



KNOWING OUR STUDENTS

# Justice-Impacted Students

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*All images in this document are for illustrative purposes only.*



# INTRODUCTION

Achieving the Dream's guide [\*Knowing Our Students: Understanding and Designing for Success\* \(2023\)](#) provides critical information and strategies to help colleges understand the diverse students they serve and provides tools that organize this important campus work.

The purpose of the supplemental guides is to highlight the significance of population-specific challenges as well as highlight what is working on college campuses. The supplemental guides are organized into sections that leverage the **student-centered design** process, referenced in the original guide, to help colleges better understand the challenges and focus on designing processes that support student populations who have been historically marginalized or have not been prioritized, such as justice-impacted students.

Also integrated into the supplemental guides (and discussed in the original guide) is the **framework for change** concepts — the structures, processes, and attitudes that sometimes create barriers for students (Achieving the Dream, 2023, pp. 32-33). This framework helps colleges design student-centered and equitable structures, policies, and processes to better serve their students. This guide identifies these challenges and barriers emphasized by the voices of justice-impacted students and shares recommendations and examples from the field for this population.

**A “justice-impacted” student is an individual whose education or life has been affected by involvement with the criminal justice system.**

## UNDERSTANDING JUSTICE-IMPACTED STUDENTS

Achieving the Dream's *Knowing Our Students* guide (2023) powerfully underscores the vital role that community colleges must play in deeply understanding the diverse backgrounds and needs of their students. This is particularly crucial for minoritized students — individuals whose identities were systematically excluded and overlooked during the creation of higher education as both a social and educational framework. Among these groups, justice-impacted students (referred to as “justice-involved” students in the original guide) stand out as one of the most significant and often misunderstood populations.

Truly understanding their unique challenges and experiences is essential for fostering an equitable and supportive academic environment.

A “justice-impacted” student is an individual whose education or life has been affected by involvement with the criminal justice system (Borough of Manhattan Community College, n.d.), Bronx Community College, n.d.), California State University – San Bernardino, n.d.). This includes those who currently are or have been incarcerated, are on probation or parole, or have faced criminal charges. Justice-impacted students are also family members who are or have been involved with the justice system through a close relative. Justice-impacted students may face unique barriers, such as stigma, limited access to resources, and challenges with employment and education, which can impact their academic experience and success.



With the start of the Second Chance Pell initiative, more than 45,000 incarcerated students have enrolled in postsecondary education since the program's launch in 2016 (Kersten et al., 2024).

Justice-impacted students endure significant “weathering” — adverse personal, economic, and social experiences that can diminish one’s identity, health, and drive — that make education both challenging and critical for them to gain or regain a chance at social mobility (Benjamin, 2022, p.40).

In 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice conducted a study focused on the employment rates of people released from federal prison in 2010. The report indicates that the average time for individuals to find their first job was approximately 6.6 months. In the first three months after release, the median quarterly earnings was approximately \$3,500, with earnings increasing over time. For incarcerated individuals preparing for reentry, community colleges offer degree and career training programs that can greatly assist with their transition.

Incredible transformations occur when we prioritize connecting with and understanding justice-impacted students, who have faced significant challenges and demonstrated resilience both personally and academically. As this guide

illustrates, these students are highly motivated, open to learning, and eager to pursue fields and professions that offer them opportunities. They are determined to overcome obstacles and seek

guidance from faculty.

While incarcerated, they strive to learn amid fluctuating and often unpredictable circumstances. Upon their release and reintegration into society, they frequently struggle with resource insecurity, which can delay their ability to pursue or continue their education until they achieve a stable foundation.

**Incredible transformations occur when we prioritize connecting with and understanding justice-impacted students, who have faced significant challenges and demonstrated resilience both personally and academically.**

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide on justice-impacted

students begins by profiling different categories of justice-impacted students and the unique circumstances in which each subgroup operates. We profile a justice-impacted student currently residing in Windham, Maine, and another residing in Lee, Texas. We then present two case studies of community colleges undertaking dynamic work with justice-impacted students: Nashville State Community College (Nashville, Tennessee) and North Central State College (Mansfield, Ohio). The guide concludes with critical components for community colleges looking to begin or expand their work serving justice-impacted students.



# SUPPORTING JUSTICE-IMPACTED STUDENTS

The challenges faced by justice-impacted students — both those currently incarcerated and those who have reentered society — are extensive and vary significantly depending on individual circumstances. However, community colleges have substantial opportunities to support these students. The approach taken will differ based on whether a student is currently incarcerated or has reentered society.

Currently incarcerated students, sometimes referred to as incarcerated scholars, encounter many challenges to an enriching educational experience that need to be addressed by colleges with flexibility, understanding, and care (Higher Education in Prison, n.d.). Lockdown is the most common challenge. Lockdown refers to periods of time when an incarcerated individual is confined to a cell or specific area of the facility due to security concerns, emergency, or routine safety protocols (LSD.Law, 2025). During lockdowns, educational programs, recreational activities, and other opportunities are suspended.

Another challenge is that faculty members often lack training in effective teaching methods suited for a prison setting, which can hinder their ability to meaningfully respond to sudden challenges like lockdowns. Prison work programs often emphasize low-wage trades and industries, which can limit opportunities for meaningful skill development. Consequently, justice-impacted students face challenges in gaining work experience relevant to their career aspirations. This lack of alignment creates barriers to accessing internships and extracurricular opportunities that are essential for enhancing their academic and professional growth.

