College and Community Partnerships

For Reentry – Workbook

ITHAKA S+R

Sindy Lopez
Ess Pokornowski
Tammy Ortiz

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.

This workbook accompanies the College and Community Partnerships for Reentry Playbook available at https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/college-and-community-partnerships-for-reentry

Workbook designed by Grace Cope

Published September 2026

Contents

EXERCISE

Conversation Starters on Partnership Fit

Explore reentry partnership fit for community-based organizations and college-based programs. Surface assumptions, identify alignment and misalignments, and clarify main goals and expectations before partnership design begins.

Complete this exercise in conversation with a potential partner organization.

Aligning on preferences clarifies expectations and how partner organizations can work together. While this doesn't guarantee success, it can create a foundation for stronger collaboration in the future. It's typical for partners to operate differently, noting differences can signal opportunities to talk through assumptions, approaches, and expectations in order to design potential partnerships more intentionally.

There are no right or wrong answers. This exercise is about understanding each other's expectations. Some of the questions may be more relevant than others depending on partnership, so feel free to add additional questions into the original set.

Participants:

» One to two community-based organization staff and leadership members
» One to two college-based program staff and leadership members

Materials Needed:

» Conversation Starters flashcards (included)
» Colored markers, pens, pencils
» Dots stickers

Recommended use

Before beginning this exercise, partners should have already engaged in initial relationship-building conversations to get to know one another and determine whether there is mutual interest in pursuing a partnership. This exercise is designed for the next phase, which is to determine if the partnership is a good fit and before formal partnership planning and development

Steps

01 | Individual selection

As individual organizations, review each question in the Conversation Starters flashcards. Discuss each question and then mark one answer per question on the cards. (with marker, pen/pencil, dots, etc.).

02 | Compare responses

As a group, review each question. Compare where markers are placed and discuss the results, noting:

- Alignment: Which answers are similar and where you have shared expectations. These areas might be easier to operationalize or integrate into partnership planning.
- Areas to work through: Where your answers are different. Consider why your potential partners answered questions differently and what steps to take to find middle ground.
- Possible friction points: Where there are significant differences in your answers. For example, how decisions are made, who leads key functions, how funding is managed, how student outcomes are prioritized, etc. These may need a clear agreement or mitigation before moving forward with partnership.

03 | Closing reflections

At the end of the exercise, discuss with potential partners:

- Where are we most aligned?
- Where are we the most different? Can these differences create friction?
- Are these differences a preference or non-negotiable?
- Where do we feel most comfortable and confident about moving forward?

Adapted From: "Museum-University Partnerships Conversation Starters." NCCPE. https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/tools-and-frameworks/mupi-conversation-starters

What type of partnership timeline are you seeking?

A — Short-term (pilot)

B — Mid-term (one to three years)

C — Long-term (ongoing)

What partnership structure do you prefer?

A — Informal/ flexible

B — Semi-formal (documented roles and expectations)

C — Formal (contract with deliverables, MOU)

CUT

CUT

What role do you expect to play?

A — Lead implementer

B — Co-creator/ equal partner

C — Supporting/ connector role

What is the main driver for this partnership?

A — Mission (shared values)

B — Program (service delivery)

C — Resources (outreach/ access)

How should decision-making be handled?

- **A** One lead decision-maker
- **B** Shared decision-making
- **C** Org-based authority (each leads their area)

How should funding be approached?

- **A** Separate funding (funds own work)
- **B** Shared funding (joint/braided funding)
- **C** Lead-funded (one org manages funding)

CUT

CUT

How often will we communicate?

- **A** As needed
- **B** Monthly or quarterly
- **C** Weekly or biweekly

Who defines what success looks like?

- **A** One lead organization defines success
- **B** Success is co-defined equally
- **C** Each partner defines success for their role

EXERCISE

Vetting a Potential Partner

This tool is designed to help community-based organizations and college-based programs to assess alignment, expertise, capacity, and collaboration readiness before entering into a reentry-focused partnership.

