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Incarcerated to Educated: The On-Campus Experiences of College Students Post Incarceration

Taylor Comer
Eastern Illinois University

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Abstract

As reentry rates continue to climb in the United States, more individuals with felony convictions on their criminal records will be looking to obtain post-secondary education to make themselves more marketable in the workforce. The purpose of this narrative study was to examine the experiences of three individuals that pursued higher education after being released from prison. It was determined that the criminality of these individuals had minimal impact on their experiences in higher education, and that there are other components of their identity that have a heavier influence on their likelihood of success. The other components of their identities also gave stronger indication as to what type of support or resources would be most beneficial to them. The participants of this study discussed their experiences with feelings of challenge and support from students and faculty, as well their experiences with factors that historically have served as systemic barriers to this population of students. Through several perspectives, real world implications are discussed, along with recommendations for individuals that may interact with and support this population of students.

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Thesis Director
Jon K. Coleman

Thesis Committee Member
Amber Webb

Thesis Committee Member
Danessa Carter

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Department of Counseling and Higher Education, Eastern Illinois University

Abstract

As reentry rates continue to climb in the United States, more individuals with felony convictions on their criminal records will be looking to obtain post-secondary education to make themselves more marketable in the workforce. The purpose of this narrative study was to examine the experiences of three individuals that pursued higher education after being released from prison. It was determined that the criminality of these individuals had minimal impact on their experiences in higher education, and that there are other components of their identity that have a heavier influence on their likelihood of success. The other components of their identities also gave stronger indication as to what type of support or resources would be most beneficial to them. The participants of this study discussed their experiences with feelings of challenge and support from students and faculty, as well their experiences with factors that historically have served as systemic barriers to this population of students. Through several perspectives, real world implications are discussed, along with recommendations for individuals that may interact with and support this population of students.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to my grandparents. Thank you both for making my dreams of going to college a reality; I owe my degrees to you. Grandpa, thank you for fostering my passion for learning and never saying "no" to taking me to Borders and Barnes and Noble for a new book. You showed me the power of education very early on and I will continue to value that lesson for the rest of my life. Grandma, your time came before I could make you proud. I wish you were here to hear about all that I have accomplished, but I know you can see it. Your memory continues to be a blessing; until I see you again.

In Loving Memory of Ann Steinbach

1945 - 2012

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To my mum, Donna, thank you for always putting Ali and I first. Your selflessness and sacrifice allowed me to dream bigger and work towards my goals in life. Thank you for being there, whether I needed emotional support, advice, or someone to share a laugh with over sarcastic remarks. Everything I do is for you, and I hope one day I can repay you for the lifetime of opportunities you provided for me. I love you more, always.

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Finally, to Eve, thank you for always sitting at the table with me while I worked and being there for close cuddles afterwards. Though you are a cat, you have shown me true companionship and what it means to be a woman's best friend. I just love you, my little meatball.

Table of Contents

Chapter I

Introduction

Imagine this: you decide to pursue a baccalaureate degree. You find a major that you are passionate about, you find an institution that is exactly what you are looking for, and you look to the future with optimism about the new opportunities this degree will provide you. Your optimism and excitement quickly turn to anxiety and disappointment as the college you dreamed of becomes out of reach because you are ineligible for federal financial aid, you are denied on-campus housing at the college that did admit you, and you cannot pursue the major you love because of a mistake you made in the past. To imagine that one's dreams become out of reach because of their past may be hyperbolic to some, but this is the reality for individuals that have served an incarceration period.

The decision to go to college and earn a degree is not easy for some, but it can be especially challenging for those who at one point resided in a correctional facility. In 2007, the Common App, a college application that is utilized by over 500 colleges and universities across the United States, added a question regarding the applicant's criminal history in an effort to enhance safety measures on collegiate campuses after the Virginia Tech massacre claimed the lives of 32 individuals (Pelletiere, 2017; Weichselbaum, 2016). Though the question was well-intended, the benefits are debatable, especially considering the lack of data that supports the idea that being asked about criminal history helps to foster lower levels of on-campus violence (Johnson et al., 2021; Stewart & Uggen, 2020).

In addition to being concerned with the systemic challenges that start as early as applying to a higher education institution, individuals that are looking to get a college education post-

incarceration may worry about being stigmatized by their peers or faculty members they interact with. People who have not served an incarceration period may look at those that have as being different from themselves, and the level to which the previously incarcerated student internalizes these stigmas is significant because it impacts their ability to successfully reintegrate into the general public after they are released (Evans et al., 2018). If a student heavily internalizes the stigmas that their non-criminal peers and faculty may place on them, they will experience more difficulty in being successful in their acclimation to life post-incarceration and in turn be less likely to succeed in getting their baccalaureate degree (Evans et al., 2018).

Being aware of the obstacles a college student may have to overcome if they are completing their degree after serving an incarceration period can be advantageous in helping higher education administrators understand how to best support this population of students. Students need support physically, emotionally, academically, and sometimes in ways that are typically provided by familial units (Dickson & Tennant, 2018, p. 92). Knowing how to best support students that are getting their degree post-incarceration begins with understanding their experiences. Once higher education administrators understand the experiences of this unique population of students, not only can collegiate institutions create a new source of enrollment as the United States faces a nationwide decline in enrollment, but they can implement policies and resources that ensures nobody is left with an array of closed windows, and the dreams that once felt so far out of reach for them can become their reality (Vedder, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the essence of being an on-campus college student post-incarceration. This study investigated not only the obstacles these

individuals may face, but also the types and levels of support provided to them as well. The experiences of on-campus college students post-incarceration included both positive and negative experiences of college students on-campus after they had completed their incarceration period and enrolled at an institution of higher education.

Research Questions

This study aimed to understand the experiences previously incarcerated students had as they attempted to earn their college degree at an institution of higher education. When considering what the experiences of previously incarcerated college students are, the following questions were used to best understand the experiences of this unique population of students:

RQ1: What systemic obstacles do previously incarcerated students face on campus as

they pursue their degree?

RQ2: What social challenges do previously incarcerated students face?

RQ3: What support do previously incarcerated students receive from faculty and

staff at their institution?

RQ4: How do previously incarcerated students experience support by their peers as they

pursue their degree?

Propositions

Through researching the experiences experienced on campus by students who have previously served an incarceration period, one possible outcome for these students was that they would be exposed to social stigmas and in turn will have experienced institutional barriers and a

lack of support from their instructors. This study hoped to create awareness for faculty and

administrators on collegiate campuses on how they can better support students on their campuses

who have served an incarceration period. Additionally, this study may have assisted collegiate

administrators in improving their campus's climate for previously incarcerated students by

correcting any myths they have heard, or misconceptions faculty, staff, or students may have

had.

Significance of the Study

In 2022, approximately 39,506 adults were released from correctional facilities in the

United States; this is 4,404 more individuals than the amount of people released in 2021 (Federal

Bureau of Prisons, 2022). There are people within this 39,506 that will reoffend and potentially

end up back in a U.S. correctional facility, but there are also people that will attempt to create a

brighter future for themself and put this experience behind them. Many of the individuals that are

hoping to better themself and create the opportunity for a brighter future for themself and their

families may look into pursuing education from institutions of higher education as the skills and

knowledge gained from an educational experience are considered valuable to employers (Giani

et al., 2020, p. 517).

Knowing that almost 40,000 people will be reintegrating into society across the United

States, college administrators may benefit from creating support plans for students that may be

looking to turn their life around by getting a degree through their institution. Students that were

previously incarcerated will have experiences and challenges that are atypical to that of a

traditional college student. The information from this study was gathered with the intent of being

utilized by collegiate administrators in creating better support and resources for previously

incarcerated students, thus creating a stronger likelihood of the student being successful at their institution.

Limitations of the Study

While this study aimed to understand the experiences of students as they completed degrees on-campus post-incarceration, it is important to acknowledge that there are potential limitations within this study.

The first limitation of this study was the lack of diversity. All three participants of this study were white men. According to the Alexander (2014), the United States Criminal Justice system is harsher on black people than it is white people. A difference in treatment has the potential to result in different experiences that can influence their decision to earn a college degree or certificate. Since the participants of this study did not represent any minority groups, this study may not encompass the experiences of individuals within this population that are not white.

Another limitation that had the potential to occur is varying levels of honesty among participants. Some participants may have felt obliged or inclined to not disclose certain experiences or fabricate their experiences in an effort to either fulfill what they think the researcher wanted to hear or because they were not completely comfortable with the researcher. Despite ample efforts to establish rapport and ensure the participant is comfortable, the researcher was unable to guarantee that the participant was completely honest and false responses could have an impact on the findings of the study.

