



Commentaries in Urban Education

Building the Prison to University Pipeline in California

Abstract

This article examines the transformative potential of education in the abolition of the prison industrial complex through the lens of the Underground Scholars program at the University of California, Berkeley. Established by formerly incarcerated UC Berkeley students and allies, the program has grown into a comprehensive initiative operating across all nine undergraduate-serving public universities in California. It addresses the specific needs of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals through its five foundational pillars: Recruitment, Retention, Advocacy, Wellness, and Career Services. The article highlights significant legislative and policy shifts in California that have expanded educational opportunities for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Despite these advancements, tensions persist, particularly within the UC system, where institutional resistance impedes the program's expansion. These challenges underscore the inherent contradictions of providing education within a system designed for control and punishment. The discussion extends to

broader abolitionist perspectives, advocating policies that prioritize education and community-based support over incarceration. By leveraging education as a tool for liberation, Underground Scholars aims to create a future where justice and equity are achieved through supportive and interdependent communities rather than punitive measures. The article concludes by envisioning a future beyond the carceral state, where graduates of the Underground Scholars program become transformative leaders in government, law, social work, policy, and education, driving systemic change informed by their lived experiences of incarceration, systemic injustice, and higher education.

Keywords

formerly incarcerated students, access, advocacy, policy, public university

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Figure 1. "Study" by Pete Railand.

Between the summer of 2011 and fall of 2013, incarcerated people in the Security Housing Unit (SHU), a permanent lockdown unit within Pelican Bay State Prison in California, organized a series of hunger strikes ending with the longest and largest hunger strike in the history of the state against the use of solitary confinement. Amid this period of powerful state-wide, cross-wall, prisoner-led organizing, Danny Murrillo and Steven Czifra—two University of California (UC) Berkeley transfer students who had been previously locked up in the SHU—began organizing to create a space on campus to discuss the challenges formerly incarcerated students face within the UC system. With the support of other

formerly incarcerated and systems-impacted students, allies, and UC Berkeley faculty, what began as a reading group about the prison industrial complex (PIC) eventually grew to become the Underground Scholars program.

I connected with Danny and Steven during this time as a recent law school graduate, working on a Soros Justice Fellowship project focused on eliminating long-term solitary confinement in California. I engaged them in our media work and legislative advocacy and supported them in attaining Soros Justice Fellowships to support the work they were doing to build Underground Scholars. As a member of the litigation, mediation, media, and organizing committees in the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition, I was actively involved in significant coalition activities leading to the successful settlement of our class action lawsuit and hundreds of incarcerated people being released from the SHU and many from prison. This experience taught me two critical lessons: When we are organized and unified, we are capable of transforming systems even with significant state repression and systemic barriers; and it is essential to center the leadership and decision-making of those with the most proximity to the issue.

These lessons have profoundly influenced my work as the executive director of Berkeley Underground Scholars and creator and instructor of the Underground Scholars Policy Fellowship. I have seen firsthand how collective action and strategic solidarity can dismantle and transform carceral policies, practices, and structures. At Underground Scholars, we foster a sense of unity and community among formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students, believing that through mutual support and collective advocacy, we can overcome systemic barriers on an individual level and transform them on a systems level. Our policy advocacy work is rooted in the understanding that those directly affected by these systems must lead the charge in transforming them.

Centering the leadership and decision-making of those with lived experience is a core principle of our program. One of my first decisions in 2018 when I was newly hired in my role as the only full-time staff serving formerly incarcerated students in the entire UC system, was that I wasn't going to make decisions alone. At UC Berkeley, students like Daniela Medina, Michael Cerda Jara, Aaron Harvey, and David Maldonado were my early thought partners and collaborators. Daniela and Michael both went on to become associate directors with our program after completing their master's degrees. As we built our statewide infrastructure with other UC campuses, I continued to emphasize collective decision-making and supported the students in developing those processes. As our team has grown to

five full-time staff at UC Berkeley and nearly a dozen more throughout the UC system, we continue to prioritize the voices and insights of our students, ensuring they are at the forefront of our initiatives and strategies. This approach not only empowers our students but also ensures that our efforts are grounded in the realities and needs of those we serve. Through collaborative efforts, we continue to push the boundaries of what is possible, advocating policies that support the educational and personal success of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, and shaping systems to remove barriers and create more opportunity.

