

# UNBOUND LEARNING: A COLLABORATIVE STUDY



Link Learning and Work

**COLLEGE UNBOUND**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper represents an initial collaboration between Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and College Unbound (CU). CAEL and CU have long been in one another's orbits; each supporting adult learning and learning in nontraditional ways for decades. This collaboration began in January, 2024 with a goal to develop a program that offers work-based learning opportunities for formerly incarcerated adult learners. The report that follows:

- ⊗ Highlights learning that occurs through incarceration and re-entry process;
- ⊗ Makes the case for honoring that learning with college credit;
- ⊗ Identifies employer best practices in supporting formerly incarcerated learners;
- ⊗ Identifies gaps in resources and support services for the justice-involved; and
- ⊗ Offers a roadmap for next steps with CAEL, College Unbound, and the larger employer-educator ecosystem.

Peeling back that onion, of course, reveals complex layers of systems that talk (and don't talk) to one another in higher education, carceral spaces, workforce training, justice, accountability, and community care.

Also as in peeling an onion, this work is heart-work that brings tears to our eyes about systems of harm and our inability to fully see one another as always learning. This is not work we could write about or organize around in abstraction. It is deeply informed and driven by currently incarcerated learners, primarily in Rhode Island, Illinois, and Louisiana, who participated in focus groups, facilitated workshops, and shared recommendations for the field to consider.

What follows is not a traditional white paper. Rather, in this document you will hear many voices, because the work we seek to do together is varied, valuable, and collaborative. It is built through the work of many connected to our institutions who have carceral experience and visions of what liberatory and lifelong learning look and feel like.

We hope you are reading this document if you are a:

- ⊗ Mission-aligned funder;
- ⊗ Higher education administrator;
- ⊗ Employer, industry association, or workforce board looking to support talented and motivated, yet under-utilized learners; or
- ⊗ A policy or personal advocate looking to challenge the status quo.

We hope you are reading this paper looking to connect with CAEL and College Unbound for larger sector change. This white paper is also an invitation for more voices and more work, for there is much to be done. As you read this document, we invite your engagement with us so that we can further these goals together.

# INTRODUCTION: WHO WE ARE

College Unbound (CU) is a non-profit educational institution focused on adult learners who have faced significant barriers to attending college. CU helps adults re-enter, stay in college, and earn their Bachelor of Arts degree with a unique approach and comprehensive wrap-around support services. College Unbound's academic content and instruction build on a student's prior studies, life experiences, and interests to create a student-driven curriculum. The program is designed to help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in a variety of careers, including business, education, government, and non-profit organizations. CU's Prison Education Program is designed to increase postsecondary graduation rates for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated adult learners pursuing post-secondary education. The program combines college-level coursework with students' passions and interests through personalized projects. Students are provided support throughout the program while they are incarcerated, including peer learning communities, mentors, and faculty advisors. Once released, students can transfer their credits to College Unbound and continue on the pathway toward degree completion. College Unbound also offers support services to help students re-integrate into society and ensure their personal and professional success.

Recognizing that adult learners are critical partners in our shared future, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, CAEL fosters a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. CAEL has extensive experience with supporting and leading the planning and development of training and education programs aimed at adult and non-traditional learners, including work to develop industry partnerships in Energy, Telecommunications, and Financial Services, as well as supporting the development of apprenticeship models across several industries. A national membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workplace™ certified.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our collaboration is informed by CAEL's ALLIES Framework. The ALLIES Framework, which stands for "Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness," is a data-driven and holistic model to guide institutions in effectively serving adult learners. It is designed to help postsecondary institutions adapt to the evolving needs of adult learners in today's dynamic learning and labor market.

- ④ **Core Focus:** The ALLIES Framework centers on the adult learner, emphasizing data-driven planning and institutional change to better support their success.

## ④ Key Principles:

- It promotes a holistic approach, considering factors like affordability, career connections, academic empowerment, student support, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- It encourages institutions to leverage the assets and experiences that adult learners bring, recognizing the value of prior learning and real-world experience.
- It advocates for systemic change, urging institutions to adapt their policies, practices, and services to meet the unique needs of adult learners.

## ④ Practical Application:

- The framework provides a structured approach for institutions to assess their current practices, identify gaps, and implement strategies to enhance adult learner success.
- It includes guidance on data-driven planning, organizational capacity building, and designing effective student experiences.

In essence, the CAEL ALLIES Framework is a comprehensive guide for institutions committed to creating inclusive and supportive environments that empower adult learners to achieve their educational and career goals.

## WORK COMPLETED TO DATE AND PROJECT TIMELINE

We began this project in 2024. Our collective goal is to increase the post-secondary graduation rates for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated adult learners looking to complete their bachelor's degrees, which strongly aligns with the missions of both organizations. The purpose of this project is to provide the resources necessary to carefully and comprehensively strategize, design, and prepare for the successful implementation of a full-scale project starting in 2026.

This document is informed by a multitude of collaborative activities, including:

- ④ College Unbound students and alumni focus groups;
- ④ Community partner focus groups; and
- ④ Interactive pre-conference workshop at CAEL's 2024 Conference.

## FINDINGS

At the heart of this paper, we find the need for more and truer ways to facilitate, assess, and appreciate learning in this world. For everyone.

We further look to lift up three core findings:

### The learning that occurs through the prison system and re-entry process needs to be honored through credit

Recognizing that learning can take place anywhere is the very essence of Credit for Prior Learning (CPL). College-level learning for justice-involved individuals encompasses both in-prison education and post-release re-entry support, leveraging CPL to bridge these phases. Within correctional facilities, opportunities range from Associate and Bachelor's degree programs to vocational training leading to industry-recognized certifications. Upon re-entry, formerly incarcerated individuals can directly enroll in colleges and universities. CPL is crucial for recognizing and translating prior military service, workplace experience, industry certifications, and even assessed experiential learning from their time incarcerated and in navigating reentry.

## Employers are key partners in the reentry process

To successfully hire justice-involved individuals, employers should adopt “fair chance” hiring practices by removing criminal history questions from initial applications, conducting individualized assessments only after conditional offers, and focusing solely on job-relevant convictions in compliance with federal and state laws. Best practices also include signaling inclusivity in recruitment, expanding channels to connect with justice-involved talent, and critically reviewing job descriptions for unnecessary requirements. Furthermore, employers should cultivate a supportive work environment through robust onboarding, mentorship, professional development, and understanding of re-entry needs. By implementing these strategies, companies can tap into a motivated talent pool, reduce turnover, and contribute to community well-being.

