



As you transition from incarceration to a traditional college campus, you probably anticipate many adjustments and new experiences. This resource will explore new challenges that could arise outside of academics and coursework and ways to think ahead. Navigating college can be emotionally and mentally taxing for students, and when you add the complexities of reentry on top, it can be a lot to manage! There are many variables when it comes to reentry, and this resource isn't intended to point you to specific services in your area. Instead, we hope the following pages will help you consider what additional preparation and support will be vital for you to pursue. We hope it can be a helpful starting point or touchstone to return to as you embark on your reentry journey.

## THE LANDSCAPE

Whether you are a brand new college student or a seasoned expert in your higher education in prison program, it's normal for students to have some uncertainty or nervousness about what to expect in college post-release. Many formerly incarcerated students have been highly successful college students and professionals; you can be too! The following pages will explore some social and emotional challenges you may have to navigate as a college student during reentry and how to prepare for them. We're starting here with the basics.

While everyone's reentry journey is different, there are two things that any person can build to help on it: a strong mind and a strong support system.

- **Prepare mentally:** It is natural to feel stressed or overwhelmed, but practicing mindfulness can keep it from getting out of hand. Breathing, sitting still, walking, and focusing on gratitude are excellent practices to start before reentry.
- **Build your support network:** People often isolate themselves during tough times, but it can help to keep in touch with positive friends and family members. Begin to think about your social support system before you leave. Contact family members and friends if you can, and be honest about your reentry plans, concerns, or support you might need. The following pages will also help you identify potential gaps in your support system so you can consider what services or programs you may need for additional support. Some of this help may be found on your campus!



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*“Despite the challenges, I'm grateful for the support system I have and the opportunities to further my education. My professors have also been incredibly helpful, providing valuable feedback and support whenever I need it. With perseverance and the help of these resources, I know I can succeed.”*

-THEI Alumnus





## HOW CAN I CONNECT WITH OTHER STUDENTS?

Suppose you are starting classes on a traditional campus. In that case, you will likely go from a college experience where you interacted with the same 20-30 people with some of the same students in every class to a campus with thousands of people where the classmates you have will be different for each course. Because you are not interacting with the same people throughout the day in every class, you might find it challenging to meet students to socialize with, study with, or even ask questions as you adjust to the coursework. Some tips to help with this adjustment:

- You can use your online class discussion boards to ask if anyone wants to put a study group together.
- Ask your advisor or even your professor if there are clubs or on-campus groups that can help you meet a smaller circle of students or meet other adult learners.
- Identify students in your classes who seem to be proactively engaged in the course and/or use opportunities to interact with the professor (through office hours, for example). Introduce yourself and inquire whether they would be interested in starting a study group.
- Visit the Student Center, check out the bulletin boards, and ask the staff questions about connecting with other students. Learn more about the different offices on your campus in the resource *The College Ecosystem*.
- The Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (FICGN) is a national organization that may provide peer support. You may find it helpful to have a mentor who has undergone this adjustment. You can find out more about this organization at their website: [www.ficgn.org](http://www.ficgn.org)

## IMPOSTER SYNDROME

If you start to second-guess yourself or feel like you don't belong at your new college or university, know this feeling is entirely normal. Sometimes referred to as "imposter syndrome," it can make you feel like you aren't good enough, you're just pretending, and everyone can see that you don't belong. Some umni have reported feeling like they have a big sign on their forehead that the whole world can see. Impostor syndrome can cause anxiety, alienation, and discouragement. But this critical inner voice is not the truth! To co at that inner voice, remind yourself of these **true** things:

- 1** If you weren't qualified, you never would have gotten here in the first place. You worked just as hard, if not harder, than most of your classmates to get where you are. Even if your resume or school transcripts look different, you have done more than enough to earn your place among your peers.
- 2** Gaining an education in prison is one of the hardest things anybody can do. The simple fact that you managed that and chose to keep going means you are just as capable as your peers, if not more so.
- 3** You are part of an entire network of formerly incarcerated students who have walked this path before you, and you are leading the way for countless others to follow in your footsteps. You are not alone. Discounting your accomplishments or capabilities only helps to prove the doubters right!
- 4** These feelings are very common. Even if it may seem like you are the only one, there are likely to be hundreds of other people on your campus who feel the same way, so give yourself some grace.

You've worked too hard to let imposter syndrome stop you now. Things might not be easy, but that will not stop you. Keep going!





## SOCIAL ADJUSTMENTS AND UNDERSTANDING

Transferring to a traditional campus can feel like entering a new world where old social rules you know don't apply. It can feel like you're not on the same page as those around you. It's important to remember that the isolation of prison and the extreme circumstances you adapted to survive have impacted you, but they don't need to define you. It will take time and effort, but you can absolutely learn to adjust to a different culture in your new school setting. You can connect with your new community and grow to understand the differences that make college students unique. Or you may decide to build your community outside of your college, and that's okay, too. You can learn how you fit into your new chapter, take what you need from your past, and pick up what you need to move forward.

