

CENTERING JUSTICE-IMPACTED VOICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Student-Ready Schools & Campuses Report

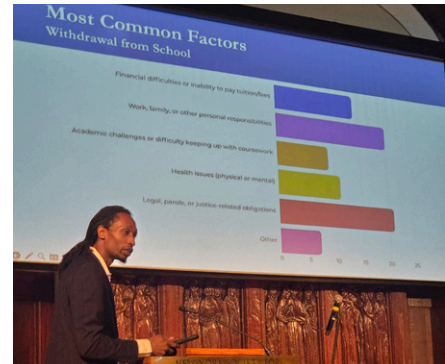
October 2026

[#DegreesNYC](#)

Goddard Riverside
Options Center

CUNY College Completion
Innovation Fund

Written By
Isaac I. Scott,
Rachel Bork, and
Diamonte Alexander



ABOUT #DEGREESNYC

This report was developed by #DegreesNYC in partnership with Goddard Riverside's Options Center.

#DegreesNYC is a data-informed collective impact movement co-led by young people, students, and education professionals, working toward education equity across New York City. Goddard Riverside serves as the backbone organization for #DegreesNYC, which operates within the Innovation and Justice Department.

Our research centers the experiences and perspectives of people directly affected by the issues we study. One way we co-create our work with community members is through our Youth Council, made up of Data and Advocacy Fellows. Fellows help design and conduct research projects, shape policy initiatives, and advocate for institutional changes.

This report is part of the #DegreesNYC Student-Ready Schools series. For the past ten years, #DegreesNYC has used the Student-Ready Schools framework to examine how educational institutions anticipate students' needs, remove barriers, and create conditions for students to persist and succeed in their educational journeys.

ABOUT THE OPTIONS CENTER

Goddard Riverside's Options Center helps New Yorkers access college and skill-specific certificate programs, navigate financial aid options, and graduate. For 40 years, Options has worked to ensure postsecondary access and success for all students, adapting its programs to meet the needs of scholars who face significant barriers to entering and completing college. This includes students who are first-generation, come from mixed-immigration-status families, are systems-involved, and/or are experiencing housing insecurity.

Our motto is "We advise, we educate, we advocate." We advise through our Access and Success programs, educate through the Options Institute, and advocate through #DegreesNYC.

Our commitment to justice-impacted students is part of Options' five-year strategic plan, made possible with support from the CUNY College Completion Innovation Fund (CCIF), National College Attainment Network (NCAN), Ascendium Education Group, the Robin Hood Foundation, and the Ichigo Foundation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Isaac I. Scott is an ordained minister, researcher, community organizer, multidisciplinary visual artist, and local and national advocate rooted in East Harlem. He is also a #DegreesNYC Data Fellow at Goddard Riverside's Innovation and Justice Department. He earned an associate degree in computer networking from Taylor Business Institute in 2004, a bachelor's degree in visual art from Columbia University in 2023, and a Master of Divinity in Youth and Family Ministries from Liberty University in 2026. His research at Columbia University examined the role of language in dehumanizing people who are justice-impacted and the social dynamics of incarceration, including how incarceration can disrupt existing relationships and make it difficult to build new ones after returning home.

That work continues to shape his research today. Across his academic, community, and advocacy work, Isaac has consistently focused on the experiences of people impacted by the criminal legal system. His current research includes participatory action research on community health and wellness through Another Choice Youth and Family Outreach Inc. He also studies Strategic Arts Engagement and the role of art and culture in reentry and alternatives to incarceration. Through #DegreesNYC, his research examines the barriers students who are justice-impacted face in higher education and what institutions must do to become more prepared to support them.



Rachel Bork is #DegreesNYC's Data and Research Coordinator at Goddard Riverside's Innovation and Justice Department, where she leads and supports student-centered research focused on educational equity and institutional change. At #DegreesNYC, Rachel has worked alongside students, researchers, and community organizations on projects examining transfer student success, youth mental health, and the readiness of New York City educational institutions to support students through the Student-Ready Schools framework. Her previous work includes institutional research at Reed College focused on socioeconomic and racial disparities in a dual-enrollment program, as well as partnerships with grassroots nonprofits to design curricula, develop research projects, and author reports.

Rachel is particularly interested in participatory research that is built with, rather than simply about, communities and that produces findings that are accessible, useful, and accountable to the people they concern.



Diamonte Alexander is a #DegreesNYC Advocacy Fellow with Goddard Riverside's Innovation and Justice Department. He is a dedicated community advocate, family man, and lifelong learner who has turned his lived experiences into a source of purpose and impact. Since returning home from incarceration, he has devoted himself to uplifting others through nonprofit organizations, youth sports leagues, and community-based initiatives, with a particular focus on mentoring young people and helping them reach their full potential. Alongside his community work, Diamonte is continuing his education and pursuing his bachelor's degree in psychology, while advocating for improved outcomes for justice-impacted individuals.

Through research, policy initiatives, and community engagement, he works to ensure that the voices and experiences of those directly affected by the justice system are heard and valued. Driven by faith, resilience, and his commitment to family and community, Diamonte strives to make a lasting difference and create a better path forward for others.

INTRODUCTION

Justice-impacted students pursue higher education across a wide range of circumstances and stages of their lives. Some begin or continue education while incarcerated, while others first enter or return to higher education after release. Their experiences vary based on factors such as age, gender, family responsibilities, length of incarceration, and stage of reentry. Justice-impacted students should therefore not be understood as a single population with one set of needs.

Like other students, students with justice-involvement enter higher education with their own goals, strengths, responsibilities, and experiences. At the same time, they may encounter particular barriers while pursuing education during incarceration, after release, and during the reentry process. These can include probation or parole requirements, interrupted education, stigma, childcare, housing, employment, financial pressure, trauma, and limited access to technology (Couloute, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2024; Hagan & Foster, 2012). These circumstances can intersect with institutional systems that were not designed with the experiences of formerly incarcerated students in mind.

The experience of incarceration can also affect how students move through learning spaces. Research by Haney (2001) helps name some of the psychological impacts of incarceration, including dependence on institutional structure, hypervigilance, distrust, emotional distancing, social withdrawal, and a reduced sense of self-worth. In a classroom, these experiences may present as a student hesitating to ask for help or struggling to adjust to unfamiliar classroom expectations. These expressions should not be mistaken for a lack of motivation or ability. They may instead reflect adaptations to previous environments that become barriers when colleges do not properly recognize or respond to them. Research also suggests that many colleges remain insufficiently prepared to support students with lived experience of incarceration, contributing in some cases to isolation and disconnection (Gais et al., 2023; Cornwall, 2023; Vera Institute of Justice, 2019).

These challenges are particularly important to consider as opportunities for postsecondary education expand. The restoration of federal Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students in 2023 was an important impetus for this study (Reynolds et al., 2024). Expanded access to financial aid has created new opportunities for people who are incarcerated to begin or continue higher education. However, financial aid only addresses one part of postsecondary access and success. Opening the door to higher education does not by itself ensure that students have the institutional support they need to persist and succeed.



Postsecondary education can also play an important role in the lives of people returning from incarceration. Research has found substantially lower rates of recidivism among people who participate in postsecondary education programs. More than three-quarters of formerly incarcerated individuals are reincarcerated within five years of release, compared with approximately one in six individuals with an associate degree, and 5% of those with a bachelor's degree (Emory University, n.d.). Beyond these outcomes, higher education can provide opportunities for learning, professional development, personal growth, and greater stability following incarceration.

A growing body of research examines how students with lived experience of incarceration navigate higher education, college-in-prison programs, and reentry support (Gais et al., 2023; Couloute, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2024). This study is situated within this broader body of work. Rather than asking students to fit the mold of an academic institution, we evaluate how institutions prepare to support a diverse array of students.

In this report, we ask: what institutional practices, supports, and conditions make colleges and universities student-ready for justice-impacted students?¹

METHODOLOGY

Study Overview

This study focuses on people with direct experience of the justice system who are pursuing, have pursued, or plan to pursue higher education. It examines individuals' experiences with access and affordability, institutional support, belonging, basic needs, mental health, technology, and interactions with faculty and staff. It also explores how reentry, family responsibilities, trauma, stigma, and interrupted education can shape students' educational experiences.

This study uses a mixed-methods, participatory research approach. Data were collected through an anonymous survey and six in-person focus groups. The design of this research project was reviewed and approved by Goddard Riverside senior leaders with responsibility for compliance and participant protection. Members of the research team completed certification through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) before collaboratively developing the study materials.

Centering lived experience was a core part of the study's participatory approach. Justice-impacted team members helped shape the research questions, develop study materials, conduct focus groups, interpret findings, and develop recommendations.



