

PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION:

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

About

GOLDMAN SCHOOL
OF
PUBLIC POLICY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY



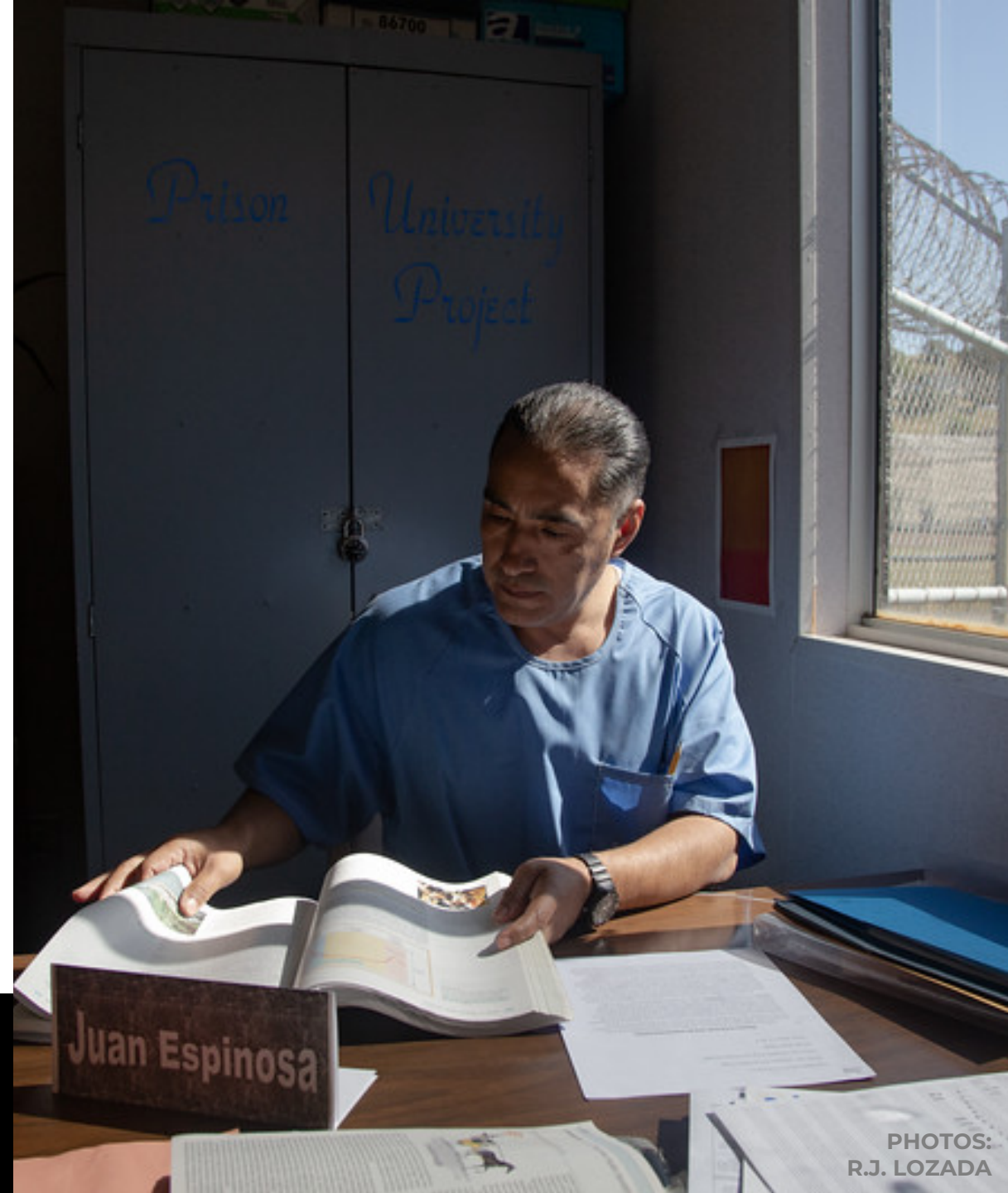
SPENCER

What did we try to find?

WHAT WE TRIED 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?

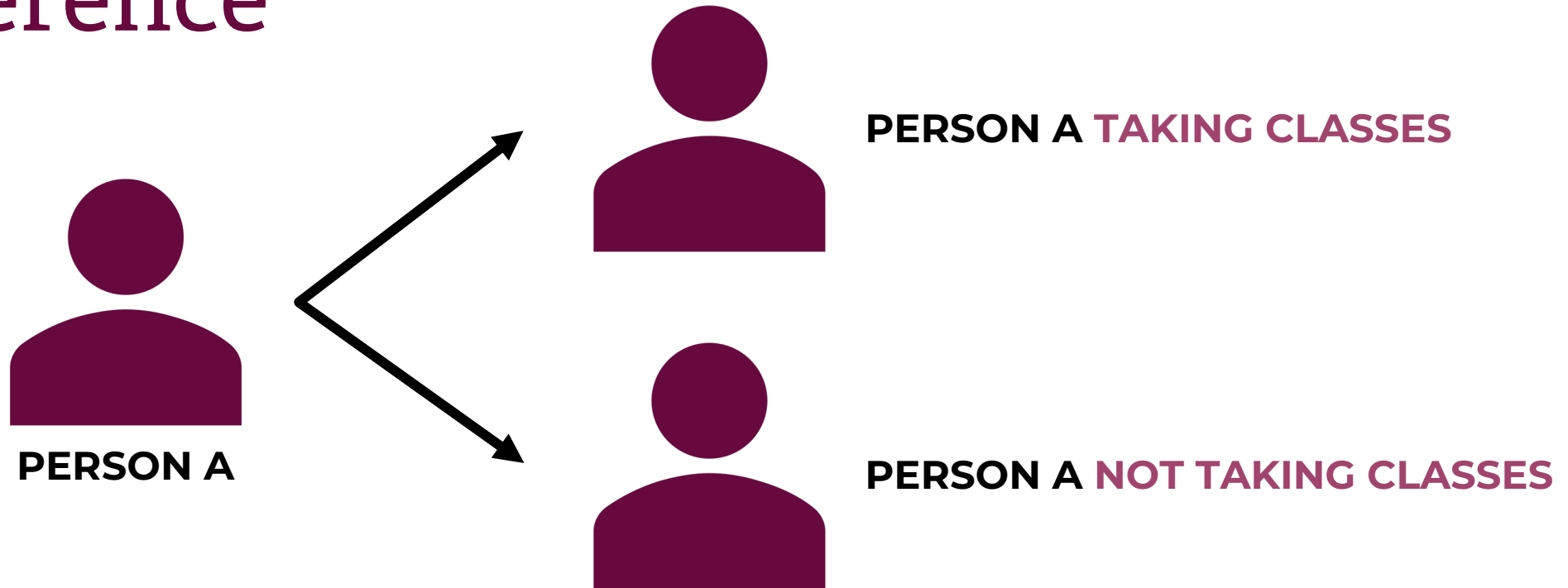
ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

