



Oregon's Redeeming Scholars Project

Profiles of formerly
incarcerated individuals and
their post-secondary
education experience •
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Staff members from Reclaiming Lives in Medford conducted interviews with five males and five females, asking about their experience with higher education after incarceration.

Post-secondary education creates substantial distance from criminal behavior and is the catalyst in building confidence and resilience.

Having someone believe in them was what prompted enrollment into college.

There were a considerable amount of barriers discussed, such as fear of the unknown, financial, and negative self-talk.

If given the opportunity, most would continue their education on to a master's degree or a PhD.

Most of these formerly incarcerated students knew they were smart, but had shame and trauma that held them back.



Shawn Sorenson, 37 Psychology

“I like encouraging younger students who have limiting beliefs”

Did you have support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

I received encouragement from my mom and grandma to pursue college but neither of my parents ever went to college. They did help me financially over the years.

I applied for TRIO at SOU but they said my grades were too good, so I didn't qualify. I utilized the tutoring center at SOU and I got plugged into Community of Recovery Education (CORE) which is a nationwide program. It took me many years to graduate partially because I didn't have any help.

What made you decide to go to college?

I was always fascinated when talking with people with college degrees. It was something that I wanted. My uncle got a PhD in microbiology and my grandpa had a master's in education, but they were not really part of my life. Going to college was self-motivated by my interest in learning.

Did you have help enrolling in school and/or utilized the resources available?

In 1998, I graduated high school from a boarding school in Mexico that was extremely strict and punitive. The experience there was traumatic. I learned to speak Spanish since that was my only way to communicate.

After high school, I enrolled in college in Modesto, CA. My parents had money so I didn't qualify for financial aid. At that time, I was in active addiction and didn't do well in school and was arrested shortly after enrolling. In 2008, I tried again but was still drinking a lot and didn't do well.

Did you receive financial aid?

Yes, eventually I filled out the FAFSA. I emailed the school and asked them what I needed to do. Some terms I finished and some I didn't, so I had to get my financial aid reinstated.

The financial aid I received was wasted on other things during that time. I kept taking loans and racking up debt. I have heard about loan payoff programs, but I know I will be paying on my loans for a long time.

Did you apply for scholarships? If yes, did you have help with your essays?

I was able to apply for scholarships. I wrote essays and submitted them. I believe in some instances I was denied because they asked questions about my criminal history.

What barriers or fears did you have concerning college?

In 2011, I was working at Taco Bell and in active addiction, but my wife was pregnant, so I was motivated to do something different. I stayed in classes through 2015 and completed a year and a half of school which gave me enough credits for an associate's degree.

I knew I wanted to go back and get my bachelor's degree, but I let money, jobs and kids stand in the way of my education. Everything else was a priority.

In the beginning I had a fear of asking questions. Now, my only fear is about getting a job.

Are you in school now? If money were no object, how far would you go in school?

Yes, I got my associate's degree of general studies in 2015, and in 2020, I received my bachelor's degree in psychology (graduating summa cum laude), with a minor in spanish. I am currently enrolled at Portland State University working on my master's degree. Eventually, I would like to work as a mental health therapist in private practice. If money and time were no object, I would like to obtain a Phd.

What added value do you think you bring to an organization or community based on your lived experience?

I think because I know what it feels like to be in the dark in addiction and how bright the other side is, I now have an edge to navigate through the daily stress of jobs and life. I also have compassion for others, and I know that we each have a whole history behind us.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

I believe college built my character, taught me to ask for help, and provided opportunities for friendship. I learned how to be an adult, take care of responsibilities, and manage my money better. I received recognition for my grades which built my confidence and helped me feel successful.

I have been able to encourage younger students who had limiting beliefs about what they were capable of. I also attended fun events and built lifelong relationships.



Sam Madden, 28 Criminology

“I wish I would have tried harder”

What made you decide to go to college?

I was in college before my addiction, right out of high school. I went directly to SOU. Neither of my parents went to college. My mom had always told me that college was the only way to have a better life.

Did you have support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

I did apply to Trio at RCC for a term. They also had TRIO in high school, which is how I did my applications and scholarships.

Did you utilize the resources available to you?