**Justice-impacted students face challenges in gaining work experience relevant to their career aspirations.**

Justice-impacted students also face significant challenges as they reenter society. A crucial hurdle is determining whether the timing is right for them to begin or continue their studies. Justice-impacted students may face multiple forms of resource insecurity that hinder their academic success, including financial instability, housing and food insecurity, lack of affordable child care, and

limited access to health care and mental health services. Many justice-impacted students struggle with transportation and digital access, which are critical for attending classes and completing coursework. In addition, unresolved legal challenges and trauma from incarceration can further complicate their ability to focus on education. These challenges can impede their readiness to engage in college, whether in-person or online.

The absence of safe spaces within classrooms and on campuses can hinder justice-impacted students from feeling supported and included. Regular check-ins from counselors, faculty, and tutors can help students feel more supported. Advisors often provide tailored guidance that aligns with students' professional goals, such as navigating pathways that allow for employment despite having a criminal record. Without these environments, justice-impacted students may struggle to share aspects of their lived experiences, which limits their ability to process and reflect on their learning and professional aspirations. Students benefit from the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences, allowing them to process their learning journeys and consider future career paths, which fosters greater understanding and connection within the educational environment.





# WHAT IS: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Justice-impacted students, low-income students, historically excluded students, gender-fluid students, and post-traditional students all deserve the same support in higher education. Many of us have been captivated by Stephanie Land's memoir *Maid* (2019), in which she recounts how her education at a community college helped and empowered her to make key changes in her life and attain opportunities that were previously unreachable. The stigma associated with the justice-impacted students' experiences in the justice system might suggest that they do not belong in colleges or in society.

Understanding the student experience allows colleges to identify and address the specific needs, challenges, and goals of their student population, leading to more effective and relevant support. To fully understand the justice-impacted student experience, there are a few approaches that a college can take. Colleges can look at quantitative data on student identities, experiences, outcomes, and progression. They can also leverage qualitative data that focuses on the student experience and gain a fuller understanding of students' needs (both academic and personal) through interviews and focus groups. Engaging and elevating the student voice is critical to an accurate understanding of the student experience. Sections III and IV of the Knowing Our Students guide (2023) provide strategies and tools for colleges to use in pursuit of a richer understanding of their students that will set them up for a successful design process.

**"Education informs  
your choices and your  
attitudes and your  
understanding not only of  
the world, but of yourself  
and your place in it."**

— Victoria Scott

## Listening to Student Stories Victoria Scott, Inaugural Fellow, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison

Victoria Scott (pronouns: she/her/hers) is, as of this writing, an incarcerated student through the University of Maine's Prison Education Partnership (PEP) Program, with the Maine Department of

Corrections. She currently resides in the Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center in Windham, Maine.

Victoria has appreciated having a "seat at the table," both in terms of being able to pursue her education while in prison and in serving on a board that enables her to speak to issues impacting justice-impacted students who are currently incarcerated. While engaging in online courses, Victoria has appreciated faculty who noticed her and did not treat

her like "another ghost of an online student who was . . . mysteriously posting messages on the boards in response to conversation topics." The regular check-ins from faculty and enthusiastic engagement with Victoria's work helped her feel "accepted into the academic community" and "brightened [her] sense of optimism." They also help her build a network while she is still incarcerated that will support her upon release from prison and as she transitions into society.

As a justice-impacted student working toward social reentry, Victoria cited the value of the work



undertaken by faculty and a program coordinator to meet with her to discuss academic and workforce opportunities. One faculty member supported Victoria by reviewing a sample grant proposal she drafted, offering page-by-page and section-by-section feedback. The skills and experiences that faculty have helped develop in Victoria are already valuable to her and will become even more so upon her reentry, as she will be able to share her skill set with future employers and community members. She refers to the process of meeting with faculty as “working across the walls.” Her story underscores a key principle of the *Knowing Our Students* guide (2023): when college faculty and staff make students feel seen, heard, known, and valued, education is much more likely to have a transformative impact, particularly for justice-impacted students.

Victoria urges educators to be vigilant about inequitable access to higher education opportunities for justice-impacted students, particularly regarding gender disparities among those currently incarcerated. With more men than women in prison, educational opportunities tend to be disproportionately directed toward male inmates, leaving women feeling overlooked. A 2020 Vera Institute report supports Victoria’s perspective. The report shows that 8% of Second Chance Pell opportunities are utilized by men, compared to just 1% of women (p. 5). As Victoria states, “It doesn’t mean we [women] have less of a right to access education and resources, student advising services, and all those things. That’s incredibly important.” She also advocates for colleges to offer justice-impacted students who are incarcerated opportunities like research assistantships, which can provide valuable experiences that enhance their resumes and curricula vitae.

**“Everyone should have the opportunity to pursue an education separate from incarceration. You shouldn’t have to be a prisoner to get an education.”**

— Amber Galvan

## Amber Galvan, Customer Service Representative, Kit Turbines, LLC

Amber Galvan (pronouns: she/her/hers) reentered society approximately 18 months ago and reflects, “I’m not exactly where I want to be, but I’m successful, and I have a lot to be thankful for with

everyone around me.” An alumna of Lee College (Texas), she credits her success to the high-quality classes, supportive faculty and staff, and timely resources the college provided, particularly during her reentry after release.

