

The Reintegration Academy for parolees

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Abstract

The Reintegration Academy was founded in 2009. It was the first program of its kind in the United States to bring a group of parolees to a college campus for an extended period for academic programming. Since its inception, the Reintegration Academy has collaborated with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Division of Adult Parole Operations to host nine cohorts and served 251 parolees. Division of Adult Parole Operations assists in recruiting, screening, and giving participants referrals to the program. The program immerses 35 participants in Academic Orientation, Life Skills, and Career Development modules for eight weeks. The Reintegration Academy has an 85% success rate of enrolling participants in college and/or placing them in gainful employment. This article is a reflective essay that concisely discusses the genesis of the program, integrates a review of literature on the challenges in re-entry, the program's anatomy, and the outcomes of the program.

Keywords

Prison re-entry, Reintegration Academy, re-entry reform, social justice education, prison education

Background

This paper is written from a practitioner's perspective. Hence, it is more reflective than it is a scholarly analysis. It focuses on criminal justice dynamics in the United States. It does not include an exhaustive literature review or a thorough discussion

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of theories in the field. The objective of this paper is to concisely discuss the formulation, implementation, and outcomes of a program for formerly incarcerated individuals in Los Angeles County, California, United States.

There are various systems of confinement in the U.S. There are 2.3 million people held in 1833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3134 local jails, 218 immigration detention facilities. Almost one in four individuals who are incarcerated in the U.S. will be re-arrested within one year. Recidivism is the term used when a person is re-incarcerated for a crime. There are various reasons why recidivism rates are high in the U.S.: mental illness, poverty, and substance abuse disorders. There is also a lack of substantive re-entry programs that help the formerly incarcerated when they are released from prison (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).

The Reintegration Academy and the Prison Education Project (PEP) were founded by the author in 2009 and 2011, respectively. The combination of these two programs creates a robust 'Prison-to-School Pipeline' for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

With the assistance of 2400 university student and faculty volunteers, PEP has serviced approximately 7000 incarcerated individuals in 14 correctional facilities in California. PEP has become the largest prison education program of its kind in the United States. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and PEP have embraced a progressive and innovative approach to supplementing and expanding educational opportunities for in-custody students. By providing academic, life skills, and career development programming, PEP aims to educate, empower, and transform the lives of incarcerated individuals. The goal of PEP is to provide in-custody students with the cognitive tools necessary to function as productive citizens. Our multi-layered approach enhances human development, reduces recidivism, saves resources, and allows participants to ultimately contribute to the economic and civic life of California. The overarching philosophy of PEP is to use the resources in the local regions of each of the state's prisons to make change, e.g. university student and faculty volunteers. There is a college within a 30-mile radius of the majority of the state's 34 prisons. PEP's goal is to collaborate with these colleges to assist the CDCR in its mission of rehabilitation.

While PEP provides academic and life skills programming to the incarcerated population, the Reintegration Academy provides life skills, soft skills, and vocational educational programming for parolees once they are released from prison. The idea is to provide a dynamic inside-outside approach to rehabilitation. The in-custody students who participate in PEP get preferential treatment in being selected for the Reintegration Academy once they are released.

In the appendix of my book *Prison Race*, I discussed a proposal for a Reintegration Academy for parolees, which would bring participants to a college campus for 10 weeks and immerse them in academic, life skills, and career development training modules. Some five years after proposing this concept in the book, I was able to create the program in 2009.

The Reintegration Academy has hosted nine cohorts: 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020 (two cohorts). The program brings 35 parolees to the college campus for eight weeks. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Department of Adult Parole Operations Southern Region recruits, screens, and refers these individuals.

The formerly incarcerated population lacks education, life skills, and job skills. The Reintegration Academy exposes its participants to all of these elements. With a network of academics, social service practitioners, program alumni, and volunteers, this program provides a dynamic learning environment and a holistic approach to the development and reintegration of its participants.

On the first day of the program, each participant receives a stipend for transportation and to purchase business-casual clothes. In the fifth week, each participant receives a free laptop computer. In the sixth week, all participants are registered into a community college and are assisted with completing financial aid forms. During the eighth week, the program hosts a job fair for the participants – inviting 20 local employers to meet, greet, and interview participants. At the graduation banquet, each participant receives a 'Certificate of Completion'.

The program has an 85% success rate of enrolling participants in college and/or placing them in gainful employment.

At the time this article was written the annual cost of housing an incarcerated person in a California prison was \$75,560 and the state's recidivism rate was 62%. The Reintegration Academy has a recidivism rate of 15% and a success rate of 85%. It is the variance between the state's recidivism rate and the Reintegration Academy's recidivism rate, which should be highlighted: 62–15%, which is a variance of 47%. Based on these calculations, the cost savings of a Reintegration Academy is \$1242, 962 per cohort of 35 participants.

The implementation of the first Reintegration Academy was challenging. I tried to convince the president of my university and his executive cabinet that bringing twenty 18–24-year-old parolees on campus for 10 weeks was the right thing to do. To my knowledge, this was the first program of its kind in the country to bring a group of parolees to the college campus for extended academic programming.

The administration at my university was fearful of what the parents of students, the students themselves, and what the public would think about this endeavour. The president and his executive committee was also concerned with liability issues, e.g. what if one of the parolees assaulted a student?

Prior to 2009, conservative policymakers and the public were still adversarial towards prison reform and re-entry services development. My campus administration reflected the sentiment of the general public at that time. Nevertheless, I convinced the administration to let me host a pilot cohort of young parolees from the ages of 18 to 24 for 10 weeks.

On the first day of the inaugural Reintegration Academy, a campus police car pulled up beside the group with its siren on. This was not necessary. I was furious but instead of confronting him, I invited him to the room to speak with the group.

He parked his car and came in with the group and spoke to them about the do's and don'ts on campus. After speaking to the group, he said, 'I like what you are doing for these guys. If you need any assistance at any time please do not hesitate to contact me'. There is an obvious lesson here. Invitation is more effective than confrontation.

After hosting the successful inaugural cohort of the program in 2009, the administrators at my university still expressed their displeasure with hosting the program on its campus. So, I decided not to host another program for the next few years until I received a call from the Obama Administration inquiring about the program. My university president learned of this inquiry and had the provost encourage me to bring the program back to campus. In 2012, we hosted our second cohort at Cal Poly Pomona. We hosted the three subsequent cohorts at Mount San Antonio Community College before transitioning to Pitzer College to host the program.