Isaac Scott co-designed and executed the study, bringing his perspective as a researcher and justice-impacted student to the questions, methods, and overall approach. Isaac and Diamonte Alexander also led the focus groups, helping create an environment grounded in trust, credibility, and shared understanding.

Given the sensitive nature of the study, the team developed procedures to protect participants' privacy, autonomy, and well-being. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could decline to answer questions. Focus group participants were also given the option to use pseudonyms during discussions. Survey and focus group participants were compensated for their time.

Five of the six focus groups were joined by Tara Donahue, the Director of Blueprint. Blueprint is a Supported Education program serving justice-impacted students with serious mental health conditions. Tara joined the focus groups to provide emotional support and connect participants with resources when needed. For the group she was unable to attend, her contact information was made available so participants could still access support following the discussion.

Study data were stored in restricted-access Microsoft Excel files within Goddard Riverside's Microsoft 365 environment, which uses Microsoft Defender to help protect devices and systems from malware and other cybersecurity threats through threat detection, monitoring, and response. Access was limited to authorized members of the research team through individual organizational accounts with password protection and two-step verification.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through the #DegreesNYC network, social media, and organizations that support justice-impacted students. Eligibility required participants to be over 18 years old; have direct lived experience with the legal system, including past arrest, conviction, incarceration, probation, parole, or juvenile justice involvement; and have current, previous, planned, or recent participation in higher education.

The interest form to participate in the survey received 13,877 responses, many of which the team determined to be likely inauthentic. Responses were reviewed and screened, and the survey was sent directly to 141 prospective participants. The team later learned that the survey link had also been shared within at least one support group for justice-impacted students, resulting in responses from some individuals who had not received the link directly from the research team. Eligibility was confirmed for all but two remaining individuals. The survey ultimately received 144 responses.

The exact number of unique respondents could not be verified, due to the anonymous nature of the survey. Eight individuals self-reported completing the survey more than once, and additional duplicate submissions may also have occurred. To assess the potential effect on key findings, the research team conducted a conservative sensitivity analysis treating as many as 15 submissions as possible repeats. Major patterns remained substantially similar, although findings near 50% and small differences between closely ranked categories were more sensitive to this assumption and should be interpreted cautiously. Additional information about the contact form and duplicate-response sensitivity analysis is provided in Appendix A.

Focus group participants were recruited through a separate post-survey contact form. Of 74 individuals who indicated interest, 18 participated in one of the six in-person focus groups based on availability and response to outreach. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Isaac Scott and Diamonte Alexander facilitated all 6 groups.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed descriptively using counts, percentages, charts, and graphs. Open-ended survey responses were reviewed for recurring experiences, concerns, and recommendations but were not formally coded.

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by members of the research team, with identifying information removed or generalized where appropriate. The focus group transcripts were reviewed for recurring themes within categories derived from the study's research questions. The analysis was thematic rather than a formal line-by-line coding or frequency analysis. Survey and focus group findings were considered together.

Limitations

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study used a targeted, non-random recruitment strategy. The sample should therefore not be understood as representative of all justice-impacted students. Participants connected to reentry, educational, or community support networks may have experiences that differ from those with fewer connections.

Second, because the survey was anonymous, possible duplicate submissions could not be definitively identified or removed, as detailed in the Recruitment section. Also referenced, there was some uncertainty related to participant eligibility. Two individuals requested compensation despite not having been sent the survey link directly by the research team.

Because survey responses were anonymous, the team could not determine whether these individuals had completed the survey or how they had accessed the compensation form. The individuals did not subsequently complete the interest form, so the research team was unable to confirm their eligibility for the study.

Third, participants represented a wide range of educational pathways, ages, family circumstances, incarceration histories, and stages of reentry. This diversity strengthened the study, but the sample was not large enough to systematically compare across each subgroup. Focus group participants were also self-selected from individuals who completed the survey and volunteered for further discussion, so their experiences should not be assumed to represent all survey respondents.

Finally, some survey questions grouped multiple forms of support together, limiting the ability to determine which specific service respondents considered most important. Qualitative analysis was designed to identify recurring experiences and themes rather than to systematically code or quantify every focus-group response.

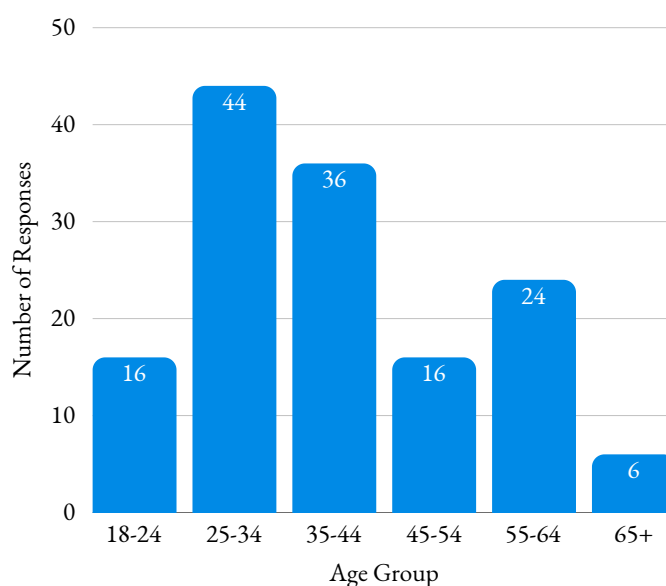
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Participant Demographics

Nearly all survey responses indicated a history of incarceration. Of the 144 responses, 142 (99%) indicated prior incarceration in a jail, prison, or juvenile facility, and 125 (87%) indicated probation or parole.

The survey also reflected an older demographic, with nearly 90% of responses coming from individuals aged 25 or older. This age distribution is important context for interpreting the findings, as many participants were pursuing or returning to higher education later in adulthood.

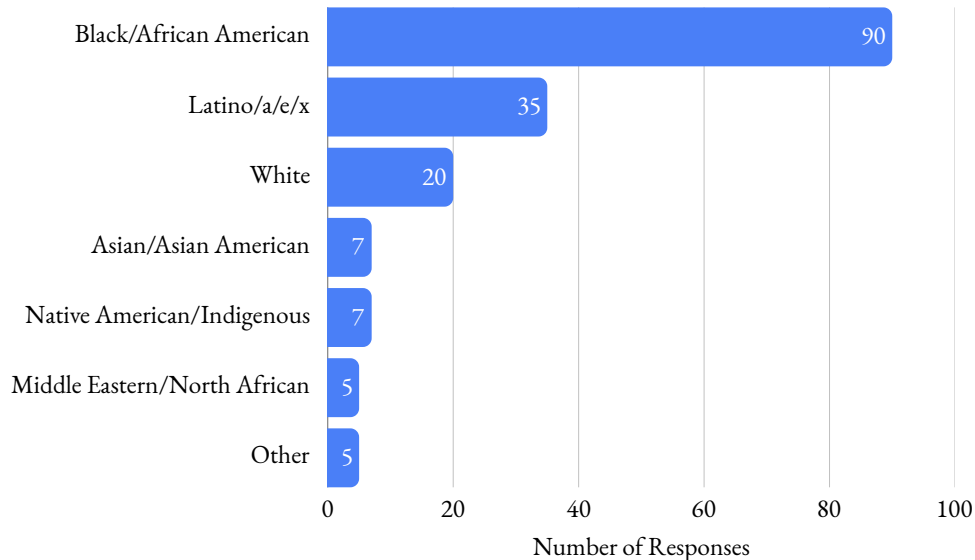
Figure 1: Age Indicated by Survey Responses



Note. This question received 142 responses.

Additionally, among survey responses, Black/African American was the most frequently selected racial identity (63%), followed by Latino/a/e/x (24%). Figure 2 shows the full racial and ethnic distribution.

Figure 2: Race and Ethnicity Indicated by Survey Responses



Note. This question received 143 responses. Respondents could select more than one response.

The study also found that 76% of survey responses identified as women, 23% as men, and 1% as non-binary or gender non-conforming. Most survey responses came from individuals who lived in New York City, although about 20% lived outside of the city.

Focus group participants reflected many of the demographic patterns seen in the survey sample. Of the 18 focus group participants, 66.7% were between ages 25 and 54, and 94.4% were age 25 or older. Women made up 72.2% of focus group participants, and 72.2% identified as Black/African American. The focus groups were also strongly concentrated in New York City, with 17 of 18 participants reporting residence in one of the five boroughs.

