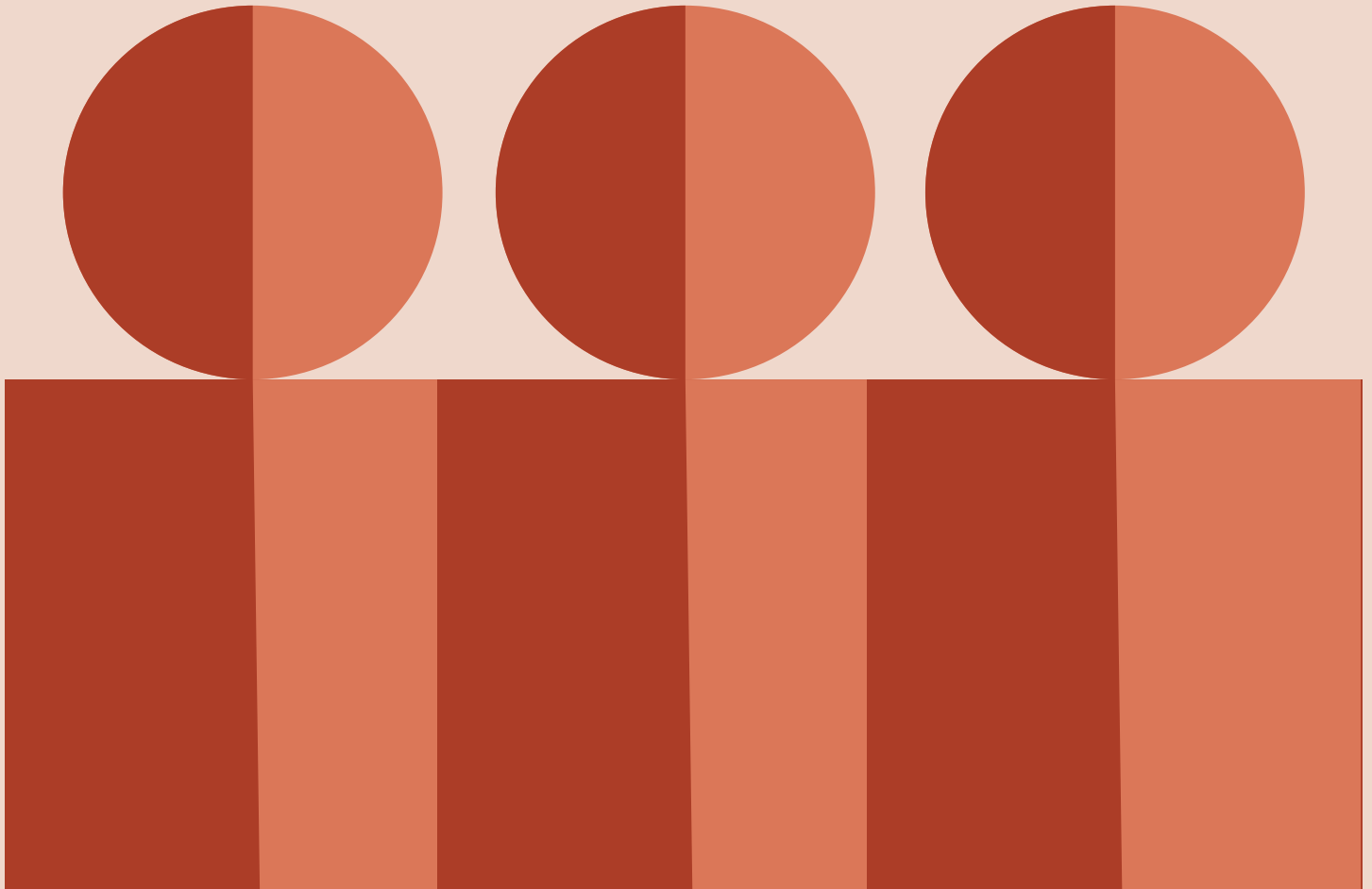
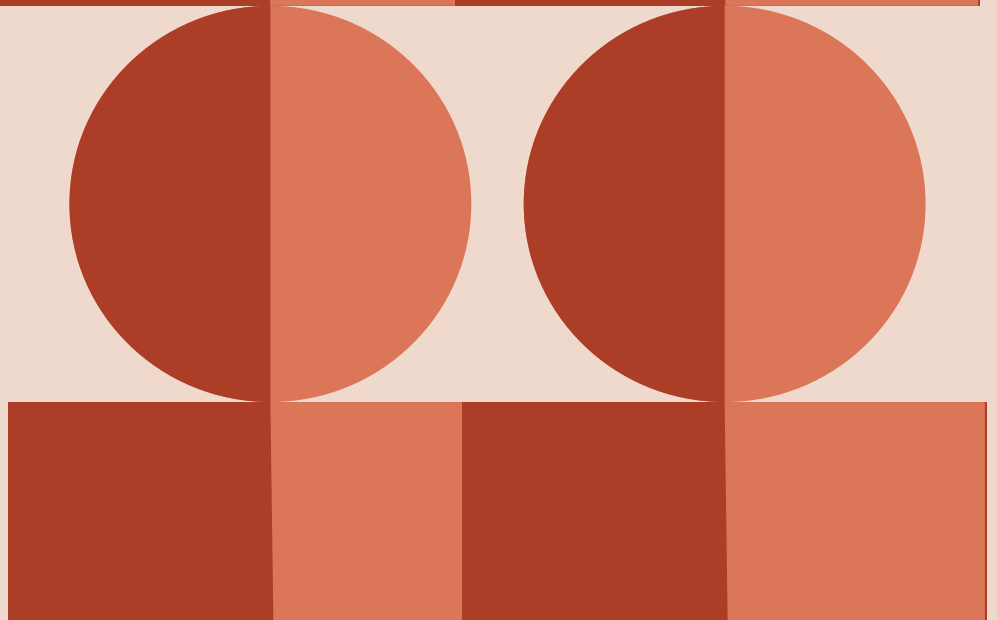


College and Community Partnerships For Reentry



Sindy Lopez
Ess Pokornowski
Tammy Ortiz



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Through research, collaboration, and innovation, Ithaka S+R informs policy, guides strategies, and builds evidence-based tools to broaden access to postsecondary education, improve student and workforce outcomes, and advance scholarship.

Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a nonprofit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We believe education is key to the wellbeing of individuals and society, and we work to make it more effective and affordable.

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Introduction: The College-Community Partnerships Cohort

In 2023, Ithaca S+R undertook a three-year study, funded by ECMC Foundation, to explore how college programs and community organizations partner to create pathways to support students in achieving their educational goals post-release. During the final year, we brought together 10 college-based programs serving currently or formerly incarcerated students and 10 community-based organizations to help them develop, expand, or formalize such partnerships.

The cohort participated in three quarterly virtual convenings, a series of monthly community calls, individual or small group consultations with Ithaca S+R staff, and a day-long intensive workshop and in-person convening at our New York office. The focus of our work together shifted gradually over the year and was co-defined by participant needs and suggestions. Roughly, the four phases of the cohort focused on: building relationships and community, identifying common challenges, sourcing strategies and solutions, and considering sustainability and strategic planning. Under these broader topics, participants identified specific areas of interest.

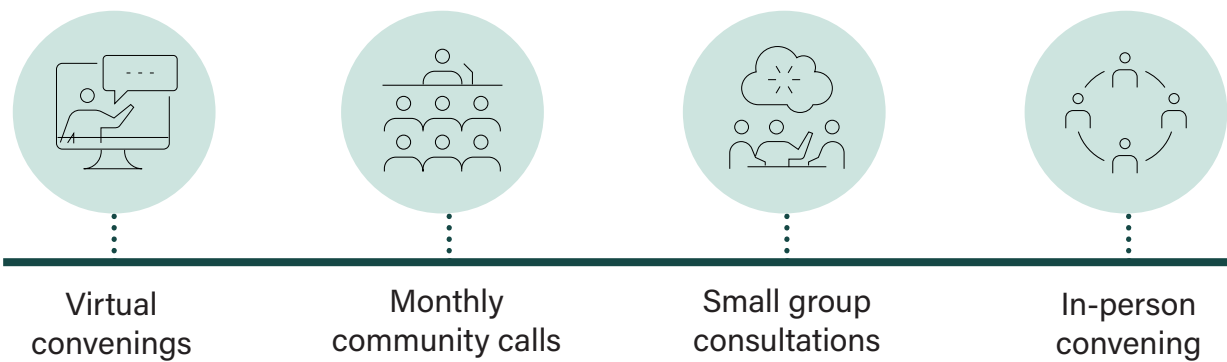


Our aim and approach

There are deep similarities in the structural challenges facing community-based organizations and higher education programs that serve incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and system-impacted individuals. Both often rely on the leadership and dedication of industrious and well-connected leaders, grapple with high levels of staff burnout and turnover, and face both individual financial uncertainty and a turbulent funding landscape. At the same time, community-based organizations supporting reintegration could benefit from more expertise on how higher education systems are structured and function. Vice versa, college-based programs thinking about how to support students’ reintegration and post-incarceration needs could also benefit from the expertise of community-based organizations. In this sense, developing deliberate, structured, and sustainable collaborations could help both types of organizations more effectively coordinate and make use of local resources to serve current and formerly incarcerated and system-impacted individuals.