Pitzer College has been a natural home for the program because the cornerstone of the college's pedagogical framework is social justice. And, the group experiences the manifestation of this when the university officials warmly welcome them to campus. The Dean of Faculty at Pitzer College welcomes participants by telling them on the first day that 'We are honored that you are on our campus'. Moreover, Pitzer received a \$1 million-dollar grant from the Mellon Foundation for a Critical Justice program, which includes support for the Reintegration Academy on its campus.

In 2017 and 2019, the program hosted 'Lifer' cohorts, which consisted of parolees who were once serving a life sentence in prison. Because of their lengthy sentences, this population is in urgent need of life skills and soft skills. The 2017 Reintegration Academy cohort was featured on *NBC News-Los Angeles* and the 2019 cohort was featured in the documentary, 'RA: A Lifer Cohort', which won an award at the *Los Angeles Film Festival*.

Literature review

Over the past 45 years, the US prison population grew from about 200,000 to more than two million—an increase characterized as 'historically unprecedented and internationally unique.' The social toll of America's system of mass incarceration has been staggering. Imprisonment reduces future earnings and job opportunities, limits civic participation, contributes to mental and physical health problems, destabilizes families, and further disadvantages economically marginalized communities. The fiscal costs of penal expansion have also been burdensome. Corrections spending accounts for an increasing share of government budgets, taking funds away from education, health care, and other services. Despite these human and economic costs, incarceration has done little to reduce crime and improve public safety. (Copp & Bales, 2018, p. 103)

The 'Tough-on-Crime' movement of the 1990s was manifested in mass incarceration. The 1994 'Crime Control Act' laid the structural foundation for this punitive era of corrections. It was during this time that the public and policymakers argued that releasing the incarcerated made communities less safe. Parole is when an incarcerated person is deemed suitable, by an administrative board, to be discharged. During the time of one's parole contract, they are still under the supervision of corrections authorities. In the 1990s, post-release parole had come 'to symbolize the leniency of a system in which inmates are "let out" early' (Petersilia, 1999, p. 480). And, when there is a heinous crime committed by a parolee such as a gruesome rape or murder, in the past, the public has clamoured to abolish parole (Petersilia, 1999).

In 2010, author Douglas E. Thompkins published an article that was highly critical of what he called the Prison Reentry Industry (PRI). He refers to those who develop and facilitate programs for formerly incarcerated individuals because these services have become a 'cash-cow', e.g. producing profits for organizations at the expense of taxpayers while being ineffective at connecting formerly incarcerated clients to resources that will help in their personal and professional development.

Data that include the voices of the formerly incarcerated, members of their families, and criminal justice practitioners suggest that a person's level of success during their 'personal reentry experience' varies in large part, by the individual parole officer they are assigned to and the number and types of programs they are required to participate in. Furthermore, their quality of life after release and their level of success is determined in large part by the program administrators managing those 'for-profit companies' and 'non-profit/for-profit agencies,' that supervise parolee programs. (Thompkins, 2010, p. 589)

Thompkins goes on to argue that there must be better monitoring and accountability of organizations that ostensibly provide post-incarceration services for the formerly incarcerated.

In the same spirit of Thompkins critique, in the article, 'Facilitating failure: Parole, reentry, and obstacles to success', author Kathryn Kleis argues that the PRI has produced an array of mechanisms that control the lives of the formerly incarcerated population. The coercive practices of nefarious entities have had an adverse impact on the formerly incarcerated population. Kleis highlights the case of New York State Parole who began contracting parolee programs and services to private entities as a result of their shrinking parole budget. This practice has resulted in ineffectiveness and failure for the formerly incarcerated, their families, and the public (Kleis, 2010, p. 525).

In the article, 'Developing the prison-to-school pipeline: A paradigmatic shift in educational possibilities during an age of mass incarceration', author DeWitt Scott argues that two decades of zero tolerance policies in K-12 schools have contributed to the problem of mass incarceration.

The funneling of poor, urban, minority school students into jails and penitentiaries, combined with reduced opportunities for education while behind bars, has produced an uneducated ex-offender who is ill-prepared to improve his/her personal condition and contribute substantively to society. Such circumstances expose a void in the nation's educational and social services system that has not been adequately addressed or remedied. (Scott, 2017, p. 47)

With so much emphasis placed on the 'School-to-Prison Pipeline' over the past decade, Scott argues that there should be a robust 'Prison-to-School Pipeline'. This new pipeline would provide formal post-incarceration educational opportunities for the formerly incarcerated. By providing this population access to a myriad of educational options: GED completion, Vocational Education, Community College, 4-Year University, and Graduate School options, policymakers would reduce recidivism, improve employability, self-esteem, and productivity among this population (Scott, 2017).

Many of those entangled in the 'School-to-Prison Pipeline' are young black men. Once these young men identified as troublesome, in some cases, in elementary school, they begin on a direct track from school to prison. Scholars have highlighted the problems this population faces once they have contact with the criminal justice system.

Harris and Harding (2019) found that not only did formerly incarcerated black men experience poor life-course outcomes relative to other similar subpopulations but also formerly incarcerated young black men dramatically lag behind their formerly incarcerated white counterparts in the context of education, employment, and residential independence. Their study used longitudinal administrative data on a cohort of male parolees from 18 to 25 years old. Although incarcerated whites have more substance abuse and mental health problems than their black counterparts, they enter prison more advantaged than blacks in terms of their life-course development. Black males' disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system before they enter prison has a significant negative effect on their life-course development once they are paroled (Harris & Harding, 2019).

Louis Napoleon (2019) states that 'incarcerated black juvenile males in adult prisons threatens to create a permanent underclass of young black males who are ineligible to vote, unemployable, and who will remain unproductive members of society'. Napoleon's primary argument is that there is a dearth of positive role models in adult prisons and when black juvenile males enter these facilities they learn negative behaviour that is counterproductive in their personal development. These learned behaviours become almost impossible to reverse once they are discharged from prison (Napoleon, 2019).