## Both in higher education and in employment, there are large gaps in resources and support services

Significant gaps in support services and persistent obstacles hinder the successful employment of justice-involved individuals. While some prison programs offer vocational training, they often lack alignment with current labor market demands or comprehensive “job readiness” skills, leaving individuals unprepared. There’s also a critical absence of integrated, holistic support that addresses housing, transportation, mental health, and substance abuse – fundamental needs that, if unmet, undermine job retention. Underfunded and inconsistent reentry programs further exacerbate these issues, often failing to provide the sustained, evidence-based support necessary for long-term success. Additionally, limited access to work-based learning opportunities, a lack of digital literacy skills, and restricted access to legal aid for record clearance create substantial barriers to economic stability.

Employers face their own set of challenges, stemming from persistent stigma and biases against individuals with criminal records, which often lead to hiring reluctance despite “Ban the Box” policies. Legal restrictions imposed by occupational licensing laws further limit job access, while many justice-involved individuals lack essential identification documents, have limited education, and possess significant gaps in their work history. Financial instability, immediate income needs, and critical barriers like inadequate transportation and housing instability compound these issues. High rates of untreated mental health conditions and substance abuse disorders among this population also impact job retention, alongside a lack of professional networks crucial for career advancement.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Throughout this project, our organizations have built the foundation for a robust community of practice. In these pages, we demonstrate the potential for building upon this foundation through meaningful collaboration with employers and educators dedicated to this important work.

The next steps in this work must build a community that strives to:

- ④ Foster the development of transferable skills,
- ④ Provide participants with valuable, resume-worthy work experience, and
- ④ Ensure a living wage to support the cost of tuition.

Such an immersive experience will significantly enhance post-secondary graduation rates for formerly incarcerated adult learners who are actively pursuing their bachelor’s degree. And doing so will be transformative for all of higher education.

# THE IMPERATIVE OF EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT FOR REINTEGRATING FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

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In a society that values justice and rehabilitation, expecting formerly incarcerated individuals to re integrate into their communities without adequate support is not only unrealistic but also counterproductive. Upon release, these individuals face numerous challenges, including the stigma of their past and the immediate need to secure necessities. Two critical components to their successful reintegration are access to education and employment opportunities. Without these, we are essentially setting them up for failure, which ultimately undermines the safety and cohesion of our communities.

## THE NECESSITY OF EDUCATION FOR SUCCESSFUL REINTEGRATION

Education serves as the cornerstone of personal and professional development. For individuals released from prison, access to educational opportunities is paramount. The lack of education is a significant barrier to gaining gainful employment, essential for financial stability and self-sufficiency. Many incarcerated individuals still need to complete high school, and even fewer have had access to higher education. This educational deficit puts them at a distinct disadvantage in the job market.

Studies have shown that educational programs within prisons can significantly reduce recidivism rates. For instance, the RAND Corporation found that inmates who participated in educational programs were 43% less likely to return to prison than those who did not. Moreover, for every dollar spent on prison education, four to five dollars are returned in reduced incarceration costs. This data underscores education's critical role in individual rehabilitation, creating safer communities, and reducing the financial burden on the state.

## EMPLOYMENT: THE KEY TO LONG-TERM STABILITY

Securing employment post-release is equally critical. A job provides more than just a paycheck; it offers a sense of purpose, structure, and a means to rebuild one's life. However, formerly incarcerated individuals often face significant barriers to employment, including employer discrimination and the lack of relevant job skills or work experience. This employment gap contributes to a cycle of poverty and recidivism, as individuals without stable jobs are more likely to revert to criminal behavior out of desperation.

Businesses and communities must create pathways for these individuals to enter the workforce. This can include initiatives such as "ban the box" policies, which prevent employers from inquiring about criminal history on initial job applications and incentivize businesses to hire formerly incarcerated individuals through tax credits or subsidies. Programs that provide job training and apprenticeships tailored to the needs of the formerly incarcerated can also play a pivotal role in bridging the employment gap.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

A critical but often overlooked aspect of reintegration is the need for strong community connections. Upon release, many individuals return to neighborhoods drastically different from the ones they left. The erosion of social networks and lack of community support can leave them feeling isolated and disconnected. This disconnection is detrimental, as a supportive community is crucial for providing the emotional and practical support needed to navigate the reintegration challenges.

Community organizations, faith-based groups, and mentorship programs can be invaluable resources. These entities can offer a support network, helping individuals reconnect with their community and fostering a sense of belonging. Additionally, community-based programs that focus on restorative justice and rehabilitation rather than punishment can help shift societal attitudes, reducing the stigma associated with having a criminal record.

## CONCLUSION

Expecting individuals to successfully re integrate into society after incarceration without providing access to education, employment, and community support is not just unrealistic—it is an injustice. By investing in educational and employment programs and fostering strong community connections, we can help formerly incarcerated individuals rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society. It is time to rethink our approach to rehabilitation and support, ensuring we provide the necessary tools for all community members to thrive. Only then can we create an indeed just and inclusive society.

# FOCUS GROUPS

We believe deeply that the only way to solve anything is together and that meaningful learning is in community. With that ethic to guide this project, College Unbound and CAEL met with both students and employers who engage with the carceral system as a way to learn together and begin building what an employment pathway that takes seriously the needs and lived experiences of incarcerated learners could be. As Jose Rodriguez, CU's AVP of Community & Belonging, says below, "if you do that, then all of the other variations of folks have access to the education at that same level. Let's flip it and do our best for folks who are incarcerated and then returning, and because of that, you also provide the best work for all of the students."

## SUMMARY OF STUDENT FOCUS GROUP

On April 17, 2024, CAEL and College Unbound (CU) held a focus group where current students gathered to speak about their experience as College Unbound students. In this 90-minute activity held via Zoom, participants were welcomed and split into two small groups. Participants were asked to reflect on their personal experiences with CU in this small group atmosphere. Following the conversation, reflection time as a large group was provided to conclude the time and provide opportunities to share and debrief.

To protect the anonymity of participants, the session was not recorded. During the small group session, the discussion focused on the support structures the students had found particularly helpful. They also candidly reflected on opportunities for learning that students felt would be of benefit through their time enrolled. A focus was placed on navigating reentry, transitioning into the world of work, and other skill development students were interested in pursuing professional experience. The broad goal of this conversation was to identify common themes among the College Unbound student experience, program successes, and opportunities for partnership and connection. College Unbound and CAEL hope that through this partnership, further networking opportunities for students will be identified and created that impact post-graduation employment opportunities for all.

One of the most striking reflections from participants was the sense of community and support at the core of a CU program. This connection to one another, as well as to student support services - particularly when facing unexpected challenges - was referenced continuously across both focus groups. In some instances, students were connected with community resources that provided access to necessities such as food and housing (Through Rhode Island Reconnect). The sense of community built across CU cohorts created what one CAEL staff member noted: "Created a very powerful ethos of giving back and helping others who have walked the same path." The ALLIES Framework, published by CAEL in 2022 places particular emphasis on supporting adult learners by focusing on designing, developing, and improving the program- and service-design components that the adult learner sees and experiences. Domains in this area of the framework include the importance of student support (particularly at the front-end of a student's journey) as well as academic empowerment. (Darnell et al., 2022)<sup>1</sup> College Unbound students and staff spoke about the experience of participating in a CU cohort as providing these services- and the deep impact of those supports on their academic persistence while acknowledging all life experiences.

