

USC Race and
Equity Center

**HOW CAN CALIFORNIA'S
HIGHER EDUCATION
SYSTEMS COLLABORATE
TO ENSURE RACIAL
EQUITY FOR FORMERLY
INCARCERATED
STUDENTS?**

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*Supporting Justice-
System Impacted
Students*

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BIOGRAPHY



Javier Rodriguez (he/him/his)

MSW

Javier Rodriguez grew up in Watts and South Central Los Angeles. He is a son of Mexican immigrants and a formerly incarcerated professional. He currently serves as a consultant; specifically partners with universities and college campuses; provides support to programs serving students impacted by the criminal justice system. Javier earned his Bachelors in Anthropology and Masters of Social Welfare from the Luskin School of Public Affairs at UCLA. During his time at UCLA, he co-founded the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) UCLA Chapter and founder of Legacy Changes Consulting (LCC). Javier is a proud alumni of Los Angeles Southwest College and a humanitarian at heart.

BIOGRAPHY



Jennifer Grijalva (she/her/ella)

Licensed Clinical Social Worker


Jennifer Grijalva grew up in Los Angeles, California, specifically Koreatown and South Central. She is the daughter of Guatemalan immigrants and is a first-generation college graduate. She obtained a bachelor's degree in Psychology from UCLA and earned her Masters of Social Welfare from the Luskin School of Public Affairs at UCLA. After completing her master's degree, Jennifer worked as a bilingual therapist in community mental health organizations serving students and families. Jennifer continues to focus on mental health equity as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

California's public higher education system consists of California Community Colleges, California State University (CSU) and University of California(UC). Each of these systems currently has programs and campus organizations that provide support to students that the incarceration system has impacted. The following paragraphs will provide an overview of the supports provided by each system.

The California Community College System has the [Rising Scholars Network](#), the largest collective of community college programs serving system-impacted students. The Rising Scholars Network started in 2020 and provides programs to support re-entry for formerly and currently incarcerated students. The Rising Scholars Network is on the state budget for \$25 million yearly (\$15 million specifically for youth-serving programs).

The CSU System has [Project Rebound](#), which was founded by Professor John Irwin at San Francisco State in 1967. This was the first organization that focused on providing assistance to formerly and currently incarcerated students. Now, Project Rebound has expanded and is in 14 CSUs. Project Rebound has been instrumental in increasing the amount of formerly incarcerated students on college campuses by providing students with academic and transfer advising, tutoring, financial planning, linkage support, and mentorship. California has allocated an ongoing \$3.3 million yearly fund to Project Rebound.

The UC System has *Underground Scholars* at all of its campuses after the program was founded at [UC Berkeley](#) in 2013. They support students in transferring and earning their UC degree by providing tutoring, financial aid planning, and leadership development programs. Underground Scholars also engages in policy advocacy to create more opportunities and eliminate current political barriers that impact currently and formerly incarcerated students. Underground Scholars is receiving an annual budget of \$4 million to be distributed across all 9 UC campuses.



All three of these support systems have helped with reducing recidivism rates, and enhancing student success. The programming and services are all publicly funded by each system (CCC, CSU, UC).

To gain a more thorough understanding of mass incarceration and barriers that formerly incarcerated students face, we invite readers to visit our previous brief called [“Who Are Formerly Incarcerated Students?”](#). The brief provides an overview of how to support formerly incarcerated students and discusses unfair incarceration policies (i.e. tough on crime policies, zero-tolerance policies) that negatively impacted Black and Brown communities.

According to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 62% of inmates released from 2017-2018 returned to prison.

Clearly, there is a need for reentry programs, especially in California which is one of the states with the highest recidivism rates in the country. Programs such as Rising Scholars Network, Project Rebound, and Undergrad Scholars can change a person’s trajectory and help end the mass incarceration of people of color.

In this brief, our goal is to highlight current student needs and different ways to expand higher education reentry programs while promoting cross collaboration across all three systems.

RECOMMENDATION # 1:

PROVIDE SUPPORT TO MEET STUDENT'S HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

There has been an increase in support for students impacted by the incarceration system throughout the years. While providing academic and financial support is important, we need to keep in mind *holistic development*. For many formerly incarcerated students, having access to mental health services and a therapist who is knowledgeable and has experience providing services to formerly incarcerated individuals is current need that should be addressed ([The Possibility Report](#)). All three educational systems should be proactive and provide training around trauma-informed care and systemic oppression to more adequately support formerly incarcerated students mental health needs.

Besides enhancing access to mental health services and therapy, colleges should take a holistic approach. Here are a few ideas regarding holistic programs that may benefit students on your campus. We recommend that you identify current programs that are already being provided and collaborate with student leaders to fill any gaps in services.

- ***Healing Circles***
- ***Conflict Resolution and De-Escalation Classes***
- ***Culturally Inclusive Mental Health Services***
- ***Chiropractic and Acupuncture Services***

Healing Circles can help create a sense of community among participating members. For some individuals, healing circles can be more welcoming than individual therapy sessions. It can also create a sense of belonging and connection as many members may share similar hardships and traumatic experiences. Healing circles led by experienced professionals who are trained on supporting system-impacted people can emphasize resilience and empower participating members.