Underground Scholars at UC Berkeley is driven by a belief in the transformative power of education—not just as a means of personal development but as a crucial lever for social justice and the abolition of the PIC. The foundation of our work rests on a visceral and scholarly understanding of the systemic barriers incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals face, particularly in accessing higher education, and the value they add to these spaces. Our mission at Berkeley Underground Scholars is not just to challenge the barriers but to dismantle them, leveraging the power of education as a tool for individual and collective liberation.

Underground Scholars Model

As the foundational Underground Scholars program, which we have now expanded to each of the nine undergraduate-serving UC campuses, Berkeley Underground Scholars operates on five foundational pillars: Recruitment, Retention, Advocacy, Wellness, and Career Services. This holistic approach is designed to address the specific needs of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, providing a pathway to access the UC system, ensuring their academic and personal success, aiding their transition into the workforce, and advocating systemic changes to dismantle the barriers erected by the carceral state.¹ Each year we work with hundreds of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students in prisons, jails, juvenile halls, community colleges, and the UC system.

This model is not just about aiding individual transitions; it's about challenging and changing the systems that perpetuate injustice and inequality. Our Policy Fellowship exists within our Advocacy pillar. This paid fellowship is an

opportunity for 10 to 15 students per year to learn how our systems and policies come to be and how they can leverage their lived and academic experiences into legislative policy change. The fellowship is cultivating a new generation of advocates by teaching formerly incarcerated UC Berkeley students to develop policy ideas, work on state legislative campaigns, and leverage their personal experiences. These advocates are not only equipped with theoretical knowledge but are also deeply rooted in the lived experiences that provide the necessary insight and passion to drive meaningful change.

Rooted in the principles and practices of abolition, our work is necessarily about dismantling the carceral regime while creating the kinds of institutions and programs that we would like to see in its place. Our model recognizes the importance of creating spaces, opportunities, and resources for healing, restoration, and connection alongside academic and policy work. This approach is a direct challenge to the extractive and traumatic circumstances that are commonly experienced by our students in both the carceral and university settings. By embodying a world where education and a supportive community are leveraged as a means to counteract the limitations imposed by the carceral system, we create possibilities for transformation on an individual and collective level. This approach aligns with the broader goals of abolition, envisioning a future where communities are built on support and interdependence rather than surveillance and punishment.

This paper, drawing from my experiences and the collective efforts of the Underground Scholars, aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the critical role of education in the movement towards PIC abolition. By examining the contradictions and tensions inherent in providing education within prison and prison-like settings and exploring how carceral logic has infiltrated educational institutions, I hope to expand the conversation and highlight how Underground Scholars are navigating these tensions and intersections.

The California Context

California's Investments in Higher Education for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Scholars

California has demonstrated a significant commitment to higher education initiatives that support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students through financial investments and policy initiatives. The state allocates at least \$40 million annually to programs serving this demographic across public higher education institutions. These investments, fought for and won with the advocacy of directly impacted students and allies, are a testament to the growing recognition of the transformative power of education, particularly for individuals affected by the carceral system. California has three public higher education systems: the California Community Colleges, the California State University (CSU) System, and the University of California system. The Community College Chancellor's Office has adopted the Rising Scholars Network—a project started by the Corrections to College California Initiative to support students impacted by the criminal legal system, and now housed in the Foundation for California Community Colleges—to support this student population, reflecting a systemic push toward inclusivity and support for carceral-impacted individuals. Similarly, the CSU system has shown a commitment to this cause, with its Chancellor's Office initiating and supporting state funding requests for the expansion of Project Rebound, a similar support and advocacy program for formerly incarcerated students at 15 campuses across the state to bridge the gap between incarceration and higher education. In the UC system, Underground Scholars has not yet received this same level of support from the UC Office of the President.

In California's state prisons, the landscape of educational opportunities is evolving, with a growing emphasis on providing comprehensive higher education programs, including the availability of bachelor of arts (BA) degrees. These advanced educational pathways are crucial for incarcerated individuals seeking to rebuild their lives and prepare for successful and safe homecomings after incarceration. The expansion of BA offerings within these facilities reflects a concerted effort to go beyond vocational training and GED preparation to equip incarcerated students with higher-level academic credentials and critical thinking skills.

Policy Shifts Supporting Higher Education Access

The legislative environment supporting these educational advancements has been shaped by policies such as Senate Bill 1391 (2019), Proposition 57 (2016),

and Senate Bill 416 (2021), which have significantly influenced and incentivized higher education access, delivery, and quality for incarcerated individuals. SB 1391, authored by Senator Hancock in 2013, has been instrumental in broadening the scope of education available to incarcerated individuals. By enabling community colleges to collect funds for programs delivered within prisons, SB 1391 addresses a longstanding barrier to expanding educational offerings. Currently, face-to-face and correspondence community college programs are offered in every state prison, and BA programs are offered in eight state prisons.