Use this tool in conversation within your own program or organization.

Use this assessment to guide conversations, surface potential risks, and arrive at a decision on whether to move forward with a potential partnership, gather more information, or pause partnership exploration for the time being.

This assessment evaluates four core areas of partnership success: 1) alignment and strategy; 2) expertise; 3) capacity and commitment; and 4) collaboration.

Participants:
» One to two key decision makers from your organization

Materials needed:
» Potential Partner Assessment
» Writing instrument (pen, pencil, marker)

Recommended use

Before beginning this exercise, partners should have already engaged in initial relationship-building conversations to get to know one another and determine whether there is mutual interest in pursuing a partnership. This exercise is designed for the next phase, which is to determine if the partnership is a good fit and whether partners are ready to move from exploration to planning.

Steps

01 | Fill out the Potential Partner Assessment collaboratively with your organization. Discuss each guiding question and capture notes or evidence to be used for later decisions.

02 | For each guiding question, choose a rating for your answers:

- **"Strong fit":** You believe there is clear alignment and readiness between the organizations and there are minimal concerns
- **"Need more information":** You believe that the potential partnership is promising, but there are still some unanswered questions on alignment. Note: If unclear, default to "Need more information".
- **"Misalignment":** You believe there is some misalignment and have some concerns about risks.

03 | Interpret your ratings using the following scoring guide:

Ratings	What does this mean?	Potential next steps?
Most statements are marked as "Strong fit"	**Think about moving forward with partnership** There may be is strong alignment across key areas (mission, expertise, capacity, collaboration) and no major risks have been identified	1. Move into partnership design and planning 2. Begin defining scope, timeline, and responsibilities 3. Begin document agreements (formal or informal)
Two or more statements are marked as "Need more information"	**Clarify gaps and then reassess** The partnership may show promise, but some details remain unclear. Partners likely need more clarification on where alignments and misalignments exist.	1. Identify specific gaps in understanding and ask more targeted questions 2. Consider a pilot or a short-term collaboration 3. Reassess after additional information is gathered
One or more statements are marked as "Misalignment"	**Pause and gather more information** There may be some issues that lead to challenges if left unaddressed.	1. Pause formal partnership development 2. Determine whether issues are fixable (e.g., unclear roles) or structural (e.g., mission misalignment). If concerns are fixable, try to re-engage after conditions change. If concerns are structural, do not proceed at this stage.

Potential Partner Assessment

Alignment and strategy	Rating (check one):	Notes or follow-up questions:
Mission and vision alignment To what extent are missions and priorities of each partner aligned around reentry, education access, and student success?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	
Shared benefits and goals Are there clear, shared or complementary goals for both organizations?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	
Shared language Do both partners use similar language and ideas to refer to the students that they serve?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	
Target population Are both partners aligned on how and when they are serving students? (timing of reentry, specific student needs)	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	

Expertise	Rating (check one):	Notes or follow-up questions:
Working with community Does the partner have a demonstrated history and experience working with re-entering or incarcerated students?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	
Complementary expertise Does this partner offer expertise that could strengthen areas where our organization needs additional support?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	

Capacity and commitment	Rating (check one):	Notes or follow-up questions:
Leadership and buy-in Is there clear leadership and organizational buy-in to support this partnership?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	
Operational capacity Are staff capacity, expertise, and time available to support partnership activities?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	

Operations and collaboration	Rating (check one):	Notes or follow-up questions:
Roles and responsibilities Can roles and responsibilities between partners be clearly defined early on?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	
Coordination Is there a plan for how students will move between partners? (e.g., referrals, warm handoffs, shared case management)	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	
Collaboration practices Are communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution practices between partners already established for future collaboration?	○ Strong fit ○ Need more information ○ Concern	

EXERCISE

Aligning Collaborator Language

This exercise is designed to help community-based organizations and college-based programs partnering to serve reintegrating students to understand: 1. Why each partner describes and defines their programs, values, and services the way they do. 2. How they can develop a shared vocabulary to describe their collaboration.

