

America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model

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By Courtney Hutchison

The University of California system — one of the largest employers in the state — will "ban the box" from all initial job applications this fall thanks to the advocacy of the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI), a student-led group that supports formerly incarcerated students and those affected by mass incarceration.

Under the new policy, applicants will no longer be asked to check a box on initial job applications indicating if they have a criminal history. Instead, a background check will only be conducted once the applicant advances to the final stage of the hiring process. This advocacy effort builds on the work of a [national ban-the-box campaign](#) started in 2004, which has led [150 cities and counties](#) to endorse similar policies for hiring in their jurisdictions.

Prior to this policy change, seven of the 10 UC schools inquired about felony convictions during the initial stage of the job application process — a "huge barrier" for formerly incarcerated workers, who are often deterred from applying out of fear of employer discrimination, said Clarence Ford, a UC Berkeley master of public policy student who led the advocacy efforts.

USI hopes the new policy will have a twin impact: mitigating "up-front employer discrimination," which is well

documented, and encouraging people "who have made mistakes in their past" to apply, Ford said.

In [September 2016](#), *America's Tomorrow* featured the Underground Scholars Initiative and its multipronged efforts to build a prison-to-school pipeline for young adults across California. The group, which was founded at Berkeley in 2013, successfully advocated to ban the box on that campus in fall 2016, inspiring the group to extend the ban across the UC system.

USI provides support and outreach to incarcerated or recently released individuals, demystifying the process of applying or transferring to UC schools. The group also advocates to remove structural barriers to opportunity for those with a criminal record, including this recent, more extensive effort to ban the box.

USI's advocacy, first in Berkeley and now across the UC system, has added to increasing momentum around fair-chance employment policies in California, including citywide efforts to ban the box among employers in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Together, these efforts laid the groundwork for a [comprehensive statewide policy](#), signed by Governor Jerry Brown on October 14, 2017, that prohibits all employers in the state from making pre-hire and personnel decisions based on an individual's criminal history. The new law, which goes into effect January 2018, extends existing legislation governing public employers to all employers in the private sector with more than five employees.

Every year in the United States, more than 600,000 people, disproportionately African American and Latino, are released from state prisons. Many reenter society with little-to-no work experience, only to encounter a host of other roadblocks — such as discriminatory hiring policies and widespread social stigma — that cut them off from opportunity and make it difficult to obtain employment.

With [190,000 staff and faculty](#), the UC system's willingness to support the hiring of formerly incarcerated individuals represents a significant impact on economic opportunity, and serves as a model for inclusive hiring for other educational institutions or large employers across the nation.