With that background knowledge, we designed the cohort with three core aims: to raise awareness about the complementary strengths and needs of these organizations and programs, to identify the challenges and barriers that hinder such collaborations, and to source meaningful interventions. We opted to do this work through a sustained cohort engagement because it allowed us to leverage our suite of skills as content experts, researchers, project managers, and strategic planners to help develop and sustain cross-organizational collaborations.

Taking this active role also allowed us to document the process, create tools and exercises to help facilitate collaboration, and collect those tools and learnings in this playbook. It also allowed us to translate what we learned into practical guidance for other college-based programs and community-based organizations as they develop and strengthen their own partnerships.



Programs and organizations in the cohort¹

College-based programs	Community-based organizations
The Bellamy Creek Program at Grand Valley State University	The Center for Community Alternatives
Brandeis Education Justice Initiative	Clean Slate Utah
Emerson Prison Initiative	Common Good Atlanta
Loyola at Rayburn	Criminal Justice Ministry
Morehouse Higher Education in Prisons Program	Fresh Coast Alliance
North Carolina State University	Louisiana Parole Project
Project Impact at the Borough of Manhattan Community College	Our Journey
The University of Rochester Education Justice Initiative	Partakers
The University of Utah Prison Education Project	The Petey Greene Program
Washington University St. Louis Prison Education Program	Thrive for Life

¹Programs and organizations are listed in alphabetical order. Cohort participants were selected for organizational, service, and regional diversity. We prioritized participant selection in pairs using the following criteria: 1) we brought together programs and organizations that already collaborated, formally or informally or 2) selected programs with the intention of helping them to strengthen or expand a new collaboration over the year-long cohort.

What we learned and how it shaped the playbook

Over the course of the cohort phase of our three-year study, participants often echoed a common set of challenges:



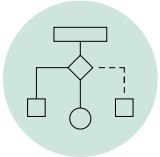
Program mission, strategy, and collaboration

Many cohort members were working to clarify their missions and build partnerships that support growth without overextending their limited capacity. Many were also focused on strengthening relationships with colleges, correctional agencies, and community partners by moving beyond informal collaborations toward more institutionalized partnerships that would withstand staff turnover and organizational change.



Student supports

Cohort members emphasized that coordination is key to providing students with basic needs resources and services around housing, employment, transportation, and healthcare, alongside support for educational success. Cohort members also described how campus policies (or lack of policies) can limit access to campus resources and create additional challenges for those navigating reentry.



Infrastructure and capacity

A number of cohort members described operating with limited staff, funding, and organizational infrastructure while trying to meet student needs. Many wished to strengthen their internal systems (like onboarding, data management, and case management) in order to improve coordination and effectiveness.



Funding and storytelling

Cohort members emphasized the uncertainty under which these partnerships operate. They often rely on short-term grants while seeking greater institutional buy-in and investment. Cohort members emphasized that sustaining partnerships requires diversified funding strategies, systems to measure outcomes for funders and institutional leaders, and storytelling that can strengthen programs and advance advocacy efforts.

We structured the playbook to address these persistent challenges. The chapters are organized around four areas that cohort members identified as key to building and sustaining partnerships:

01 | Finding the right partners

Identifying complementary organizations and building strong collaborative relationships.

02 | Aligning and setting shared goals

Establishing shared goals, mission, roles, and partnership structures.

03 | Reviewing campus policies and practices

Identifying institutional policies and practices that support or create barriers to formerly incarcerated students.

04 | Planning for sustainability

Building partnerships by reflecting on approaches to onboarding, staff transitions, funding, data, and storytelling.

On terminology

We use “college-based programs” as an umbrella term for higher education programs serving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. This can include higher education in prison programs and/or college- or university-affiliated programs that provide academic, reentry, advising, or other holistic supports for re-entering students. Because models differ, we use this term to capture a broad range of programs.

In this playbook, we also frequently refer to higher education programs that serve currently or formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students as “programs,” and community-based organizations serving reintegrating individuals as “organizations.”



How to use this playbook

This playbook is intended to help college-based and community-based organizations build stronger and more intentional partnerships that support currently and formerly incarcerated students in the process of reentry, social reintegration, and the transition to campus. It draws on information collected through desk research, interviews, and sustained engagement with a cohort of college programs and community-based reentry organizations.

The playbook provides a suite of tools and exercises alongside contextual information documented through the cohort.

Throughout the playbook you will find four types of resources:



01 | Background and context

Descriptive information on what we learned and observed through research and cohort facilitation.



02 | Consider

These sections highlight areas where there is no simple answer or advice to give, but where deliberate planning and coordination may be necessary. In many cases, these are areas where participants have identified ethical issues, challenges, or difficult choices.



03 | Tools and exercises

These items are designed to help facilitate the development, formalization, and strategic planning of partnerships between organizations and programs.



04 | Cohort tips

Information, documents, templates, and tips gathered directly from cohort participants. This is provided in two primary ways: (1) via de-identified quotes gathered through surveys and interviews, and (2) in the form of short narrative “spotlights” that focus in more detail on a specific partnership or initiative that the cohort, project team, or advisory thought would be of particular interest to the field.

The tools and exercises linked throughout this document are available as a separate standalone workbook. We hope you will adapt and revise the templates we provide to reflect your organization’s context, capacity, and goals.

Connections with
similar reentry groups
so the work
doesn't feel so lonely.

01

Understanding
reentry,
reintegration, and
transition among
the student service
landscape

What is reentry?

While there are some key areas of need—such as support for housing, employment, etc.—attempts to rigidly categorize reentry needs and/or services can lead to overlooking individual needs. The full array of services and needs that might be considered under the term “reentry” is wide-ranging, context-dependent, and individualized.² The Office of Justice Programs in the US Department of Justice offers some helpful context: “The risks and needs of individuals returning home from incarceration are often unique. The programs and services offered to returning individuals should address their critical needs such as housing, employment, family unification, and treatment for substance use, mental, and physical health as necessary.”³

All of the organizations and programs who participated in the cohort hold expansive views about what might be considered a reentry service or a reintegration need, but they had different philosophies about how their own organizations and programs should respond to those needs. Those philosophies then informed how community-based organizations and higher education programs collaborated to fill particular areas of need. In a previous publication, we emphasized distinguishing between reentry, reintegration, and transition; we’ve carried over and slightly amended those provisional definitions below.⁴

² Ess Pokornowski, “Exploring the Landscape of College and Community Reentry Partnerships,” *Ithaka S+R*, 30 September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.321356>.

³ “Reentry Special Feature,” Office of Justice Programs, Department of Justice, <https://www.ojp.gov/feature/reentry/overview>.

⁴ Ess Pokornowski, “Exploring the Landscape of College and Community Partnerships,” *Ithaka S+R*, 30 September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.321356>.

- » **Reentry** refers to the moment when an individual leaves incarceration and makes their way back into broader society. It describes a moment in time and a movement in space.
- » **Reintegration** denotes the process that it takes for an individual to successfully rejoin the community. Reintegration is a socioemotional process or journey, rather than a simple spatial one.
- » **Transition (or transition to campus)** refers to a move from a prison learning environment to becoming a college student on the outside, which carries with it a unique set of institutional barriers.

Throughout this publication, we refer to “reentry services” as a blanket term, as it is recognizable across service needs and fields of study. When talking about specific needs, services, or experiences, we default to the term “reintegration,” to be mindful of the fact that much of what we are discussing is not simply about gaining access, but finding access to resources that have the quality, fit, and long-term sustainability to support individual success.

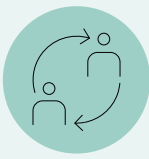
Why look at community-based organizations and college-based programs together?

