



2025-2026 FELLOWS RESEARCH

Unlocking Formerly Incarcerated College Students' Democratic Participation and Civic Engagement

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Published September 2026 by the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement.

Project Background

Research has long chronicled the disenfranchisement of formerly incarcerated people in society, noting the numerous barriers formerly incarcerated people face during reentry—returning to society after incarceration—including difficulty accessing housing, finding employment, securing social services, participating in elections, among other issues (Colbert, 2025; Couloute, 2019; Visher & Travis, 2003). The compounding barriers formerly incarcerated people face ultimately restrict their social and civil liberties (Miller & Stuart, 2017).

Understanding the multiplex barriers these individuals face, many non-profit organizations operate reentry programs to help formerly incarcerated people navigate the transition of the carceral system. These programs typically provide counseling, job training and life skills coaching, addiction support, occasionally housing, and other helpful services that make the transition easier (Negi et al., 2026). Over the last two decades, an increasing number of higher education institutions have begun to offer reentry programs and support for formerly incarcerated students, especially in California (Quach et al., 2022). In California, the California Community College Chancellor's Office coordinates the Rising Scholars Network, a statewide network of community colleges that support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. These programs primarily occur on community college campus, as they are the main providers of prison education and can help students continue their education once released. These programs often provide rehabilitative, financial, and educational services, as well as social support for their students (Abeyta et al., 2021; Yucel & Ortega, 2021). These types of programs serve as resource brokers for students, connecting them to key material and reentry resources via their inter-and intra-organizational ties (Yucel, 2024). Programs often have cross-campus ties in departments like Financial Aid, Admissions, and Disability Services, where they have a designated staff member with whom they work, which can help provide a warm handoff for students (Yucel, 2023). They may also have ties with local Probation Departments and housing shelters, which can help students have local liaisons to access community resources. Campus reentry programs provide students a safe space that values their lived experiences and allows them to build connections with peers who share similar backgrounds, which ultimately helps them as they transition back into education and their community (Contreras-García, 2023; Yucel & Ortega, 2021).

The current social and political climate has increasingly put college campuses at the center of issues around academic freedom and free speech. Colleges and universities are implementing progressively restrictive policies around free speech, academic freedom, anti-protest demonstrations, and in some attempts to quell activism on campus, militarizing the use of law enforcement for control, and employing severe disciplinary actions against students and faculty. Students experience and respond to the social and political climate in different ways. Some students have organized rallies or protests on campus, held informational workshops and clinics, wrote newspaper articles or blogs, or advocated for policy change on campus. Yet the

current political climate places the safety and civil liberties of formerly incarcerated students at increased risk compared to their peers, as their legal history draws increased scrutiny from college administrators and law enforcement. As such, this project sought to examine if and how formerly incarcerated students experience the free speech environment on campus.

Understanding the tactics and actions of formerly incarcerated students—those who have little political power, face high oppression on campus, and jeopardize their freedom—can illuminate important areas for fostering democratic participation and civic engagement on college campuses and call attention to the safeguards that must be put in place to protect students.

Research Questions

RQ1) How do FI students conceptualize notions of free speech, freedom of expression, and civic engagement?

RQ2) How do FI students elect to engage and participate civically and politically?

Methods and Data

This brief presents insights from a qualitative case study examining the free speech and civic engagement behaviors and experiences of formerly incarcerated students. My study focused on a program for formerly incarcerated students (Rising Scholars) at a community college in California, pseudonymized as Barton Community College (BCC), selected for its unique program history (described below) and location in a county with a high incarceration rate (imprisonment and parolee rates above the median (Widra & Gomez, 2022)).

I recruited students for participation with the help of the program director. I conducted 45–120-minute semi-structured interviews with 17 (13 male, 4 female) students in the program, as well as the program director. I asked questions about how they defined, understood, and experienced free speech and civic engagement both on campus and within their communities. All interviews took place over Zoom and were transcribed verbatim. I also reviewed documentary materials, such as institutional and program websites and local news articles, which could elucidate greater details about BCC, the Rising Scholars program, and the local environment. I created thematic memos based on the interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials, all of which informed the findings written here.