Overview of Findings

Participants entered higher education from different points in their lives and followed varied educational pathways. Across these experiences, however, several patterns emerged. Participants frequently described balancing education with financial pressure, work and family responsibilities, reentry and legal obligations, housing and transportation needs, mental health, and adjustment to college systems and technology. At the same time, they identified people, programs, and resources that made it easier to continue their education.

The findings below are therefore organized around four areas: participants' common educational experiences; the challenges that affected access and persistence; the supports that helped individuals pursue their higher education goals; and what these experiences reveal about the readiness of educational institutions to support students who are justice-impacted.

EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS AND COMMON EXPERIENCES

A. Diverse and Non-Linear Educational Pathways

Participants represented a diverse group of justice-impacted students at different stages of their educational journeys. Thirty-five percent of survey responses came from current students, 31% from recent graduates, 17% from individuals planning to enroll, 15% from individuals who were not currently enrolled but hoped to enroll one day, and 13% from individuals who had withdrawn or stopped attending school.² Focus group participants also represented a range of educational experiences, including current enrollment, graduation, withdrawal from school, and plans to return to or begin higher education.

The educational journeys represented in this study were often non-linear. Some participants pursued higher education while incarcerated. Others re-entered or started higher education once they returned home, soon after release or years down the line. Some participants withdrew from their schools, changed programs, or reconsidered their majors. The study's participants also pursued higher education for different reasons. Across both the survey and focus groups, participants hoped to gain knowledge and skills, reach career goals, and build confidence and discipline.

B. A Changing College Environment

For some participants, entering or returning to higher education also meant adjusting to unfamiliar academic systems and expectations. Technology was one particularly visible example.

Most survey responses indicated that they had reliable access to technology and moderate confidence using it for their schoolwork. Sixty-six percent described their access to a computer, internet, and software as reliable most of the time, while 24% described it as reliable some of the time. Ten percent reported that their access was rarely reliable or not reliable at all. Forty-eight percent of recorded responses indicated feeling extremely confident using technology for schoolwork, while 33% were somewhat confident, 12% were neutral, 4% were somewhat not confident, and 3% were extremely not confident. At the same time, focus group participants shared struggles with understanding and using the specific technologies required in college.

Participants who had spent significant periods of time incarcerated described returning to educational environments where unfamiliar, newly developed digital tools had become central to college. Even when they had access to laptops, some still needed support using programs and completing tasks with tools such as Excel, PDFs, online courses, formatting, and electronic submission systems.

One participant illustrated the gap between technically having access to technology and their sense of being underprepared to use certain technology:

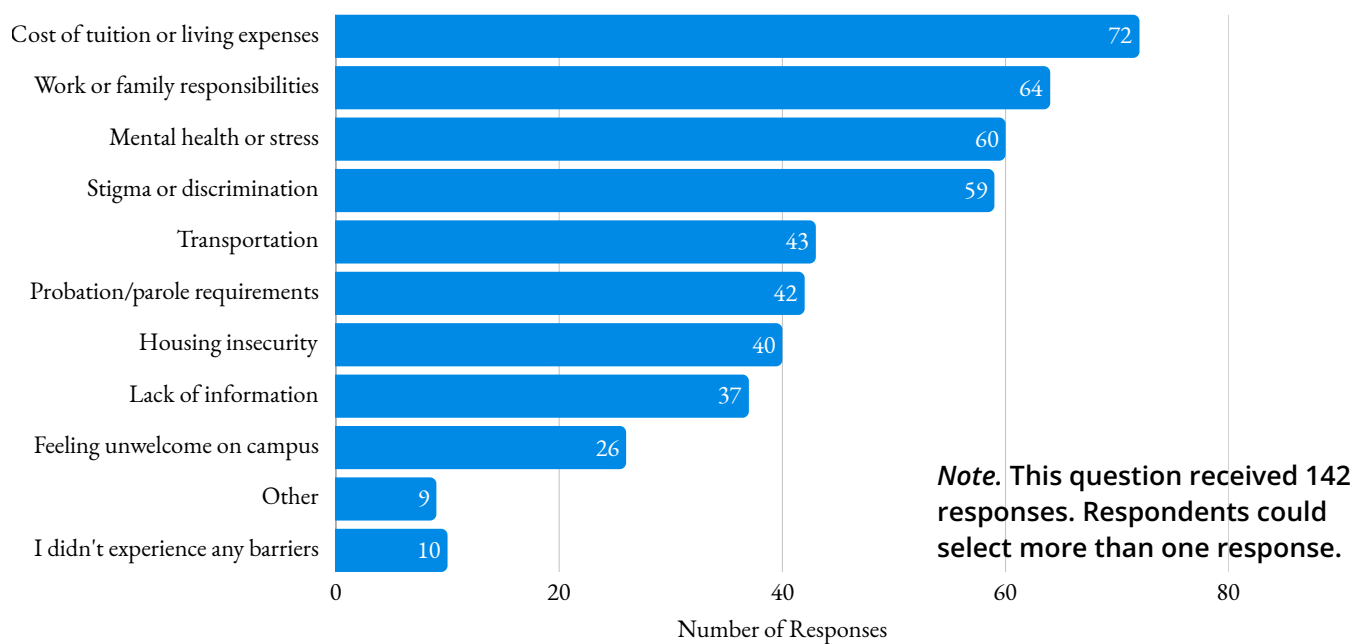
"There's still certain things on the computer that I don't know how to do. I have to try and take some more classes... They're offering Microsoft Excel and I think that could [make] a difference."

These experiences illustrate that students could be academically prepared for school while still needing time and assistance to adjust to new technological systems used in colleges and universities.

Common Challenges to Access and Persistence

The survey identified several barriers that affected individuals' ability to apply, enroll, stay enrolled, or graduate from college. Among the most frequently cited barriers were tuition or living expenses (51%) and work or family responsibilities (45%). Only 7% of responses indicated that they did not experience barriers. Work and family responsibilities and legal, parole, or justice-related obligations were also the most common reasons for withdrawal from school.

Figure 3: Barriers to Enrollment and Persistence





The focus groups gave nuance to the effects of overlapping barriers within the same educational journey. Participants spoke about attending school while parenting, working, caring for family members, complying with legal requirements, dealing with unstable housing, and coping with mental health challenges. Persistence often depended not only on a student's desire to continue, but on whether they could manage competing responsibilities and access support when circumstances changed.

A. College Access and Administrative Systems

For some individuals, challenges began before they entered a classroom. The survey identified a lack of information as a barrier to apply, enroll, stay enrolled, or graduate from college for about a quarter (26%) of responses.³

In the focus groups, participants described not knowing how to apply to college, which institutions would be a good fit, when applications were due, how to obtain records, or who could help them move through the process. One participant described wanting to attend college for years without understanding how to begin:

"It was very frustrating because I always wanted to go to college. I just didn't know where to start. I didn't know the process. I didn't know who to speak to. I didn't know what I really wanted to do."

Participants also described challenges obtaining transcripts and records, recovering prior credits, completing applications, navigating registration, and learning how college systems operate. Specialized programs and reentry organizations sometimes helped bridge these gaps by connecting participants directly to institutions and staff. Other individuals knew resources existed but still struggled to find or use them. One participant described returning home with little knowledge of the financial aid process:

"I didn't even know about FAFSA. I didn't know how to do [any] of that [and] that kind of discouraged me."

These difficulties sometimes continued after enrollment. Some students knew resources existed but did not know where to find them, what they provided, or which resources fit the problem they were experiencing.



