The Prison University Project’s College Program at San Quentin is one of the largest and longest-running prison higher education programs in the United States. It was established in 1996, when most higher education programs in prisons had closed down due to the passage of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which barred incarcerated people from accessing Pell Grants to pay for college. Approximately 350 students are enrolled at any given time, and nearly 500 complete at least one class during an academic year.

The Prison University Project is dedicated to empowering students to realize their potential, re-integrating marginalized communities into civil society, and catalyzing civic engagement, in order to build a just, vibrant democratic society. Our students benefit socially, psychologically, intellectually, and professionally from education in the liberal arts, and they use their talents, passion, and life experiences to make their own creative, academic, and social contributions.

The core values of the Prison University Project — inclusivity and academic excellence — are reflected in its commitment to provide free, high quality, liberal arts, face-to-face education to every mainline, program-eligible student at San Quentin who holds a high school diploma or GED. The time spent with instructors and classmates in the classroom is key to the psychologically and socially transformative nature of its programs. It also allows students to build the social capital that will serve them powerfully both pre- and post-release.

In recognition of our impact and our leadership in supporting educational opportunities for the incarcerated in California and nationally, the organization was awarded the 2016 National Humanities Medal by President Obama.

Former student and current board member Aly Tamboura:

“The Prison University Project changed my life. I have witnessed how education brings hope to the hopeless, a voice to the voiceless and opportunity to those who seek it out. Education gives us the ability to look at life through a different lens — one that begs us to question things critically. Education also gives us power to change the cycle of incarceration. With each course [the Prison University Project] offers and with every achievement a student gains, it produces a positive change in that person. It is a mind-freeing change.”
Vision, Goals, and Growth Plan for 2018 and Beyond

The Prison University Project has set the following strategic goals for the next three to five years:

1. **Expand and improve the College Program at San Quentin**
2. **Provide technical assistance to expand in-prison higher education in California and the U.S.**
3. **Educate the public to build a movement and inform change**
4. **Conduct rigorous research and evaluation to generate data and support continuous improvement**
5. **Strengthen the organizational capacity of the Prison University Project**
The Prison University Project’s overarching goal for the College Program at San Quentin is to set a world-class example of a radically inclusive, academically rigorous, student-centered liberal arts college that happens to be located within a prison. To fully realize this vision, the Prison University Project will focus on three key directions.

1. Build out course offerings, support services, and faculty training

The Prison University Project is committed to demonstrating both the importance and the possibility of meeting the needs of students who face a broad array of learning challenges and academic skill deficits, by providing the highest-quality instruction and individualized support. In the next three years, the Prison University Project will prioritize growth in the following areas:

- **Communication and critical thinking**, by expanding access to writing-intensive courses (e.g., journalism and creative writing) as well as collaborative projects, publications, and events that further strengthen skills and facilitate creative, intellectual, and political engagement with the outside world.

- **Math and science**, by adding a broader variety of math and science classes as well as more advanced classes, creating more institutional partnerships to educate, and inspiring students about pathways within STEM fields.

- **Technology**, by integrating technology better into the classroom, increasing technological and computer skills among students, advocating for increased technology use, and training across the California prison system.

- **Spanish language and culture**, by assembling the human and material resources and
technology to better immerse students, and improving their proficiency in the language and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world.

- **Student support services**, by hiring a Learning Differences Specialist to increase individualized, specialized tutoring and support for students with special needs; by developing more relevant teacher training and supervision; and by establishing more intensive student tracking and advising systems.

- **Instructor recruitment, training, retention, and support**, by creating more training, supervision, professional development, and professional networking opportunities for instructors and by actively recruiting more diverse faculty from across the disciplines.

2. **Build out alumni support services and leadership development programs**

Prison University Project alumni leave San Quentin with a strong academic foundation. However, services for people leaving prison in California are generally under-resourced and poorly coordinated. The Prison University Projects partners with several reentry-focused organizations, to ensure that students receive the support they need pre-and post-release. Over the next three years, the Prison University Project will expand and intensify this work by:

- **Formalizing a collaborative of reentry-related organizations** to ensure that every student receives fully coordinated support services during and after release from prison, with planning and advising starting at intake.

- **Maintaining contact with students post-release**; facilitating academic and professional mentorship and networking; supporting participation at events; and advocating for post-release student financial aid opportunities for alumni.

3. **Become a fully independent, accredited academic institution**

The Prison University Project is planning to transform its own academic institutional structure and affiliation, specifically by discontinuing its current partnership with Patten University. This is primarily due to concerns about Patten University’s mission fit and long-term organizational stability. A top Prison University Project priority remains safeguarding its capacity to offer high-quality programs with the greatest measure of organizational independence and integrity.
For many years, the Prison University Project has provided ad-hoc technical assistance and advice to other practitioners in the field of prison higher education across the U.S. In 2014, the passage of SB 1391 authorized California community colleges to receive funding for courses offered inside the state prison system. In 2015 the Prison University Project began advising and supporting various sites, and providing multi-day trainings to interested community college faculty and administrators.