A final potential limitation of the study is who is willing to participate in this study. There are nine different classifications of felonies (Class A - Class I) recognized in the United

States, and the type of felonies under each classification are usually similar to one another (StateRecords, n.d.). If, for example, the researcher only gets participants with Class G felonies (negligent homicide and various types of embezzlement), the experiences discussed within this study would be limited to people with those specific charges. This would create a lack of variability in the study and in turn make it difficult to discuss the experiences of other on-campus students post-incarceration as well as make it difficult to capture the true essence of being a previously incarcerated college student.

Definitions of Terms

- **convicted:** To be found guilty of a criminal offense by either a jury or a judge (Judicial Council of California, 2023).

- **incarceration:** "the long-term confinement of convicted and sentenced offenders" (United States Department of Justice, 1999, p. 1)

- **on-campus student:** For this study, the term *on-campus student* will be used to describe any student completing courses for a degree, certificate, or certification through an in-person program rather than online.

- **post-incarceration:** For this study, the term *post-incarceration* refers to the time after someone has completed an incarceration period.

- **Previously incarcerated:** "Anyone who has been in a carceral setting and is now released" (University of California, Berkeley, 2019).

Summary

Individuals who have experienced incarceration for committing a crime face many stigmas and struggles in society and one of the most powerful tools for improving a person's situation in

life is through education. These individuals often experience struggles in finding the resources

and support to pursue higher education. This study looked to gain a better understanding of the

on-campus college experiences of students post-incarceration as they attend either two- and four-

year institutions in hopes of earning a certificate, an associates, or a Bachelor's degree. This

study helped faculty and staff at institutions of higher education to better understand this

population and their unique needs. Chapter two will provide a review of the relevant literature

on higher education and this population of students.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

When determining how successful a student may be as they attempt to navigate higher education after concluding a prison sentence, there are two major factors that need to be considered: the barriers to college and academic success and the facilitators of student success (Donaldson & Viera, 2021). Barriers to higher education and academic success are determining factors for a student that has completed an incarceration sentence to successfully enroll in, and complete, academic courses. Even if this unique population of students has the means to attend college and take courses, they may not truly be successful without a concrete support system at the institution facilitating their success.

Barriers to Higher Education for Individuals with Criminal Records

In discussing the barriers to college and academic success, one of the most important factors to consider is the presence of stigma (Hibbett, 2005). Almost everyone in society can be stigmatized to some degree, but the ways in which people are identified vary depending on what is being stigmatized. More so than not, the stigmas that accompany having a criminal record are exposed through certain demeanors and behaviors (Evans et al., 2019). People in society that have a flawless criminal record hold certain, typically negative, perceptions of individuals with criminal records, but individuals that have served prison sentences also hold certain perceptions of themselves (Evans et al., 2019).

While it is important to consider how the presence of stigma impacts the experiences of on-campus college students after they complete an incarceration period, there are also systemic barriers that hinder this population's likelihood of completing their college degree. One of the

most commonplace systemic barriers is found on college applications where the applicant is

asked to mark the appropriate box (yes or no) to disclose any criminal history. This practice can

discourage otherwise qualified applicants from even applying and prohibit them from being

admitted into universities (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 706). Considering how early in the college

journey this barrier occurs, Johnson et al. (2021) explained that in recent years, there has been

considerable debate in higher education pertaining to the necessity of asking college applicants

about their criminal history, gaining enough momentum to create the "Ban the Box" social

movement.

Stigmatization

Many times, individuals with criminal records already have a poor perception of

themself, and these stigmas and perceptions are worsened by hyperbolic media depictions and

political rhetoric (Evans et al., 2019). Many individuals are told from an early age to "walk a

mile in someone's shoes" before judging them because everyone has a story, and that story may

be hidden away behind stigmatization. However, this philosophy is often abandoned when

discussing the incarcerated population. Even if someone is convicted of homicide because they

were defending a loved one or if someone is a registered sex offender because they were caught

engaging in intercourse in public when they were 18 while their significant other was only 16,

they will carry the scarlet letters of stigmatization for these crimes, judged by many people who

become aware of them.

In terms of stigmas put on students that have served prison sentences by college

administrators, certain crimes hold more severe impacts of stigmatization than others (McTier et

al., 2020a). Many administrators believe that individuals with sexual related offenses should not

have the privilege of attending campus sponsored activities or have access to on-campus

housing, as this can pose a potential threat to the safety of other students in some situations

(McTier et al., 2020b). If certain groups of previously incarcerated students are stigmatized to

the level of not being permitted to live on-campus, this creates a new set of barriers for them. Not

only does not having access to housing have the potential to create financial stress (especially

considering it is often difficult for individuals with certain types of convictions to find

employment), but it also creates a sense of disconnect because it is harder for these individuals to

create meaningful relationships with others and sends them a nonverbal message that they are not

welcome in that institution's community (McTier et al., 2020). If the barriers are extreme

enough, individuals with criminal records may think that higher education is unattainable, and it

will deter them from attempting to better themselves academically.

   Stigmatization Among the Discreditable and the Discredited. When an individual

who has previously served a prison sentence makes the decision to enroll in university, they can

either be what Goffman (1963) described as discreditable or discredited. At the simplest level,

stigma is a particular type of relationship between an attribute and a stereotype (Goffman, 1963).

This relationship identifies a person as either discreditable or discredited. If someone is

discreditable, the trait that can be stigmatized (in this case, their criminal history) has not been

disclosed often because the person is under the impression that people who are unaware of their

criminal status are unable to identify that they have a felonious past, however the potential for

revelation of that status always remains a possibility. If someone's stigmatized attribute has been

revealed, then the person is considered to have the status of discredited as that attribute has

become known to others, or others have been able to recognize the attribute, leading to the

person being marginalized or judged by their surrounding community (Carnevale, 2007). College students that have served a prison sentence can typically make the choice for themselves as to whether they want their peers to know of their criminal record, and if they do want to disclose that information, they also choose how and when it is exposed. However, there are some instances in which it is inevitable that someone who is applying for college is required to disclose any criminality on their record; the most prominent instance being on college applications.

Despite the fact that nearly a quarter of America's population has some sort of criminal history and 20 million of those people specifically have a felony on their criminal record, many colleges and universities gate-keep college admissions by forcing applicants to indicate their status on the application, specifying whether or not they have a criminal record and if so, to describe it. Some colleges even take this a step further by running state background checks on applicants to ensure that they are being completely honest on their application, as well as guarantee the applicant does not have a conviction on their record that would prohibit them from being able to obtain licensure to work with populations such as the ill or children (Custer, 2018). If a student applies to a university and discloses that they do have a criminal record and then explains what they were convicted of, they skip the idea of being discreditable almost entirely and become discredited. While there are certain crimes that individuals can still choose to not disclose or remain in the discreditable stage, there are some crimes (namely sexual related offenses) that students cannot conceal.

When Becoming Discredited is Inevitable. Rubenstein et al. (2019) explained that even though recidivism rates among individuals with sexual offenses on their record is lower than

other crimes, this type of charge comes with an incredible number of challenges and obstacles

because universities are required to provide information on where they can find sexual offenders

on campus if there are any. The requirement that the presence of any sexual offenders on campus

is acknowledged comes from the Federal Campus Sex Crime Prevention Act of 2000, which

states:

> To ensure that the information [about registered sex offenders] is
>
> readily accessible to the campus community… colleges and universities [are required]
>
> to provide the campus community with clear guidance as to where this information can
>
> be found, and clarifies that Federal laws governing the privacy of educational records do
>
> not prevent campus security agencies or other administrators from disclosing
>
> such information (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 65,6598).

This act was established to ensure that students would be protected on their college campuses

and feel safe even if they were aware that they may share a classroom or communal area with a

sexual offender.

　　　　While research indicates that an overwhelming majority of the population agree that

information regarding sexual offenders, including their name, photo, address, and type of vehicle

they own, should be accessible to anyone, it simultaneously indicates that it does not create any

notable advantages to public notification of a sexual offender being within a close proximity

(Garland et al., 2018). With a swift internet search, most people can find information on sexual

offenders within a close geographical radius of them in the time it takes to make a cup of coffee.