“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”



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

ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

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”

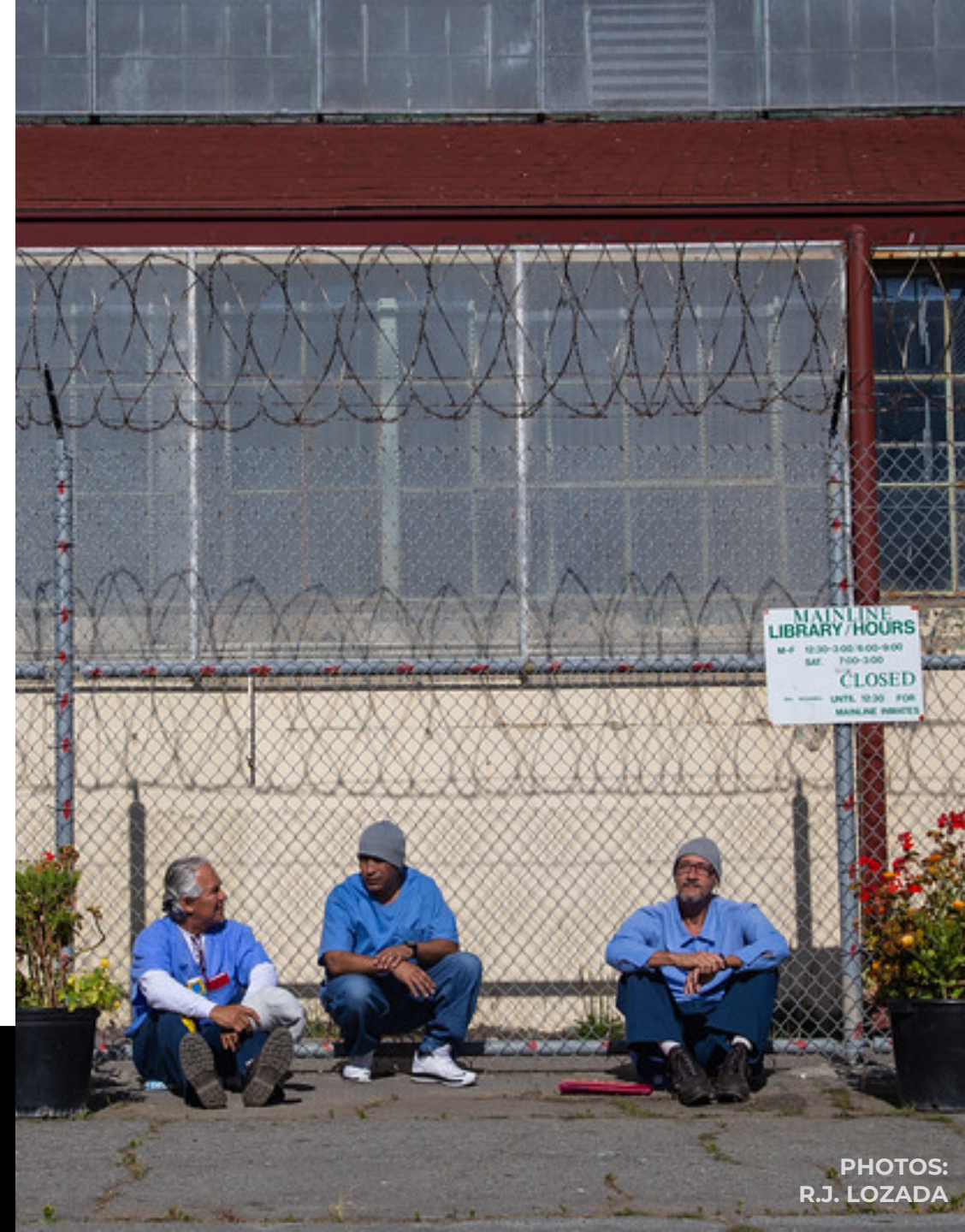
Ask questions

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

ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Data

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



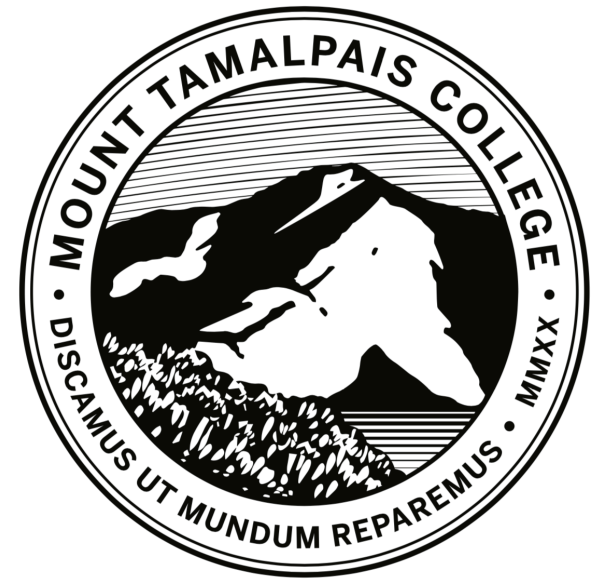
CDCR data

- Violations
- Admissions
- Sentencing

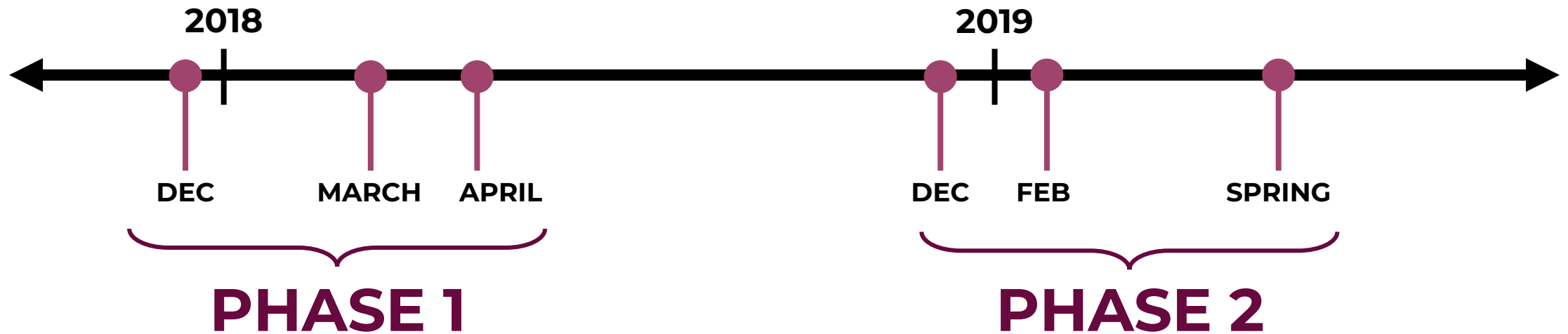


Mount Tamalpais College data

- Demographics
- Administrative
- Academic



Longitudinal survey



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**

WHAT WE FOUND

How students see their place in the world

- **Relationships** with others
- **Future** orientation

How students see themselves

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




HOW STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES | SKILLS

“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.”

