

## Building Student Leadership Opportunities During and After Incarceration Transcript

- [Maurice] I ask that you disable your video so that only your audio will be captured during this event. The Vera Institute of Justice provides assistance to grantees on focused education, employment, and reentry. We connect grantees to peer networks, best practices and resources. Our agenda for this event, we'll begin with introductions, we'll have speaker remarks. We'll have our student panel discussion. We'll then transition to our Q&A section and I will provide key takeaways from today's event before we close out. Today's speakers will be Danny Murillo, Brandon Warren. We have speakers from the University of Maine at Augusta, his name is John Lopez, and the student from the Voice Council, the Washington Department of Corrections, her name is Tiana Wood-Sims. Co-facilitator for the panel discussion will be Terrell Blount. I will ask Terrell at this point to introduce himself.

- [Terrell] Thank you, Maurice. And good afternoon, everyone, and possibly good morning to anyone that is in a time zone that is outside of the US. But my name is Terrell Blount, I serve as the executive director of the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network. We're a nonprofit that supports and promotes the post-secondary education attainment of justice-impacted people that's both in reentry as well as incarcerated individuals. And you'll see on our panel today that we have a panelist from both groups. I do appreciate the Bureau of Justice Assistance as well as the National Reentry Resource Center and the Vera Institute of Justice for providing this space and uplifting the voices of justice-impacted learners. It is of the utmost importance that all community organizations, corrections departments, and colleges, all service providers that focus on education at the intersection of the justice system, it's important that we not only listen to, but really take into account the information and feedback that directly impacted people give toward improving these systems, these various systems that we operate inside of. We believe at FICGN as well as a number of our partner organizations that the importance of student leadership in post-secondary education programs provides agency for students, it gives them, in this system of power imbalance, it gives them a little bit of power and say-so in various things, whether it's how the college program is ran to a certain extent, what courses come into the prison? What reentry opportunities could and should await them? So there's a number of things that come from listening to the population. I can't stress it enough how important it is. And I think in many ways, which we'll get into later on during the student panel is, the other benefits and gifts that comes from investing in student leadership, because I believe that the student leadership piece then grows into professional leadership, whether that's at a nonprofit organization or in the private sector, or possibly even in government, it starts with the opportunities that you're able to provide to students while incarcerated. And it starts at the student advisory groups while inside, in reentry, it then continues into student organizations on campus where you're now welcoming students from those college programs onto campus and informing traditional college students about the justice system and education in prisons. And then they can then grow into many more roles that require decision-making, which again, we'll get into later. So I will stop there and pass it on to Mr. Danny Murillo.

- [Danny] Thank you, Terrell. You covered a lot there, so definitely, a lot of what you just shared with us, a lot of it I'll probably be reiterating and highlighting as important takeaways in helping us to establish leadership opportunities for incarcerated folks and as they transition out. So thank you for that. Hello, everybody, my name is Danny Murillo. I work multiple hats right now being that I'm a full-time graduate student first at Cal State Long Beach pursuing a Master's of Arts in Education. But I also work and I'm affiliated with the Michelson 20MM Foundation. I am the smart justice fellow where I convened a statewide coalition of experts, formerly incarcerated leaders, higher education advocates, and we're establishing a list of guiding principles for colleges and universities serving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. I'm also the research coordinator for Project Rebound at the CSU, at the Cal State University system. We have Project Rebound which supports formerly incarcerated students. There's 14 universities with the Project Rebound program, and of those 14 campuses, we selected 10 students to participate in our first research cohort program, which I am the research coordinator, and I facilitate the seminars and just pretty much providing students an overview of research while they work directly with their faculty mentor on the institution that they are located at. And so, I just wanna kinda give an overview of kind of what I do and maybe even discuss how I got there, but as I'm talking about what I'm here to talk about which is how college education programs can implement ways to give incarcerated students the opportunity to develop their leadership and some of the things that colleges can do and certainly something that I never had the opportunity being that I was a college student in solitary confinement. And at the time, when I was a college

