



2025 REPORT

Rising Scholars Network Biennial

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office | Sonya Christian, Chancellor



California
Community
Colleges

SONYA CHRISTIAN
Chancellor

Mach 9, 2026

Secretary of the Senate
Erika Contreras
State Capitol, Room 305
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Rising Scholars Network Biennial Report

Dear Secretary Contreras,

Pursuant to California Education Code section 78075, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office is pleased to release the Rising Scholars Network Biennial Report.

The Rising Scholars Network supports currently and formerly incarcerated students across California community colleges. This report summarizes statewide progress, increased student completions, and readiness to expand services to all 116 colleges, and provides recommendations for systemwide expansion.

For any questions regarding this report, please contact Assistant Vice Chancellor Erin Larson at elarson@cccco.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sonya Christian".

Sonya Christian, Chancellor

Enclosure: Report

CC:
Sue Parker, Chief Clerk of the Assembly
Office of Legislative Counsel
Department of Finance

RISING SCHOLARS NETWORK BIENNIAL REPORT

Prepared By

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office
Educational Services and Support Division

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RISING SCHOLARS NETWORK

The Rising Scholars Network (RSN) is the California Community Colleges statewide program serving currently and formerly incarcerated students, and since launching in 2015, the network has grown into the largest higher education in prison infrastructure in the nation. More than 31,000 students pursue degrees through the network while every community college student inside a California state prison has a laptop to support their education. The California Community Colleges system built the Rising Scholars Network because California made a sustained commitment to ensuring that every Californian can pursue a degree and change the trajectory of their life while positively impacting their family and community.

Vision 2030, the California Community Colleges strategic plan, commits the system to equitable access and success for every student. The Rising Scholars Network delivers on this commitment for currently and formerly incarcerated Californians by providing degree pathways and comprehensive support from facility enrollment through campus completion.

SCALE AND REACH

The state invests \$35 million dollars annually in the Rising Scholars Network. Twenty-one million dollars is allocated to 45 colleges serving youth across 60 juvenile justice facilities. Fourteen million dollars is allocated to 95 colleges serving currently incarcerated adults in 31 state prisons, 9 federal prisons, and 44 county jails. Eighty-eight college campuses operate dedicated Rising Scholars programs where formerly incarcerated students access wrap-around student support services that strengthen their pathway to completion. An additional three million dollars provides textbooks and digital course content for incarcerated students enrolled in community college programs.

INCARCERATED STUDENT PATHWAYS

When incarcerated students enroll in a community college pathway within the Rising Scholars Network, they enter a structured educational experience that provides comprehensive academic support and access to the same rigorous courses and credentials available to students on any California community college campus. Colleges assign dedicated staff and faculty to serve incarcerated students, reflecting the California Community Colleges' commitment to consistent, high-quality instruction and comprehensive support for every student in the Rising Scholars Network.

TECHNOLOGY AND INSTRUCTION

In 2025, California completed universal laptop distribution to every community college student incarcerated in California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), achieving full digital access and transforming how students engage with their education while incarcerated in state prisons. Students engage with coursework and instruction through Canvas, the learning management system used across the California Community Colleges system, meaning a student completing coursework inside a state prison receives the same quality of instruction as a student sitting in a classroom anywhere in California.

The technology investment enables real-time digital instruction, allowing students to engage with coursework and communicate with faculty through secure digital platforms.

STUDENT OUTCOMES AND STRENGTHENING INFRASTRUCTURE

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Enrollment growth across both populations signals sustained student demand for higher education pathways. Formerly incarcerated students enrolled in California Community Colleges grew 64%, from 6,401 to 10,481, and currently incarcerated students grew 16.7%, from 18,302 to 21,354. Students are converting enrollment into credentials at increasing rates. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of formerly incarcerated students earning degrees and certificates grew 75.7%, from 1,142 to 2,007, and the number of currently incarcerated students earning degrees and certificates grew 47.7%, from 1,529 to 2,258. Colleges funded through the network grew from 45 in 2020 to 102 today, while justice facilities served increased from 38 to 144, positioning California as the national leader in higher education access for justice impacted populations. Students in the Rising Scholars Network choose from multiple educational pathways. Students pursuing Associate Degrees for Transfer complete their associate degree and transfer to California State University and University of California campuses alongside partner institutions including Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Students pursuing career technical education credentials complete programs in high-demand fields that lead directly to employment.