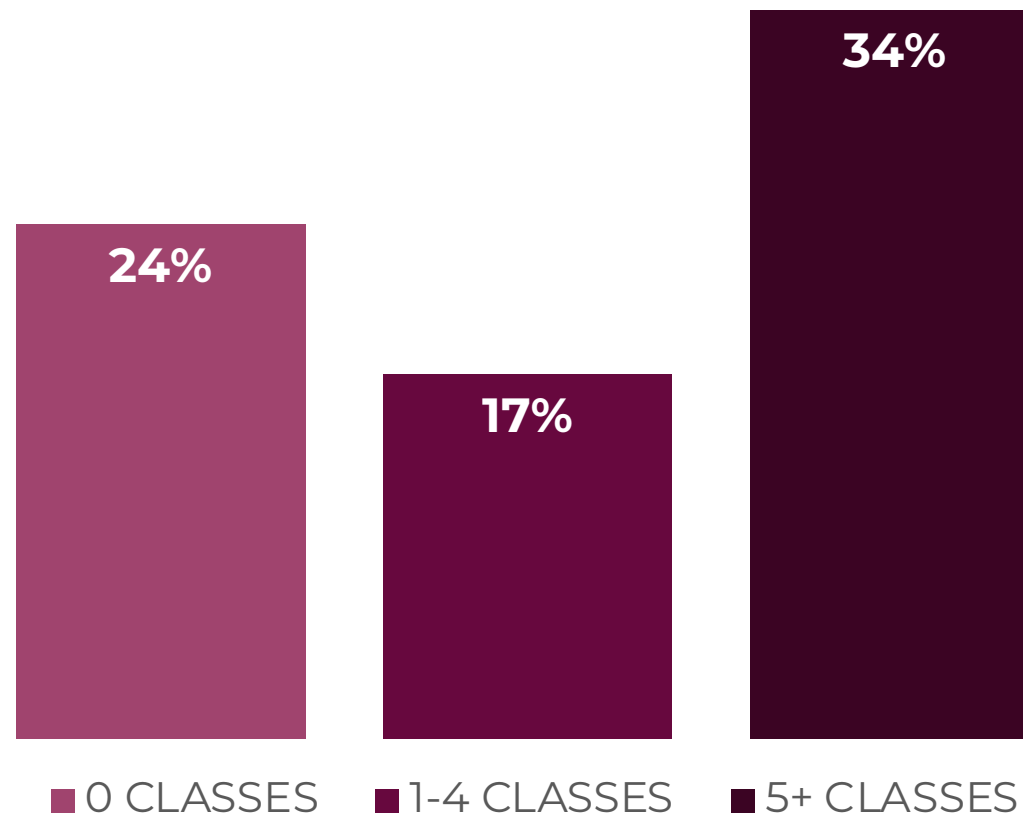
FORMER STUDENT

“Skills” survey questions

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

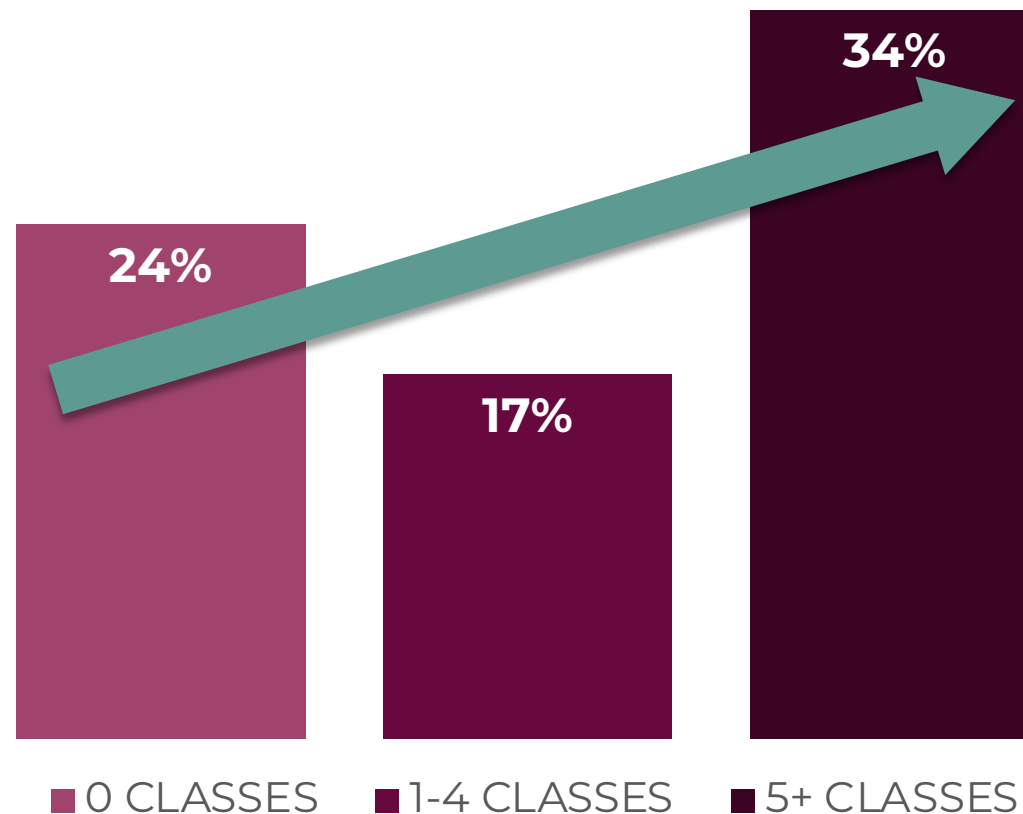
HOW STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES | SKILLS

Ability to
handle
unexpected
problems



HOW STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES | SKILLS

More classes may help students be more **resilient** when challenges arise