student, access to education wasn't readily available, and it wasn't what it is now. So now we're at a point where in California at least, almost all of our 35 institutions have a college program, providing some type of college program to a small group or a large group of students, depending how much the college is invested and how much resources they have allocated to be able to provide those services. And so one of the things that we're trying to get some of these colleges to do is invite the students that are now on the outside. So we have about 50 colleges and universities in California that are providing some type of support service program to formerly incarcerated students. And so one of the things that's a benefit that we do out here through Project Rebound and Underground Scholars, which is at the University of California. And then we have Rising Scholars at the California community colleges, is that we get a lot of the formerly incarcerated students to go into the facilities and do workshops, workshops on academic success, workshops on preparing for transition. What are the resources and the information they're gonna need to be able to continue their education once they transition out? So that's one way that you can provide students those leadership skills, and just even information. Also information, just provide 'em information about what comes next once they transition out of the facility, or things that they can do while they're in the facility. I think for those students that have long sentences, colleges and universities that are providing academic services on the inside can utilize these students as academic tutors and as assistants in their program, especially those that have already transitioned out of those education programs and still have a long sentence. For folks that are still gonna be incarcerated for a long time and especially for those that are lifers, at least in California, something that we're seeing, especially those that are going to education, is that they're cultural change agents in this institution. A lot of these old-timers, a lot of these guys have been in there for a long time who've already have all this education can serve as advisors and counselors to a lot of the younger folks that are really coming in. And kind of using education to create a pathway for them to think of different ways to do their time. So there's, again, kind of reiterating the part about the formerly incarcerated students, the importance of bringing in those formerly incarcerated students as credible messengers, especially to be able to show folks that there is a possibility to continue education once you come home, and this is what you can do with it. Because a lot of times, students on the inside aren't aware that there's... What are the opportunities on the outside? And folks can... We have formerly incarcerated people that are lawyers, we have formerly incarcerated people that are executive directors of nonprofits, whether at the local level to the national level. We have folks that are now reentry fellows at BJA. So we have folks that are doing things all over. We even have folks that are doctors at Howard University and doing medical research. So understanding that what are the different pathways to be able to take once somebody comes home instead of just thinking that it's just one pathway and that's it. So also thinking of once folks come home. It doesn't stop at the prison gate, especially for prison education programs. Once the students come home, they're on their own, thinking of how do you help them prepare for when they come home, and as they're on their way home, what are the college programs or universities that are gonna be in their parole region that are providing on-campus services for formerly incarcerated students? So for those programs that are on campus providing those services, it's important for them to take in mind that these students come with additional needs, that their academic services and career services are gonna be much more intricate and compared to a regular student. Now, we're talking about what kind of career do you wanna pursue and what the barriers that exist to pursue that career in terms of licensing? So academic counselors need to be aware of what are the needs that these students are gonna encounter? Or the barriers that they're gonna encounter in terms of career and academic majors. Are these majors are leading to careers where there's barriers in terms of wanting to be a clinical psychologist? Not to say that it's not possible, but trying to be a clinical psychologist, wanting to be a lawyer, there's these licensing barriers that you still have to encounter. You can get the degree, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you can get the license and that you're gonna be able to practice. Not to say that those barriers are not being addressed, it's kind of more a state-by-state kind of issue, but these are things that inside programs and outside programs need to take into consideration when they're providing these academic and career advising to students. Also being aware that in prison programs and on campus that there's leadership programs that students can participate. There's, for instance, with incarcerated students in California, they participate in certain correspondence programs, whether it's Underground Scholars, Project Rebound or Rising Scholars, you communicate with on-campus programs, and particularly with those that are gonna be in your region, for when you come home so that they can start helping you establish that pathway for when you come home. You already have a community at a community college, at a university, that's there to embrace you and accept you and help you transition from incarceration into higher education. So I probably have about a couple seconds left over and just wanna kinda just... Overall, there's great opportunity for programs to create leadership opportunities for students on the inside and helping them prepare on the outside. And as they prepare for the outside, providing them with the resources

and information to be able to make that transition as smooth as possible. I'm just gonna go and end it right there. Thank you.

- Thank you for that, Danny. Brandon, do you have something that you'd like to share with us in regard to your focus and your work on student leadership?

- [Brandon] Yes, sir. So y'all, bear with me, I'm gonna speak very fast. So my name is Brandon Warren, I'm the director of reentry services and an adjunct instructor for the Lee College Huntsville Center. I'm also formerly incarcerated, between the ages of 16 and 24, I spent about 6 1/2 of those eight years incarcerated. And in the last incarceration is where I had the opportunity to participate in a college program which was run by the Lee College Huntsville Center who I now work for. So I finished a horticulture certificate, an HVAC certificate, and an Associate of Arts in Humanities with Lee College. Since I've been released, I've finished a Bachelor's Degree, two Master's Degrees. And last May, I finished a Doctorate of Education in Ethical Leadership from the University of St. Thomas here in Houston, Texas. I've been working inside the Texas prison system since 2011 as an administrator and adjunct instructor for two different college and prison programs, one of them was a Bachelor's Degree program, which was fully-accredited, but offered free of charge to men serving long sentences, 30 years or more. And since 2017, I've worked for Lee College Huntsville Center as a reentry specialist. And here in the last two months, I became director of reentry services. So Lee College has been offering educational opportunities for people in the Texas prison system since at least 1966, if not 1965. We are currently offering degrees on eight different prison units, seven of them are men's, one is a female unit and we are possibly going to expand to three more, so we'll have two women's units. We average about 1,000 students a semester, right now, I think we're pushing 1,200. We have eight different Associate of Applied Science Degrees, one of which is a Business Management Degree, which also has stackable certificates like in entrepreneurship. And we have awarded over 10,000 individuals with certificates and degrees in the last 25 years. That's as far as the digital data goes back, as far as I can see. So we started offering reentry services in 2017, that's when they hired me, the first time they hired a formerly incarcerated person to work for Lee College. But also as far as I can tell, as far as I know, we're also the first college in Texas to offer reentry services to our students. Two months ago, the Lee College decided to expand those services, and so now, we are a reentry services department, and that includes two other colleagues of mine, Mr. Matthew McGinnis, who formerly worked for parole as a parole officer and then a trainer in the academy and Tracy Williams. Tracy Williams is also formerly incarcerated. He spent about 25 years in prison. He's been out 15 months. He happens to be a graduate of the Bachelor's Degree program that I taught 14 years ago, but he's also a Lee College student as well. So he's focusing a lot on our alumni network development, and Matthew is focusing a lot on our entrepreneurship and employment network. So I wanted to say a little bit about the specific bullet points in the description of this talk, which is creating student leadership opportunities. So in the Texas prison system, people incarcerated can be peer educators. They can be field ministers, which is what Tracy was for six years. They have a new title called life coaches, but for Lee College students in particular, they can become tutors. This was something created by one of our faculty members, Amanda DeVore, several years ago. Our students can become tutors in the classroom. So a tutor is usually assigned to all of our classes to help the students with their work and also help them with our computer labs. So in terms of promoting student success, we have computer labs in all of the prison units that we serve. Some of those classrooms are smart classrooms with smart board technology. We're also offering... We're doing a pilot program right now where two of those computer labs have some limited internet access so that students can do coursework through the learning management system, Blackboard, which is very common among the colleges out here. And our librarian, Jessica Licklider, is also providing a wealth of research information that includes reentry resources that myself and my colleagues have developed, but especially to support the research that they do for their individual classes. These things can be uploaded to their computer system, but they can also write her to get information related to their classes, and she'll print that out and send it to 'em. So now I wanted to talk about the reentry services component. So when I started in 2017, I didn't step into a job description that was very particular because we had never offered reentry services before. But in my conversations over the years with groups like NJ-STEP in New Jersey or people in California, or Washington, I learned how some of the other higher education and prison programs were offering reentry-related services. And so from my own experience and in discussions with other programs, I created what we have at Lee College Huntsville Center now, which I think is a pretty decent, pretty robust reentry services department. The way I envision it or explain these things is that we have two major dimensions to our reentry services, one of which is student services. By student services, I just mean people who are currently incarcerated. They're not necessarily current students of Lee College,

