

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Looking Beyond the Stain of Incarceration: Educational Access as a True Second Chance

DR. LENA M. CAMPAGNA AND DR. ANGELA S. MUROLO

Dear Social Justice Mountain colleagues,

We are writing to you from the perspective of two social scientists engaged in social justice work in the criminal legal system. My name is Dr. Lena M. Campagna, and I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Caldwell University in New Jersey. I am a trained sociologist with a focus on victimology. Most of my research focuses on help-seeking behaviors and social support at various points in the criminal legal system. I am co-writing this letter with my colleague, Dr. Angela S. Murolo, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New York. Dr. Murolo not only holds a doctorate in Criminal Justice from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY Graduate Center, but is a justice-impacted scholar, being the child of an incarcerated parent. She has witnessed firsthand the ways in which incarceration can impact not just the incarcerated person but those around them, like immediate family, across the life course.

In our work, particularly from our standpoint as undergraduate professors who are in the classroom day in and day out, we have witnessed the transformational power of access to higher education. We also know how detrimental the lack of such access can be, particularly for those currently or formerly entangled in the criminal legal system. People coming home from prison encounter numerous challenges reintegrating back into society, including limited employment opportunities, barriers to gaining stable housing, and decreased mental and physical health (Murolo, 2022). Literature has shown that education — particularly higher education — can play a fundamental role in social reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals and can provide numerous benefits in aiding reentry and encouraging prosocial behaviors (Murolo & Campagna, 2025).

In the 2023–2024 academic year, we were awarded an academic research grant funded by the Elaine T. Borchard Center on Law and Aging to examine social support for those of advanced age leaving prison across the state of New Jersey. We administered surveys to over 400 organizations in New Jersey that provide all types of services, ranging from healthcare to housing. One critical avenue of social support in the reentry process is education. While our mixed methods study unveiled a great deal about available social support along with orientations to providing social support from the perspective of service providers, it also paved the way for an examination of how education can play a key role in reintegration into society post-release. It should be noted that criminal history has long stood as a barrier to gaining acceptance in the college admissions process (Mayer & Smith, 2024). Prospective students with criminal histories are often denied the opportunity to earn a college degree long after time has been served.

In the spring of 2025, we published a systematic literature review exploring educational opportunities for those of advanced age either formerly or currently incarcerated (Murolo & Campagna, 2025). Using the PRISMA method as our methodological basis, we examined articles — from both the US and around the globe — from 2008–2023 on how education in prison impacts older people while incarcerated and upon release. We found

that, overall, older people in prison have a greater level of education upon incarceration, and are often excluded from opportunities like Federal Pell Grants, which are prioritized for younger learners; this can stifle any opportunities for further education during incarceration that are likely available to their younger counterparts (Murolo & Campagna, 2025). Across the board, results reflected the importance of education in improving cognitive ability and cultivating social capital, especially upon reentry into society.

These findings further illuminate the need for more educational opportunities for formerly incarcerated people as we look across our campuses. Research highlights the reluctance of higher education to include or actively recruit people with a criminal legal history (Campagna et al., 2024). It is critical that university policies are more open and inclusive to students with criminal legal histories — not only because of the positive impact that a higher education can provide throughout the life course, but also to include the voices that are most impacted by social justice issues like social inequality. People coming home from prison directly encounter many of the social problems and failures of our social institutions, including housing insecurity and an unwelcoming labor market, along with many other issues that are at the center of our social justice rhetoric.

More often than not, educators like Dr. Murolo encounter justice-impacted students in their classrooms who are academically motivated but have limited options for graduate study because of the stigma of a criminal record. These students want to learn and they value the importance of higher education, but they are stifled in moving forward because of a past mistake. Don't most of us reading this letter have a memory we could rewrite for the better? Not only does education help these students move forward, but firsthand perspectives from formerly incarcerated individuals are pivotal in creating knowledge of social justice issues like access to education and barriers to reintegration. The inclusion of formerly incarcerated students in our classrooms creates greater understanding and empathy for the plight of incarcerated individuals while enriching the classroom experience.

Here's to more inclusive higher education policies for our formerly incarcerated neighbors. We know that education has the power to change lives for the better and to promote behaviors far away from a life of crime — especially critical as people reintegrate post-release. Let's look beyond the stain of a criminal record, make it a point to follow the data, and allow education to make its transformational mark as a true second chance.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts.

Respectfully,
Dr. Lena M. Campagna and Dr. Angela S. Murolo

Works Cited

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About the authors

Dr. Lena Campagna is an Associate Professor and Alvin M. Calman Endowed Chair in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Caldwell University. Her research focuses on help-seeking behaviors, reentry, and social support for those impacted by various parts of the criminal legal system. Dr. Campagna has published as both a co-author and solo author in empirical, peer-reviewed journals, including *International Review of Victimology*, *Law and Society Review*, and *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*.

Angela S. Murolo, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New York. Her research interests include the impact of age and incarceration on life and health outcomes, correctional responses to geriatric inmates, the aging prison population, and geriatric parole. Her solo and co-authored research has been published in *Journal of Correctional Healthcare*, *Journal of Prison Education Research*, *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology*, *CUNY Law Review*, *SN Social Sciences*, and *Journal of Community Justice*.