As you learn to adjust, it's also important to remember that other people are adjusting to you, and patience and understanding are needed on both sides. It can help to plan for the differences between you and your peers so that you're more prepared to seek clarity and understanding. Think about the values you both hold and where they align. Ask yourself what are the best ways to address differences you encounter. Think about the things you're not confident in yet, like small talk, for example, or the things you're not caught up on, perhaps things like technology or popular TV shows. What can you do to research and practice these skills and interests so that it's easier to connect with your peers? How can you tell them you're working to adjust while keeping your privacy intact? Who can you go to for help during this adjustment period? Don't forget: there is nothing wrong with you!

## CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

Use the space below or a larger piece of paper to explore the following prompts:

- 1 What are some of the most significant indicators you are going through a hard time and need support for? What should your future self look out for as the warning signs that you are struggling?
- 2 What are the things that bring you back to yourself during challenging times? Think of a time you set a goal and achieved it. How did you feel after reaching it? What was the most challenging aspect of reaching the goal? How did you overcome that difficulty?
- 3 Identify a challenge you overcame while taking courses on the inside. How did you do it? What are some of the positive adjectives or words that your classmates on the inside or your professors would use to describe you as a student and team member?

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## SHARING YOUR STORY

Sharing about your past or your experience with higher education in prison may feel good, like you are connecting or making a positive impact on others. Other times, talking about your story may not feel good, like you are over-exposed or want to be known for different things. Your feelings about sharing your story may change over time or based on the audience; that's also ok. You're allowed to change your mind about what you want to share about yourself. You do not owe people access to your story, experiences, or struggles.

People from your college program who knew you on the inside may contact you to talk about your story. Professors may invite you to speak to their class, or program leaders may ask you to speak at a fundraiser. Some students may love these opportunities, but again, it is totally appropriate to set boundaries if you are asked to do something that you aren't comfortable with. You can say no.

If you are comfortable talking about your experience, that's great! You also get to decide what parts of your story you want to share and what parts you don't. In one-on-one social situations, or even if you are speaking in front of a large group of people, if someone asks you a question you don't feel comfortable answering, you don't have to answer. You can always say, "I'd rather not answer that question, but thank you for your interest," or "I'd rather keep that part of my story private."

While some people might be interested in your past, others might react less warmly. Experiencing people's prejudices can be painful, but it's not something that has to ruin your college experience. For every person who tokenizes or rejects you, there will be others who are committed to connecting with you and who value you for who you are. You will need to practice connecting with the people who are open and respectful and setting boundaries with those who don't properly appreciate you or your story. This is something that all college students have to learn. You are in a unique position because your journey is different than most, but the skills you learn are a natural part of anyone's development, and the social networks you build will be just as important as anyone else's.

Use the boxes below to write or draw the qualities you possess that will help you connect with more people and stay focused on your priorities. If you get stuck, the questions inside the box may help you focus your ideas.



### INTERESTS

*What do you love talking about or doing?*



### STRENGTHS

*What are you good at? What do you like about yourself?*



### ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*What have you done that was hard?*



### GOALS

*What do you spend time thinking about in the future?*







## RESENTMENT

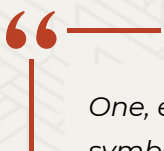
As you learn to adjust socially and emotionally to a new place, it's natural to feel some negative emotions. You may sometimes feel frustrated when your efforts to change or connect don't work. You can feel confused or insecure when you don't understand what other people are saying or why they react to you in a certain way. It can be very easy to feel resentful because you are having a harder time connecting to the world around you than your peers or because your reentry journey isn't going as you had planned for it to go. This is okay.

The critical thing to remember is that these negative feelings can influence how you interact with others if you let them grow out of control. You owe it to yourself and the people you care about to get help with your struggles and set yourself up for future success. Identifying key resources, like trusted mentors or mental health services, is an important part of working through these powerful emotions so you can heal and connect with the people around you. Changing your self-talk when you are in a negative emotional state is also important. It can help to remind yourself that you are simply building a skill and that, soon, this skill will benefit you and the people you care about. The work is hard, but it is worth it, and you will get better at it over time.

## DOUBT

Adjusting to this new social and emotional environment takes time and repeated effort, especially when things don't always go right. It's important to remember that a successful transition doesn't happen without the choice to *keep going* after every struggle. Persistence is key, but you already know that. You wouldn't have gotten this far if you weren't determined to keep going after every setback you faced. You can apply that same determination and hard work to this new area of your life. You are going to be okay.

