

USC Race and
Equity Center

**HOW CAN WE DEVELOP
THE FULL POTENTIAL
OF JUSTICE SYSTEM-
IMPACTED STUDENTS
TO TRANSFER FROM
COMMUNITY COLLEGE
TO FOUR-YEAR
UNIVERSITIES?**

Mirvais Aminy

***Supporting Justice-
System Impacted
Students***

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BIOGRAPHY



Mirvais "Mir" Aminy (he/him/his)

Mir Aminy is an Academic Counselor for Project Rebound at California State University Fullerton. Project Rebound supports the higher education of formerly incarcerated students who wish to use education as their transformative practice. Mir earned his bachelors degree in the sociology of deviance and crime from Cal State Fullerton. He went on to earn his masters in counseling with an emphasis in student development in higher education from Cal State Long Beach. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Education from Chapman University. Mir also sits on the Board of Directors for the Dayle McIntosh Center, an independent living center that serves people with disabilities within Orange county. He is a social justice advocate and believes in amplifying the voices of marginalized communities to tear down societal barriers.

We hear much about the school-to-prison pipeline in academia. How boys and girls of color from underserved communities are more likely to get ensnared in the web of the criminal justice system as opposed to individuals who come from more affluent backgrounds. Whether your specialty is counseling, chemistry, or computer science it is widely known in the halls of higher education that marginalized students of less privileged socioeconomic status have fewer opportunities at pursuing college degrees. Society has always been aware of these injustices, but it is in recent years that we have seen a change in how we respond to folks returning to our communities from prisons and jails.

The following brief will discuss best practices for student affairs professionals that serve formerly incarcerated students. Many of the challenges that the students face: stigma, basic necessities, transfer navigation, and ill-informed stereotypes can be lessened and even eliminated by taking an asset-based approach when delivering services. Utilizing the framework of Tara J. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (CCWM), student affairs professionals can contribute to the successes of resilient, persevering, and brilliant scholars.


Higher education being used as a transformative practice for formerly incarcerated students has had a long history in the state of California. With the advent of programs such as the Underground Scholars within the UC system and the [Rising Scholars Network](#) within the California Community College system, higher education has become more available to folks who have been impacted by the criminal justice system now more than ever in history. Another program, Project Rebound, has been in existence for over 50 years. Launched in 1967 by its founder Dr. John Irwin at San Francisco State University, Project Rebound was successful in providing support services to students with criminal convictions. Dr. John Irwin himself, a formerly incarcerated person, was released from prison in the 1950s and sought to use education as his transformative practice. Having earned his

bachelor’s degree from UCLA and then a PhD from UC Berkeley, he taught at San Francisco State University for 27 years. He established Project Rebound to extend the same opportunities that he was afforded to others like himself.

Support Programs for Formerly/Currently Incarcerated Individuals within California

	Campus Support Program	Student Organizations	Prison Education Programs
CSU	15	5	1
UC	11	2	0
CCC	62	20	29
Private Universities	1	1	0


The transfer process from a community college to a four-year university, can be very daunting and intimidating. Ensuring that your Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA form is filled out correctly is only half the battle. In the CSU system, community college students must apply to the university many months in advance. For formerly incarcerated students, this process is exponentially more stressful for numerous reasons such as adherence to strict timelines, lack of technological acumen, a misunderstanding of transfer requirements, acute impostor syndrome, not to mention the lack of secure housing, employment, and job opportunities. As student affairs professionals, counselors, faculty members, advisers, and others in positions of privilege, we must be aware of the unique obstacles that our formerly incarcerated students face when being released from custody and initiating the process to transfer from community college to the four-year university.



