



## Prison University Project Founds Mount Tamalpais College

### Fact Sheet & Media Kit

#### MISSION AND OVERVIEW

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide an intellectually rigorous, inclusive Associate of Arts degree program and college preparatory program, free of charge, to people at San Quentin State Prison; to expand access to quality higher education for incarcerated people; and to foster the values of equity, civic engagement, independence of thought, and freedom of expression.

The College Program at San Quentin was founded in 1996, as an extension site of Patten College (later Patten University). The Prison University Project was formally established in 2003, to provide support to that program.

**Today, after twenty years of supporting a robust, high-quality Associate of Arts degree program at San Quentin State Prison, the Prison University Project has become its own institution of higher education, Mount Tamalpais College.**

The overarching goal of Mount Tamalpais College 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.

The College will continue to offer a 61-unit liberal arts curriculum that includes courses in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science, and culminates in an Associate of Arts degree. The program will also continue offering its five-course intensive college preparatory program in math and writing.

The College also remains committed to its longstanding open-admissions policy, whereby students are required only to hold either a high school diploma or GED. The College does not utilize a competitive admissions process, and no student is excluded from admission based on age, length of sentence, commitment offense, or time left to serve.

As has been the case since the program's inception, the College will continue to rely solely on private donations from individuals and foundations, rather than state or federal funding. No fees or tuition will be charged, and students will continue to receive school supplies and materials free of charge.

In recognition of its impact and leadership in supporting educational opportunities for incarcerated people, the Prison University Project was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama in 2016.

#### RATIONALE FOR INDEPENDENCE

Three key motivating factors have inspired the Prison University Project to seek independent accreditation:

- **Organizational Stability**—The historic partnership with Patten University was critical to the College Program's inception as well as its survival. However, the structural uniqueness of the Program, combined with its steady growth and increasingly ambitious goals, would have made finding a new partner a challenge. In this era of increasing instability for higher education institutions, independence also protects the program from unexpected changes in a partner institution's financial stability, mission, or strategic priorities.

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- **Capacity for Innovation**—Becoming independent means the freedom to develop policies and practices that are fully aligned with our strategic priorities, our values, and the needs of our students, for example, in curriculum development, academic policies and procedures, student support, staff and faculty training. We are now at liberty to establish new institutional partnerships, or even, eventually, create new extension sites at other institutions.
- **Symbolic Impact**—The creation of an independent, accredited college dedicated specifically to serving incarcerated people sends a powerful message, both to our students and to the society at large: our students are fully worthy and capable people, intellectuals and community members, and we are committed to investing significant resources into serving and including them.

## IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

The Prison University Project is committed to engaging with diverse forms of inquiry and analysis, including rigorous, data-driven evaluation, both to ensure that our work is effective and continually improving, and to document the powerful and complex impacts of higher education in prison.

While programs in prisons are traditionally evaluated from a correctional perspective—i.e., in terms of their fiscal impact, as well as their impact on recidivism and public safety—the Prison University Project is primarily concerned with the impact of programs on the well-being of students themselves, as well as on their families, their larger communities, and society as a whole.

Most immediately, we are interested in students' intellectual development and educational attainment, including in particular, critical reading and thinking, quantitative reasoning, and written and verbal communication skills. We measure these through systems embedded within the College Program itself.

We are also deeply interested in the impact of participation in the Program on students' long-term educational and professional attainment, social and economic wellbeing, mental and physical health, civic engagement, as well as on the wellbeing of their children and other family members.

Initial findings from a longitudinal study conducted by the UC Berkeley Goldman School of Public Policy have shown a direct and statistically significant correlation between the number of classes students have taken and a range of social-psychological outcomes, including students' confidence with public speaking; their overall mental health; their faith in their ability to accomplish their goals; their desire to make a positive contribution to others' lives; and their intention to continue their education.

## CURRENT MAJOR GOALS

**Building an Institutional Effectiveness Department.** We are currently expanding our institutional research capacity. With the support of our research partnership with U.C. Berkeley, we are building a set of metrics that tracks traditional data points such as persistence, retention, and attrition rates, as well as metrics more specific to our student population.