When asked what words they would use to describe transferring to a traditional campus after release, a THEI alumnus had this to say:



*One, empowering: Moving from an inside college program to an outside college program symbolizes a reclaiming of my agency and independence. It represents my ability to take control of my future and pursue my goals in a more autonomous environment. Two, challenging: This transition undoubtedly presents various challenges, from adapting to new routines and environments to facing societal reintegration. These obstacles test my resilience and determination but also offer opportunities for personal growth and development. Third, liberating: Stepping into an outside college program provides a sense of freedom and new beginnings. It signifies leaving behind a constrained setting and embracing the opportunities and possibilities that come with re-entering society and furthering my education in a more open context.” - THEI Alumnus*





## UTILIZING RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

There may be people and programs through your school that can help you navigate the physical space of your campus. Some University programs provide bus passes for students or even allow students to use their ID cards for bus passes if they need to. Speaking to your advisor or someone at Student Services may help you determine whether those programs are available at your school. A reentry program you are connected to after release can help cover transportation costs if your school doesn't.

Many colleges have programs that provide campus tours for new and potential students each year. Even if you're already well into your degree program, signing up for a campus tour may be beneficial to gain more familiarity with the new space. The Student Services Office and/or Disability Services Office may be able to provide a more in-depth tour or guidance if you have issues with mobility and want some help planning for your time on campus. A volunteer or case manager from your reentry services program may be willing to go with you and explore the campus before the term starts to help you better prepare for navigating campus on your own. It may also be possible for other non-profit organizations supporting students from prison to help with these tasks. Speaking to your advisor, case manager, and other trusted people can help you learn what other options may be available as you navigate this new space.

## STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Here are some strategies that you can use to make your transition to a traditional campus smoother:

- ☒ Before you are released, identify a point of contact to help answer questions or connect you with resources once you get out. This might be a professor, a peer, or an academic advisor. Be sure you have their proper contact information for them.
- ☒ Take advantage of the opportunities to engage with college faculty and support staff. Check for office hours or the ability to schedule a drop-in appointment online or by email. Speaking with people you don't know can be intimidating, but it might be helpful whenever you hit a dead end.
- ☒ You can learn as much as possible about campus offices dedicated entirely to supporting students. These might include:
  - Mental health services
  - Academic tutoring
  - Writing support
  - Career services
  - Financial aid offices
  - Office for Transfer Students
- ☒ What can you do if you can't get a response by phone at the office you are contacting?
  - Visit in person
  - Contact an advisor or professor
  - Reach out to a different department to ask for help

### LEARN MORE

Learn more about the resources on a typical college campus in *Navigating the College Ecosystem*.





## REENTRY CHECKLISTS

The following lists can help you prepare for the beginning of your reentry journey. Use the Key Questions to explore your immediate priorities and challenges, and the Checklists to inventory some essential elements that your reentry plans should include.

### KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT HOUSING:



Where will you live when you leave prison, and how familiar are you with the area?

How will you pay for your housing?

What are you not willing to put up with at home, and are these deal breakers accounted for in your plan?

What is your timeline for applying for housing?

How long do you plan to stay at your first place?

If you're moving in with family, what are the expectations for you living there?

How long do you intend to stay there?

What concerns do you have about your living dynamics?

Does your current housing plan create any threats to your freedom?

### CHECKLIST:

- ☐ Submitted transitional housing applications
- ☐ My housing plan has been approved
- ☐ Confirmed halfway house bed availability or confirmed arrangements with housing host
- ☐ I understand the expectations and rules at the house I'll be staying at (whether family member or transitional home)
- ☐ Anticipated housing costs are accounted for

### KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH AND WELLNESS:



What are your health/wellness goals and priorities during reentry?

What are your health and wellness concerns?

What are your mental/emotional goals and priorities during reentry?

Do you have any medications that need to be filled, and do you have a plan to do so?

Do you have any urgent medical needs?

Is substance abuse or sobriety something you are concerned about during reentry, and if so, how will you seek support?

What wellness practices help you through challenging times, and how can you incorporate them into your reentry plan?

What will you do for fun, joy, or peace of mind?

Are you eligible for an affordable health insurance plan in your state?

### CHECKLIST:

- ☐ Plan for medical services/dental services
- ☐ Plan for mental health services/counseling
- ☐ Plan for accessing any substance use support (if applicable)
- ☐ Plan for accessing disability services
- ☐ Plan for prescription medications and any health-related supplies







## REENTRY CHECKLISTS - CONTINUED

### KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR BASIC NEEDS:



What are your most significant immediate needs during reentry?

What programs can help you meet those needs?

Which people in your life can support you in those needs?

