



Higher Learning Inside

An Exploration of the Demographic Make-up of Incarcerated Persons Taking Postsecondary Courses in California

Tolani Britton, Elizabeth Friedmann and Sara Adan

Introduction

ALIGNED WITH IMPORTANT and assertive state policy goals for student success and equity in the community colleges,¹ the past decade has brought heightened focus on educational opportunities for the more than 99,000 people currently incarcerated in California state prisons. In 2014, new state legislation² expanded access to face-to-face community college courses within state prisons. More recently, state legislators have sought to establish a reentry commission to reduce barriers and expand resources for former prisoners. Governor Gavin Newsom has initiated a public-private partnership to provide housing and other supports for prisoners released during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the federal level, recent legislation has reestablished access to Pell Grants, allowing incarcerated people to access financial aid that can cover college costs beyond tuition. Policymakers, researchers, educators, and advocates for the incarcerated are observing these developments closely, particularly with regard to the promise of educational attainment as a contributor to success post-release.

This brief summarizes the findings of recent reports on access to community college courses in California's prisons, and augments that earlier research with a more detailed analysis of statewide data on the demographics of those taking college courses while incarcerated. It also provides a first look at the types of courses incarcerated students take, their course loads and course performance during a four-year period prior to the pandemic.

Overall, and encouragingly, the number of colleges offering courses and the number of students enrolling has increased significantly over time, and those who do enroll are seeing success that exceeds that of students in campus settings.³ Yet, participation is not representative among different racial and age groups and these inequities merit attention and action.

TOPLINES

- > **Participation by race is uneven:** Overall, Latinx and Black incarcerated students are slightly underrepresented in college courses compared to their numbers in the total incarcerated population.
- > **Incarcerated students perform well:** Students passed courses at high rates – 96% on average in Spring 2019 – across all racial groups.
- > **Students are taking more courses in more diverse subjects:** Early course offerings were primarily in Public and Protective Services. But by 2019, courses in the Humanities were the most popular. The average number of units taken has also increased over time.
- > **The majority of young adult students take courses to prepare to fight fires:** Across all racial groups, 18–24 year olds were more likely than older students to take courses in Public and Protective Services, most commonly the Basic Fire Crew Firefighter course.



Background: Learning Opportunities for Incarcerated People Prior to 2014

Higher education is a demonstrated means of improving opportunity and life prospects, as true for people who have been incarcerated as those who have not. A meta-analysis of rigorous studies of correctional education found that incarcerated persons who participated were 28% less likely to recidivate than those who did not participate in education programs.⁴ Nationally, however, postsecondary education programs for incarcerated persons declined dramatically starting in the mid-1990s, after the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act barred incarcerated individuals from accessing Pell Grants, the federal aid that supports postsecondary enrollment by low-income students.

California has removed the cost barrier for incarcerated students through the California College Promise Grant (formerly the Board of Governors Fee Waiver), which is used by almost all of the state's incarcerated community college students to take courses for free.⁵ One face-to-face associate degree program has been offered at the San Quentin prison since the late 1990s, provided by the Prison University Project, an independent non-profit organization.⁶ Prior to 2014, broader access to for-credit, degree-applicable college coursework was offered primarily through non-interactive correspondence courses, generally delivered via paper through the mail and/or by video.⁷

Incarcerated people who participated in education programs were 28% less likely to recidivate than those who did not.

Change in State Law Leads to Major Expansion

Senate Bill 1391 of 2014 catalyzed major changes in this landscape by allowing apportionment funding for the community colleges – that is, allowing community colleges the same state reimbursement rate for students taught in face-to-face courses at prisons as they receive for students taught on traditional campuses. The legislation also specified that courses should lead to degrees and certificates, thus signaling that incarcerated Californians should, like all residents, aspire to and be supported in receiving credentials of value in the labor market.