The community-based organizations in the cohort tend to specialize in serving an area of need (i.e., housing) or a broad category (i.e., assistance with legal documentation and services, professional development). College-based programs have significantly different service models and designs, based on the populations they primarily serve, the maturity of their program, the number of reintegrated alumni matriculated, and existing complementary services provided by other campus programs or local community-based organizations. Participants emphasized that this dynamic—where an expansive and protean set of needs is served piecemeal by a fragmented, shifting landscape of localized actors—is one of the first challenges to establishing proximate collaborations: you have to find out who you need to work with, and then determine how closely you can reasonably and sustainably work with one another.

For example, one college-based program emphasized repeatedly that they are not in a position to directly provide key reintegration services—such as housing, employment support, legal assistance, etc.—and instead partner with local community-based organizations who already have expertise in providing such services. The college program focuses the energy of their staff on helping students navigate the transition to campus and academic bureaucracy, learn about professionalization, and develop digital and cultural literacy skills.

Types of Collaboration

We found it useful to think of partnerships in the context of a spectrum, with three or four major categories.



Referrals are by far the most common and least formal version of collaboration in the field. While this might be as simple as pointing students or clients to existing resources, experts recommend “warm handoffs” instead, where a student or client is not simply given information, but personally introduced to a referral. The benefit of referrals lies in their volume and the limited coordination necessary to maintain them.



Handshake partnerships are a loose and wide-encompassing category of collaborations that have some formal elements and/or shared structure, but lack institutionalization or formal contracts. These might also be called **informal partnerships** or **developing partnerships**. These collaborations require more coordination and communication than simple referrals, and offer flexible structure. Their benefit lies in their fluidity and the ease with which they can be maintained by a very limited number of stakeholders. The drawback is that they can be reliant on personal relationships and enterprising individuals, and may be disrupted by change without additional institutional structure.



Formal partnerships refer to the most institutionalized arrangements, usually involving contracts, memoranda of understanding, or memoranda of agreement. Experts and cohort participants emphasized that these collaborations are the most durable and sustainable, but that reaching such a formalized agreement takes a tremendous amount of time, effort, and communication.



How do reintegration services intersect with other campus services?

Reentry services cover a vast array of potential needs, some of which overlap in part or in full with services commonly offered on college and university campuses. College-based programs and community-based organizations supporting college and university students should be aware of and prepared to coordinate or collaborate with other campus-based services. Such collaborations can run in two major directions: programs and organizations might help students find and use other campus services, and campus service providers might learn about how to best serve formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. Many colleges and universities offer support for housing, healthcare or health insurance, meal plans, mental health counseling, tutoring and mentorship, professional development, technology rental and use, technology assistance, skills development and training, and employment, among other services which might each be an essential piece of a student’s successful reentry, reintegration, and transition to campus. The challenge comes in being aware of what is available on and off campus, and what available options might best serve a given student, or be modified to do so.

This may mean having difficult conversations about how campus services do, or do not, serve formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. “Reviewing Campus Policies and Practices for Formerly Incarcerated Students,” the first tool in the workbook, provides more information on exploring and assessing how formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students may be affected by campus policies and services. Cohort-members emphasized that simply knowing about campus services is not enough; programs and organizations should also consider how to best connect students to those services, without stigma, in the ways that will best support their success. This could look like working with campus housing to ensure that older students have access to housing that reflects their family situation and needs, such as student family housing or other non-dormitory options.

See the “Reviewing Campus Policies and Practices for Formerly Incarcerated Students,” section in the playbook for more information and assistance on exploring and assessing how formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students may be affected by campus policies and services.

Student needs

Including formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students under the broad umbrella of “non-traditional” students is another way to address the student needs discussed above.⁵ Some formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students have explained that this inclusion makes them feel like less of an exception and more integrated in the student community.

Non-traditional students are often over the age of 24 (adult learners) and share one or more of the following characteristics: they delayed enrollment in college after high school, attend college part time, work full time, are financially independent, or have dependents (spouse and/or children). Indeed, nearly 75 percent of US college students have at least one of these characteristics.⁶ Sometimes these students are also veterans or former foster youth.

For a variety of reasons, individuals who attend higher education during or after incarceration disproportionately share these characteristics. For example, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the vast majority (94.6 percent) of individuals incarcerated in federal prisons are older than 25.⁷ Given that many who are incarcerated experience different lengths of time within the system, they are likely to enter higher education as adult learners. Similarly, although military service and incarceration are completely different experiences, students transitioning from either setting often face similar challenges adapting from highly structured environments to the independence of college life. This suggests that many of the supports developed for adult learners or veterans may also benefit formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students.⁸

Framing incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and system-impacted students within this larger context helps shift the conversation from treating them as exceptions to recognizing that these students share the same educational pathway as many other students who may have similar needs (whether regarding basic needs, academic support, or flexibility). Therefore, colleges and universities can consider ways to redesign policies, services, and teaching practices that better support this growing population of students through more flexibility, more comprehensive supports, and more inclusive approaches to service design and delivery, and pedagogy or andragogy. This can benefit a wide range of students, including those with conviction histories, and can provide a nonstigmatizing way to discuss how to best serve different student groups.

⁵ “DataLab,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed 17 October 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/152-national-postsecondary-student-aid-study-administrative-collection-2018-undergraduates/percentage-distribution>.

⁶ Alexandria Walton Radford, Melissa Cominole, and Paul Skomsvold, “Demographic and Enrollment Characteristics of Nontraditional Undergraduates: 2011–12,” Web Tables, US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, September 2015, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>

⁷ Vernisa M. Donaldson and Christopher Viera, “College after Prison: A Review of the Literature on Barriers and Supports to Postsecondary Education for Formerly Incarcerated College Students,” *John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity*, The City University of New York, October 2021, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED615575.pdf>.

⁸ “Inmate Age,” Statistics, Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020, https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_age.jsp.



02

Finding fitting partners

Finding fitting partners

In the previous section, we described why partnerships between college-based programs and reentry organizations might develop in order to serve students and alumni reintegrating in the community and/or transitioning to campus outside prison.

This raises some crucial questions for both college programs and community organizations to consider.

Namely:

- How do you decide who to collaborate with?
- How can you gauge when a partnership is and is not working?

Answering these questions will help you decide which local programs and organizations you want to be able to refer individuals to, and which you might want to partner more deeply with.



COHORT TIPS

- » Be willing to become a leader for reentry, because most agencies have low capacity to organize others.
- » Prioritize a partnership with an organization led and/or staffed by people who have been incarcerated themselves. While people who have never experienced incarceration can certainly learn how best to work with people struggling through reintegration (through training in trauma-informed care, etc.), authentic connections through the words, “I’ve been there, too” are irreplaceable.

Determining service needs

Cohort participants explained that, while we may know what the most common barriers to successful reentry are, the lived reality of reentry, community reintegration, and the transition to campus is a unique and idiosyncratic experience, requiring individualized support and solutions. For this reason, nearly all cohort participants talked about the importance of reentry needs assessments or consultations.

Performing individualized needs assessments are the starting point for not just determining an individual’s reintegration needs, but also what partnerships should be developed. These questionnaires or conversations are specifically designed to identify (and often triage) areas of strength and need. Considered individually, they suggest what services and supports an individual might need to access most urgently. Considered together, they plot the most pressing and common reintegration needs for a given program, and can thus be used to help orient and prioritize service provision partnerships and collaborations.

CONSIDER

Data over time

Tracking needs, providers, and outcomes over time can also provide crucial data about what services are most urgently and frequently required, whether there are identifiable trends in service delivery successes, who may or may not be best served by which partner organizations, and what the program’s own reintegration impacts might be.



Reentry Needs Assessment Template

TOOL

Explore the tool: <https://sr.ithaka.org/reentry-needs-assessment-template/>

What it is:

An example/template form of a reentry needs assessment questionnaire, based on several examples shared with us during our research.

Why we shared it:

To demonstrate the broad, sometimes competing considerations of reintegration and the types of available support services. The tool is not comprehensive, but can serve as a good first reference or starting point for thinking about the conflicting needs and challenges facing reintegrating students.

How you can use it:

This is a sample document that can be used as a reference. Take from it what you find valuable and adapt it to your purposes.



Identifying suitable partners

Student need is the most important consideration when choosing potential partners, but many other factors can impact the potential and success of a partnership. Cohort participants made it clear that before moving forward with a partnership there are two main imperatives:

1. Always start by assessing student or client service needs.
2. Vet potential partner organizations to make sure that your values and your operations align.