The phenomenon that Napoleon describes leads to high recidivism rates among black men. They go into prison with few life skills. They learn no positive transferrable life skills in prison. They discharge ill-equipped to deal with various life challenges. The obvious result of the lack of rehabilitation is re-incarceration. At

what point in this cycle has this population been taught useful information that will enhance their personal development?

David Kirk's (2019) research examines the changes in the spatial concentration of the formerly incarcerated. Traditionally, inner-cities have been the hub of re-entry programs. However, Kirk argues, 'The demolition of public housing, the suburbanization of poverty, and desegregation—may have altered the prevailing spatial distribution of returning prisoners, thereby spreading the challenges of prisoner reintegration to new geographic domains' (p. 255). Some 95% of the incarcerated will one day be released from prison. There are more than 625,000 incarcerated individuals who are released each year in the United States. Moreover, there are approximately five million formerly incarcerated individuals who live in neighbourhoods (Kirk, 2019). Policymakers, parole administrators, and nonprofit organization must urgently account for the new spatial realities of the formerly incarcerated population.

Most scholars and scholarly research on criminal justice reform focus on federal and state prisons; however, authors Jennifer E. Copp and William D. Bales (2018) highlight in their research that 18 times more people are admitted and released from local jails each year. They urge policymakers in their study to direct more resources and focus more attention on local jails. They delineate the differences between prison and jail and state that it is important to understand these differences to guide policy. 'Recognizing that people who cycle in and out of our nation's jails are disproportionately struggling with poverty, poor health, mental illness, and substance abuse'. The authors suggest that counties can reduce jail populations by connecting people to the programming and services they need and by investing in rehabilitation and prison re-entry (Copp & Bales, 2018).

In the United States, a meta-analysis of thousands of in-prison education programs nationwide was conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2013. This study found that those who participated in educational or vocational training are 43% less likely to return to prison once they are discharged (Palta, 2013).

Degrees of freedom: Expanding college opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated Californians followed up on the RAND Report but focused exclusively on educational opportunities and challenges in California, the state with the largest prison population in the U.S. This 2015 report was a comprehensive examination by scholars from University of California's Berkeley Law School and Stanford University's Criminal Justice Center. This study meticulously documents the educational opportunities for those incarcerated and parolees and outlines a progressive way forward in improving educational opportunities for this population (Mukamal et al., 2015).

There are other innovative programs in the U.S. that provide incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals dynamic educational opportunities. One of the leading proponents of prison education and re-entry reform has been John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The College's president Jeremy Travis posed the following question in 2011: 'If over 700,000 people are leaving our prisons, how should the nation's educational institutions be organized to help them make a

successful transition to free society?'. The response to this question resulted in John Jay English professor, Baz Dreisinger founding the innovative Prison-to-College Pipeline program. This program, which is administered by the Prison Reentry Institute in partnership with Hostos Community College gives incarcerated individuals access to public education, mentorship, and community resources (<http://johnjaypri.org/educational-initiatives/prison-to-college-pipeline/>).

One of the most effective and influential re-entry and advocacy groups in the U. S. is the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC). ARC, based in Los Angeles, was founded by Hollywood Producer, Scott Budnick. ARC provides soft skills, life skills, educational opportunities, and job training for its 1400 formerly incarcerated members. According to Kent Mendoza, the organization's policy manager, says that the U.S. criminal justice system should be less punitive and more rehabilitative. According to Mendoza, 'The way you hold people accountable is by actually helping them change. So, when they come home, they're better than they were when they went in' (Potter, 2020).

CNN commentator, Van Jones, is the CEO of the Reform Alliance. Like ARC, the Reform Alliance is an influential and effective advocacy organization for the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. The mission of the Reform Alliance is 'to dramatically reduce the number of people who are unjustly under the control of the criminal justice system – starting with probation and parole'. The Reform Alliance uses a network of celebrities, philanthropists, and policymakers to help transform the U.S. criminal justice system (www.reformalliance.com).

The Reintegration Academy exists among a dynamic group of organizations throughout the U.S. that have emerged to create a robust criminal just reform movement.

Program activities

The Reintegration Academy takes advantage of having its participants in one place at one time – for four and a half hours for eight sessions. This time and platform allows us to expose participants to valuable resources. In program sessions, not only are topics such as mental health care and substance abuse addressed, but also the program exposes participants to the appropriate resources to address their personal issues.

The following is a concise outline for our Reintegration Academy. With each cohort, we focus on academic, vocational, and life-skills development. The campus exploration module is a unique feature of this program, which separates it from other re-entry programs. It is our belief that the campus environment has as much transformative powers as inspirational lectures. See Table 1.

Norway's rehabilitation approach in its prisons is viewed as the model approach to transforming this population. In the article, 'Policies to reintegrate former inmates into the labor force', authors examine the impact of Norwegian prison rehabilitation efforts on the formerly incarcerated population's capacity to re-enter the labour force. The authors of this study found that incarceration in Norway's

Table 1. Reintegration Academy Program Outline.

 Program Outline

Schedule: Eight-week sessions; one day per week

Location of Program: Pitzer College, Claremont, California

Program Highlights: Each participant receives a laptop computer; a \$100 stipend for transportation and completes a FAFSA application for the Federal Pell Grant. Participants will be registered into a vocational education program at community college or in an apprenticeship program during the fourth week of the program with the goal of securing unsubsidized employment.

Objectives: To immerse program participants in Soft Skills, Life Skills, Vocational Education, and Career Development training modules for eight weeks and to help place them in high-demand jobs in the labour market with the goal of reducing recidivism

Program Partners: The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Division of Adult Parole Operations (DAPO) and Pitzer College

Intervention: DAPO is responsible for all mental health and housing interventions regarding participants in this program

Activities

Campus exploration

Participants get the opportunity to meander around campus with each other and with volunteers and eat at the college's dining hall. This component gives the participants a chance to feel like college students.