As intended, this change led to an expansion of in-person course offerings and enrollments in prisons. Four colleges were initially awarded state funds to pilot new academic programs. Based on data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, from 2014 and 2019, the number of in-person college programs in California prisons grew from one at San Quentin to 34 programs offered in all but one of 35 state prisons, and the number of colleges offering face-to-face instruction grew to 19 colleges. Student enrollment also increased to over 7,000 students by Fall 2017,⁸ and the number of courses offered rose more than six-fold, from 49 to 309.⁹

DATA, METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

Results for this brief are drawn from a rich dataset of administrative records from the CCCCCO, which include the census of all California community college students enrolled from 2013–2019 across the state's community colleges. The data include detailed information on student demographics, units enrolled and earned, course type, grades and campus characteristics. Because state law prohibited colleges from offering in-person courses to students in state prisons prior to the passage of SB 1391, we focused this analysis on student outcomes from 2016 through 2019, the latest year of data available.¹⁰ Students who were incarcerated in out-of-state, juvenile incarceration facilities, city or county jails, and U.S. federal or private prisons were excluded. Community colleges provide some in-person courses in the state's 58 county jails, ranging from CTE to GED preparation to transfer-level coursework. Our analysis, however, focuses on state prisons only.

It is important to note some limitations in the data. There are significant differences in statewide data collected by the CDCR and CCCCCO, which can lead to inconsistencies and gaps in analyses of incarcerated student education. While the CCCCCO data contains rich information on course taking and enrollment by race and age, incomplete reporting by some college campuses makes this data set less than a full census of the incarcerated student population. In order to achieve the fullest portrait possible of incarcerated student enrollment, in some instances we relied on the Spring 2018 semester and in others, Spring 2019.

Prior Research on Incarcerated Student Performance

A 2018 report by the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) analyzed data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and from its own administrative data on the face-to-face courses for the five semesters from Spring 2016 through Spring 2018.¹¹ Researchers found that the retention rates of these courses, in aggregate, averaged 92% versus 89% for on-campus courses.¹² CCCCCO also reported that incarcerated students were more successful in their courses than those in on-campus courses, with 85% passing, compared to an average of 75% passing on-campus courses.¹³

The Stanford Criminal Justice Center conducted a separate analysis of incarcerated students enrolled in face-to-face courses offered by six community colleges, and reported similarly positive findings.¹⁴ They found that the incarcerated student population at these college mirrored the overall CDCR incarcerated population. Incarcerated students in this study outperformed on-campus students in success rates and grades (earning a C or better). In the Fall 2018 semester about 87% of incarcerated students were successful in their courses compared to about 73% of those enrolled in the same courses on the college campus. Overall, incarcerated students earned higher grades than the average for students at their college as well as higher than the average for the on-campus sections of their courses. Black incarcerated students received higher grades than non-incarcerated Black students taking CCC courses.

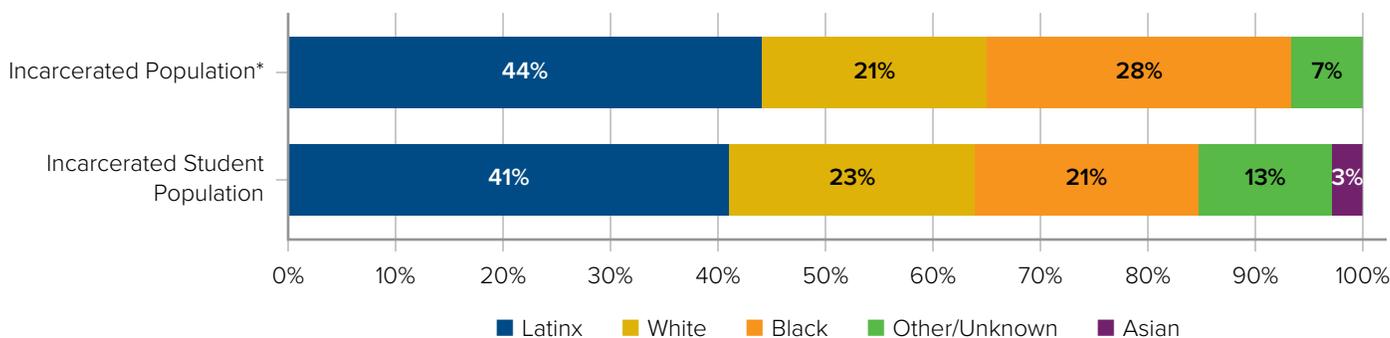
These early indicators on the provision and successful completion of face-to-face courses at California state prisons are positive. But these previous reports did not include a statewide examination of incarcerated student participation and student outcomes by demographic characteristics of the persons taking college courses while incarcerated in California. Our analysis augments these findings by examining who has accessed these opportunities, whether access has been equitable and what kind of academic momentum incarcerated students have achieved while learning inside.