The Rising Scholars program at BCC was first established as a student club called Elevating Lives¹ in 2018 by a faculty member and a formerly incarcerated BCC student. As a student club, they received minimal funding on campus, and it was difficult to garner broader financial support for the club. The club was student-led with the support of one faculty sponsor and one

¹ Also a pseudonym.

staff sponsor, who supported the club in addition to their formal academic responsibilities at the college. As a club, Elevating Lives was primarily a social outlet for students, where students could gather, provide academic advice, and update each other on what was happening in their lives. They also held fundraising events, organized volunteer outings, and engaged in public advocacy activities to raise awareness for their club, as well as for formerly incarcerated and incarcerated communities more broadly. Now, Rising Scholars is an institutionalized program at BCC, where it provides similar, but more formal and robust academic and material services. Through grant funding from both private and public dollars, the Rising Scholars program provides students a suite of services, including academic counseling, tutoring, financial assistance such as book vouchers and stipends, peer support, academic workshops, and transfer assistance in coordination with the Underground Scholars program at the University of California system and the Project Rebound program at the California State University system.

All students with whom I spoke were enrolled in an Associate of Arts program and many had desires to transfer to a local Cal State or UC school. Most students had newly been released from jail or prison within the last few years and were trying to get their life back on track. The findings presented here offer not a consummate illustration, but rather a unique glimpse into how formerly incarcerated college students experience the social and political climate around them.

Findings

Conceptions of Free Speech, Freedom of Expression, and Civic Engagement

In each of my interviews, I asked students to define free speech, freedom of expression, and civic engagement to gauge a common understanding of what these terms meant to them as it related to their daily life against the backdrop of their schooling and their incarceration experiences. Students' responses to the first two questions were pretty straightforward. Students defined free speech as:

“to say whatever you want to say”

“not being censored for your opinions or beliefs”

“being able to have your own opinions, being able to rally”

Students described freedom of speech as being able to speak freely on any topic and in any manner, even if the espoused views could be considered incendiary or provocative. Although they did not reference the Constitution directly, students understood free speech was prescribed by the law and referenced it as a value of the United States. For example, Felix, noted,

This is the United States and that's what we have, the ability to do things like that. Everybody has a right to their voice, their opinion, but there's a time and a place for everything. Just because people are pro-Trump. That's fine. You have the right to your opinion, a pro-Trump or Democrat, whatever you are, whatever you believe, that is fine. We're willing to hear you out. That's cool. Doesn't necessarily have to believe it, but that's what makes this country great.

Felix and other students contrasted the U.S. environment with countries that had more authoritarian governments, where people were not allowed to speak freely because they would be punished for going against the regime. Students knew that speech could invoke ire, argument, and discussion, but most felt they were not going to be punished for what they said.

Students defined freedom of expression similarly, often referring to how people dress or talk:

“being able to wear what you want, have language on your shirt, your identity, your expression”

“just to express yourself, how you're feeling”

“to speak, to write in a way that makes you feel comfortable with yourself, that makes you happy, that you're comfortable with that”

Students conceptualized notions of free speech and expression as being “authentic” to themselves and their identity. One student, Cordo, noted that free speech gives individuals “the courage to go against that sometimes and to say what is right or maybe wrong, depending on the situation.” Ultimately, they framed speech and expression as legal protections they were guaranteed by the Constitution as long as it did not veer into hate speech.

When it came to civic engagement, however, nearly all students were unfamiliar with the term itself and needed me to describe the term. They often confused “civic” for “civil,” describing ways of interacting and speaking with another in a civil and considerate manner. Another student defined it as, “people coming together to try to do something.” However, prior to me asking these questions, some students would describe forms of civic engagement they were involved in, such as volunteering and working on political action campaigns, unknowing that it was a form of civic engagement.

Enacting Speech and Expression

For the most part, students expressed that they were able to speak and express themselves freely on campus. They felt BCC was a safe place where different views and diversity of thought were tolerated and respected and even noted the free speech corner on campus where they had seen people engaged in peaceful discussion around various political and religious topics.