The more closely you decide to collaborate with another program or organization, the more important it will be that your values and priorities align. Cohort participants suggested that there are some clear red flags or warning signs that a collaboration might be mismatched. On the other hand, some collaborations seem perfect on paper but fall apart due to operational rather than ethical issues.

Here we offer a couple quick exercises to help you structure your thoughts and vet a potential partner.

Is the collaborator a good match? (red flag, green flag)

- Red flag: Collaborator uses problematic or dehumanizing language. (Values)
- Red flag: It is unclear who the point of contact is and different individuals provide different answers to the same question. (Operational)
- » Green flag: Collaborator’s mission statement is complementary to your own and uses similar language. (Values)
- » Green flag: Collaborator suggests, schedules, and attends regular touchpoints, and builds strong rapport with you and your team. (Operational)



Conversation Starters: Exploring Partner Fit

EXERCISE

Explore the exercise: <https://sr.ithaka.org/conversation-starters/>

What it is:

A set of topics and questions to help you discuss alignment and fit with a potential collaborator.

Why we shared it:

Collaboration and alignment conversations are often organic and unstructured. If you're new to developing a college and community partnership, that can be daunting. If it's something you're experienced at, stepping back to be systematic and document the process can help you with formalization and knowledge transfer later.

How you can use it:

Use it in dialogue with a potential partner organization.

Use it to better understand where the values and expectations of your program or organization align with or diverge from those of a potential partner. Use it to adjust how you divide labor, take accountability, and set expectations.



Vetting a Potential Partner

EXERCISE

Explore the exercise: <https://sr.ithaka.org/vetting-a-potential-partner/>

What it is:

A reusable worksheet that asks you to reflect on several aspects of a potential partner organization.

Why we shared it:

This formal and systematic approach to vetting a partner can help you understand potential areas of tension and indicate if internal stakeholders have differing opinions about partner fit.

How you can use it:

Use it in dialogue with internal colleagues to decide where alignment is strong, information is needed, or friction is likely to arise if you partner.

CONSIDER

Identity and background impact need

Identity and lived experience can shape reintegration needs and constraints, and programs and organizations should plan individualized responses. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals with religious trauma might not find the best support from certain religious organizations. And, despite ADA compliance requirements, we have heard of cases where transportation, housing, and professional development providers are not prepared to provide accommodations or adequately meet individual accessibility needs. Therefore, taking a trauma-informed, individualized approach to reentry service coordination is key as it can empower reintegrating individuals and mitigate social and psychological harm.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

North Carolina State University and OurJourney

THE PARTNERS

Alberto De Simoni is an assistant teaching professor of classics at North Carolina State University (NCSU). His research revolves around ancient incarceration and problems of justice, punishment, and forgiveness. Alberto has also worked in reentry, leading a collaboration between the Brazilian Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC) and My Father’s House, a reentry home in Denver, Colorado. Alberto strives to integrate his passion for teaching general education classes in the humanities with community engagement efforts and scholarly research.

OurJourney is a not-for-profit organization, based out of North Carolina, committed to providing resources for people returning from prison during their first 90 days. OurJourney believes that our communities are stronger, safer, and more complete when people returning after incarceration don’t go back. They support people on their reentry journey and also raise awareness about challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face through the lived experience of their staff and board members. OurJourney offers numerous programs including reentry assistance and a reentry simulation exercise.

Developing the partnership

Alberto and NCSU first became aware of OurJourney at a reentry simulation at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in November 2024. Many organizations and governmental departments have created their own versions of reentry simulations, which model the process an individual goes through once they are released from prison. Through the reentry simulation OurJourney hosted, participants experience challenges that individuals returning from incarceration might encounter, such as obtaining identification, locating housing, and employment opportunities. Alberto realized that it is one thing to witness and support a person’s journey through reentry, and another thing to experience it directly through a simulated environment.

Soon after this initial meeting, NCSU and Alberto were invited to participate in the Ithaka S+R reentry cohort and OurJourney was suggested as a possible partner. At the time, NCSU did not have a prison education program, but had an abundance of faculty, students, and staff eager to support one. This made them an ideal candidate to help develop a new partnership from scratch. And OurJourney’s strong community engagement and deep network made them an ideal collaborator. The first thing they did as a partnership was organize a reentry simulation at NCSU, using this event to launch their new student organization, Second Chance Initiative. The student organization spreads awareness around campus and the community at large of the barriers that students who have been incarcerated face upon reentry. The student club is also hoping to create a welcoming atmosphere on campus for formerly incarcerated students. Their partnership grew from the ground up and they were able to travel together to Miami to operate a reentry simulation at the Florida International University.

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges they faced was navigating large institutional bureaucracies, and they are still facing a challenge to convert student and community engagement into a formal prison education program. Everything they were doing was new to both partners and involved interacting with two big state institutions, NCSU and North Carolina Department of Adult Correction (NCDAC), each with their own complexities, bureaucracies, and idiosyncrasies. Finding out how to start a formal program that builds on the developing collaborations has proven to be more difficult than anticipated, especially in terms of figuring out where and how to start, and with which stakeholders. As a beginning attempt, the partners invited NCDAC leadership to NCSU to the initial reentry simulation community event, giving them a chance to see what was already happening on campus. Progress has been slow, but they are committed to eventually opening a prison education program housed within NCSU.

“From what I thought would be a transactional relationship, I saw a living organism grow. And we don’t know how many more doors it will be able to open, or the direction it will go.”

-Alberto De Simoni, assistant professor at North Carolina State University

Successes

The partners believe their biggest success has been the foundation of the student organization on the NCSU campus, Second Chance Initiative. The student club conducts bi-weekly meetings, where they are able to interact with new people from campus regularly. The partners feel the campus and surrounding community are interested and dedicated to a prison education program and continued work within the reentry space. The student organization also received nonprofit status, which allows them to expand their reach beyond the university boundaries. NCSU also believes having a student club on campus will allow them to encourage formerly incarcerated students to become involved and feel welcome.



Advice for future partners

The pair believe their partnership was successful because they learned to trust each other. Each partner had their own network of contacts and opportunities that allowed potential development in multiple directions. Having honest conversations also allowed them to invest their time and energy into identifying the direction that each partner wanted to go, either together or individually.



03

Aligning and
setting shared
goals

Aligning and setting shared goals

Finding a fitting partner is only the beginning of the work. After you find who to work with, you need to figure out how to work together in a sustainable way by aligning, strategizing, and institutionalizing the collaboration.

College-based programs and community-based organizations each told us how challenging it can be to carve out time for the intellectual labor and dialogue necessary to strategize and further develop a partnership. Moreover, as one cohort member noted, few people in the nonprofit sector—and even fewer in academia—receive professional development or mentorship on how to align, strategize, and institutionalize. This section offers resources to help develop a shared language, mission, and goals.



COHORT TIPS

- » Don't go into the partnership with a predefined idea of what you want from them, but hear out their ideas and learn with and from them.
- » Assess the assets and the needs. Start from there.

Foundation building

Because collaborations between college-based programs and community-based organizations often begin as primarily informal arrangements with minimal documentation, the terms and expectations of partnerships may be unclear or shift over time as programs and personnel change and develop. Cohort participants identified this as an issue impacting service delivery, quality control, and coordination.

Exacerbating this, leaders of both college-based programs and community-based organizations also emphasized that they often feel they do not have adequate time (and, in some cases, professional development or support) to adequately align on, plan, and document clear roles and strategies for collaboration. To paraphrase one participant's explanation: "I feel like all I do is triage. I spend so much of my time in the thick of it, dealing with problems like whether my students have enough notebook paper, that it feels like I don't have the time to step back and strategically plan or coordinate."

This chapter is intended to help meet that need by providing structured activities to help collaborating organizations align their language, develop joint-plans, and sketch the guiding mission and values for a collaboration. These are three activities that cohort participants stressed were challenging to find time for, structure, and execute, but incredibly helpful to complete.

CONSIDER

A challenging balance—lead with human connection, protect boundaries

Jessi Brewer, director of administration and operations at Partakers and a cohort participant, recently related how the cohort allowed her to reflect on and identify a disconnect in communication between her organization and one of their higher education partners, Emerson Prison Initiative (EPI). Jessi noted that there was a gap between what Partakers thought they were communicating, and what EPI thought they meant. The resolution came about through deeper personal interaction—"we literally broke bread together"—which in turn led to more open communication, as Jessi described during our panel at the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison in April 2026.