It might feel tedious or overly simple to discuss something so basic, but making sure that the terms that collaborators use—and the meanings intended—match up is an important piece of outreach, expectation management, and quality control.

What language needs to line up?

Partnering college-based programs and community-based organizations don't need to use the same terms for everything. They may not even think of the individuals they serve in the same way—college-based programs often refer to those they serve as students or alumni, while community-based organizations often use terms like client. This makes sense as the services they deliver and the role they play differ in meaningful ways. However, when these organizations partner to refer or deliver shared services or programs, it is important that the terms and intentions they use match. While that may seem obvious, it often cannot happen without explicit conversation and exploration. This may mean making sure that you accurately describe a partner organization's services and offerings or it may mean developing shared language to describe joint services.

Participants:

» One to two community-based organization staffmembers
» One to two college-based program staffmembers
» Optional: you could include more stakeholders and/or students or clients to ensure the language you settle on makes sense and feels accurate.

Materials needed:

» White board or flipchart
» Sticky notes or scrap paper
» Existing brochures, websites, referral materials, program descriptions, or other communications that describe your organizations, missions, and/ or services.

Recommended use

After initial exploratory conversations and at the start of partnership design to help inform goals and implementation plans.

Steps

01 | Read, rephrase, and reflect on your own language

Individually, take 5–10 minutes to write down words or phrases you commonly use when describing:

- The people you serve
- Your organization's mission or role
- Your services or programs

If available, you may reference brochures, websites, or other organizational materials for ideas.

02 | Discuss

As a group, discuss the key terms and services surfaced by each organization. Take notes and make comments for yourself:

- Which words or phrases are similar?
- Are there descriptions or explanations you particularly like?
- Are there important ways the language you would use is different?

03 | Align and document

- Afterwards, individually write a couple brief sentences describing the work of your partner organization to a reintegrating client or student.
- After reviewing together and then come to a shared understanding of how you will describe the program or services being offered or referred through your collaboration.
- Make sure to consider both what is the most precise or accurate way to describe services and what might be the most helpful and easy to understand way. The goal is not for every organization to abandon its own terminology, but to ensure that when communicating about the partnership that the language is consistent.
- Example: you might partner to help clients or students access "professionalization training." Be sure that both collaborating organizations understand what that does and does not include and how to explain it simply.
- Record any agreed-upon language or terms in a shared document for future reference.

04 | Reflect and consider

After aligning on potential language and terms, discuss:

- In this process, where were points of tension or disagreement?
- What worked well or was easy to resolve?
- How will you use this shared language in future communications, referrals, or outreach?

EXERCISE

Building a Shared Mission

Use this exercise to build a shared mission and identify shared goals, develop a shared language, and produce a first draft of a working mission statement.

Participants:
» One to two community-based organization staff and leadership members
» One to two college-based program staff and leadership members

Materials needed:
» Printed exercise
» Writing tools: pens, pencils, markers
» Sticky notes and whiteboard/flipchart or virtual whiteboard/document (e.g., Mural, Miro)

Steps

01 | Take a few minutes to individually reflect on your organizational goals. Using sticky notes, respond to the following prompts:

- What are the top goals for this partnership?
- What outcomes would indicate success?

02 | Go around the group and have each person share their top priorities. As people share, have one or two facilitators cluster the sticky notes on the whiteboard or flip chart, based on similarities. Using a marker or different sticky note, identify:

- Shared Goals: What you want to achieve together.
- Complementary Goals: Goals that support partnership, but may not be a shared priority for all partners.

03 | After discussing, identify the one to three shared goals and record them in the "Shared Goals" section of the worksheet. These goals will serve as the foundation for your North Star and partnership planning.

Recommended use

Complete collaboratively with program and leadership staff after initial exploratory conversations and at the start of partnership design to help inform goals, roles, and implementation plans.

