



THE MICHELSON 20MM  
FOUNDATION

## California's Best Practices For Students Transitioning From Prison to Campus

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**Kenia Miranda Verdugo**

Hello everyone, Happy New Year. My name is Kenia Verdugo, I am the Smart Justice Program Manager with the Michelson 20MM Foundation. Thank you so much for joining this continued conversation, where we will discuss California's Best Practices for Students Transitioning From Prison to Campus. Before we begin, and as we give folks a few minutes to hop on Zoom, I would like to share a bit of background on our foundation and describe what we have in store for you today.

Founded by Dr. Gary K. Michelson and Alya Michelson, the Michelson 20MM Foundation is a private non-profit organization that seeks to accelerate progress towards a more just world through grant making, programs and impact investing. Four years ago, we launched our Smart Justice Initiative to leverage higher education as a catalytic force for transforming the lives of justice involved individuals, while also reforming the justice system itself. We work to transform the communities impacted by our country's punitive legal system to forge brighter, more prosperous futures via education.

As part of that commitment, we are proud to recently formed a Smart Justice Think Tank, which is a coalition of higher education champions and directly impacted leaders in California. The Smart Justice Think Tank developed a guiding framework to inform a common agenda for scholars, advocates, practitioners, legislators, reentry organizations, and postsecondary higher education both in-prison and on-campus programs. This framework is what we call California's Best Practices: Pathways From Prison to College. We will drop a link to our Best Practices page in the chat.

Today, we have the honor of hosting a few members of the Think Tank, who will share their expertise having helped incarcerated students legislatively, educationally, and institutionally. Here we have an overview of all of California's Best Practices, and these are a few of our Smart Justice Think Tank members we will be seeing in the webinar today. These are also the organizations that some of our think tank members are in.

So today, we are going to be talking about California's Best Practices: Students Transitioning From Prison to College. These best practices include creating a process so that transitioning students have access to personal documents, ensuring that students obtain copies of their transcripts, offering clear information to transitioning students regarding the California

Community College, California State University and University of California enrollment and transfer processes. Additionally, the other best practices are providing access to affordable on campus housing, financial aid services and support, facilitating connections and accessing networking opportunities with potential employers and their respective career interests. And lastly, offering community resources to provide information about employment and licensing barriers due to conviction while giving assistance to obtain legal advice to better assist transitioning students pursuit of their careers.

As a quick note, the opinions expressed in this webinar are each participant's own perspective, which in no way represent the opinions or views of the Michelson 20MM Foundation. Before we get started, I would like to remind everyone that you will be able to ask questions via the Zoom Q&A function throughout panel discussions.

During our previous webinar, we discussed the barriers that students inside prisons face and how the best practices can ensure that adopting institutions break down those barriers. Today, we will be discussing the struggles that students in prison face when transitioning into reentry and on campus and how the Best Practices can address these challenges.

It is now my great pleasure to introduce our panelists. Today, we have Keramet Reiter, who is Professor and Vice Chair of Criminology, Law, and Society at the University of California Irvine. She studies prisoners' rights and the impact of prison and punishment policy on individuals, communities, and legal systems. She's the author of two books: *23/7: Pelican Bay Prison and the Rise of Long-Term Solitary Confinement* and *Mass Incarceration*. She is the Director of the LIFTED Program to offer University of California Bachelor Degrees to incarcerated students, and the co-founder of UCI PrisonPandemic, a digital archive of incarcerated California stories of living through the COVID-19 pandemic.

I would also like to introduce Nohealani Casperson. She's currently enrolled at California State Fullerton for Human Services. From her release in 2016, she has worked towards change and transformation during her time at Cypress College. Currently, she sits on the Rising Scholars Advisory Committee and continues to learn and grow. She is very grateful to develop the work we get to do as a collective.

It is also my pleasure to introduce Patrick Acuña, who is the Junior of Social Ecology at the University of California Irvine, and believes in the transformative power of education. He began his journey while confined within the security housing unit, or SHOE, at Pelican Bay, and having graduated with honors from Southwestern College. Now he dreams of pursuing his postgraduate degree. After three decades of incarceration, Patrick knows he'll be a powerhouse within the prison reform arena. His biggest accomplishment to date involves GED tutoring for those convicted of a crime. From personal experience, he understands how educational accomplishments are instrumental in reclaiming personal dignity and fundamental in the pursuit of higher education. When he's not at UC Irvine, Patrick scours the back crunchy for hidden fishing holes with his yellow lab, Nash, by his side.

Lastly, we also have Steven Green, whose research interests include criminal justice, policy reform, punishment, sentencing enhancements, rehabilitation, reentry and the use of life without parole. His educational goal is to earn a Ph.D. in criminology and to become a professor. Stephen transferred to U.C. Fullerton after graduating with honors and six associate's degrees from Coastline Community College.

So I just want to give a really big welcome to all of our panelists. Thank you all so much for being here. We will now begin the first panel discussion. And as a reminder, to the audience, please feel free to ask questions to our panel using the Q&A function during this discussion.