Soft skills

Participants are introduced to Communication Skills, Conflict Resolution, Emotional Intelligence, Teamwork, Character Development, and the elements that make a Good Employee

Life skills

Participants are introduced to strategies to cope with their day-to-day challenges: Stress Management, Anger Management, Time Management, Financial Literacy

Vocational education

Participants are enrolled in a community college, they periodically sit in college courses, and are introduced to vocational education fields such as Truck Driving, Construction, Renewable Energy, Aviation Maintenance, Plumbing, HVAC, HAZMAT, and Welding

Career development

Participants take the Myers–Briggs Personality Inventory and learn about the various felony-friendly career opportunities that match their personalities

Career fair

The program hosts a Career Fair with 20 Felony-Friendly Employers

Program banquet

Participants receive a 'Certificate of Completion' in front of their family, relatives, and friends

Wrap-around

Check-Ins with Program Graduates; Quarterly Dinners

HAZMAT : Hazardous Materials ; HVAC : Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning .

prisons discourages further criminal behaviour. It lowers the probability that a person will re-offend within five years by 27 percentage points. While incarcerated, those incarcerated in Norway participate in programs that improve their employability, raise employment earnings, and discourage criminal behaviour (Bhuller et al., 2018).

U.S. prisons lack to the intense and robust rehabilitative approach of Norway. Because of this, the incarcerated population leaves U.S. prisons with few job skills, low employability, and susceptible to high recidivism rates. The lack of job preparedness of formerly incarcerated individuals makes it essential for re-entry programs to provide life skills, job skills, and career development services.

The Reintegration Academy and other re-entry programs in the U.S. attempt to do what the prison facilities did not do, which is to prepare their incarcerated population with the necessary tools to successfully reintegrate into society.

In Session I, we administered and interpreted the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) assessment, which is designed to measure psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions. It is based on Carl Jung's *Psychological Types* which proposes that there are four main functions of consciousness, two of them being perceiving functions (sensation and intuition) and two being judging functions (thinking and feeling). The functions are codified into two primary attitude types: extroversion and introversion. Jung believed that people are predisposed to an attitudinal type but environmental factors are also significant in determining whether one is introverted or extroverted (Jung, 2006).

After understanding the job environments that the participants were best suited for, we proceeded to explore their interests in Session II. Utilizing the Strong Interest Inventory in combination with the MBTI allowed the participants to make connections between how their personality fit into careers of interest or why some interests are not suited for certain jobs. John Holland created this inventory. It was his belief that the work environments that people choose are based on six General Occupation Themes (GOT): realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. For example, people with realistic interests are good at working with tools, mechanical, machines or animals. They tend to enjoy outdoor activities, sports, and are very hands-on. Examples of careers for this interest type are engineer, mechanic, construction, and agriculture. The GOT measures basic categories of career interest (Holland, 1997).

From the outset of the program, we realize that focusing on vocational opportunities is more pragmatic than focusing on academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, politics, or law. The participants in the Reintegration Academy served long sentences in prison. Our objective is to quickly identify personalities and characteristics and match them in felony-friendly careers that will enable them to be gainfully employed. Consequently, our program focuses on placing participants in the following careers: Supply Chain Logistics, Truck Driving, Solar Panels, Electronics, Plumbing, Welding, Construction, Health Care Assistants, and Culinary Arts.

Session III consisted of the Career Values Card Sort by Richard Knowdell. It is a user-friendly tool that allows the participants to prioritize values in a short timeframe. There are 54 variables of work satisfaction (e.g. community, independence, physical challenge, and family) that are described in brief detail. The subjects then recorded their findings on a Career Values Worksheet – first, they ranked their values in order of top preference; second, they explored connections between occupations and their values (Knowdell, 1996).

Session IV of the program discussed resume preparation. We incorporated an interactive workshop and study guides where the participants were required to develop a rough draft of their resume. We reviewed their resumes individually and provided detailed feedback for improvement.

The interviewing module, Session V, included an interactive lecture and a mock interview. The latter required the participants to role play with their peers and provide a peer evaluation of their interviewing skills. The mock interviews consisted of four traditional interview questions and an evaluation of verbal and non-verbal responses over a 15-minute time span. We observed the youth during their mock interviews.

The Reintegration Academy uses the power of the network to achieve its goals. It is the efforts of the staff, volunteers, and the participants themselves that make this program transformative.

At the beginning of the program, we have a mixer for the participants and the volunteers. From the very outset of the program, the participants realize that this is a different experience. One of the participants noted that he could not believe that a group of convicts were in a place mingling with university students. At least once per year, we have a Bowling Mixer in which all the RA alumni, current RA participants, and volunteers from PEP and RA come out to mingle, share updates, and to have fun. Everyone leaves these mixers feeling better about themselves.

The philosophy of the *Campus Exploration Module* was for the participants to be able to see the pastoral and bucolic beauty of the university campus. We wanted them to meander around campus and smell the flowers, see the trees, and consume the energy of the college campus because these elements are potentially just as transformative as any lecture that they hear. Administrators tend to think that this population can be transformed with motivational speeches, harsh warnings, or stringent punishment. Our philosophy was to allow transformation to take place organically. It might not be a motivational speech about the benefits of attending college that actually motivates the parolees to attend college. Instead, a participant might be motivated to attend college by actually walking on campus seeing students studying on the lawn, walking to classes, and frolicking in the campus quad. The parolees might be motivated by the positive energy found on the university campus. This feature has been a component of the program since its inception.

The majority of our participants had never stepped foot on a university campus before. The first day they come to campus, you can see the look of amazement, curiosity, and awe. After the participants are given a program orientation they are given a tour of campus.

A prospective volunteer once asked me what they should do when they come to an RA session. She expressed her fear of speaking in public. I told her just to be there. We often think that we have to do a specific task when we volunteer but sometimes just 'being there' is important. There is something to be said about the energy we emit when we have a positive spirit. Although it is intangible, we can feel it in a room. When there are 30 participants and 30 volunteers in the room it feels magical. It feels like we can accomplish anything together. Our philosophy of having volunteers just show up has been a feature of this program from the beginning.

In one of our cohorts, a participant's pen stopped working. A volunteer noticed this and tapped the person on the shoulder and gave him a pen. This is an example of how powerful simple things are in volunteerism. Many small things such as: a friendly smile, a 'hello', a hug at the beginning and at the end of a session, an e-mail reminder, answering a question, etc., all have a cumulative transformational effect on the participants. Thanks to the volunteers, when the participants come to an RA session they feel a sense of warmth, safety, and security.