No, I didn't access them. I was stressing at home by myself instead of using the resources. I know it would have made a difference in my success. I am a completely different person now.

Did you receive financial aid or loans?

Yes, and my dad helped me. I have about \$50,000 in student loans. I spent a lot of it on “living expenses” and extravagant purchases. I bought cars and X-boxes. People who get loans need accountability, so that it gets used for school expenses. I wish I had that.

Did you apply for scholarships? If yes, did you have help with your essays?

I applied for scholarships and I did get a few but lost them because I was doing so poorly. No, I did not receive help. I would apply and ask for help now though.

How far would you like to go in school?

I'd like to get my bachelor's degree.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

I didn't take it seriously. I wish I would have had more accountability.

Are you in school now? How long have you been out of school? Why do you want to go back?

It's been 3 years since I went to school. I've been in recovery since December 2019 and have 2 months clean. I want to go back so I can pay off my debt. It would take me two years if I went full time and focused. I have a bunch of credits that would count towards my major.

Originally, my major was environmental science, but I'd like to switch to criminology.



Kelly McEvilly, 40 Criminology

“Learning to be a leader is new
for me”

Did you have help enrolling in school and/or utilized the resources available?

At the time, I was homeless with my kids, living in a shelter. I thought I would try massage therapy. I went to a class and somehow it led me to hear about the Human Services program. I had been interested in psychology so that's what started my journey into the program.

When I was 19, I took a college placement test. I never got my GED, I just kept going on to college.

What barriers or fears did you have concerning college?

Financial mainly and navigating the scholarship process. For me to come forward and ask for help was difficult because of the shame I was feeling.

What made you decide to go to college?

I am a high school dropout who was inspired during treatment. My counselor brought it up to me, but the thought of going back to school was crazy. I was trying to pay rent and keep my electricity on. School seemed impossible with my kids and work. She told me I could apply for scholarships.

I did well in school when I was focused, I would have never gone to school if that counselor hadn't encouraged me.

Did you have support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

Two months after treatment I had a relapse. It took me some time to get back to my recovery. I decided to take one class at RCC, which turned into two. I had to take six credits successfully to get off academic probation.

TRIO at RCC was so supportive. My advisor was amazing, very supportive. He is still always available to me. I got a tutor through TRIO. I couldn't believe it when I got an A in math.

Did you receive financial aid?

I had a loan and was on academic probation due to dropping a class too late and owing money. I made ten payments of \$5 a month and it freed up my academic probation.

There was also a loan set aside program during Obama's administration where they helped me clear things up with the college. The loans weren't wiped away though.

I didn't know that I could dual enroll at a community college and a university for far less money.

Did you apply for scholarships? If yes, did you have help with your essays?

I applied but I didn't have help writing my scholarship essays. I was fortunate because Maslow Project (program for homeless) helped me go through Access to get subsidized housing which lowered my cost of living while I was in school.

There are two reasons people don't apply for scholarships. One is they don't believe they will get one and the other is not knowing how to apply for them.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

There is a story we tell ourselves. When we run into these barriers, it creates our belief system. School has allowed me to re-write my story. The whole school process has really strengthened me as a person.

There have been so many challenges along the way. I have my degree hanging on my wall with a vision board next to it. It feels surreal. I've learned to take my walls down and have become more self-accepting.

A combination of support and love and acceptance from others that has helped build my self-esteem. Giving myself grace and allowing myself to be human. There are people who make one wrong decision and they go to prison for it. I almost was that person. My focus everyday was on how I was going to get high.

Being a student in college also persuaded the courts to drop my fines.

How far would you like to go in school if money was not a factor?

I would get my master's degree and work in mental health.

I've heard that there are programs that if you are in the health field you could go to school for free. Many resources exist that people don't know about.

Are you in school now? Why do you want to go back?

I am at SOU part time and work part time. School online has been a challenge. I have a daughter in the sixth grade. Keeping her on track with her schooling has also been a challenge.

My kids have watched me in school without having housing and it has created a growth rather than a fixed mindset. I have demonstrated some resilience from way back when to now. My kids have seen the growth and my son has said he's proud of me. That meant a lot to me considering where we came from.