they could be graduates or someone who, for whatever reason, wasn't able to finish. And we have alumni services, and by alumni, I just mean formerly incarcerated. They are not necessarily graduates, maybe they were released before they graduated. And what it's also turned into is that we have people who are in our alumni group, who are not necessarily Lee College students either, they're part of other college and prison programs across Texas who don't yet have robust reentry services, and so, we're essentially working with those students as well. With the student service side, students who are Lee College from any of the prisons can write myself and my two colleagues and ask for anything reentry-related. If they need halfway house lists, if they need job openings in their particular field, if they need educational degree program information, if they need to know where they can get their tattoos removed. Anything reentry-related, they can write us, we'll research it, print it out and send it to them. That is a huge resource for people who do not have outside connections who can adequately supply them with some of that up-to-date, reliable information. We also do classroom presentations, so all our new vocational courses to explain who we are. I also developed a reentry course which I originally designed to last a full 13 week academic course meeting once a week for three hours, but I've modified it so that it can be done in six weeks. We do a lot of myth busting, talking about the myths and false ideas that circulate the prison about different benefits that they have upon release. And we've created quite a few resources to provide them while they're students. On the outside, we are building up our contacts. So we started off with about 40 alumni, now we are almost at 500 alumni. So building that out and creating a network, I've created an informal mentor network of some of our successful students who've been successful business owners, are able to answer questions and make connections with our students who've been just released about the different industries that they are working in. We also have a support group every Wednesday at 5:30, so we'll be meeting this afternoon, and former students can jump in and just ask any kind of questions about parole, leg monitors, education, transcripts, job openings, how to start their own business and get a DBA, it's really wide open. The people who are on that call are either serving to answer those questions or they're newly-released folks who just need a lot of support and networking assistance. So we also have started an entrepreneurship group and we're starting a group that is specifically for people who served long stretches of time, 15, 20, 25 years. And then in terms of just reentry assistance, that was the premise on which I was originally hired when we got started. So we connect people with jobs, educational institutions, halfway houses, identification resources, anything reentry-related, we try to make those connections. In doing that, we do a lot of research. Our students can be released anywhere in the state of Texas, so our students can be released eight or nine hours away from us. So we have to cover basically the whole state, primarily Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth areas, but we do quite a bit of statewide research on reentry resources. And then most recently, I spent a lot of time trying to do data collection on things like recidivism stats, employment stats, student data, transitioning into, or transferring into further educational resources. So a lot of that is still in its nascent phase because we've only been doing it for a couple of years, but there's just quite a bit of data to be tracked over the last 50 years of our presence in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. So I'm sorry that was really fast, but that's all I have for you. Thank you.

- [Terrell] Brandon, do not apologize. That was a lot of good information and you communicated it very succinctly and in a way that we can all understand great work that's being done over there at Lee College as well as specifically on the reentry team as well.

- [Brandon] Thank you.