<sup>1</sup> Darnell, B., Shafenberg, K., & Klein-Collins, R. (2022). (publication). *Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES)*. CAEL.ORG. Retrieved from <https://www.cael.org/hubfs/CAEL%20ALLIES%20Full%20Report%202022.pdf>.

When asked about professional development experience that students hoped to gain through obtaining a CU degree, students consistently referenced technology, customer service and people skills, as well as business communication and professional dress to prepare for workforce success. College Unbound's program focuses heavily on the "Big 10" Transformational Leadership and Change Competencies, of which students are assessed by creating portfolios. It is clear that the development of these portfolios is interconnected with student's personal and academic empowerment. Thanks to College Unbound's flexible degree framework, creative partnerships with employers and community partners could provide opportunities for students to model these competencies through stackable credentials. If paired with career pathways, this may offer great opportunities for College Unbound to increase student reach and success, while also continuing to impact recidivism in the justice involved population.

College Unbound has an impactful program built on flexibility and access to learning for students of all life experiences. The conversation with students was deeply impactful and moving to all those who facilitated the time together. We hope this work will continue to grow and support more students by creating additional opportunities and connections with workforce programs. Just as we acknowledge that learning can occur beyond the traditional walls of a classroom, providing students personalized and continued support can also have a deep impact on student's personal, professional and academic success.

## TRANSCRIPT OF COMMUNITY PARTNER FOCUS GROUP

**Bill McKinney:** Thank you all for being here. This is an important project that CAEL is working on with our colleagues at College Unbound in continual efforts to improve those connections between employers and educators for the learners that College Unbound serves. My name is Bill McKinney. I am a senior director for higher education initiatives at CAEL.

**Adam Bush:** So College Unbound is in its 15th year, its 10th year as a college, and one of the earliest things we did when we were recognized by the State of Rhode Island 10 years ago was reach out to CAEL to say we were interested in exploring how to build practice in our organization and connected to a larger movement that CAEL's been a part of for 50 years to honor credit and lift up lifelong learning. I'm really excited to come back into partnership with this project and am excited to move towards crafting what a job guarantee could look like for CU students who are incarcerated and pursuing a Bachelor's degree to know that there is a job that awaits them. We need to be more than a college- and higher education as a sector needs to be more than a passive partner in supporting its learners. With a job, learners can better navigate parole and probation, and that's connected to the learning that they're doing in the world. That is the kind of work that is only possible with folks around this virtual table.

**Jose Rodriguez:** I understand the importance of being able to have a job and transition from a carceral space into community. And you know, some of the smartest people that I've ever met in my life have been folks that are or have previously been incarcerated. All they needed was an opportunity. They needed an entry point. For me in Providence, the Nonviolence Institute was my entry point. That was my opportunity for my 1st adult job. As I like to say, opportunity is just as important as the degree that we're giving folks. The degree holds a lot of weight, but they still need to be able to walk into a place and be given an opportunity.

**Sylvia Spears:** I have responsibility for curriculum, faculty and faculty development-Making sure the promises we make to students, we actually keep through the delivery of our curriculum and create a robust learning environment in which students can grow and thrive and challenge their previous understanding. Our ability to translate the learning experience that students have, and to support students in translating it to the rest of the world is really important. And that is for all students, and especially critical for students who've been incarcerated- to be able to translate what they've learned in an educational setting how they reflect on their previous experience, and that all of that combined brings strengths and what we like to call core competencies to bear for an employer or in a job, or as they continue to make a change in the world. This work is so important to the work that we all do together.

**Jimi Orange:** I'm based out of Chicago and a Lab Faculty with College Unbound and a staff member at the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago. I support my fellow colleagues, and students all in the vein of higher education in attaining something bigger and better than what we each can individually imagine. I have a personal attachment to the education of my fellow peers. I still am a non-traditional student. Dropping out of college a year after I started, due to lack of resources, and the lack of support and was able to do so because of a mentor of mine. I ended up getting my master's degree.

**Lisa Pina Warren:** I'm the new Executive Director of the Nonviolence Institute. Most recently, I was running our intervention services program, which did street outreach and victim services and as part of my role, needed to hold a deep awareness of the many "selves" and skills folks bring into any job.

**Karla Alba:** I am at the United way of Rhode Island, where I'm the program officer for the Providence Equity grant, and College Unbound is one of our recipients to do work specific to addressing the very real inequalities that we experience here specifically in the city of Rhode Island and the strategic pillars are closing the racial wealth gap offering culturally congruent out of school education for our young ones and then also addressing the impacts of urban renewal and gentrification. How do we disrupt that never ending cycle that has been so ingrained in our systematic oppression here in Rhode Island?

**Keith Morton:** I'm the interim executive director at the Nonviolence Institute in Providence. I've been on their board since 2006 and until June of 2023, I was also a professor at Providence College. I'm old enough that I've watched a couple of the iterations of CAEL over the years, and I'm just so excited where you all are now, like, you're just sort of setting a gold standard for everybody, and that's really needed. My sense of the way the conversation is being framed is that some of it is the pipeline. The process is incarceration, education, reentry with more education often, and then employment. Is kind of the scheme, but at the Institute we have people who have some employment and then are trying to figure out education. But part of their professional public identity is that they've also been incarcerated, and that presents both logistical and practical problems. There's a point in the initial employment of a lot of folks coming out of prison into work with us, where they start off really, really strong. And then they just hit some big bumps. And a lot of those are internal things that they're just processing dealing with. As an employer we need to be a place that is really attuned and compassionate and supportive.

**Juan Carter:** I'm the outreach manager at Gifford Center for Violence Intervention. I'm more in the policy and advocacy space at Giffords, on the community, violence and intervention side. Part of it is reentry work, and making sure that as folks are returning home they're in an equitable space and they're included in the process,

especially education. You know, know the saying, those closest to problem closest to solution. As long as those individuals have a voice at the table it just makes the community a better place.

**Bill McKinney:** Those of you who are on the employer side, what skills and competencies are you looking for that are of benefit to either current or new hires, and obviously of benefit to your organization?

**Jimi Orange:** One of the challenges I've seen from being on the side of hiring is someone being away for a long time and then coming back and being acclimated back into society, is about them having a skill set in technology. At College Unbound we have a position called alumni mentors who provide a peer voice to guide the vulnerability folks share when they need help navigating new technology. On the employer side, I've led workforce programs and you can talk about soft skills, you can talk about interviewing, but I think sometimes we do miss out on those opportunities for those for that technology piece, and we sometimes make assumptions that folks have that capacity and they don't yet.