According to the *Possibility Report* (2021), Danny Murillo, an expert in the college/prison nexus, there were 11,472 students enrolled in some form of college classes within California's state prisons as of June 2020. Of that number, approximately 1200 have earned at least one associate degree. Although there are no official figures, it is estimated that over 1,000 formerly incarcerated students are enrolled in campuses college campuses in California. (Murillo, 2021)

Over 95% of California's incarcerated folks will be released. It is highly unfortunate that only 10% of formerly incarcerated students who have college exposure while incarcerated are pursuing their degrees upon their release. This may be due to the fact that they are not connecting with resources or feeling welcomed at the college campuses that they may be reaching out to once they are home. With better training, raising awareness amongst faculty and staff and being more inclusive, administrators in higher education can attract more of this rich population.

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and challenges traditional interpretations of capital utilizing the asset-based approach (Yosso, 2005). This framework acknowledges that students of color possess a rich tapestry of capital that gets overlooked by society in general. By analyzing the six forms of capital outlined by Yosso's CCWM, we realize that formerly incarcerated students already possess a wealth of assets that they have accumulated even prior to setting foot on a college campus and can challenge racialized assumptions and misconceptions.



1: ASPIRATIONAL CAPITAL: UNDERSTANDING THEIR POINT OF VIEW

The first step I take with every student that walks into my office is listen to what their dreams and aspirations are. I ask questions such as what do you want to do with this degree? Where do they see themselves in three years, five years, 10 years from now? What job could you think of that would bring a smile to your face every day as you drive to work? This will give me an idea of where this student is headed, their mindset and the practicality of their aspirations. Do they want to go into the tech field, or do they want to serve other individuals like themselves? Do they want to teach, or do they want to start their own business? Secondly, I let the student know that it is perfectly OK if they do not have answers to these questions.

We must first establish that there's a difference between aspiration and knowing what your next immediate steps are on your educational journey. The ability to preserve aspirations for the future despite actual and imagined

obstacles is referred to as aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). You may have aspirations but not know how to achieve those goals. As student affairs professionals, we must harness this aspirational capital that many previously incarcerated students possess.

Many of my students have served years if not decades incarcerated. There is an unrelenting pressure upon their shoulders to expect to know what they want to do.

“OVER 95% OF CALIFORNIA’S INCARCERATED FOLKS WILL BE RELEASED.”

After all they have had years to think about it right? Wrong. For many folks who started their educational journey while they were incarcerated, they never had access to career counselors, advisors, or transfer counselors. For many they could not see past the end of the current semester. To find yourself in a prison education program is to find yourself in a tenuous situation. It is our job to provide guidance to these students and illuminate the multiple paths they can take towards success. Pushing your students to live up to their potential is key and fostering transfer pathways from community college to the four-year university and beyond.

2: LINGUISTIC CAPITAL: INHERENT SKILLS

The power of bilingualism has always been evident in the workforce. Linguistic capital involves the knowledge and abilities acquired from exposure to several languages and/or communication etiquette (Yosso, 2005). Formerly incarcerated students have encountered, worked, cohabitated and “programmed” with people from a myriad of ethnicities, social economic backgrounds, and various cultures. Over the years, the students have acquired exposure to many languages and cultural backgrounds which develop into the valuable ability to code-switch. They adapt to a wide variety of social environments. These skills need to be realized by the student and considered an asset. Formerly incarcerated students possess the ability to adapt and excel in many different social settings. Harnessing this form of capital will make them more marketable to employees, graduate programs, and lead to teaching opportunities.

3: FAMILIAL CAPITAL: THE POWER OF LOVED ONES

In my intake appointments with students, I spend a significant amount of time discussing their academic aspirations but also getting to know them on a personal level. The counselor/student dynamic requires some

level of personal disclosure, building trust and vulnerability. Asking them if they are parents, who they kept in touch with while they were incarcerated, and who they may be living with now can provide the practitioner with an overview of the responsibilities and resources available to the student. This provides me with a glimpse into how much familial capital the student may have. Having a strong support system is imperative for all students' success, but it is even more crucial for formerly incarcerated students who may rely on family

for basic needs upon the release. There may be family members who are not supportive of the student's education and who would much rather see them working and garnering an income.