- Before we transition into the second part of this webinar, I just wanna highlight some of the things I heard from our two presenters. I'm hearing there's a good blend of information sharing, which is very intentional, not just from the institution, meaning the education institution, but as well as amongst each other. And I think there's also a sense of empowerment that comes from being a student leader, whether inside or in reentry. I heard the accountability in there, which again, kind of speaks to us holding each other accountable and looking out for one another as peers in the same classroom or program and a continuation or continuum of resources and support from incarceration to reentry. And I think overall, just the theme of community, and I believe that's what we are, especially when it comes to higher education in prison. I believe we are a community, a mixed bag of brave and innovative correctional leaders, folks who are at the colleges thinking deeply about how to not just simply provide education, but find a way to encourage students to be imaginative and think about the different roles that they can play upon reentry or for those who may not return to our communities, how they can still have a meaningful and impactful life from the inside by connecting their peers and preparing their peers who will return home with the tools and resources that they

need. I believe in many ways, we're a community in the student level from directly impacted people. I look at the people in the chat, I know about 1/2 the names of the folks who are attendees here as well as the panel. I met Danny in 2016 when he came from California to New Jersey when I was working for NJ-STEP, and we both then began working at Vera at the same time. I met Brandon in 2017 when I traveled to Texas to visit Lee College's program and Brandon and I were on the road for a few hours traveling to facilities. And I remember how shocked he was that there were other people like him who navigated the correction system as well as college education and we built from there. I met Maurice in 2018 in Washington, DC at a panel and introduced myself, and him and I have kept in contact. So we are very much a community. And I point this out because each of the people that I just named are on that trajectory, including myself, to becoming impactful leaders in influence and change. And when we talk about the student leadership piece, again, I briefly mentioned in my opening remarks about how it starts on the inside with just the advisory boards for incarcerated students. I think in that space, there's so many skills that we begin to learn from learning how to communicate in groups, how to negotiate, 'cause not everybody is always on the same page. You can't expect that all 20 plus students is gonna be on the same page. So there's bargaining and negotiating skills that come into play. You learn about where your values are. You begin to think about how you can improve the program itself and what things you're missing, what things you aren't, missing where you're good at. And just so many foundational skills that students begin to grow and acquire from the inside. But then on the outside, as Danny mentioned, organizing student groups on campus, I feel that is the next step for those who do not complete a degree on the inside or continue education on the outside. Here in North Carolina, there's a student who, again, came from California. She participated in the program while on the inside, she's now at a college close by in Raleigh where I am and reached out to me about starting the student organization on campus. So if you see people are moving from place to place or visiting different states and spreading the knowledge and skills that they've learned in their home states and now, we're informing and educating other justice-impacted learners to do the same. So just from her experiences in California and seeing places like Project Rebound and Underground Scholars, she's now here in North Carolina organizing students on campus who are justice-impacted to now do the same. I think from there, with the student organization which I helped, I was a founder of one on Rutgers campus as well, the Mountainview Program Student Organization. I think outside of that student organization piece, there's also space for us in the broader college community. So running for different positions within the college, the student roles that they have within the college, I think is key as well. In that space, you again, learn how to negotiate, bargain. You do planning with the university, you manage budgets if you're gonna be holding certain events. Those are all things that if we're thinking further out, years out when people are executive directors of nonprofits or program managers or working in philanthropy, whatever that looks like, these are skills that are grown and manifest through this participation. But for our incarcerated students, I think the next step in terms of forward thinking, I really wanna be intentional with the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network and any other colleges or nonprofits that we partner with is beginning to look at how directly impacted students can play a role or serve roles on education and commission. So each state has a higher education commission or some type of agency or governing board for higher education. And nine times outta 10, you have a student role for that commission, and within that commission and in that role for that student, they learn, again, a lot of the things I mentioned. You learn about budgets, you're around all decision-makers who have 20 years, 30 years in the game, you get to hear these conversations and see what the colleges are planning either throughout the state or at a particular college that's around student success and curriculum development and different programs. And I really think that if we strategically organize and are intentional about our formerly incarcerated students and possibly currently incarcerated, because in my research, with a lot of the higher education commissions, it's nothing that excludes incarcerated learners from being involved. And especially during this pandemic, where all meetings are via web, it's quite possible that some students in some states may be able to apply for, or throw their hat in the ring, for something like that. But to be able to be a formerly incarcerated student and serve on the commission and be able to put in there something about funding for that particular college program or throughout the entire state. That's, again, speaking to the agency, kind of leveraging that power and leveraging our voices. So I wanted to just kinda highlight that and get folks to begin thinking about something much more greater and much more strategic that can benefit the college programs, and then more importantly, leverage the power and benefit the students in the college programs in the prison. So with that, I will now pass it over to our student panel and first introduce John, or have John introduce himself. John, are you there? Are you unmuted?

- [John] Yes. Thank you. My name is John Lopez and I am currently a student at the University of Maine Augusta, and I'm pursuing a finance degree. I am a board member of the Prison Education Partnership and

work primarily on equitable access for incarcerated students, whether that access is course materials, the internet or email to correspond with instructors. There's also some other topics that we go over such as informing instructors on the challenges that we face being incarcerated and how to deal with that or work with us so that way, we can get the best education received from their course. I'm also working on things to allow extracurricular activities if it's educational-based and equitable access to student services, such as mentoring, tutoring and things like that. We're going very far with the work that we're doing. Soon, across all facilities in the state of Maine, they will have internet access for everybody, which is a major step in the work that we've done, so yeah.