Even though these websites also often contain the exact charge a sexual offender was convicted

of, many people overlook that and focus on the portion of the report that requires the individual

to register themself as a sex offender. Overlooking the specific charge makes the person

convicted of being a sexual offender automatically discredited by people in their community, as

many people automatically assume that they are a "vile and wicked individual" (Garland et al.,

2018). Individuals with sexual offense convictions on their record are typically shown little

empathy or flexibility because the general public views these types of crimes as highly serious

due to common moral judgment.

   Herzog and Einat (2016) explained that the moral judgements and attitudes people have

toward socially unacceptable behavior has a direct correlation to how severe people perceive

certain crimes to be. When someone hears of a sex offender, they may think of someone who is

well into adulthood sexually abusing a child or having a secret stash of child pornography on

their computer when in reality someone can become a sex offender over something seemingly

less threatening, such as indecent exposure due to public urination while intoxicated. However, if

someone were to assume the former, they may perceive this individual to be a threat to the safety

of others because sexual exploitation of a child is an incredibly serious crime. In instances such

as the Common App, where there is limited space for an individual to explain the nature of their

criminal charge(s), an admissions representative can make a variety of assumptions, both

positively and negatively. While some admissions counselors may assume the individual is

making an honest attempt to better themselves and are deserving of a second chance at life, other

admissions counselors may possess an assumption that would lead them to feel inclined to deny

admission for this student in an effort to keep other current and future students and community

members safe.

Keeping student safety and wellbeing is the utmost priority for many institutions, but there are ways in which institutions can rewrite policies and procedures to keep the same amount of safety instilled for non-criminal students while simultaneously not immediately discrediting students with certain offenses (Natow, 2020). While there are legitimate arguments that certain individuals that should be barred from having access to on-campus housing or majors that would require interaction with vulnerable populations (such as the sickly or children) because of their previous criminal actions they were convicted of such as a sexual offense charge, universities can also take their investigations a step further and determine if disclosing to other students that they will be sharing a learning space with a registered sexual offender is vital to their safety based on the reason in which the person has a sexual offense on their record. This would not require students with criminal records to be immediately discredited, but it may for more consideration of those convicted of serious crimes and impact the stigmas during the process (Pinel et al., 2005).

College Applications as a Systemic Barrier for Individuals with Criminal Records

When one considers a systemic barrier, it is not uncommon for people to consider barriers that are instilled once an individual has access to a formal institution. However, there are some instances in which there is a barrier to how accessible a resource is. A prime example of a systemic barrier to gaining access to higher education for individuals with criminal records is found on the college application. Johnson et al. (2021) noted that roughly 80 percent of collegiate institutions in the United States have a box for applicants to mark if they have been convicted of a felony, as well as text lines under the box to describe the charge(s) if they have been convicted (p. 706). This barrier gained considerable attention during the Obama

administration in 2016 upon the U.S. Department of Education's realization that almost 600,000

people are released from state and federal correctional facilities every year, and these people will

be subjected a plethora of sanctions, laws, and limitations that will make it difficult for them to

reintegrate into society (Johnson et al., 2021).

When considering if asking about criminals' history is truly necessary on college

applications, Stewart and Uggen (2020) determined that the most prominent reasons institutions

ask about an applicant's criminal history is to "minimize and reduce campus violence, protecting

against potential liability cases, and reducing the rates of illicit drug usage" (p.161). While the

logic behind these reasons is sound, Stewart and Uggen (2020) went on to reveal that there is no

actual evidence that proves that asking about criminality on the college application has aided in

reducing the rates of campus crime. With no research to reinforce the reasons for colleges to

require applicants to disclose whether or not they have any sort of criminal history, many states

are beginning to reconsider and even ban their institutions from asking applicants to check the

criminality box.

In 2017, one year after the U.S. Department of Education under the Obama

administration openly acknowledged how serious of an issue the criminality box is on college

applications, Louisiana became the first state to pass legislation that regulates how and when

institutions can ask applicants questions regarding their criminal record with exception to sexual-

related offenses (Johnson et al., 2021; Phoenix & Steib, 2021). Louisiana officials were driven to

create legislation that limited how much a university can know about an applicant's criminal

record before an admission decision is made because they saw the criminality box as both a

deterrent for potential applicants, as well as a determinant of how likely they are to get accepted

into a given institution depending on how information pertaining to their criminal record is used (Johnson et al., 2021). It is important to note that Phoenix and Steib (2021) clarified that this law only puts limitations on criminal inquiries before a decision process is made. In other words, colleges and universities in Louisiana are unable to ask applicants about their criminal history before they are given an admission decision but can be subjected to questions regarding criminality after they have been accepted. This ensures that applicants that otherwise meet the application criteria have an unbiased likelihood of getting into the university.

Louisiana policy makers acknowledged that college applicants with criminal records will likely be subjected to discrimination or bias throughout their application process, and this can be especially concerning in Louisiana because it was once known as the incarceration capital of the United States with roughly 50,000 people serving time in one of their correctional facilities (Johnson et al., 2021). By setting limitations on when a university can find out about a student's criminal history, Louisiana officials are creating more opportunities for their residents to better themselves through education. Since the passing of this legislation, other states have begun to modify their policies regarding criminality boxes on their college applications. The most recent example of this being in June of 2022 in which Delaware passed legislation that prohibits universities from asking applicants about their criminal histories at any point during the application process with few exceptions (Chase, 2022).

Financial Aid as a Systemic Barrier for Individuals with Criminal Records

When an individual makes the decision to attend college, they may choose to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). There are certain qualifications students must meet to receive financial aid through FAFSA, but it is largely income based (Page et al.,

2020). There has proven to be a positive correlation between a student receiving FAFSA and completing their undergraduate degree, however FAFSA is not accessible to everyone (Eng & Matsudaira, 2021). The presence of limitations on financial aid is examined as Mungo and Klonowski (2022) explained that FAFSA applicants must acknowledge that their responses to the questions on the application may be used in determining how much (if any) financial aid they will receive. This can hinder the ability of a student with a criminal record to receive the financial aid that may be vital to them attending university, and even deter them from completing the FAFSA entirely due to personal anxieties that their application will be denied.

To begin, one should consider the ways in which the United States government has been set up in a way to disenfranchise individuals with criminal records that are looking to get a college degree. According to Custer (2021), both political parties are guilty of this, as he explains,

> The trend began in 1968 with an attempt to punish students who were convicted for participating in campus protests. In 1988, drug users and traffickers became the target when Congress gave judges the ability to take away financial aid during sentencing. After multiple attempts, lawmakers again targeted people with drug convictions in 1998 with a new question on the FAFSA. Finally, 2008 saw the last major policy development, when Congress eliminated aid eligibility for the relatively few civilly committed people enrolled in college. Only twice in the 50 years since the creation of the major federal financial aid programs has Congress reversed trend by expanding access to system-impacted students, in 1980 with the repeal of convicted protestors rule and in 2005 with a narrower FAFSA question pertaining to drug convictions. (p. 9).

Policies such as the ones described by Custer indicate that there has been a long-standing

systemic barrier to collegiate financial aid for individuals with criminal records. Not only do

policies like this make it difficult for people with criminal records to qualify for financial aid in

general, but it also makes it difficult for individuals to understand if they even qualify for

FAFSA in the first place with the changing policies (Custer, 2021).

If a potential applicant with a criminal record is unsure if they currently qualify for

FAFSA, the official FAFSA website has a page to help outline the restrictions placed upon

applicants in this population (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). According to the FAFSA website, any

applicant that is currently incarcerated at either a federal or state-level institution is completely

ineligible, but applicants that are on probation or parole are eligible, but individuals with sexual-

related charges are exposed to additional criteria that may make them ineligible for FAFSA

(Federal Student Aid). This study will examine students with criminal records that are attempting

to complete their college degree after completing their prison sentence, so the observed

population is eligible for FAFSA. However, there is still the possibility that they can be denied

FAFSA depending on how they answer the 23rd question on the application: "Have you ever

been convicted for the possession or sale of illegal drugs while you were receiving federal

student aid (grants, work-study, and/or loans)?" (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). By answering "yes"

to this question, individuals with criminal records caused by drug-related offenses can be denied

financial aid provided at the federal level (Federal Student Aid, n.d.) According to the National

Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, roughly 244 thousand Americans are convicted of drug-related

offenses every year (2022). Inevitably, some of these individuals will have the desire to pursue a

college education after their incarceration. Despite how many people can be denied the

opportunity to pursue higher education because of this question, one can look at the future of

college accessibility for individuals with criminal records with optimism, as the FAFSA

Simplification Act will fully take effect at the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year and help

both incarcerated and previously incarcerated individuals that want to obtain an undergraduate

degree (Collins & Dortch, 2022).