B. Financial Pressure and College Affordability

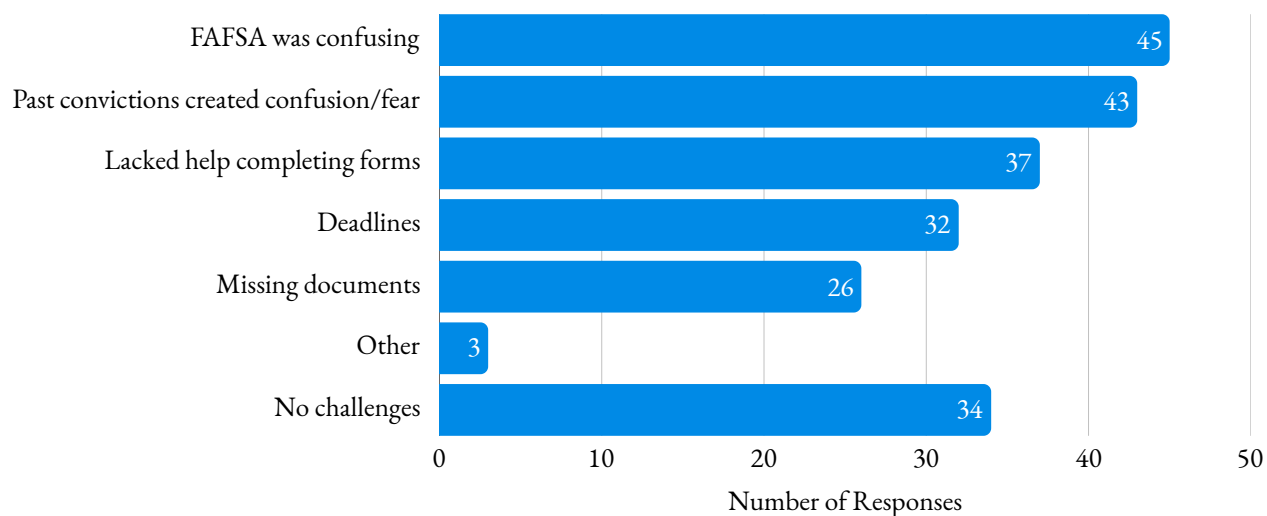
The affordability of college was closely connected to the costs of maintaining daily life while enrolled. Half (51%) of the survey responses identified the cost of tuition or living expenses as a barrier that made it difficult to apply, enroll, stay enrolled, or graduate.⁴

Financial assistance played an important role in participants' ability to pursue higher education. The majority (60%) of survey responses reported that they currently or previously received need-based aid or scholarships to help pay for college.⁵ Focus group participants described using multiple forms of assistance, including scholarships, grants, and loans provided through their college, reentry program, or community-based organizations.

Students learned about financial aid from a variety of places. The most commonly cited sources were college or university staff (57%), community-based organizations (37%), family or friends (34%), and reentry programs, probation, or parole (29%). Only 6% of survey responses indicated that they did not receive information about financial aid when applying to schools.⁶

Despite broad awareness of financial resources, participants faced many difficulties in accessing and securing aid, such as confusion about FAFSA and concerns about how past convictions might affect eligibility. Figure 4 shows the full range of challenges reported by survey responses.

Figure 4: Challenges Applying for Financial Aid



Note. This question received 142 responses. Respondents could select more than one response. "Not applicable" responses are not shown.

Participants emphasized the importance of individualized assistance in resolving these challenges. While some students received help from college staff, community organizations, and specialized programs, others felt brushed aside, misunderstood, or unsupported.

Unresolved student debt further complicated some participants' ability to restart or continue their education. The majority of survey responses (63%) indicated that they had been impacted by student loans or bill collections. Focus group participants also described how older loans, defaults, and balances owed directly to colleges affected their ability to receive new aid, register for courses, or complete a degree. One participant in particular had to take on substantial debt by taking a loan out of default in order to receive a much smaller amount of financial aid to continue their education. Some participants described piecing together assistance from specialized programs, community-based and reentry organizations, and scholarships when existing debt complicated access to traditional sources of financial aid.

Participants frequently noted that their ability to afford college depended on much more than tuition assistance. Even if participants were offered a substantial financial aid package, they often struggled to cover their remaining costs of living without taking time off of school to work. One participant described having to stop near the end of a degree program when their financial aid ran out, despite a desire to complete the program.

C. Housing, Transportation, Work, and Family Responsibilities

Housing emerged as one of the most common unmet basic needs for participants. Of 142 survey responses, 66% reported being permanently housed, while 21% were living in a shelter or temporary housing, 8% were living in transitional housing, and 5% were unhoused or experiencing homelessness. In a separate survey question about barriers to apply, enroll, stay enrolled, or graduate, 28% of responses identified housing insecurity as a barrier.⁷ Twenty-eight percent of responses also reported annual incomes below \$15,000.

The focus groups gave greater context to what housing instability meant for someone pursuing an education. Participants talked about returning home from incarceration without permanent housing, living in shelters or halfway houses, moving between places, and trying to complete schoolwork without a quiet or consistent place to study. Others described benefitting from stable housing and recognizing the difference that stability made in their ability to focus on education.



One focus group participant put the relationship between stability and educational progress plainly:

"You have to be stable in life to climb. If you're not stable, it's very hard to be strategic and actually climb up the ladder if you're moving from here to here. So, housing has been the biggest issue."

Focus group participants identified housing as important not only for having a place to sleep, but also for privacy, quiet, access to belongings, and the consistency needed to organize life around school.

Other basic needs and responsibilities created similar pressures. Forty-five percent of responses identified work or family responsibilities as a barrier to applying, enrolling, staying enrolled, or graduating, while 30% identified transportation as a barrier. One participant in particular described that they:

"Picked [their college] because it was around the corner from their job and [they] couldn't afford car fare."

Some students balanced multiple jobs while enrolled in school, while others were able to financially rely on family and community support. Frequently, students stopped and started their schooling in response to other financial demands. While financial aid can provide substantial support, it does not always make ends meet for all students. Many participants in this study were older students who described responsibilities and monthly expenses that affected how much time they could dedicate to education.

One participant described this tension:

"I would go and take a couple courses... and then I would stop... [and] I would work because I had to live somewhere. I had to have clothing; I had to have food."



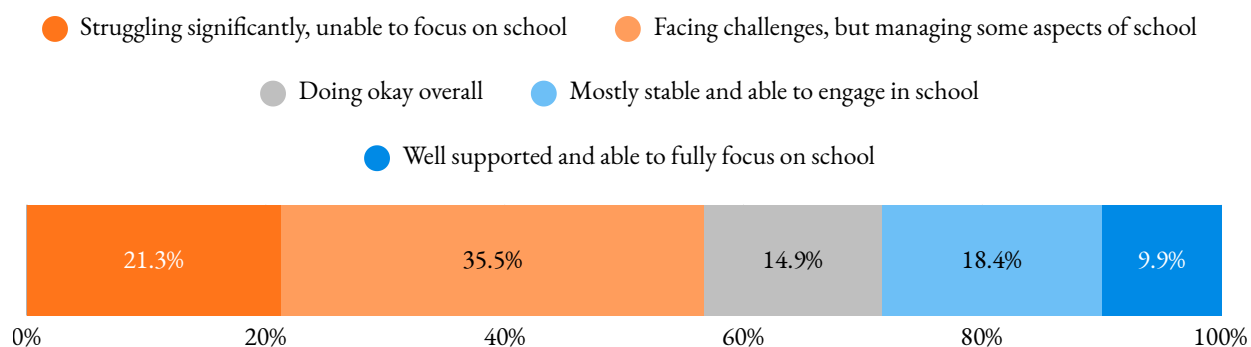
Caregiving created another set of pressures. Some participants were raising children, caring for other family members, paying for childcare, and maintaining responsibilities at home while pursuing education. One participant in particular struggled to take care of a child with special needs, assist their parent with emerging health issues, and focus on finishing their degree.

Together, these experiences show that remaining enrolled often required students to make education fit alongside the everyday costs and responsibilities of their lives rather than setting those responsibilities aside.

D. Mental Health, Trauma, and Well-Being

Across the survey and focus groups, participants closely linked their mental health with their ability to participate and persist in education. For example, 42% of survey responses identified mental health or stress as a barrier to apply, enroll, stay enrolled, or graduate from college.⁸ More than half (57%) indicated that they were struggling significantly or facing challenges that at least partially affected their ability to focus on their education, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Overall Well-Being and Ability to Focus on Education



Note. This question received 141 responses. Recently graduated respondents were instructed to answer based on how they felt while enrolled.

The focus group participants frequently described dealing with anxiety, depression, trauma connected to incarceration, difficult family experiences, and grief. Participants also mentioned that the classroom environment sometimes reminded them of past traumatic events. Two-thirds (66%) of survey responses indicated that they were currently experiencing or had previously experienced re-traumatization in learning spaces. These experiences, and other struggles with mental health, led some students to mentally disengage or stop showing up to class. As one focus group participant describes:

"I dealt with anxiety, and I ended up just leaving [school]. I never went back to the class [after an uncomfortable experience], and that was the last time I did school."

Another focus group participant described struggling to return to in-person courses due to their mental health:

"I was doing great over Zoom... But once I got there [in person], I felt like my anxiety took over, you know, being around people... during COVID... and going through depression."

E. Stigma, Disclosure, and Belonging

A substantial share (47%) of survey responses said they believed they had faced stigma or discrimination in an academic setting because of their justice involvement, and 25% were unsure if they had.⁹ Forty-two percent of responses identified stigma or discrimination as a barrier that made it difficult to apply, enroll, stay enrolled, or graduate.¹⁰

Focus group participants described being exposed to negative assumptions about people who had been incarcerated, conversations where people involved with the legal system were reduced to criminal labels, and situations where disclosure caused people to question whether someone belonged in an educational setting. Other participants described the fear of being judged even when no one explicitly knew their history.