**Expanding Alumni Affairs.** We are now working to create an alumni affairs program, in order to increase our ability to comprehensively track and support our students post-release, and to connect them to a broader network of alumni, supporters, and other resources that support their success.

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**Enhancing Student Support.** We continue to expand our student support services, including college success and study skills workshops; regular office hours; trauma-informed teaching and learning resources; access to library materials, including research databases; and an under-development computer lab that will finally bring our students' computer and information literacy skills into the 21st century.

**Expanding the Technical Assistance Program.** As the field of prison higher education rapidly expands, the demand for training and technical assistance for new and emerging practitioners and programs continues to increase. While we have been providing support to the field in California and across the U.S. for years, we are now formalizing and expanding our work in this realm. This includes more intensive and frequent trainings, an array of web-based toolkits, regular meetings and convenings to network the field, and other tangible resources.

## **ABOUT OUR NAME: MOUNT TAMALPAIS COLLEGE**

Mount Tamalpais is the name of a mountain, the largest and most visible geographic feature in Marin County, that stands roughly five miles from San Quentin State Prison.

For us, the mountain is a powerful symbol of hope and strength that connects members of our community, both inside and outside of San Quentin State Prison. For many people at San Quentin, the mountain serves a positive psychological purpose—allowing them to maintain a visual connection with the physical world outside the prison walls. Outside the prison, Mount Tamalpais is one of the most ubiquitous references in the area; businesses and institutions across Marin county have adopted its name.

Mountains evoke timelessness, strength, achievement, hope, and are often associated with educational institutions for these reasons. Much like scaling a mountain, education gives you perspective; offers opportunities for adventure; makes your world bigger; and allows you to achieve meaningful, ambitious goals.

Former students often recount the experience of climbing Mount Tamalpais and looking down at San Quentin, and finding that this perspective helps shift their relationship to the prison as a place.

## **ACCREDITATION TIMELINE**

The Prison University Project began the process of seeking independent accreditation from the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) in July of 2018.

- In February 2019, the Prison University Project's application passed the Eligibility requirements.
- In August 2019, the Prison University Project submitted its first ever Institutional Self-Evaluation Report to ACCJC, in support of initial accreditation for the program. The report evaluates the institution against the accreditation standards outlined by ACCJC.
- In October 2019, the Prison University Project hosted a four-day accreditation site visit conducted by a 10-member team. The site visitors, comprising faculty and administrators from colleges across California, observed the program; interviewed Prison University Project staff, students, faculty, and board members; and evaluated the degree to which the organization met the standards of accreditation.
- During its January 2020 meeting, ACCJC accepted the Prison University Project as a Candidate for Accreditation.

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## RESOURCES AND FURTHER LEARNING

- [“Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide to Higher Education in Prison”](#) by Tanya Erzen, Mary R. Gould, and Jody Lewen
- [“The Promise and Practice of Prison Higher Education”](#) by Amy E. Lerman (a longitudinal, mixed-methodological study documenting the effects of participation in the College at San Quentin)
- [“Prison Higher Education and Social Transformation”](#) by Jody Lewen (abridged keynote address from the 2013 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison in St. Louis)
- [Prison University Project Strategic Plan 2018](#) (note that a great deal headway has been made on the priorities outlined in this document)
- [Fall 2018 Print Newsletter](#) announcing accreditation process
- [“Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reform: 21st Century Solutions to 20th Century Problems” Academic Conference Video 2018](#)
- [TEDxSanQuentin 2016](#)

## STUDENT PUBLICATIONS

- [“The Judge and Jury Agreed I Didn’t Kill Anyone. So Why Did I Just Serve 16 Years For Murder?”](#) by Adnan Khan. *New York Times*.
- [“I Host a Popular Podcast. I’m Also in Prison.”](#) by Rahsaan Thomas. *The Marshall Project*.
- [“I did 18 years in prison for murder. Now I’m on a mission to end gun violence.”](#) by James Houston. *San Francisco Chronicle*.
- [“One prison taught me racism. Another taught me acceptance.”](#) by Jesse Vasquez. *The Washington Post*.
- [“Redemption is not just for me.”](#) by Emile DeWeaver. *San Francisco Chronicle*.

## PHOTOGRAPHY

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