HOW STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES | SELF-CONCEPT

“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

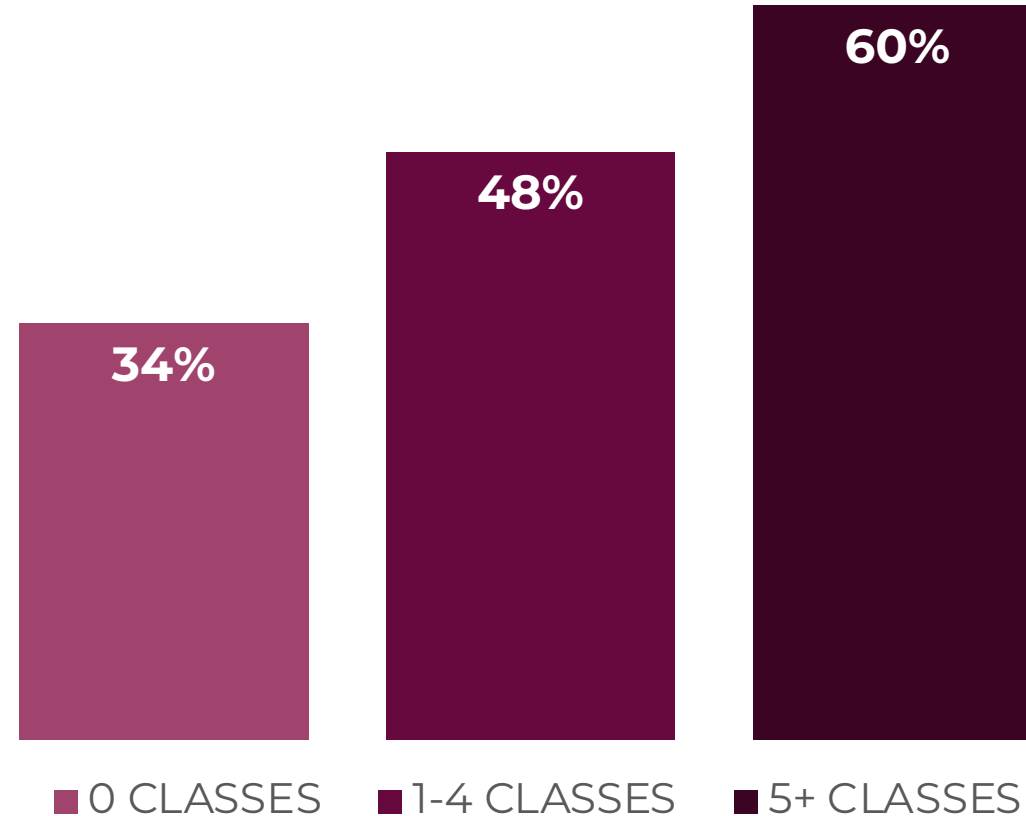
“Self-concept” survey questions

- 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

+ 8% PTS

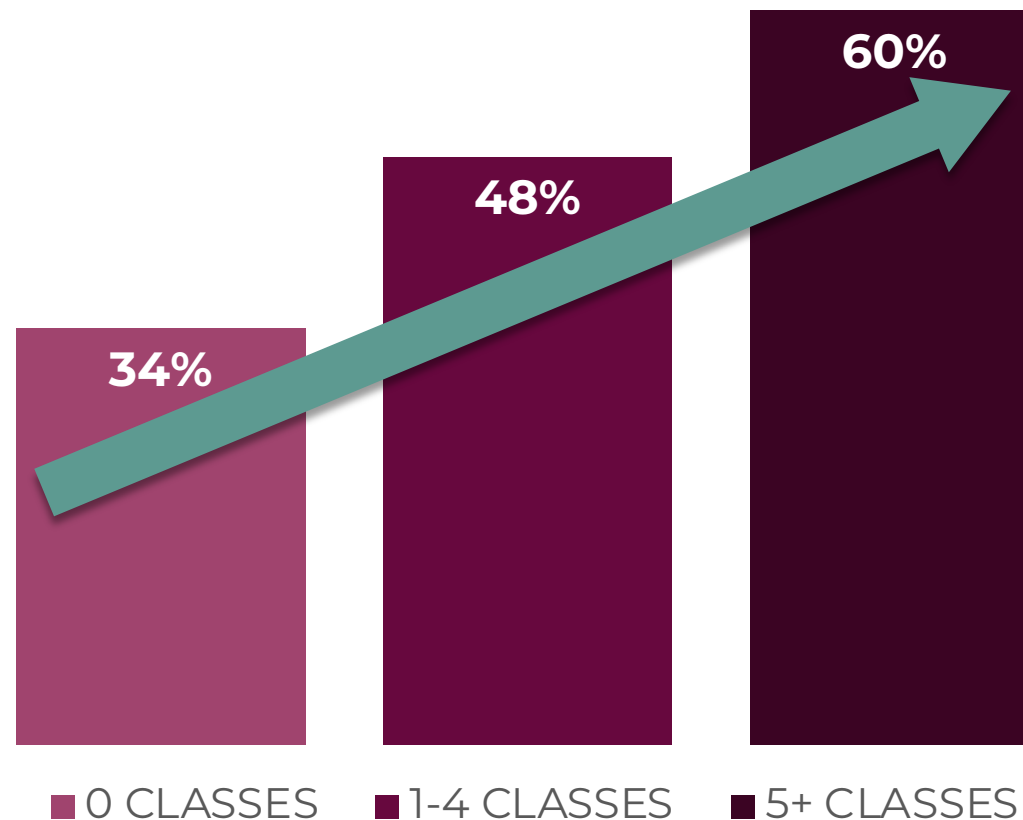
HOW STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES | SELF-CONCEPT