These are the cultural and

communal traits that can affect the student and the family union. Yosso (2005) refers to these cultural traditions that are passed down through kin and carry a feeling of local history, memory, and cultural intuition as familial capital. As student affairs professionals, we must use a student's familial capital as a resource that can support positive student outcomes and also as an opportunity to be able to change generational models of thinking and break cycles of trauma. If a student has minimal familial capital, campus support programs can fill this vacuum and offer the support that the student may need.

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4: SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE POWER OF COMMUNITY AND NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

Of all forms of capital that are outlined by Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model, social capital is the one form that I thought many formerly incarcerated students were in short supply of. This professional opinion has since been debunked. Social networks and available resources within the community are examples of social capital outline in the CCWM (Yosso, 2005). Since the prison realignment project was launched well over a decade ago, which has led the state to fund support programs for justice impacted individuals, reentry organizations have sprouted throughout the state of California. Utilizing these resources and having strong lines of communication with them can allow you to tap into a rich plethora of organizations who serve formerly incarcerated students. Such organizations as the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, Homeboy Industries, Root and Rebound, Rising Scholars network, Underground Scholars, Project Rebound, Insight Garden Project, and Project Kinship are just a few of the organizations that specialize in serving justice-impacted individuals. Having a connection within the organization will allow you to foster a warm handoff of the student should they need their services. The importance of connecting students with available resources will not only relieve your campus of any pressure but also allow these students to tap into an entire social network. A mantra that many of us in the reentry community live by is "why reinvent the wheel?" If somebody is already providing the service, refer the students out. This is vital in fostering transfer pathways for formerly incarcerated students as these organization and networks of support will go on providing their services well after they have graduated from your institution.

5: NAVIGATIONAL CAPITAL: THE POWER OF CHOICE

Formerly incarcerated individuals have overcome huge obstacles to be able to set foot on a college campus. Many have spent years navigating societal institutions such as the foster care system, social services, juvenile justice, K-12 education, or the military. They approach any type of authority with a certain level of suspicion. Many community colleges as well as for your universities have programs in place to assist students who may have been marginalized or who may be considered vulnerable. To break down this barrier of distrust of authority that many formally incarcerated students have used to protect themselves from her student affair professionals must build trust. To them I am just another suit in a position of power who is there to tell them what they should do. Building a rapport with students who have faced traumas, psychological devastation, abuse, and letdown after letdown is not simple. We must treat this specialized population of students with kindness, affirmations, understanding, empathy and instilling them hope for the future. Rather than using the deficit approach when serving them we must adopt the asset approach and emphasize the qualities they already possess as valuable rather than pointing out what they are missing and what they should be pursuing. Utilizing Tara Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model, the asset-based approach to serving formerly incarcerated students can empower, invigorate, and encourage students who may have thought that their years were wasted while they were incarcerated. Providing students with a thorough understanding of the transfer process can also assist you in making your job easier. Justice impacted students are phenomenally resilient individuals and are quick learners. Explaining the requirements of the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) for the UCs, the Golden Four for the CSUs and other transfer options will allow students to make well-informed decisions about their education. In my experience, students had misconceptions about the requirements for entrance into particular institutions.

Misconceptions about transferring to a four-year university:

a) Not having a thorough understanding of course requirements (A1, A2, A3 & B4 requirements, IGETC series of course).

b) You are automatically disqualified from receiving the Pell grant or any other form of federal financial aid if you have a criminal conviction. Reforms to financial aid and the FAFSA form have been made in recent years to make it more accessible for individuals. In the past, if you had a drug conviction while receiving Financial Aid you were barred from receiving assistance, if males did not register for the selective service in a given time, you were also disqualified. In many instances, there are avenues of relief which can make financial aid more accessible.

c) You need a high GPA to transfer to a four-year university. Although, having a high GPA is certainly grant you more opportunities, the decision to offer admission to the student is not solely based on GPA. Many graduate programs only focus on the last 60 units completed by the student. Many formerly incarcerated students, dabbled with higher education after high school and did not perform well. The misconception is that these grades can come back to haunt them decades later. Students affairs practitioners need to utilize every tool in their arsenal such academic renewals, grade forgiveness and course repetition.