(For more, visit Lee College’s Huntsville Center [webpage](#).) While incarcerated, Amber studied supply chain management, and, during the past six months, she has been applying her training as a customer service representative at Kit Turbines, an authorized distributor of PT6 parts for aircraft maintenance.

Amber is a first-generation college student who initially did not recognize the value of education in her early years. Like many incarcerated individuals, she dropped out of high school. Prior to her incarceration, she prioritized her family and children over pursuing her education, even starting and owning two businesses as an entrepreneur. However, during her time in prison, Amber realized that she wanted to maximize her potential. “You have time to reflect on and work on yourself,” she says of life in prison. She was incarcerated at Lucile Plane State Jail in Dayton, Texas, a women’s prison, where she experienced “horrific” living conditions. Early in her two-year stay, Amber completed an I-60 form, a formal way for Texas incarcerated scholars to submit requests to prison staff, officials, or committees, to resume her education. She quickly earned her GED and began exploring her options for higher education at Lee College.



At the time, Amber had two programs of study options, horticulture and supply chain management, available to her (while five options are now available). Although she initially leaned toward horticulture, she ultimately chose supply chain management after recognizing the vast job opportunities in that field. Her advisor at Lee College worked tirelessly to ensure Amber had all the resources needed for success. While studying, Amber found that Lee created a learning environment like that of a traditional college campus, providing the materials, technology, instruction, and experiences necessary for success. In class, she formed strong connections with her fellow justice-impacted students, and together, they provided mutual support.

As a justice-impacted student, Amber found that the most challenging experience was her first day and the following weeks after reentering society. She almost returned to prison on the same day she was released because her initial housing situation fell through. Fortunately, a sober living housing facility was able to provide her housing. Lee College connected Amber to networking events and a support group for justice-impacted students,

as well as gas cards to help cover transportation costs.

Amber is currently pursuing Associate of Applied Science degrees in logistics and supply chain management as well as business management, building on her initial training and degree. She credits the college's wraparound support as crucial to her successful reentry. She states, "What broke me out of my shell was Lee College. They saw how closed up I was, and they gave me space when I needed it. They talked to me and tried to figure out what my plans were in life so they could support those plans. ... I realized that these people are never leaving my life. They want to be there. They want to see me strive."

## Commonly Encountered Barriers

Community colleges face unique challenges in creating inclusive environments that support the success of justice-impacted students. The college experience is often not designed with justice-impacted students in mind. As outlined





in Achieving the Dream's *Holistic Student Supports Toolkit* (2018), "Redesigning the student experience through a holistic student supports approach requires transformative institutional change rather than piecemeal enhancements to significantly and sustainably improve outcomes." Achieving this transformative change involves addressing and removing structural, policy-related, procedural, and attitudinal barriers. This is particularly important for justice-impacted students, who often find themselves at a crossroads, coping with social and institutional stigmas and obstacles.

## Structural Barriers

The community college mission focuses on serving all students, including those who are justice impacted. A significant structural barrier community colleges face when serving justice-impacted students is the lack of integrated data systems to identify and track this population effectively. Without specific coding or mechanisms in student information systems to indicate justice-impacted status, colleges struggle to understand the unique needs of these students

or to tailor resources and support services accordingly. This gap limits the institution's ability to provide targeted outreach, measure outcomes, or address systemic challenges, such as reentry support, financial aid eligibility, or access to career services, ultimately hindering efforts to create an equitable and supportive educational environment.

A key structural challenge in serving students who are incarcerated is the limited access to technology and digital resources. Many correctional facilities restrict or prohibit internet access due to security concerns, making it difficult to deliver modern, technology-driven educational content. This limitation affects the ability to offer online courses, use learning management systems, or provide digital textbooks and resources, which are increasingly standard in higher education. As a result, incarcerated students often rely on outdated materials and face barriers to developing digital literacy skills, which are crucial for academic success and workforce readiness after release. This disconnect between educational delivery and real-world expectations poses a significant challenge for community colleges striving to support incarcerated learners effectively.



## Policy and Process Barriers

A significant policy challenge community colleges face in serving justice-impacted students who have been released is the lack of clear institutional policies to address reentry-related needs. Justice-impacted students often face barriers such as unpaid court fines, probation requirements, or restrictions on certain career pathways, which can impact their ability to enroll, attend classes, or complete programs.

### DISCLOSURE UPON APPLICATION

A significant challenge for community colleges is managing the “disclosure upon application” process, which requires applicants to disclose prior criminal convictions. While some colleges use this information to ensure campus safety, it can also create unintended consequences, such as institutional bias or inconsistent application of policies. Admissions staff may lack clear guidelines or training on how to evaluate disclosures fairly, leading to subjective decisions or unnecessary

barriers for justice-impacted students. Additionally, collecting and managing this information can raise concerns about data security and compliance with privacy laws, particularly when disclosure policies are not standardized or aligned with best practices. These challenges can complicate the admissions process, hinder efforts to promote equitable access, and conflict with the institution’s goals of fostering an inclusive environment for all students.