Rising Scholars Upholds Safe Spaces

Students also felt like the Rising Scholars program was an especially safe place for them to speak and express themselves freely. The program had created a “safe zone,” for formerly incarcerated students to have “a second chance without being judged.” “For Rising scholars, I feel like I can express myself completely, a hundred percent...” Eva noted, “it’s a very safe setting, I’m very able to express myself in any shape, form or way I want without having that fear or anxiety in me.” Another student, Lisa, shared that as a Chicana student, she and her peers were “feeling under attack.” The Rising Scholars program held healing circles where she and other students could speak openly about the political environment and all the immigration raids happening in their city and across the country and general feelings of being unsafe and scared for their loved ones. Jay, one of the founding members of the Elevating Lives club at BCC, also echoed Eva’s concerns and mentioned that as a collective, Rising Scholars students really prioritized supporting one another’s mental health in the current sociopolitical climate.

Different Contexts Mediate Speech

Interestingly, students overwhelmingly believed they had free speech and that it was a protected right, yet they often still self-censored their words or actions based on their environment and backgrounds or beliefs. In contrast to their experiences on campus or in the Rising Scholars program, some students felt like they had less agency or ability to speak freely in their community or at work because they worried about repercussions. For example, Jordan spoke about Jimmy Kimmel’s show being cancelled and then uncanceled:

He [Jimmy Kimmel] said something like, "I'm not going to talk about politics anymore on my show," but that's like a form of censorship and free speech. Sorry. It's like an infringement on his freedom of speech and stuff. And it's like, "Well, that sucks." But these companies, you're kind of at the mercy of them.

He recollected working at Dollar Tree and Walmart and having to censor what he posted on social media because he could get fired. “It makes you wonder if we really do have free speech or is it limited?” he observed:

“At this current moment I don't think free speech is really free speech. I think it's watered down. If I go outside and say the wrong thing, I'm definitely either A) getting canceled, or I'm going back to jail. Simple as that.”

Eve also felt like she had to hide her beliefs and avoid politically and socially charged discussions and suppress part of her identity to protect her physical and emotional safety, as well as to not get her sister in trouble. Her sister worked in an administrative position on campus, and Eve worried if she drew too much attention to herself, it could put her sister’s job at risk. She identified with the LGBTQIA community and worried about drawing undue attention to herself. “I have this fear too,” Eve voiced, “where I'm going to be stereotyped and I'm going to

be detained, and I'm going to lose everything because of this political climate. So, it's very scary." The immigration raids elicited a lot of fear for formerly incarcerated students of color and many avoided contentious conversations, whether in class or in the community, or simply just did not speak up because they wanted to avoid unnecessary or potential conflict.

Another student, Will, engaged in codeswitching at work, where he would dress and talk differently from his normal identity. "It's a comfort thing," he shared, "all my life I've been judged for speaking a certain kind of way or act a certain kind of way, and that brings negative vibes." As a result, at work, he "developed a sense of code switching" as a "survival technique." Some of this can be attributed to general maturity and entering adulthood where over time you learn to use discretion in different environments, knowing when and where to say certain things. However, in general, most students felt they had to self-censor a bit more as a formerly incarcerated person. Students understood there were already pre-conceived judgements about them and their actions, so they often had to suppress their beliefs or present in a different, less authentic way. As Josue noted,

I really don't do too much sharing...At school or just with people I don't know. I tend to be very quiet trying to just get off parole and not do anything. I'm already a two striker, so I'm trying to just be humble and not do too much of anything. Just focus on school.

Similarly, Darian also employed discretion in choosing when and where to get involved in certain conversations in class or with faculty/staff. Darian had tattoos all over his body, including his face, and knew that people would already make assumptions about him and his identity:

I just know they'll probably take it with a grain of salt [his speech] considering what I look like. They can already assume where I've been or if I've been incarcerated or not. So, I really only use my freedom of speech if it seems beneficial for both parties.

Darian actively self-censored his participation in discussions because he knew people might make assumptions based on his appearance and did not want to waste his time engaging if people would not be receptive.