One of the biggest fears that parolees have when they are released from prison is that of being stigmatized as a felon. The stigma is not just a perception, it is real. This stigma poses a barrier to employment and causes ostracism in social circles. Knowing this, one of the primary goals of RA is to shower the participants with respect. Everything the volunteers do counters the stigma and helps to build confidence.

The common denominator in all of our program activities is building confidence. Ironically, the machismo and bravado that many incarcerated individuals have stems from a lack of confidence. Many individuals are incarcerated because they lacked confidence. For example, if someone says, 'Hey, let's go rob this bank' and you know that it is wrong and has potentially serious consequences and you rob the bank anyway, that reflects a lack of confidence. Confidence is when you can say, 'No. I'm not robbing a bank. I'm about to go back home and read'. Tough-guy culture makes this person a coward when he is not. The irony is the tough guy goes to prison and winds up asking the 'square' to send him letters or packages. RA helps to enlighten participants so they can go out and enlighten others in their network with the message: it's okay to be a 'square', it's okay to go to school and better yourself. Most of our RA volunteers are college students and just by being at the sessions they are telling the participants that it is okay to be 'square'. And, it is okay to create a new peer group of like-minded individuals who are positive.

Volunteerism thrives when there are meaningful nonmonetary incentives of the work. Volunteerism also thrives when there is reciprocity, e.g. when the volunteers get back just as much as they give. Reciprocity is one of the most important elements of the volunteer experience. The 'Reciprocal Reflex' is palpable in each meaningful volunteer experience. The clients are visibly moved by the experience. They express gratitude for the outreach efforts. The volunteers express gratitude

for the gratitude. The ‘Reciprocal Reflex’ enables the volunteer experience to be rewarding, fulfilling, and meaningful (Reese, 2017).

The ‘Reciprocal Reflex’ is dynamic with the Reintegration Academy because the volunteers get instant feedback on how much they are valued. This is manifested in the intense attention given to the volunteers by the inmates during the volunteers’ presentations. This can also be seen in the animated gratitude that the inmates show towards the volunteers after each academic session.

In the end, it is not the presentation of content that makes the experience rewarding and life changing but it is the reciprocal behaviour that creates an extraordinary exciting in which the volunteers and the inmates motivate each other. The ‘Reciprocal Reflex’ leads to life-long learning for all involved.

The Reintegration Academy volunteers use the power of words to transform. Words are the most powerful way in which we can transform the internal human condition. The internal human condition is the way we feel about ourselves, e.g. our self-esteem and confidence. It takes money and resources to transform the external human condition. But, in the absence of money and resources, we still have the agency to educate, empower, enlighten, and inspire through the simple use of words. If we doubt the transformative power of words, we should ask ourselves how we feel when someone says to us: ‘Great Job!’, ‘Hang in there’, ‘Be Careful’, ‘Stay Safe’, ‘Things will be okay’, ‘You’re awesome’, ‘I’m proud of you’, ‘Keep up the great work’. These words have the capacity to empower and transform participants into being more confident, more inspired, and more hopeful about their future.

Words have the extraordinary potential to educate, empower, and enlighten these recently discharged parolees. Beyond the academic content presented by the volunteers, it is the power of other exchanges that inspire participants. When the volunteers say to the participants: ‘How are you doing?’, ‘We’re glad to be back’, ‘Good Question’, ‘Great Question’, ‘This was another great session. We look forward to coming back next week’, and when the volunteers hear from the participants: ‘Thank You’, ‘Thank you so much’, ‘We really appreciate what you are doing for us’, ‘We are learning so much from you’, ‘You volunteers are amazing’, these statements validate the participants and the volunteers in a price-less way. This is an example of how words help to create an exciting and dynamic learning environment that is based on reciprocity (Reese, 2017).

Methods and outcomes

There have been nine cohorts and 251 graduates of the Reintegration Academy: 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020 (two cohorts). In terms of outcomes, the Reintegration Academy measures success as alumni of the program having a job and/or being in college, and staying out of prison during a three-year period. The following data represent the program’s success rates: 2009: 75%, 2012: 86%, 2013: 88%, 2014: 88%, 2015: 89%, 2017: 92% (at two-year mark). The 2019 and 2020 cohorts will be evaluated in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Participants in

each cohort were given a series of questions to respond to before the program began and after the program ended. These questions revolved around their confidence and preparedness in academics, life skills, and career development. There was improvement in each category from the pre-program assessment to the post-program assessment for all cohorts. See the summary data below.

The selection process for the Reintegration Academy involves a four-step process: Screening, Referrals, Interviews, Selection. Two months before a cohort begins, the District Administrator for the Division of Adult Parole Operations (DAPO) sends a notice to all parole agents in the Southern Region's Pomona Office about the start of the Reintegration Academy. These agents are encouraged to send the District Administrator five referrals from their caseload. Collectively, the agents sort through approximately 500 names. If we know that we will be selecting 40 participants, the ideal number of referrals for the program is 45. For a population that has dealt with disappointment and rejection, we want to minimize the number of interviewees that we have to reject for the program. Hence, we rely on the meticulous screening of the referrals and on the judgment of the parole agents. The parole agents have grown to take pride in the clients that they refer to the program. They understand that their referrals are a reflection of them.

Once the program receives 45 referrals, there are three days of interviews. The duration of each interview is 15–20 minutes. The director of the Reintegration Academy and two parole administrators sit for the interviews. Parole agents periodically sit in on interviews throughout the three-day interview period. The interviews for the program are always held at the parole office.

Each of the interviewers is given an evaluation form, which is used to rate responses and assess candidates during the interviews. Each of the interviewers is provided 'Face Sheets' of each of the candidates before they are interviewed. The *Face Sheets* show the person's photo and gives a detailed summary of the person's history of criminal offenses. It also tells whether the person has psychological issues and if they have had substance abuse issues in the past. The interviewers briefly review each person's *Face Sheet* before they enter the room to be interviewed. The candidates are escorted to the interview room by their parole agents. Once they enter the room, the program director gives a brief overview of the Reintegration Academy before the panel begins with the interview questions. The panellists take turns asking the questions below. There are also follow-up questions.

Parole administrators and parole officers have a tendency to be cynical when it comes to rehabilitative opportunities for their clients. Parole officers have two primary mandates: (1) to monitor the behaviour of their clients and (2) to provide their clients with rehabilitative opportunities. Too much focus put on monitoring and punishing client behaviour can undermine the energy and focus put towards providing clients with rehabilitative opportunities. In our interviews with Reintegration Academy prospects, the tension that exists in the two charges of

the parole officers is conspicuous. The teetering between good cop versus bad cop within each of the parole agents is palpable.

