

Practice of Freedom

**Spotlight Update: The Accelerated College Transition (ACT)
Program**

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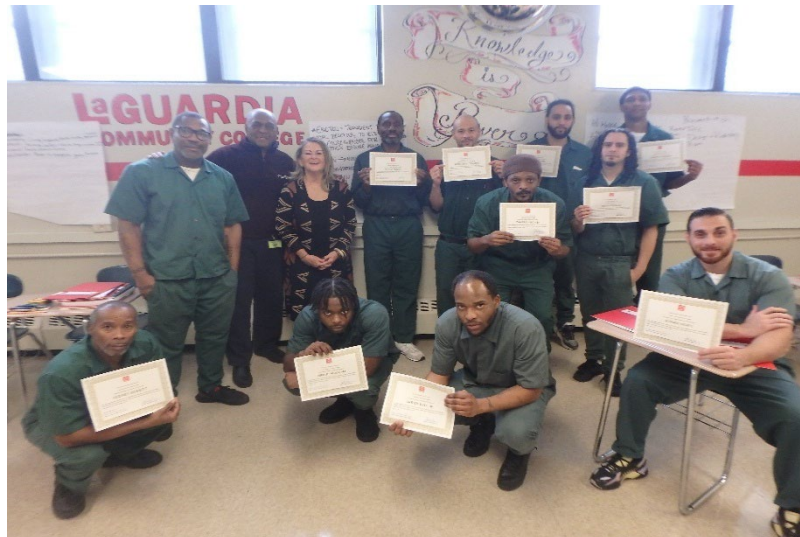
Referenced by the editors in DSJ's Fall 2023 Vol. 8 No. 2 special edition, *Adult Education & Prisoner Reintegration*, a post-award action plan for the Accelerated College Transition (ACT) program was finally approved by the US Department of Justice in July 2024, officially launching the three-year project funded under the Second Chance Act Improving Reentry Education and Employment Outcomes grant. Since then, ACT investigators have made headway in creating a program targeting incarcerated adult males, offering a pathway of prerelease college and continuing education courses with sustained wraparound supportive services leading to post release college admission, student retention, and graduation.

ACT targets the residents of Queensboro Correctional Facility (QCF), a New York State prison situated directly across the street from the City University of New York's LaGuardia Community College campus and is specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of urban prisoners slated to return home to the New York metropolitan area within three months. The project enhances the college's productive partnership with the New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS) that began in 2017, when CUNY Professors John Chaney and Dr. Joni Schwartz-Chaney initiated volunteer college courses at the facility. With ACT, each student can now utilize their remaining sixty to ninety days of prerelease time completing one of four accredited college course offerings while receiving one-on-one prerelease case management interventions with an ACT Prison to College Liaison. Once released and enrolled into the college, each student then receives credit for their course completion at QCF while receiving tailored wraparound transitional supports and mentoring until graduation. Enabled with three years of funding totaling 900K, ACT faculty can now contribute to the praxis-driven community project while receiving "reassigned time" that gets applied toward their contractual teaching workload requirement.

DOCCS has also contributed to the plethora of research confirming the positive impact educational resources have on the New York State prison population in promoting successful and sustained community reintegration. In its most recent Legislative Report on Reentry Planning and Access to Social Services, it reveals that among individuals in DOCCS custody with an academic need who were released in 2021, 93% had addressed their academic need, meaning they either participated in programming or were offered an opportunity to participate in academic programming. Among those first released in 2021 with an academic need, 58% had satisfied their academic need while still in custody or were still participating in programming at the time of release. They further report that among releases from DOCCS with an academic need, those who successfully completed academic programming returned to custody within 3 years at a lower rate (33%) than those who did not complete academic programming (40%).

The overwhelming majority of QCF residents are Black males, their overrepresentation in the national carceral system being well-documented. The Vera Institute of Justice confirms that while Black males are 15% of the New York State population, they represent an astounding 48% of the population in our state prisons. The need for a productive collaboration between community resources that squarely address this glaring disparity has never been greater than right now.

Toward this end, ACT Principal Investigators have prioritized LaGuardia Community College's commitment to engage their newly released students enrolled into the college with wide array of supportive services from admission through graduation. Fully realizing the importance of consistent and strategic engagement of these students during this crucial leg of their academic and reintegration journey, ACT's commitment to these students is enhanced once they receive a letter of admission and register for classes.

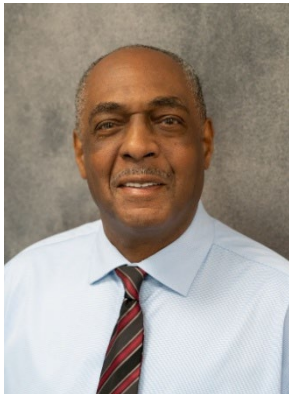


ACT Cohort 3: Non-Verbal Communication 3-credit college course.

ACT investigators are extremely encouraged with the progress of the program's post release component, recently celebrating the commencement of Spring 2025 classes for several students who now continue their education on campus. The sentiments expressed in the quote below is reflective of many.

The ACT program has made my transition to college easier by providing support and resources. I first met Dr. Joni Schwartz and Professor John Chaney while incarcerated, and they continued to support me after my release..... Their guidance has given me confidence in my classes and a sense of community. I don't think I could've made this transition without them. -----Raul Roman

On track to meet its annual goal of enrolling 80 QCF residents into prerelease college and continuing education courses, administrative obstacles continue to test ACT, a foreseeable circumstance for a new project having to learn, then meticulously navigate compliance protocols with local, state, and federal bureaucracies. Most recently, a monthlong statewide strike of DOCCS corrections officers shut down all program operations at the prison, including canceling ACT's popular First Year Seminar course midstream. With plans to resume in April 2025, ACT investigators are extremely encouraged by its year-one outcomes. Early assessments confirm the effectiveness of its unique pedagogical design for incarcerated adult males in utilizing sustained wraparound education and supportive services as a pathway leading to successful community reintegration. In time this project may well find itself becoming a replicated collaborative model for colleges and corrections institutions nationwide.



John R. Chaney is a Professor at City University of New York's LaGuardia Community College and former director of Criminal Justice programs for the college. A recognized authority in developing productive agency collaborations that promote successful prisoner community reintegration, he serves as Principal Investigator for ACT and has provided technical assistance for the Criminal Justice section for the American Bar Association; New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services; New York State Department of Education; Nevada Workforce Connections; and Uganda Prisons Service in East Africa. He is co-editor and co-author of *Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizen* and *Gifts from the Dark: Learning from the Incarceration Experience*. Professor Chaney received his B.A. from New York University and a J.D with honors from Brooklyn Law School.

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