An opportunity to change how students see themselves and their place in the world.
About

GOLDMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY

+ The People Lab

+ SPENCER
What did we try to find?
How does higher education impact students in prison?

• Rigorous, data-informed methods
Challenges of research in prison

• Confidentiality
• Complexity
• CDCR Bureaucracy
How did we try to answer this question?
ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

“Fundamental problem of causal inference”

• Cannot compare outcomes for:
  • A person who takes classes and
  • That same person had they not taken classes
ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

“Fundamental problem of causal inference”

PERSON A TAKING CLASSES

PERSON A NOT TAKING CLASSES
The gold standard: Randomized Control Trial (RCT)

- Randomly assign incarcerated individuals to either take classes or not take classes
- Isolate the impact of classes taken
  - Minimize the risk of biased results
Randomized Control Trial (RCT)

• Could **not** perform an RCT
  • Not feasible: admissions waitlist
  • Not ethical: integrity and fairness
Methods

• Compare groups
• Track over time
• Ask questions
Compare groups

• Students / non-students
• More experienced students / less experienced students
• How students respond to different labels like “students” / “prisoners”
Track over time

• Use students’ past self as a comparison
• Would indicate a “dose effect”
Ask questions

- Interviews with former students
- Complement quantitative methods
- Center voices of incarcerated students
Data

1. CDCR administrative data
2. Mount Tamalpais College student data
3. Longitudinal student survey data
CDCR data

• Violations
• Admissions
• Sentencing
Mount Tamalpais College data

- Demographics
- Administrative
- Academic
Longitudinal survey

2018
- DEC
- MARCH
- APRIL

2019
- DEC
- FEB
- SPRING

PHASE 1

PHASE 2
What did we find?
WHAT WE FOUND

Participating in prison higher education positively impacts students

- How students see themselves
- How students see their place in the world
WHAT WE FOUND

How students see themselves

• Perceived skills
• Perceived self-concept
• Salient identities
How students see their place in the world

- Relationships with others
- Future orientation
How students see themselves
Students that took more classes and spent more time in the program felt:

• More **capable** and more **skilled**
• **Better** about themselves
“Matter of fact, I took a critical thinking class. And to this day, it assisted in terms of critical thinking skills... I tell people all the time, that was one of the best classes I’ve ever taken... It was a class that provoked you to think.”
“Skills” survey questions

- Handle unexpected problems
- Make prison a better place to live
- Work with others
- Asking peers, teachers for help
- Public speaking skills
Ability to handle unexpected problems

- 0 CLASSES: 24%
- 1-4 CLASSES: 17%
- 5+ CLASSES: 34%
More classes may help students be more **resilient** when challenges arise.
“Your self-esteem definitely changes after you start to develop an identity, and that’s why I started to develop not only an identity of who I was, but one that had character and strengths and just responsibility, accountability, and integrity.”

FORMER STUDENT
“Self-concept” survey questions

- Putting oneself first
- Not feel embarrassed about mistakes
- Ability to be a positive role model
- Does not feel disappointing to others
- Tendency to not give up on tasks
- Not seen as cold or unfeeling by others

HOW STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES | SELF-CONCEPT

8% PTS
I don’t give up on things before completing them

- 34% of students taking 0 classes
- 48% of students taking 1-4 classes
- 60% of students taking 5+ classes
Program participation may help students become more determined.
“And while you are there for the two or three hours, you completely forget about the fact that you are in prison... and you are a student.”

FORMER STUDENT
Social identities

• Different outcomes based on salient identity
• Survey: use random assignment to vary “prisoner” and “student” identities
Survey variation

• As a **prisoner at San Quentin**, how confident are you that you have the skills and abilities to accomplish your goals?

• As a **student in the college program**, how confident are you that you have the skills and abilities to accomplish your goals?
Identity matters

• Those that spend more time in the college program are **less impacted** by “prisoner” language

• Particularly strong among new participants
  • **New** students: college experience is fresh
  • More **veteran** students: already internalized new identity
Accomplishing goals

"AS A STUDENT" 83%

"AS A PRISONER" 60%
College classes change how students see themselves

• Enabling students to learn and practice new **skills**
• Increasing their **self-esteem**
• Shifting their **identities** and view of what they can accomplish
How students see their place in the world
Students that took more classes and spent more time in the program have:

• Improved relationships
• More positive views of their future
“It was a lot of contact with the *outside world*, which was important, okay? That being in a classroom with people and teachers was important. That whole socialization aspect of it was really important.”

*Former Student*
“Relationships” survey questions

- Frequency of contact
- Feels someone is invested in their success
- Served in leadership role
- Helped start a group or activity
- Help others learn something new
How often do you help incarcerated people that are not students learn something new?

- 9% of students take 0 classes
- 13% of students take 1-4 classes
- 40% of students take 5+ classes
Taking more classes may help students become teachers and mentors to their peers.
“If you look at the eighty-something groups that exist in San Quentin, the overwhelming majority were created by people who had graduated from [MTC]. And if you look at all the benefits that are going at San Quentin, at the root of all of that is people that have graduated.”

FORMER STUDENT
Have you ever helped start a group or activity in prison?
Program participation may give students organizing and leadership skills.
“For some people, it is like being born again. It is like they go from this lifestyle that is a total prison lifestyle to, you know, something that is preparing them for the future.”

FORMER STUDENT
“Future orientation” survey questions

- Ability to achieve goals
- Finding a job + 9% PTS
- Finding a stable home
- Staying out of prison + 11% PTS
- Continuing education
- Registering to vote
- Likelihood of volunteering
If you are released, will you work or volunteer for an organization that tries to help other people?

- 65% of students who took 0 classes
- 61% of students who took 1-4 classes
- 74% of students who took 5+ classes
Taking classes may make students more willing to **give back** to their communities.
“All they hear about is people going back to their past behavior, high recidivism rates. The people I used to hang with were all gone or dead, so I didn’t really have any negative influences...I mean, yeah, after 3 years I had no problems, but I think [MTC] prepared me totally for coming out of here.”

FORMER STUDENT
Students are less likely to return to prison

RECIDIVISM RATE:
ALL CALIFORNIA PRISONERS

RECIDIVISM RATE:
PRISONERS THAT PARTICIPATED IN COLLEGE PROGRAM
College classes change how students see others and their own future

- Improve relationships
  - Inside and outside of prison
- Impact future intentions
- Affect future actions
What can we learn?
“It is a truly transformative experience and one that will not only transform the individual but allow the individual to regain a contributory role in society (...) you’re no longer a drag on the community; rather, you’re dragging the community along to a better day.”

FORMER STUDENT
Transformative impacts

• How students see themselves
  • Identity
  • Self-concept
  • Skills

• How students see their place in the world
  • Future
  • Relationships
Impact and implementation

- Prison higher education is key:
  - Break the cycle of incarceration
  - Policy and practice of incarceration
  - Ensuring access and opportunity
An opportunity to change how students see themselves and their place in the world.