



OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARS

Stories & Recommendations from Justice Impacted Students

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**CUTLER
INSTITUTE**
MUSKIE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE



**UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MAINE**

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About

This report shares stories gathered from participants in the Opportunity Scholars initiative between 2019 and the present, and reflects on the experiences of the scholars with:

- Exploration of post-secondary options;
- The application, acceptance, enrollment, and advising process;
- Navigation within the academic community;
- Coursework and course load;
- Skills building and assessment of skill gaps; and,
- Employment and career development.

This report seeks to accomplish two goals by sharing this information. The first is to highlight the issues and barriers scholars have faced in their academic and employment journeys; the second is to provide recommendations for the academic community for how to improve academic pathways to success for all students. 

Justice-Impacted Students Matter.

Currently, students impacted by the criminal justice system are not finding the necessary resources and infrastructure needed to thrive at USM.

One of the goals included in *USM: The Next Five Years 2020–2025* is to “foster an organizational environment that creates a sense of belonging for students, faculty and staff” and to be a leader in the state on equity, inclusion, and belonging. The highest purpose of an academic community is to help students to succeed and realize their own potential to contribute to their classes, to the institution, and to their communities. However, there are groups of students who are not experiencing belonging and inclusion at USM, and who are not being supported to meet their potential.

Currently, students impacted by the criminal justice system are not finding the necessary resources and infrastructure needed to thrive at USM. The demand for such resources and infrastructure is most likely to increase, especially when the Pell Grant opens back up to incarcerated students in 2023.

The goals of the Opportunity Scholars initiative are to support justice involved individuals to achieve post-secondary credentials, degrees, and certificate

programs and to interrupt the cycle of incarceration and recidivism. Nationally each year, approximately 600,000 people reenter their communities after a period of confinement in either state or federal prisons, and about 750 of them are in the state of Maine.¹ Research shows that of all individuals with a lived experience of incarceration, 68% recidivate within three years of release and 77% recidivate within five years of release. For individuals with an associate degree, that rate of recidivism drops to 14%. With a bachelor’s degree, it drops further to 6%. And for individuals who achieve a master’s degree, the rate of recidivism is effectively 0%.² In Maine between 2010 and 2020, there have been 39 individuals who completed either an associate degree or bachelor’s degree during their incarceration and have been released into their communities, and of that number only 2 (5%) have recidivated or returned to the criminal justice system.³ For every \$1 invested in correctional education programs, \$4 to \$5 are saved on three-year re-incarceration spending.⁴ ♦

Recidivism Rates & Higher Education

68%
of individuals with a **LIVED EXPERIENCE OF INCARCERATION** **RECIDIVATE** within three years of release

For individuals with higher education degrees, the rate of recidivism drops to:

14%
ASSOCIATE DEGREE

6%
BACHELOR’S DEGREE

effectively **0%**
MASTER’S DEGREE



Applying & Acceptance



Applying to college is a considerable undertaking for any young person. Decisions about which institutions to pursue, stress about the financial components, and adhering to deadlines and requirements large and small can all be daunting. For young people who have a lived experience of incarceration, the hurdles are even higher.

In 2019, two opportunity scholars applied for admission at the University of Southern Maine. Both received support from program staff to complete their application, and were eventually accepted; they continued to be supported throughout the follow-up period.

At that time, there was a mandatory response question on the application, referred to as the judicial affairs question, which addresses criminal background and criminal history. The question was: “Have you ever been convicted of a misdemeanor, felony or other crime, or adjudicated of committing a juvenile crime?” The application supplied a Yes/No check box for this question, and then instructed applicants who answered yes to: “attach a separate sheet of paper that gives the approximate date of each incident and explains the circumstances.” This question and the instructions were both confusing and emotionally challenging for the applicants. **This question was removed from the application as of 2020.**

The two scholars included in this report who applied in 2019 struggled with the application, as well as during the follow up period. **There was confusion about how to apply and what to include on the application.** These individuals needed

support gathering the necessary paperwork and keeping it organized, tracking down previous transcripts, and understanding what was required. These small barriers were also joined by a larger, more emotional barrier to the feeling of belonging. Research has shown feelings of belonging in academic institutions to be influential on success.⁵ The criminal history question on the application was a deterrent for many and did not promote a community of inclusion and belonging.