- [Terrell] Thank you for that, John. And we'll kick it over to Washington where we have, is that Tiana at the Student Voice Council?

- [Tiana] Yes, this is Tiana Wood-Sims representing for the Student Voice Council here at Washington State Corrections Center for Women. Currently, we are in a COVID pandemic, so all the students haven't been able to get together. So I'm gonna do my best to speak for everybody as a collective. I like everybody to give opinion and input. I don't like to be the one voice, but unfortunately, we have to make it this way today. I just wanted to shout out to the council. Here we are working with students, we are representing students, we are advocating for students, we are making change in the prison. As students and scholars, we are shifting the culture in here. I feel like when we come into this school, we're seen as students, other than in the prison, I feel like in the prison, education is treated as a contraband, so we get in trouble for behavior, they take schooling from us. So Student Voice Council, we're creating policies to change these things. We also have tutoring services as well, learning lab, we've created videos for people who are in receiving, so they can start thinking about what type of educational opportunities are here and what they wanna do. We are basically here to just lead, to inspire, to encourage, to help people on their path of transformation, to be a standard. I feel like I've been here for eight years and when I got here, I had 11 years to do, and there was no educational opportunities for me. Thankfully, things have shifted through time through advocates advocating for long-termers to get education. I am currently working towards my Bachelor's Degree through the Freedom Education Project at Puget Sound, which is a nonprofit that was started by long-termers in here. The women in here fought, and fought, and fought to get education in here, and so, I'm a part of that. I'm also a part of the Black Prisoners' Caucus, the executive secretary. We also help tutor and do educational opportunities. The Student Voice Council is also working with organizations in the community, so they're reaching back in so we can try to build relationships and foster those relationships and cultivate a collective a voice. 'Cause I feel like formerly incarcerated students, that's a different type of perspective. And so from our standpoint, what do we need? Times are changing, DOC is constantly changing policy, education programs are getting cut. So I'm just here to advocate and be a leader and just make change.

- [Terrell] Thank you so much, Tiana. So I'll go ahead and open the floor to just ask questions to the group at large and maybe sometimes it'll be directed to a specific individual. But are there any challenges that any of you have identified in this work, in your respective work, whether it's establishing the student groups on campus, if it's partnering, and I could see Brandon maybe speaking a little bit more toward this and partnering with other community organizations, but what are the challenges that anyone has experienced with any, inside the prison or outside?

- [Brandon] I can say something to that. Is that alright? Do you want me? Go ahead? Okay. Yeah, so offering student leadership opportunities while still incarcerated is still been a sort of barrier. I have good reason to believe that the Texas prison system is gonna be much more flexible in the near future. We've had meetings in the last few weeks where they've verbally agreed to opening up a lot of things but having currently incarcerated students have authority or any kind of leadership role is still difficult, but that's opening up more and more. So for example, we don't have an advisory board of students who are currently incarcerated, but we do have an advisory board of students who are formerly incarcerated. So organizing them in different ways is still kind of a barrier. Other than that, on the outside where some of our students have started their own businesses and are hiring our students, so that's actually a good thing. And then we've have started nonprofits as well, which are focusing on things like reentry, so we're partnering with them as well. So just the major challenge, I think, is still student leadership opportunities inside as opposed to outside.

- [Danny] I think another challenge would have to be with parole once people are, the transition to parole

from the inside to the outside. And then once folks are home and they've been awarded an admission to a university that's 50 miles outside of their parole region and getting that parole transfer to another region. And so, these are things that come out on the ground, but being that most of my work's right now is more at the macro level and there's trying to create either policies with these guiding principles that's gonna kinda address more for specifically for California higher education institutions. And so, even if you pass, say for city, you pass a policy bill around parole, it is still you pass the bill, but it's still the issue is implementation. A lot of these parole regions operate regionally and they kinda similar to prisons, the warden operates pretty much, to a certain extent, independently from other prisons. What happens in one prison, doesn't necessarily mean it happens in another prison. And so, trying to figure out ways, how do we streamline these barriers. If a student that's in the inside gets accepted to UC Berkeley, but his parole region is Los Angeles, and he doesn't wanna go back to Los Angeles because he's going back to his old neighborhood, 'cause that's usually what happened, you go back to the region that you got arrested at. That's how they do it in California, so you get arrested in LA, you get arrested in the hood, you're going back pretty much to the same place you got arrested. And you have an opportunity to go to UC Berkeley where it's totally different in terms of the opportunities and the resources. Just by the fact that you're a student, your opportunities expand exponentially. And so sometimes, folks are not allowed to transfer from the inside as they're being released to be able to transfer to another region outside of the region that they got arrested in. And even once they're home, they're also still encountering these barriers to get in, to be able to transfer their parole to another region to go into another university. And so, programs are supporting in that, they're writing letters of support either to the parole board before they come home, or to the parole officer, or to the parole regional directors. But it's still something where you have to constantly be asking people as opposed to like, "Yo, this shit." I'm sorry, excuse me, excuse my language, but if somebody gets accepted, he earned it or that person earned that. They earned a transfer to a Master's, a undergrad, or whatever. They earned it, so approve that transfer because it's only gonna expand their opportunities. And that, in the larger picture, it means safer communities.