As the coordinator of this program, my objective is to appeal to the good cop in each of the agents and encourage them to focus on providing rehabilitative opportunities to their clients.

This is a very delicate exercise because if the parole agents feel that I am undermining their ability monitor and punish behaviour then they will no longer support my efforts, which could undermine the success of the Reintegration Academy. In this instance, I follow the sage words of the late country singer, Kenny Rogers, who tells us in 'The Gambler' that 'You've got to know when to hold'em, know when to fold'em, know when to walk away...'

For example, one of our most outstanding Reintegration Academy participants was re-arrested two years after she graduated from our program. She failed a urine drug test – having crystal methamphetamine in her system and was found in possession of the same substance in her car. She called me begging me to help get her out of this situation. I understood that I could not tamper with the system's due process. Tampering, in this case, would have been counterproductive – potentially jeopardizing a program for one person who was indeed guilty of violating her conditions of parole.

Respecting systems is the key to the survival of a program. And, effectively navigating systems is the key to a program thriving, becoming relevant and successful.

At conferences, workshops, and in classrooms, individuals are continuously encouraged to think outside the box. Indeed, this is good advice when brainstorming or trying to build chemistry among a group. However, when it is time to get serious about creating and implementing, a person must contemplate how to collaborate and work within systems.

The irony is that the person who is the most critical of a system is the least likely person to change it. The linear approach to change, which is driven sometimes by passion and sometimes by ego, is ineffective. In any system, there is give, take, and compromise – and the 'my way or no way' approach rarely succeeds. The overhaul approach to change is great rhetoric but poor practice. The savvy person understands that most changes are incremental and that it takes patience and persistence to transform systems (Reese, 2016). See Table 2, which is an outline of program activities.

There were 36 participants in the Reintegration Academy 2019 cohort. Some 28 of the 36 (78%) participants were once serving life sentences in one of California's prisons. A life sentence is when a person is sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. The average time served by the participants in this Reintegration Academy cohort was 18 years. Eighty-six per cent of the participants in the program who were serving life went to prison for murder. The longest sentenced served by a participant was 36 years and the shortest time served was 6 years. The average age of the participants was 42 years old. The oldest participant was 68 years old and the youngest participant was 24 years old. In terms of ethnic make-up, 47% of this

Table 2. Interview evaluation template.

Reintegration Academy Interview Evaluation Template

Interview Location: Pomona Parole Office

Name of Evaluator:

Interview Process

The interview begins with a brief description of the Reintegration Academy by the program director. Interviews proceed with the interviewers rotating asking the following questions:

- 1) Tell us something that you are most proud of about yourself. Tell us what you are least proud of about yourself.
- 2) What did you think about school growing up? What do you think about the value of education now?
- 3) Tell us about your family. Are they supportive?
- 4) What are your goals in life?
- 5) If you begin this program can you stay committed for 8 weeks?

Ratings 1–5 (1 = Poor 5 = Excellent) Please feel free to write notes.

Name	Overcoming Challenges	Value of Education	Family Support	Goals	Sincerity Seriousness
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cohort was Hispanic, 28% were White, and 25% were African American. Forty-two per cent of the participants in this cohort were female and the majority of the female lifers were sentenced to prison for killing their boyfriends or husbands as a reaction to domestic violence.

Travielle Craig was one of the participants in the 2019 Reintegration Academy cohort. Craig was arrested on the first day of the 1992 Rodney King Los Angeles Riots.

He and two fellow gang members tried to rob a Hispanic young man for pocket change and a fight ensued. Craig hit the young man in the head with a wooden plank, which cracked his skull and he died three months later. Craig was tried and sentenced to life in prison at the age of 18 and was released from prison at the age of 44 years with a commutation by the California state governor. Like many of the lifers in the Reintegration Academy, he returned home from prison with few life skills. He did not know how to use a computer, a Smartphone, how to develop a resume, or apply for a job. The Reintegration Academy has been designed to outreach and assist individuals such as Travielle Craig. Table 3 below is a pre- and post-program survey questions, which tries to capture the impact the program had on participants. Table 4 contains the post-program comments by program participants. The data in Figure 1 captures the recidivism and success rates of the Reintegration Academy. Figure 2 displays pre and post-program survey data.

Lessons learned

The George Floyd tragedy and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations that have ensued highlight the need for criminal justice reform in the U.S. The Reintegration

Table 3. Pre- and post-program survey questions.

 Pre- and post-program survey questions for the eight-week Reintegration Academy

1. I am confident in my academic preparation to attend college.
 2. I know what careers match my personality.
 3. I know my career interests.
 4. I know how to apply my values in career and life decisions.
 5. I know how to develop a marketable resume.
 6. I know how to effectively search for a job.
 7. I know how to effectively interview for a job.
 8. I know how to effectively manage my stress and anger.
 9. I am confident in my ability to manage my life effectively.
-

Table 4. Post-program comments.

 Post-program comments

 What did you learn from your participation in the Reintegration Academy?

- What helped a lot was having formerly incarcerated guest speakers that comes up and shared their experience of where they came from. It was very relatable.
 - I enjoyed the Reintegration Academy. It taught me that the sky's the limit and I can do what I want to do if I apply myself and work hard.
 - This was a life changing program. I encourage others who want to put in the work to invest in this program and it teaches life skills that will take you very far in life.
 - It's amazing how many volunteers there were. I know now how to network and use the resources that are available to me.
 - I am very grateful for the experience of the program because it made me think about what I want to do with my life. I didn't know what to do until I attended this program.
 - The whole structure of the program is very well put together. It is very helpful in teaching you how to be successful. Very resourceful.
 - I am very grateful for the experience of the program because it made me think about what I want to do with my life. I didn't know what to do until I attended this program.
 - The whole structure of the program is very well put together. It is very helpful in teaching you how to be successful. Very resourceful.
 - I learned that I could do a college prep that I didn't think I could do. It gave me the confidence that I can do anything as long as I am confident.
 - The program exposed me to the opportunities that are available to those who have been incarcerated. It showed us the network that is opened to us as we come out. The staff and volunteers overextended themselves for us. The program is very inspiring and very important.
 - I learned that I can do anything that I put my mind and effort in to. There is nothing that is not available to me. I would tell everybody to participate if you have been recently released from prison because the program's network is huge.
 - To begin, I learned true sister and brotherhood. I experienced an energy of compassion, love, and a driven force that was much needed in my world. I have only been a member of this society three months next week. I needed the Reintegration Academy. It reinforced my values
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(continued)

Table 4. Continued.