Oftentimes, community colleges face challenges when managing the application process for students who are currently incarcerated. Many incarcerated applicants lack access to traditional application platforms or advising support, requiring colleges to adapt their processes to accommodate paper-based applications or restricted communication methods. Coordinating with correctional facilities adds another layer of complexity, as college staff must navigate security protocols, restricted timelines, and limited access to applicants for follow-up questions or clarification.



## ATTENDANCE AND COURSE DEADLINE POLICIES

Community colleges face the challenge of accommodating the significant difficulties that justice-impacted students experience regarding attendance and coursework deadlines. For justice-impacted students who have reentered society, a range of challenges exist, such as housing stability, frequent court appearances, probation requirements, or unexpected work shifts, all of which can disrupt their ability to attend classes consistently or meet deadlines. Limited access to child care, transportation, new job responsibilities, and mental health issues can also hinder students' ability to attend class and meet assignment deadlines. Without clear policies or procedures that address these challenges, justice-impacted students may face academic penalties for circumstances beyond their control, potentially leading to higher rates of attrition and inequitable outcomes.

Community colleges face significant challenges in implementing attendance policies for currently incarcerated students due to the restrictive nature of prison environments. Incarcerated students often have limited access to classes due to lockdowns, facility transfers, or security protocols, which can disrupt their ability to attend scheduled sessions. Additionally, the lack of consistent communication channels between the institution and the facility can make it difficult to coordinate accommodations for missed classes. Many colleges struggle to adapt their attendance policies to account for these unique barriers, often holding incarcerated students to the same standards as their peers in more flexible, accessible environments. This can lead to unnecessary penalties or failure to complete courses, hindering their academic progress.

### CHALLENGE OF EXPUNGEMENT

A significant challenge community colleges face when serving justice-impacted students who have been released is the issue of addressing expungement on application forms. Many colleges require students to disclose prior criminal

convictions during the admissions process, and this can be a barrier for justice-impacted students who have completed their sentences but are seeking to move forward with a clean slate. Expungement, the legal process of removing criminal records, is often not reflected or acknowledged in the college's application forms. Students may feel compelled to disclose convictions that have already been expunged, leading to potential stigma or biased decisions. Additionally, college staff may lack the training or resources to differentiate between expunged records and current convictions, complicating the admissions process. This can create unnecessary barriers for students who have successfully reintegrated into society and are seeking educational opportunities to improve their lives.

## Cultural/Attitudinal Barriers

Community colleges often encounter cultural and attitudinal challenges when serving justice-impacted students who have been released, particularly in addressing stigma and biases. These students bring valuable life experiences, resilience, and a strong commitment to personal growth yet may face assumptions or stereotypes from faculty, staff, and peers based on their past involvement with the criminal justice system. Rather than being seen for their strengths and potential, they can sometimes be perceived through a narrow lens of their past, which may affect expectations, support, and opportunities. Faculty and staff may unknowingly allow their biases to control their engagements, which can impact interactions and hinder students' full immersion in academic and social experiences.

Similarly, for currently incarcerated students, instead of being seen for their potential and commitment to education, they may be judged based on their current circumstances, which can influence the level of support they receive and the opportunities available to them. This stigma can create significant barriers to providing a meaningful and supportive educational experience for incarcerated students, limiting their ability to fully participate and succeed in their academic journey.





# WHAT WORKS: STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS JUSTICE-IMPACTED STUDENTS' CHALLENGES

The student profiles highlighted above vividly demonstrate that community colleges possess the remarkable capacity to forge dynamic, unexpected, and unprecedented opportunities for justice-impacted students. Realizing this potential necessitates a fundamental shift in perception, one that acknowledges the inherent worth of these individuals despite the pervasive social stigmas and assumptions that may cloud judgment. When community colleges actively engage with justice-impacted students, they both embody their commitment to student success and catalyze transformative change within their institutions. This mobilization of a student-centered culture not only enriches the educational experience for these individuals but also contributes to a more equitable and inclusive academic environment, ultimately benefiting the entire community.

Community colleges can profoundly transform the lives of justice-impacted students by actively confronting stigmas, dismantling barriers, and creating pathways for their success. Often, these students may come to believe that their only options are low-wage jobs that fail to provide a living wage for their families. However, community colleges have the power to offer meaningful educational opportunities and collaborate with community partners to challenge and dismantle the stigmas associated with criminal records that limit access to certain professions. Achieving this transformation necessitates substantial collaboration with justice-impacted students and a broad range of community partners. When executed effectively, the positive outcomes of these efforts are bound to impress and uplift both justice-impacted students and their communities.



# WHAT WOWS: EFFECTIVE APPROACHES IMPLEMENTED IN THE FIELD

## Nashville State Community College (Tennessee)

Nashville State Community College prides itself on its commitment to serving justice-impacted students in Tennessee, a state that acknowledges the critical need for educational and workforce opportunities for this population. The state has made strides in supporting these efforts by providing funding and resources to colleges and universities. In 2021, Tennessee launched the Correctional Education Initiative (CEI) to create a robust support network that includes community colleges and colleges of applied technology, aimed at offering justice-impacted students the educational opportunities and resources necessary to achieve their aspirations.