Proposition 57, approved by California voters in 2016, influenced the landscape of higher education within the state's prisons by expanding milestone credits. These credits are awarded to incarcerated individuals for their participation in rehabilitative programs, including higher education courses, and can be used to accelerate their parole eligibility. The passage of Proposition 57 effectively heightened the value placed on educational pursuits within correctional facilities, recognizing that such engagement is pivotal to supporting incarcerated people in reclaiming their right to education and reducing the likelihood of reincarceration. This legislative change spurred increased demand for and participation in academic and vocational training programs as incarcerated individuals became more motivated to engage in education to advance their reintegration into society. Consequently, Proposition 57 has not only underscored the importance of education as a cornerstone of reentry but also that over 64 percent of voters were interested in the availability and enrollment in higher education programs within California's prison system and a process for accelerating release through parole, reflecting a shift toward a more education-focused, rehabilitative approach to public safety.

In 2021, Underground Scholars worked with Project Rebound Consortium, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, and the Michelson Center for Public Policy on SB 416, which mandates that college programs offered in state prisons must be provided through partnerships with accredited institutions, specifically prioritizing the California Community Colleges, the CSU system, and the UC system, alongside other regionally accredited, nonprofit colleges and universities. Moreover, SB 416 emphasizes the need for comprehensive support services and face-to-face instruction, recognizing the unique challenges faced by incarcerated students and the importance of direct engagement in facilitating effective learning outcomes. By establishing these criteria, SB 416 creates a pathway to ensure that such programs are designed to meet the academic needs of the

prison population and that the California Department of Corrections will not enter into contracts with predatory educational providers now that Pell Grants have been reinstated to incarcerated students. Underground Scholar policy fellow Kevin McCarthy helped shape the bill's language with his personal experience completing his associate of arts degree in prison and being the first Underground Scholar to be offered admission to UC Berkeley while incarcerated in state prison. Policy fellows worked with the coalition to develop talking points, met with legislators and the governor's office to discuss the bill, and attended hearings to comment in support of the bill. The bill passed through the entire legislative process on consent which means there wasn't a single vote in opposition so it passed through each committee without being heard and was signed by the governor.

In 2022, we cosponsored a bill that was developed directly on the experiences of our students. Many of our students are still on parole as they are navigating higher education spaces and applying to universities. Every year, over 90 percent of the students we support are offered admission into the UC system, sometimes while they are still incarcerated or on parole. People on parole are subject to travel restrictions that require them to ask for permission to travel further than 50 miles from their approved residence or to transfer their parole supervision to another county. These requests for travel and parole transfer are often ignored or arbitrarily denied, sometimes resulting in the loss of an education or employment opportunity. Each year, I had to advocate for students individually to get their parole transfer requests approved so they could attend UC Berkeley. Still, the process often created uncertainty, fear, and hopelessness for students on parole who should have been celebrating their admission to the university. We worked with one of our organizational partners, Root and Rebound, to draft and cosponsor a bill to remove this barrier. Our policy fellows lobbied for the bill, told their stories, and attended every hearing. One of the policy fellows and I provided expert witness testimony in the legislative hearings and highlighted the success stories of our scholars who were able to access higher education while on parole. We were successful. We changed the law for the whole state, and parole travel and transfer requests for education, employment, housing, or treatment opportunities in another county must now be approved within 14 days unless there is evidence that parole transfer would threaten public safety. To create accountability in the implementation process if the request is denied, the reason must be provided to the person on parole in writing so our team can compile data and follow up with additional legislation or litigation if needed.

Against this backdrop, we see the potential and power of legislative advocacy to create systemic changes to statewide institutions and processes and to pilot and sustain transformative programs. Yet, as a policy advocate, higher education practitioner, and prison abolitionist, I am consistently engaging with the tensions and contradictions of liberatory education and policy efforts in the context of the carceral state.