-
- in life and gave me the confidence I was lacking since being released after serving 20 years in prison. Effective communication skills are necessary and I value what was taught to me. I had no money management skills prior to this class and am grateful for what I learned. I had no idea about what a credit score was or the importance of saving. I was inspired weekly by every guest speaker that attended and again my confidence level grew. I hope to be able to one day be a part of the inspiration given to the future classes. God Bless!
- The power of networking is important. Thank you with all my heart for this wonderful opportunity. The Reintegration Academy provided me with tangible results that will have a profound effect on the rest of my life. In a brief time, I created a personal budget, secured a credit card, began the student loan rehabilitation process, enrolled in Chaffey College, received the BOG waiver, established a fantastic network, and met some of the most caring volunteers on the planet. This truly was a magnificent program. I cannot express how grateful I am to everyone who took the time to help me achieve a rock solid foundation of hope. I humbly pray I can one day serve those who come after myself and my community as a whole. This was truly a life changing experience. Thank you to everyone who helped make this possible.
 - I really enjoyed the program, it was very insightful, it gave me a lot of knowledge on how to get things started. I really enjoyed every session and will be more open and ready for what to expect in life.
 - It's a great program for those who just got out of prison.
 - I learned my future depends on myself and the choices I make. The Reintegration Academy gave me hope to strive and achieve my goals. They gave me the tools and the encouragement to follow my dreams. Thank you!
 - I learned that I am not limited in my choices. That even though I have a past it does not define what I can achieve. I have the confidence now that I can be anything I want to and I still will. I have the belief in myself as a person with potential and the ability to also give back to others who need to be uplifted like I did. There will always be challenges but it is how you look at them and move through them that shape who you are. I appreciate the opportunity that I had so much and look forward to helping others see their potential. It was truly a moving experience and I now network everywhere I go.
 - It was such an amazing program and I enjoyed every moment of it. Everybody was very helpful.
 - Thank you for being there and helping us to believe that we can change and be a better version of our past.
 - The whole structure of the program is very well put together. It is very helpful in teaching you how to be successful. Very resourceful.
 - I learned that I could do a college prep that I didn't think I could do. It gave me the confidence that I can do anything as long as I am confident.
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Academy shows the power of collaboration. The program has been successful because it relies heavily on the DAPO to screen and refer candidates to the program. Beyond this role, DAPO's parole agents enthusiastically promote and support the program. There are 5–8 parole agents at every RA session. They do not come to these sessions to monitor, they come to support. Some of the participants

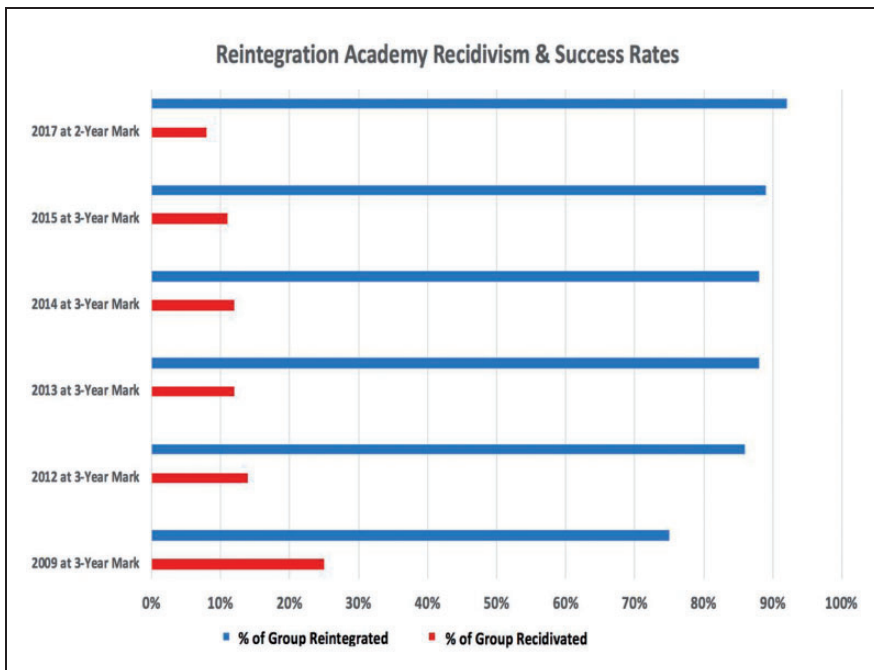


Figure 1. Reintegration Academy recidivism and success rates. (www.ReintegrationAcademy.org)

are grateful for this type of support. These agents debunk the stereotype of parole agents being adversarial and apathetic towards the parolees on their caseload.

One of the biggest fears that parolees have when they are released from prison is that of being stigmatized as a felon. The stigma is not just a perception, it is real. This stigma poses a barrier to employment and causes ostracism in social circles. Knowing this, one of the primary goals of the Reintegration Academy is to give the participants respect. Along with programmatic content, we will cultivate the human spirit.

I have learned over the years that the four-year degree is overrated for certain populations. There are those who do better in carpentry than in political science courses and those who do better in welding than in English literature. The community college is a dynamic place for those who do not connect with traditional college majors. Not only are community colleges affordable, but they also have an array of practical vocational programs that lead directly to gainful employment. Who is more employable? A person who has their nursing degree from a community college or one who has a four-year degree in philosophy?