      The FAFSA Simplification Act that will be completely enforced starting at the beginning

of the 2024-2025 school year will aid in making FAFSA accessible to more people with criminal

records that may not have previously qualified for it (Collins & Dortch, 2022). The official

FAFSA website explains that people who are currently incarcerated are unable to apply for

FAFSA, however, Collins and Dortch (2022) noted that changes caused by the FAFSA

Simplification Act will permit individuals that are incarcerated to apply for FAFSA, but they

must be attempting or already enrolled in a prison-sponsored education program. This means that

there needs to be a program, in-person within the correctional facility, that the person is

attending rather than trying to obtain their degree through an online program at an outside

university.

      To assist the overwhelming amount of people with drug-related offenses that may be

looking to complete college courses on-campus, it is noted that part of this act will take effect at

the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year and eliminate the possibility of a student being

denied FAFSA because of a drug-related offense (Collins & Dortch, 2022). So not only will

people that are currently incarcerated have access to financial aid for their education, but people

with drug-related offenses, a part of the population that has had the potential to be denied federal

financial aid for years, will also have a stronger likelihood of being granted federal financial aid.

The FAFSA Simplification Act will create opportunities for thousands of people that previously did not qualify for FAFSA, thus weakening the impacts of this long-standing systemic barrier and allowing for more people with criminal records the opportunity to complete their college degree.

Facilitators of Student Success

After identifying potential barriers to higher education and academic success, one area of investigation is to consider who supports previously incarcerated students as they embark on their post-secondary journey. While having the support of friends and family can aid in a student's collegiate success, having an on-campus mentor or staff member that supports a student can allow for a student to have a positive college experience due to their ability to promote healthy relationships with peers and inform them of resources and opportunities that will promote their success (Barney et al., 2022). Establishing that almost 700,000 people will go through the reentry process every year, Halkovic and Greene (2015) explained that there is a plethora of research the positive impacts a college-level education can have on an individual after they are released from a correctional facility. However, higher education is an under-utilized tactic to help previously incarcerated individuals reintegrate into society due to college administrators ignoring the research and therefore reinforcing negative stigmas.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) does not protect information on the criminal record a student has before attending a collegiate institution (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Given this knowledge, faculty and staff, may hear about the criminality of a student they work with through online news sources, public police records, or through the self-disclosure of the student. If a student affairs professional hears about the criminality of a student

through a news source or reads a public file, there is room for interpretation that can lead to the formation of a negative prejudice towards the student. Stigmatization is an inevitable reality for previously incarcerated post-secondary students across the United States, but Halkovic and Green (2015) determined that college campuses and the faculty on these campuses play a pivotal role in providing a support system that is crucial to the long-term success of these students. They indicated that the first step in helping college campuses become more accepting and welcoming of students that have served prison sentences is building the foundation for meaningful and long-term connections with communities that are often disregarded or overlooked. If a college admits a student for enrollment, it is incumbent on them to ensure that the student is set up for success, even if they are a student that has previously served time in prison. Building connections with this population of students will create a less stressful transition period, as well as set the student up with the resources they may need to successfully complete their post-secondary degree and not feel the impacts of their stigmas as heavily as they did when beginning the initial college-search process (Halkovic & Green, 2015).

In addition to meaningful relationships between college campuses and marginalized members of their community, Ott and McTier (2020) suggest that collegiate faculty and staff must do their part in creating a safe learning environment for the previously incarcerated students that they may teach or interact with on a regular basis. Ott and McTier (2020) found that faculty had a relatively negative perception of students that had previously been incarcerated compared to students with blemish-free criminal records, but how negative their perceptions of these students were varied based on what they were convicted of. A student's success and development heavily rely on the interactions that they have with their instructors and other staff

at their institution, if a student consistently has positive interactions with their instructors and

other staff, they have a stronger likelihood of feeling supported, having a great college

experience, and submerging themself in the campus's culture (Ott & McTier, 2020). However, if

a formerly incarcerated student does not have positive interactions with faculty and staff, they

may feel less persistent and are in turn less likely to successfully complete a college degree.

There is no cookie cutter solution in helping faculty and students become more open-minded to,

and accepting of, the idea of working with students with criminal records. However, Ott &

McTier (2020) determined that it may be beneficial for faculty and staff to become aware of the

fact that this population of students is faced with a unique set of challenges as they try to

acclimate to college life, and the self-stigmatization they are experiencing proves to be

challenging for them to successfully complete college. If they are well-versed on the challenges

students that have previously been incarcerated may face as they navigate college-life, they may

be able to support them better and create a more productive learning environment for them (Ott

& McTier, 2020). Creating a welcoming college campus through meaningful connections and

supportive faculty and staff is one of the most effective ways to decrease the impacts of

stigmatization and allow for students that are wanting to pursue higher education after being

released from prison and in turn allow for a stronger likelihood that they will be successful in

obtaining their college degree.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

There were two theories used in interpreting the findings from this study: Émile

Durkheim's 1893 social integration theory and Erving Goffman's 1963 stigma theory. Upon

release after an incarceration period, individuals find themselves navigating struggles with

mental health ailments, learning deficits, and financial strains without any additional or long-term support (Shoham et al., 2022). These struggles can be difficult for anyone to challenge alone, but these challenges can be worsened if there is something like a criminal conviction on someone's record because that in turn creates struggles with being able to access resources or support systems that may assist in alleviating symptoms of these strains. If someone does have the privilege of obtaining or accessing resources that can help create a brighter future (such as an opportunity to earn a postsecondary degree), their capabilities of establishing meaningful connections with their peers and being able to defy the odds set forth by their stigmas are heavily weighted factors in determining how successful students that previously served prison sentences are as they embark on their collegiate journey.

Émile Durkheim's Social Integration Theory

When an individual is attempting to reintegrate themselves into society after serving a prison sentence, their ability to socially emerge themself is imperative. When observing the potential social obstacles that previously incarcerated college students face, it is advantageous to consider Durkheim's social integration theory. Holt-Lunstad and Lefler (2020) defined the term *social integration* as the "extent to which individuals participate in a variety of social relationships, including engagement in social activities or relationships and a sense of community and identification with one's social roles" (p. 1). The ways in which individuals socialize and create relationships with the people around them can partially be determined by the life experiences they have. For college students that have served a prison sentence, social integration may not always be an easy feat.

The concept of social integration was originally explored by French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his book *The Division of Labor in Society* (Cummins, 2018). During his research, Durkheim's main goal was to determine how an individual's behavior correlated with the larger society that they were a part of (Berkman et al., 2000, p. 844). One of Durkheim's most notable pieces was his article *Suicide*, where Durkheim (1893) explained that he discovered the level in which someone was connected with a subpopulation of society was directly related to their mental health; if someone was minimally connected (or socially integrated), they were more likely to experience mental health ailments and in turn more likely to commit suicide.

Durkheim's findings in this study are still applicable in the modern day, as people who feel disconnected from society may experience higher levels of mental health ailments than their socially integrated peers (Berkman et al., 2000). Durkheim's social integration theory can be used to explain the experiences of college students as they navigate higher education after completing a prison sentence in a sense that their college campus can be a "society" that they are a part of. While a college campus is typically a smaller part of the community, most of their interactions will be on campus, and in turn, the main population that a college student typically interacts with are fellow college students, faculty, staff, and administrators on their college campus. If they struggle to connect with their peers and experience difficulty with having access to campus-sponsored resources or activities, they will likely struggle with finding a sense of belonging and in turn have a more troublesome integration experience.

Goffman's Stigma Theory

Whether people are conscious of it or not, everyone is guilty of stigmatizing someone dissimilar from them at one point or another, a phenomenon typically referred to as subconscious

bias (Miu et al., 2022). The concept of stigma was first explored by Criminologist Erving

Goffman, who described the term "stigma" as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Jensen &

Sanström, 2015, p. 128). To simplify Jensen & Sanström's (2015) interpretation, stigma is a trait

(whether it be something that can be physically observed or is observed through an individual's

attitude or behavior) that deviates from social norms and can cause an observer to create a

negative perception of someone with a socially unfavorable appearance or demeanor. Given this

information, it can be widely considered that the stigmatization of college students that have

served a prison sentence can be largely problematic as they transition back into society (Ray et

al., 2016). If an individual is stigmatized, the likelihood that they will experience a mental health

ailment increases (Copenhaver et al. 2007). Stigmatization makes it difficult for people to

connect with people that are dissimilar to themselves, but when the stigmatized part of

someone's identity is undetectable solely by observation, they may have an easier time blending

in with their peers.