Manny Pacheko, 58 Human Services

**“I want to see people do good.
I believe people haven’t been
taught differently”**

What made you decide to go to college?

I was working at the Mail Tribune on graveyard, living in Oxford housing and working with Voc Rehab. I was struggling with being content and knowing there had to be more out there for me.

My Voc Rehab counselor said I seemed like a pretty intelligent guy and asked if I thought about going to college? She gave me a list of things to do. I took the placement test and did okay. When I was trying to enroll for classes I didn’t even know how to click a mouse. A woman by the name of Emma from a program called Bright Futures, came out to the computer banks and said “can I help you?”

Did your parents encourage school?

My parents are immigrants to this country from Germany and Mexico. They worked hard and my dad was in the military. They dreamed of college, but it was just a dream.

I did well in school when I applied myself. You did one of two things in my neighborhood. Either you were a gang banger or an athlete.

Did you apply for scholarships? If yes, did you have help with your essays?

Yes, I wrote an essay that got me a scholarship. I talked about what I was doing and hoping to do. I had people edit my essay. I still edit papers for my students and encourage them to apply for scholarships. Olsrud scholarship were great supporters of me. I was invited to the country club.

The OSAC scholarship asked me about my past, at the time I was paying restitution. One board member said they were not comfortable giving scholarship money to anyone who was paying restitution. It was demoralizing and I stopped sharing my story after that. So much judgement in that statement.

What barriers or fears did you have concerning college?

My barriers were my past and myself. There was a lot of stigma around addiction. I had a lot of tattoos and piercings and hair down to my waist. There weren't a lot of students who looked like me. Before I got into my background, I wanted people to know me for me. Pam Green and Denise Caldwell were mentors to me, and I would not be where I am without them. I literally asked them to be my mentors. Without their support I wouldn't have finished. There was no one like me.

I also learned to stop disclosing because I was an over sharer.

Impression Management was something I worked on for years. Making a first impression is important. People helped me with that because my own best thinking had got me only so far. I was open and willing to listen.

Did you have other support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

It helped that my brother enrolled in college a year before me. I was with TRIO at SOU and met Kathy McNeill she was very caring and helped me.

Support came from being a part of Bright Futures, as a student worker, and my two mentors that told me about TRIO. I qualified for TRIO based on my learning disability and financial status.

Did you receive financial aid?

I did through Bright Futures which paid for the two semester program.

How far did you go in school?

I started SOU in 2005. I knew that I didn't want to get an associate's degree. I knew that getting a bachelor's and a master's degree would put distance between my addiction and me.

My major changed a couple of times. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. All I knew was I wanted to help people. I loved sociology.

I was working as a drug and alcohol counselor and I became a single dad and had custody of my daughter. I managed because I was good at college. I was on the honor roll and rocking a 4.0. It surprised me at first. It helped with my recovery and self-image. My education coupled with my involvement in 12 step fellowships allowed me to blossom. I also have a CDAC-II.

Are you in school now?

I got my bachelor's degree when I was in my early 40's, in 2008. I got my first master's in 2010, in mental health counseling and my second master's in 2012, in business management. Now I'm running the Human Services Department as Coordinator for Social Sciences at RCC.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

I will do anything to accomplish my goals. Just like I would have done anything to get high. I am humble willing and teachable. I had small successes. I had to do whatever it took.

The transformation for me was when I started to do the work in my head and heart. I realized that I was good at school. It was my dream to do something that my parents were proud of. Being smart meant that I was a man on the come up.



Shavonne Foster, 41 Criminal Justice Psychology of Addiction

“I want to be financially
successful”

What made you decide to go to college?

I had been in college fifteen years ago and wanted to go back. I went back a total of four times.

Did you have support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

My PO brought me to RCC and paid for my first term. He walked in with a gun and a badge. His support was so important. My parents were also supportive. They helped me financially and with babysitting. I didn't know about TRIO. I didn't have any tutoring.

Did you utilize any school resources that were available?

No, I did it all on my own

Did you receive financial aid?

Yes, I applied for FAFSA and took out a lot of loans.

Did you apply for scholarships?

I didn't know about scholarships. I would have applied if I did.