How will you get clothing, essential supplies, and toiletries?

How will you acquire a cell phone?

How will you get Internet access?

What is your plan for short-term transportation to run your immediate errands?

What is your plan for transportation for work?

What is your plan for the use of your savings?

How much are you willing to spend in your first three months?

### CHECKLIST:

- ☐ Weather-appropriate clothing to wear when you leave prison
- ☐ Essential toiletries and clothing, and contact information for essential services
- ☐ Plan for transportation
- ☐ Plan for food and basic necessities
- ☐ Cell phone

### KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR DOCUMENTS:



What is your plan for acquiring an ID, Birth Certificate, and SS card?

What is your driver's license status, and what will you do to get it reinstated?

What (if any) supervision requirements do you have?

When will you meet with your P.O. for the first time, and how will you get there?

Do you have any ongoing court cases or legal affairs to navigate?

Are you aware of your court costs, fees, and other responsibilities you'll have?

Do you have a plan for addressing child support (if applicable)?

### CHECKLIST:

- ☐ Social Security card
- ☐ Birth Certificate
- ☐ State ID
- ☐ Plan for driver's license
- ☐ Supervision plan and contact information for your PO or supervision office
- ☐ Records from the department of correction, including your income records

### LEARN MORE

For more information about the documents you will need to continue college, see the *Navigating Forward* resource called **Preparing to Transfer**.





## REENTRY CHECKLISTS - CONTINUED

### KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM:



What is your plan for your release day, and whom do you need to coordinate with?

How safe do you feel in the environment you'll be returning to?

What kinds of support might be missing from your home dynamic?

What are your biggest immediate priorities?

Who will assist you in running errands, or what route will you take on public transportation?

Who can you reach out to when you encounter challenges?

How do you know when you are not taking good care of yourself, and what red flags do you want your future self to look for?

What people or community groups will you seek out for support when things feel overwhelming?

Not everyone leaving incarceration has a support system to return to, and that's okay. But it is crucial to accept that we all **need** support. If your support system isn't established yet, use the checklist below to help identify where to start.

### CHECKLIST:

- ☐ Transportation from prison
- ☐ Support running errands and meeting basic needs
- ☐ Emotional support – who can you turn to?
- ☐ Friendship and community – who can you experience belonging with?
- ☐ Emergency contacts

## CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

What does support mean to you? What does it feel like? When has it been difficult for you to accept support? What lessons have you learned about support that you want to remember? What do you want to do differently when it comes to receiving or asking for support? Write yourself some words of encouragement here to return to when needed.

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## CONTINUING SCHOOL CHECKLIST

This checklist will help guide you through the first steps to transfer to a new college. Please understand, this is not a complete list, and you should be in touch with the college that you want to attend to make sure you have completed all necessary steps. For more information on navigating reentry in the middle of a semester, see the resource [\*Preparing to Transfer to a Traditional Campus\*](#).

**State/Federal Financial Aid Requirements:**

- ☐ I have learned about the financial aid process and understand what FAFSA is
- ☐ I am not in default on any student loans.
  - ☐ If so, I have begun to rehabilitate my loans. My last payment will be made on \_\_\_\_\_.
- ☐ Completed FAFSA for year(s): \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_
- ☐ I signed and submitted the FAFSA signature page.
- ☐ I reviewed my FAFSA Submission Summary and completed all required steps
- ☐ Completed my state's financial aid application (username: \_\_\_\_\_)
- ☐ Completed any additional financial aid program applications (username: \_\_\_\_\_)
- ☐ The login to my student portal is (username: \_\_\_\_\_ PW: \_\_\_\_\_)
  - ☐ I have completed the school's financial aid application
  - ☐ I have confirmed all Financial Aid Requirements in my student portal
  - ☐ I have officially accepted my financial aid offer

**College Requirements:**

- ☐ Completed College Application(s)
  - ☐ School: \_\_\_\_\_(username): \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ School: \_\_\_\_\_(username): \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Requested high school transcript/GED transcript
- ☐ Requested all prior college transcript(s)
  - ☐ Prison education program college name : \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ Other Prior College(s) : \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Requested all applicable verification forms that the school has requested:
  - ☐ Proof of Income
  - ☐ Proof of Residency
  - ☐ Proof of Non-filing
  - ☐ Proof of Educational Purpose
- ☐ Completed all other outstanding requirements from the college (confirm by logging in to your student account and/or checking your email for school correspondence)
- ☐ Received my Student ID Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional requirements some schools may have:**

- ☐ Placement Tests
- ☐ Letters of Recommendation
- ☐ SAP appeal letter and supporting proof (for more info see [\*SAP and SAP Appeals\*](#))
- ☐ Personal Writing Statement