04 | After reviewing your shared goals, discuss the following prompts and record them in the worksheet:

- Who are we serving?
- What is our desired impact?

05 | Now, you'll try and define an overarching mission, or North Star. This is a clear articulation of what the partnership or program is trying to achieve and why it matters. You can return to this statement across your partnership to help inform decisions or stay aligned. Record your drafts in the "North Star" section of the worksheet.

- Write one to two drafts of the statement: "Our partnership exists to ___ so that ___."

06 | Discuss the guiding principles that will help shape how you work together to achieve your North Star. Discuss your shared values and, in the worksheet, complete the three "we will be guided by..." statements. Below is an example:

- Principle #1 Shared Accountability: "We will be guided by shared accountability in order to address successes and challenges together"

07 | Review your draft shared goals, North Star statements, and guiding principles. As a group, select or combine your favorite ideas into one working mission statement. This is just a starting point that can be refined as your partnership grows.

08 | After developing your working mission statements, try to set short-term goals, milestones, and metrics for the next year. Use the goals and milestones section to capture your ideas. For this section:

- Set specific, finite, and measurable goals that serve the mission or North Star.
- Make metrics measurable (e.g., "distribute 50 vouchers," "hold three training sessions")

09 | After reviewing your intended goals and milestones for the next year, develop a roles and communications plan to decide who will do the work and how. For this section decide:

- Who will lead or support the strategic mission and plan?
- How frequently will you review updates together (e.g., quarterly, yearly, etc.)
- What information should be shared with different audiences? When should it be shared and with who?
- Who will be responsible for ensuring this information is shared?

10 | At the end of the exercise, review the worksheet and discuss:

- Does the draft mission statement and vision reflect our shared goals?
- Where do we need more clarity and agreement?
- What are our immediate next steps?

Worksheet: Building a Shared Mission

Shared goals

1. ______________________________

2. ______________________________

3. ______________________________

Who are we serving?

____

What is our desired impact?

____

North Star: "Our partnership exists to ____ so that ____."

1. ______________________________

2. ______________________________

Guiding principles

"We will be guided by…"______________________________

"We will be guided by…"______________________________

"We will be guided by…"______________________________

Working mission statement

Our partnership's working mission statement:

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

Goals and milestones

	Six months	One year
Shared goals:		
Success metrics:		
Milestones:		
Checkpoints:		
Responsible person(s):		

Roles and communication strategy

Audience	What to share	Frequency / format	What to keep internal
Internal / partner Org(s)			
Funders / stakeholders			
Public / community			
Other (specify):			

EXERCISE

Making a Road Map

Identify shared goals, priorities, and actions using a logic model framework. Partners will map what goals they want to achieve, what outcome they want to see over time, and have a shared artifact to return to.

What is a logic model?

Logic models are “road maps” that try to answer these questions: What are we trying to change? What will we do? What resources do we need? And what changes do we hope to see in the short and long term? They can help you identify what the partnership is trying to achieve, how to plan to get there, and what you’ll need to achieve these goals.

Definitions for exercise

- Activities: What we will do togetherThe actions, services, events, or strategies that we need to carry out to support students.
- Inputs: What we need to make this work
- The people, resources, tools, funding, and time needed to carry out our activities.
- Outcomes: The changes we hope to see
- The improvements or changes that happen as a result of your work. Outcomes focus on what is different for students, organizations, or the community because of the partnership.

Participants:

» One to two community-based organization staff members
» One to two college-based program staff members

Materials needed:

» Logic model
» Sticky notes, dot stickers, and whiteboard/flipchart
» If virtual: shared document or virtual whiteboard (e.g., Mural, Miro)

Recommended use

After initial exploratory conversations and at the start of partnership design to help inform goals and implementation plans.

Steps

01 | Identify key issues

Within the larger group, take a few minutes to individually reflect on the question: What are the key issues related to reentry and student success we want to address?