Understanding that partnerships often develop through informal connection, and that leaders and staff from both community-based organizations and college-based programs face similar logistical, administrative, and capacity challenges, can be helpful to building strong interpersonal connections. Developing rapport founded on transparent and mutual dialogue allows each collaborating organization to be forthright about their own strengths and constraints. Over the three years of this research project, we heard repeatedly that the work is personal.

This creates a catch-22 for leaders: much of the work is driven and sustained by building meaningful human connection, but this requires additional effort that often goes unrecognized and can easily creep into one's personal time and personal life.



Establishing shared language

When we began to build the cohort, one of the first things we discovered was that finding shared language can be a challenge. This is a technical issue, as reentry is a sprawling field covering a diverse array of services, and the terms used to refer to services are often vague or overlapping. Partners must understand precisely what needs are being identified and which services are being provided. For example, “professional support” alone could refer to peer mentorship, professionalization workshops, training, courses, job fairs, mock interviews, networking support, internships, resume feedback, or a variety of other services and support. Establishing a shared language ensures that organizations understand one another’s missions, values, and political or philosophical approach to the work. Put simply: it helps collaborators make sure that they mean the same thing when they say the same thing.

Cohort participants suggested this process was important for both identifying values-aligned collaborators and building sustainable services and programs.

Developing a shared mission and values

Cohort participants emphasized the value of establishing a shared mission, both for the exercise itself—which they noted helps both parties elaborate their own organizational and programmatic aims—and as a way of identifying potential areas of tension or conflict. If developing a shared language helps collaborators make sure they understand each other, then developing a shared mission and values helps collaborators ensure that they work towards the same goals for the same reasons. A joint-mission statement and shared values can also give collaborators a North Star to refer back to that can help partnering organizations assess whether changes in systems, structures, or programming are already mission-aligned, or whether they might require deeper reflection and conversation.

⁹Bobby Milstein and Tom Chapel, "Developing a Logic Model or Theory of Change," Community Tool Box, Chapter 2, Section 1, Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/overview/models-for-community-health-and-development/logic-model-development/main>.

Building your partnership road map

Once partners have established a shared mission, they can begin planning how they will achieve it. This exercise guides partners through the development of a road map by using logic modelling. Logic models show “the route traveled (or steps taken) to reach a certain destination. A detailed model indicates precisely how each activity will lead to desired changes... This road map aspect of a logic model reveals what causes what, and in what order.”⁹

Together, partners can identify the resources they bring to the partnership, the activities that will be needed to achieve their goals, and the indicators they will use to assess progress. The road map can be revisited periodically as the partnership grows. Reviewing the logic model together can help partners assess whether activities are aligned with their mission and note progress toward shared goals. The road map can be both a planning tool and a framework for continuous improvement.



EXERCISES

Aligning Collaborator Language

Explore the exercise: <https://sr.ithaka.org/aligning-collaborator-language/>

What it is:

An exercise designed to develop a shared vocabulary for partnered services.

Why we shared it:

The vast and fragmented landscape of reintegration services and the complex bureaucracies involved mean stakeholders may use the same term with different meanings or intentions. This exercise is designed to help align language and expectations.

How you can use it:

Use it as a discussion guide or exercise among stakeholders. This can be completed with existing partners, or used as a quality assurance tool to gauge whether prospective partners or other stakeholders, like clients/students, understand your program or organization and the services it delivers the way you intended.

Building a Shared Mission

Explore the exercise: <https://sr.ithaka.org/building-a-shared-mission/>

What it is:

A strategic planning exercise designed to help formalize or institutionalize a developing partnership.

Why we shared it:

Little information about how to formalize a partnership is publicly available, but establishing a shared mission and vision for collaborative services or programming is an important step.

How you can use it:

Use this exercise to help formalize your partnership and align on the deeper mission of your shared services.

Making a Road Map

Explore the exercise: <https://sr.ithaka.org/making-a-road-map/>

What it is:

An exercise designed to help you identify major goals, set measurable outcomes, and plan the activities needed to achieve them.

Why we shared it:

A more robust strategic planning tool, the logic model can help to build longer-term program plans. It can play a key role toward institutionalizing partnerships and services and serve as an important knowledge transfer document.

How you can use it:

Use it within your program or organization, or with partners, to set and document plans, activities, and expectations that you can measure success against. Treat it as a living document that can be adjusted.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Emerson Prison Initiative and Partakers

THE PARTNERS

Mneesha Gellman is founder and director of the Emerson Prison Initiative, and Associate Professor of Political Science at Emerson College. She is the editor of *Education Behind the Wall: Why and How We Teach College in Prison*, and co-editor of *Unlocking Learning: International Perspectives on Education in Prison*.

Jessi Brewer is director of operations and administration at *Partakers*, a Massachusetts nonprofit focused on prison education and reentry. Since 2021, she has held leadership, teaching, and programmatic roles supporting access to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.

Connecting students with mentors

In 2017, Arthur Bembury, the educational director of Partakers, reached out to Emerson Prison Initiative (EPI) to express interest in extending the services already being provided to their incarcerated students. Unfortunately, college programs behind prison walls do not have access to adequate funding and resources required to increase student experiences for their incarcerated classes. Partakers fills one of these gaps by matching teams of caring community members with incarcerated students in an effort to advance their educational journeys. Many incarcerated students have little or no college background and Partakers mentors are able to bring their own life experiences and wisdom to visit, guide, encourage, and correspond with their mentees. These kinds of relationships provide the stability and support that benefit incarcerated students as they work toward gaining their diplomas, which will allow them better opportunities for success upon release. Partakers has recently undergone exciting, but quick expansion. As more college in prison programs have grown and expanded across Massachusetts, so has the need for services and community mentors to provide them. As the need for student support has increased, EPI has been a key partner by including Partakers mentors in their campus community, events, and learning opportunities. The partnership cultivates networks of care and accountability that extend beyond the classroom and prison, strengthening educational outcomes, and making visible the collective benefits of investing in the intellectual, emotional, and relational support of those behind prison walls.

Setting expectations

Partnership challenges included managing organizational growth and changing roles, and clarifying expectations. Limited time and resources, especially with part-time staff at Partakers, made it hard to maintain relationships and stay aligned as both organizations changed priorities. Brewer and Gellman emphasized that working to understand similarities and differences between partner organizations can eliminate ambiguity and uncertainty about language and expectations, which is vital to a successful partnership. As Brewer explained from the community-based organization’s perspective: “It can often feel like higher education institutions speak their own language which can make it difficult for community organizations to understand their operations, communication processes, and/or institutional bureaucracy. It is important to recognize that there is a little translation work that occurs across these kinds of partnerships, and sometimes just getting to know one another, breaking bread together, meeting in person, etc. can really improve partner relationships.”

“Since learning is not only academic but relational, mentoring is a critical component of this work.”

-Jessi Brewer, director of operations and administration, Partakers

“Students see that there is a new network of people rooting for them, willing to talk through things, and ultimately believing in them and their ability to succeed in college and in life.”

-Mneesha Gellman, Emerson Prison Initiative founder and director

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Take time** to build trust and learn to speak – or at least understand – each other’s language.
- **Align** on your goals of success for incarcerated students. Stay away from partnerships that contradict your core values.
- **Lean into** the things you do well together, while recognizing that each organization has its own subculture, strengths, weaknesses, and visions for themselves.
- **Be honest** about your limitations and don’t overpromise.

Connecting students to community

Incarcerated learners have varying ties to the community—some individuals have strong family relationships and deep community connections outside prison, while others have almost no interaction with people from the outside world. Having a team of mentors providing social and emotional support and care benefits the whole community. The growing network of mentors across the state, many who never previously encountered the justice system, learn more about the realities and harm caused by mass incarceration. Meaningful relationships between mentors and students are being created and sustained, which gives students coming home from prison a village rooting for them.

Student impact

Students were able to see and feel the commitment of the mentors through monthly meetings. The collaboration bridged the gap between two communities with diverse experiences and backgrounds. Students were able to recognize how the connection with their mentors helped to build greater understanding between their communities. As one EPI student shared: “Partakers has done an amazing job of bridging differences. Here I am, an Afro-Latino man serving time in prison, and I’ve got these elderly, White well-off folks from the suburbs who care about me so much and they show up month after month to spend time with me. And we love each other! It’s an amazing connection!”

