND study shows that participants in prison college programs have 51 percent lower odds of recidivating than those who do not participate and, after release, the odds of obtaining employment are higher for those who participate in education.

At the same time, **the state's need for a college-educated workforce is growing and projected to outpace the number of citizens with a college education**. By 2025, 41 percent of jobs will require at least a Bachelor's degree, while only 35 percent of working-age adults in California will have attained this level of education. Around 60 percent of new jobs in California this decade are estimated to require at least some college education. These potential students need access to a quality college education, and the state needs these future workers.

Report Finding: California has not been adequately providing effective college opportunities for criminal-justice involved students.

California once led the nation in correctional education. In 1979, in-person college courses were available in every prison in California, nine of 19 California State University (CSU) campuses provided on-ramp programs designed to support these students as they transitioned into the college environment, and 15 community colleges had programs that supported students with criminal histories on their campuses.

College programs in the state's prisons were decimated in the early 1990s and replaced with low-quality correspondence-based distance education. Campus-based transition and support programs for formerly incarcerated students were similarly cut. The number of prison inmates enrolled in college courses, which had been 8.6 percent of all inmates in 1976, dropped nearly in half to 4.4 percent by 2013.

Twenty years after the funding cuts, California's prisons continue to rely on outdated and non-interactive distance education for college courses; these courses have the lowest success rate of all education delivery methods. Fewer than 28 percent of those with verified high school diplomas or GEDs are enrolled in college classes, and inmates in college classes can be subject to sudden and involuntary transfers that disrupt their education by moving them in the middle of their studies.

Today, there is **only one in-person college program in all of California's 35 prisons**. In contrast, New York has at least 21 in its 54 correctional facilities. For students out of custody, the state has only one CSU program for formerly incarcerated students, and among the state's 112 community colleges, only a small handful of outreach and support programs exist. Programs for formerly incarcerated students in community colleges and universities maintain long waiting lists throughout the state.

The state's community colleges and county jails have been operating in silos, despite the fact that nearly 90 percent of all jail inmates in the state are housed within 10 miles of a community college campus. Students studying in county jails are often released prior to completion of an education program, and almost all counties lack any sort of transition mechanism that can support these students if they want to continue their education upon release.

California Can Build Effective College Access

Making effective college accessible for these students need not come at a high cost for Californians. Through Senate Bill 1391, signed by Governor Brown in 2014, community colleges can teach students inside prison and jails as if those students were learning on the community campus. Existing funding streams identified in *Degrees of Freedom* can be leveraged for campus and community programs that will support formerly incarcerated students through to a degree. Although these students often face stark economic pressures and financial hurdles, California is a leader in making college accessible for all low-income students, and those same paths of accessibility can serve as models for currently and formerly incarcerated students. Moreover, California has the largest public higher education system in the nation. **The vast majority of the state's community colleges are located near a prison, jail or**

community with high concentrations of formerly incarcerated residents, making collaborative partnerships feasible. These colleges enroll 74 percent of all undergraduate students in California; they are affordable gateways with existing support structures and experience in helping educationally disadvantaged students succeed.

Degrees of Freedom Recommendations

1. Build high-quality academic programs both inside and outside custody.
    - High quality means overcoming the use of and dependence on ineffective and outdated correspondence-based distance education classes for students in custody. It also means incorporating strategies to build persistence, resilience and study skills that will help these students succeed through to a college degree.

2. Enable success by prioritizing academic and non-academic support services.
    - Many of these students have already been failed by California's education system, often at an early age. Colleges should recognize and respond to the range of needs faced by their students, including those arising from leaving custody.

3. Recruit and invest in qualified and committed staff.
    - Students who have been involved in the criminal justice system often feel ashamed and unwelcome. Program staff who understand their experiences can make the difference between the student obtaining a degree, and the student dropping out and returning to custody.

4. Foster sustainability through funding, evaluation, quality control and institutional support.
    - For true long-term success, the state needs strong programs that are sustainable over time. This may mean establishing state standards or review requirements, particularly for colleges that provide education inside prisons and jails.

5. Build local and statewide networks.
    - Colleges and programs cannot continue working in silos. Criminal justice and education administrators must work together to achieve positive results.

6. Shape the policy landscape to support these college pathways.
    - The report explicitly identifies existing laws, policies and funding sources that can be used to build high-quality college pathways. It also identifies barriers that can and should be overcome through legislative and policy change.

Degrees of Freedom is based on over 175 interviews, academic research and historical investigation; it demonstrates how to pave the pathways that will help these underserved students become college graduates. The report profiles existing programs and sets out recommendations for critical growth and sustainability, because these programs don't come anywhere close to meeting the need. It highlights challenges and successful strategies, and sets out a series of concrete recommendations to ensure that future programs are sustainable, scalable and high quality. It demonstrates how the state's existing structures can bring education and criminal justice systems together to achieve mutual goals, including increasing college graduation rates, preparing students to meet the demands of the labor market and

increasing the chances of reentry success. It is a resource for anyone interested in the subject, whether a policymaker, a potential student, or a college administrator.

Degrees of Freedom was jointly written by the Stanford Criminal Justice Center at Stanford Law School and the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy at UC Berkeley School of Law. Research and publication of the report was supported by the Ford Foundation, as part of its Renewing Communities initiative. The report is here: http://bit.ly/1AysaAB.