I will now begin with the first question. And I just wanted to ask the entire group, all of our panelists, what their thoughts are on the Best Practices we will be discussing today and how they see them working for the benefit of not just the students, but the faculty and institutions as a whole.

**Keramet Reiter**

I'm in such good company with folks who've experienced this firsthand, but as someone who's working on building a program, I'll just say briefly that I think it's it is so helpful to have benchmarks and principles to follow in this work to point to, and to have them articulated in collaboration, particularly with folks like the rest of the panelists who really experienced what it's like to try to earn a bachelor's degree behind bars. And so, you know, even as I'm building our program, I think all the time about the importance of space to study and how to advocate for that for students and the importance of access for everyone who's inside the importance of technology. It's not just the principles, it's also this community of people who are advocating for these principles with higher education providers, with prison officials and with state legislators. And I think that's some of the excitement of this community.

**Kenia Verdugo**

Anyone else want to take a stab at the question?

**Steven Green**

Can you repeat the question?

**Kenia Verdugo**

Yes, sorry about that. I was just asking how the Best Practices that we're going to be talking about today, how they're beneficial to not just students, but faculty and institutions on the whole.

**Steven Green**

I would say that anytime that we're talking about the inside, when people are still incarcerated, I would say that if people are focused on learning and earning a degree, that it does take away time from them, you know, participating in what I've considered, you know, negative environment, with all the trauma that goes with that, right. And so they're concentrated and they're focused on trying to better themselves and improve their environment and their community that they're currently in. And so with that it will make us safer institutions. So from my

point of view, there's a win-win for everyone, right? Then the families who support them also get a benefit by seeing that their loved one is changing and they're trying to prepare to come home—they're looking for the force for their future. Once coming home. I mean, obviously, like, you know, the opportunities just open up in front of you and it's just a matter of us walking through those doors as they present themselves.

I don't know if you've seen in the chat, someone was asking for closed captions.

[Kenia Verdugo](#)

Yes, thank you, Jen, if you can please turn on the Closed Captioning.

Thank you so much for your responses to the question. I will move on to the next question. What challenges did any of you face during enrollment while being incarcerated or being recently released? So this would be enrollment into the college system?

[Nohealani Casperson](#)

Well, I know one of the situations that I walked into very early on was the idea or the dream that I wanted to go back to school, but no assistance or instruction on how so I wasn't able to go to school when I was inside. So when I got out, I knew I wanted to change. I knew that education, especially higher education, could assist in that change. But I am from Hilo, Hawaii, and I'm out here in Orange County, California, and I'm going to my PO's office telling her like, "Hey, I want to go back to school." And she's like, "That's just unrealistic. You need to get a job, you need to pay for sober living, you know." I wasn't given the opportunities, and I really had to do the work that it took to navigate how to make the space and time and try to develop some kind of a resource list for others who get out and want to go back to school, you know. I have no family here. I had no friends here. I didn't know anyone, but I knew that I wasn't able to leave the county. And so that was a big challenge that I walked into initially, just navigating or understanding. I'm a first generation college student in my family, so even the people I could call couldn't give me that advice, you know?

[Patrick Acuña](#)

Yeah, myself, it was important with regards to being able to start while I was in prison, because when I got out thanks to LIFTED, I was able to more so hit the ground running. What was different about my case is that I didn't have parole, so I didn't have that added barrier of being restricted to a certain county or a region, I was able to go wherever I needed to go. Because I'm from LA County, going to school in Irvine might not have been as easy as it was for me, but even with that, I feel that I've struggled with technology and time management. Everything out here is just computerized. And what we had was a problem on the inside where, you know, Keramet could probably speak to that more, and people like Jen Gomez were getting all 25 of us enrolled because you don't enroll in Irvine or most colleges on paper anymore. So that was a big struggle, but had I needed to do it on my own, or even some of the things I've been needing to do now just to get housing and things like that, I get overwhelmed and I have to come and reach out to people, you know, more so like Dr. Reiter or Steven and a lot of the people from the Underground Scholars right here on campus have been invaluable to be.

Kenia Verdugo

Thank you for sharing. Absolutely, it takes a village, and, you know, through expressing that, it's definitely hard to do it on your own without already having the barrier of having been formerly incarcerated. So thank you for sharing. Go ahead, Steven, sorry about that.

Steven Green

Yeah, what I would say is that enrolling after coming home wasn't particularly hard. There were a couple of challenges, but I started school in 2008 and I've been enrolled in school ever since. So earning those six, eight degrees the enrollment process became, you know, very normalized, right. But the very beginning was extremely hard. I needed a social security number, they wanted a driver's license number, you know, they wanted this information that we don't have. I was incarcerated at 18, I didn't know my social security number by heart, so I had no idea what it was, I had to ask for it, there was no one to ask for it. My wife, I think, found it or someone found it like in my transcripts, in a probationary report and so I was able to start doing it that way.