Since that time, dozens of California community colleges have begun entering the field, to highly mixed results. This landscape presents significant challenges, but also an extraordinary possibility for the Prison University Project to play a leadership role in expanding educational opportunity not only within the prisons, but in their neighboring communities. By building the institutional capacity of these community colleges, the Prison University Project’s assistance intends to create a ripple effect beyond the incarcerated students, their families and communities, to include the local towns and regions in which these schools and prisons are located.

The Prison University Project is currently formalizing its training and technical assistance activities in order to scale the support it provides for the creation of high-quality in-prison education programs across California. This includes:

- **Creating toolkits and training procedures** for practitioners, as well as others in the field.
- **Offering several multi-day trainings per year** to practitioners from California and beyond.

- Providing intensive, customized, and hands-on support to select programs, with an emphasis on under-resourced regions with high potential for impact.
- Establishing statewide and regional networks of practitioners and other stakeholders, to foster professional development and partnership opportunities, and promote a professional culture of excellence and accountability in the field of higher education in prison.
One of the fundamental commitments of the Prison University Project is to humanizing the image of incarcerated people in the public imagination. We consider this both a humanitarian imperative and a critical strategy for bringing about a more rational and humane discussion about criminal justice policy in the U.S.
The Prison University Project has long worked to amplify and disseminate the voices of students and alumni, in order to transform public perceptions and attitudes. The Prison University Project will continue these activities, as well as expand them to:

**Engage the field and the public**
- Continue to host visits to San Quentin from an array of stakeholders and members of the public.
- Support staff and students’ engagement in public educational events.
- Educate professionals in corrections, higher education, philanthropy, media, policy, and others through briefings, events, publications, and site visits.
- Participate actively in the newly formed national network of practitioners, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison.

**Share stories of impact**
- Expand circulation of the semiannual newsletter, currently shared with over 6000 people and institutions, as well as of OpenLine, an annual journal of student work, and other publications.
- Highlight the creative, professional, and political work being done by current and former students independently and in collaboration with media and arts practitioners through videos, publications, and other media.

**Build communications capacity**
- Expand our social media presence and outreach.
- Develop the staffing and organizational infrastructure to maintain a strong public profile and presence.
While programs in prisons are traditionally evaluated from a correctional perspective — in terms of fiscal impact, effect, recidivism, and public safety — the Prison University Project seeks to evaluate the impact of its programs on the well-being of students themselves, as well as on their families, the larger community, and society as a whole.

Foremost, we are interested in educational attainment, including reading, writing, critical thinking, written and verbal communication, and quantitative reasoning skills, which we measure through systems embedded within the College Program itself.

In addition, the Prison University Project has established a partnership with U.C. Berkeley’s Goldman School of Public Policy to conduct a multi-year study on how participation in the College Program leads to improved student outcomes across a range of categories in addition to recidivism, including economic mobility, mental and physical health, civic engagement, educational attainment, and family and community stability.

This study will result in data for shaping policy, supporting advocacy and communications work, analyzing the value of the model itself, and creating tools with which future and existing programs may evaluate themselves. This is much-needed data that will make a significant contribution to the entire field of prison higher education, and that can be utilized by both advocates and practitioners across the country.

As a precursor to this study, in 2016, Dr. Amy Lerman produced a qualitative research report on the impact of participation in the College Program on students post-release, based on in-depth interviews conducted with 27 former students. This report suggests that participation in the Program leads to significant benefits for

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**GOAL 4**

*Conduct rigorous research and evaluation to generate data and support continuous improvement*
students, specifically related to their self-identity, mental health, and relationships with family and friends. Data highlights include:

- Over 90 percent of respondents suggested that the program positively affected their self-identity, mental health, and social and familial relationships.

- More than two thirds of respondents reported that the Prison University Project has positively influenced the prison culture at San Quentin, particularly in regards to race relations.

- Individuals who have participated in a prison higher education program believe their education provided long-term improvements in outcomes for them, as well as for their families and the correctional administration as a whole.
The Prison University Project is mindful of the robust organizational infrastructure that will be required to support the work outlined in this document. The Prison University Project intends to ensure that growth takes place thoughtfully, filling existing gaps and building for the future without placing undue strain on the organization. We plan to grow sustainably in the following areas:

- **Staff**: The Prison University Project will invest in developing and retaining existing staff (e.g., compensation benchmarking and potential salary adjustments, professional development, improved performance management systems, and strengthening organizational culture).

- **Board**: We will grow and develop the Board to support our current growth goals, in particular, by recruiting members with expertise in fundraising and governance.

- **Physical plant**: We will invest in much-needed upgraded information technology and equipment to support our work, both inside and outside San Quentin.

- **Strategic ability**: Given our increased organizational complexity, the Prison University Project will create a system to track progress toward the goals outlined here, collecting metrics throughout the duration of the plan.
“Everybody should have access to a college education because everybody counts. Everybody has value.”

—Rahsaan Thomas, Prison University Project Student