- [Terrell] Thank you for that, Danny, and I definitely identify with the piece about parole and any type of community supervision and how that can be a huge challenge for not only those who operate or run the college program on campus, but more specifically for the formerly incarcerated learner, it's always for any person who's under supervision in reentry. Most of the time, it is challenging to not be in a situation where you have a person that you report to, parole officer, or any other designation that they may have, who doesn't have a negative disposition on people who have been in prison. It's very rare that you have someone who is not just staying off your back, 'cause it's not necessarily just about you not coming after me and trying to catch me breaking curfew or having the dirty urine. For me, is more about you assisting me, not sending me to a case worker or sending me downtown to get in line somewhere where I'm not gonna receive the services. We need to rethink community supervision and the role of the parole officer and change it from something that is, someone who's punitive and looking to catch people to get them remanded, and instead, have the officer be someone who is there to support you through your reentry and not give you a hard time. We really need to rethink how that setup and that dynamic is. But I saw something in the comments from Tiana about the challenges in student turnover, which didn't come to mind, but I'm pretty sure is a real thing. Can you speak a little bit more toward that?

- [Tiana] Sure, so the leadership groups that we have, of course, people, and we want people to get out. So of course, people are going to be reentering into the community. And so, it's never fully-established the foundation of our group. We're always constantly adding somebody in or somebody's leaving and then it's just never consistent. I've been consistent in it because I've been here a really long time and I'm one of the founders of it. So having to do that shift, it's disruptive. We have to update people on the current projects we're working on. We're cultivating leaders constantly, so we're actually working on a training right now specific to women leadership inside the prison and we're trying to get some type of curriculum, I guess you can say a curriculum on how to deal with things like that on the quick turnaround and how we can cultivate leaders quickly and the different type of leaders there are. And so, it's a really big challenge, so.

- [Terrell] Thank you for that. And I wanna give John the spotlight for a second and maybe either speak to the the current conversation that's happening, or I feel like you kinda shortchanged the audience in sharing about the program that you're currently in and your specific work. So this is your time to shine, brother. Do you have anything you wanna share?

- [John] Yeah, so there's also other angles that we work on, that was just the most prevalent situation right now that we're dealing with. But I think some of the work that we do that really helps and promote some opportunities for people is kind of dealing with that turnover and success rate of people following through in the policies with inside the DOC for that. I think Danny was speaking to it, or you might have been earlier, kinda the lack of information for people for the opportunities that they have or the challenges they may face. And we're looking into doing some things that address that to where if you're chasing a certain degree, in that transitioning, planning period, whether it's your personal life, how does your work life go into that? And I think that people need to be educated on how much time that work consumes and then how do they plan that in to their transition period? There's also, I believe, a lack of focus on transition from facility to facility. Part of the reason that we are working so hard on getting more tech access across all of DOC departments in the state of Maine is that depending on where you are housed depends on how much tech access you can have. And it's kind of backwards right now, where if you're at a higher security facility and you come to a minimum, you actually lose tech access. And I think that that's a shock for some people because that's not something they would ever think about where I'm getting lower security, but I'm getting more restriction. So that's just some other angles that we're working on and a lot of different things going on. But I think that proper reentry planning while you're inside and transition from facility to facility and being well aware of the challenges you're gonna face with licensing and things like that to see if you still wanna pursue it, or if there's another avenue that might be a better fit for you.

- [Terrell] Thank you for that, John. I'm now going to... and thank you to all the panelists as well in case I don't get to speak again. I thank you all for joining and sharing your knowledge and expertise with the group today. I'm going to turn it over to Maurice, I believe, for our Q&A.

- [Maurice] Terrell, I'm gonna make sure that you have a few more minutes to speak. I would like to thank our panelists. We do have a few questions that I wanna get to. I will try to address all of them, time permitted. I wanna start with a question for the entire panel. The question is, what advice do you have for colleges looking to start a program that supports students leaving prison? And that's open to the entire panel. Terrell, you can jump in here if you choose to. Would anybody like to address that question?

- [John] I think something that programs could do to do that is find ways to accommodate individuals that are incarcerated to allow them to be fully-involved with extracurricular educational opportunities, whether it's clubs and organizations or whatever that may look like. I think with that opportunity, you gain many of the skills that we talked about earlier as far as leadership, learning how to communicate with people or communicate in the group and just building those basic necessities that you need in order to progress further on when you get out.

- [Danny] I would say my advice would be, I guess my question would be to the program, why do you wanna start the program? Is it for yourself or is it for the students? And if you're thinking about the students, then when you start to create a program, approach it from a student-centered perspective. And understand that there's already a large network of people and organizations and universities that are doing this work. So tapping into those resources and understanding what are those best practices that are already out there, as opposed to assuming that you're gonna come up with the best program ever And that it's not a competition, it's about building opportunities for those that you're gonna be serving.

- [Maurice] Thank both of you for sharing. Tiana, I wanna make sure that your voice is uplifted. So would you mind addressing or answering what ways can a correctional department best support student councils?