And there's some of the questions that they asked me, like, I had no idea what an AB 540 student was, does that apply to me? You know, just all these different things, you know, how do we fill it out? And then when they're asking you about domestic partnership, you know, for those who don't know, California's prisons are very male toxic, right with that masculinity thing. And we're like domestic partners? What is that? No, I'm not. So you write these things, and they would reject your application, and then you have to learn to get in the process and what that means. So that was pretty difficult for sure.

Keramet Reiter

One thing that I've learned from conversations with folks like you, and especially the LIFTED students, is there are these substantive challenges, right? Like there's all of this, like, how do you fill out this paperwork? How do you get it? But there's this intangible challenge also of feeling like those layers of work to fill out that paperwork, I think, make people feel like they don't belong, even our incarcerated students who we are so focused on trying to help succeed and create space. I think one thing I've learned from them is just how important it is to do work to make them feel like they belong, right. And it's something our, particularly our formerly incarcerated staff have been wonderful with, right, like showing students pictures of campus, bringing them campus material, having wellness workshops, and those things I just would have never thought to do. I'm so focused on that, can we get a classroom into the prison space?

So I just want to echo what you all are saying, that there's another layer of that we don't talk about enough, and that that work to do is so important, right? I heard students say yesterday at a site evaluation visit that they feel like UCI students first and prisoners second, and that's got to be one of the best things I've ever heard. And I think that should be one of our goals: How do we make that identity feel like your first and primary identity in these spaces?

Kenia Verdugo

That was the perfect segue. Thank you so much. Keramet. For my next question. I know we're talking about, you know, challenges, transitioning out and needing these transcripts, needing this paperwork, housing, but what has been the challenges going into campus—whether that's, you know, a culture shock or imposter syndrome when you're a person of color, formerly undocumented, going into these spaces that you really feel weren't built for you. Can we talk a little bit about, you know, those challenges.

#### Nohealani Casperson

So, I think my first semester on campus, I really hid in the counselor's office with a couple of friends. I was super intimidated, you know, I was going to Cypress College at the time, and it's in Cypress, California. I'm Brown, I'm covered in tattoos, and I'm at least three times their age, you know, and the campus is beautiful, it's not anything that looks like something I grew up around. So it felt like I was doing something wrong, just being there. Then I'd go into the bookstore or I go into the classroom, and people are friends. And I mean, if it wasn't honestly for God's intervention, the way that he was, and showing me like at least one person every semester that I knew from a different version of me, I don't know how I would have made it through all of that stuff. We have a great program director that was just a career counselor at that time, and Anne Marie would let us formerly incarcerated [students] hide out in her office. There were five of us at the time, and we would just make plans and by the second semester, third semester, we were planning our classes around the same time so that we could meet there at the same time and that's kind of how Fight Club came about in the first place.

#### Peter Acuña

No, I agree with exactly what you were saying. My first day out of prison, I was on campus and totally overwhelmed by how big it was and how young people were and how fast things move. If it wasn't for having people who were supportive around me, I think I would have probably just turned around and walked away and said that this wasn't for me, but now that I'm beginning winter quarter and getting into the groove of things and still getting lost on campus—not knowing exactly where my classes and having to run halfway across—things are getting a little bit easier. I do understand what you're saying about imposter syndrome and feeling like I don't belong here and feeling that there's a culture shock, going from many, many years in prisons to this environment that is so beautiful. I wish the guys and women in there could see how beautiful it is out here and how that I have been welcomed. But again, you know, I have been hiding out in places, because I feel safer around the people I know, people that I've met that came into the prison. I know I could turn to them and go hang out in their office or in the space provided for Underground Scholars. It's like where I'm at right now. It's the first place I go when I come to campus because I feel like these are my people, because they've known my struggle, they have a similar struggle, and we're here to support each other because we know we're our minority on the campus.

#### Steven Green

I would say that, one, there's a culture shock. And I agree with my counterparts, right, like you go from a very structured environment to all hell break loose environment, right. And then the more time that you did, I think the bigger shock it is. So like me and Patrick, I did 28. So, you

know, I went in at 18...I think I'm these kids his age, right? Then I look in the mirror like now I got a lot of gray here. I'm damn near 50 now. And so there's that realization too, right that, you know.

It's just very different. And I went, I went from, you know, Ironwood State Prison on Saturday being paroled to Cal State Fullerton. On Monday, I was on campus, walking around, and that was a very big shock. And then another thing that was difficult as I went from correspondence courses that were a semester long with soft deadlines because it's a correspondence course, two semesters, like in person with the teaching, that was fine, but it's a different pace that you have to learn that. And then you learned that these are harder deadlines, and so if you don't turn the work in, some professors have the leeway to say, "No, we're not making exceptions", and others can do it. And I'm sure there's gonna be another learning curve. If you go to a quarter, a school that's on the quarters, it's even faster. So there's just different things that you have to learn to adjust to and be flexible with, that's for sure.