   While trying to understand why stigmas have such negative impacts on people, Goffman

identified that stigma can be created due to one of three factors: "physical imperfections, faults in

in individual character, and affiliation with a certain ethnic group or culture" (Copenhaver et al.,

2007, p. 269). There are three different types of stigma: stigma that stems from physical

imperfections or deformities, stigma that stems from flaws in someone's individual character

(that is, a stigma made if it is known that someone has experienced phenomena such as mental

health disorders, having a criminal record, or suffering from addiction), and the final stigma is

one that stems from someone's religion, ethnicity, or race (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). To best

interpret the results of this study, the researcher will heavily rely on the type of stigma that stems

from flaws in someone's individual character, as the flaws of each participants' character will aid in promoting a stronger understanding of the experiences of college students post incarceration.

After identifying the three primary sources of stigma, Goffman realized that everyone was flawed to some degree, so even the people that are stigmatizing their peers are trying to camouflage imperfect aspects of themselves in an effort to blend in with the people around them (Jensen & Sanström, 2015). Goffman's stigma theory can be tied into the experiences of college students that have previously served a prison sentence because many times, individuals with criminal records choose if/when and to whom they disclose the fact they were previously incarcerated (Copenhaver et al., 2007). If a college student discloses that they were previously incarcerated and their peers stigmatize them as a criminal, they will experience difficulty in success in both in- and out-of-class interactions and opportunities.

Summary

This chapter looked at the existing literature on formerly incarcerated students and their experiences in higher education. An examination of the barriers these students faced identified the challenges of stigmatization of their status, the inevitable revelation of their previous incarceration as well as issues associated with the application to college and the difficulties these students face obtaining financial aid. How student success is facilitated was also reviewed to examine how institutions can support this population. Durkeim's Social Integration Theory and Goffman's Stigma Theory were used to provide a framework for the participants' experiences as shared in the study. Chapter Three will provide a description of the methodology that was used for this study.

Chapter III

Methods

This narrative, qualitative study investigated the on-campus experiences of previously incarcerated college students. Specifically, the researcher gained a better understanding of the type of, or lack of, experiences these individuals had at their institution at both the social and institutional level. According to Yin (2011), transparency in how a study is conducted is "essential to ensure that the methods can be perused and repeated by others" (p. 14). To guarantee transparency in this study, this chapter will provide an in-depth description of the procedures including the design of the study, participants, research site, data collection and analysis, and the treatment of the data.

Design of the Study

This study utilized a qualitative methodology, as qualitative research is best for studies where the purpose is to better understand a phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Patten, 2014, p. 29). A narrative qualitative study was chosen because this type of study looks at the world from the perspective of the participants, specifically allowing them to share their unique experiences and perceptions (Krefting, 1991). The study utilized one-on-one interviews to gain data from participants. These interviews were conducted by Zoom or phone call, and participants were asked about the perceived support they received from their peers and institution, as well as areas that they may not have had adequate support or resources but would have greatly benefited from having them.

Participants were recruited through Facebook groups that were established to provide support for previously incarcerated individuals. In these groups, a message was posted (see

Appendix A) that provided a brief introduction of the researcher and the goals of the study. The

goal was to attempt to obtain participants from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Once

participants agreed to be part of the study and received the informed consent form (see Appendix

B), they participated in a one-on-one semi-structured interview with the researcher.

When recruiting participants solely through online platforms, there are both potential

benefits and potential disadvantages. Benedict et al. (2019) explain that online recruitment has

become more commonplace in recent years because it allows researchers to reach larger

populations that are potentially more diverse than if they were restricted to populations within a

close physical proximity. Since online recruiting allows larger populations to be reached, which

in turn allow for higher potential for data to be more inclusive of the population, it has been

concluded to be more effective than in-person recruitment tactics (Benedict et al., 2019, p. 2).

While using online platforms can be beneficial in that it expands the sample pool, online

recruiting can also disadvantage researchers. One of the more impactful disadvantages is that

some people are unable to effectively use the internet as a recruitment tool. Galanaki (2002)

explains that some individuals are not well-versed on different ways to find potential participants

through search engines or successfully navigate online platforms to find participants (p. 244). If a

researcher is unable to successfully utilize an online platform, it can be difficult to find an

adequate number of participants for a study.

Participants

For this study three participants were recruited from Facebook groups that serve as

support systems for previously incarcerated individuals. These individuals all identified as white

males, were least 18 years old, had been convicted of a felony charge in the United States, and

had served at least one calendar year incarcerated at a correctional institution in the United

States. Once the participants expressed their interest in participating in the study, they confirmed

a time to engage in a Zoom or phone call with the researcher and were sent a copy of the

Informed Consent (Appendix B). Given the virtual nature of the interviews, they verbally gave

their consent to participate in the study at the beginning of their interview. Part of this consent

was their acknowledgement that the study was voluntary, and they had the opportunity to

withdraw at any time.

- Shaggy, was a 52-year-old white male who served 18 years in prison. Once released,
  he enrolled at a two-year institution, but did not complete his program.

- Rodney, was a 31-year-old white male who served four and a half years in prison.
  Once released, he enrolled at a two-year institution and completed a vocational
  degree.

- Nolon, was a 67-year-old white male who served 14 months in prison. Once released,
  he enrolled at a four-year institution. He earned two bachelor's degrees after being
  released and attempted to earn a master's degree. He was unsuccessful in obtaining
  his master's, but later completed a two-year certification program in lieu of the
  graduate degree.

Research Site

Participant recruitment occurred online, meaning that there was not a physical site where

the research occurred. Each participant was in a private location that ensured their comfort. This

research did not aim to examine a singular university, rather, it aimed to capture the lived

experiences of individuals that were attempting to obtain a college degree or certification after being released from a correctional facility.

Instrument

An interview protocol was developed and helped guide the one-on-one interviews with participants. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that participants were asked open-ended questions and utilized follow-up questions when necessary. These questions were created to learn more about the on-campus experience of undergraduate students that served at least one year in a correctional facility before enrolling at their institution. The interview protocol is attached as Appendix C. By asking open-ended questions, participants were able to tell their story through their own perspective. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share as much or as little detail as they wanted, while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions to gain more information that could have potentially been overlooked or left out (Weller et al., 2018).

Researcher-as-instrument

When discussing the researcher-as-instrument, Pezalla et al. (2012) explained that when a qualitative researcher is conducting interviews with participants of a study, attributes that are unique to that researcher "have the potential to influence the collection of empirical materials" (p. 166). The concept of researcher as instrument is relatively normalized among qualitative researchers (Xu & Storr, 2012). When conducting qualitative research, it is important to consider how the researcher can influence the study, as personal attributes possessed by the researcher have the potential to influence the findings and conclusion of a study (Yin, 2011). Going into this study, there were aspects of the researcher's background, such as knowledge of the subject and lack of personal experience with incarceration, that were fundamental in executing this study.

These attributes may have impacted the outcome of the study, but efforts were made to minimize

potential negative impacts by establishing rapport through making a strong first impression,

being aware of body language, and attempting to find commonalities in interests among

participants. Additionally, participants were provided an opportunity to review the transcript of

their interview and make corrections to ensure there were no discrepancies through a process

known as *member checking* (Yin, 2011). Finally, the researcher worked with the thesis advisor

and committee to review that the findings were supported.

Data Collection

Participants were obtained through posts in Facebook groups that serve as support

systems for previously incarcerated individuals beginning in the summer of 2023. As individuals

expressed interest, follow-up messages were sent to confirm their interest and explain in further

detail what the study entailed. If the potential participant was still interested, they were sent an

electronic copy of the informed consent form and were asked to verbalize their consent at the

beginning of the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview was scheduled either

over a phone call or a Zoom call depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted

approximately 45-60 minutes and was recorded using an audio recorder or the Zoom software

with the consent of the participant.

Data Analysis

Inspired by Glaser's (1965) method of constant comparison, participants' responses were

transcribed, and the data was analyzed through a coding system created by the researcher that

highlights key concepts, experiences, and perceptions shared by the participants. Descriptive

coding was used through the assessment of a short phrase or word to summarize each identified

keyword (Saldana, 2013). Once all participant's transcriptions were coded, the codes were used

to identify common themes guided by the study's research questions.