New Statewide Findings

Participation by Race

Figure 1 shows incarcerated student participation by race. In 2018, the overall incarcerated population in California was 44% Latinx, 28% Black, 21% White and 7% Other (which includes Asian). The demographic makeup of incarcerated students that same year had higher shares of White and Asian/Other students compared to the total incarcerated population. Black students were particularly underrepresented, constituting 28% of the overall incarcerated population but only 21% of incarcerated students.

Figure 1. Share of Incarcerated Students Statewide by Race, Spring 2018



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

* Incarcerated population data obtained from the CDCR,¹⁵ which includes Asian incarcerated people within the “other” category in their data. Incarcerated student data obtained from CCCCCO, which reports Asian incarcerated students as a separate category.

Participation by Race and Age

Figure 2 shows substantial variation in the age of incarcerated students by race. In 2018, the age of the total incarcerated population was relatively evenly distributed across age category, with the largest group of incarcerated persons (33%) aged 45 or older, reflecting that the total incarcerated population has been aging over time.¹⁶ The total incarcerated student population was relatively younger, with 52% of incarcerated students between the ages of 18 and 35.

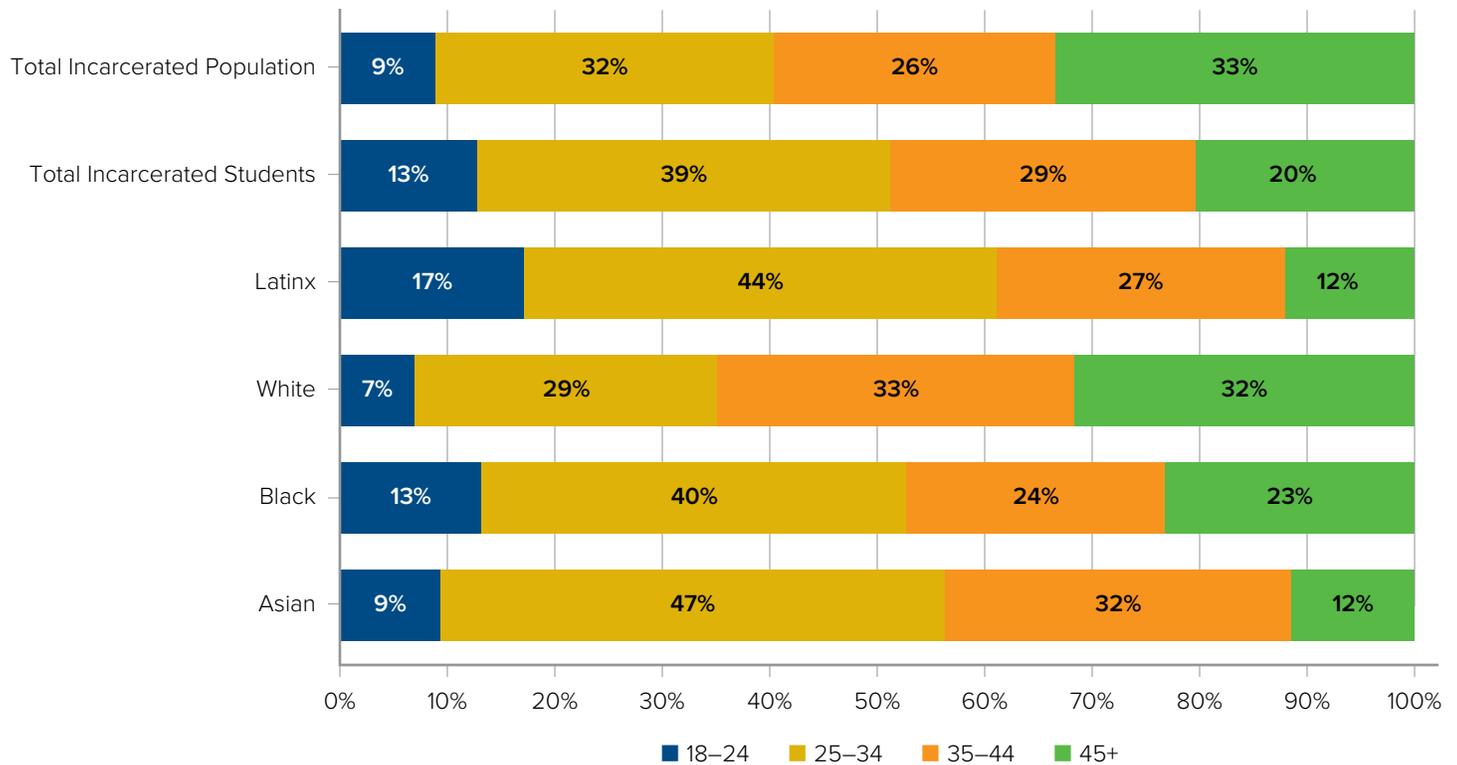
Overall, Latinx incarcerated students were younger than both the overall prison population and total incarcerated student population, while White students mirrored the overall prison population. While only 9% of the total incarcerated population and 13% of the overall incarcerated student population was aged 18–24, this age group accounted for 17% of Latinx incarcerated students but 7% of White students.