I don't give up
on things
before
completing
them



HOW STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES | SELF-CONCEPT

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

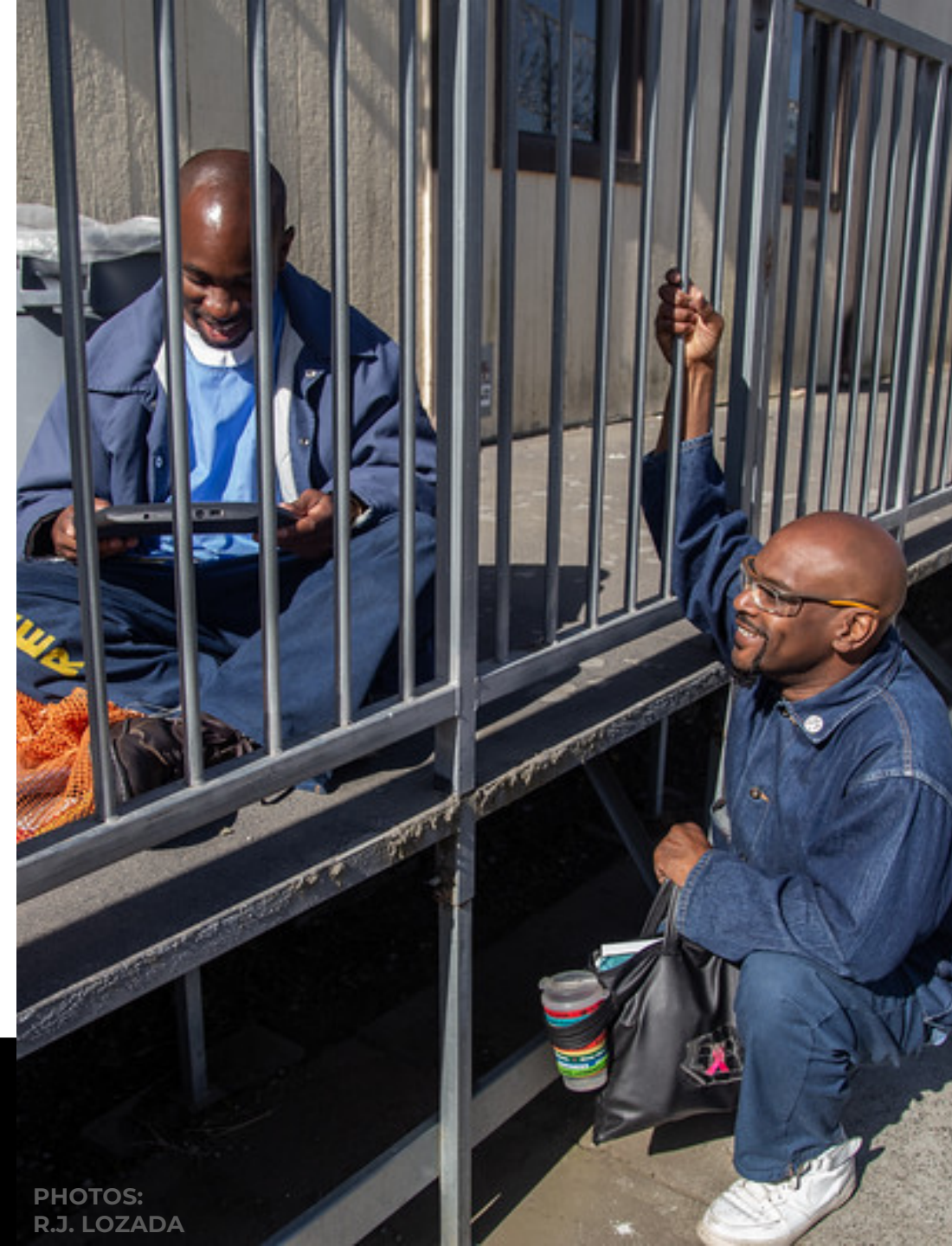
- Enabling students to learn and practice new **skills**
- Increasing their **self-esteem**
- Shifting their **identities** and view of what they can accomplish

How students see their place in the world

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**





PHOTOS:
R.J. LOZADA

HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | RELATIONSHIPS

“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.”