Treatment of Data

Data was treated following the policies and protocols outlined by the Institutional Review

Board. Aliases were chosen by participants to protect their identity, and all forms of identifying

information from participants were stored in separate files from the data collected from them.

After each interview, transcriptions from the audio recorder were uploaded to a file in a

password-protected drive that would only be accessible to the researcher and thesis advisor. This

file in the drive will remain intact for at least three years, per requirements established by the

Institutional Review Board.

Summary

This narrative study was completed through the completion of virtual interviews. The

study aligned with the ethical standards implemented by the Institution Review Board at the

researcher's institution. Additionally, the researcher took great care to ensure the comfortability

of the participant and honesty of responses through building rapport and refraining from using

leading questions. The findings of this study were analyzed and will be discussed in Chapter IV.

Chapter IV

Narratives

This chapter dives into the narratives of the participants and takes a closer look at their experiences with higher education after being released from a correctional facility. Each of the participant's stories are broken down into three elements. The narratives start off with a brief introduction that gives some background information on the participants. Following that, their narratives were divided into their criminal background and their experience as they navigated higher education. This chapter is designed to tell the participants' story and shed light on the experiences of this particular population.

Shaggy

Shaggy is 52 years old and identifies as a white male. He was previously enrolled at a two-year institution in the South-Atlantic region of the United States. Shaggy is originally from South Carolina, but now resides in Virginia. While he lives alone, he is within proximity of family. His decision to attempt to earn a college degree post-incarceration was part of his post-release plan for success. "Education was fourth on the list. Shelter food, and clothing were one through three. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't about the money. It was checking off multiple goals and necessities at once."

Criminal Background

Shaggy engaged in a plea bargain to reduce his potential sentence from 129 years to 18 years. He was sentenced to 18 years and served the entirety of his sentence in a maximum-security facility in South Carolina after being convicted of trafficking and manufacturing 28-100 grams of methamphetamine, third degree burglary of a building, unlawful possession of a

firearm, and assault on a police officer. After being incarcerated for five years, Shaggy started

thinking about what his future would look like once he was released. "I couldn't imagine what

kind of time I'd get for a second offense being that I got 18 years for the first offense." He knew

he wanted to create a brighter future for himself, so he took the first step in joining a program

that eased the reentry process for people in the penal system.

The maximum-security facility Shaggy was serving time at hired a program coordinator

during his incarceration period. The program coordinator created programs for the inmates to

participate in that improved their social and emotional skills, as well as equip them with new

coping mechanisms. Additionally, these programs provided inmates hands-on experiences that

were transferable to the workforce once they were released.

> I was a member of a cat and dog program where inmates on good behavior could keep an
>
> animal for a couple of days and help get them [the animals] ready to be adopted. [The
>
> coordinator] will change lives for decades, she brought all kinds of stuff to prison.
>
> Beekeeping class, quilting and crochet classes, being in her program helped me cement
>
> my plans after my sentence was done.

While Shaggy had already been contemplating going to college upon his release, being part of

the reentry program solidified his decision. After finding shelter and a steady income to support

himself on, Shaggy eagerly enrolled at his local community college.

Experience in Higher Education

When discussing Shaggy's experience with higher education, he reminisced on his time

in college quite fondly. Shaggy was honest about his criminal background, as he wanted his

instructors to understand that he was going to struggle to understand technology, as he did not

have access to newer versions of software when he was incarcerated. "I was practically a caveman with technology. My teachers tried to help as much as they could." Throughout our discussion, Shaggy identified his instructors as a strong source of support for him as he navigated his college classes. "I liked my teachers a lot, and I was doing great too. I had professors call me later and tell me I was a natural at all the subjects. I appreciated knowing my professors cared." While his interactions with faculty were positive, Shaggy admitted that his peers had no impact on his college experience. He explained nobody really talked to him in class, but it never bothered him because he was there for the educational components rather than the social components.

Shaggy's enrollment period was short, as he did not complete a full semester of college. His first semester of college was the Spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic put the world on pause. Schools around the world closed their doors and moved to an online learning platform, and Shaggy's school was no different. He acknowledged that this was a stressful time for everyone and was understanding when his instructors began to exhibit signs of stress and burnout. "There was only so much that could be done. They told me about school resources that would normally be available. Basically, according to them, it was all on the website somewhere." Given his lack of knowledge on technology and how to navigate online resources, Shaggy withdrew from school before the semester ended. He did not return to higher education as he found a full-time job and is currently happy with the direction his life is going in and does not see the need for a degree or further formal education.

Rodney

Rodney is 31 years old and identifies as a white male. He was previously enrolled at a two-year institution in the Midwestern region of the United States. Rodney was born and raised in Missouri and continues to live there. Rodney lives with his grandmother who has provided unwavering support since his release from a medium-security correctional facility. He made the decision to enroll in college post-incarceration in an effort to make himself more marketable when he began his job search. "I tried the traditional college route right after high school and it didn't work for me, however I needed some kind of education. I couldn't find an apprenticeship, so I looked into trade school."

Criminal Background

Rodney was sentenced to four and a half years after being convicted of involuntary manslaughter. "The prosecuting attorney tried to tack on a second-degree murder judge, but the judge stuck with involuntary manslaughter. I think he knew I had a lot of remorse and that I was never going to forgive myself." He served the entirety of this sentence, and immediately moved in with his grandmother. Rodney expressed gratitude for having a place to live without having to pay for rent or utility bills while remaining aware that not everyone has the same privilege that he does. "I've come to realize that a lot of ex-cons don't get that kind of support and when I get myself situated, I plan to open a halfway house and network to help people find work and relevant education." While making himself marketable was the main influence in Rodney's decision to attempt to obtain a vocational degree, this dream kept him motivated throughout his collegiate journey.

Experience in Higher Education

Rodney attended a private technical school for his vocational program that consisted of night classes that were taught by individuals that were employed in the trade rather than being taught by individuals that had obtained a PhD. This allowed the students to gain direct experience through apprenticeships and other related work throughout the day. While he did not enjoy having long workdays and then having to sit through two or three hours of class, Rodney enjoyed the learning environment. He did not go out of his way to disclose his criminality to his instructors or peers but would be honest about his past if anyone asked what provoked him to go to technical school or what he had been up to since graduating high school. Rodney did not feel his instructors treated him differently even if they knew about his conviction; he felt just as valued and supported as the other students he had class with. Rodney explained that his instructors graded students on individual curves in acknowledgement that they all had different skill sets. "I liked it because not everyone does everything the same, but that does not make them better or worse. I liked not feeling like I was competing with anyone."

When asked about the support he felt from his peers, Rodney shared that his experiences were mostly positive. Rodney felt that it was easy to connect to his peers, especially since many of his peers shared the mentality that "you are all there to learn and if someone asked for your help, you showed them what worked for you and then went back to whatever you were doing." He recalled an instance where he missed almost a week of coursework due to illness, and the classmate he shared a workspace with readily shared his notes with Rodney, and the instructor was flexible and allowed him to complete the modules he had missed.

Rodney explained that this flexibility and convenience was not unique to his instructors, and that the institution did an excellent job in making the application and enrollment process stress-free because they completed all of his enrollment paperwork after receiving the relevant information. He also expressed appreciation for an on-campus eatery that allowed him to eat dinner before class. He also expressed gratitude for the abundance of resources and websites Rodney had access to in case he needed to do supplemental research to better understand a concept.

The only negative experience he shared was that the academic advisors were not as knowledgeable as they could have been in terms of the curriculum of each program. "I took electrical control systems when electrical automation would have been better for me, but none of the office staff knew the difference to tell me which way I should go. I actually had an instructor tell me mid-semester I should be across the hall for a lot of the questions I had." Despite this brief setback, Rodney was able to successfully obtain his vocational certification and find a job in his field. He has maintained that job and is optimistic about his future.

Nolon

Nolon is 67 years old and identifies as a white male. Across the span of seven years, Nolon attended various colleges and universities in the Western Mountain and Midwestern regions of the United States. Nolon grew up in New Mexico but spent several years in other states and countries while he served in the United States Army. After being discharged, Nolon returned to New Mexico where he currently resides. Now retired, Nolon lives alone and spends his free time writing about his life experiences. Nolon had completed his associate of arts degree before enlisting in the Army, and his passion for education motivated him to return to college on

the G.I. Bill. "I have always loved learning. After serving our country, I wanted to go to school

to become a journalist. I've always had a knack for storytelling, so it made sense."