Tennessee community colleges like Nashville State Community College are also fortunate to have the [Tennessee Higher Education Initiative \(THEI\)](#) operating in the Volunteer State. THEI has been instrumental in developing relationships and connections that help Nashville State serve justice-impacted individuals in Tennessee. Nashville State has benefited from the ongoing efforts of THEI and other partners, along with additional funding from CEI, eliminating the need for its own fundraising initiatives. A commitment from the governor's office to cover tuition and fees, course materials, and technology — in addition to partnerships such as THEI — has established an ideal environment for Nashville State to support

justice-impacted students in and around Music City.

Nashville State began serving justice-impacted students on site in correctional facilities in 2012. Over a decade later, Nashville State now serves three facilities: Turney Center Industrial Complex, a minimum-to-close facility focused on industry; Debra K. Johnson Rehabilitation Center, a maximum-security prison holding people identified or identifying as female; and Riverbend, a death row facility holding people identified or identifying as male. As of fall 2024, Nashville State currently

had 97 students enrolled across five cohorts and is in the process of enrolling in another cohort and an additional prison.

**It is widely recognized that students require a sense of belonging and a culture of care to thrive at community colleges.**

It is widely recognized that students require a sense of belonging and a culture of care to thrive at community colleges. Nashville State has observed that this is especially true for justice-impacted students who are currently incarcerated. These students flourish when faculty at Nashville State foster a “college-created environment,”

an educational setting that exists on site at the correctional facility yet operates independently, highlighting the transformative power of education.

“These [justice-impacted people] are our students,” says Dr. Shanna Jackson, president of Nashville State. “We’re serving them while they’re behind walls, and we are serving them when they are released.” When she began her role as president, Dr. Jackson was inspired to learn that justice-impacted students graduating





from Nashville State had a 0% recidivism rate. Colleges benefit from having a mindful, proactive president like Dr. Jackson, who understands the unique needs of justice-impacted education and is committed to providing timely support. This type of education demands considerable flexibility, and a president who is actively engaged can help navigate and overcome slow processes or restrictive policies that might otherwise hinder justice-impacted students from pursuing their educational and personal goals. Such leadership ensures that necessary exceptions and adjustments are made to support these students effectively.

Nashville State's experience supporting justice-impacted students demonstrates that it is important to help students overcome the gaps they experience upon being released, such as those related to technology, transportation, housing, work, and family support. Students transitioning out of prison have key Pavlovian questions, as

Dr. Sarah Roberts, associate vice president for academic affairs and the lead on Nashville State's justice-impacted efforts, points out: "Where am I gonna live? What am I gonna do? How am I gonna [do this]?" Nashville State recognizes that it needs to provide a support structure to help these students complete their degrees.

For Nashville State, faculty are critical to the college being successful in its efforts to reach justice-impacted students. Some faculty were initially hesitant to enter correctional facilities, but once they did and began forming relationships with students, they became some of the biggest advocates of justice-impacted educational opportunities. Nashville State had urged faculty in areas like accounting to participate in prison education and provided support to overcome initial hesitations and reservations. Reflecting on how Nashville State faculty work with justice-impacted students, Dr. Roberts observes, "You gotta walk in with grace. They are unlike any other student population."

Faculty are deeply invested in supporting justice-impacted students, but Nashville State has found it is critical to have a dedicated point-person directing efforts to serve these learners. Dr. Roberts, an administrator who coordinates with the unit to confirm a student's status and ensure continued support, manages the prison education programs at Nashville State. "I don't know a college could do it [run a justice-impacted program]" without someone fully committed and invested like Dr. Roberts," says Dr. Jackson. Colleges need someone who is able to build and maintain relationships, which is critical to the program's success.

Nashville State recognizes the importance of preparing faculty for teaching in prisons and provides informal, facility-specific training before they begin working with justice-impacted students. Since each correctional facility operates differently, the training is tailored to the unique conditions of each facility. Faculty are informed about common occurrences, such as lockdowns and student "segregation" (solitary confinement), which can disrupt the learning process. Often, faculty may



not be notified directly when a student is placed in segregation, learning about it instead through other students. In such cases, they are trained to reach out to Dr. Roberts.

Remarkable outcomes occur when the entire college community — from the president to program leads and faculty — commits to supporting justice-impacted students. Dr. Jackson reflects, “When you think about the work we’re doing inside the walls, you’re opening up minds. You’re giving them hope. Their life is transformed because they built that confidence in themselves, and they see the world from a different place [now].”

## North Central State College (Ohio)

North Central State College has prioritized moving slowly and deliberately and building relationships

as they have implemented justice-impacted educational programs for their community. They currently provide educational opportunities at a correctional facility and hope to expand to other facilities in the future, now that an institutional reorganization is complete. North Central State has built its programs using existing institutional funds and personnel, with the correctional facility contributing a portion of tuition costs for the correctional education program offered.

Tom Prendergast, executive director of strategic and institutional transformation at North Central State College, encourages colleges interested in serving justice-impacted students not to be discouraged by lack of funding: “Don’t let the fact that you don’t have a big grant [stop you] from reaching out, picking up the phone, trying new things. There are plenty of opportunities from just talking with people.”