Incarcerated students are relatively young compared to the overall population of incarcerated people.

Course Availability and Enrollment

Incarcerated students take courses in subject areas whose variety has grown as more colleges offer academic programs. Table 1 shows that in 2016 the most common enrollment was in Public and Protective Services (which include Firefighting, Counseling, Addiction, and Criminal Justice).¹⁷ In subsequent years, enrollments grew in Business and Management, Social Sciences and Psychology, Humanities, and Interdisciplinary Studies. Public and Protective Services now accounts for only 14% of course enrollments, putting it behind Humanities (primarily writing and speech courses) at 25% and Social Science and Psychology at 21% of all courses taken.

Figure 2. Student Enrollment by Race and Age, Spring 2018



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Table 1. Incarcerated Student Course Enrollments by Subject Area, 2016–2019

Subject Area	2016	2017	2018	2019
Mathematics	2%	1%	4%	6%
	22	23	248	514
Interdisciplinary Studies	6%	7%	7%	6%
	77	186	429	569
Fine and Applied Arts	5%	8%	4%	7%
	64	190	251	623
Business and Management	33%	39%	15%	10%
	444	966	897	917
Other	2%	4%	11%	11%
	31	111	670	1,018
Public and Protective Services	43%	23%	20%	14%
	577	581	1,213	1,286
Social Science & Psychology	2%	11%	22%	21%
	28	268	1,367	1,860
Humanities	8%	7%	17%	25%
	108	172	1,076	2,229

Note: “Public and Protective Services” course topics include Firefighting, Counseling, Addiction, and Criminal Justice. “Interdisciplinary Studies” course topics include Tools and Strategies for College Success. “Other” includes Family and Consumer Science, Education, Physical Science, Foreign Language, Information Technology, Law, Media and Communications, Biology, Agricultural Resources, Health, Engineering, Environmental Sciences, and Library Sciences.