These struggles may have been felt by other students with similar backgrounds. Data from USM show that between 2017 and 2020 a total of 691 applicants responded yes to this judicial affairs question.⁶ In that period, 485 were sent to review and 401 were eventually admitted to USM, of which 297 matriculated. Only 2 applicants in that time period were completely denied, and 24 were admitted with stipulations. That leaves 206 who applied but did not proceed further, the reasons for which are not captured by the data. There are also 58 that are not accounted for in the data of applicants that were admitted, sent to review, or admitted with stipulations. The data may represent students with a history of criminal justice involvement who are struggling in ways captured by the stories in this report. 💎

Ali's Story

In 2019, I made the decision to apply to USM after taking two years off school. When I filled out the USM application, there was an option to “check the box” if you’ve ever been charged with a crime, and I checked it. I was directed to send in my whole criminal record from when I was a child and my probation officer’s information.

I decided to go to admissions to seek assistance. The staff member was very nice and helpful at first. They told me that until I have both of my transcripts from previous schools, as well as completed the background process, USM could not move forward with my application. I asked some follow up questions about the required criminal history. The staff member then started to treat me differently. I’ve seen this before. Looking at me, you couldn’t tell I’ve been involved with the system, but it amazes me the effect that a “criminal record” can have when someone finds out you have one. The stigma, the bias, I could sense it in their voice. It wasn’t until after I told them about some of the work I do in the community, how I recently shared a stage with the president of USM, and about the newspaper article about it that their attitude changed. I find I consistently have to prove my worth to people who find out about my criminal history.

I previously attended community college. With regards to my transcripts, I still owed a total of \$802 to the school, and they would not release any transcript until that payment was made in full. I was able to receive a grant from a private donor to pay for the remaining debt owed. I was hoping to start in January for the spring semester but unfortunately, that payment process and the criminal background check caused delays until early March. I enrolled in classes for the summer of 2020, a semester later than I had hoped.

The problem lies here: when I, as a Black Muslim immigrant with a criminal record, am trying to do better in my life, to pursue a career, it is nearly impossible. Education equals opportunity. But the opportunity decreases when it is easier for certain groups of people. The bias and the difficulty of being accepted to a school to receive higher education needs to change. It should be easier for me to get into a school, to change my life. USM failed me when it came to enrolling, giving guidance, clear direction, and acceptance. Without Opportunity Scholars, my mentors, and the relationships I built, I don’t think I’d be in school today.



“Education equals opportunity. But the opportunity decreases when it is easier for certain groups of people. The bias and the difficulty of being accepted to a school to receive higher education needs to change. It should be easier for me to get into a school, to change my life.”



Enrollment & Advising



Enrollment in classes, picking an academic focus, and finding support from academic experts are all critical elements to any college student's success. For formerly incarcerated and justice impacted individuals, there are many hurdles to overcome in the enrollment and advising process.

Research has shown the role that academic advising can play in supporting students to find belonging, connect to beneficial services, and persist academically, especially historically underrepresented students.⁷ Staff who are supposed to help ease a student's path to success can behave like gatekeepers in both real and perceived ways. For a young person with a history of criminal justice involvement, an academic advisor is yet another person to interface with and decide how much information to disclose. These questions include deciding whether to disclose criminal history and how much to disclose about current hardships such as housing insecurity, financial insecurity, or previous educational trauma. Staff may be a source of support, or a source of misunderstanding, perceived judgment, and stigma.

Three Opportunity Scholars enrolled in classes during the 2019-2020 academic year at USM. As is required, all three met with academic advisors to discuss academic goals, choose courses, and adjust their schedules and course loads as needed. All three had varying degrees of experiences with their academic advisors, from feeling highly supported by that staff to feeling judged and unsupported. All three needed additional support from Opportunity Scholars staff to choose their courses, attend courses, and find a semester schedule that fit their needs and goals. 💎

Sophie's Story

I grew up in Maine. I was incarcerated as a child for a long time at Long Creek Youth Development Center. I was released a few days before my 20th birthday. I lived at the Teen Center for some time, and with my family once I was able to. I completed twelve credits through community college while I was at Long Creek. I also received my GED and my ServSafe® certification. I decided that I wanted to get more credits toward my degree, so I applied to USM.

