

# The Evolving Promise of Postsecondary Education for Incarcerated Learners in California

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## ***California's developmental education reforms aim to remove barriers to higher education—but are they working for students behind bars?***

California is home to one of the nation's largest prison in higher education systems.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests that incarcerated learners are more likely than their non-incarcerated peers to be first-generation college students, to have experienced interrupted schooling, and to enter college with unmet academic support needs<sup>2</sup>, leading some researchers to advocate for the provision of basic skills and developmental education for this population to support their readiness for college-level credit-bearing coursework.

At the same time, significant changes are unfolding for many incarcerated learners due to major statewide developmental education reforms in California. These reforms were intended to improve equitable outcomes by eliminating developmental coursework and placing community college students directly into transfer-level<sup>1</sup> coursework. Although prior research has documented important gains in transfer-level enrollment and completion statewide, gains have not been equitably distributed<sup>3</sup>, and little is known about how these reforms are shaping the specific experiences and outcomes of incarcerated learners.

As California eliminates developmental education in its 116 community colleges with the passage of Assembly Bills 705 and 1705, a critical question remains unanswered: ***What happens to the 12,000+ incarcerated students whose educational pathways are being fundamentally reshaped by these reforms?***

## Postsecondary Education in Prison

Postsecondary education in prison is commonly defined in several ways but typically includes any educational programming beyond GED or high school diploma preparation.<sup>4</sup> In our research, we use postsecondary education and follow Castro & Gould's (2018) suggestion by using the term higher education in prison which provides language that rejects pathology and dehumanization. Higher education in prison better describes the specific learning and teaching experiences in prison outside of what is typically called correctional education. These experiences include students' access to courses beyond GED and high school, programs provided by accredited postsecondary

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to AB 705, there were three levels of coursework in California's community colleges: remedial or DE, college-level (those which contributed toward a local associate's degree), and transfer-level (those transferable to either the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) system, or both). Post-AB 705, there are just two levels: transfer-level and below-transfer-level.

institutions, courses for credit and non-credit, instruction provided institutions with two-year and four-years status, and degree pathways<sup>5</sup>.

A 2020 survey of higher education in prison programs showed that most involved a partnership with a single institution that provided in-person instruction at an average of 3.2 prisons per institution, and most programs require students to have a secondary credential, such as a high school diploma or GED.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, most programs are offered through public two-year institutions, and the most common credential pathway was the associate’s degree.<sup>7</sup>

### Why in-prison higher education matters

Across studies, researchers have demonstrated that participation in higher education during incarceration is associated with meaningful benefits, including lower recidivism rates, improved employment outcomes, and increased personal development.<sup>8</sup> These findings have positioned higher education in prison as not only a rehabilitative mechanism but also a critical component of broader economic and public safety strategies.<sup>9</sup> Research further highlights the transformative intellectual and psychosocial outcomes of educational participation, with students frequently describing increased confidence, critical thinking, leadership, and a renewed sense of identity and purpose.<sup>10</sup>

### Developmental education support needs in higher education in prison

At the same time, research points to persistent structural and contextual barriers that limit both access to and effectiveness of higher education in prison programs. Challenges such as technological constraints<sup>11</sup> and institutional mission misalignment<sup>12</sup> continue to impede students’ participation and success within correctional environments. Additionally, researchers have found that institutions and staff members are often not fully prepared to support incarcerated learners<sup>13</sup>, who, on average, have lower literacy and numeracy skills than their non-incarcerated peers<sup>14</sup>.

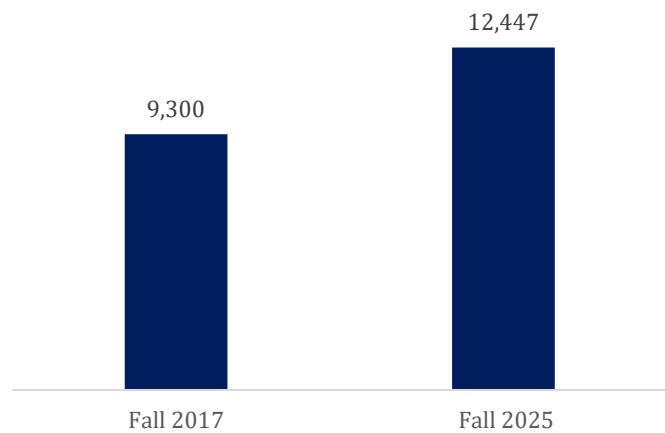
## California’s Incarcerated Learners

As of 2025, over 12,000 incarcerated individuals were enrolled in either face-to-face or correspondence education in higher education in prison programs across California’s state prison system, up from roughly 9,300 enrolled incarcerated learners in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

In 2025, 24 community colleges provide educational services to currently incarcerated students in prison.<sup>16</sup>

Partnerships between California’s 30 state correctional facilities and community colleges are extensive; almost all (29) facilities have face-to-face community college programs, and all have community college programs available through correspondence.<sup>17</sup>

Number of Incarcerated Students Enrolled in California Community Colleges



Source: California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office Management Information Systems Data Mart

## California's Developmental Education Reforms

All incarcerated learners enrolled in community college programs in California's prison system in are subject to reforms associated with major developmental education reforms under AB 705 and 1705.

### What are AB 705 and AB 1705?

California's Assembly Bills (AB) 705 and 1705 move community colleges away from offering developmental education to enrolling all students in transfer-level coursework in English and math. AB 705 (2017) required all colleges to use multiple measures assessment (e.g., high school GPA, coursework) to place all entering students in transfer-level English and math courses. AB 1705 (2022) went even further, requiring colleges to eliminate all developmental education offerings in math and English and provide more direct access to Calculus.