Course Selections by Race and Age: Focus on Public and Protective Services

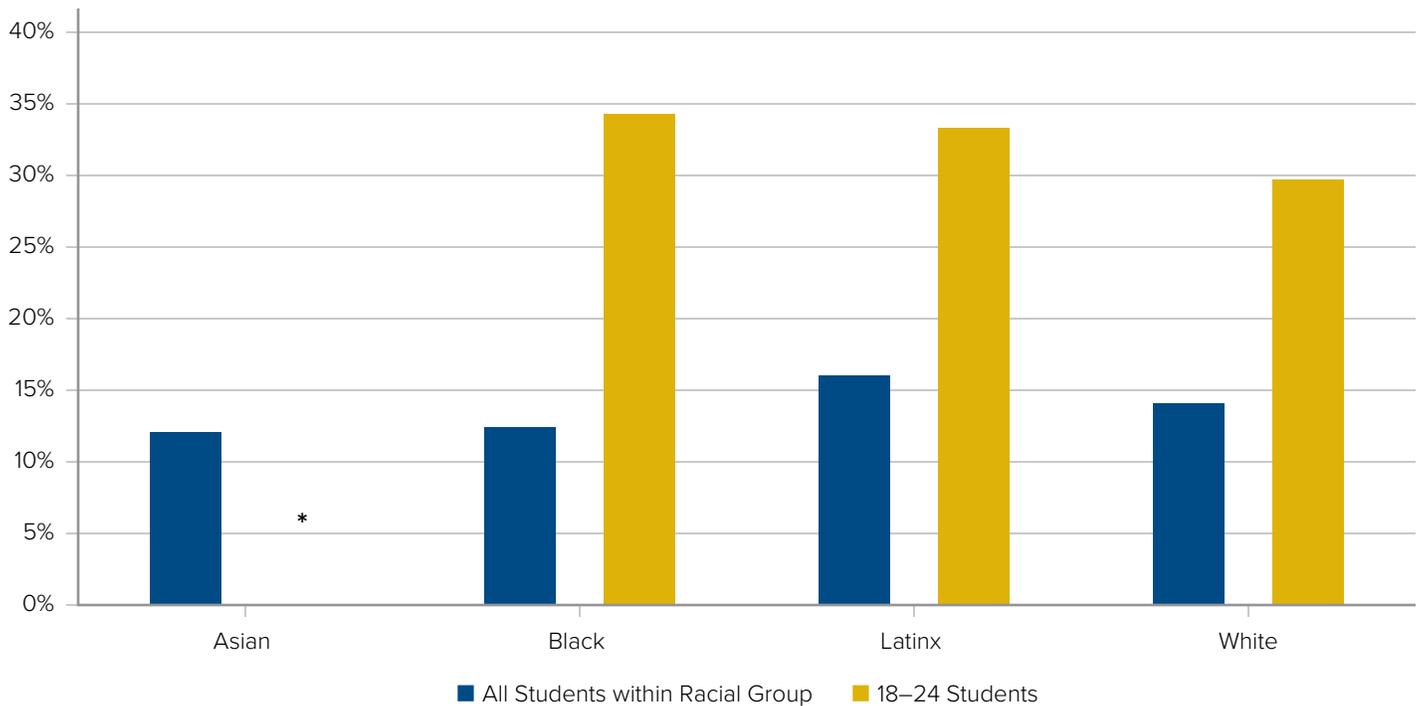
Overall, course subject enrollment did not differ greatly by race and age, although a few notable differences emerged. In particular, Figure 3 shows that students between the ages 18–24 were the most likely to take courses in Public and Protective Services (which accounted for 14% of all courses taken in Spring 2019) compared to all the students in their racial group. In Spring 2019, 34% of Black students aged 18–24 took a course in Public and Protective Services, compared to only 12% of total Black students. Rates of enrollment in this category were similarly high for students aged 18–24 of other races. Public and Protective Services include the Basic Fire Crew Firefighter course (FS-60A), which is the most common course taken by incarcerated students in this subject area. The skewing of participation in these courses by younger incarcerated students may reflect the fact that younger men are more likely to qualify for assignment to the fire camps.¹⁸

Interest in these courses is strongly aligned to California’s need for skilled firefighters and its reliance on incarcerated persons to perform these increasingly essential jobs. Newly signed state legislation¹⁹ takes an important step by removing some prior obstacles for non-violent incarcerated persons to apply for the certification needed to become firefighters post release.²⁰

Academic Momentum Among Incarcerated Students

Previous research has found that incarcerated students pass and earn credit for courses at high rates,²¹ and Figure 4 shows results consistent with those findings. Between 2016 and 2019, the average number of units attempted increased from 3.8 units in Spring 2016 to 5.7 units in Spring 2019. Given that most courses are worth three units, the average number of courses attempted has increased from slightly more than one course per term to almost two courses. The increase is notable, however still less than half the course load of a student attending community college full-time.

