Support Services Are Infrastructure, Not Add-Ons

Building the out-of-classroom supports that turn courses inside into a college experience.

> Offering classes and calling it done will fail; a program has to identify students' holistic needs and meet them. Support outside the classroom, from advising and counseling to well-being check-ins, is just as critical inside as on campus, and it is infrastructure for persistence, belonging, and self-advocacy.

KEY CONCEPTS

1 It is not just about the classes

Approaching the work as "we are offering these classes, we are done" will fail the program. Students' holistic needs must be identified and met, and they are not so different from what higher education deals with every day.

2 Support is infrastructure

Services create a space where students feel they belong and can build self-advocacy skills. Through that relationship building, students persist through the challenges of earning a degree. These are essential services, not add-ons.

3 Lived experience strengthens the team

A multidisciplinary team spanning criminal justice, humanities, education, and school psychology, including members who are formerly incarcerated or system-impacted, is strong and dynamic, and shows students that "this is possible."

4 Consistency builds trust

Students show up because staff show up. Regular well-being check-ins, questions, and resources left students unafraid to ask questions of their own.

5 Time and space are the biggest barriers

There are ways to work around them: approved restricted-internet platforms such as Canvas, and dedicated weekly support time negotiated with the facility from the beginning.

WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- A weekly support day beyond class time
- Workshops on well-being and coping
- Advising and counseling alongside coursework
- Staff and students building relationships over time
- Students asking questions without fear
- Support delivered on restricted-internet platforms

STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE

Ask students what would be meaningful

Survey students and ask directly: what services would be helpful, and what do you want your college experience to include? Develop services that respond to those answers rather than assumptions.

Use the last minutes of class for feedback

Sit with students for the final five to ten minutes: are you enjoying yourself, is there anything we can add, do you see gaps in your learning?

Build a team that mixes expertise and lived experience

Combine professional expertise across disciplines with members who share students' lived experience of the carceral system. Pursue outside funding, such as foundation grants, to make out-of-class services possible.

Negotiate time and space from the beginning

Ask facility partners for a dedicated weekly block beyond classes, around three hours most weeks, so students can connect with support staff and faculty outside class. Extend support online through approved platforms.

QUICK CHECKLIST

- ☐ Survey students about desired services and supports
- ☐ Reserve class-end minutes for feedback regularly
- ☐ Recruit team members with lived experience
- ☐ Request dedicated weekly support time from the facility
- ☐ Use approved platforms to extend support online
- ☐ Pursue grant funding for out-of-class services

KEY TERMS

Self-advocacy • Speaking up for one's own needs and learning.

Multidisciplinary team • Members from different fields, ideally including lived experience of the carceral system.

Restricted internet • Limited online access allowing only approved educational platforms.