Reforms were based on a growing literature that has challenged the effectiveness of developmental education for the general population, suggesting that students deemed academically underprepared are more likely to succeed when they enroll directly in college-level coursework with appropriate support (e.g., corequisite remediation, embedded tutors).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this research indicates that the harmful effects of developmental education are racialized; because of the widespread use of placement tests, racially minoritized students are more likely to be placed into developmental education.<sup>19</sup>

Consistent with reform logics, RFA's previous research on AB 705 and 1705 has demonstrated that enrollment and completion of transfer-level math and English have increased dramatically since the reform. However, inconsistent with the racial equity goals of the reforms, equity gaps in completion have persisted between Black and Latine students and their white peers.<sup>20</sup>

### Addressing a Critical Gap

California's developmental education reforms increased the importance of access to academic supports for learners entering college with unmet academic needs.<sup>21</sup> Because incarcerated learners are more likely to have experienced educational disruption, they may be entering college needing additional support.<sup>22</sup> An important question is how California's developmental education reforms are shaping their access to—and success in—college-level coursework. What happens when policies designed to reduce remedial course-taking are implemented for a population that commonly faces significant barriers to college readiness?

To address the question of how developmental education reforms in California are impacting incarcerated learners, Research for Action (RFA), through funding from Ascendium Education Group, is taking a deep dive into reform implementation to see how reforms are experienced by incarcerated students, faculty, and administrators in community colleges.

As researchers committed to a just education system where all learners can thrive, RFA is exploring how higher education opportunities provided to incarcerated students are aligned with viable pathways and help them acquire credits that support their post-release academic trajectories, drawing on insights from incarcerated learners themselves, and the faculty, administrators and staff who support them.

## What We're Discovering

The first phase of our research study involved creating a novel dataset comprised of California Chancellor's Office Management Information System (COMIS) data and community college level course offerings to provide estimates of enrollment and course offerings for incarcerated students. RFA contacted the 24 community colleges that provided educational services to currently incarcerated students in 2025 to request course schedules from 2017 to present. We received data from 22 of these colleges and compared course offerings available to incarcerated students with those available to the general population. Here is what we found:

- All 22 institutions offer courses to incarcerated students, but the variation is striking. Some offer fewer than 100 course sections while others offer more than 500.
- While many colleges offer both math and English courses (the focus of AB 705 and 1705) in prisons, some only offer one or the other. Of colleges that offer fewer than 100 per year, more of these sections are transfer-level math and all are in person; for colleges that offer more than 500 per year, sections are more likely to be offered via correspondence and are less likely to be transfer-level math.
- Enrollment and completion<sup>2</sup> patterns vary as well; some institutions demonstrate steadily rising enrollment in prison sections while enrollment in non-prison sections remains more constant. Some colleges' prison sections have higher completion rates than their non-prison sections; others are more mixed.
- While the provision of concurrent support (e.g., corequisites) was a common institutional response for on-campus course sections, only five institutions offer corequisites for prison sections.

## Our Next Steps

The next phase of our research involves site visits to seven community colleges providing education to currently incarcerated students across the state of California. We will be conducting interviews with faculty, administrators, and counselors working directly with incarcerated students, as well as prison staff charged with supporting incarcerated students' academic goals.

We will also be conducting focus groups with formerly incarcerated students to understand their experiences of these reforms when they were incarcerated, and how these reforms have impacted their transition to college post-release. Our goal is to infuse community-engaged research approaches into the study through inviting formerly incarcerated students to support sensemaking of research findings.

Optimizing the strength of our mixed methods approach, we will also be using the novel dataset to estimate changes in rates of enrollment and completion in transfer-level courses among incarcerated students associated with AB 705. Our dataset will span 2014-2023, which represents four years before and after AB 705.

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<sup>2</sup> The percentage of students who passed a transfer-level course out of all students enrolled in the course.

## Shaping Future Possibilities

- Through giving voice to incarcerated learners in higher education in prison and those who support them **this research will contribute to shifting the knowledge and attitudes of key decisionmakers and implementers, including college administrators, faculty, and policymakers**, by providing a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges faced by students involved with the justice system, particularly those from racially minoritized backgrounds.
- An additional critical outcome of this mixed methods study is **the development and enhancement of a dataset that captures the educational experiences and outcomes of students pursuing postsecondary education while incarcerated**. By creating a comprehensive dataset that includes students' enrollment, retention, and completion rates, as well as details about course content, delivery modalities, and academic supports, this study will provide a proof-point of the benefits of a more integrated and accurate data infrastructure.
- Lastly, this study will generate **evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and institutions**. These recommendations will inform necessary adjustments to ensure that the intended benefits of these reforms, such as increased access to transfer-level coursework and improved completion rates, are fully realized by incarcerated students.

As states nationwide reconsider developmental education and expand access to prison higher education programs, understanding how these two movements intersect is essential. Our research will provide the first comprehensive evidence of whether equity-focused reforms reach some of our most marginalized students—and what it takes to ensure they do.

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<sup>2</sup> Lollar, J., Mueller, C.J. & Anthony, W. (2023) Students in Correctional Education: Developmental Education's Forgotten Population, *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 53:3, 170-191, DOI: 10.1080/10790195.2023.2204315

<sup>3</sup> Burkander et al. (2024). *Interim Report 2 on the Implementation, Impact, and Cost Effectiveness of Developmental Education Reform in California's Community Colleges*. Research for Action; Burkander et al. (2025). *Interim Report 3 on the Implementation, Impact, and Cost Effectiveness of Developmental Education Reform in California's Community Colleges*. Research for Action.

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<sup>15</sup> Montenegro, D. A. (2021). Reaching at-risk student populations during a pandemic: The impacts of Covid-19 on prison education. *Frontiers in Communication*, 6, 604963.

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