The need to support justice-impacted students in Ohio is pressing, with one in six Ohioans having a felony or misdemeanor on their record. While applicants to North Central State College are not required to disclose their criminal records, the college has learned that serving justice-impacted students often requires providing holistic support. This means addressing basic needs, such as housing and food security, before students can fully engage in their education. Additional complexities arise when students are registered on a sex offender list, as advisors must help them navigate career paths with potential legal restrictions. Empathy is at the heart of North Central State's approach, with leaders, faculty, and student affairs professionals committed to understanding the unique challenges these students face and offering personalized support.

At North Central State, building partnerships with correctional facilities to create educational opportunities for justice-impacted students required perseverance and open dialogue. The college recognized the importance of trust and mutual understanding in these relationships. Wardens, as key decision-makers, played a vital role in granting access and ensuring the program aligned with the needs of those incarcerated. After multiple thoughtful conversations, one facility embraced the opportunity, enrolling a cohort of fifteen students. They expressed interest in seeing how North Central State could expand the program's impact, underscoring the potential for future growth and success.

In partnership with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC), North Central State provides training to full-time and part-time faculty and staff before they begin working with justice-impacted students at any correctional facility. Monica Durham, director of

student support services, personally meets with faculty and staff, preparing them for the nuances and complexities of supporting inside scholars.

North Central State recognizes its community as a vital partner in supporting justice-impacted students. Over the years, the college has engaged its community members to address financial and personal needs that arise. For example, when a justice-impacted student faces a barrier like paying a transcript fee, community members often step up to cover the cost, ensuring the student can continue their education. In Ohio, a streamlined \$25 process allows employers to lift liability concerns when hiring individuals with a record, offering a pathway to employment without the more complex and costly expungement process.

North Central State is committed to serving all justice-impacted individuals in its region and relies on its community to help identify when students are ready to embark on their higher education journey.

"It's hard work and a heavy lift" to serve justice-impacted students, according to Durham. Colleges benefit from creating inclusive spaces like equity caucuses and success committees, where faculty and staff can ask questions, share insights, and deepen their understanding of how to support justice-impacted students. As awareness of the importance of this work grows, it sparks a contagious passion across the campus community. North Central State found that key to building support for justice-impacted students was fostering a culture of experimentation, resilience, and continuous learning. Embracing challenges, learning from setbacks, and trying again allowed the college to progressively establish a highly impactful program that supports students both inside and outside of the facility.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The strategies to address challenges related to structure, policy, and culture that colleges face when serving justice-impacted learners can be categorized into various themes, including academic, familial, financial, and community-related aspects. Implementing a combination of these strategies can contribute to a more supportive and inclusive environment for justice-impacted learners, enhancing their ability to succeed academically.

The original ATD *Knowing Our Students* guide notes, “We need to challenge ourselves to see our students not only as learners, but also as individuals whose life contexts impact their academic journey” (2021, p. 2). Achieving the Dream and its Network colleges, including Nashville State and North Central State, have discovered the vital importance of an inclusive, strengths-based approach when working with justice-impacted students and families affected by incarceration. Colleges benefit from learning about students’ justice-impacted status — but only *after* enrollment (to ensure such status does not limit access to open-enrollment institutions). By understanding students’ backgrounds — including socioeconomic status, past academic experiences, and program of study — colleges can better support them. This holistic view, as outlined in the original *Knowing Our Students* guide, allows institutions to meet students where they are, empowering them to succeed.

The following five principles can guide colleges in their efforts in developing prison education programs and nurturing justice-impacted students during their academic journey.

## Devote Resources and Ensure Leadership Support

Community colleges can greatly enhance their efforts to support justice-impacted students by designating a dedicated leader to spearhead these initiatives. At Nashville State, Dr. Sarah

Roberts fulfills this vital role, managing a diverse range of responsibilities within her portfolio. Similarly, at North Central State, faculty collaborate with Monica Durham, who effectively coordinates concerns and liaises with correctional facility team members and community partners to address them. Ideally, colleges would benefit from appointing a leader focused solely on justice-impacted student programming.

Given current resource

constraints and staffing limitations, identifying a key individual to champion these efforts could be challenging; however, it represents a crucial first step in fostering a supportive environment for justice-impacted students.

The unique needs of justice-impacted students often require colleges to adapt their policies and procedures, making it essential to have an equity-minded, visionary president who wholeheartedly supports these students. Such leaders play a critical role in providing timely support from the executive level, especially when challenges arise. Policies related to attendance, credit for prior learning, and academic holds can inadvertently create obstacles for justice-impacted students as they navigate their complex

**Community colleges can greatly enhance their efforts to support justice-impacted students by designating a dedicated leader to spearhead these initiatives.**





circumstances. By staying informed about the complex situations these students face, presidents and chancellors have the opportunity to champion flexibility, enabling their teams to modify standard practices to ensure that justice-impacted students can move forward. This proactive approach not only fosters an inclusive environment but also empowers students to achieve their educational goals.

Here are some specific strategies that focus on leadership support for justice-impacted students:

1. Share with presidents and chancellors information and data about past, present, and future opportunities to support both currently incarcerated and reentered students. This enables leaders to make informed decisions when allocating resources and staffing to invest in these programs.
2. Appoint and empower a leader or small team of leaders to champion educational support for justice-impacted students and ensure their colleagues receive the training and professional development needed to effectively work with and support this population.