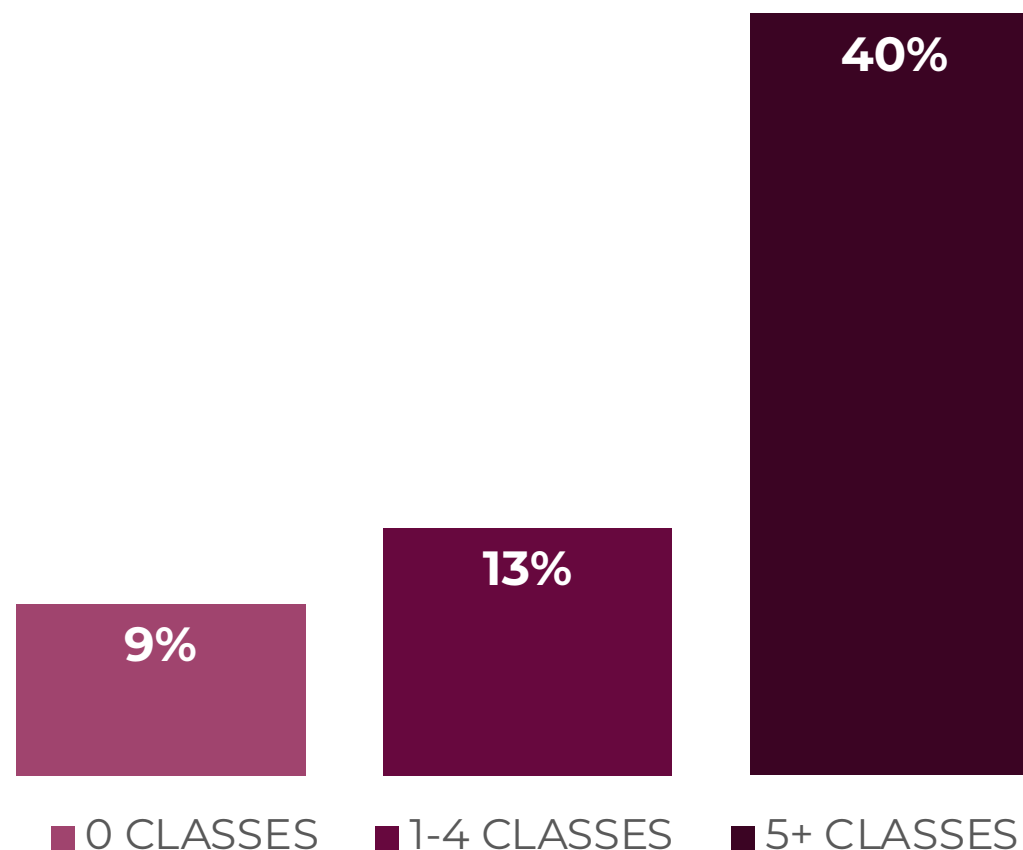
FORMER STUDENT

“Relationships” survey questions

- Frequency of contact
- Feels someone is invested in their success
- Served in leadership role  + 15% PTS
- Helped start a group or activity  + 13% PTS
- Help others learn something new

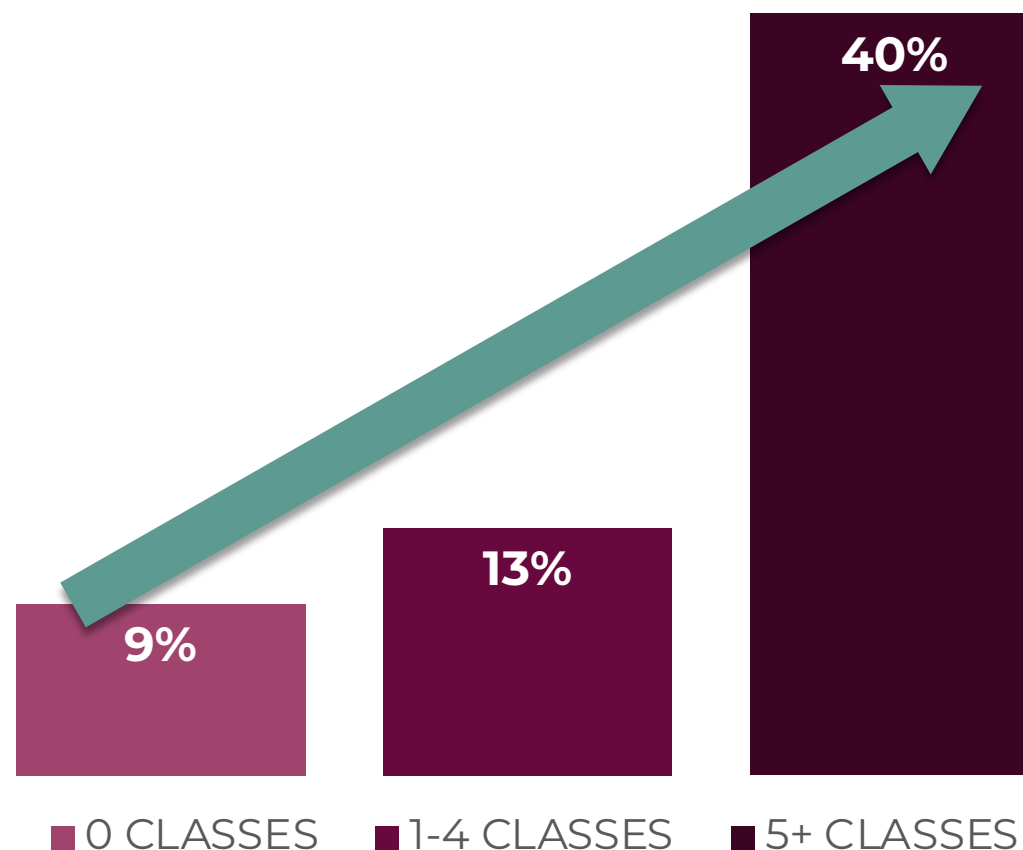
HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | RELATIONSHIPS

How often do you help incarcerated people that are not students learn something new?



HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | RELATIONSHIPS

Taking more classes may help students become **teachers and mentors** to their peers



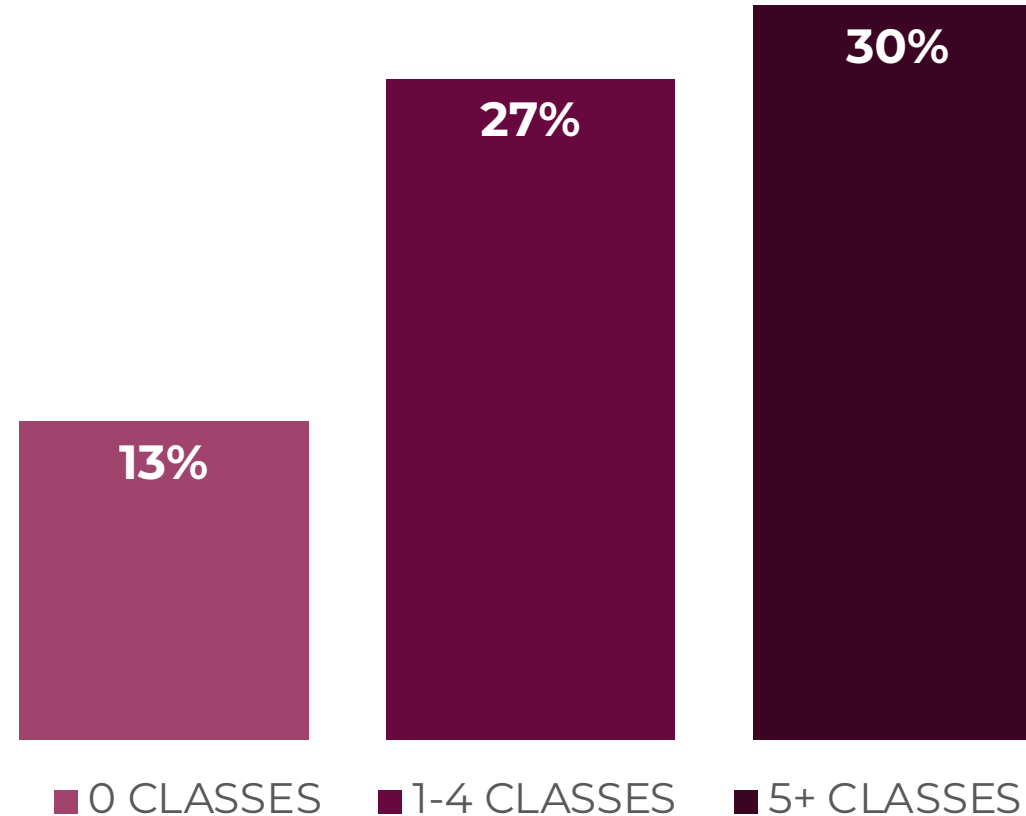
HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | RELATIONSHIPS

“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

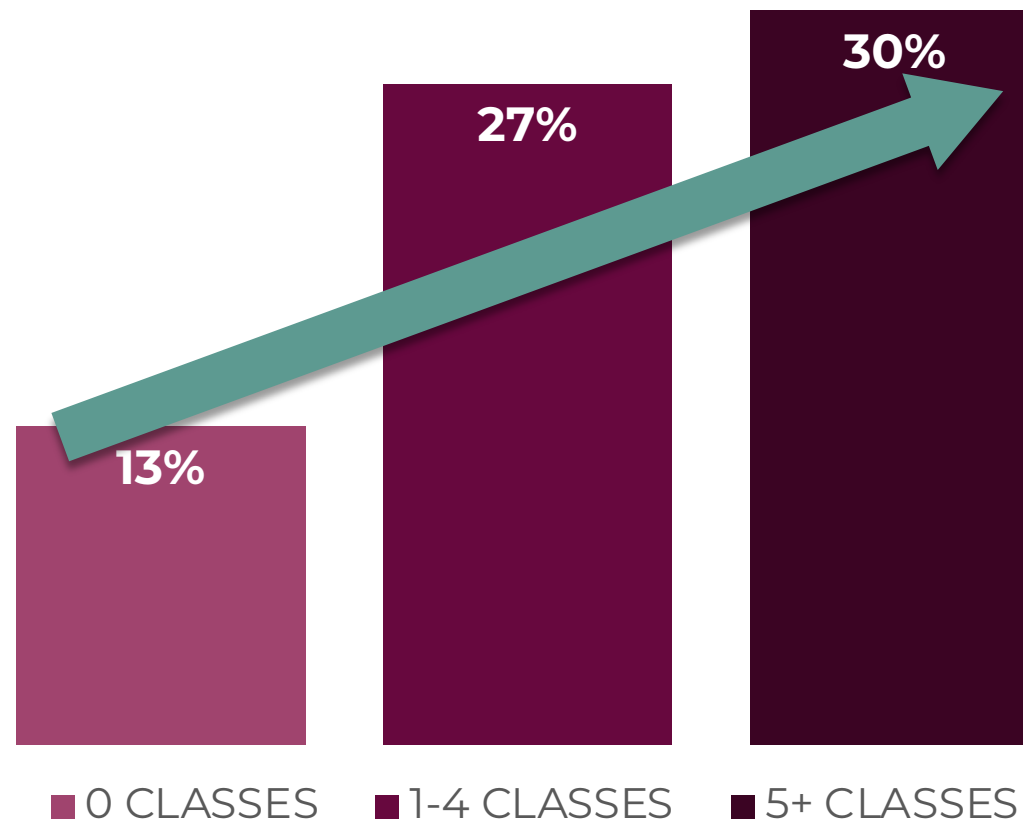
HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | RELATIONSHIPS

Have you ever
helped start a
group or
activity in
prison?



HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | RELATIONSHIPS



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**.”