For this reason, disclosure was not experienced as a simple decision. While 60% of responses indicated that participants were very or somewhat comfortable disclosing their justice-impacted background, a quarter (26%) reported being somewhat or very uncomfortable, illustrating substantial variation in whether students felt safe sharing this information.¹¹

These experiences also connected to participants' sense of belonging. Forty-six percent of survey responses agreed or strongly agreed that they felt a strong sense of belonging in their college or program community, while 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 31% were neutral.¹²

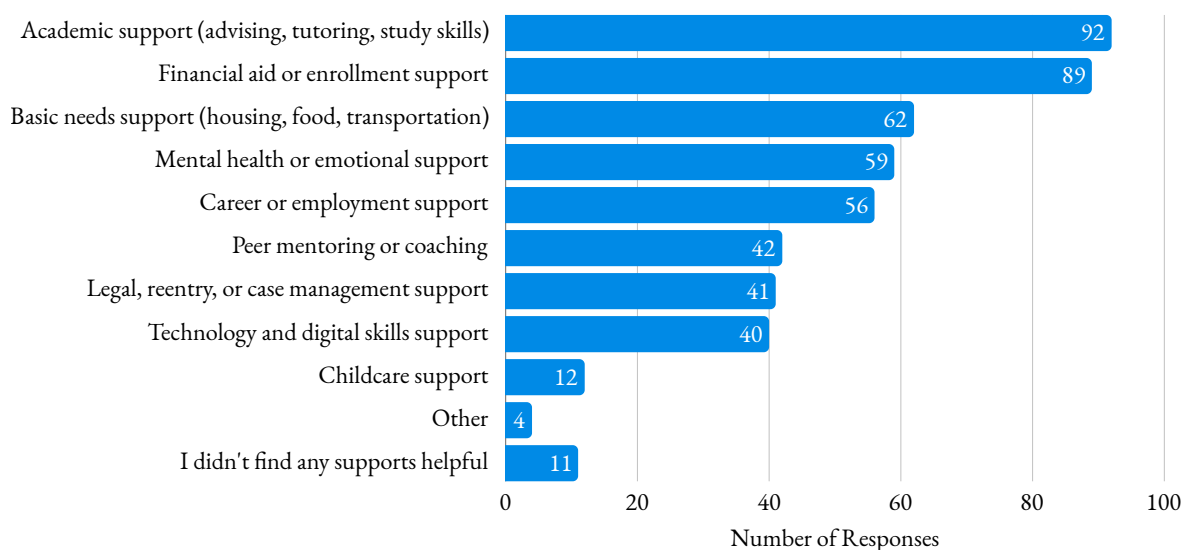
For many participants, belonging came from being in a space where they did not have to explain their background or wonder how others would respond to it. Focus group participants tended to have more positive, inclusive experiences when they were involved in smaller programs specifically serving people with similar experiences, versus larger college settings where a student might be one of very few people who had been incarcerated.

Helpful People, Programs, and Supports

Although participants described substantial challenges, they also identified people, programs, and resources that supported their educational progress. These supports came from inside and outside educational institutions and often worked together.

Academic support and financial aid or enrollment support were among the most helpful supports, while basic-needs, mental health, career, peer, reentry, and technology supports were also commonly identified. Figure 6 shows the full distribution.

Figure 6: Most Helpful Supports to Navigate College Journey



Note. This question received 143 responses. Respondents could select more than one response.

A. Family, Friends, Peers, and Mentors

Family and friends were important sources of support. Fifty-seven percent of survey responses identified family or friends as among the people who had been most helpful in supporting their college journey.¹³ Focus group participants described family and friends as providing housing, childcare, encouragement, accountability, and emotional support. One participant described one form of meaningful encouragement while working toward a degree:

"My son... was really encouraging me. [He would say,] 'you got to do this, you got to do this!'"

Family support was not available to everyone in the same way. Some participants returned home to family members who supported them financially and/or emotionally. Others described family members who cared about them but did not understand what they were experiencing after incarceration. Peers, mentors, therapists, and community organizations could become especially important for focus group participants without strong family support.

Peer and mentor relationships were a major source of support across survey responses, as well. Forty-eight percent of survey responses selected peers, mentors, or student groups as among the people who had been most helpful in their college journey.¹⁴ Peer mentoring or coaching was also selected by 32% of responses when they were asked which types of support had been most helpful in navigating college.¹⁵

Mentorship appeared throughout the focus groups as something participants had benefited from and believed other students needed. Participants described feeling closer and more comfortable with mentors who had attended the same college, mentors who had lived experience with the criminal legal system, peers who had already learned how to navigate college systems, and people who provided encouragement when school became difficult.

One participant described a mentor who was familiar with their college and could talk them through difficult academic moments:

"I'm very, very grateful for my mentor who actually attended [my college] ... In the frustrating moments... She talked me through it."

Focus group participants especially valued mentors who could combine practical guidance with an understanding of incarceration, reentry, and the challenges students were navigating outside the classroom. Mentorship was described not as making decisions for students, but as listening, guiding, encouraging, sharing information, and remaining present when problems arose.

B. Community and Reentry Organizations

Community-based organizations and nonprofits were among the most frequently selected sources of support in the survey. Sixty-four percent of responses identified a community-based organization or nonprofit, including faith-based groups, as helpful to their college journey.¹⁶ Thirty-one percent of responses selected a reentry program or probation or parole support.

The focus groups repeatedly showed how organizations helped participants reach higher education or remain connected to it. Organizations helped with applications, tuition, acquiring laptops, transportation, housing, counseling, navigating reentry, finding employment, and other needs. In some cases, individuals first learned about educational opportunities through these community-based organizations.

Community-based support also sometimes fulfilled needs that colleges could not meet. Participants turned to these organizations for assistance with housing, financial issues, reentry, technology, or emotional support while using the college primarily for academic services. For some participants, the educational support system therefore extended well beyond the campus itself.

C. Academic, Financial, Basic-Needs, and Mental Health Support

Academic support was one of the most commonly praised forms of assistance. Seventy percent of survey responses indicated that academic support, including advising, tutoring, and study skills, was one of the most helpful supports in navigating their college journey.¹⁷ The focus groups also described benefitting from tutoring, academic advising, professor support, information technology assistance, writing workshops, accessibility services, and other forms of help. Participants had different experiences accessing these services, and consistently described that they found supports most useful when they were responsive and personal. Participants appreciated when people provided individualized help and attention, rather than simply directing them to an office or service.

Basic-needs assistance also played an important role for the study's participants. Forty-three percent of survey responses indicated that basic needs support, including housing, food, and transportation, was one of the most helpful supports in navigating college.¹⁸ Participants described receiving food and transportation assistance through colleges and community programs, although awareness of these resources varied.

Participants used a range of strategies to manage stress and support their mental health. Survey responses indicated that they relied on personal routines or self-care (59%), speaking with trusted people (57%), spiritual or cultural practices (49%), counseling or mental health support (48%), and physical or creative activities (46%). About a quarter (23%) of individuals used campus or community programs to support their wellness. Thirteen percent of responses indicated that they hadn't found any resources to be helpful and were still looking for support.¹⁹

Focus group participants also relied on a variety of supports, including therapy, family and friends, physical activity, spirituality, community organizations, and personal routines. A few participants noted that their success in higher education was due to an overlap of several underlying factors that supported their wellness.

Participants also described technology support that worked well. They appreciated receiving college or program-provided laptops, using public libraries, and getting direct help from college information technology (IT) staff. These experiences suggest that higher education should consider not only whether students have access to technology, but whether they have the skills and support needed to use the technology that their coursework requires.

D. Specialized Programs

Specialized college-in-prison and reentry programs were especially important sources of support. Three-quarters (75%) of survey responses reported that they were currently participating in or had previously participated in a college-in-prison or reentry education program, and 13% were interested in participating in one. Focus group participants named specialized programs that helped with enrollment, academic advising, technology, financial support, mentoring, reentry, and navigating college systems. They often described specialized programs differently from general college services. Specialized programs could be smaller, more personal, and more familiar with the experiences participants were bringing into school. One participant described the difference of being in a program where other students shared similar experiences:

"I think it made it easier [to be part of a small program] ... It was a [small] class. The teacher was more helpful. [and could] help you one-on-one because [they had less students]."