After being admitted, I went to meet with the financial aid person to get my FAFSA set up. When I went in there, she said I wasn't actually accepted. I was confused again because I knew I was. That was really upsetting. I was in tears. I went down to Admissions again. They told me I was accepted, so I went back and told the FAFSA person that I really was accepted, and she still couldn't help me. She said I had to go on the online system and fill out a questionnaire about advising. Every step of the way was like this. **There were so many points where I wanted to give up, it was too hard.**

When I finally met with my advisor, he made my life easier, helped me to choose/select my classes, and was so nice. **He was the first person that made me feel like it was possible to go to school, outside of Opportunity Scholars staff.**

I am the mother of a young child. I set up childcare around my class schedule, but it fell through. The first week of class, I tried to go but it was really bad. I had a hard time finding the class, went into the class late, and I felt like everyone was looking at me. I was already anxious about being in class, about being late, and the people in the class were so different from me; I had even more anxiety. When it came time for me to talk and introduce myself, I started talking about things in my past I wasn't ready to talk about yet. I had an anxiety attack, I grabbed my stuff, and left.

I tried different classes, but it was all really hard without childcare. Ultimately, because of the childcare issue, I had to drop out of USM entirely.



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Coursework & Graduating

For young people matriculating at a college or university from a high performing high school, the learning environment at a post-secondary institution may not seem that different. There may be an increase in independence and responsibility as they shift to living on their own, but the academic experience, social environment, and course requirements are familiar.

However, for individuals who come from a disrupted academic path or a less academically rigorous high school, the transition to higher education may be daunting.

However, for individuals who come from a disrupted academic path or a less academically rigorous high school, the transition to higher education may be daunting. Becoming acclimated to so many new social, financial, and physical environments all at the same time can be overwhelming. Many formerly incarcerated students experience gaps in support and access to resources that promote stability.⁸ Formerly incarcerated students are also more likely than students without a history of incarceration to have learning disabilities and challenges with literacy.⁹

Two Opportunity Scholars completed a semester or more of coursework during the 2019–2020 academic year, taking one or more classes. For both, there were understandable difficulties around juggling course demands with employment, care of family and dependents, and maintaining housing and financial stability. Financial, housing, or relationship instability can cause things to deteriorate very quickly for a student, and the inability to complete a post-secondary program or degree can have negative impacts on students, such as the accumulation of debt.¹⁰ 💎

Skye's Story

Since being accepted to USM, what I've noticed is that some of the teachers are better than others. Some of the classes aren't as accepting for people who don't have that traditional high school experience. Picking your courses is hard before knowing what the teacher is like or what the course load is going to be. Some of the classes aren't explained well in the descriptions of the class. You come to class expecting one thing and get something totally different. And there's not enough time to change it because by the time you figure out you don't like it, all the other classes are full.

There is also an intimidating culture at USM. No one is approachable to ask for help. Not knowing anyone is difficult and makes you give up, and then you're behind before you start.

Some of the classes require you to get books before the classes even start. But what if you don't like the class? Then you are stuck with the books. They don't give you the money through your financial aid until a week after school starts.

So how do you pay for your course materials? You have to start your classes without the things you need.

It can be hard to get a good grade if you miss classes. Some teachers are really by the book and some are more flexible and helpful. I sometimes need more explanation about projects and to do things in a different way. For example, there was one class where I had to make a presentation about my high school. But I didn't really go to one high school. And the questions were ones I didn't identify with, about the culture at my high school and the cliques. That wasn't my high school experience; I spent my high school years just trying to survive. When I approached the teacher about that, she wasn't willing to work with me to find another way to do that work. Imagine if I could have done a presentation about how I was able to be successful in alternative schooling settings. It would have been better for me, but that wasn't an option.



“They don't give you the money through your financial aid until a week after school starts. So how do you pay for your course materials? You have to start your classes without the things you need.”



Graduate School

For an individual with a lived history of criminal justice involvement, pursuing a graduate level education often seems impossible. However, the potential rewards are huge.