Conflict Resolution and De-Escalation Classes would help students improve conflict resolution skills, gain positive communication strategies and emotional regulation tools. This could be specifically helpful for formerly incarcerated students because the prison system cultivates violence as a solution to conflict. Therefore, it is necessary to help formerly incarcerated individuals transition their conflict resolution skills.

The impact that trauma has on students' mental and physical health directly impacts their life trajectory and academic success. Formerly and currently incarcerated students often have experienced racial trauma, intergenerational trauma, trauma in their neighborhoods or their home and/or while being incarcerated. Students deserve to be provided with adequate and *culturally inclusive services* that address the adverse impact racism has had on their life.

Chiropractic and Acupuncture Services may help many students. Research has shown that trauma and stress impacts the body. Especially with students with complex trauma history, it can be useful to take a more holistic approach that goes beyond therapy services. Chiropractic and acupuncture services can provide the body with relief and in some cases, has been seen to reduce PTSD symptoms.

RECOMMENDATION # 2: ENSURE THAT COUNSELORS ARE WELL- INFORMED ON HOW TO HELP NAVIGATE HIGHER EDUCATION AND LIFELONG PROFESSIONS

It is important for counselors to understand a student's overall holistic needs and provide referrals to services such as the ones listed above. Practitioners, faculty and staff can help create a more inclusive space for all students by honoring and respecting the individual experiences of each student and by connecting students to tangible resources.

In terms of professional supports, it is challenging to navigate careers with convictions. Many students need help with letters of support, resume building, mock interviews and career exploration. However, formerly incarcerated students often experience additional barriers, for instance, with applying to jobs while having a conviction history and also maneuvering through licensing board regulations. Therefore, advisors on all three educational systems (CCC, CSU and UC) need to be knowledgeable about how to navigate career opportunities when students have a conviction history.

It's important to provide students with adequate support in order for them to navigate systemic barriers as professionals. By doing so, it can mitigate and decrease the barriers that system impacted students face and can help with dismantling the racial and social inequities that Black and Brown communities face on a daily basis.

RECOMMENDATION # 3: ***CULTIVATE MENTORSHIP***

It is imperative that the Community Colleges, Cal States and the UC system help to create support networks to help reduce isolation and improve the overall mental health and educational success of system impacted students. There are a variety of ways to increase support networks.

For instance, professors can play a vital role of ensuring that students can have a faculty member that they connect with and trust to seek mentorship. Professors can also help students in their academic journey by providing letters or recommendation for jobs, scholarships, transfer and graduate admissions. This can help reduce the educational barriers that students often times face throughout their academic career. Faculty recommendations can be powerful especially for formerly incarcerated student's reputation because it can reduce stigma they face from society, prospective employers and university admissions.

RECOMMENDATION # 4: ***EXPAND PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS ACROSS THE CCC, CSU AND UC SYSTEM***

Peer support networks can be equally as powerful to help build a sense of community and allyship. Many system impacted students create informal peer networks that have helped them navigate higher education. This is an opportunity to growth. For instance, it would be beneficial to form formal cross collaboration between students in Community Colleges with students in CSU or UC systems. We found that being able to connect with students across different educational systems gave us a sense of community outside of our own institutions and a sense of belonging as scholars. Attending conferences where we met other formerly incarcerated students from other institutions pursuing Doctorates and Masters degrees was inspiring. The generation of students who we got to meet have become life-long friends as alumni of these different institution.

As an alumni, we also have a culture of “each one teach one” and a culture of giving back where we support each other as alumni and also alumni support current students navigating higher education.

Cross-collaboration is key because a student may end up being a student at multiple institutions in higher education. When a formerly incarcerated student is exposed to another formerly incarcerated student who is pursuing or has obtained an advanced degree, they themselves get inspired to earn an advanced degree. A peer support network also helps with reducing social barriers and challenges that come with obtaining employment with convictions. The network can provide job referrals, job leads and create support with professional pursuit as well as emotional support. Overall, it comes down to having relationships and a community of individuals that support you through the journey of higher education.

It's important to provide students with adequate support in order for them to navigate systemic barriers as professionals.

Here are two ideas on how to create cross collaboration between students:

- ***Have annual conferences where students from all public educational systems can attend.***
- ***Plan workshops and community events on campus and invite students from different schools to attend.*** An example of a community event that was done at UCLA was called Just Culture which was a celebration of formerly incarcerated students succeeding in higher education. The event encompassed live performances, cultural vendors, art gallery, classic car showcase which was all relevant to the identity of formerly incarcerated students.

Higher education is the most proven effective pathway towards reducing recidivism.

Higher education is a vehicle for upward mobility in this society. Therefore, it's imperative that CCC, CSU and UC strengthen their collaboration and are inclusive and intentional when it comes to supporting formerly incarcerated students.

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