The focus groups also made clear that specialized services should not be treated as evidence that every institution was prepared. In several cases, the specialized program was precisely where participants found support that they were not receiving elsewhere. For some students, specialized programs served as a bridge to a broader institution that remained more difficult to navigate. Their success therefore demonstrates both the value of specialized support and the need for larger institutions to become more responsive.

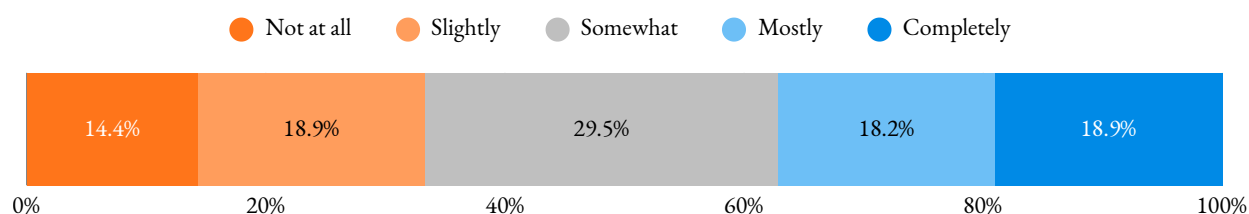
Evaluating Institutional Student Readiness

Participants' experiences provide an opportunity to evaluate institutional student readiness not simply by asking whether particular services existed, but by examining whether students could access those services, whether faculty and staff understood their circumstances, and whether institutions responded consistently to the factors shaping students' ability to persist.

A. Overall Institutional Preparedness

Responses did not show a clear consensus about how well institutions understood and supported the needs of justice-impacted students, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Institutional Understanding of Justice-Impacted Students' Needs



Note. 132 responses are included in this figure after excluding 11 who selected "Not applicable."



These responses do not describe institutions as uniformly prepared or unprepared. Instead, they show substantial differences in how people experienced their schools. Some respondents felt understood and supported. Others experienced only partial understanding, and some did not feel understood at all. The focus groups reflected the same variation. Participants described institutions and programs where staff understood their circumstances and others where the student was expected to enter existing systems and figure out how to make those systems work with little guidance.

A focus group participant described the limits of institutional readiness through their experience seeking help with problems that extended beyond coursework:

"All colleges have [a] student center, but when you go to the student center with real life issues, they don't know what to do."

The participant described asking for help after becoming a single parent and being directed back toward solutions they had already been unable to find. The issue was therefore not simply whether a service existed, but whether it was accessible and could respond to the circumstances affecting a student's ability to continue their education.

Additionally, forty-one percent of survey responses indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that their institution provided the academic, financial, emotional, and administrative or legal support that participants needed to succeed, 35% were neutral, and 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed.²⁰ These results further suggest substantial variation in institutional experience rather than a single shared assessment of college preparedness.

B. Access to Resources and Proactive Support

Participants' experiences repeatedly demonstrated a distinction between having resources and being able to access them. Some participants learned about services through flyers or other students, discovered resources only after experiencing difficulty, or knew that support existed but did not know how to use it. Others struggled to identify what kind of help they needed in the first place.

Participants highlighted a difference between support that students had to seek out themselves and support that institutions offered proactively. Some students described repeatedly asking for help or locating resources on their own, while others benefited from staff and faculty who reached out, noticed absences, or connected them with assistance. This contrast suggests that academic adjustment was shaped not only by students' ability to advocate for themselves, but also by how readily institutions and their staff made support available.



One participant imagined how differently they might have responded if counseling support had simply been made more visible:

"Honestly, if [there] was a big sign [that stated], 'it's okay to ask. Visit us here,' at the counseling [office], it would have been perfect. I would have [thought it was] okay to ask [for help]. I would have went to that room... and would have probably just spilled everything."

These experiences show that the existence of a resource does not make it accessible. Students also need to know that support exists, understand what it provides, and recognize that they are welcome to use it.

C. Faculty and Staff Responsiveness

Experiences with faculty and staff varied. Participants described professors who answered questions, offered flexibility, gave feedback, checked on students, and helped them move through difficult academic periods. They also described faculty and advisors who were difficult to reach, overwhelmed by the number of students they served, inconsistent in their expectations, or unable to respond to circumstances affecting a student outside the classroom.

College and university staff were important sources of support within the survey responses. However, focus group participants frequently experienced support through individual relationships rather than consistently across an institution. Some participants described professors who were helpful in one course and unresponsive in another. Some said they had to repeatedly advocate for themselves before receiving assistance. Others felt that individual professors were doing the best they could within institutions where staff were already overwhelmed.

D. Institutional Climate, Belonging, and Stigma

Participants described disclosure as a decision shaped by how safe and accepting they perceived the surrounding environment. Some participants openly discussed their lived experiences, particularly when they were enrolled in programs specifically serving people who were justice-impacted. Others described that they had never disclosed their background to professors, advisors, or classmates. Sometimes, focus group participants waited to hear how people spoke about incarceration before deciding whether to disclose.

One participant who had disclosed their background during an admissions process later learned that some people had challenged their presence:

"It was other people who didn't agree with them. They're like, what was the charge? Are you crazy? She can't be here."

Together, the survey and focus groups show why disclosure cannot be separated from the institutional climate surrounding justice involvement. Students were not only deciding whether to share personal information; they were also assessing whether doing so could expose them to judgment or exclusion.

The findings on belonging point to a similar issue. Some participants found community in smaller programs or among people with shared experiences, while others attended college without developing the same connection, sometimes completing coursework without forming meaningful relationships on campus.

For a student-ready institution, belonging therefore involves more than enrollment or physical presence on campus. It also requires an environment in which students feel accepted, supported, and able to participate without being reduced to their justice involvement. Participants' experiences suggest that institutional climate can shape not only whether students feel connected to their college, but also whether they feel comfortable seeking help, building relationships, and sharing information that may be relevant to the support they need.

E. Cultural Responsiveness and Trauma-Informed Support

Institutional readiness was also measured in terms of whether faculty and staff understood the range of experiences students brought with them into educational settings. Half (50%) of responses agreed or strongly agreed that their schools were culturally responsive and sensitive to the experiences of students from justice-impacted backgrounds, 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed; and 30% were neutral.²¹

The focus groups showed that participants understood cultural responsiveness through more than racial or ethnic diversity. Conversations included race, gender, language, age, incarceration, economic circumstances, disability, religion, and other lived experiences. Participants also distinguished between having a diverse student body or staff and having people who actually understood how different experiences shaped the way students entered the classroom.



One participant made that distinction, describing that:

“Because they have such a diversified staff, they believe that [it] represents cultural sensitivity and it doesn't.”

Participants described both positive and negative experiences, reinforcing that a diverse campus did not automatically translate into students feeling understood by faculty or staff.

Nearly three-quarters (72%) of survey responses agreed or strongly agreed that faculty and staff could better support students who are justice-impacted through additional training on trauma-informed and inclusive practices.²² The focus groups provided substantial context for this finding. Participants spoke about incarceration, violence, family separation, foster care, grief, substance use, and other experiences that did not disappear when they entered a classroom. Some described educational environments that activated memories or emotions connected to earlier experiences. Others described needing faculty and staff who understood that trauma could affect concentration, trust, communication, asking for help, and the ability to remain present in school.

One focus group participant described what trauma-informed support meant to them:

“So just a mentor that's trauma-informed and understands the reality. Everybody who goes to jail isn't a bad person. Everybody who goes to jail didn't do long bids necessarily because the crime matched the time. Things like that.”

Participants described varied histories and needs while consistently expressing a desire for faculty and staff who could understand those differences without judging, labeling, or reducing students to their incarceration. Cultural responsiveness and trauma-informed practice therefore appeared less as separate services than as elements of how students wanted to be treated across the institution.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENT-READY SCHOOLS

The recommendations in this section are grounded in participants' shared thoughts and experiences. Using the Student-Ready Schools framework, we translate those participant priorities into recommendations for institutional practice. Although these recommendations primarily focus on colleges and universities, many require sustained partnerships with community-based organizations, reentry programs, and other organizations that support students beyond campus.

Across these recommendations, one principle is consistent: students should not be expected to coordinate multiple disconnected systems on their own. Institutional readiness means anticipating where barriers are likely to emerge and creating support that is visible, coordinated, and responsive before those barriers become crises.

1. *Provide Coordinated, Individualized Navigation and Follow-Through*

Participants repeatedly called for individualized, consistent navigation support throughout their educational journeys. Survey responses described the need for dedicated advisors, caseworkers, success coaches, care coordinators, and one-stop support centers. Rather than being referred from office to office, students wanted a trusted person who understood their circumstances and could help them navigate enrollment, financial aid, academic requirements, technology, housing, legal obligations, mental health, and career planning. Focus group participants expressed a similar need:

"I would recommend some type of mentorship or mutual aid – not in a needy way – but someone to hold your hand through the process, because a lot of different things come up."

