

# TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING AND IDENTIFY SHIFT: EVIDENCE FROM A COLLEGE BEHIND BARS

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## The challenge

Correctional institutions are exceptionally punitive contexts, where it is difficult for people to be open, vulnerable, and self-reflective. Incarceration in this environment can lead to a range of long-term emotional and psychological challenges, making it more difficult for individuals to successfully reintegrate into society upon release.

In contrast, liberal arts education in the college classroom can provide students with a way to counteract the trauma of incarceration, potentially creating conditions where transformative learning can occur. Yet while a range of studies have examined the long-term benefits of prison education programs on recidivism, there is little empirical evidence about how higher education in prison can affect a broader range of outcomes, including participants' sense of themselves, their ability to accomplish their goals, and their capacity to contribute to their communities.

## What we did

Mount Tamalpais College (MTC, formerly the Prison University Project) is a college operating solely for incarcerated individuals at San Quentin State Prison in California, and is one of the oldest and largest degree-granting prison college programs in the country.

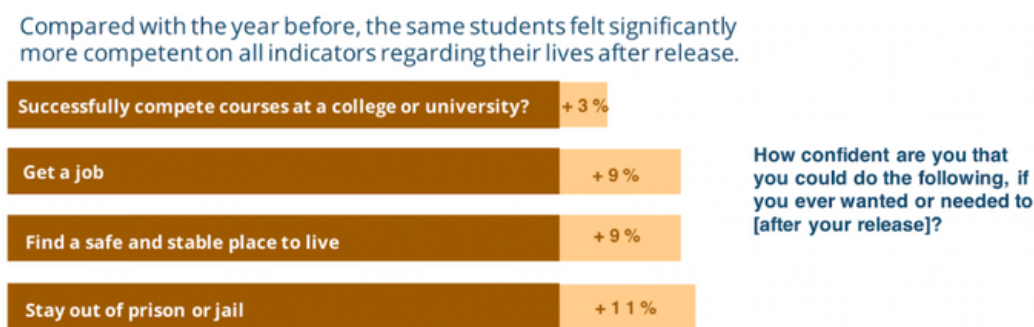
Using MTC administrative data, data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and original longitudinal surveys, we analyzed data on MTC college students to examine how participation in the MTC program impacts a range of important outcomes.

In this study, we focused on two key outcomes, which we hypothesize will be affected by participation in prison higher education: (1) self-efficacy (i.e., the extent to which people conceptualize themselves as the type of person who can find a job, housing, and stay out of prison after release), and (2) civic orientation (i.e., the extent to which people report contributing positively to those around them).

## Our findings

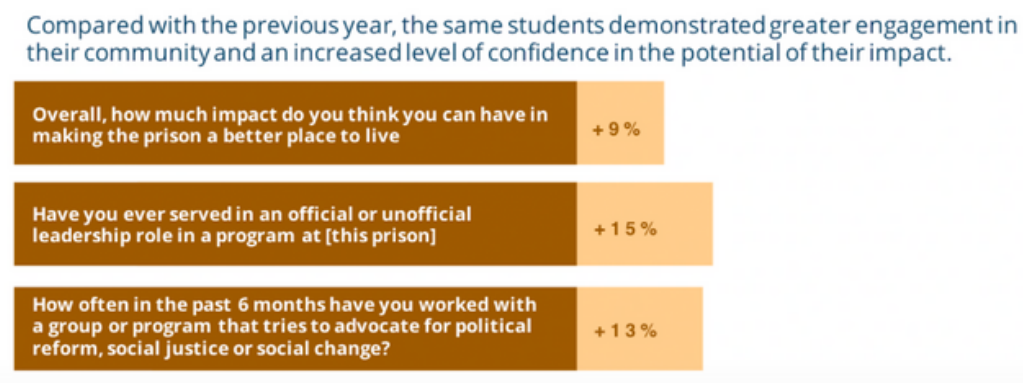
We found that students who participated in the MTC program over the course of a year showed significant increases in both self-efficacy and civic orientation. With respect to self-efficacy (Figure 1), we find an increase in the extent to which students say they are confident in their ability to complete college courses once outside prison (+3 points); an increase in the proportion of students who are confident they will get a job (+9 points) and find a safe and table place to live after release (+9 points); and an increase in students who report being very confident they will not return to prison following release (+11 points).

### Figure 1: Self-Efficacy



With respect to civic orientation (Figure 2), we find a significant increase in students' perceptions of their ability to make prison a better place (+9 percentage points); students who report having served in a leadership role in a prison program (+15 points); and students who report having advocated for political reform, social justice, or social change (+13 points).

### Figure 2: Civic Orientation



These findings fill an important gap in existing knowledge about prison higher education. First, our study highlights the potential for transformative learning to occur within the confines of a prison environment. While prison can be a harsh and stigmatizing place, the classroom culture exemplified at MTC appears to create an environment that fosters self-respect and a sense of purpose.

In addition, our analyses offer a broader framework for measuring the impact of prison education programs. Our study makes clear that recidivism need not be the only, or even the primary, outcome of interest in studying prison programming. Rather, higher education in prison should be held to the same standards as a college or university anywhere: it should be evaluated by the extent to which it can provide students with the skills and capacity to advance in their lives and careers, and to contribute to their families, communities, and the world around them.

## **Next Steps**

Moving forward, future research should continue to assess how high-quality higher education programs like MTC can translate into longer-term improvements, including post-release housing, employment, and economic security, as well as other qualitative outcomes including attitudes racial group attitudes, gender norms, and hyper-masculinity.

By understanding the critical role that higher education can play in shaping the self-efficacy and civic orientation of historically disadvantaged students, this work aims to shed light on the importance of expanding access to high-quality higher education for all.



## Additional Resources

- [Mount Tamalpais College](#)
  - Mount Tamalpais College [One Pager](#)
- [Spencer Foundation](#)

### Related Research

- [Results Presentation](#)

## ABOUT US

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