Figure 3. Public and Protective Services Course Enrollments, Spring 2019



* Asian students aged 18-24 were excluded from this figure for privacy reasons; there were too few students to report.

The average number of units taken that are transferable to the California State University and University of California systems has increased from 1.4 in Spring 2016 to almost five in Spring 2019. Students also performed very well in these courses; in Spring 2019, the average success rate²² was 96% – 22 percentage points higher than the overall CCC student population success rate of 74%.

Figure 5 shows no major differences in course performance by race. In Spring 2019, White students enrolled in an average of 5.6 units, compared to 5.7 units for Black and Latinx students. Asian students enrolled in an average of 6.2 units. On average, students across all racial groups had very high pass rates of 95-97%, though Asian students had the highest pass rate of 97%. This near-parity is encouraging; even though Black and Latinx students are under-represented in overall participation, there was no significant gap in student outcomes.

Unless opportunity and access increase, progress toward state policy goals for incarcerated students to earn associates degrees will be slow.

Recommendations, Further Study and a Note About the COVID-19 Context

The growth in opportunity for study by incarcerated persons in California, and high course success rates, are encouraging signs in a state that wants to decrease recidivism and improve life prospects post release.

Yet significant room for improvement remains in equity of opportunity by race, intensity of study and ultimately, completion. Black and Latinx persons are underrepresented in course participation relative to their share of the overall incarcerated population. And while course loads and subject matter options have increased, incarcerated students take on average just one to two courses each semester through face-to-face courses. This load represents less than half that of students attending community college full time. Unless opportunity and access increase, progress toward state policy goals for incarcerated students to earn associate degrees will be slow. Future work will explore attainment, particularly in light of the longer time to degree for incarcerated persons. CCCs and prisons alike have strong opportunity to build on recent gains and remedy inequities in opportunity and access.