Sustaining the partnership

In early 2026, EPI and Partakers formalized their partnership with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that documents the relationship and helps to demonstrate their commitment to doing good work with each other over the long haul. The MOU allowed the partnership to identify where and how it needs to grow, clarify the details of the relationship, and emphasize the importance of being in community with each other. Defining their shared understanding, vision, and language improved their relationship, while also strengthening their connection and ability to communicate. Surprisingly, the MOU brought a sense of joy and trust to the work.





04

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Reviewing campus
policies and
practices

Reviewing campus policies and practices

For formerly incarcerated students, institutional processes can create barriers for reentry.

Currently, admissions, financial aid, transcript, and housing policies are often built with traditional students in mind; for reintegrating students, these processes create additional challenges during a period when they are already navigating significant transitions related to housing, employment, transportation, family responsibilities, and supervision requirements.

Colleges and universities can reduce these barriers by examining their policies and practices through the perspective of formerly incarcerated students. The goal is not to create exceptions for formerly incarcerated students, but to identify hurdles and build systems that are more accessible, coordinated, and responsive for all students.

Understanding the Student Experience

Routine processes can create challenges for students returning from incarceration. These processes can delay enrollment or prevent a student from accessing services during reentry. Some of the common barriers include:

- Meeting basic needs, such as housing, food security, and transportation
- Securing identification documents like a state photo ID or driver’s license
- Parole and probation requirements that limit movement and time
- Searching and finding stable employment
- Mental health needs related to the impact of incarceration and reentry
- Limited technology or digital literacy skills
- College application and FAFSA questions related to incarceration history and/or requiring documentation that students do not have
- Transferring credits from previous prison education programs and limited recognition of prior learning
- Stigma, discrimination, and lack of belonging on campus



These challenges often reinforce each other. For example, difficulties in securing identification can delay financial aid applications, while supervision requirements and a lack of transportation can make it harder to attend classes. After release, individuals who were formerly incarcerated often face the “collateral consequences” of being involved with the criminal justice system. Criminal records can limit access to public housing and housing assistance while additional requirements such as background checks and documentation make it more difficult to secure stable employment.¹⁰

Campus climate also shapes students’ experiences. Many formerly incarcerated students report concerns about stigma, discrimination, or being judged because of their conviction history. Some choose not to disclose their experiences because they fear differential treatment from faculty, staff, or peers. At the same time, stigma and discrimination can impact securing on-campus housing for students. Reentry experiences also differ across student populations. Women returning from incarceration often balance education with childcare responsibilities, family reunification, and concerns about personal safety and housing stability. Other students may face challenges related to disability, age, race, ethnicity, or rural location that further complicate their college experience.¹¹

Because of the broad range of issues and challenges that re-entering students can face, colleges and universities should try to design supports that are flexible enough to meet diverse student needs. In order to start these conversations, this chapter offers two tools to help programs and organizations better understand the experiences of formerly incarcerated students and assess both their current obstacles and available supports.

¹⁰ Vernisa M. Donaldson and Christopher Viera, “College after Prison: A Review of the Literature on Barriers and Supports to Postsecondary Education for Formerly Incarcerated College Students,” *John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity*, 2021, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED615575.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid

Reviewing and revising campus policies and practices

Supporting formerly incarcerated students requires more than dedicated program staff. Colleges and universities should regularly review how their policies affect formerly incarcerated students across the entire student experience (from pre-release planning to admissions to graduation). This review should consider both formal policies and how students experience these policies in practice. A policy may appear equitable on paper but can still create barriers if students receive unclear and inconsistent information, or whether they need to navigate multiple offices independently, or encounter additional administrative barriers compared to traditional students.

We have developed a campus policy audit tool to help colleges and universities examine existing policies and practices and better understand how they affect re-entering students. Community-based partners may want to use the tool to help their clients navigate campus bureaucracies and identify policy barriers. The audit provides a roadmap of current policies and offers reflections on whether the policies are clear. Colleges and universities should complete the audit with representatives from multiple campus offices, including admissions, financial aid, advising, housing, student affairs, and registrar services. It is also essential to include re-entering students or alumni in these discussions. Their perspectives can help identify gaps and opportunities that may not be visible through policy documents alone.



EXERCISE

Campus Policy Audit

Explore the exercise: <https://sr.ithaka.org/campus-policy-audit/>

- What it is:
A worksheet designed to help you consider what policies and protocols on a college or university campus can disproportionately affect formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students. It can also help you to identify offices to partner with and revisions that can be made to better support such students.
- Why we shared it:
This tool helps demystify campus bureaucracy and identify challenges that an organization's clients may face in the transition to campus.
- How you can use it:
Read through the audit to gain a better understanding of the landscape of programs and services that might intersect with lived experience in the criminal legal system.
- Complete the audit to assess how supportive or challenging policy and procedures at a given college or university are for the students you are supporting.

During the review: guiding principles

While reviewing campus policies and practices, colleges and universities should focus on opportunities for revising policies, procedures, and practices to make them more clear and accessible. Below are some guiding principles to integrate as you develop or revise existing systems.



Use a student-centered lens. Design policies and processes that explain requirements, expectations, and connect students with resources before challenges become barriers. Consider gathering admissions, financial aid, advising, housing, student affairs, career services, and community partners to work together. These offices should consider how to coordinate support so that students are not left to navigate multiple offices on their own.



Use person-centered, non-stigmatizing language. Review forms, policies, websites, and communications to ensure they use person-first language and avoid unnecessary references to conviction history.



Recognize that reentry looks different for every student. Formerly incarcerated students have diverse backgrounds and support needs. Consider building flexible policies and services that can respond to different circumstances.



Include formerly incarcerated students in decision-making. Consider engaging students and alumni in policy reviews, focus groups, and advisory boards. Their experiences can help identify barriers and inform improvements.

Supporting formerly incarcerated students requires more than a single program or initiative. It requires colleges and universities to examine how their policies, practices, and campus culture affect students' ability to enroll, persist, and graduate.

Center student voices

The following op-eds were written by incarcerated students of Grand Valley State University's educational program at Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility. Both emphasize that incarcerated students are full members of the university with the same academic aspirations, challenges, and commitment to learning as their peers on campus. They also emphasize that listening to students with lived experience can help colleges and universities build more supportive policies and foster a stronger sense of belonging for all students.

Student op-ed 1: <https://lanthorn.com/123214/opinion/bellamy-creeks-incarcerated-students-are-part-of-the-laker-family/>

Student op-ed 2: <https://lanthorn.com/122459/opinion/incarcerated-scholars-in-gv-bellamy-creek-program-crave-connection/>

Centering the student experience

Another way to identify barriers is to examine the student journey directly. The transition from prison to college can be particularly jarring, as the former is a total institution where life is heavily controlled and choice is highly restricted, while the latter is a fragmented constellation of different systems, offices, and authorities. Formerly incarcerated students also face additional, competing challenges navigating probation and parole, court and legal requirements, and a host of knock-on effects on their employment, housing, and family situation. Formerly incarcerated students face many of the challenges that other nontraditional students do; they are just likely to face a myriad of them simultaneously. Given this, it’s important for institutions to understand how students experience campus systems from their perspective. Student journey mapping can help identify where students encounter confusion, delays, duplicated processes, or gaps in coordination between campus offices.

It is critical that formerly incarcerated students be included in these conversations. Their experiences will provide insight into how policies function in practice and where programs can make improvements. Including students in policy reviews, advisory groups, focus groups, and program planning helps ensure that institutional changes respond to real barriers rather than assumptions about student needs.



EXERCISE

Student Journey Mapping

Explore the exercise: <https://sr.ithaka.org/student-journey-mapping/>

What it is:

An exercise that centers the student experience in navigating campus services and bureaucracy.

Why we shared it:

The student journey map is a way to understand systems and the support and challenges they might produce in the context of the student experience. More broadly, it can be a way to gauge student, client, or user experience and to identify places where you can intervene.

How you can use it:

Complete the template and respond to the suggested prompts to begin building your own student journey map. Or adapt the exercise and prompts to explore the user experience of any service or program.

Disclosure of conviction and “Ban the Box”

College and university programs should also carefully review policies related to criminal history disclosure. While “Ban the Box” efforts can reduce barriers during admissions, research suggests that disclosure policies alone do not address all barriers that re-entering students face throughout the enrollment process.¹²

What is “Ban the Box”?