- Go around and share your ideas with the full group, allotting a few minutes to each person. Depending on the amount of ideas, each person should share their top three priority areas.
- A lead facilitator should begin to cluster similar priorities together, as individuals share their ideas.
- Once the ideas are clustered into similar areas, identify one to three shared priority areas you agree to focus on and document them in the situation section of the logic model.

02 | Define outcomes

Then, take a few minutes to individually reflect and define the outcomes for your partnership:

- Start with long-term outcomes:
  - What long-term change do we want to see (two+ years)?
  - What would success look like at the systems or community level?
- Move to intermediate outcomes:
  - What intermediate outcomes do we want to see in the next year?
  - What changes need to happen before we reach that long-term goal?
- Define short-term outcomes:
  - What short-term outcomes do we want to see in the next six months?
  - What immediate changes should happen first?
- As a full group, discuss and identify one to two outcomes per each time frame. If consensus is not clear, try and time limit discussion or give every individual three dot stickers to vote on their preferred outcome.

03 | Define activities

Next, identify the activities and inputs required to achieve outcomes. Work backwards from the desired outcomes to ensure that activities are tied to results. Discuss: What do we need to do to achieve these outcomes? For example [add examples]. Add these to the template under Activities.

04 | Identify inputs

Discuss the resources that are needed to complete the Activities. For example, staff time, funding, space, data systems, tools, etc. Add these to the template under Inputs next to the activities they support.

05 | Closing reflections

Once you’ve filled out the template, check for gaps or mismatches between activities inputs, and outcomes. Discuss with your partners:

- What assumptions did we uncover?
- What feels realistic vs aspirational?
- What are our immediate next steps (one to two months)?

"If we can identify key issues" → "We can decide on inputs and activities" → "We can achieve these outcomes"

Key issues

What it means: The key issues you want to focus on

How it connects to the exercise: Ensure everyone is aligned on what matters most

Inputs
Resources we need

What it means: Resources each partner brings to collaboration (staff, funding, space, etc.)

How it connects to the exercise: Clarify what can be contributed and what is needed for partnership.

Activities
What we do

What it means: Specific actions or services that will be carried out together.

How it connects to the exercise: Define how partners will work together to create change.

Outcomes
Changes we hope to see

What it means: The changes/ results that happen because of your activities

How it connects to the exercise: Outcomes are your goals (defines success in the short-, mid-, and long-term)

Planned work

What you want to achieve over time

Key issues	Inputs Resources we need	Activities What we do	Outcomes Changes we hope to see
	Short term (within six months)		
	Intermediate (within one year)		
	Long term (within two+ years		

EXERCISE

Campus Policy Audit

Historically, campus policy is seldom designed with formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students in mind. As a result, administrative, logistical, and cultural assumptions can make it more difficult for such students to navigate campus systems.

This tool is designed to help assess how existing policies, practices, and resources support—or hinder—formerly incarcerated and reintegrating students. Through this exercise, you will: identify strengths, document evidence, uncover gaps, and prioritize opportunities to improve the college fluency and student experience of formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. This audit focuses on three stages in the reintegrating student experience:

1. Awareness and access
2. Integration and belonging on campus
3. Career pathways and post-degree support

Participants:

» At least one participant from campus offices that influence student experience (e.g., admissions, financial aid, advising, student affairs, career services, higher education in prison programs, or reentry partnerships)
» Strongly encourage: one to two student and faculty representatives
» Designate one facilitator to guide discussion and one note-taker to document findings, evidence, and action items.

Materials needed:

» Campus policy and practices audit
» Pen or pencil
» Scrap paper or whiteboard

Recommended use

Use this audit at any stage of program or partnership development or implementation to evaluate how campus policies affect re-entering students. You can also use this tool as part of ongoing institutional planning and continuous improvement. Complete collaboratively with staff across campus offices and departments to identify policy gaps and consider how to improve coordination.

Steps

01 | Fill out the campus policy and policies audit with your group according to your institution's current policies, practices, and available resources to determine what support already exists for re-entering students.