Criminal Background

Nolon enrolled at a four-year institution shortly after discharge from the United States

Army to begin his Bachelor of Arts in journalism. Early in his studies, Nolon found himself

standing before a judge in New Mexico after being charged with voluntary manslaughter. "They

called it unnecessary violence; I called it self-defense. It didn't matter what I said though, I knew

I was going down." He was convicted of this charge and was sentenced to 14 months in a

maximum-security correctional facility. Nolon was incarcerated in the late 1970s, explaining that

this was an era before correctional facilities categorized inmates before assigning them their

cells. "I knew I was in with the worst of the worst. My cellmate was a pedophile, and my

neighbor was a serial killer. I didn't belong here with these guys."

Nolon tried to keep to himself and focus on maintaining good behavior to prevent delay

in his release. He assumed a job in the facility's library, where he and another inmate who had an

interest in journalism would discuss their ideas. His passion for learning did not subside while he

was incarcerated and was determined to complete the degree he had started before incarceration.

Upon release, Nolon made the decision to transfer institutions and attempt to complete his four-

year degree.

Experience in Higher Education

When discussing his experiences in higher education, Nolon made it apparent that the

only person who he felt contributed to his success was himself. "I didn't need anyone's help or

handouts. I was there to earn my degree and graduate." In addition to his studies, Nolon joined

the institution's debate team where he found a passion for communication. He did not befriend

his teammates, and seldom socialized with them outside of meetings or competitions.

Socialization was incredibly low on Nolon's priority list, as he wanted to achieve as high of a

grade point average as possible. "I was 29 and 30 years old, not dating anyone and not meeting

anyone. I didn't care though; I was focused on my degree."

He did not disclose his criminal status to anyone throughout his time in higher education

due to fear of stigmatization.

> Felons don't like to tell people they're felons because it's like once someone knows that
>
> about you, it's like they have expectations for you. They think you're going to act a
>
> certain way or be a certain way and they try to put you into those boxes. Society doesn't
>
> want felons to succeed.

Nolon was able to complete his Bachelor of Arts in journalism and returned to higher education a

couple of years later to earn a second Bachelor of Arts in communication. After earning his

second baccalaureate degree, Nolon took a break from academia to obtain full-time work and

pursue hobby writing. It was not until he attempted to earn his master's degree that he felt

outwardly challenged by a professor over a difference in perspectives.

Nolon attempted to pursue his graduate degree at a public institution in the Western

Mountain region of the United States. He explained that he had to take prerequisite courses

before applying to the program, one of which being a classic literature course. "The professor

was progressive for the time, so he tried to incorporate themes of feminism and sexuality into

every book we read." Nolon challenged his professor and suggested a theme that had not been

mentioned before. He was able to produce examples and explanations that aided in the drawing

of his conclusion. "Well, the professor didn't like that I challenged him, and he absolutely didn't like that I was right. He got angry and from then on had a grudge on me."

The professor that Nolon had the disagreement with was on the committee that reviewed applications for the graduate program he had applied for, which Nolon felt was against his favor. Nolon was denied admission to the master's program and decided against returning to that institution the following semester to reapply, feeling that the interactions he had with the professor would be a barrier to being accepted. Instead, he decided to enroll in the paralegal certification program at a nearby two-year institution. Nolon successfully completed the certification program, which concluded his collegiate endeavors. "I couldn't go to college today, I would never last. But I'll tell you what, I would do what I did all over again. I don't regret my education at all."

Summary

Through a narrative approach, each participant had the opportunity to share their lived experiences. When trying to understand what resources and accommodations may best serve the population of college students that are on-campus post-incarceration, it is crucial to be informed of the experiences of those that have attempted college whether they obtained their degree. It is also worthy of acknowledgment that not everything the participants shared was applicable to the research questions, but that does not discredit their experiences.

Chapter V

Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of previously incarcerated students as they navigated higher education in an on-campus program. This chapter divulges the themes that emerged through the qualitative analysis of three semi structured interviews. Several themes were identified, and they are organized by research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTION #1: What systemic obstacles do previously incarcerated students face on campus as they pursue their degree?

In this study, each participant was asked about the obstacles that they faced in higher education in their pursuit of a college degree or certification. Although the experiences each participant had in higher education were unique, three common themes emerged among their stories identifying the systemic obstacles that they had faced. These obstacles included issues with housing opportunities, struggles with the cost of attendance, and the accessibility of technology.

Housing Opportunities

When participants were asked about systemic obstacles, two of the participants, Shaggy and Nolon, described difficulty in obtaining housing in the early stages of attempting to obtain their college degree. Shaggy explained,

> When I was still in prison, I knew I wanted to look into living in a dorm because it would
> be easier than finding an apartment and trying to pay all my bills. I knew I wasn't going

to be able to work as many hours if I was taking classes, so this would help take care of

my post-release shelter.

Unfortunately, Shaggy had difficulty with this plan when he discovered that student housing was

not available at his intended institution. He shared his discovery of this significant obstacle to his

plan and how he found a solution:

What I didn't know was that community colleges don't usually have dorms for the

students. I asked if they had any suggestions and they had landlords that rented to college

kids, and I eventually found a cheap place and lived there for a little bit before moving in

with my sister to cut the cost more.

While Shaggy had trouble finding housing due to the lack of housing options offered by

his institution, Nolon identified his problems with on-campus housing as an obstacle in that it did

not meet his needs, "I was still pretty young when I got out of the Army, so I was open to the

idea of living in a dorm instead of looking for an apartment or trying to make it work at home."

The difficulty for Nolon was that he found his life experiences made it difficult for him to accept

the kind of oversight that the housing program operated under.

[Institution] had some really strict policies that I did not agree with. I fought for our

country, there was no way they were going to give me a curfew and tell me who could

and couldn't visit me and see my room. I tried talking to the guy in charge of housing and

he told me that the rules were rules.

This was not something that Nolon was willing to compromise on. "I ended up couch surfing

while I saved some money to afford my own place."

For Rodney, housing was not an obstacle because he lived with his grandmother while he completed his college courses. He acknowledged that living with his family was a privilege that many others do not have and that security, and convenience, was a significant source of support in his educational pursuits. "Having a short commute to class definitely made it easier for me to go, especially when the weather got bad."

Cost of Attendance

All three participants discussed the cost of attendance in their interviews. All of them had access to some form of financial aid, and two admitted that college would have been unaffordable without the financial aid opportunities that were made available to them from the government and their institutions.

When Shaggy enrolled at his institution, he had to pay out-of-state tuition because he did not yet have a local address. Since out-of-state tuition was more expensive than in-state, Shaggy had to look for assistance through private loans.

> Out-of-state tuition is inconvenient. It cost twice as much, and I had to take out loans. I was worried about those tanking my credit, especially because I had to look for housing after taking out these loans. I got lucky when they did the Covid loan forgiveness because it helped my credit score go up and I have been able to keep it higher even though I do not make a lot of money.

Rodney proudly discussed that he was the recipient of the Second Chance Scholarship, which allowed him to afford and enroll in college classes.

> It's basically a scholarship people can apply for if they want to go to college but they have experienced some sort of hardship that can make affording college more difficult.

> Without the Second Chance Scholarship I wouldn't have been able to go back to school, and knowing that I had one chance to make or break was definitely a motivation.

Nolon had served in the United States Army, making him eligible for the G.I. Bill.

> I knew I wanted to keep advancing my education, and not having to pay a dime for it really made it appealing to me. I would have figured out a way to go back even without the G.I. Bill, but I would have been stupid to say "no" to free money.

All three participants used commonplace resources to help finance their education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) recognized that an estimated 82-85 percent of American college students rely on federally funded financial aid opportunities, which indicates that the participants were similar to their non-felonious counterparts in terms of receiving financial aid.

Technology Accessibility

Given that Nolon's journey through higher education took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, technology played no real influence on his experiences with attending college. However, Shaggy and Rodney both had very different experiences in terms of taking advantage of the technological resources available to them.

Shaggy was incarcerated from 2001-2019, meaning that almost two decades of technological advancements were made while he was imprisoned. He discussed how "the prison got heavily restricted iPads for the inmates at the end of my time there, but I never got to even see one before I was released." His limited experience with technology commonly used in higher education was not originally a problem when he started, but Shaggy's first semester of college was the same semester that the world was impacted by COVID-19 and once his campus shut

down, his lack of technical competence was a significant issue. He felt this experience heavily

impacted his ability to succeed in college.

> I think it was the stress people were feeling about the lockdown, but once classes went to
>
> computers there was no way to get tutoring except online. There were like two sites and
>
> they were so complicated. I grew up with learning disabilities and always did better
>
> with hands-on. I asked for more help, but there was only so much that could be done.