The “Ban the Box” movement encourages colleges and universities to remove questions about conviction history from admissions applications. The goal is to reduce barriers that discourage formerly incarcerated students from applying. However, removing the question alone does not eliminate all barriers. Students may still encounter challenges related to financial aid, housing, employment, transcript evaluation, and campus climate after admission. As a result, many institutions are increasingly focusing not only on admissions policies but also on the broader systems that support student success.¹³

Colleges and universities should view “Ban the Box” as a part of a strategy rather than a stand-alone solution. Creating pathways for re-entering students requires reviewing the policies and practices that shape the entire student experience and not just the admissions process.

Beyond campus offices: engaging faculty in student success

Faculty also play an important role in creating a campus where re-entering students feel welcomed and supported. While faculty may not oversee admissions or financial aid, they can influence a sense of belonging through their teaching and interactions with students. Colleges and universities can engage faculty in practices that support re-entering students by providing professional development and opportunities to learn more about their experiences. Training for faculty and staff can focus on understanding college-based programs, using person-centered language, recognizing common barriers to reentry, and connecting students to campus resources when needed.

Faculty do not need to become reentry experts, but they should know how to refer students for additional support. For example, faculty can help create a more welcoming learning environment by recognizing that students may face challenges related to housing, employment, transportation, or supervision requirements, and referring them to appropriate campus resources when needed.¹⁴

¹² Ibid

¹³ “The Box: How The Conviction History Question Shapes College Admissions,” *Vera Institute of Justice*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.vera.org/news/the-box-how-the-conviction-history-question-shapes-college-admissions>.

¹⁴ Terrell Blount, Jenna Dreier, Haja Kamara, Rachel Pleasants McDonnell, “Preparing Instructors to Support Students in Prison,” *Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network and Jobs for the Future*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.jff.org/idea/preparing-instructors-to-support-students-in-prison>.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

The “One-Stop Shop” Student Center at the Utah Prison Education Project

THE PARTNER

Dr. Pamela Cappas-Toro is the director of teaching, learning, and impact for the Prison Education Action Research Lab (PEARL) at the University of Utah. She works with Drs. Andy Eisen (director of Prison Programming) and Tessa Brunnenmeyer (manager of Prison Programming), where incarcerated Education Advocates receive professional training and compensation to provide peer tutoring, facilitate humanities programming, and develop resources that support all learners in the women's designated unit at the Utah State Correctional Facility. The center was launched in 2024.

The program

In dialogue with students, the University of Utah Prison Education Project (UPEP) has created a “One-Stop Shop” Student Center, which offers educational advocacy, peer tutoring, humanities programming, and resources to all people incarcerated in the women’s designated unit at Utah State Correctional Facility. This project emerged in direct response to the launch of the campus’s bachelor’s degree for incarcerated women in Utah in 2024. The scholars selected for this opportunity immediately recognized that there were additional students at their facility being left out and asked “What about the others?” They voiced a need for something that would address the “holistic experience of learning” to their entire community of incarcerated individuals at the women’s designated campus.

While designing the program and positions, students felt the title “tutor” limited them and suggested that “Education Advocates” would be a more appropriate name for the position. This emphasized their roles as leaders who embraced the joy of education and their feelings of collective responsibility. The students recognized that their experiences as incarcerated individuals, as well active members of their communities, allowed them to have an essential understanding of designing an effective program. Today, the Student Center contains four core working groups: Arts, Education Pathways, Health & Wellness, and Policy, Protocols, and Procedures, all developed directly from student participation and feedback.

Challenges

One of the largest challenges the program faced was how to imagine and provide the trainings, structures, and resources that would allow them to build and sustain a Student Center for such a diverse population of learners. The project design team believes that education is a right and not a privilege and has expanded access to resources for all who are interested. The Center has served more than 350 individuals since opening in January 2025 and has become a space that cultivates curiosity and respects the autonomy of all individuals involved. The program design team needed to determine and prioritize working groups based on the needs of their community, and find a way to maintain clear communication among 13 team members, while some were incarcerated and others were not. The program design team has also recognized that they are living through a time of vast and rapid change (in the university, prison, and with community partners), and that it is important to create organizational structures that provide ground rules and democratic processes. Together, they have developed a collaborative consensus decision-making model that accommodates and serves both incarcerated and non-incarcerated team members.

“

[Students] called for an environment grounded in joy and belonging where individuals could experience what it means to be accompanied, supported, seen, and intellectually engaged across all levels of educational attainment, from what is often referred to as “adult basic education” to college coursework.

- **Dr. Pamela Cappas-Toro**, director of Teaching, Learning and Impact for PEARL

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Develop an advocates team** that reflects a range of backgrounds and voices.
- **Commit to consensus-decision making processes.**
- **Establish ways of being in community** and open communication, and know this work takes time and patience.
- **Do team-building activities** and bring in a skilled external facilitator when necessary.
- **Be informed by history** - practice should be informed by study. Ex. The UPEP team studies and discusses strategies, like those from the Citizenship Schools of the civil rights movement, hoping to follow in their footsteps.

Successes

In addition to the over 380 individuals the Student Center has served since opening, the Education Advocates have supported more than 50 individuals to earn their high school diplomas, while also serving as teaching assistants at Salt Lake Community College and Weber State, and leading educational programming for all, including those in maximum security. The Student Center has become recognized as a national model for other prison education programs and with the generous support of the Mellon Foundation, they will be able to offer similar support to a variety of prison educational programs in women’s facilities interested in operating their own Student Centers. Their education advocates are already developing trainings for future generations of advocates.



Community engagement

The Student Center has increased retention, persistence, and completion of educational programming inside while also creating a love for learning that is extending out. These skills will prove to be essential when obtaining employment upon release. The Student Center has provided the Education Advocates career pathways which has allowed them to deliver high-quality programming in a caring and affirming manner. Education Advocates have recognized the need for fair wages, which is allowing them to provide support to their children and household expenses on the outside and save for reentry.

Sustainability

Members of the Educational Team have been able to work closely with the Utah Department of Corrections to formalize clear procedures and shared protocols. These sustainable partnerships are ensuring that future programming will be aligned with institutional policies and are in cooperation with UPEP staff, Education Advocates, and their broader constituents.

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“Students envisioned a space where learning could be shared and experienced as a relational and community-driven process, rather than an individual endeavor. .”

- **Dr. Pamela Cappas-Toro**, director of Teaching, Learning, and Impact for PEARL

Topic 4: FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

WE'VE BEGUN STRATEGIZING AROUND DEVELOPING DIVERSE REVENUE SOURCES THROUGH MEMBERSHIPS FOR HEP, + FARE CHARGE EMPLOYEES

State Library administered by the Dept. of Corrections has completed a few things in Michigan:
1) funded a statewide data survey of libraries for the program
2) set high standards for program quality
3) experience
4) encourage collaboration between libraries

Some funders have shifting priorities, where HEP/R may not have a dedicated Budget or strategy (P)

Leverage the stories and data to amplify the opportunity. In ways that are asset-based and honor the experience (vital & professional). (S)

Funders face limited budgets and have to make difficult decisions on what to invest in. (P)

Looking for opportunities to co-fund w/ other funders, to minimize dollars and opening to meet need (S)

#2

TAPPING INTO state funded resources for keeping (name program)

Braided funding - government/institutional + private foundations

How do you get to braided funding -

State/city like items for campus based stuff -

Private foundation become used for student services/unrestricted funding.

Templates for advocacy/ Speaking to Return on Investment

Public/Private funding/matching

Generating a well-creating cross-institutional pathways to leverage funding has also to ↑ capacity of project momentum + highly project

Learning that we are interconnected and have to leverage our opportunities to leverage return them. (P)
We have the 2nd chance to create the conditions for educational success.

Using grant funds to support projects that address

CONTINUALLY WORKING ON OUR ONBOARDING AND WHAT PROFESSIONAL DEV LOOKS LIKE INTERNALLY

05

Planning for sustainability

Planning for sustainability

Partnerships between community-based organizations and college-based programs help formerly incarcerated students by providing coordinated support and creating pathways to educational and career success.

However, even strong partnerships can often struggle to provide services due to staff changes, funding uncertainty, and shifts in organizational priorities. Our cohort has demonstrated that sustainability is often about ensuring that knowledge, relationships, and commitment continue over time.