Colleges and community partners should create a clear point of entry where justice-impacted students can connect with a consistent navigator who remains connected to them over time. This navigator may be based at a college, specialized program, or community-based organization, but should understand both college systems and the realities of reentry. They should also have the relationships needed to help students move across systems. Support should be proactive, helping students anticipate and address barriers.

Institutions and community partners should also establish clear referral pathways, named points of contact, and follow-through procedures. When a student is referred to another service, the referring person or organization should, when appropriate and with the student's consent, follow up to ensure that the connection was successfully made.

2. Center Lived Experience in Mentorship, Support, Employment, and Leadership

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of receiving support from people who understand incarceration, reentry, and higher education through lived experience. Survey responses called for peer mentors, support groups, credible messengers, and advisors with lived experience, while focus group participants frequently described the value of trained peer counselors, navigators, mentors, and advisors who were justice-impacted themselves.

As one focus group participant explained:

“I feel like someone with lived experience should be navigating all of this.” While they appreciated the work of other academic activists, they stated that *“it’s just not the same. Their fight is not our fight.”*

Colleges, community-based organizations, and other programs serving justice-impacted students should treat lived experience as expertise and create meaningful, paid roles for people with lived experience. These roles should extend beyond peer support and mentorship. Justice-impacted students, alumni, and professionals should have opportunities to train faculty and staff, advise institutional leaders, evaluate programs and services, and participate in decisions that affect justice-impacted students.

Institutions should also build ongoing mechanisms for students and alumni with lived experience to assess whether programs are responsive to students’ needs and recommend changes. Programs intended for justice-impacted students should be developed, implemented, and evaluated with their meaningful participation.

3. Support Academic Persistence Through Reasonable Flexibility and Basic-Needs Assistance

Participants made clear that academic persistence often depends on circumstances outside the classroom. Survey responses recommended support with housing, food, transportation, childcare, emergency expenses, technology, school supplies, clothing, and other needs that can directly affect a student’s ability to remain enrolled and engaged. One focus group participant recommended mutual aid specifically for needs that could otherwise interfere with education.

Participants also called for greater flexibility when unavoidable responsibilities related to reentry or legal-system involvement conflict with academic requirements. Survey respondents specifically mentioned court appearances, supervision check-ins, and the need for attendance policies that account for probation or parole obligations.

Colleges should treat basic-needs support and reasonable institutional flexibility as components of academic persistence, not as issues separate from academic success. Institutions should connect students to accessible assistance for essential needs and review policies related to attendance, deadlines, registration, financial holds, and documentation to identify requirements that may unnecessarily disrupt students' progress.

Flexibility should not mean lowering academic expectations. Rather, institutions should establish clear processes for responding to legitimate circumstances so that a temporary financial, family, reentry, or legal obligation does not unnecessarily become a barrier to continuing a student's education.

4. *Make Financial Aid and College Affordability Easier to Navigate*

Participants described college affordability as involving more than simply qualifying for financial aid. Survey respondents also called for emergency funds, FAFSA assistance, affordable textbooks, and help addressing previous debt. Focus group participants similarly described how older student loans, incarceration, financial aid eligibility, institutional policies, missing documentation, and current tuition balances could intersect in complicated ways.

Colleges should provide financial aid support that is equipped to address complex and interrupted financial histories. Students with older or defaulted loans, missing records, gaps in enrollment, or unusual financial circumstances may need more individualized assistance than a standard financial aid appointment provides.

Institutions should also offer accessible FAFSA assistance, clearly identified scholarship opportunities for justice-impacted students, emergency financial support, and staff who understand how prior debt and reentry circumstances may affect college affordability. Financial support should include both access to funding and access to knowledgeable people who can help students understand and navigate the systems governing that funding.

Colleges should also establish clear points of contact for community-based organizations and reentry partners assisting students with financial aid issues that require institutional action.

5. *Prepare Students for the Academic and Digital College Environment*

Participants emphasized that students returning from incarceration may encounter unfamiliar academic technologies even when they are otherwise prepared for college-level work.



Survey respondents recommended technology and digital literacy training before release, as well as access to laptops, software instruction, tutoring, writing support, and academic skill development. Focus group participants similarly recommended incorporating technology preparation into orientation and transition planning.

Colleges should assess academic and digital readiness separately and provide support for both. A student may be academically capable while still being unfamiliar with learning management systems, cloud-based documents, electronic textbooks, online financial aid platforms, video conferencing, or commonly used software.

Technology preparation should begin early, focus on the actual tools students will be expected to use, and remain available throughout the semester rather than ending after orientation. Institutions should treat gaps in technological familiarity as areas for support, not as evidence that a student is unprepared for or does not belong in college.

Where possible, college-in-prison programs, colleges, reentry programs, and community-based organizations should coordinate so that digital preparation can begin before release and continue through the transition into college.

6. Create Trauma-Informed, Culturally Responsive, and Anti-Stigma Institutions

Participants called for counseling, trauma-informed services, peer support, wellness resources, and mental health professionals who understand incarceration and reentry. They also emphasized the importance of interacting with faculty, staff, mentors, and service providers who do not judge students or reduce them to their justice involvement.



Colleges should create institutional environments in which justice-impacted students can seek support without stigma, unnecessary disclosure, or repeated pressure to explain their histories. Trauma-informed practice should not assume that every person who has been incarcerated has experienced trauma or requires therapy. Rather, it should help institutions avoid practices that unnecessarily recreate experiences of surveillance, punishment, humiliation, distrust, or loss of control.

Faculty and staff across the institution should receive practical preparation on incarceration and reentry, stigma, trauma-informed practice, respectful communication, confidentiality, and circumstances students may be managing outside the classroom. This preparation should extend beyond counseling services to admissions, financial aid, advising, accessibility services, career services, student affairs, public safety, and administration.





Training should focus on what staff should do, not simply what they should know. Staff should understand how to respond when a student seeks assistance, protect privacy, avoid unnecessary disclosure, communicate respectfully, and connect students with appropriate support. People with lived experience and community-based organizations should be meaningfully involved in developing and delivering this training.

7. *Make Resources Visible and Strengthen Coordination Across Institutions and Community Partners*

Participants emphasized that having resources available is not enough if students do not know they exist, understand how to access them, or know whether they are eligible. Survey respondents called for consistent communication, regular check-ins, centralized resource information, and clear points of contact. Focus group participants similarly recommended making support highly visible and communicating that asking for help is welcomed.

Colleges should communicate available resources repeatedly, clearly, and through multiple channels rather than relying on students to discover them on their own. Information should identify what support is available, who it is for, how to access it, and whom to contact when a student encounters difficulty.

Participants also emphasized the importance of stronger relationships between colleges and the community and reentry organizations that often support students before, during, and after enrollment. As one participant stated:

“I feel like more... college institutions should be more connected with reentry programs.”

Colleges should establish working relationships with reentry organizations, community-based organizations, legal-service providers, and when appropriate, probation and parole systems. These partnerships should include named contacts, clear referral procedures, defined responsibilities, and mechanisms for addressing problems that cross organizational boundaries.

The goal should be coordination rather than simply more referrals. Students should not be expected to serve as the primary messenger between colleges, community organizations, service providers, and other systems. When referrals are made, institutions and partners should have appropriate processes for follow-through, with the student's consent.

Any coordination involving probation, parole, or other justice-system agencies should protect student privacy, minimize unnecessary disclosure, and ensure that support does not become another form of surveillance.



8. *Connect Education to Long-Term Career and Economic Opportunity*

Participants repeatedly emphasized that earning a credential does not automatically translate into access to employment. Survey respondents called for employment assistance, internships, vocational opportunities, career counseling, legal information about occupational restrictions, and connections to employers willing to hire people with conviction histories. Focus group participants similarly described the need for career guidance that accounts for justice involvement rather than assuming that all graduates face the same employment landscape.

Career planning for justice-impacted students should begin early and continue throughout their education. Students should have access to accurate information about licensing requirements, background checks, occupational restrictions, transferable skills, internships, entrepreneurship, graduate education, and employment opportunities.

Colleges should build relationships with employers, workforce organizations, community-based organizations, and legal-service providers that can help students understand potential barriers, identify realistic pathways, and connect their education to meaningful employment.