#### Kenia Verdugo

So hearing about all of these challenges, how can in-prison education programs, or maybe CDCR itself, help create a more seamless process for transitioning students to on campus in their parole or probation region if they have one?

#### Steven Green

Well, first of all...one good thing about Project Rebound at Cal State Fullerton is that they have a relationship with the probation parole office in our area. When I first came home, obviously I didn't have a job and I was getting enrolled in classes, but I didn't have my class schedule yet. My parole officer used to call me anytime he wanted to just drop by at the house anytime he wanted to. And then one day, he was like, "Hey, I'm on my way." And I'm like, "I'm on campus, you're welcome to come see me on campus if you want." And he did, he showed up. That was good because I've heard other students in the past say that you better leave your class. So you got to this is the time that I got to meet you, and I'm not going over there. And I'm like, "What's the difference between, you know, where I live unless you're trying to search it, or when I'm trying to get my education?" And so the POs in Orange County were very supportive of Project Rebound, I'm sure you know, Underground Scholars as well. So long as you're on campus, they make an exception that there will be a visit there they want to see, you know, my profs, or one of them was asking for my grades. Okay, well, your grades this semester, he was invested in me and my success, right. And I think that's how they should all be but I do believe there may be a need for a relationship and not that adversarial role, right? Like they understand that education is a pathway to success, and not me like being lazy and don't want a job because some people still view it that way.

#### Nohealani Casperson

I just want to say there is a big difference between my agent and my PO, right because one was very laid back. My agent was very like, "I'll just check in with you" and would do things like show up at the parenting class or whatever it was that I was in that was required, but my PO is the really structured and difficult one. For me, it was this constant, like, tug of war that was going on.

Because, I mean, ultimately I was here in California and I had no support system initially. And I have four beautiful children, so the reintegration process with my children took three and a half years, you know, because I have to fly to Hawaii for visits. And so that takes longer than usual. But getting a travel pass, and then being in Orange County, I'm going to Cypress College and she's like, "What are you going to school for? Like, you need to get your children back? Like, don't you need a job? How are you going to get a place?"

It almost made the fear unbearable, if not, for people I had met that have walked the steps already, you know, like, for other women that were like, "Oh, don't listen to that, you know, don't listen to that", but but my head was full of fear and my ears would be used as trash cans occasionally, because I would hear these things as if I wasn't telling them to myself already, right like, "This is pointless. For what? You're 40 something and you're gonna start an associate's degree?" You know, like all of these other things that you need to get a job, you need to support your kids, you need to be a good American citizen.

There was a definite conflict in the conversations that were happening from college and fellowship, my support groups who were encouraging the healing and the growth side of me, and then the disciplinary action that was threatened consistently if I didn't get the paycheck stubs or the whatever else it was and make it to UAVs and parenting classes in this class and whatever else I had to do.

#### Patrick Acuña

My experience, I can't really speak to being on supervision like the rest of the panel, because I didn't have that, but I could tell you that a lot of the same pressures that you felt regarding whether to go to school, or to get a job and start a career and maybe start vocational school. I experienced that too, and a lot of that comes from preparing for release.

A lot of the thought was that, "I'm going to go here, I'm going to get this job, this is what I'm going to do. And this is going to be my life." Then all of a sudden, an opportunity arose to go to UC Irvine and to pursue a bachelor's degree. And I mean, who knows what else after that, but at the same time, there was that indoctrination of "I need a job, I need to be a contributing part of society to show everybody, "Look, hey, I'm not this threatening person anymore. And look, I can make good on myself." And for some reason, and it's totally wrong, for some reason, sitting in class and studying somehow seem like less than and it shouldn't, because it should be something that everybody is supported to aspire to not feel guilty for doing. I talked to a couple of Underground Scholars the other day to two women, and they were talking about mommy guilt about being in class trying to study and make a better life and at the same time, not being there to make dinner because they have a late class, you know, and that shouldn't be the case, but unfortunately, it is.

#### Kenia Verdugo

Our next question, if you could choose 1-3 things to ensure that incarcerated students succeed and complete their academic goals, what would they be, what would be your recommendations? This could be within the prison system educational system.

### Nohealani Casperson

I definitely have seen what a miracle it is to have transitional housing for students coming home. I am still in the work and still willing to do whatever is possible to see the dream of a women's home, but I do understand that there's a lot more licensing, especially with the children and everything else that happens. So it is a really big dream, right, to have a home that we could come to that would be safe and allow for the education and that support system, if you will. But I think housing insecurity is a huge deal. You know, again, Orange County, California, I'm released in 2016 and expected to pay rent for a place like this. And now, in order to get the kids back, you have to have a room for every male and female in different rooms. I said there's four or five of them now you know and so how can I afford to get that much space or those many rooms for this many children to even qualify to think about getting them back? You know, it really seems so overwhelming that you almost want to stop before you start.