What barriers or fears did you have concerning college?

Money, I was afraid of racking up more debt. I'm working full time because I have a 6-year-old daughter to take care of. I was also afraid of my past and how I felt about myself.

I knew I was smart, but I didn't have the confidence.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

Confidence and resilience. Learning more about my likes and dislikes. School set me up for quality, everyday life skills.

How far would you like to go in school?

I'd like to get a master's degree.

Are you in school now? How long have you been out of school? Why do you want to go back?

No, not yet, I received my associate's degree this year. I just applied to SOU to get my bachelor's degree and ideally, earn my master's right after.

Earning my associate's degree has helped open other doors. I recently received an 11% raise for getting my degree at my current job. I want to be financially successful.



Ara Aguirre, 39 Human Services

“Little victories are how you win
the war”

Did you have help enrolling in school and/or utilized the resources available?

I had a good experience with the advisors, but I didn't get help from most of them. I learned the hard way and asked the cohort in front of me. I picked their brain and asked what classes they were in.

What made you decide to go to college?

Ultimately, the love of my family is what changed my heart. I knew I needed to get clean. I sold my condo and was able to buy a 4-bedroom mobile home in Medford. I moved within 30 days. The big homies in California let me go.

After prison I released to Freedom House in Bakersfield and went to meetings every day, got a sponsor and heard about homies who found a new way to live. I decided to go to school because my father in law told me he didn't know what he wanted to be and he was 57. I had to do something to support my family. I loved service work at Narcotics Anonymous. That started me thinking about the people who were genuine and who needed what I had. I decided to be a drug and alcohol counselor.

Did you receive financial aid?

With FAFSA they wanted to know if you were charged with a drug offense. If so, I didn't think I could get financial aid.

I didn't apply.

Did you apply for scholarships?

I didn't apply for scholarships and wish I had. I have \$16,000 in debt.

What barriers or fears did you have concerning college?

Fear of failure or success if I'm honest. I worked hard on negative self-talk and believe in the power of changing my thinking.

How far would you like to go in school?

I'm a lifelong student. You can't take from me the things I know. I'm over formal college but could see myself continuing.

You become obsessed with getting an A and you start shooting for excellence instead and then learning the balance of good enough.

I had 11 hours of practicum left that I didn't finish because of Covid but I am now working on that online.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

I've learned a lot about myself and what impact I can have on others. School has been a tool in learning to celebrate small successes. Little victories are how you win the war. At the end of the term you have something to be proud of. I graduated with a GPA of 3.47. My plate gets bigger as I adapt and grow. I started with a saucer and now I have a large plate.

School allowed me to learn about motivational interviewing and coaching. Education is important because I want to effectively help people and cause no harm.

We don't have to grow just through pain. Be aware of your thoughts and entertain them. If something needs to change, quit making excuses and move forward.



Leila Carlson, 48 CADC

“I got my schedule and books, then Covid hit”

What made you decide to go to college?

To better myself. To have a career. A woman from my peer support class told me she was going to college and that she would help me apply. She had been in prison too. I was so excited.

Did you have support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

Yes, TRIO helped me apply for FAFSA and helped schedule my placement test. I took the tests, got my schedule, got my books online then covid hit and I withdrew.

Why did you quit?

I want to be able to raise my hand and ask for help. In my first class I had to tell about myself and attach an assignment and didn't know how to do it.

I spent about two hours trying and decided to withdraw and will wait until classes open in person.

I needed more encouragement.

Did you receive financial aid?

Yes, I received full Fafsa but I needed more support. They deposited an extra \$93 which was left after books and classes and I paid it back. A woman on the phone walked me through how to do that.

Did you apply for scholarships? If yes, did you have help with your essays?

No, I didn't have time before Covid hit.



Anthony Verastegui, 28, Computer Engineering

**“I was a straight A student before
I started getting in trouble”**

Did you have any school opportunities in prison?

I did not have a high school diploma when I went to prison so that was my first goal. It took me a while to get into the program they had. You had to go to school every couple of days. You would get a packet to study for an hour before you could leave. This was at Santiam Prison. It took a while to get into that program. They move slow there. It was hard to see my counselor and get things rolling.