This support should not narrow students' ambitions or steer them away from particular fields solely because of their justice involvement. Rather, students should receive enough accurate information and individualized guidance to make informed decisions about the pathways they want to pursue. A Student-Ready institution should therefore view persistence and graduation as part of a broader educational and economic trajectory, rather than as the endpoint of its responsibility to students.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study addresses several areas that deserve deeper research. First, future studies should examine differences within the justice-impacted student population, including how experiences differ between people who pursued college while incarcerated and those who entered higher education after release. This should include a closer examination of how probation, parole, court requirements, parenting, age, gender, and other responsibilities shape educational experiences and persistence.

Second, future research should examine how systems of support connect to one another. This study found examples of colleges, community organizations, reentry programs, and specialized programs all playing important roles. It also found places where students encountered gaps between those systems.

The open-ended survey responses also raise questions about centralized support. Many responses described dedicated advisors, one-stop centers, case management, peer navigators, and resource centers. Future research could compare these models and examine whether referrals actually result in students receiving the intended support.

Third, financial aid and technology readiness should be examined in greater detail. Future research on financial aid should consider the relationship between prior student debt, default, financial aid eligibility, scholarships, institutional balances, incarceration, and reentry. Technology research should distinguish access to devices from readiness to use current academic systems.

Finally, future research should evaluate whether the institutional changes recommended in this report improve student experiences in practice. Students who are justice-impacted should help determine whether those changes are working.

CONCLUSION

This study began with a shift in perspective: rather than asking whether students who are justice-impacted are prepared for higher education, we asked whether higher education institutions are prepared for them.

The experiences shared by participants show why that distinction matters. Their educational journeys were shaped by reentry, work and family responsibilities, financial and housing instability, mental health, technology, and the lasting effects of incarceration, but there was no single justice-impacted student experience. Participants brought different histories, strengths, needs, goals, and circumstances to higher education.

Their experiences also show that many of the barriers they encountered are not inevitable. Participants described mentors who understood their experiences, staff who helped them navigate complicated systems, programs that provided financial and basic-needs support, professors who offered flexibility and encouragement, and community organizations that helped bridge the transition into and through college. These supports often made a meaningful difference.

The problem was that they were not consistently available. Too often, students had to locate resources on their own, repeatedly advocate for what they needed, or rely on individual relationships to navigate systems that were not designed with their circumstances in mind.



Becoming student-ready therefore requires more than opening the doors of higher education. It means examining what happens after students enter: whether institutional systems are understandable and accessible, whether support reaches students before problems become crises, whether faculty and staff respond without stigma, and whether students encounter people who recognize the strengths and experiences they bring with them.

Justice-impacted students are already doing the work of returning to school, rebuilding their lives, supporting their families, and pursuing educational and career goals. A Student-Ready School should be prepared to meet them when they arrive, support them as they move through higher education, and ensure that they are not required to overcome institutional barriers on their own.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the individuals who participated in this study and shared their experiences through the survey and focus groups. Their perspectives and recommendations are at the center of this report and its vision for more responsive, student-ready institutions.

We also thank the organizations, programs, and community partners that helped connect the research team with justice-impacted students and supported recruitment for this study.

We are also grateful to Tara Donahue and Blueprint Supported Education for helping provide emotional support and resources for focus group participants when conversations touched on difficult or sensitive experiences.

We also thank the broader #DegreesNYC and Goddard Riverside team, including LaKisha N. Williams, Latiqua Washington, Susan Matloff-Nieves, Lateefah Miller, and Bri Ruiz for their thoughtful feedback, editing, and support throughout the research and report-development process.

Finally, this project was made possible through the generous support of the CUNY College Completion Innovation Fund (CCIF), National College Attainment Network (NCAN), Ascendium Education Group, the Robin Hood Foundation, and the Ichigo Foundation. We are grateful for their investment in research that centers the voices and leadership of people directly affected by the systems we seek to understand and change.

ENDNOTES

- [1] For this study, we define justice-impacted as students with direct lived experience with the criminal legal system, including incarceration, probation, parole, juvenile justice involvement, arrest, or conviction.
- [2] Because respondents could select more than one educational status, these categories overlap and percentages might exceed 100%.
- [3] Participants had the option to select as many barriers as applied, so the total may exceed 100%.
- [4] 142 respondents answered this question. Respondents could select as many responses as applied.
- [5] 142 respondents answered this question. 11 who selected "Not applicable" were excluded from these results.
- [6] We recorded 143 responses to this question. Because respondents could select more than one source, these responses overlap and may exceed 100%.
- [7] Participants could select as many barriers as applied, so total count may exceed 100%.
- [8] 142 respondents answered this question. Respondents could select as many responses as applied.
- [9] 142 respondents answered this question. 8 who selected "Not applicable" were excluded from these results.
- [10] We received 142 responses to this question. Participants could select multiple responses.
- [11] This question received 143 responses. Seven responses that selected "not applicable" were removed from analysis.
- [12] This question received 142 responses. Eight that selected "not applicable" were removed from analysis.
- [13] Participants were able to select as many supports as applied. There were 142 responses to this question. We excluded 13 responses who indicated that they had not received meaningful support from any source.
- [14] Participants were able to select as many supports as applied. There were 142 responses to this question. We excluded 13 responses who indicated that they had not received meaningful support from any source.
- [15] Participants were able to select as many supports as applied. There were 143 responses to this question. We excluded 11 responses who indicated that they had not found any supports helpful.
- [16] Participants were able to select as many supports as applied. There were 142 responses to this question. We excluded 13 responses who indicated that they had not received meaningful support from any source.
- [17] Participants were able to select as many supports as applied. There were 143 responses to this question. We excluded 11 responses who indicated that they had not found any supports helpful.
- [18] 143 responses answered this question. Respondents could select as many responses as applied.
- [19] Respondents could select as many responses as applied.
- [20] 143 respondents answered this question. 10 who selected "Not applicable" were excluded from these results. Percentages are rounded, so may show a total that slightly exceeds 100%.
- [21] 142 respondents answered this question. 12 who selected "Not applicable" were excluded from these results.
- [22] 142 respondents answered this question. 11 who selected "Not applicable" were excluded from these results.

REFERENCES

Cornwall, G. (2023). "Revolutionary" housing: How colleges aim to support formerly incarcerated students. The Hechinger Report.

Couloute, L. (2018, October). Getting back on course: Educational exclusion and attainment among formerly incarcerated people. Prison Policy Initiative.

Emory University. (n.d.). The impact of higher education on recidivism rates. Institutional Research Brief.

Gais, T., Grace, R., & Wilner, P. (2023). Participation & outcomes in SUNY college-in-prison programs. Office of Higher Education in Prison, State University of New York.

Hagan, J., & Foster, H. (2012). Children of the American prison generation: Student and school spillover effects of incarcerating mothers. *Law & Society Review*, 46(1), 37–69. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5893.2012.00472.x.

Haney, C. (2001). The psychological impact of incarceration: Implications for post-prison adjustment. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

Reynolds, G. M., Rusca, E., & Ibrahim, D. (2024). Supporting justice-impacted students: Recommendations for Elgin Community College. Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University.

Vera Institute of Justice. (2019). Unlocking potential: Pathways from prison to postsecondary education. Vera Institute of Justice.

APPENDIX A. CONTACT FORM AND SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

Because the survey was anonymous, participants used a separate contact form for compensation and focus-group interest. The form received 166 submissions. After 16 duplicate contact-form entries were removed, 150 remained. Because the contact form could not be linked to individual survey responses, these records were not used to determine the number of unique survey respondents.

The conservative 15-response sensitivity scenario included the eight self-reported repeat survey submissions plus seven additional cases with duplicate contact-form records for which survey duplication could not be determined. This scenario was used as a stress test, not as an estimate of the actual number of duplicate survey responses.

For key survey findings, percentages were recalculated under two extreme assumptions: that all possible repeats were concentrated among those selecting a response or among those not selecting it. For questions answered by all 144 submissions, this produced a denominator as low as 129.

CONTACT US

To learn more about #DegreesNYC, visit: www.degreesnyc.org

To learn more about the Options Center, visit: www.goddard.org/options

If you are interested in learning more about this study or resources to support students who are justice-impacted, feel free to reach out to the research team:

- Rachel Bork (rbork@goddard.org)
- Isaac Scott (iscott@goddard.org)
- Diamonte Alexander (dalexander@goddard.org)



Complete the Options Center's College Access & Success Interest Form to join the Justice-Impacted Student Cohort:
<https://shorturl.at/zw0zP>



Goddard Riverside Options Center's Letter of Support Template:
<https://shorturl.at/wO5pA>



[#DegreesNYC](#)

Goddard Riverside
Options Center

CUNY | College Completion
Innovation Fund

www.degreesnyc.org