02 | Once you've filled out the audit, assign a rating for each question. The rating system is intended to help identify priority areas for discussion and improvement. Ratings should be informed by the evidence collected during the audit.

- **"Established":** There is a clear process, policy, or support system already established.
- **"Developing":** An informal process, policy, or practice exist, but they are inconsistent or not widely communicated
- **"Missing":** There is no clear process or support in place, or students may face barriers in this area.

03 | Review your results and discuss suggested next steps with your group:

Ratings	What does this mean?	Suggested next steps
Most statements are marked as "established"	Your institution has foundational supports for formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students.	Continue strengthening coordination across departments and partnerships. Identify opportunities to improve and expand supports.
A mix of "established," "developing," and "missing" ratings	Some promising practices exist, but there are some inconsistencies across departments or stages of the formerly incarcerated or system-impacted student's experience.	Clarify policies, improve coordination, and identify priority areas for improvement.
Most statements are marked as "missing"	There may be barriers affecting formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students across the student experience due to lack of information, policies, and practices.	Focus on building foundational policies, improving collaboration, and addressing gaps.

04 | After completing the audit, discuss with your team:

- Where are the biggest gaps in support for re-entering students?
- Which areas were hardest to assess or lacked clear information?
- If we could improve one policy, process, or practice immediately, what would it be?

05 | Consider and discuss what should be prioritized over the next six to 12 months. Capture one to two opportunity areas identified through the audit. For example:

Priority area	Proposed action	Lead person	Timeline	Follow-up conversation
Ex: Admissions and enrollment	*Ex: Review admissions materials to ensure information for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students is clear and accessible.*	*John Smith (Admissions Office and HEP administrator)*	*Within six months*	*December 202X*

Campus Policy Audit

Student life-cycle stage	Policy area	Audit question	Rating	Notes or evidence
Awareness and access	College awareness and pre-application	Does your institution provide information about admission for applicants with conviction histories?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Does your institution highlight higher education in prison programs on its website?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
	Application and admissions	Does the application ask about convictions? [Undergraduate, Graduate, Transfer application]	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Is there a standardized review process for applications with conviction history?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Does the institution conduct background checks for applicants?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
	Financial aid	Are students provided guidance for completing the FAFSA after incarceration?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Are staff trained on financial aid eligibility rules affecting re-entering students?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Does the institution help students resolve defaulted federal loans?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	

Student life-cycle stage	Policy area	Audit question	Rating	Notes or evidence
Integration and belonging on campus	Enrollment	Are processes in place to transfer credits from college-in-prison programs?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Do admissions, advising, and financial aid coordinate to support re-entering students?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
	Student life	Are students with criminal records eligible for campus housing and other campus resources?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Are mental health services accessible and trauma-informed?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Are background checks required for student jobs?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
	Academic supports	Are tutoring and academic support services accessible for students?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Are faculty trained in trauma-informed teaching practices?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Are digital literacy programs available for students returning after incarceration?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	

Student life-cycle stage	Policy area	Audit question	Rating	Notes or evidence
Career pathways and post-degree support	Career services and employment	Does career counseling address employment barriers for people with records?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Are students informed about licensing restrictions related to conviction history?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Are background checks required for internships or clinical placements?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Does the institution reach out to fair-chance employers?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
	Graduation and alumni support	Are formerly incarcerated students connected with alumni networks or mentorship?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	
		Does the institution track employment outcomes for formerly incarcerated graduates?	○ Established ○ Developing ○ Missing	

Student Journey Mapping

EXERCISE

Identify the challenges and successes of a re-entering student as they try to enroll in college. You will discuss and map the student journey from preparing for release through the first day of class to identify where barriers and delays happen and uncover opportunities for better coordination and support.