### Patrick Acuña

Like I mentioned earlier, one of the biggest things has been technology for me. I was enrolled in a computer related technology class prior to being released from prison. So there's a lot of people that will be getting out that have no concept of what that means out here and how really important it is. Even with that, there's so many restrictions placed on the equipment that we're using to train on that, once I got my hands on an unrestricted device, that I could message, email, and try to figure out how to link from a phone to a computer even to do a Zoom meeting, I literally drove all the way from home in traffic over an hour and a half to get here so that I could sit down with somebody, so they could show me how to turn on my camera, because I can't seem to figure that out. Anytime I come to a Zoom meeting, I've been to a few classes and various things, so having something that speaks to that on the inside to better prepare individuals to come out and to be able to tackle these obstacles, I think that that's something I wish I would have had to be able to engage in that.

Transitional housing would be awesome, especially if it was in a campus setting, to be able to come into it and be able to have people that are have gone through the same thing to be able to sit there and show me like, "Hey, this is how we do this, this is where we go, this is where we go eat, this is how you get your your your student ID and you put money on it, or you could go for your meal swipes", those things would have been important. And I think that a lot of times, those are little small things that might be overlooked. But again, the strong community right here with the Underground Scholars and supportive professors and various other professionals that are out here, that's been something that I found to draw on, more and more, just to be able to not feel like I'm drowning out here and to be able to continue to go and keep pushing, because it's important.

I just want to let all the men and women that are in prison right now that maybe at some point, we'll be able to watch this, just let them know that there is a support network out here and all of us that are coming home, we're here to help you.

### Steven Green

So I would say why, like some of the recommendations, and I'm gonna have some of the questions in the chat. One is like network and network period, and I know it's hard for a lot of us who are formerly incarcerated to network because we have to learn to trust people and we don't do that easily—and I still don't do that easily. Trust has to be built, right? It has to be fostered. I would say that disclosing our background is a choice that each person has, and so that's a very wide fishing net to throw out there. I'm very open with it. I'm on Facebook with it. I'm on Twitter with like, my whole life is out there. So I'm not trippin. However, I have friends who don't disclose at all, like you wouldn't know. None of us wear name tags “Formerly Incarcerated” even though we all think we do in our heads, right? It's like they know.

So I would say network. Period. But then I would also say the recommendation is to network with your professors, right? Like I don't think Patrick would be sitting here if he wasn't networking with Dr. Reiter, right, like he wouldn't be here. So if he was just closed off and just handed his homework assignments in, he would not be sitting where he is today, that's for sure.

And then I would also say learn, listen, learn, and act upon, you know, those who have tried this path before you. So I was fortunate enough to come home to Project Rebound, who have a good number of people who've all done this, and they encouraged me to do office hours, they encouraged me to go talk to my professors. I would disclose like, “Hey, this is where I'm at and what's going on.” I have never felt rejected. I have never felt judged. Unfortunately, that's my situation, and they have all encouraged me to continue to only do the right thing and sometimes they'll even ask for, you know, mentorship, “Hey, we can help mentor you to help you navigate more of what you want in your educational goals, whatever they may be.” And then the last I would say, is that, you know, it's perseverance, right, we're gonna fail, we're gonna fail again, you know, I just want to make learning lessons. So if you fail once, they'll be better the next time, until you finally complete, right? That's how that works. So, you know, with that, I'll be quiet.

#### Keramet Reiter

I'll add just one, one thing, echoing some of what you've said, you've all said, especially Patrick, is that I think, you know, getting more technology into prison for these programs is so vital, right? I mean, the fact that some of our students in our college program have laptops now is huge, but they're, they're largely disconnected from the internet, they're extremely limited in what's on them. And, as I always say, 95% or more people are coming out, right. As you're all describing, those technological barriers are so huge, and anything that can be done inside, to kind of give people those tools to be more comfortable, I think, is just such an obviously easy thing that can ease the transition. Frankly, you know, I always think about in this work, how can we make the walls more porous? Right? How can we bring more people in and get more people out? And technology is such an obvious way to do that also, and so I hope it stays on the forefront of people's agenda that, you know, the system isn't going to break, if there are computers and access to the internet, lots of other places around the world have that. And it's starting and you know, and we have to resist that argument. And to the extent we resist that argument, I think, you know, there are all these amazing collateral consequences that come with it in terms of the benefits for people inside and and the ways it changes the institutions.

Kenia Verdugo

Definitely, thank you for those remarks. I think nowadays, you know, having access to, you know, digital internet technology, it's considered a basic need, you know, with everything being online. So I'm hearing a lot of, you know, what we need are basic human rights. So thank you so much for answering that question.

I think we have time for one more question, and then we can move to the Q&A. So how do the assets and strengths that incarcerated scholars possess, help them build their resiliency into ending up with their degrees?

