

**UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement  
VOICE Initiative, December 2021**

***Art, Prisons, and the University: Creating a Culture of Inclusivity for Formerly Incarcerated Students***

**Rachel Nelson/ Institute of the Arts and Sciences  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
Amount Awarded: \$5,000**

In February 2021, the Institute of the Arts and Sciences (IAS) was pleased to receive \$5000 through the VOICE Initiative to support *Art, Prisons, and the University: Creating a Culture of Inclusivity for Formerly Incarcerated Students*, an event and art project created in collaboration with members of the Underground Scholars, a University of California-wide initiative aimed at supporting formerly incarcerated students and other system impacted students.

With this valuable funding and support, the students involved with the Underground Scholars worked with award-winning artist Ashley Hunt to create a [broadsheet](#) about how their experiences in prisons, jails, and juvenile detention centers impacts their university experience. The broadsheet was printed and mailed out to over 300 people, with physical copies also available at UCSC Mary Porter Sesnon Gallery and San José Museum of Art.

Additionally, we hosted two public, online events with the Underground Scholars. The first event was on March 2, 2021, and featured six student members of the Underground Scholars: MJ Hart, Joshua Solis, Alberto Lule, Ryan Flaco Rising, and Rodrigo Vazquez. Ashley Hunt served as the moderator for the event, with a conversation focusing on the roles of art and the university in struggles to end mass incarceration, particularly addressing how they are working to create what they call “the prison to university pipeline.” Over 100 people attended this event live and an additional 220 students and members of the public have since watched it on UCSC’s [Art and Culture Youtube Channel](#).

The second event took place on May 12, 2021 through UCSC’s Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery’s “Speak Up” Series, which was designed to allow faculty and campus leadership to hear student concerns. MJ Hart, Joshua Solis, Alberto Lule, Ryan Flaco Rising, and Rodrigo Vazquez spoke with the dean of humanities, faculty in the arts and humanities, as well as other students about their experiences in classrooms and with campus security.

Impact

As we stated in our VOICE application, our goal has been to help create a culture of welcome and support for formerly incarcerated students. The statistics are against us: these students are 8 times *less* likely to complete college than the general public. And, as the members of the Underground Scholars shared through their broadsheet and their events, this is often because they are made to feel as if they do not belong in our classrooms and our communities.

We were proud to have this opportunity and are grateful to the VOICE Initiative for helping providing a forum for students to make visible the challenges of reversing the school-to-prison pipeline. The firsthand accounts from students who have made that leap, and who are working to make it easier for others to do the same, were heard by campus leadership, faculty, students and the public. We hope this inspired the more than 500 members of our community who took part in events and/ or received the broadsheet to think more deeply about how we are caring and supporting those among us who have faced these challenges.

We certainly remain committed to contributing to creating community for system impacted students.

We also thank you deeply for giving direct support to the Underground Scholars. Of the \$5000 awarded to support this project, \$3500 of the funds went directly to the students in return for their participation. They were incredibly grateful, and related to us that although they are often called upon to share their experiences, they are rarely paid for their labor. Thank you for making this possible.