Students understood protesting was a form of civic engagement and clear enactment of speech, and they supported individuals' rights to protest or assemble, even if they did not necessarily believe in the cause themselves. They saw different protests happening on college campuses across the country as it related to Palestinian rights and anti-immigration movements. They also observed protests happening in their communities and nearby and the police and university violence being used against protestors and spoke out against both violence being used by protestors and by law enforcement. However, because of their backgrounds, nearly all students actively avoided protests in fear for their lives and their families, even if they believed in the cause and wanted to be out there with their peers.

As Lisa articulated, “That’s not feasible for me because if I disappear, who’s going to take care of my babies? And that’s the real, real, real thing. Because now you’re using AI, they’re capturing freaking faces.” The increasing use of surveillance tactics made students very scared to participate in large rallies or demonstrations. Instead, Lisa found other ways to be involved and continued to provide resources and support to families who needed assistance. Jay also noted that over time, he had become less involved in protesting, and when he did, he took extreme precautions to cover his face and leave before anything became chaotic or violent. He shared, ““It’s very scary because you want to have a voice, but you’re also been... I was looking at life in prison at one particular time, and those charges are still very much on my record.”

Although the right to protest and speak freely is not restricted to those without a record, formerly incarcerated students face rigorous consequences of potentially violating probation or parole requirements, and as a result, facing re-arrest or longer sentences. The increasingly hostile and polarized sociopolitical climate heightened students’ awareness of free speech issues and helped them mobilize movements for activism and engagement on campus and in the community. However, it also brought to the forefront potential repercussions and increased fear in many students such that they were actively calculating how to show up and engage in different environments.

Although legally students believed their speech was protected, in practice, they modified their actions and speech depending on the context. Students tangibly precepted the power dynamic implemented via the carceral system and protected themselves by avoiding situations or environments that could get them in trouble. That being said, students generally felt safer to express themselves on campus because they believed that college was a place where diverse ideas were allowed to exist safely in contention with another. Students felt even safer when engaging with peers and staff in the Rising Scholars program, compared to other places on campus and in the community, because of their shared backgrounds and experiences. Students in the Rising Scholars program understood that engagement in the program required vulnerability and honesty, as identifying themselves as formerly incarcerated put their actions and behaviors under increased surveillance and scrutiny, so there was greater trust fostered between them.

Forms of Civic Engagement

Despite not knowing outwardly knowing the definition of civic engagement, most students were actively involved in trying to better and give back to their community. Some students volunteered at mental health clinics and hospitals or the local homeless shelter. A handful of students were involved in political advocacy work on campus or statewide campaigns.

For example, Lisa was the president of the Student Parent Club on campus and actively advocated for student parents and tracked different legislation happening nationally and statewide. She studied social at work at BCC because she wanted to help people and was preparing to transfer to a university. She described her advocacy role on campus: “keep the

families strong and to help them get the resources they need.” She was grateful for her time at BCC because she was leaving “empowered” and knowing she had contributed “to the community in tremendous ways.”

Similarly, Jay volunteered for an organization that provided rehabilitation services, mental health support, conflict resolution tools, and other services to system-impacted young adults to help them avoid gangs and incarceration. Another student, Robin, became involved with a statewide justice advocacy organization, working on local and state campaigns and increasing political awareness of criminal justice system issues. He shared how his involvement in the organization empowered him to believe in his own political power:

They enlightened me so much on what power that we do have, because up until then, I thought, “They don’t care what I got to say,” and that’s where it’s totally wrong. But then we learned our voice matters and that we can actually affect laws and change laws.

Being involved in movements and organizations with others who shared their background helped students realize their collective agency and power.

There were a handful of students who expressed interest in doing these types of activities, but because they had recently been released from jail or prison, they were working to make their life more stable first and trying to focus acutely on school. However, across all levels of involvement and activity, students expressed a deep interest in giving back to their communities.

Discussion and Implications

To hide who you are and what you believe, for fear that the mere act of expressing yourself risks punishment, is an exceedingly cruel and oppressive circumstance.

(Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017 p. 25).