Patrick Acuña

I think that, well, honestly, I believe that people coming home from prison, a lot of us are probably the best students on campus, even though we have many obstacles or barriers to overcome, and most of them are just right here. Because I know that I have these thoughts in my head that I don't belong, or that somehow this is the real world and all the work that I've done in the past is somehow was watered down or made easy, so that I would be able to progress because maybe a program needed to fit I need to need it to succeed. But, you know, for all the people that think that on the inside that that is not true. The professors, they're giving you exactly what they give you out here, you're getting in there. So the work that you're doing, and those grades that you're achieving, and those high GPAs that you're holding on to—that's real, that's real, and you earn that.

But I believe that those of us coming home are also more driven. And by virtue of surviving what we've gone through within the prison system, the gangs, the shoes, correctional officers that may be a little bit not as friendly, or other incarcerated people around we're resilient, we're highly resilient, or else we wouldn't be alive. That's just the truth, you know, we would have checked out a long time ago, but we continue to push and we take that same drive and we bring it out here. There's no limit to what we could do because we have it in us already and all we have to do is get out of our way.

Nohealani Casperson

Well, and I want to say something my sponsor always says to me, you know, whenever I get into this whining, he says that pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. I had made a conscious, and maybe even unconscious to some extent, of what it would look like, you know, a decision that I was done suffering, like I was done suffering and I was going to do whatever it took and I was going to seek healing and I was going to seek growth. I was going to seek change. All of those things are found in, in, in education and knowledge and wisdom and connection and networking, like Steven was talking about, you know, like, all of these things for healing my heart and healing my mind, I have to learn. And so first I had to learn how to learn, right? And so I had to get to the space where I could learn how to learn. And I found that in school, and I still find that in school, whether it's a club, or a program, or a relationship with my classmates, you know, like, I get the privilege of being that student now, you know, and I don't think it develops

resiliency, I think at some point I transition to that's just who I am. It's just a part of what we're doing for the rest of this life for the rest of this gift, right? It's just how it is.

Not only do I get to have that reserve, but I get to be infectious with it, right? Like, I get to create study groups, group text threads, and I just learned how to make a Discord group—watch out next semester, right, because I'm gonna have groups with emojis every single time, you know. All of these things pull us outside of self, it really is something helpful to me because if not I'll sit in my head and think that none of them want me to call them anyways. So I just do it and that level of resiliency, that level of bounce back, I never really had until getting to Cal State Fullerton. It really is a beautiful experience, to watch me become whatever it is I'm becoming and to. The greatest gift is really watching other people become what they're becoming, you know, we all kind of get to grow up in this here and now moment and it's really amazing to be a part of any of it.

### Steven Green

I don't know if I have anything to add, she killed it. I would say like the right column transferable skills, like skills that we learned on the inside, and then we can transfer on the outside, right? I definitely think Patrick hit it on the head, man, the study habits that we learn on the inside. It's hard to beat us, right? Especially when we put our mind to it, it's really hard to beat us.

I would say the difference is the longer I'm here, and I'm starting to notice it, well, I noticed that semester for sure is that so much can be put on your plate and those distractions—because it's not just school, like on the inside, you know, I only had my five classes or four classes, whatever I was doing, and everything else was just really not a factor—then you come home, and then you know, I have wife, I have kids, I have a job I have, I have this, I have that. Those are all different directions I'm being pulled in, hence away from my study time. But you learned to balance, to navigate those waters, right, even if they're chopping.

The second was soft skills we learned on the inside, because we don't have phones. The tablets are very new for us in California, that we talk to one another face-to-face, you don't have a problem with communication. And you know, that's great for the professors. It's also great for study groups, right? Like Nohealani said, study groups, I missed that in my first couple of semesters, I miss going out to the day room and there'll be some people out there who would already have the same class as you and maybe have some questions about it, we would also have the day room table and have a study group and try to figure it out. Even if we were all misguided on the same concept, we at least did it together because you know, there was no expert in there, right? And so we'd have to, someone would have to turn the paper in...so you can correct the rest of the group, right? Now we're changing those study groups to Discord. That's what we're doing now. Those skills are like, you just can't beat them. And I would say just continue to be encouraged to keep those up, that's for sure.

### Keramet Reiter

I just want to validate what you all are saying that you are not unique. Right? I do think that students with the experiences you all have do turn out to be some of the most incredible

students in higher education. And you know, our first cohort of students, 60% of them made Dean's honor list in their first quarter at UC Irvine. I can't imagine another group of students for whom that would be true, right. Just from the faculty side, I can tell you that every faculty member I work with who interacts with the student population and, you know, has that opportunity to do so in a concentrated way in prison and knows, right, as opposed to in their classroom they may not on-campus, just can't stop talking about how incredible these students are. These are students who actually want to be in the classroom to learn, who do their reading, who are thoughtful, who developed the best study groups they've ever seen. So I just want to validate that what you guys experience people see on the other side when they have that opportunity, and it's really amazing.

You know, I, I've started to say that I think this kind of work can transform higher education by reminding people why they're here, right when they have students who are this excited and committed to it.