**Jose Rodriguez:** When I went away smartphones weren't weren't a thing. Come home, everything is digital and I am confused and lost. I needed to be comfortable enough to be like, "yeah, I don't know how to do this." Juan, thank you for helping me. As we're trying to bring students in, we need to make sure that we're matching them with jobs and making employers aware of the fact that that is going to be a barrier and a need. But if an individual doesn't know technology or isn't yet comfortable with technology, it doesn't mean that they can't do the job. It just means that they're gonna need a little bit of extra care and time around that thing.

**Keith Morton:** Another skill kind of underneath the surface of the specific of technology is maybe being able to ask for help. A lot of programs are pretty good at getting their students into college. Not very many of them are getting their students through college. Programs that do it well are ones that center a kind of advocacy work; self advocacy and larger communal advocacy. I feel like there's often a concern for people who are coming home and into a new job. There's a lot of fear that they're gonna lose it if they are found out to have gaps of any kind. And because of that this kind of old school hustle, mentality comes in, and there is a often a desire to kind of just say, "you got this." We need to work with folks so that they they know how to identify who to ask, and then how to ask and that it's ok when you need to say "I'm just gonna need a little time."

**Sylvia Spears:** Connected to this, though, is that employers need to assume responsibility for creating an environment in which folks who are returning can feel safe to say, "I don't know how to do this and or I'm going to need some support." Some of that belongs to the new employee, and some of it is about an employer. We talk about College Unbound being "student ready" as opposed to students being ready for college. What would that look like for an employer to really be ready to receive student folks who are leaving incarceration and going into the workforce? What's their checklist in terms of creating an environment that's going to be supportive? I'm thinking about one of our own recent alums who got out of incarceration after 30 years and we hand them a computer and an iPhone and expect it to be ok?! For the person I'm thinking about, Jose, you were the one who sat with that learner for days and days and days to create a kind of comfort. The other thing I'm always interested in is the skills and competencies that might be invisible. There are ways of being and thriving that have been honed and developed while incarcerated that are actually translatable to any work environment. Skills around resourcefulness, resilience, perseverance, like those are things that folks have

actually built capacity around, that employers actually benefit from people who, when they meet a problem. Folks who can also sit with that problem and figure out a solution with limited resources. That's what we see from learners who have been incarcerated.

**Jose Rodriguez:** When individuals step into a new position after being locked up, there needs to be a clear pathway of where and for how long they intend- and the employer intends- to hold, have, and build that job. Too often I see people just sit in an organization and be just placeholders of a position- they are there because they don't know where to go next and no one is supporting them to get there.

**Keith Morton:** When we are hiring people to do street outreach work, lived experience is one of the most valuable. You can call it a skill, but you can call it wisdom, knowledge, or just an understanding of things that are cultural and subjective and very subtle. Often, that means the difference between being successful and not successful in doing that work. But there is a difference between having that and being able to use it as a tool; turning experience into knowledge. To the point about the things that I think come with people from when they have been incarcerated, I think you become a really good systems analyst in a lot of ways. You can read situations around you really, quickly and deeply. You have a really good bullshit detector for how you're being played, or might be played. What the risks are of saying yes to this or no to that. Lifting that up and having it be recognized as a form of understanding systems theory and a form of analyzing complex situations, colleges and workplaces that do that are better able to build with formerly incarcerated learners.

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**Bill McKinney:** What do you have, or what have you seen maybe other employers use in terms of assessments that you use when you're involved in the hiring process?

**Jimi Orange:** I do think that there is an opportunity, or there could be an opportunity to formalize that a little bit more when it comes from the employer's perspective. I'm thinking outside of the community violence intervention space too. We have 3 employees at the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago who have graduated from College Unbound and they all are going to grad school. They want to do work that may not be CVI related and we have a responsibility to support them to grow in ways that may move them away from our organization. We also need ways to support the next generation of leaders of this organization so that the folks in charge are ones with both deep experience and systems analysis.

**Lisa Pina-Warren:** Some of our techniques may not be the best practices in the HR world, right? But for us, especially being from the community, we have a little bit more insight on what folks bring to the table, some of their skill sets. And for us, we also know that doing this work, your street cred means something. The respect you get in the hood means something. You have to be able to navigate and move around in a way that one, you're safe. Just because someone was incarcerated also does not mean that they're gonna have a positive impact on our violence intervention work. So a lot of my hiring has always been from my knowledge of the streets and who people are and knowing people and connecting with others, and kind of word of mouth, right? You also want to give people opportunities. We are a program inside of a program. you know? Many times in my role, I was not just supervising my staff. I was also case managing. and I was helping them to navigate. And you know, help them get their life in order while also gaining skills so that they can do their jobs to the best of their ability.

**Bill McKinney:** What kinds of career readiness skills do we need to think about and in what ways can utilize required academic coursework help to remedy trying to bridge that gap between employers and educators?

Karla Alba: I know that when I was applying to the role I am in, there wasn't that box that says "Check, if you have a previous criminal record." But I do remember coming on board at this organization and having this idea of coming as you are depending on how you want to dress, how you want to present yourself. There is a lot of attention about coming as you are. I think it's safe to assume that as a hiring employer, and we have this model of come as you are, I think that during the onboarding process there would be an assessment of what are the skills, and how can we better assist you getting acclimated to the role as well as what professional development opportunities will be available to help you grow in the organization, help you be the best employee for whichever position.

**Jimi Orange:** I think what you said about dress attire is so on point, and it's something that may seem small to some. But it's so huge to our people who are applying for jobs where we say, come as you are, and I can't tell you the amount of times where I've had conversations with applicants after they've left the interview, and they said I didn't have the money to get pants. I didn't have the money for a tie. I didn't have the funds or the resources for a nice shirt.

**Karla Alba:** United way recently started like an employee fund, kind of like an employee closet/food pantry to address the needs of each individual, and what barriers might be in the way that might not make them successful in the role. So they've turned one of the mail rooms into a closet, and if we have it, we can bring in professional clothing that we can share within our organization with the people who are employed by us, and they can go in and pick what they want and what they need. As well as having this food pantry for our internal staff. But there is a big emphasis on making sure that the food that we get is culturally appropriate for our staff. And that's something that I find I've never actually experienced at any other role. A lot of the time we work in silos, and you're kind of like whatever barriers you have outside, you check it at the door, and you kind of come in and be who you are.

**Sylvia Spears:** That's really powerful because it makes me think about the hard skills somebody might need in an environment as well as building the social capital that people have to know how to navigate in those spaces. You know, people talk about. Oh, our attire for an organization is business casual. What the heck is that? If I've been incarcerated for 20 years, I don't know what business casual is. Unspoken norms serve as gatekeeping functions. This goes beyond folks who've been formerly incarcerated. It plays out the same way in black and brown communities and folks who are struggling. In some ways, we keep turning the conversation around. not just to what inputs there should be so that people can do the job. But we're also asking, "what can the job do to ensure people's success?"