## Provide Training and Development To Enhance Situational and Contextual Awareness Among Faculty and Staff

To effectively support justice-impacted students, community colleges should implement a strategic approach that emphasizes specialized professional development for faculty and advisors with a focus on situational and contextual awareness. This training equips educators to understand the diverse needs of justice-impacted students and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. A key component of this strategy involves situational and contextual awareness, particularly regarding the specific environments where students are engaged. For instance, the support strategies for students in a minimum-security facility will differ significantly from those needed in a death row setting. Furthermore, upon reentry into society, the needs of justice-impacted students can vary widely and change rapidly. By fostering this strategic awareness and adaptability, colleges can create a robust support system that empowers justice-impacted students throughout their educational journeys (see below, *Prioritize Reentered Students' Basic Needs*).





Community colleges can enhance their support for justice-impacted students by strategically familiarizing advisors and student affairs staff with the sociopolitical and economic realities these individuals face in their educational pursuits. Understanding the landscape of potential employment challenges, such as regulations surrounding the hiring of justice-impacted graduates, allows colleges to be proactive in their approach. As North Central State discovered, some obstacles can be addressed through straightforward solutions, like paying a nominal fee to alleviate employer liability for hiring candidates with criminal records. In other situations, it becomes essential for community colleges to collaborate with community partners to advocate for the removal of systemic barriers. This collective effort not only paves the way for justice-impacted students to access their desired careers but also underscores the transformative power of education in their lives.

Here are some specific programs that promote situational and contextual awareness:

1. Provide training for faculty and staff preparing to work with and support justice-impacted students.
2. If training has not been developed, create time for justice-impacted program directors to meet individually with each colleague preparing to work with justice-impacted students.
3. Map the student experience and identify points along the way where currently incarcerated and reentered students might experience barriers. Explore ways to remove those barriers or engage community partners in providing resources that can resolve the situation for justice-impacted students.



## Provide Professional Learning on Justice-Impacted Teaching for Faculty and Advisors

A central cornerstone of Achieving the Dream's framework for building a culture of excellence in teaching and learning, found in ATD's [Teaching & Learning Toolkit](#), is embracing "professional learning for continuous improvement, realigning related expectations in hiring, evaluation, promotion" (Achieving the Dream, 2024, p. 13). As both North Central State and Nashville State demonstrated, preparing faculty to work with justice-impacted students with equity-mindedness and empathy is critical to justice-impacted students being successful in classrooms on a college campus and in a correctional facility setting.

Faculty are essential partners in creating an inclusive learning environment for justice-impacted students, and they benefit from support in adapting their teaching methods to meet these students' unique learning situations. Similarly,

professional learning focused on justice-impacted teaching is essential for advisors to support students effectively. Specialized learning prepares advisors to advocate for supportive institutional policies and practices, creating a more inclusive campus environment. Professional learning in justice-impacted teaching empowers advisors to foster an educational experience that respects, understands, and uplifts these students, promoting their academic and personal growth.

Embracing flexibility in response to unexpected challenges — such as lockdowns or resource shortages — enables faculty to effectively assist students facing difficult circumstances. Additionally, it is vital for faculty to be aware of the key contacts at their college who can facilitate communication with correctional facilities team members and community partners. This collaborative approach empowers colleges to identify strategies for removing barriers and enhancing the educational journey for justice-impacted students, ultimately supporting their continued progress toward achieving their goals.





Here are some specific professional learning strategies to equip faculty and advisors in supporting justice-impacted students:

1. Empower faculty to adapt their own classroom policies and work around institutional policies so they can provide flexibility and support to justice-impacted students experiencing situations that create challenges with the course timeline and plans.
2. Provide training to faculty in culturally responsive teaching, helping them make both their syllabi and their teaching practices welcoming to justice-impacted students and honoring their experiences.
3. Provide training for advisors so they are aware of common challenges reentered students face and prepared to help these students utilize college and community resources to persist in their studies.

## Build Relationships With Correctional Facilities and Communities To Support Currently Incarcerated Students

Building relationships and trust with correctional facility teams and wardens is a long-term effort that can take years, but it is a critical part of expanding educational opportunities for justice-impacted students. With the availability of Second Chance Pell, some correctional facilities are cautious, concerned that colleges may be motivated solely by the financial benefits. However, community colleges, as open-access institutions, are inherently well-positioned to support justice-impacted students. Their commitment to equity and fostering community vibrancy is key to demonstrating a genuine desire to provide transformational educational opportunities. By consistently showing this dedication, colleges can build the trust necessary to form lasting partnerships with correctional facilities.



The community plays a vital role in supporting justice-impacted students within a college's service area. Communities often understand — or can be guided to understand — the transformative power of education in overcoming the stigma associated with justice-impacted status. This stigma can affect individuals both personally and professionally, but education serves as a key to unlocking new opportunities. When communities are invited to contribute financially, even in small ways, they can make a significant impact by removing barriers to persistence in education for these students. As community colleges navigate changing enrollment trends, community involvement can be instrumental. By identifying justice-impacted individuals who are ready to pursue higher education, communities can help colleges reach and serve these students at the right moment, fostering more meaningful and timely support.