Figure 4. Credit Units Attempted and Earned Over Time

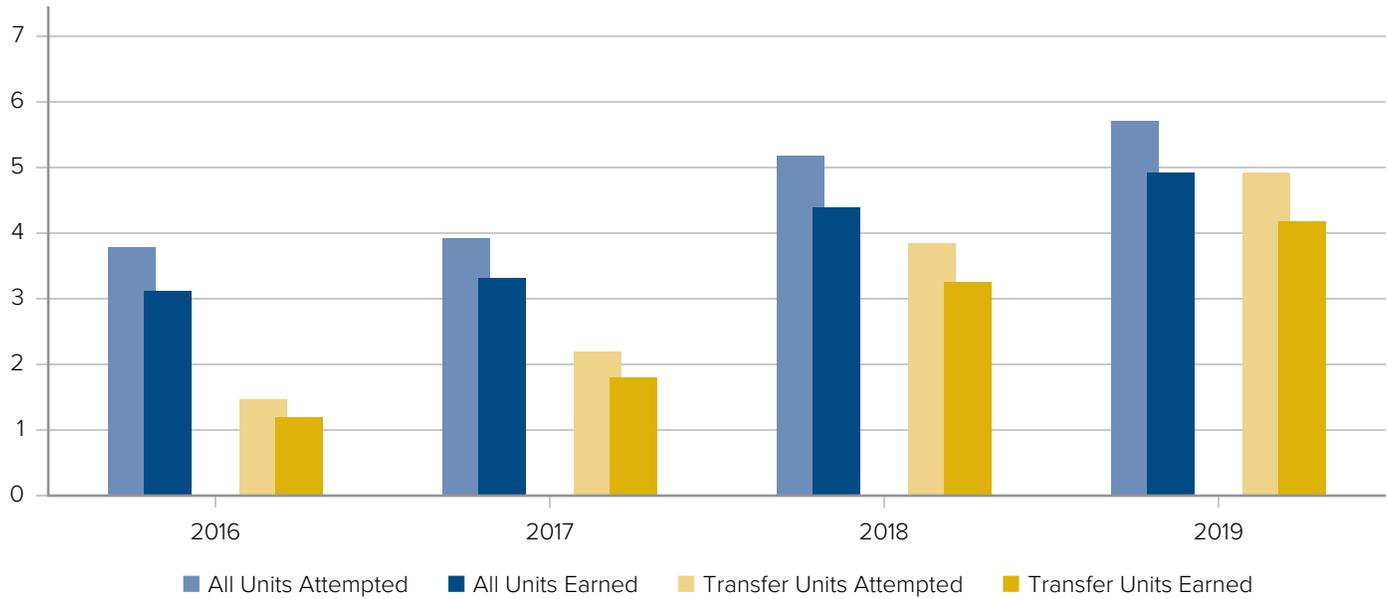
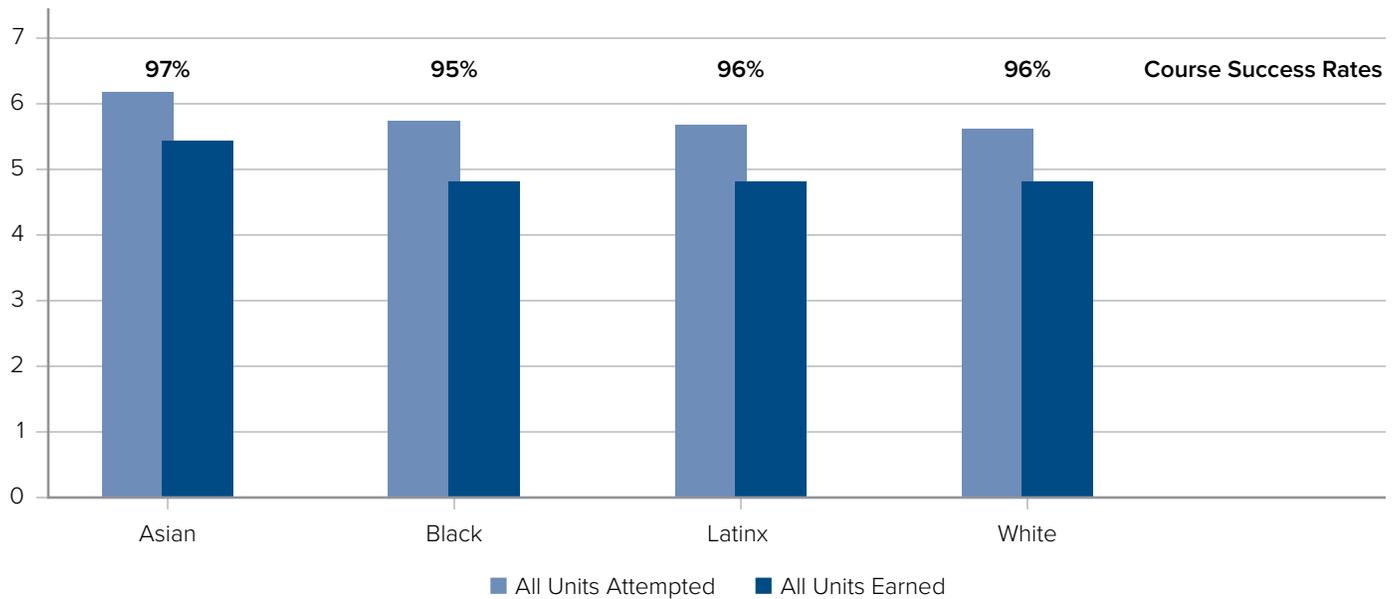


Figure 5. Average Units Attempted and Earned by Race, Spring 2019



State efforts to smooth reentry for formerly incarcerated persons should focus on helping these students accelerate progress to degree. Recent initiatives include the CCCCO’s Rising Scholars Network, which prioritizes providing community college courses to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. More support is needed for pathways that create continuity (in coursework, advising and financial aid), with units earned while incarcerated counting toward degrees or certificates with strong prospects for employment.