One lesson learned is that our perspective on mentorship is flawed. People do not have time to mentor an individual one-on-one. Professionals have their own

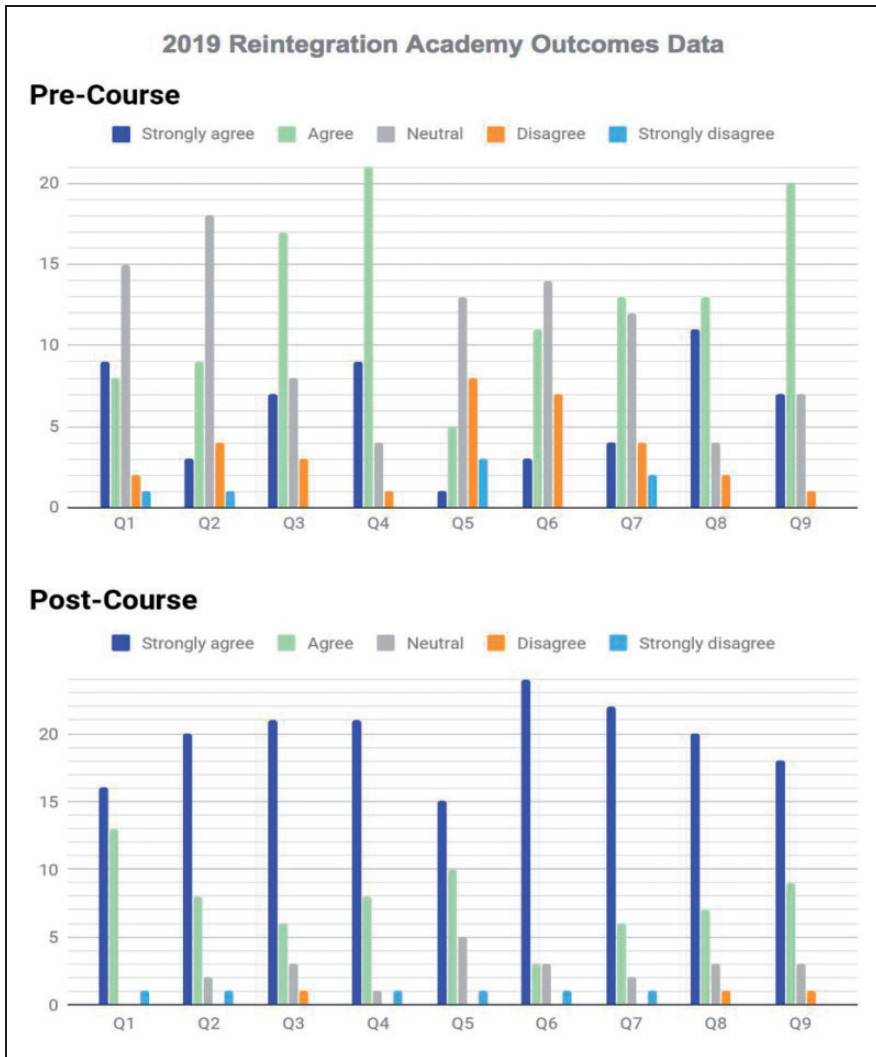


Figure 2. Pre- and post-program survey outcomes. (www.ReintegrationAcademy.org)

children, families, and careers to attend to. So, the idea that this person will take the time to mentor a person on a long-term basis is unrealistic. I cannot give the adequate time that it would take to mentor each of the parolees in my program. However, there are students, graduate students, university staff, attorneys, professors, and successful entrepreneurs who volunteer for the Reintegration Academy. So, if the participants have a question that I do not have the time to answer, there is always someone around who can step in to answer it for me.

We learned through the Reintegration Academy that the academic expectations of the formerly incarcerated population should be raised instead of lowered. When you motivate them, provide the proper resources, and expect them to achieve, they will. We learned that this population should be immersed in positive environments that embrace learning. We learned that we must expose the formerly incarcerated population to an array of vocational educational opportunities and not assume that the university is a perfect fit for everyone. We must get this population to understand the career development process. They must understand that in their dress, behaviour, and skill sets they have to market themselves in a way that makes them attractive to employers. Education is liberation. And, it is only through increased exposure, consciousness, and education that the formerly incarcerated will be transformed.

I have learned that when running a program such as this you should not walk on eggshells but rather be vigilant and very cautious of every step in the process. If you do not screen the candidates properly, there can be consequences. For example, one of our RA participants had a heroin addiction that we thought he had kicked at the time we accepted him into the program. When his girlfriend dropped him off at one of our Reintegration Academy sessions, they got into an animated argument in the university's parking lot. The campus police came, which prompted quite a scene.

In any type of social service outreach program, crisis is inevitable. But, it is your response to the crisis that determines whether your program thrives or not. In this case, I had the participant's parole agent speak to the campus police about the incident. I understood that the campus police would have a unique camaraderie with and respect for another peace officer such as the parole agent. After they came together to resolve this incident, it became a non-issue.

To run a successful program such as the Reintegration Academy, one must combine idealism with pragmatism. However, this is a delicate balance. Some leaders are so pragmatic that they lack creativity, imagination, and vision. Pragmatism can also undermine their courage. Some leaders are so idealistic that they lack a rational, logical, and realistic perspective. Their fervour can undermine their goals. Effective leaders understand how to fuse idealism and pragmatism.

Through the implementation of the Reintegration Academy, I learned that universities are hyper-risk averse. Universities promote research and the pursuit of theoretical questions more than practical solutions. The conferences, mini-conferences, committees, sub-committees, and steering committees that make up the academic environment are largely gatherings to discuss the 'problem'. The fact that academia is intrigued with the problem is, in fact, the problem. Few academics want to come down from the 'ivory towers' and get in the trenches to create solutions. And, when this does happen, there are administrative consequences.

The Reintegration Academy remains as one of the only programs in the nation that brings recently released parolees to the college campus for an extended period of time for programming. The program has thrived because of the staff's capacity

to be flexible, the power of collaboration, the commitment of its volunteers, and the participants' intense commitment to transforming their lives.

When the Reintegration Academy was founded in 2009, there was virtually no support for supporting formerly incarcerated students on college campuses in California. However, times have changed.

In 2015, the California State University system offered support for incarcerated students on its campuses with its support for Project Rebound. Project Rebound gives academic support to formerly incarcerated students on various CSU campuses. In 2019, the governor of California signed a budget that included \$3.3 million in annual ongoing funding for Project Rebound.

Programs such as the Reintegration Academy and Project Rebound are reflections of a new re-entry movement, which highlight the potential found in second chances and the transformation found in education.

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