#### Kenia Verdugo

Thank you all so much. I feel really empowered just hearing you all. And like Nohealani said, it makes me very happy to just see everyone on this panel's growth, and continue to do the work that we are all doing to see other people grow in these spaces. So thank you so much for sharing those comments.

We will now move on to the live Q&A. One of the first questions we have is, how did you get to a place where you thought you could apply to college? Was it the program that gave you the idea? Or maybe it was, you know, yourself just wanting to become a scholar? What got you to a place where you wanted to apply?

#### Nohealani Casperson

So for me, I had been in California, off and on for like, maybe two years? Yeah, so about two years, and I struggled with it back and forth, and back and forth. But someone that I used to meet up at the office, when we had to go check in and UA and all of that stuff, I ran into him again, who I call my mentor, and like a big brother, now, Vince. And so I ran into him again. And Susan, after not seeing them for a little while and seeing the difference in them, like the entire transformation that had happened in a person that I knew, you know, I had had talked to him and had had these conversations with him—the language was different, the mannerisms was different, and what I saw was like some semblance of real healing was going on. He wasn't so angry and stuff. So I was like, “Ah, I need to figure that out.” You know, and so I talked to his wife, who is Susan, and she kind of bragged to me, she was like, “I'll help you pick your classes, I'll do this, I'll do this”, I did it and made it like super easy for me to like, figure out how to take the first steps because I literally was shaking, walking on campus the first time like, my whole body was shaking, I was more scared to do that than some of the things that I've done in life, you know, and so really, if not having someone there to hold my hand like that enough.

#### Steven Green

For me, I would say so regardless, when I was 18, and I got my GED. So I think they offered at the time and CDCR I got it within my first year of incarceration, that's like the assignment they give you. So I got that, and then for the next 15 years, there was nothing offered, I couldn't get called, there were no college courses on the inside, at least where I was at, and then the way we found out about it on our yard was absolutely insane. I used to watch these two individuals go into this classroom, like they would empty out the classroom and these two people would go inside and I could never figure out what they were doing. You learn to kind of mind your own business inside, and so somehow one of my buddies had gotten into that class and others, three of them sitting in there. So I was asking my buddy, "Hey, what are you guys doing there?" And he was like, "Oh, it's something for you know", he had a hard time coming up with this, this lie that he had to tell me, right? I was like, "Okay." I just let him go. And then when the instructor came out by himself I said, "Hey, what is that class? What are you guys doing in there?" He's like, "Oh, it's college courses. We're offering college courses." I said, "What you're offering, it's free?" He's like, "Yeah." I said, "Do you have an application?" He's like, "I've always wondered why no one signs up." I said, "Well, give me an application." I literally ran 1000 copies, passed them out to the yard and everybody was signing up and we started it up.

You know, people were hella mad at me, but other people were not. And you know, that's what started my educational journey and it was really just plateauing at a GED for 15 years. And being, you know, like the one book scholar, or you read a book on a subject and be like, "Oh, I know all about it", right? That didn't really work for me. And so I found a couple of classes and I just kept going and never stopped.

#### Patrick Acuña

For me, school has always been a challenge. I grew up with learning disabilities and I grew up thinking that I was stupid because I would fail everything I did. Starting education in prison, I didn't really start it for myself. I started it for my younger nieces and nephews to just basically show him that even though we live in the same area, we come from the same background, that you could do more than I did and more than anybody else is doing around you because most people are just stuck in that rut of poverty and insecurity, and just thinking that that's all life had to offer for people from our backgrounds. I wanted to show them something different. I was serving life without parole, I couldn't figure out any other way to do it. Like Stephen said, there was no college, unless you paid lots and lots of money to go to programs like Ohio or Indiana, which were like the only two things that cater to correspondence. Earning a degree was just, it was just something to do really. At one point, it became not so much just about anybody else. I found that I was growing and becoming proud of who I was, and doing these things and, and learning that, that I wasn't stupid that I was capable. I could learn, and that I still struggle with dyslexia, I don't think it ever goes away, but I just have to work two, three times harder to get it to get it down to get, you know, the correct answer. But I get there, and through that, I'm able to tell other people like, "Hey, man, why don't you come try this? Why don't you? Why don't you enroll in a class and, you know, let me help you with your GED, get you past that, so that you could get enrolled in and you are capable of so much more."

So that's kind of like where I came about to be sitting right here, but really, a lot of it started when I was sitting in the hole. I was sitting in the hole and, you know, there was an older guy. He was also a gang member, he was a prison gang member, and he was fated to spend the rest of his life in Pelican Bay. At one point, he handed me a book, and it was the meditations of Marcus Aurelius. Honestly, I read it because I was scared not to, I was scared that if I didn't read this book, and he asked me about it, that like, I would be stabbed to death or something for not reading it because I was young, and that was what I thought prison was, you know, you do this or you die. For some people, that's exactly what it was. And I read it in, I didn't realize it at the time, but that sparked something in me.