- [Tiana] That's a layered question, but I guess I'll start with saying, instead of coming with the barriers, let's try to figure out angles to break down those barriers. All the no's, the instant no's, are challenging sometimes when we're trying to do good and create community and culture inside this prison. I think that also we need to start more programs only with students, we don't need to have staff all the time around us or being policed by staff. If we had student leaders that have the proper training to create a curriculum, to hold a tutoring session, to facilitate a learning lab, to facilitate things, I think it would take a lot of the stress off and it would build confidence within incarcerated students. It would be able to be a standard as well. Other students who are fresh coming into the prison, be like, "Oh, she's doing that? How can I do that? I wanna do that." So I think that's my answer.



- [Maurice] Thank you, Sultan. Danny, I have a question for you, Danny. How are programs like Project Rebound dealing with people convicted of sex offenses and restrictive parameters that affect them?

- [Danny] From my experience, from my understanding is that those are not something that we ask students about. In terms of the admissions into a Project Rebound program or a Underground Scholars program, and those are not questions that come up in the application. But however, there are instances where people outside of these programs would take it upon themselves to investigate who are the students. And so for us, it's a very intricate situation because it's also people's privacy. And so, if to be honest with you, I don't know what the policy is in terms of either Project Rebound or official policy because we don't ask those questions, we don't ask people's convictions. And it's not just a question about privacy in terms of the institution, but it's also within how we deal with it within our own community because it already carries a negative stigma. And particularly in California, when it comes to addressing people with that stigma in prison, they experience a lot of violence. So basically, one thing that as me as an abolitionist, I don't wanna continue that violence with people who has those convictions. If anything, I wanna create ways to be able to help them address the issue, one, the harm that they've committed and possibly the harm that has been committed against them.

- Thank you, Dan. Brandon, I have a question for you. Brandon, are there specific DOC policies that had to change to support students as tutors or permit formerly incarcerated people to come back into the prison and tutor or teach?

- [Brandon] Yes, but as far as whether those policies were actually changed in writing, on the books, I don't know. But it was more of a pervasive attitude that needed to change in order for people to come back in and have leadership or teaching-related roles, either on the inside or the outside. So usually, the idea is that nobody incarcerated could have any authority over another, and that would be used as a reason to wipe out anything that remotely resembled authority, so teaching, tutoring, any form of education, but that's changed quite dramatically, especially in the last 10 years. So I was hired, I had already been off parole when they hired me. I'm not aware of anyone else who was formerly incarcerated and also hired as a TDCJ contract employee working for a college program. But when they hired my new colleague, Tracy, Tracy's still on parole for 20 something years and they hired him here recently, and again, that was another, in my mind, breakthrough opportunity for others who are formerly incarcerated here in Texas. And then since we hired him, a division of TDCJ has offered several former students who have been released within the last year jobs as chaplains because of their particular educational background. So things are changing. It's been a long process. I don't know particular policies which have changed other than the fact that there's a group of formerly incarcerated students called field ministers who instead of having to wait 18 months to two years in order to come back into the prison system, can now come back in within 90 days, that was a literal change in policy. And I imagine the fact that they're willing to hire people who are formerly incarcerated means that some sort of formal policies have changed in order to support that.

- [Maurice] Thank you. I guess a good follow-up question to what you just provided us with is, do you have any guidance on how to have that conversation about safety when talking to correctional departments?

- [Brandon] I think that most of the public generally wants statistical data to lead the conversation. We can tell anecdotal stories about people like myself and Danny and Terrell and everyone else about how education changes individuals, they wanna share it, it makes the prison safer. At Lee College, we have one former warden who is on our full-time faculty. We've had three in the past, and they will tell you that from the perspective of being a warden, they knew that on units with college educational programs, it changed the tone of the environment of the prison. But those are anecdotal stories, what we need is more statistical evidence that shows that sort of thing. And there have been some studies which try to measure things like disciplinary conduct. One of the Bachelor's Degree program I work for here in Texas, a study done by researchers out of Baylor University showed that it had an 85% reduction in disciplinary conduct while they were participating in the school. So those kind of statistics are, I think, what people who don't know us personally want to hear.

- [Maurice] Thank you. John, what are some of the questions you get from people curious about college in prison? And what are some of the myths that you would like to debunk about what college really is in prison?

- [John] Some of the questions I get are that they don't believe how do we have the resources to do the program? And answering that is that we don't necessarily have all the resources that we need to do it, but we made do with what we have and just kind of find a way to get it done. I think one of the myths that surrounds us is that it can't be done and it can't be done at a high level either. Some of the smartest people I've met are in prison. I have a friend that recently just got his doctorate while he was incarcerated, or he is working on his doctorate. So I think the biggest myth is that it can't be done to people that aren't aware.

- [Maurice] Thank you. And Tiana, do you have anything that you wanna add to this?

- [Tiana] Can you repeat the question for me, Maurice, please.

- So the question is, what are some of the questions you get from people curious about college programs? Are there common myths about college that you would like to debunk or dispel?

- For one, that we don't deserve education. I hear that a lot from staff, not educational staff, but actually DOC corrections officers that how are we getting a education? They're shocked when we tell them we're in a Bachelor's program. So the myths is that incarcerated people are uneducated, incapable, or stupid, or dumb. It's like people are people, they make mistakes, and so, everybody's capable of getting a education.

