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Author

Remillo, Tyler Jade

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The System-Impacted Scholar Experience at UC Berkeley: Struggles, Successes, and the Path Forward

A glimpse into the lived experiences of system-impacted scholars attending the University of California, Berkeley



Photo by [Janet Ganbold](#) on Unsplash

by [Tyler Jade Remillo](#) on 31 July 2025

A criminal record is often stigmatized as an irredeemable mark, a stain on one's life that cannot be easily washed away. All my life, I've witnessed those around me struggle with finding work, earning a livable wage, and pursuing an education. Many of them have either been involved with the carceral system at some point in their lives or have felt the real-life ramifications of having family members involved with the system. A fundamental belief of mine is that education should be equitable and accessible to anyone who seeks it. Unfortunately, statistics from the [Prison Policy Initiative](#) reveal that **formerly incarcerated people are 8 times less likely to complete college in comparison to the general public**. This may be due to stigma and discrimination, mental health challenges, lack of academic support systems and targeted programs, or practical life demands. With this in mind, I sought to understand the current terrain that these individuals must navigate to attend and graduate from UC Berkeley through research and qualitative interviews.

Experiencing incarceration doesn't necessarily make attending college an impossible reality, but there are certainly barriers that make obtaining a degree all the more difficult. Social stigmas can greatly impact

one's decision to attend college post-incarceration. One respondent describes the judgment she felt from those around her as a heavy weight on her shoulders, leading her to believe that her criminal record would never allow her to get an education: "I never thought that I'd amount to anything. **I couldn't envision myself in higher education at the time.** Pretty much everyone around me told me it wasn't possible [to go to college] because of my past."

One interviewee I spoke with shared his experience as a system-impacted individual who took his traumatic experience with law enforcement officers as fuel to pursue higher education and research: "I find education so empowering, so valuable. Getting a degree in political science allowed me to understand how the court system worked. Being able to pursue that through school fueled my passions for advocacy even more. I like to share my story with others because it's part of my journey." He was drawn to apply and attend UC Berkeley as a transfer student because of the research opportunities available at Cal, and is now pursuing a research project focused on the experiences of wrongfully accused and detained individuals whose lives have been impacted by the carceral system. Upon committing to Berkeley, this interviewee was met with overwhelming support from Berkeley's Basic Needs Center, Bridges Multicultural Resource Center, Undocumented Student Program, and Firebaugh Scholars. Accessing these resources allowed him to focus on school as he acclimated to Berkeley both as a transfer student and as a system-impacted student.

Another interview respondent informed me that the biggest hurdles she faced before arriving at Berkeley were mainly financial. As she was already disproportionately impacted as a low-income community college student, the prospect of attending university seemed particularly low. She thought that she wouldn't be eligible for financial aid or scholarships due to her record. And yet, with a bit of research, she discovered that system-impacted individuals are indeed eligible for financial aid considerations: "The money is there. As a low-income individual who didn't think that college was financially possible for me, I was still eligible for financial aid, grants, and scholarships. Knowing this information completely shifted my perspective on getting my education." Other respondents echoed similar sentiments, affirming my hunch that more system-impacted individuals would consider pursuing higher education if they knew of the resources and support services available to them.

Community colleges are often the key to making college more accessible and affordable for students who may be formerly or currently incarcerated. To deepen my understanding of the experiences and resources available to these students, I became involved with the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) at UC Berkeley. USI was founded by formerly incarcerated and system-impacted UC Berkeley students and is entirely student-run, with the overarching goal of increasing the number of formerly incarcerated people in higher education. As an intern, I engaged in correspondence with currently incarcerated individuals interested in gaining college credits to either obtain a degree or transfer upon release. This experience was truly eye-opening, as USI can provide resources for academic advising, scholarships, evaluate transcripts, and help those in prison with transfer applications.

Berkeley Underground Scholars (BUS), which is an academic support program embedded in the UC Berkeley Division of Equity & Inclusion, provides wraparound services to incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and system-impacted individuals to further dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Upon speaking with one of the staff members working within BUS, I learned about the numerous support services that are available to students. Berkeley Underground Scholars often collaborates with other campus entities, such as the Basic Needs Center and the Disabled Students' Program, to streamline as

many resources as possible for those who need them. Food, emergency aid, mental health and therapy resources, scholarships, and professional development programs are available through BUS for students to access. Berkeley Underground Scholars is housed at Stiles Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. One respondent shared the importance of having a physical space to study, connect with others, and meet with people to receive resources: “It’s really special to be able to connect with people of a similar background, in a safe and supportive environment.”

The students I interviewed emphasized how important it is for students and faculty alike to actively work on combating any biases or stereotypes associated with formerly incarcerated individuals. One student in particular said: “There are a lot of preconceived notions about us in general that are hard to get through -- even at a more progressive university like Berkeley. People might think that we’re more likely to reoffend or go back to prison, are ‘dangerous,’ or may not take their education as seriously as everyone else. People tend to conflate incarceration with violence, or drug use, and stuff like that, when in reality, that is simply not the case.”

Another student expressed that some professors, while well-intentioned, can sometimes end up offending the system-impacted students that they teach: “This population is strong and capable and does not need to be infantilized or treated differently, but perhaps needs to be given a bit of grace. Some students are still trying to figure out how to live outside of prison, and others have been incarcerated for very long periods. These students may be transitioning not just to university life, but to an entirely different world.”

Growing up, those closest to me who have experienced incarceration have expressed how much they wished they had returned to school. There are a plethora of reasons as to why system-impacted individuals may not choose to pursue college. Whether it be for financial reasons, familial obligations, plain disinterest, or they think it might be “too late” for them to try, the following remains true: education should be available to anyone who seeks it. Upon completion of this research, I am truly moved by the stories of the students I spoke with and the vulnerability and resilience that they exuded. I am equally impressed and overjoyed by the services available to impacted students at UC Berkeley. Moving forward, it is my hope that all people, especially those who are system-impacted, may attend, thrive, and graduate from higher education.

This research is extremely personal to me. I am eternally grateful to those who have worked with me to make this possible: the individuals who shared their stories with me through interviews, and the entire team at the Matsui Center’s Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program. I dedicate this research to my family and the neighborhoods of Southeast San Diego, a community full of hardworking and resilient people, a place that I will forever be grateful to call home.