**Juan Carter:** Talking about formerly incarcerated people, then we know that everything outside of your organization is still against them. And you have to understand that you're taking that person and all of the issues that come with them. And so how are you taking care of that person as an employer? And even though you're gonna have some rough spots and some setbacks- and I'm not saying everything falls on the employer. But you know what you're signing up for potentially and taking on this individual.

**Karla Alba:** It's not just a matter of just giving them the job and allowing them the opportunity. It's also how we look at an individual as a whole. And what are their

needs? As someone who worked in admissions and meeting that diversity quota, it's not enough to just get students in the door. How are we supporting them to make sure that they are successful while they are working through whatever they're working through in school, outside of school. What are we doing for them as an individual? How do we assess them, and then provide them with whatever resources they need to make sure that they are successful. And I think that looks at the individual holistically, and not necessarily as okay. Well, there's diversity and equity and inclusion, because we have these people here. But how are we making sure that they're thriving while they are here?

**Lisa Pina-Warren:** I also wanna remind folks that it's also very important to be flexible and understanding, but also hold people accountable right? Because what I've learned over the years is we're not empowering people if we don't hold them accountable, and we don't teach them. You know what I mean, like when we expect something a standard right? Like, yeah, we can be flexible and bend the rules here and there for different reasons and different situations. But if that becomes our practice, we're not empowering our people to do better, and strive for better. And I just think that's really important. I try to remind myself of that a lot, because I feel like when I reflect back over the years of all the people that I have supervised, there are some that I wish that I did not make it so easy, or I wasn't so flexible. If I push them a little bit more, or I try to lift their standards or the expectations so that they could be greater than where I left them. So empowering our people is very, very important.

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**Bill McKinney:** What strengths have you found that justice involved individuals bring to your organizations? And then, as a corollary to that, how has that benefited your organizations?

**Lisa Pina-Warren:** I want to say resilience, problem solvers, critical thinkers. I've never been incarcerated, but I know that plenty of my friends and family and community members have. And I know that they bring those qualities. It's survival for them. So they do learn a skill set, and also, time management, I think. But as long as we don't allow them to lose that right? Because I think a lot of people that are coming back into the community are very stuck on this regimen of getting up early, having structure, those are some great skill sets that they bring.

**Jimi Orange:** This is not a soft skill you hear often, but they bring authenticity to the work. They are the spokespeople. They are the HR representatives. They are speaking in spaces that you know. To be quite honest, I should not be speaking upon, but I will. There is a caveat to that, because I do think that there's a fine line to that, and I've been in these spaces before- it can turn into exploitation, if not handled properly, if you will.

**Keith Morton:** For people who are incarcerated, 0.5% of the money spent on their incarceration is pointed at reentry. So the paradigm shift that I think a lot of folks are trying to work on is that reentry should begin the 1st day somebody is incarcerated, and it doesn't end until they've left. We need to really turn that paradigm around so that this kind of education and all these really awesome things we're talking about simply become part of what's available to folks right from the jump when they're inside.

**Jose Rodriguez:** A soft skill that a lot of folks who have been previously incarcerated bring is a BS detector. We are fairly good at being able to see things for what they are. And although we, you know, as a society, we believe that common sense is common. A lot of folks in the workplace who don't have this type of lived experience don't have common sense.

**Juan Carter:** In the work that we do, it's so important that the communities we work with that the way people carry themselves is almost everything. There is a kind of a genuine humility that people often bring, and that's 1 of the things that makes them really approachable, and also something that makes them very good learners. And, we are fierce advocates. If nurtured and treated well, they're fierce advocates, and they'll be loyal. Don't exploit that.

**Karla Alba:** Empathy is important when addressing equity. If we don't take the time to understand each individual and their needs, and not only understand it for what it is, but really understand it. Then we can't get the work done. And then also to Keith's point, you know, reentry should be starting as soon as they start because it is our prison process. Our prison system in the United States, it's not rehabilitative. It's not set up for these currently incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated individuals to have the opportunity to transform and change.

**Sylvia Spears:** A lot of the things we just lifted up as really important for folks who are returning citizens are very much in alignment with CU's transformational leadership competencies. It's just powerful to hear it come in a different way.

**Adam Bush:** The work of lifelong learning, the work of care. The work of making sure that folks are fully seen is rarely the work of a college. What we're surfacing here is that it also needs to be the work of employers too.

**Jose Rodriguez:** CU's work as a college is to ensure the folks who are most marginalized, most distanced from opportunities for learning are actually in the center. And if you do that, then all of the other variations of folks have access to the education at that same level. Let's flip it and do our best for folks who are incarcerated and then returning and because of that you also provide the best work for all of the students.

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**Bill McKinney:** These kinds of conversations are so enormously helpful as we work together, really to move forward in this work. Thank you all for the work that you do. It really inspires us. It drives us.

# INSIDE, OUTSIDE, AND UNBOUND: ASSESSING LEARNING WITH STUDENTS IN CARCERAL SPACES AND BEYOND

A pre-conference workshop hosted by College Unbound was held at the 50th Annual CAEL Conference on October 29th 2024 in New Orleans, Louisiana. This half-day session, titled *Inside, Outside, and Unbound* was held on-site at the Ashé Cultural Arts Center. It provided an opportunity for conference participants to understand the work of College Unbound and explore the assessment of learning in carceral spaces and beyond. The following materials are a reflection on that workshop.

## SYNOPSIS OF CAEL PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

Just outside of prison walls, inside carceral spaces, and for the countless folx and families impacted by justice systems, our work of teaching, learning, assessment, and pathways to success are not only powerful vehicles to change, they are guiding practices that can lead us to more equitable and liberatory educational approaches for all. In November 2024, College Unbound teamed with Ashé Cultural Arts Center and others working in the field of Re-entry in New Orleans to share stories, share student work, and deeply dive into how we assess learning for our students in our prison education program and beyond. We were honored to be joined by CAEL members from across the country at various stages of development and implementation of their own prison education programs and we all learned from each other across the four hours we shared space. Our common ground was working with students who are or were justice impacted, which means we were working with some of the most marginalized students in higher education. To do so, College Unbound's assertion is that our work with these students must be liberatory. And, once we know how to create liberatory programs, can we expand those programs to all of the other adult students for more deliberate paths to futures unbound.

College Unbound is a student-driven, non-traditional accredited college focused on providing comprehensive support to adult learners progressing towards a Bachelor's Degree in Organizational Leadership and Change. Based in Providence, Rhode Island, we have cohorts all over the country from Seattle, Washington to Greenville, South Carolina to the Delaware Valley and beyond. We ensure that we develop supports throughout our curriculum and care services so that any student at CU can thrive as they work through our single major; our Transformative Educator Pathway works with learners towards their teacher certification and our Prison Education Program works with students with current or previous experience with the carceral system to be able to tackle projects at the heart of their curriculum with meaning and authenticity. College Unbound has a longstanding history with the Ashé Cultural Arts Center and its co-founder, Carol Bebelle, who partnered with us on one of our first cohorts serving adult learners many years ago. Both organizations' work is deeply rooted in community-based connectedness, justice, and an organic pursuit of a more equitable world.