Tensions and Contradictions

Despite these positive strides, significant tensions and contradictions persist, reflecting deeper systemic issues within the carceral and educational systems, particularly within the UC system. For instance, the UC Office of the President (UCOP) has been obstructive toward implementing Underground Scholars programs throughout the UC system. In 2020, UC Berkeley and UC Los Angeles Underground Scholars staff asked UCOP to support us with a state budget request to expand the program to every UC campus. They declined. In 2021, we began our expansion with nearly \$2 million in foundation funding, which our team had secured independently. In 2022, we successfully backed an ongoing allocation of \$4 million from the state budget with the support of the UC Student Association, which advocated raising the priority of this funding request with the UC Regents and the Underground Scholars policy fellows who led the campaign. For the past two years, as we've been working to operationalize the new funding and build new programs across the UC system, UCOP continues to refuse support and creates barriers to our success in several ways, including impeding statewide coordination, setting inequitable funding allocations, and lacking oversight and accountability for the implementation of funded programs. This struggle mirrors broader institutional challenges faced by liberatory educational initiatives, where bureaucracy and resistance to equity-oriented changes often impede the delivery of quality education and related services. The contrasting approaches of the Community College Chancellor's Office and the CSU Chancellor versus the UCOP highlight the crucial role of institutional commitment in shaping the landscape of prison higher education in California.

For incarcerated students, despite the establishment of college programs within state prisons, there exists a stark disparity in the student support infrastructure compared to what is available on traditional college campuses. Incarcerated students face considerable challenges in accessing consistent and meaningful

support services, including tutoring, academic advising, libraries, and accommodations for disabilities. Prospective students are often directed to apply solely to the CSU system which offers more flexible admissions timelines, is less selective, and more strongly emphasizes technical and vocational programs. Students are often advised that the more prestigious and selective UC schools are an unattainable goal, despite the consistently high acceptance rates of Underground Scholars applicants. These gaps undermine the efficacy of prison education programs and highlight a fundamental contradiction: While the value of education is recognized as pivotal to supporting incarcerated individuals and reducing the likelihood of reincarceration, the comprehensive support necessary for academic success and access is often lacking.

Another point of tension arises from the shifting demographics within California's prison system. The state has seen a significant decrease in its prison population, from 160,000 in 2011 to less than 96,000 by 2023 (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2023; Lofstrom & Raphael, 2015). This is mainly due to policy reforms that transfer thousands of individuals to serve time in county jails instead of state prisons. As California considers closing several prisons in response to these changes, a paradoxical situation has emerged for some community colleges in California's rural prison town communities that have come to rely on incarcerated students for up to 50 percent of their enrollment. These institutions argue that prison closures could impact incarcerated community college students, disrupting their education and hindering their rehabilitation process.

From a prison abolitionist perspective, these tensions underscore the inherent contradictions of attempting to provide higher education within a system fundamentally designed for control and punishment. While educational programs in prisons are a step toward addressing the harms of incarceration, they operate within an extensive carceral system that limits their potential. The reliance of community colleges on incarcerated populations for enrollment highlights the complex interdependencies that have developed between educational institutions as a part of the carceral state. Education is defunded and access to needed funding comes primarily through relationships with carceral infrastructure which has been increasingly funded, raising critical questions about the sustainability and ethics of such arrangements.

Abolitionist approaches require a reimagining of these systems, advocating the dismantling of structures that perpetuate incarceration and the creation of

alternative forms of education and community support that do not rely on carceral spaces. It calls for a reevaluation of the role of education in achieving justice and equity, emphasizing the need for educational opportunities that are genuinely accessible and supportive for all individuals, regardless of their incarceration status. Moreover, it prompts a critical examination of how educational policies and practices can either reinforce or challenge the broader mechanisms of the carceral state.

In navigating these contradictions, the need for systemic change becomes evident—not merely to expand educational access within prisons but to fundamentally transform the conditions that lead to incarceration in the first place. This involves encouraging policies that prioritize community-based support, accountability, and opportunity over punishment. Organizations like Underground Scholars are crucial in this regard, challenging existing paradigms and working toward a future where education and support are detached from carceral control, embodying the principles of justice, equity, and collective well-being.

Abolitionist Dreams: Envisioning a Future Beyond the Carceral State

As we work to dismantle the vast and complex machinery of the carceral state, legislative and policy interventions serve as one of many powerful tools for change. For Underground Scholars, Senate Bill 990 (2021) emerges as our entry into abolitionist-friendly policymaking, exemplifying how legislative efforts can directly confront and curtail the carceral state's power and reach. By facilitating the parole transfer process for individuals seeking to advance their education, employment, or access essential treatment and housing and removing the element of officer discretion in those requests, SB 990 represents a meaningful stride toward reducing the carceral system's grip on people's lives, highlighting the potential of policy to pave pathways to freedom and opportunity.

