

Promising Practices

The Prison Arts Collective: An Art-Based Therapeutic Program in a Correctional Setting

Creating art is often thought of as cathartic or therapeutic, [with effects](#) ranging from improved self-awareness and communication to improved wellness. Art-based therapeutic interventions adopted for correctional settings can provide learning opportunities while also creating a sense of community. One promising example of a correctional-based art intervention program is the [Prison Arts Collective \(PAC\)](#), a statewide art in corrections program based out of California's San Diego State University. The program was started in 2013 by the director of the [School of Art + Design at San Diego State](#) Professor Annie Buckley.

The Prison Arts Collective (PAC) operates out of a belief that art is a fundamental human right, with the program offering art workshops to men and women across prisons in California. The workshop curriculum is created in collaboration with teaching artists, faculty mentors and staff and is available [open-source](#); the curriculum is designed to center the learner and to engage participants in discussion and inquiry, critical as well as creative thinking, and reflection and creation processes. Art-based classes are designed to remain flexible and capable of adjusting course based on student interest and teacher area of expertise. All programs include elements of art history/culture, reflection and creation. Offered courses include foundations in art, introduction to drawing, portfolio development, collaborative mural workshops and creative writing courses.

One unique element of PAC is its art facilitator training, which offers incarcerated artists university-level content education in the arts.

The 60-hour program allows for dialogue, learning and opportunities to learn and practice teaching skills. Upon completion of the program and the accompanying three-month apprenticeship, graduates have the opportunity to teach a weekly multidisciplinary art program at the prison, with PAC staff and faculty serving as mentors. So far, 50 facilitators have graduated the training and are teaching weekly classes in eight prisons.

The program began at San Diego State University but has since expanded to other universities. PAC's other chapters include California State University San Bernadino, California State University Fresno and California State University Fullerton.



Partnerships & Success

Funding for the Prison Arts Collective is provided by organizations such as the California Arts Council, the National Endowment of the Arts and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.



At the heart of this program is a strong partnership between the California state prison system and the California state university system. Prison-based instruction is provided by undergraduates, graduate students and alumni, as well as faculty, allowing students the opportunity to facilitate art-based discussions and coursework. One other unique aspect of PAC is that it invites [guest artists](#) to participate in its art programs to share wisdom and guidance.

During the COVID pandemic, PAC created the podcast series [Outside: Inside Radio](#), which interviews formerly incarcerated artists, and a video series called [Outside: Inside Productions](#), a collection of instructional art and wellness videos.

[As of April 2023](#), PAC facilitates weekly art programs at 13 California prisons. [According to the PAC website](#), 5,437 incarcerated individuals and 150 California state university system students participated in programming.

[Studies](#) of art-based correctional programs indicate these types of programs help incarcerated participants build important skills such as reflection and learning from mistakes. Additionally, research has shown that participation in art-based programs reduces disciplinary issues. The Prison Arts Collective, which has been in operation for a decade, is unique in its university-prison partnership, in the way courses are collaboratively created by participants, staff, faculty and students, and in its arts facilitator training program for incarcerated program participants.

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