We began our afternoon with a Story Circle, out of the traditions of many indigenous cultures, from the organizing work of SNCC Freedom Summer project of 1963, and from John O'Neal with Ashé. We start with story for several vital reasons: it sets the course for human-centered work, it connects us with one another in deep and meaningful ways, and it brings the power of narrative into the conversation on learning



# Assessment Philosophy

Equitable

- Students should communicate in their own voice and style
- Assessors recognize student expertise and unique perspectives
- Assessors let go of hierarchical notions of learning / gatekeeping
- Multiple subject matter experts assess each portfolio
- Suggestions and support always offered, revisions welcomed
- Policies, procedures, and criteria will be transparent and applied consistently and equitably for all students and in accordance with CU's educational standards.

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# Assessment Philosophy

Accessible

- Policies/procedures are inclusive of and available to all students
- Multiple modalities for reflection on learning and for documentation
- Conducted with consideration of student learning and communication preferences and needs
- Assessing understanding NOT academic english

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# Assessment Philosophy

Unbound

- Learning is often “multi-faceted, interdisciplinary, and collaborative, not broken into compartmentalized subject-matter packages nor individualized silos”
- Learning is not bound to one experience or time
- Both development of portfolio and assessment feedback contribute to the process of learning
- The objective is to evaluate “development, integration and application.” (GLQE)

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and assessment. Our stories, and pointedly the stories of adult students in carceral spaces, are how we make meaning, how we reflect and grow from our experiences, and how we come to truly know each other. But even more importantly, our narratives are our own. We get to keep them or share them as we wish, we control them, we alone can change them, and we are the only author of our own stories. Honoring that which is so authentically and intrinsically one's own is liberatory. In our work with all of our adult students, College Unbound prioritizes narrative as a key piece to crediting learning experiences and we have witnessed the transformative power and deep understanding revealed through narrative based portfolios.

We use the word “Liberatory” to mean designed and implemented free from the oppressive structures that do not serve us or our students. In fact, our entire Learning in Public (LIP) program, College Unbound’s iteration of a credit for prior learning program, was designed to be liberatory. Some defining elements of our Learning in Public program are that the portfolios can be completed anytime during college enrollment, students can earn credit for experiences/learning prior to and throughout enrollment in college, every CU student earns at least 10 credits at no cost through LIP, we have a wide variety of options in terms of content and modality, and we rely on narratives to showcase students’ deep learning. Working with narrative, and especially with students who face barriers obtaining traditional certificates or licenses, is a human-centered approach to assessing learning and fundamental to working with justice-impacted students. As Assistant Dean of Curricular Integration at College Unbound, I teased out the philosophy of Liberatory Assessment to support portfolio evaluation for college level learning. In our CAEL workshop, we unpacked Liberatory Assessment with our colleagues and allowed that to inform all of our future goals. CU trains Assessment Specialists on our approach every month and we wanted to share this work with others who could use these non-traditional assessment strategies to assess traditional learning outcomes.

In short, Liberatory Assessment is a rigorous evaluation that is Equitable, Accessible, and Unbound (See below for a detailed breakdown of each component). Every portfolio, including the three portfolios from formerly incarcerated CU graduates we brought to share with those in attendance, is assessed by at least two experts in the field, adhering to clear rubrics for each degree requirement. What is liberatory is embedded in the process of our LIP program AND integral to our assessment specialists’ approach to each portfolio. First and foremost, we train assessors to take an asset-based approach, recognizing student expertise, and valuing each person’s unique perspective. We appreciate each student’s own voice, evaluating for clarity and understanding not assessing academic English or content-specific vocabulary while we are evaluating other important learning outcomes. Assessors at CU see the stories in the portfolios as part of a learning journey, not the completed, final product. Because we believe in Lifelong Learning, we provide feedback, encourage next steps, ask constructive questions, and offer resources to continue towards the students’ own goals.

Towards the end of our pre-conference workshop, we took the time to reflect on where each of us were in our programs and dreamt up how we wanted our programs to be. Between those two points, as with any social justice work, we identified potential barriers or challenges we might face. The exciting thing about this work of bringing more liberation into our teaching, learning, and assessment practices is that we are not alone in facing these obstacles. We are a growing community of educators and leaders looking to push our work in carceral spaces and beyond towards equity and justice. Towards the end of our session College Unbound’s president, Adam Bush, shared Martin Espada’s poem The Angels of Bread, and asked us all to add a line to name what we wanted this year to be. At College Unbound, we want this to be the year all of our incarcerated students’ educational journeys feel like liberation.



## IMAGINE THE ANGELS OF BREAD

by Martín Espada

This is the year that squatters evict landlords,  
gazing like admirals from the rail  
of the roofdeck  
or levitating hands in praise  
of steam in the shower;  
this is the year  
that shawled refugees deport judges,  
who stare at the floor  
and their swollen feet  
as files are stamped  
with their destination;  
this is the year that police revolvers,  
stove-hot, blister the fingers  
of raging cops,  
and nightsticks splinter  
in their palms;  
this is the year  
that darkskinned men  
lynched a century ago  
return to sip coffee quietly  
with the apologizing descendants  
of their executioners.

This is the year that those  
who swim the border's undertow  
and shiver in boxcars  
are greeted with trumpets and drums  
at the first railroad crossing  
on the other side;  
this is the year that the hands  
pulling tomatoes from the vine  
uproot the deed to the earth that sprouts the vine,  
the hands canning tomatoes  
are named in the will that owns  
the bedlam of the cannery;

this is the year that the eyes  
stinging from the poison that purifies toilets  
awaken at last to the sight  
of a rooster-loud hillside,  
pilgrimage of immigrant birth;  
this is the year that cockroaches  
become extinct, that no doctor  
finds a roach embedded  
in the ear of an infant;  
this is the year that the food stamps  
of adolescent mothers  
are auctioned like gold doubloons,  
and no coin is given to buy machetes  
for the next bouquet of severed heads  
in coffee plantation country.

If the abolition of slave-manacles  
began as a vision of hands without manacles,  
then this is the year;  
if the shutdown of extermination camps  
began as imagination of a land  
without barbed wire or the crematorium,  
then this is the year;  
if every rebellion begins with the idea  
that conquerors on horseback  
are not many-legged gods, that they too drown  
if plunged in the river,  
then this is the year.

So may every humiliated mouth,  
teeth like desecrated headstones,  
fill with the angels of bread.