Building on the momentum of SB 990, I would like to continue exploring and advocating innovative, abolitionist policy efforts aimed at dismantling systemic barriers to education and liberation for those entangled in the criminal justice system. One key policy area I'd like to work on is developing and expanding diversion programs that offer people accused of crimes and survivors of

criminalized harm the opportunity to resolve the harm through restorative or transformative justice and provide an option to pursue higher education instead of incarceration. Such programs would reduce the prison population and strengthen communities by supporting educational attainment and a pathway to economic stability. California does have limited diversion programs for specific populations, but they are primarily used for misdemeanors. In New York, Common Justice has successfully used its alternative to the punishment model for harms that would otherwise result in felony charges and focuses on supporting those who experienced harm, restorative justice circles, accountability without incarceration, and healing communities.

Another policy idea is to enable individuals with five years or fewer remaining on their sentence to be released if they are accepted into a four-year university program. Education has been shown to have better results in reducing reincarceration than parole. This approach recognizes the potential of education as a transformative tool, allowing individuals to engage in meaningful learning and skill development that can lead to stable, fulfilling careers. By prioritizing education and reintegration over continued confinement, this policy could significantly reduce reincarceration, reduce the size of the California prison population, facilitate a smoother and more supported reentry process, and provide incarcerated individuals with a tangible, hopeful pathway to rebuilding their lives.

These policy initiatives reflect an abolitionist vision that seeks to advance decarceration and address the underlying social and economic disparities that contribute to mass incarceration. By leveraging education as a means of liberation, these policies aim to shift the focus from punitive measures to supportive, community-based solutions that foster healing, growth, and opportunity.

The Path Forward

In championing these abolitionist policy efforts, the Underground Scholars recognize the profound challenges and resistance that lie ahead, yet the commitment to this work is driven by a deep-seated belief in the possibility of a world beyond the carceral state—a world where education serves as a bridge to freedom, equity, and justice for all. To be clear, I don't see education as a solution

to incarceration. I see education as a transformative and liberatory tool that can be leveraged in our fight for a different world. By equipping individuals with lived experiences of incarceration, racial discrimination, and exclusion with the tools of education, advocacy, and leadership, Underground Scholars is poised to fundamentally alter the landscape of societal leadership and policy-making in the generations to come.

The Underground Scholars Initiative is more than an educational program; it is a transformative movement that prepares its graduates to become influential leaders across various sectors—government, law, social work, policy, non-profits, and education. Graduates of the Underground Scholars, armed with academic credentials and a deep understanding of systemic injustices, are uniquely positioned to bring about profound change. In the fields of government and law, these leaders can drive legislative and judicial reforms that address the root causes of mass incarceration rather than merely its symptoms. They can advocate policies prioritizing collective care over punishment, equity over exclusion, and community well-being over isolation and surveillance. In social work and non-profit sectors, Underground Scholars alums bring empathy, insight, and a commitment to justice that can transform how services are provided to marginalized communities. Their leadership can ensure that programs are designed and implemented with an understanding of the complex realities faced by those they aim to serve, fostering genuinely supportive and empowering approaches.

The realm of education, too, stands to be revolutionized by the contributions of our graduates. As educators and administrators, they can challenge and dismantle the pipeline leading from schools to prisons, replacing it with pathways to opportunity and access for all students, including those from historically excluded backgrounds. By integrating abolitionist principles into curricula and pedagogy, they can cultivate learning environments that encourage critical thinking, empathy, and social responsibility.

Including people with lived experiences of incarceration, college degrees, and political education in these influential spaces promises a future markedly different from our current reality. Their presence and perspectives challenge the status quo, creating more possibility for systemic change that resonates with the principles of prison abolition. Moreover, leadership informed by lived experience challenges the stigmatization and marginalization of formerly incarcerated individuals, proving that past circumstances do not define one's potential to

contribute positively to society. It sends a powerful message of hope and possibility, not just to those currently entangled in the carceral system but to society as a whole.

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1. When I refer to the carceral state, I mean “the formal institutions and operations and economies of the criminal justice system proper, but it also encompasses logics, ideologies, practices, and structures, that invest in tangible and sometimes intangible ways in punitive orientations to difference, to poverty, to struggles to social justice and to the crossers of constructed borders of all kinds.” This definition necessarily includes the university. French, G., Goodman, A., & Carlson, C. (2020) What is the carceral state? University of Michigan.
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