Every credential represents a Californian rebuilding their future and returning to their family with an education to sustain long-term stability and success. National research consistently demonstrates that postsecondary completion strengthens employment outcomes and community stability, making Rising Scholars both an equity initiative and a public safety investment. Students who complete degrees through the Rising Scholars Network enter careers aligned with regional workforce needs, and many return to their communities as leaders who mentor the next generation of students and contribute to the economic vitality of their regions. The Rising Scholars Network connects California's investment in higher education to workforce development and long-term economic mobility.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON CONSORTIUM

In January 2026, the Chancellor's Office launched the California Higher Education in Prison Consortium, formalizing coordination across all higher education institutions operating inside CDCR and establishing a structure for aligned advising and coordinated degree pathways.

The Consortium brings together 24 community colleges alongside 9 universities from the California State University and University of California systems, with Mount Tamalpais College as a partner institution. The Consortium is focused on intersegmental alignment so that course credits transfer between institutions and students can continue their education seamlessly, whether they complete their journey inside a facility or after release. Students move from associate degree coursework at a community college to bachelor's degree completion at a university, and the Consortium coordinates across institutions to provide clear pathways from enrollment through graduation and career entry.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE INFRASTRUCTURE

In 2025, the Chancellor’s Office established a new Rising Scholars Network (RSN) Technical Assistance Providers (TAP) team to strengthen statewide support for justice-impacted students. The RSN TAP team is made up of subject-matter experts and regional coordinators who work directly with community colleges to help identify gaps, strengthen local strategies, and support student enrollment, persistence, and completion. Support includes ongoing technical assistance, regional convenings to share updates and best practices, and regular office hours to answer questions and encourage collaboration.

In addition, the TAP team is designed to help colleges build and deepen partnerships with community-based and regional organizations, while also lifting up and sharing promising practices across the system. This work is aligned with the system’s broader Vision 2030 equity goals and is intended to help scale our support for justice-impacted students.

REENTRY INFRASTRUCTURE

Students who complete coursework while incarcerated may be released before finishing their degrees. California community colleges’ reentry infrastructure ensures students can continue their education at a community college in their home county. When students are preparing for release, college teams coordinate with Rising Scholars programs on the receiving campus to ensure students know exactly where to go and who will support them. Students connect with peer mentors who provide direct guidance on navigating campus and building the relationships that support long-term success. The Rising Scholars Network provides transitioning students with dedicated support on campus ready to help them complete their degrees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Education Code section 78075 requires the Chancellor’s Office to recommend whether and how the Rising Scholars Network can expand to all community college districts and campuses. The Rising Scholars Network has built statewide infrastructure that delivers measurable outcomes for currently and formerly incarcerated students, and the Chancellor’s Office recommends expanding this infrastructure to every community college in California.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: SUSTAIN CURRENT FUNDING

The Chancellor’s Office recommends continuing current funding to sustain the statewide infrastructure. Current funding supports 95 colleges and 144 justice facilities alongside dedicated programs at 88 campuses. Sustained funding ensures the infrastructure operates at capacity and outcomes continue to grow.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: AUTHORIZE AND FUND EXPANSION

The Chancellor’s Office recommends authorizing expansion to the final 21 community colleges with increased funding to support expanded capacity. Based on current per-college allocations, the Chancellor’s Office estimates that expanding to all 116 colleges will require approximately \$10 million dollars in additional annual investment.

Expansion will follow a phased approach that provides new colleges with technical assistance as they build Rising Scholars programs and join the statewide support network. Expanding to all 116 colleges ensures every California community college can serve incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students in their region.

The Chancellor’s Office will provide detailed fiscal projections and an implementation timeline upon request and is prepared to work with our legislative partners to develop an expansion plan that extends the network’s success to every corner of California.

CALIFORNIA’S COMMITMENT

California has developed the nation’s largest higher education in prison infrastructure through sustained investment and cross-agency collaboration. The Rising Scholars Network carries this work forward by supporting students as they return to their families and communities with the education needed for career pathways and economic contribution. Vision 2030 commits California to every student’s success, and the Rising Scholars Network ensures all currently and formerly incarcerated students who want to earn a degree can pursue one, whether they begin inside a correctional facility or on a college campus after release.

“I joined the Rising Scholars Network in 2016 and earned my associate degree inside a California state prison, and today I attend California State University, Los Angeles and work with California community colleges to build Rising Scholars programs because the pathway that reached me now reaches more than 30,000 students.” — Isaiah Posey, Rising Scholars Graduate

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San Bernardino Valley College

Photo at right:
College of the Redwoods

Back cover photo:
College of the Redwoods



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California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office
1102 Q Street | Suite 4400 | Sacramento, CA 95811

www.cccco.edu