Here are some relationship-building strategies in supporting justice-impacted students:

1. When seeking to start a new program for incarcerated students, regularly yet sensibly reach out to the warden to invite a conversation about what such a program might look like.
2. Consider Prison Education Programs to formalize your partnership. Prison Education Programs — PEPs — are eligible programs defined by statute under 34 CFR 668.8, offered by a public or nonprofit educational institution (as defined in 34 CFR 600.4), or a postsecondary vocational institution (as defined in 34 CFR 600.6).
3. Start small, with one to two credential or degree programs of labor market value in your community. Focus on teaching



and learning. Be prepared to work with a smaller number of students at first and potentially scale as the program gains traction and success.

4. Expand access to technology for incarcerated students. Colleges can collaborate with correctional facilities to provide secure, offline educational technology solutions. Initiatives might include offering preloaded tablets with advising and academic content.
5. Equip advisors with program materials, forms, and advising materials for their visits to the facility. In many situations, advisors will only have access to printed materials while advising their students.

## Prioritize Meeting Reentered Students' Basic Needs

As demonstrated in the earlier case studies, justice-impacted students possess unique and evolving needs that can change rapidly. Upon reentry into society, justice-impacted students often prioritize settling immediate needs like housing, transportation, and finances. By acknowledging these priorities, community colleges can better support students on their educational journeys.

Utilizing tools like the Student Needs Assessment from the *Knowing Our Students* guide (2023, p. 21) can be instrumental in understanding the needs of justice-impacted students. However, it is essential to recognize that their circumstances can shift day to day. Despite the challenges they face, justice-impacted students are among the hardest working and most driven individuals, as Nashville State has observed. These students emerge from a social system that has disrupted their lives, careers, and financial stability. Community colleges can be instrumental in fostering a culture of care that actively identifies and addresses these changing needs, ensuring that students have the resources necessary to continue their education.

Continued support during the transition from incarceration to social reentry is crucial for justice-impacted students. As Victoria notes, “A college community, an educational community, and a peer community can be an extremely stabilizing force of support on reentry.” While residing in a correctional facility, justice-impacted students engaged in their community college’s programs are students of the college community. Justice-impacted students are worthy of strong support as they reintegrate into society. By strengthening these connections, colleges can play a crucial role in empowering justice-impacted students to thrive in their educational journeys.

Here are some specific strategies to provide basic needs to support justice-impacted students:

1. Ensure any incarcerated students you have supported have the immediate resources they need in the days and weeks immediately after they have been released (housing, food, and transportation being the most important) to minimize the risk of reincarceration.
2. Assemble an ongoing support group for reentered students, consisting of college faculty and staff who actively work with reentered students, including both newly and established reentered students. Let this be an outlet and a support network for these students. Determine whether it should meet in person or virtually based on the students’ needs.
3. Offer and connect reentered students to mental health supports that cost them little to nothing, realizing they may not yet have health insurance that covers such supports.
4. Leverage tools and practices like early alert systems, tutoring, and advising to foster communication about needs reentered students may have, and act quickly to meet them as these needs emerge.





# CONCLUSION

Community colleges hold a unique and powerful position to support students experiencing the impact of the justice system to becoming engaged, empowered learners. Our role as educators is to unlock opportunities for these individuals, transforming their realities into ones filled with possibilities that they can actively shape and enrich. The traditional notions of “typical students,” highlighted in the original *Knowing Our Students* guide, could be adapted when applied to justice-impacted individuals. Their distinctive experiences, perspectives, and resilience challenge us to reimagine our institutions and connect with them on a personal, case-by-case basis.

To effectively support justice-impacted students, we must embrace a student-centered approach in our initiatives. This involves utilizing multivariate data to understand and cater to their diverse needs. Additionally, we should critically assess the structures, processes, and mindsets that influence their educational journeys, as emphasized in Achieving the Dream’s [Holistic Student Supports Redesign toolkit](#) (2018).

This population-specific guide reinforces the importance of remaining flexible and responsive to the unique challenges faced by justice-impacted students. Their journeys are marked by a variety of experiences and rapidly changing needs, yet the students’ determination and potential are extraordinary.

Justice-impacted students can achieve greater academic success and contribute to the overall vitality of our institutions when community colleges actively engage with them and thoughtfully adapt educational structures to align with their unique strengths and needs. This transformative approach elevates our understanding of all students, including those unjustly labeled as “the least of these.” In doing so, we create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment that benefits everyone, fostering a community where every student can thrive.



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Thank you to everyone involved for your dedication to advocating for justice-impacted students and for your commitment to creating more equitable educational pathways. Your contributions have made this guide a powerful resource for transforming how colleges support justice-impacted students and ensuring their success.

## ABOUT THE ADVISING SUCCESS NETWORK

Formed in 2018, the Advising Success Network is a dynamic network of national organizations partnering to support institutions through a holistic approach to advising redesign that supports students' personal, academic, and career goals. The network addresses the multifaceted needs of colleges and universities to design a meaningful student experience and improve institutional retention and completion rates for Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, and poverty-affected students.

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Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on our expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, we provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work — from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K–12 partnerships, and more. We call this Whole College Transformation. Our vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable and economically vibrant communities. We know that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes — so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers.

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