Providing students with a thorough understanding of the transfer process will empower them in taking the lead to dictate their own educational path. The more information we provide to justice impacted students the more navigational capital they will possess and allow them to make well-informed decisions.

6: RESISTANT CAPITAL: THE “RAMBO COMPLEX”

Many previously incarcerated students must battle and overcome obstacles that have been set in place by people who were meant to assist them. They may have been let down by social workers, counselors, foster parents, family members and the judicial system to name a few. It is no surprise that they have built a tough exterior; able to overcome many hardships with minimal external assistance and persevere. Yosso (2005) refers to the understandings and abilities developed via challenging inequality through oppositional conduct as resistant capital. Formally incarcerated students have a strong

sense of intuition. They are able to pick up on body language and are able to interpret nonverbal communication from years of isolation. Formerly incarcerated students have a keen sense of picking up on insincerity. It instills a fierce independence within them. But within the realms of higher education, it is not necessary to take on this momentous journey by themselves.

Dr. Brady Heiner, former Executive Director of Project Rebound at California State University Fullerton and the current Chair of the Project Rebound Consortium, which oversees Project Rebound programs at 15 of the 23 CSUs, has coined the term the “Rambo Complex.” Referring to the fictitious movie character of our childhood, Rambo was a one-man army who victoriously took on entire enemy forces on his own. What we at Cal State Fullerton try to convey to our students is that they do not have to be like Rambo. We have housing resources, opportunities to employment, scholarships, textbook stipends, resources to fund graduate school, meal support, pantries, a diaper bank, study spaces, access to technology, and etc. How do we deconstruct the Rambo Complex, which is

a result of years
of failures and
letdowns from
societal institutions?
It is not easy, but it
is possible.

More often than not,
I have encountered
students sitting
square-shouldered,
erect, with their

hands on their lap and austerity written all over their face come into my office and take a seat across my desk. Students often come in not knowing what to expect. Many, you can tell, have only been out for a few days. There is a certain air of uncertainty, anxiety, and nervousness that formerly incarcerated students carry with them. The amount of resistant capital that they possess is almost tangible during my initial meeting. Utilizing this form of capital to leverage their education is crucial in their success.

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CONCLUSION:

I have worked for Project Rebound at Cal State University Fullerton for approximately four years both as an Enrollment

Specialist and as an Academic Counselor, but for 16 years of my life I was known as inmate K-93685. I decided to use higher education as my mode of integration upon my release from prison. I did not sit in my first college class until the age of 34 years old. I was petrified, pensive, anxious, and worried. I did not know what my future held for me or whether I was making the right decision. I had to conform to the conditions of my parole while becoming self-sufficient. I had to look for a job to garner income, pay my bills, my rent and put gas in my car. For me, having access to higher education was a privilege, but it was also a gamble. I was investing so much of my time, limited resources, and energy into pursuing a college degree without knowing the outcome or if it would provide me with potential job prospects. For years I was told that because of my felony convictions my job opportunities would be drastically limited. And there is immense truth to that. But I also knew that with a college degree I would be in a better position to overcome these obstacles. It was through student affairs practitioners: counselors, academic advisors, professors, program coordinators, directors, deans, assistant deans, presidents of universities and colleges, provosts and my fellow students that I was able to navigate the intimidating halls of academia. Oftentimes, acute imposter syndrome would rear its ugly head into my subconscious instilling within me fear, apprehension and anxiety. But with the support I received inside and outside the classroom I was able to overcome these obstacles and realize my own potential. I am now privileged to be in a position where I can help and guide others. Education was my transformative practice. By being conscientious and well-informed we are able to change the trajectories for those individuals who have been marginalized by society. You don't have to possess incarceration experience to be able to empathize with individuals who want a better future for themselves. We all have an innate desire for a better tomorrow.

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