It's something that I always look back on, and I draw upon, for when did this start, and that's where it started. Right there, sitting in the hole, never expecting to get out, indeterminate, and thinking that this was the sum total of my life was to sit in, in this little square of a room and, you know, do hundreds and hundreds of burpees and wait for my door to accidentally pop so I could potentially attack somebody. And it was that book right there. I think that that was his way of making amends in his own life by passing education onto somebody and sparking them because I think he's seen in me that I still have, I still had hope I was still young and maybe I can make a better choice, one that he wasn't willing to make for himself, but wanted to give to somebody else. He couldn't just say, "Hey, man, get out of this stuff, and then have a light", because that's the death sentence for him. But in a small way, it was a nudge down a better path.

#### Kenia Verdugo

Thank you for sharing your personal experiences. Patrick, you're here even responding to comments while on the chat. So Zoom was nothing to you. You got this. One last question we have is what advice would you give staff on campus so that they can pick up on the nuances of what formerly incarcerated students need and are afraid to ask more because of the fear of sounding inadequate?

#### Nohealani Casperson

I'd say start with connection, just being able to open up the door to have a conversation makes it a little bit easier when I have a question, right? The little classes are big sometimes, you know, I've had a class in a lecture hall and there's over 100 students. I'm not saying the teacher has to go around and shake hands or introduce themselves to every single one, but usually, we're sitting right up front and so just like a head nod, or an acknowledgment to your first couple of rows can go a long, really long way. You know, I know for me personally, the professors that have even made that eye contact or even said "Have a nice day", or something like that on the way out, makes me second guess that first time because I'm still going to walk away a couple of times, right? But by that third time, I'll be able to stop and say, "You too", and you know and have that conversation.

#### Steven Green

I would definitely have to agree with that, right? Just putting the elephant out there, right? We definitely do not look like the traditional student trying to earn either an associate's degree or,

you know, an undergrad degree. Obviously, you can try to get your Ph.D. when you're older too, but it's not always the case, right? So...the faculty sees that, just the acknowledgement that we're in the room, I think people like to have that acknowledgement anywhere, right? Just "Hey, how are you doing today?" Like that little, you know, icebreaker can go a long way because then it also says, "Oh, you know, I've been recognized, I have value of work that I'm in this classroom", because they don't know what's going on in our head. We have all kinds of stuff in our head and usually, it's all connected, right? Just from the years of, of the environment that we're in. And just that little human gesture, reaching out with compassion will spark what, "Hey, when are your office hours? I need to show up for those." And then we start to have those conversations, right. And then a few people feel comfortable disclosing.

I've heard horror stories where people have disclosed to their professors and their professor was immediately, you know, about face, right? I was like, "What?" And they were like, "Yeah." But then the question is, is it my background? Or is it my, you know, my disposition? Right. But those are different, different stories, but I would just say, just being friendly to one another, compassionate, and remember that we're all people with, you know, suffering severe trauma, you know, living in this country, the things that we built here.

#### Patrick Acuña

I think both of you said it pretty, pretty well. I know, something that's that's professors have done, not necessarily for me, but just some of them in their classrooms is engaging in small groups with students because, leave it up to me, I probably wouldn't reach out to the student next to me, because I feel that that impostor syndrome, you know? I mean, because that's, that's, that's valuable to me. When I walk around campus, you know, those soft skills, Steven was talking about, you know, the saying hello, and the respect and things like that, it's different out here. And, you know, you walk by and you say hi to somebody, and they don't even look at you. They're just straight ahead. And I don't know if I'm left thinking like, "Is it because I'm older? Is it because I have tattoos and I look threatening maybe? Or do they have things in their ear and then they're just not hearing? Or, or what's the deal?" But when I'm sitting in class, and the professor gives his spiel, and it says, "Okay, you know, here's three questions, you know, find a small group and break it down, and then we'll discuss it later." That's helped me a lot to be able to be a little bit more personable with my fellow students that I feel like that I'm old enough to be their fathers. But that helps. So little things like that, that probably the professor's going to do anyways, was helpful. And you know, just saying hello and acknowledging you in class, I think is also important, because I'm sitting there thinking that I really shouldn't be here and maybe people don't even want me here.

#### Kenia Verdugo

I really want to thank you all so much, for this really beautiful conversation. I feel very privileged to have these connections with you all and to be able to hear your stories. So I just really want to express my gratitude. I also want to extend my gratitude to the audience for attending this inspirational conversation that will hopefully serve many incarcerated and justice impacted students and communities.

If you'd like to sign the pledge and download the Best Practices, we'll drop the link to both of those in the chat. We'll also post the recording of today's discussion on our YouTube channel, the Michelsen 20MM foundation by tomorrow.

The next and final webinar in this series will take place on March 29, 2023. Here's the link to register for the next webinar. In the meantime, you can stay engaged by signing up for our newsletter at [20mm.org](https://20mm.org) to receive news and updates about our Smart Justice Initiative, as well as our other events and programs.

Again, thank you all so much for taking the time to join us. I hope you all have a wonderful rest of your day and we'll see you on our next series.