"Imagine the Angels of Bread" from *Imagine the Angels of Bread*.  
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## REFLECTION FROM CAROL BEBELLE, ASHÉ CULTURAL ARTS CENTER

The people are warm, the food is fine, and the music will blow your mind. New Orleans is a cultural city, and the culture bubbles up from the streets here. And as for me, I, in a history of doing community-based human service planning, came to learn that as one of the big lessons. And it helped me to make a decision to join with Baba Douglas Redd and to found this place, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, and to anchor it in a mission of using culture to do economic development and culture development. Understanding that culture is the core element of sameness that we all have. When we get to understand that we all root ourselves, we all bear with culture, that we wind up bridging when we find other things that we want to bring in and that we make culture. That when we learn that and become expert at it and have it as a second nature to us, we do better than we do right now.

I'm going to start with our Sifa. Sifa, that's a word that means praise. And that's how we start most of our meetings and our sessions at Ashé to get grounded into who we are and where we are.

*May we always remember those who have gone before us. May we be inspired by their vision and valor. May their lives continuously remind us that service is more important than success, that people are more important than possessions, that principle is more important than power. May whatever we do be shaped and molded by honesty, competence, and commitment. May our children and our children's children carry forth with pride the nobility of our history and tradition. To the creator of all of us, we dedicate our lives to make this world beautiful, to make this world better and more beautiful. And to that we say,*

—Ashe

Gathering together, I am interested in reflecting on a story in our lives that reveals a way you understand justice or the justice system. When we hold space for Story Circles at Ashé, we do so in a way that speaks to our shared affirmation that everyone's story has value. Everyone learns and everyone learns best together. What is different when you create a higher ed institution that starts from the premise that all learning has deep value, and how can college be an excuse to bring folks together to do learning reflection collectively? How is the college the excuse to have folks recognized and seen for the learning they're doing in daily practice? How is college the excuse for folks to imagine a new way of being in the world, where we are truly valuing seeing and honoring one another? And when you have those as the founding principles, then what are the institutional practices that you build that really wrap around and try to embody that? You have a way of higher education that is grounded in culture, cultural practices, and the cultural continuum.

Bringing that into spaces where people do not feel their stories have value can be truly transformative because it reminds us that culture transcends bars and walls. When we storytell, we make sense of who we have been and point to where we might go. All learning should do that.

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## **PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP: PARTICIPANT REFLECTION**

### **Cheers to CAEL, The Ashé Cultural Arts Center, and College Unbound**

*As the Career and Technical Program Coordinator at the Virginia Community College System, with a primary focus on higher education and justice-involved populations, I was eager to attend my first CAEL conference. I took advantage of a pre-conference workshop, Inside, Outside, and Unbound, held in the heart of New Orleans at the Ashé Cultural Arts Center.*

*This workshop, hosted by the amazing teams from College Unbound, the arts center, and CAEL, brought together diverse people from all over the nation who committed to the transformative capacity of education for both individuals and communities. Situated in the black box theater at the center, the energy in the room was illuminating.*

*In story circles and breakout sessions, participants (artists, educators, administrators) immersed themselves in rich conversations, sharing experiences about justice in teaching and learning. As an artist and educator, I was particularly drawn to the College Unbound philosophy of nurturing adult learners as an experiential journey.*

*In rhythm with CAEL's mission to support organizations and learners through creative innovation and diverse partnerships, this workshop set the pace and commitment to holistic and regenerative educational approaches.*

*Cheers!*

Colleen Pendry, MFA  
Career & Technical Education Coordinator  
Higher Education Programs for Justice-Impacted Individuals  
Perkins Grant/MOA Facilitator  
PhD Candidate - Visionary Practice & Regenerative Leadership  
Southwestern College and New Earth Institute

# OVERVIEW OF LEARNING IN PRISON

## INCORPORATING LIVED EXPERIENCE IN PRISON INTO COLLEGE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

### Humanizing the Prison Experience

Lived experience provides a human perspective that is often missing in theoretical discussions or policy debates about the prison system. College papers that incorporate firsthand accounts from formerly incarcerated individuals offer a deeper understanding of the harsh realities within prisons, from systemic violence to psychological tolls. These narratives counterbalance the often dehumanizing statistics or abstract analyses, adding a personal and emotional dimension to academic work. When students who are currently incarcerated can contribute their stories, their voices further challenge the often reductive portrayals of prisoners in educational and media narratives, showing that they are capable of thoughtful reflection, growth, and critical engagement.

Brandon Robinson, a formerly incarcerated individual, vividly illustrates the transformative power of academic credit for lived experiences. He shares, *“Getting credits for my experiences helped boost my confidence because it showed me I didn’t go through my life circumstances for no reason. Earning these credits also sped up the time it took for me to complete my degree credits and made obtaining my goals closer.”* Robinson’s experience is a testament to the personal and educational benefits that many incarcerated individuals can derive from reflecting on their past struggles and triumphs in an academic context. This validation of their journeys and acceleration of their educational progress make their long-term goals more attainable. The experience of earning academic credits for lived experiences is a powerful tool for self-discovery and confidence-building, reinforcing the importance of incorporating these narratives into educational settings.

Robinson’s words also speak to the broader implications of lived experience in academia. When incarcerated students can incorporate their personal histories—related to the criminal justice system, systemic inequality, or personal struggles—into their academic work, they are no longer viewed as passive recipients of education but as active contributors to scholarly discourse. This recognition challenges the dominant narrative that incarcerated individuals are incapable of meaningful intellectual engagement. Instead, it acknowledges the depth of their lived experiences and the unique insights they bring to the table. For Robinson, integrating his experiences into his academic journey not only allowed him to understand his own life better but also enabled him to get closer to achieving his personal goals. This personal empowerment underscores that lived experience is not only academically valuable but also personally enriching and empowering.

### Promoting Empathy and Understanding

By including lived experience in college papers, we can foster empathy, a crucial element for understanding the complexities of incarceration. Students who have directly experienced the prison system may develop a more comprehensive and compassionate understanding of the factors contributing to criminal behavior, recidivism, and the societal stigmatization of formerly incarcerated individuals. This understanding, rooted in empathy, is crucial for creating a more just and rehabilitative system. Including incarcerated students’ perspectives in academic work also recognizes that individuals behind bars are not just passive recipients of criminal justice policies but active participants in the intellectual discourse surrounding those policies.

## STUDENT PROFILE: THE CASE OF EVAN WATSON

In the context of education and personal transformation, Evan Watson's story serves as a compelling argument for validating lived experience as a form of legitimate learning. Watson's journey from his immersion in gang culture to self-reflection and transformation demonstrates how experience can offer critical insights that no formal classroom can replicate, especially in challenging circumstances. His life narrative underscores the importance of educational institutions recognizing and valuing non-traditional learning pathways, particularly for individuals whose personal growth occurs outside conventional academic settings.