What made you get your GED?

Doing the GED program did give me confidence that I can do this. You must have a minimum of two years in your sentence to qualify to go to college. I was ready but they make you wait before you can take the test.

A lot of people are motivated and clear headed when they get out of prison so knowing their options for college ahead of time would really help.

My mom went to school for nursing and has a certificate.

Did you enjoy school?

Yes, I was always a straight A student before I started getting in trouble. I enjoyed school and wanted to do more. I didn't have any periods of clean time, I had 13 years of use and criminality.

How long have you been out of prison?

One year

Anthony Verastegui, 28

Computer Engineering

Did you have apprenticeship opportunities in prison?

Only a few prisons offer electrical and other schooling. If you do not have over 40 months, they will not allow you to be in the program. They ship them to other prisons to get real life experience. Change the lights in one prison, work on electric panel in another, etc.

Some inmates ask to be given a little longer sentence so they can get into an apprenticeship program. There are very few opportunities.

Did you apply for scholarships?

Not yet, but I have two mentors that said they would help me apply.

What barriers or fears do you have concerning college?

I have back taxes that I need to pay off. About the time I was ready to go to school Covid happened. I'm confident that if I set my mind to it, I could be successful in school, but I have some doubts.

What do you think the response would be from people incarcerated about college opportunities?

If people knew that there was a peer support based program like Project Rebound they would be motivated to take advantage of that.

It would be nice to get an introduction to trades or outside opportunities. There are a lot of doubts and fears about lack of connection.

How far would you like to go in school?

I'd like to go to school for computer engineering and software design. I have been passionate about computers, coding, and cybercrimes.

I'm also thinking about going to Pacific Bible College and talk to them about scholarships. I know I have a calling in my life to preach and be able to gain knowledge of the Bible to preach confidently.



Kristy Laschober, 55 Innovation and Leadership

“I wondered what else I could accomplish”

Did you have support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

It took a lot of guts for me to walk into RCC. I was ashamed of my past and didn't know how to explain that I had been in prison for four years. Luckily, the woman in the Financial Aid Department was intrigued by my story. I will never forget her. She walked alongside of me throughout the whole application process and introduced me to TRIO.

TRIO provided me with tutors, a place to study, computer access and helped me with my schedule each term. I felt supported.

What made you decide to go to college?

I was involved in reentry court when I got out of prison. The judge questioned me about college. She strongly urged me to apply.

I had some college credits from 30 years ago but didn't know what I wanted to do or how to access my old transcripts.

Did you utilize any of the resources available?

Yes, I took advantage of all the resources, once I made the commitment. I couldn't believe everything that was available to me. I was working full-time at a hotel in the evenings and then spent my days in class and in the tutor center. Tutoring helped me establish relationships as a student.

Each time I got an A on my tests, I went back to the tutor and thanked them.

I really enjoyed helping the younger students get more comfortable with asking for help.

Kristy Laschober, 55 Innovation and Leadership

Did you receive financial aid?

Yes, I applied for FAFSA in prison, filling it out with a pencil and borrowing a stamp from my cellmate. I had no idea where it went and how to access it when I got out.

Dawn, from the Financial Aid Department at RCC helped me find my application and we learned that I was eligible for full FAFSA.

Did you apply for scholarships? If yes, did you have help with your essays?

Yes, Dawn and Layne, from TRIO encouraged me to apply and helped edit my essays. I received \$1,000 from RCC.

After I transferred to SOU, I applied for many, many scholarships and received about \$8,000.

Checking the box that indicated I had a criminal history was discouraging. I didn't know how much to disclose, what kind of details they wanted. I wrote and erased my explanation several times.

What barriers or fears did you have concerning college?

First of all I thought I was too old for college. I also didn't know what field I wanted to go in. I had a lot of interests though.

Accessing my old transcripts scared me too. My grades weren't great because I had health issues and was always in the hospital.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

I gained an enormous amount of confidence. My first math test I got 100% and I was shocked. Gradually, I revealed parts of my past to other students and instructors which dissipated shame. I started making connections with people of a perceived higher caliber and held my ground. I started to really like myself.