Finally, prior research and new findings presented here rely on the latest available data, which predate COVID-19. There is no question that the impact of the pandemic on both the state prison and community college systems will have disrupted some aspects of higher learning inside. A close examination of the pandemic’s impact on the trajectory of otherwise promising developments is needed.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The California Community Colleges Vision for Success, proposed by Chancellor Oakley at the outset of his tenure in 2017 and adopted by the CCC Board of Governors that same year, calls for the system's 116 colleges to eliminate achievement gaps, increase by 35% the number of students transferring to a University of California or California State University campus and increase by at least 20% annually the number who earn a degree, credential, or certificate preparing them for in-demand jobs. The Vision employs Guided Pathways, a model recommended by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University, as its organizing principle for implementation. See: ccco.edu/About-Us/Vision-for-Success
- ² Senate Bill 1391 of 2014 directed the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office to work together to expand access to community college courses.
- ³ Arambula, R. & LeBlanc, L. (2018). Incarcerated students: Encouraging results from pilot program. Sacramento, CA: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. Retrieved from files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596593.pdf
- ⁴ Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L. & Turner, S. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve postrelease outcomes? A meta-analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(3), 1–40
- ⁵ Silbert, S. & Mukamal, D. (2020). Striving for success: The academic achievements of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students in California Community Colleges, *Corrections to College California and Stanford Criminal Justice Center*, January 2020.
- ⁶ See: prisonuniversityproject.org
- ⁷ Mukamal, D., Silbert, R., & Taylor, R. M. (2015). Degrees of Freedom: Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians. Stanford Criminal Justice Center, February 2015. Retrieved from law.berkeley.edu/files/DegreesofFreedom2015_FullReport.pdf
- ⁸ California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (n.d.). *Currently and formerly incarcerated students*. ccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Educational-Services-and-Support/What-we-do/Currently-and-Formerly-Incarcerated-Students
- ⁹ Arambula & LeBlanc (2018).
- ¹⁰ This is 23,002 unique students in total.
- ¹¹ Arambula & LeBlanc (2018).
- ¹² The CCCCO report uses data from the CDCR for a full census of incarcerated students and participating colleges because of there is incomplete reporting of CCC campuses to the CCCCO administrative data. But the authors use CCCCO data for course-taking and unit accumulation because it is not available in the CDCR data.
- ¹³ Arambula & LeBlanc (2018).
- ¹⁴ Silbert & Mukamal (2020).
- ¹⁵ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2020). Offender data points: Offender demographics for the 24-month period ending December 2018. Retrieved from cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2020/01/201812_DataPoints.pdf
- ¹⁶ Harris, H., Goss, J., Hayes, J. & Gumbs, A. (2019). Just the facts: California's prison population. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. Retrieved from ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/jtf-prison-population-jtf.pdf
- ¹⁷ California's 2020 fire season was marked by shortages of firefighters (and incarcerated firefighters in particular as the state released prisoners in response to the COVID-19 pandemic). Significant policy barriers have prevented formerly incarcerated people from pursuing post-release employment as firefighters. Lawmakers are reexamining longstanding state policy that prohibited those convicted of felonies, who have trained for and played critical roles fighting wildfires, from qualifying for the certifications they need to become firefighters after reentry.
- ¹⁸ Together with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and the Los Angeles County Fire Department, CDCR operates several dozen fire camps in multiple counties statewide. According to CDCR, there were approximately 1,800 incarcerated persons who volunteered to work at fire camps in 2020. To qualify, volunteers must have minimum custody status, or the lowest classification for inmates based on the nature of the offense for which they were incarcerated and on their behavior in prison. Most incarcerated firefighters receive two additional days off their sentence for every day they serve as a firefighter. See: cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps
- ¹⁹ Assembly Bill 2147 of 2020 allows persons formerly incarcerated for non-violent offenses who worked in CDCR fire camps to expunge their records, thus enabling them to apply for necessary certification.
- ²⁰ Sabelow, R. (2020, July 23). These California inmates risked death to fight wildfires. After prison, they're left behind. *Sacramento Bee*. sacbee.com/news/california/fires/article244286777.html
- ²¹ Arambula & LeBlanc (2018), Silbert & Mukamal (2020).
- ²² Success rate is defined as the percentage of students who earn a grade of A–C or Pass.