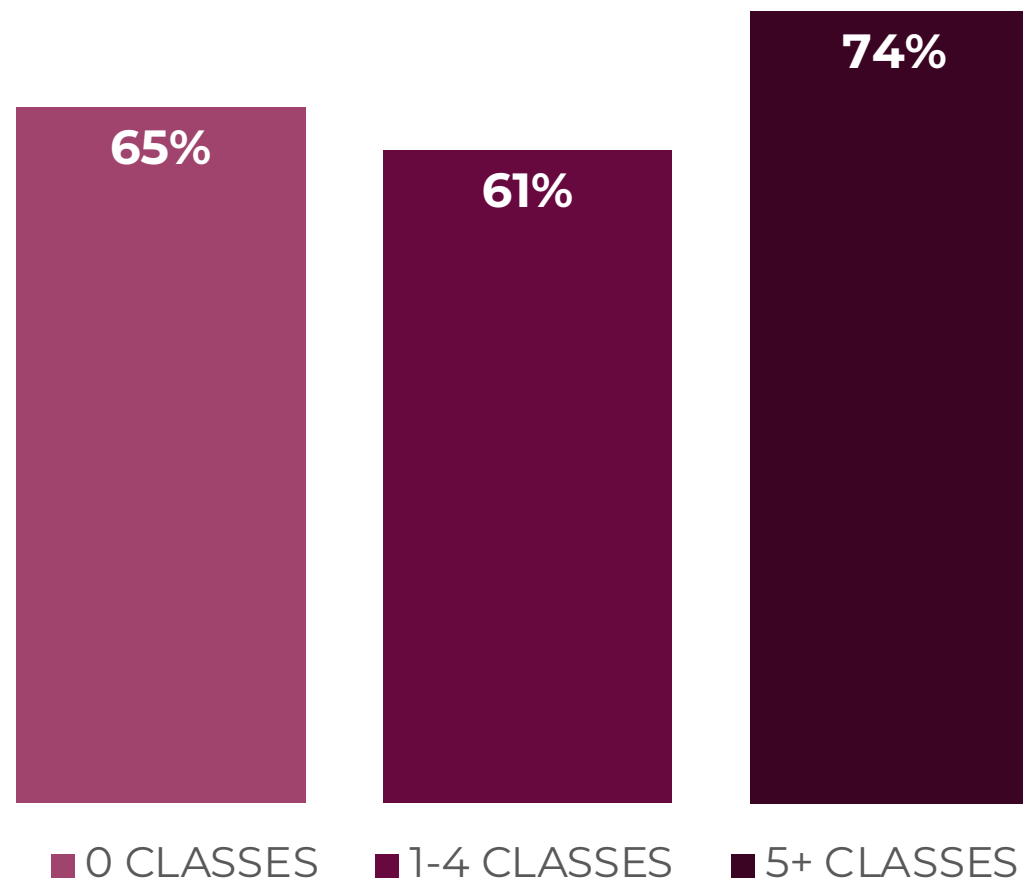
FORMER STUDENT

“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

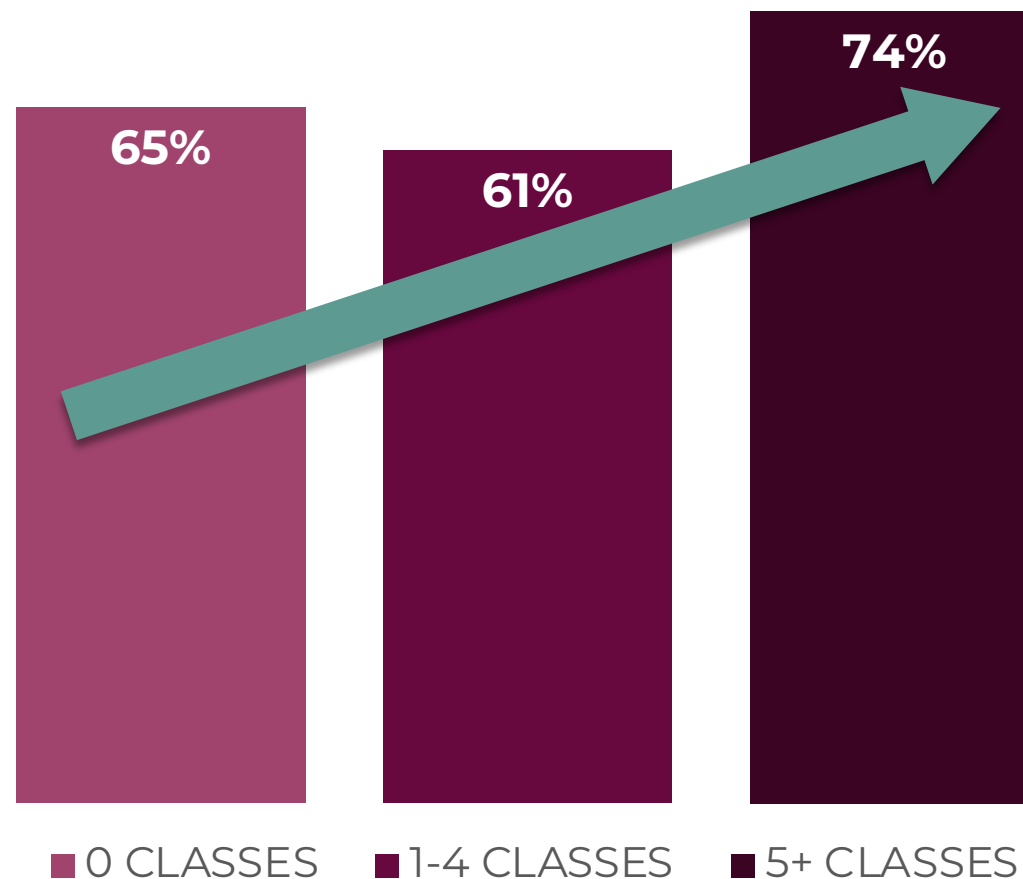
HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | FUTURE

If you are released, will you work or volunteer for an organization that tries to help other people?



HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | FUTURE

Taking classes may make students more willing to **give back** to their communities



HOW STUDENTS SEE THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD | FUTURE

“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.”

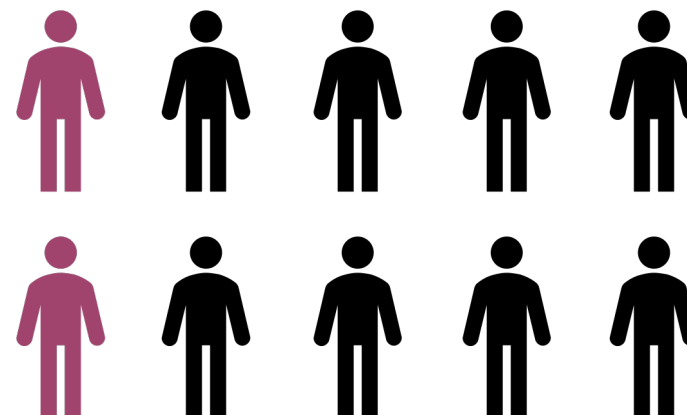
FORMER STUDENT

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



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