While research shows that individuals who obtain a graduate degree are the least likely to recidivate,¹¹ there are still many barriers which can make it challenging for many to pursue this goal. In December 2020, the ban on access to Pell Grants for incarcerated populations was lifted by Congress, once again providing an essential option for financial aid. **However, this funding does not cover graduate level study, and scholarships are difficult to find and obtain,** especially for incarcerated students.

It is estimated that almost a third of the population in Maine attains a bachelor's degree or higher,¹² which matches national rates. However, according to national data, only about 4% of formerly incarcerated people achieve that level of education.¹³ In 2020, there were three incarcerated people pursuing a master's degree in the state of Maine, and about 29 who successfully completed a bachelor's degree.¹⁴ ♦



Abdi's Story

It is extremely hard, especially when you are in prison, to change yourself. I completed my bachelor's degree in Liberal Studies and graduated in 2019.

It seemed that the harder I tried to change, the larger the barriers got. Prison bureaucracy and politics (from both staff and peers) occasionally gets in the way of progress.

Wanting to continue my education, I enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Southern Maine. As a graduate student, I have zero privacy, consistency, or freedom to complete my academic work in a timely fashion. Every assignment, communication with my professors, the university, and my fellow students is monitored. I experience pushback and unnecessary harassment. Now and then, I hear comments like: "Prisoners going to college only want to get extra time out of their cells," or "Prisoners are manipulating the system." I am constantly under

scrutiny and regularly reminded that going to school is a privilege and not a right. Higher education is viewed by some staff members as an act of aggression instead of progression. The toxic culture makes me feel like I am constantly walking on eggshells. Sometimes the stress is unbearable. The lack of proper resources has limited my abilities to produce good quality work. At times, I get research materials after the assignment due date, or materials that are irrelevant to the assigned task. Sometimes it feels like I am using 5th century tools in the 21st century to complete my assignments. Education is supposed to be part of you that blossoms. But how can it when the sunlight is so restricted?

Everyone deserves kindness, encouragement, and empathy. Increasing educational resources and compassion can help pave the way for positive reintegration back to society.



“The lack of proper resources has limited my abilities to produce good quality work. At times, I get research materials after the assignment due date, or materials that are irrelevant to the assigned task...Education is supposed to be part of you that blossoms. But how can it when the sunlight is so restricted?”



Recommendations

Though formerly incarcerated and justice-impacted individuals are especially vulnerable, the obstacles and challenges presented in this report are by no means limited to this population. First generation college students, international students, immigrant and asylum students, veteran students, students in recovery, students with a history of homelessness, and students with a history of mental health or developmental disorders all may experience similar barriers and have challenges achieving a sense of belonging and wellbeing in the higher education environment. For this reason, improvements made to policies and practices that increase success for formerly incarcerated students can have a positive impact for all students.

Given the experience of the Opportunity Scholars described in this report, there are many recommendations which could help academic communities for formerly incarcerated or justice involved students.

ASSIST STUDENTS TO NAVIGATE THE APPLICATION PROCESS

- **Provide training and education to admissions personnel and allow those with expertise, like advocates or those with lived experience, to provide support.** Admissions staff should be able to help students with criminal backgrounds in an empathetic, supportive manner. In addition, facilitate having a third party, mentor, or advocate to help students submit documents and complete their application requirements.
- **Provide support to transfer students in getting their credits transferred from other institutions.** Reaching out to various universities and colleges to find the right contact or procedure to follow is time consuming and confusing.
- **Create a process map or check list for the application process.** A tool like a process map or checklist can provide clarity around all the steps applicants need to complete to submit their application and matriculate.
- **Encourage 'no wrong door' policies for the multiple departments and offices involved in the application process.** Look to the "one door" models in other states like California and New York, where students go through one intake process to receive support with financial aid, advising, transportation, housing, counseling, and other resources all from one staff person or case manager.