This exercise is designed to help college-based programs and community-based organizations:

- Clarify the systems and processes that a student must navigate at the same time
- Identify where students are more likely to encounter barriers
- Surface assumptions, policies, or practices that create barriers
- Identify opportunities for coordination between college-based programs and community-based organizations

Participants:

» One to two program and leadership staffmembers from community-based organization
» One to two program and leadership staffmembers from college or university prison program
» One to two formerly incarcerated students. The student perspective is critical for this exercise.

Materials needed:

» Printed student journey map exercise
» Sticky notes
» Markers or pens
» Whiteboard or flip charts
» Dot stickers or colored markers for prioritization

Recommended use

After partners begin working together, during program design or strategic planning.

Steps

01 | Imagine a student that has just been released from prison. They want to enroll at their local college and attend classes on campus. They may be on parole or probation, may not have secured housing, and may not have easy access to documentation and technology. You and your team will map the interactions, barriers, and supports that shape the student's experience from release through their transition into college. Focus on what the process looks like today and not what it is intended to be.

02 | Use the student journey map template as a guide to map out the phases, using the format that works best for your group:

- This exercise can be done on paper, or translated to a whiteboard or a digital tool (e.g., Miro or Mural). Use sticky notes, markers, or digital notes to capture observations. One idea per note is recommended so that themes can be grouped and discussed.

03 | As a group, walk through each stage of a student's journey. The steps we provide are intended as prompts, not fixed categories. Feel free to rename, remove, or add steps based on your context:

- Pre-entry planning: Period preparing for reentry
- Post-release: First few weeks or months
- Applying for admission: Researching colleges and submitting applications
- Enrollment and financial aid: Navigating admissions, financial aid, class registration
- First day: Completing orientation, class schedule, campus readiness
- Campus life: Adapting after the first day

04 | For each step, use the suggested prompts to guide the discussion. The goal is not to answer each question, but to utilize these prompts to create a shared understanding of what the process currently looks like.

05 | After completing the map, review the barriers and drop-off points. You can use the following methods to identify the most high-impact barriers:

- Dot voting (three to five stickers per participant to mark most important barriers)
- Use colored stickers or markers to mark the most challenging barriers
- Use a digital voting tool in a virtual platform

06 | After identifying the barriers, discuss the following questions:

- Which barriers cause the greatest harm to students?
- Which barriers can we address?
- What office would we reach out to in order to address this barrier?
- What is the next immediate action we can take to improve this process?

See an example: https://app.mural.co/t/ithaka4009/m/ithaka4009/1773839705269/9e66bda5432994d9862430145740d4aa0303fc4b

Student Journey Map

Timeline	Pre-entry planning	Post-release	Applying for admission	Enrollment and financial aid	First day	Campus life
Student actions *What does the student have to do at this step?*						
Documentation *What documentation will the student need?*						
Community *Which external systems must students navigate simultaneously?*						
Campus *Which offices are involved at this stage? How are they involved?*						
Barriers *Where does the process break down?*						
Opportunities *What could make this step easier for students?*						

Suggested prompts

Student actions

- What does the student have to do at this step?
- What decisions and deadlines are they facing?

Documentation needed

- What documentation will students need? (e.g., driver's license, transcripts, proof of residence)
- What are the obstacles in gathering documentation?

Community and external systems

- Which external systems must students navigate simultaneously?
- External supervision: parole and probation requirements, travel restrictions, mandatory meetings
- Housing agencies
- Workforce programs
- Transportation
- Basic needs and public benefits (SNAP, medicaid)
- Digital literacy and technology access
- How are students interacting with corrections at this stage?
- Where do community organizations step in?

Interaction with institution/campus offices

- Which offices are involved at this stage? (e.g., admissions, registrar, financial aid, advising, student life)
- What obstacles are students navigating within these offices?
- What assumptions do these offices make about students? (or what biases are present?)

Barriers

- Where does the process break down?
- What creates delays or drop-off?
- Where would a student realistically give up?

Opportunities

- What could make this process more accessible for students?
- Where could communication, coordination, or support improve?
- What partnerships or policy changes could reduce barriers?