Curtis Ziegler, Psychology

**“Emotional and physical wellness
is attached to volunteerism”**

What made you decide to go to college?

I was in residential treatment at Addiction Recovery Center (ARC). A man from RCC who was very inspiring and authentic, spoke to us about going to college. I took that information and believed that I wanted to be a drug and alcohol counselor.

Six months after getting out of treatment I enrolled at RCC. No assistance, I just walked in the door and signed up.

Did you have support throughout college? Were you a part of TRIO?

TRIO was an amazing help with financial aid, etc. They are the ones that told me that I could move right into the bachelors program at SOU. If Project Rebound is an office similar to the TRIO office, then that's amazing. I would be willing to volunteer.

Did you apply for scholarships? If yes, did you have help with your essays?

Yes. Scholarships were given to me based on my perspective on homelessness. Scholarships are very important.

I received \$27,000 in scholarships with the help of numerous staff who read my letters and edited them.

I was able to inspire people and give them hope.

What would prepare formerly incarcerated individuals for college?

When someone with a criminal background wants to pursue a career, they should know what their limits are as far as employment. Felons cannot hold some jobs. Someone should run their background and be sure they are not limited by their criminal record. It is important to have a direction that is attainable to help you figure it out before you enroll. You can always start with the prerequisites.

Before registering, evaluate whether you have a stable place to live and accountability for financial aid and loans. Once you get the loans, there are major consequences. Someone needs to let students know about the seriousness of what they are taking on.

Stability is important – they may not be ready right out of prison. Assistance with setting up a professional profile that includes a new email address and learning how to navigate websites.

Readiness to engage is important.

Did you have help enrolling in school and/or utilized the resources available?

I asked for help and I got it. People need someone there to support them and be their ally. It needs to be about the person succeeding not the institutions involved.

What benefits did you gain in going to college besides learning?

Today I have a lot of autonomy. I'm not so much under the wings of others. I don't think I'm the normal story. I am not sure why this happened to me. I feel very blessed.

How far would you like to go in school?

I'm currently pursuing my master's in social work and social justice. I would like to teach at RCC potentially.



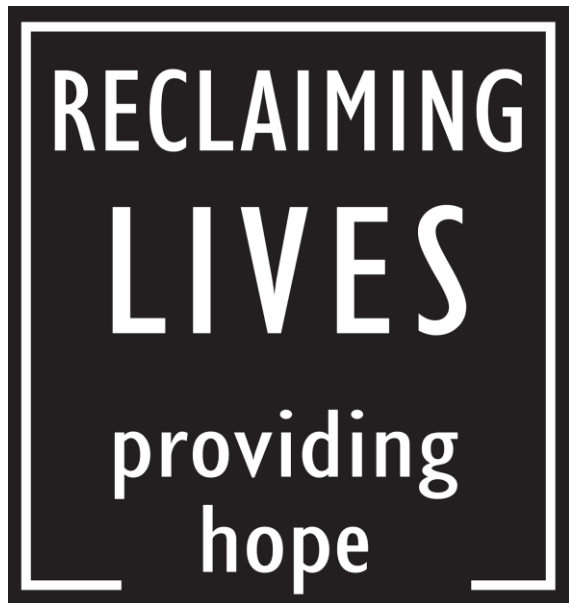
Barriers:

- Fear of asking questions**
- Outstanding school loans**
- Raising kids**
- Past mistakes/shame**
- Too old**
- Accessing old transcripts**
- Lack of computer skills**
- Uncertain about what direction to go in**
- Navigating the scholarship process**
- Hard to ask for help**
- Homelessness**
- Stigma**
- Working full-time**
- Lack of confidence**
- Obtaining more debt**
- Negative self-talk**



Post-secondary education provides:

- Confidence and connections
- Creates a desire to improve quality of life
- Increased employment opportunity
- Creates space from a life of addiction
- Break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration
- Creates curiosity - "What else can I achieve?"
- Establishes prosocial relationships
- Learn how to celebrate small successes
- Provides opportunity to venture out in uncharted territory
- Builds character and resilience
- Teaches to ask for help
- Learn how to manage money
- Autonomy
- Ability to write a new story of my life



This report was compiled for Redeeming Scholars
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