FOSTER A MORE WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT SO ALL STUDENTS FEEL LIKE THEY BELONG

- **Provide space for justice-impacted students to connect with each other and supportive faculty or staff.** Many justice-impacted students feel like they are 'the only one,' though the data show us that is not true. Increasing visibility and providing spaces and means for justice-impacted students to connect with others who have similar lived experiences can increase a sense of belonging.
- **Encourage peer-mentorship.** Peer mentors can provide ongoing assistance to incoming students with similar backgrounds and histories while earning valuable work experience.
- **Help students find their classes and make the first week more welcoming.** Create a 'buddy system' that can connect peer mentors, dedicated staff, or faculty guides available to accompany people who need support the first week of classes.
- **Provide resources for parents who need childcare.** The University of Maine System could provide accessible childcare at all campuses or student stipends to help offset costs. There are many models used by other schools.

HELP STUDENTS WHO ARE STRUGGLING WITH PERSISTENCE

- **Implement Academic Success Coaches at USM that can work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, modeled after the work currently happening at UMA.** This person should help students at all levels of education, both undergraduate and graduate students.
- **Include a day room or center at advising or another central location where people feel welcome to ask questions or get help when needed.** Ensure grading and course requirement policies are fair. Grading and mandatory attendance policies should not place unnecessary barriers on students who may have outside responsibilities like work and families. Treat students like the adults that they are and ensure policies are flexible and do not penalize certain groups of students.
- **Develop a safety net or expand the Behavioral Intervention Team to support more students.** A student who is consistently absent may benefit from some direct outreach and support before they fail their course(s). Some colleges require faculty to report a student who is frequently absent so that a student success staff member can check in with them and develop a plan to prevent failing.
- **Connect students to resources.** Ensure all students can access the necessary tools they need to complete course requirements. This may include access to computers, internet, textbooks, and course materials; help navigating the library and with research; tutoring and academic support; and emergency funds and resources for urgent needs like housing, meals, and transportation.
- **Have flexibility for students who are incarcerated.** Courses should be required to provide accommodations such as additional time to complete work if an incarcerated student is having trouble accessing necessary resources such as technology, internet, or research materials.

EXPAND AND PROMOTE ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

- **Explore technological solutions and innovation for incarcerated students.** Many states are removing barriers and implementing creative solutions that increase incarcerated students' ability to pursue any degree or course of study.
- **Provide technology skills development support and resources for students.** Many students may need help learning basic computer skills, navigating student sites, accessing email, or using videoconferencing tools. Technology and access to technology can be very stressful and a barrier for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students who may not have had as much experience with computers and technology.
- **Create funding streams and remove barriers to student work positions for incarcerated students.** All students should be able to find scholarships, work study positions, student internships, and graduate assistantships, regardless of background. Incarcerated students have a lot to contribute to the academic community and can benefit from professional work experience just like any other student. 💎



Education is an opportunity like no other.

It is connected to many critical outcomes of well-being for young people, families, and communities.

Education can be the key for individuals with a history of criminal justice involvement to break the negative cycle of incarceration and recidivism. Though it is not the answer for everyone, it should be accessible to everyone as an option. Higher education should be an opportunity to learn and succeed, rather than another place of marginalization and exclusion.

As a public university, the University of Southern Maine plays an important role in ensuring educational access for all Mainers. The USM community should be a place of welcoming, belonging, and second chances. With a little effort and investment, the University of Southern Maine can become a leader in building educational pathways for all students and a brighter future for Maine's communities. 💎

Concussion

Acknowledgments

The Opportunity Scholars program is an initiative which is part of the Place Matters project out of the Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine. The Place Matters project aims to support the state of Maine and its communities in redesigning, implementing, and evaluating a community-based continuum of care through systems innovation, data resources, and community inclusion. Our work focuses on translating data and innovative practices into community-based solutions that are both responsive to local needs and supplement existing assets so that all transition-aged young people in Maine thrive into adulthood.

The Opportunity Scholars initiative provides a supportive community of peers and program staff to help scholars throughout their academic and employment journey. The initiative was initially funded in 2018 by the Maine Economic Improvement Fund as an internship program focused mainly on building skills and employment experience. After receiving feedback in the first year by participants, the initiative was redesigned and renamed Opportunity Scholars in 2019 to reflect a greater emphasis on post-secondary academic attainment in addition to skills development and employment support. The initiative has received funding to continue from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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