In this project, I sought to understand how formerly incarcerated students experience free speech on campus and the types of civic engagement activities they participate in. As individuals whose rights are most at stake, understanding the conditions that facilitate or attenuate their political and civic engagement on campus is crucial so that colleges can safeguard their civil liberties through both written and enacted policies and through the interactions students have with institutional agents on campus.

Students overwhelmingly stated they felt as if they could speak and express themselves freely on campus and in their community. They understood the right to speech and expression as a legally protected right. Most did not think their speech was limited or threatened and they all lauded the Rising Scholars program at BCC as an empowering environment that uplifted students and destigmatized notions of what it means to be incarcerated or formerly incarcerated.

However, in practice, students referenced many instances where they felt like they had to mediate their involvement, their actions, and their speech, such as not being involved in protests, or not engaging in politically charged discussions. These actions predominantly reflected their identity as a formerly incarcerated person and person of color. The legal system disproportionately targets people of color, which directly impacts how people of color engage in society. Students are actively making decisions every day about when and how to speak up and in which environments because there is a greater risk to them due to their background as a formerly incarcerated person. Freedom is not immediately granted when people walk out the gates of prison; it is a gradual, often never complete, process whereby as more time passes, individuals gain access to increased civil and social liberties (Miller & Stuart, 2017). The give and take of this process puts formerly incarcerated people in a type of precarious limbo and reinforces a form of secondary punishment, where they must continually try to make good (Maruna, 2011) and atone to society.

In some ways, the process of pursuing higher education is both a symbolic and material gesture of trying to make good. Because postsecondary education is viewed as socially positive, in the court's and society's eye, it symbolizes a commitment to rehabilitation by formerly incarcerated students. Indeed, all the students with whom I spoke were pursuing college because of a desire to turn their life around after incarceration, and often in majors where they would be helping others in some way. Students held a deep desire to give back and were not only pursuing paths in careers where they could do so, but many were also involved in service-oriented volunteer activities. Although students were engaged in genuine acts of service, they may also subconsciously be trying to demonstrate social redemption (Gurisami, 2017).

We often think about violations of free speech as active suppression: shutting down a rally, cancelling a speaker, dictating what can be said or taught inside a classroom, but in this increasingly heightened era of surveillance, scrutiny, and discipline of speech and civic activities, the continual and regular self-censorship that people endure is an equally important extension and violation of these rights. Colleges should and must care and about and safeguard free speech, especially for those whose rights are most at stake, as free speech is essential to a healthy democracy. As students highlighted, the antithesis is a restrictive, authoritarian government regime. The constant encroachment of power by state and federal policymakers in targeted academic freedom and activism on campus and the increasing use of surveillance technology puts formerly incarcerated college students at the great risk and of the most extreme consequences.

The restriction of free speech is not generally thought of as a collateral consequence of incarceration, yet prisoners' speech is vastly limited due to the extremely restrictive and authoritarian nature of their confinement and the supervision and control to which they must provide total deference, otherwise they risk retaliation (Bianchi & Shapiro, 2018). Much like other freedoms, this veil is not lifted upon release. If society is to represent a full and cooperative democracy, all voices must be represented, especially those who have historically

faced marginalization and oppression. As prison education programs continue to increase, and as more incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals are pushed toward pursuing a postsecondary credential (Quach et al., 2022), colleges and their students will continue to contend with these issues. State and institutional investment in campus reentry programs both symbolize and materialize a commitment to support formerly incarcerated students and can reduce stigma as both students, faculty, and staff become more aware of the barriers formerly incarcerated people face. Colleges can help safeguard formerly incarcerated students' speech and civic engagement by reaffirming a safe campus environment. Reevaluating disciplinary policies and having representation of formerly incarcerated students on student councils and college/university disciplinary and leadership committees can help create more equitable practices and policies on campus. Further, for colleges that collect data on whether students identify as formerly incarcerated, they should limit access to who can access that data to certain individuals, such as those working in Disability Services or campus reentry programs, as unfettered access could lead to faculty and staff acting consciously or unconsciously biased toward formerly incarcerated students in class or other engagements. Small actions like these can help foster an environment where students feel like they are safe to fully engage and can further hone and develop their leadership skills and civic identities.

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