- [Maurice] Thank you. Thank you. Terrell, I wanna bring you back into the conversation. Earlier, you spoke about the impact of education. Could you speak a little more about the profound impact of education and how does it affect one's self-esteem, self-awareness and agency?

- [Terrell] Absolutely. I think we all on this call have a pretty good idea about the positive impact that higher education has on incarcerated individuals, and I would probably even say people overall. But I think I'd much rather like to maybe talk about a couple other themes that come to mind in regard to the myths and beliefs that are associated with this work. So for one, I think it's really important for people to understand that it's not necessarily the education program that is transforming an individual. When we talk about this work being transformative, yes, we are changing lives, but we gotta make sure that we're not thinking that we're actually changing people. Changing lives, I consider it to be increasing the likelihood that I persist through my higher education or increasing the likelihood that I'm more employable by holding a Bachelor's Degree, which I don't even believe 50% of Americans have, if I'm not mistaken. So transforming or changing my life in that sense, yes. But I think a lot of the times people think of this work as changing people, and I emphasize this because what it really is is that we were the young adults and for some of us, preteens, that were incarcerated, we always had this potential. We always had this ability to become scholars, so what we're really doing is tapping into that potential. As higher education providers, we're now really intentionally tapping into that potential that was locked away because we were ignored in some way, shape or form, whether it was in our household, if it was in the foster care system, if it was in the school system. There was some part of society that failed us and did not tap into this potential, and then we found our ways into the justice system. But make no mistake about it that it isn't necessarily the curriculum or education that's now transforming this person into who we are today, it's the fact that now we're actually being offered the opportunity to pursue a education and have a quality education and then that changes our lives. So I just wanted to raise that because it's something that I hear quite often. And as it speaks to your question, Maurice, as the benefit of post-secondary education, it absolutely is a benefit, but again, changing my lifestyle or my trajectory and success in life is very different than changing the person themselves. And I think it also plays into this narrative that people quite often use the term monsters or bad people. It plays into that narrative that we were once bad people or something other than human beings. And now, because we've enrolled into a college program, we somehow, voila, changed over time. So we really gotta kinda counter that narrative, and I would challenge all currently and formerly incarcerated people to do that same thing and let folks know that if you do agree with that, what I just shared, you always had it inside of you. You've always had it inside of you, it's just that nobody around you, the people that were responsible for tapping into that potential, 'cause it's not on the high schooler to do that. We don't do that self-reflection and stuff, that's something you do as an adult. You don't figure out ways to pursue opportunities, not as a kid, that's up to adults that surround you, that's up to your community, that's up to your school system. That's up to your provider to tap into that potential that we have. That's up to your mom and dad, or whoever is caring for you to tap into the children and help them blossom and find their way. So again, I just wanted to share that piece about how we view this work because we so often put ourselves on the pedestal

for the great program that we have when really we're investing in people's futures and their livelihoods and their children's livelihoods. So we don't want people to come home and just be surviving, we want people to thrive. And I think the things that people are sharing today in regard to leadership opportunities and community building, information and resource sharing and all of these beautiful fruits that come from this labor of higher education in prison, it needs to continue in the way that humanizes individuals who are justice-impacted, it needs to be intentional around making sure that not just the education piece is in place, but really wrap-around and holistic services and support because we all know that you could be in school and have the potential to get great grades all you want, but if you don't have a roof over your head, you living out of a car, or if you got financial issues, bad credit, can't get a loan, whatever the case, those things will impact not only your persistence through higher education, but also have ramifications in regard to your mental health and wellness. So we have to be intentional about not just focusing solely on one thing and not necessarily calling it on colleges to begin doing reentry work as a college, that's not what universities were built for, but there are ways, and a lot of programs and departments that support those other pieces, such as the food pantries, such as the CareerOneStop, such as the student support services and the other trio services.

- [Maurice] Terrell.

- Yes, sir.

- No, I hate to interrupt you, we have two minutes on the time. Yeah, yeah, we have a two minutes left. I apologize because I appreciate everything that you contribute. I'd like to thank my panelists for opening up and sharing. I wish I had more time to address some of the questions because there was a lot of good questions in the chat that I wanted to get to. But some key takeaways from today's session, for correctional departments, please don't be afraid to offer student leadership opportunities because student leadership reinforces pro-social behavior. Having student leadership councils is a great way to receive feedback and ensure your programs are meeting your students' needs. For our college institutions, recreate student leadership opportunities in your PEP programs that resemble the student leadership opportunities available on your main campuses. Establish reentry navigators on college campuses to ensure that students' reentry needs are being met. Connect with organizations like FIGN to see how you can best support your students post-release. And most importantly, hire formerly incarcerated students into your program and provide them with the training and resources they need to excel in their field of choice. The contact information for our panelists can be found here and will be available to you on the NRRC website. Once again, I would like to thank you for attending today's event. I encourage you to visit the NRRC's website to see upcoming Second Chance Month webinars that are scheduled. We have one that is taking place next week on the 20th. Slides from this webinar and the contact information will be made available on the website. Thank you.