Evan Watson once embraced gang membership as a source of identity, community, and belonging. As a member of the Crips, he viewed the gang as a surrogate family, one that provided structure, meaning, and protection. At the time, he did not question the gang's values or actions, accepting them as a regular part of life. This uncritical participation highlights how deeply embedded social environments can shape individual worldviews, often limiting one's ability to question or challenge harmful norms.

It was not until Watson was incarcerated that he began to reflect critically on his life choices. The turning point came when he was tasked with creating a "change studies" portfolio, an assignment designed to help inmates explore personal transformation. Instead of avoiding his past, Watson used the portfolio to map out his progression through gang life, what led to his imprisonment, and, crucially, what lessons he had learned along the way. This exercise became a vehicle for deep self-analysis and sparked a desire for change rooted in lived reality rather than abstract theory.

Watson recognized profoundly that meaningful change required both internal commitment and external support. He realized that while he could choose to change, the process would be hindered without a community willing to believe in his transformation. His story reflects a critical truth: Reintegration and personal growth depend not only on individual will but also on collective affirmation and institutional support.

Watson's insight that some lessons can only be taught by life itself should prompt educational institutions to reconsider how they define and value learning. Formal education often privileges theoretical knowledge over experiential insight, inadvertently marginalizing individuals whose understanding of the world comes from hardship, survival, and resilience. By recognizing lived experience as a valid form of knowledge, institutions can create more inclusive models of education that honor diverse learning trajectories.

Evan Watson's life story illustrates that experience can be a powerful educator, often surpassing traditional academic instruction's depth and transformative potential. His journey compels educators, policymakers, and community leaders to broaden their conception of what counts as learning. Institutions are committed to equity and lifelong learning; in that case, they must create frameworks that validate and support individuals whose wisdom comes not from textbooks but from the trials of life itself.

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

CAEL's Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework notes that just as adult learners come with different backgrounds and experiences, they also come with different barriers to learning and success. Institutions effectively supporting the adult learner population recognize and address this by creating programs that serve all unique, specific personas. Concurrently, we know that more than 80 million Americans have a criminal record. (*Why it matters 2025*)<sup>2</sup> CAEL and College Unbound, in partnership, recognize the ample opportunities existing within communities nationwide to support and uplift the abundant population of qualified candidates facing this barrier to success.

Supporting a justice-involved population also requires addressing a unique set of barriers within the institutions doing the work. These barriers do not exclusively exist among higher education institutions and postsecondary education providers. Throughout this partnership, CAEL connected with various individuals representing the hiring process across employers and workforce development consortia nationwide. The message was clear and consistent: though interest in improving outcomes for this population exists, it is often difficult to successfully implement. Though prison learning programs and the recent reinstatement of PELL grant funding for incarcerated individuals have created additional learning opportunities for incarcerated individuals, barriers to employment for justice-involved individuals are often far beyond access to education and degree completion. Thus, higher education institutions and employers must work in partnership to support opportunities to grow education, training, and employment opportunities as a combined unit - rather than as separate challenges.

The ALLIES framework serves primarily as a resource for post-secondary education providers to engage with the barriers associated with various adult student personas. There is, however, an additional opportunity to connect the principles across higher education and employers through mutually beneficial partnerships. Crafting a holistic approach to the adult learner as a student as well as a potential employee is critical to hiring a committed and engaged workforce. Furthermore, recruitment of the justice-involved population utilizing support services specific to unique skills and needs can promote long-term employee retention associated with company loyalty.

College Unbound excels in their unique approach and non-traditional focus on areas of need identified within the ALLIES Framework, particularly within Level 3, centered on the Student Experience. In Level 3, an institution that effectively serves adults focuses on designing, developing, and improving the best possible program for its current and prospective adult learners. This is done with special attention to: affordable programs; student support, particularly at the front end of the student's journey; academic empowerment; and career relevance and connections. (Darnell et al., 2022)<sup>3</sup> College Unbound's academic program centers the student's lived experience as a component of a larger student support network. Students are encouraged to reflect on their individual challenges and successes within an academic context, and as a means

<sup>2</sup> *Why it matters*. Second Chance Business Coalition. (n.d.). <https://secondchancebusinesscoalition.org/why-it-matters>

<sup>3</sup> Darnell, B., Shafenberg, K., & Klein-Collins, R. (2022). (publication). *Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES)*. CAEL.ORG. Retrieved from <https://www.cael.org/hubfs/CAEL%20ALLIES%20Full%20Report%202022.pdf>.

of earning credit. This approach is a powerful tool for self-discovery and confidence-building, a key domain of CAEL's ALLIES Framework: Academic Empowerment. ALLIES research shows that adult learners seek institutions that recognize their complete experience and provide opportunities to control their own progress and development. These students have specific goals and milestones to reach, and they know themselves well enough to recognize what they need to be successful. (Darnell et al., 2022)

When considering the formerly incarcerated / justice-involved population, students learn the skill of owning their narrative and speaking to their experience from a growth-centered mindset. This is a skill that will serve them well through the interview process and beyond an application requirement to disclose a criminal record. College Unbound also takes a holistic approach to student support services through their Community Cares team, including Student Wellness and Engaged Living Initiative (SWEL). By creating spaces for students and staff to share stories + strategies associated with wellness on a holistic level, students are immediately given the opportunity to engage in a sense of belonging that balances education with other responsibilities and anticipated barriers to success. This sense of community belonging supports navigating the process of being a student and successful completion of academic and personal goals.

In CAEL and College Unbound's collective exploration of the space, we have identified need for continued partnership and collaboration - focusing on the growth of partnerships and opportunities for unique entities to center support services for justice-involved students. CAEL and College Unbound began providing space for these conversations and community building while holding a Pre-Conference Workshop at the CAEL Annual Conference 2024 in New Orleans, Louisiana. It is our hope that this work continues to grow by the development of a community of practice which may include focused development of:

- ④ Identification of employer partnership opportunities for formerly incarcerated students nationwide;
- ④ A community of learning and professional development opportunities for employers and higher education institutions in these areas;
- ④ Development of recognized crosswalks recommendations for trainings, certifications and programs frequently held within prisons- resulting in easier implementation of academic institutions awarding credit for prior learning;
- ④ Continued space for conversation and connection relative to supporting the unique population of formerly incarcerated adult learners; or
- ④ Opportunity for the collective development of funding sources to continue or elevate work at institutions and cross-collaborative

# CAEL AND COLLEGE UNBOUND CONTRIBUTORS:

Dr. Adam Bush, President, College Unbound

Dylan Knutson, Director of Grants and Strategic Initiatives, CAEL

Deborah Kronenberg, Assistant Dean of Curricular Integration, College Unbound

Bill McKinney, Senior Director of Initiatives, CAEL

Darrah Mugrauer, Director of Initiatives, CAEL

Dr. Alicia Myrick, Director of Initiatives, CAEL

Jose Rodriguez, Assistant Vice President for Community & Belonging, College Unbound

# **COLLEGE UNBOUND**