Moving beyond individual champions

Program missions often rely on individual champions, or passionate members who act as the driving force behind the organization or cause. However, sustainable partnerships require collective commitment, especially when founders and staff move onto new endeavors. Partnerships become more vulnerable when critical knowledge or decision-making rests within only a few key members. Instead, partners should work toward embedding partnership responsibilities into organizational structures and operations. This can include:

- Identifying staff members within each partner organization who can serve as points of contact and maintain key partnership relationships.
- Establishing communication protocols like monthly partnership meetings, quarterly leadership check-ins, and documented follow-up actions.
- Formalizing expectations through written agreements that clarify roles, responsibilities, referral processes, and decision-making authority.

When partnership responsibilities are shared across multiple people and embedded into organizational processes, they are less likely to be disrupted by staff turnover or leadership changes. Partnerships can also prepare through transition planning in order to maintain momentum, especially if founders or directors retire.

Transition planning involves identifying critical partnership roles, knowledge, and responsibilities. Use the reflection exercise below with staff and leadership in order to contemplate how your partnership will maintain continuity during staff or leadership transitions and identify opportunities to strengthen your planning.



Partnership reflection: planning for staff and leadership transitions

As your partnership grows, staff and leadership changes are inevitable. Partners should take the time to consider the questions below to plan for future transitions. Review these questions with leadership and staff and then document any action items.

Staff and leadership transitions

- Who currently manages the partnership?
- Who would assume these responsibilities if that person left?
- Is there a backup leader for key partnership responsibilities?
- Are leadership roles and responsibilities documented?

Documentation and knowledge transfer

- Are partnership procedures documented?
- Could a new staff member understand how the partnership operates using existing materials?
- What deadlines, deliverables, or funding requirements require ongoing attention?

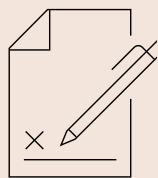
Planning ahead

- What knowledge should be transferred before someone leaves?
- How will relationships with partners and students be handed off?
- What documents, systems, and resources should be transferred?

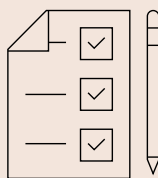
Next step: Identify one or two priority actions that your partnership can take to strengthen continuity planning (e.g., documenting procedures, creating a shared file repository, or developing a transition checklist).

Preserving institutional knowledge

Many partnerships and organizations operate based on informal knowledge; staff often intimately know the relationships involved, how referrals and supports work, and how problems are typically solved. A challenge, however, is that informal knowledge is often not documented or preserved. It is important to create formal documentation that helps preserve institutional knowledge to ensure continuity. Important documents to develop and maintain can include:



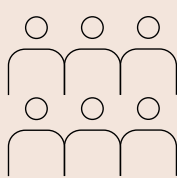
Memoranda of understanding (MOUs): Formal agreements that define each partner’s roles, responsibilities, and expectations. An MOU should define who provides which services, what information will be shared, and how partnerships will be reviewed and updated over time.



Standard operating procedures (SOPs): Step-by-step guidance for carrying out routine activities and coordinating services. SOPs can include referral processes, eligibility criteria, required forms, case management procedures, onboarding, records management, and coordination with partner organizations.



Job descriptions and role documentation: Current job descriptions define responsibilities, reporting relationships, and partnership duties. Role-specific documentation can also identify key knowledge that should be transferred during transitions.



Contact lists: A directory of personnel across partner organizations, which should include names, roles, phone numbers, email addresses, and backup contacts. It is important to track key relationships and review and update lists periodically.

Create central repositories

Partnerships should also consider maintaining a central repository for key documents like mission statements, key points of contacts, contracts and agreements, current initiative information, referral and student support procedures, and funding information. Repositories can also include annual reports, communication templates, and impact data. The repository should be stored in a shared location that can be accessed by multiple staff members rather than a single individual.

Strong documentation supports onboarding

New staff members bring new expertise, but often lack understanding of the history, relationships, and processes that have developed over time. Investing time in onboarding helps maintain continuity and strengthens partnership capacity over time.

Core knowledge for onboarding: an onboarding process should contain clear knowledge on the partnership’s purpose, including why it exists, the student population it serves, and the shared goals guiding the work. It should also explain the partnership’s structure by identifying the organizations involved, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and outlining how decisions are made. New team members should learn how students are referred into the program, what support services are available, and the current referral process. In addition, onboarding should introduce key contacts across both organizations, relevant community partners, and internal departments, while also providing an overview of current projects, funding sources, existing documentation, and organizational priorities.

Onboarding involves creating a system to develop and maintain institutional knowledge that makes teams more effective in carrying out functions and fulfilling their duties. Use the reflection exercise below with staff and leadership in order to identify current gaps in the onboarding process and opportunities to improve it.



Partnership reflection: planning for onboarding

Onboarding is a key component to sustainability as organizations grow. Partners should take the time to consider the current onboarding process and where there is room for improvement. Review these questions with leadership and staff and then document any action items.

Current onboarding process

- How are new staff introduced to the partnership?
- Who is responsible for onboarding new staff?
- What written materials or resources currently exist?

Documentation and knowledge transfer

- Where do new staff commonly experience confusion?
- Which parts of onboarding rely on informal knowledge rather than documented information?

Planning ahead

- Which materials related to onboarding need to be updated?
- What new resources should be developed to instruct new staff?

Next step: Identify one or two priority actions that your partnership can take to strengthen onboarding (e.g., documenting procedures, program history overview, referral flowcharts, contact lists, etc.)

Funding and sustainability

Funding can be an ongoing challenge for long-term sustainability. Many reentry partnerships begin with grant support, but that funding is often short-term, donor-driven, and highly competitive. To build sustainable partnerships, organizations should look beyond a single funding source and pursue a diversified or braided funding strategy. This can include:

- Federal and state funding opportunities
- Foundation and philanthropic support
- Institutional funding, including university investment and buy-in
- Workforce development resources
- Employer partnerships
- In-kind contributions and community support

Rather than assigning a single funding source to an entire partnership, consider matching funding sources to specific functions. For example, workforce development funds may support career readiness service and community donations may support emergency student assistance.



COHORT TIPS

Collaborative approaches to funding opportunities

- » Identify unmet reentry needs that partnerships can address. Funders often look for proposals that fill clear service gaps. Consider where you and your partners can combine staff, facilities, expertise, or other resources to expand services that are not currently available.
- » Use partnerships to demonstrate capacity. When developing grant proposals, collaborate with partners that provide complementary services or resources. Joint proposals can show that partners have established mechanisms that can further service delivery through expertise and resources to meet community needs.

Demonstrating impact: data and storytelling

Partnerships that can demonstrate impact are often better positioned to sustain long-term support. Cohort members have emphasized that data and storytelling help stakeholders understand real human impacts and can be important tools in engaging funders, institutional leaders, and community members.

Partnerships can also build storytelling into existing practices and should consider creating a regular process for gathering student and faculty perspectives. Examples can include:

- Conducting student and faculty interviews
- Collecting written reflections from students at key milestones (See: <https://sr.ithaka.org/Post-Secondary-Reflection/>)
- Hosting alumni panels
- Inviting students and faculty to participate in site visits with funders or institutional leaders
- Creating short video testimonials that students can choose to share



COHORT TIPS

Communicating project impact

- » Define success beyond recidivism. In your communications, you can frame recidivism as not the only success indicator and instead emphasize outcomes related to educational attainment, career advancement, personal growth, and community engagement. Demonstrating multiple points of impact can also demonstrate to funders a more comprehensive understanding of your program’s success.
- » Measure outcomes that matter to students. Developing evaluation measures with program participants can help reflect outcomes that are valued by students and the community. In your program evaluations and storytelling, consider outcomes like advocacy skills, leadership development, civic engagement, and sense of belonging.
- » Center student voices in your communications. Consider how to incorporate the voices of program participants through testimonials, interviews, op-eds, and direct engagement with funders, institutional leaders, and community stakeholders. Pairing student voices with outcome data can help to further illustrate both the human and program impact.



Ethical storytelling

When sharing student stories, it is important to obtain informed consent, avoid sensationalizing their incarceration experience, and make sure to center their accomplishments. Below is a checklist to consider when publishing communications on students:

- Obtain informed consent and explain how the story will be used. Make it clear that participation is voluntary and will not affect services or educational opportunities.
- Center accomplishments, skills, goals, and future aspirations.
- Avoid defining students by their incarceration or emphasizing traumatic experiences. Make sure to also use person-first, respectful language (e.g., “student who is incarcerated” rather than labels).
- Allow students to review and approve their quotes or story before publication. Also, protect privacy by removing identifying details if requested by students.
- Use a principled lens in reviewing communications by asking whether a story preserves the student’s agency before sharing.