Navigating higher education already presents itself as a challenge to some students but having to

navigate higher education through remote learning after not having access to technology for

almost two decades proved to be too difficult for Shaggy. The anxieties affiliated with needing to

navigate this new normalcy ultimately triggered Shaggy's departure from higher education.

> In contrast, Rodney recalled his institution having a plethora of online resources that

allowed him to thrive in the academic setting.

> The school had a huge library with just about any kind of documents you could think of.
>
> In most trade work I have to get in the engineer's head with no contact, we get really
>
> good at reading technical documents. If there was not a physical copy of a document or
>
> contract I needed to see, the librarian was able to help me find it in the online system.

His previous experience with computers and technology was much more recent than Shaggy's,

as he only served three years during the 2010's. The difference in length of incarceration allowed

Rodney to be better familiarized with navigating online resources, so he was much quicker to

take advantage of them.

Research Question #2: What social challenges do previously incarcerated students face?

Participants were asked about what challenges with socialization they faced during their experiences in higher education. While Rodney indicated that he did not feel that he had experienced any significant social challenges, two themes were identified from the interviews with Shaggy and Nolon. These themes focused on personal indifference to social connections that the participants felt and the anticipated relationship they had for faculty.

Indifference

Though both Shaggy and Nolon were considered non-traditional students, Shaggy was significantly older than his peers, which he said made his peers less inclined to talk to him.

> Compared to most of these people, I was an old man. They really had no interest in talking to me but I really didn't care. I wasn't in college to make friends, I was there because I wanted to get an education. I was obviously closer in age to my instructors, and they were all fine having small talk with me, and I was fine with that being the extent of people talking to me.

Shaggy viewed his time in college more in terms of professional and career preparation, so his developmental needs were very different from his classmates, a fact that he both recognized and was generally unconcerned about.

Nolon, in addition to being an older student, was also a student veteran. Unlike Shaggy, Nolon was not significantly older than his peers, but his maturity and experiences created some social distance with his classmates. In pursuing his education, he consciously decided to allow socialization to fall to the wayside in an effort to complete his degree with the highest grades he

could earn. "People my age were going out to bars and having fun on the weekends. I was

staying home and getting my homework done. If I wasn't doing homework, I was reading and

writing for leisure." This drive for academic achievement did not manifest as no social

connections for Nolon, instead he focused on non-classmates for those relationships.

> I had friends and I ended up meeting the woman I would later marry and divorce, but
>
> they all knew I was very serious about getting my degrees and they knew I wasn't going
>
> to put anything but G-d above my studies. I never felt like I was missing out on anything,
>
> and I never really cared if people thought I was boring.

Nolon shared that his experiences, while not for everyone, were the right choice for him, "I don't

regret the way I did it." He was very proud of the fact that he accomplished his educational goals

despite the lack of social connections to his classmates.

Anticipated Relationships with Faculty

This theme emerged from the stark experiences with socialization for Nolon and Rodney.

In his interview, Nolon recalled a class he took (referenced in chapter four) with a professor that

had different perspectives on the literature they reviewed in class.

> He was definitely one of those guys that had tunnel vision. He had the themes already
>
> picked out for the books that he wanted to talk about, and the other people in the class
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> listened to him because he was in charge. I wasn't trying to be disrespectful when I was
>
> pointing out different viewpoints, but he really didn't want to hear it. Nobody else in the
>
> class dared challenge him on what he was teaching, I don't know if it's because they
>
> agreed with him or if it's because they were too scared to challenge him. I know I rubbed

him the wrong way, and while I enjoyed the books we read, I didn't feel as though I was

able to share my thoughts because they didn't line up with what he wanted us to think.

The reluctance Nolon felt to share his experiences with his professor created an subconscious

expectation for him that this professor was always going to challenge his thoughts and in turn

make it difficult for Nolon to feel welcome to share his perspectives with the class. This created

a negative anticipated relationship, and it would not be correct before Nolon's journey through

higher education concluded.

Rodney, on the other hand, had a positively anticipated relationship with his instructors,

as he always felt well supported by them and had positive interactions with them. In his

interview, Rodney explained his professors were matter of fact, and were there to help him learn

the craft, and to get his certification. Rodney trusted his instructors as they guided him through

course content, and ultimately found success as he completed his courses. Rodney consistently

had positive interactions with his instructors and he followed their instruction to be successful in

his college career. Therefore he was able to form positive relationships with his instructors which

lasted beyond his time in their classroom.

Research Question #3: What support do previously incarcerated students receive from faculty and staff at their institution?

This study examined both sources of challenge and sources of support participants

received from faculty and staff on their campuses. Nolon did not recall any instances where he

felt personally supported by representatives of his respective institutions throughout his time in

higher education. However, two themes emerged from the interviews with Shaggy and Rodney

pertaining to the support they experienced from faculty and staff members: Willingness to assist

and mentorship.

Willingness to Assist

Two of the participants spoke highly of the positive relationships they had with their

faculty members during their time in higher education, stressing how their encouragement made

their decision to enroll feel like the right one. Throughout his interview, Shaggy kept referring to

his instructors as sources of support throughout his time in higher education.

> I was never afraid to ask my instructors questions because they answered them the way
>
> they would for anyone else. If I wasn't able to come to their office hours because of
>
> work, they were flexible with me and let me set up a time to come in and ask questions or
>
> get help when I needed it.

Shaggy also stressed that his faculty understood that he was lacking some skills as a result of his

incarceration and took the time to work with him, never making him feel that he was a burden or

did not belong.

> When we did things on the computer, they were always patient when they were
>
> explaining how it worked. I tried my best to follow along, but they understood there was
>
> a bit of a gap in what I knew and how much technology had developed, so they spent
>
> extra time with me.

Even when Shaggy made the decision to discontinue his education, he felt supported by his

instructors in his decision and his reasons. He recalled that "they understood why I was leaving,

and they told me that if I changed my mind, they would be happy to see me in class again."

Rodney also felt strong levels of support from his instructors in class. "My instructors never made me feel stupid. They were average guys just looking to educate people that wanted to have a career in the field." In addition to promoting a learning environment where Rodney was comfortable asking questions, he expressed that his instructors were flexible with him as well.

> There was one point where I was really sick. Like I was so sick that I had to spend a couple of days in the hospital and I ended up missing about two or three weeks of school. I explained to my instructors what was going on, and they told me to not worry about what I was missing in class. When I came back, they were willing to let me make up assignments and complete the hands-on portions of the lessons that counted for grades. They wanted me to get it right and feel confident, so they gave me a little bit of time to prepare instead of just loading it all on me.

Rodney felt that the flexibility and willingness to assist him that they showed him was a significant contribution to his ultimate success in obtaining his certification from the school. He expressed that he "definitely wouldn't have believed in [himself] without their help. I have always done better with hands-on instruction, but knowing they believed in me helped keep me motivated to keep coming to class and officially getting certified."

Mentorship

In addition to having instructors that were readily available to assist them as needed, Shaggy and Rodney also reported an element of mentorship between them and their instructors that helped them when they struggled. Shaggy knew he was relatively close in age to his instructors, but that did not deter him from seeing them as mentors for him.

I really looked up to my instructors, but not just because they had their PhD's. They

were great people, and I considered myself lucky. Sometimes I felt like they were more

of someone I could go to for advice or be friends with, instead of being the person who

taught my classes.

He concluded that making the decision to disclose his status was key in establishing that

supportive relationship with his faculty members and it was a decision he looked back on with

pride. "Being honest about my past definitely helped, and I think they respected me and were

willing to be open with me because I was willing to be open with them first."

Similar to Shaggy, Rodney looked to his instructors for guidance and felt he had

established a strong connection with them during his time in higher education.

My instructors were sort of like role models to me. They were so good at what they did,

but they were also humble about their capabilities. That's how I want to be, I want to be

good and know I'm good, but also not feel the need to show off my skills and make other

people feel intimidated.

Having this relationship also paid off for Rodney as he approached the end of his education

because he was able to have support from his faculty when he started looking for jobs.

They gave me advice on how to find jobs towards the end of the program, and one of

them offered to be a reference to prove he had faith in me. He didn't do that for everyone,

so I felt like we really bonded while I was there, and I was good enough to really make an

impression on him.

Rodney continued the mentorship relationship with his instructor who offered to serve as a reference for him after graduation. They continue to stay in touch today. "I still ask him questions from time to time, but usually when we talk it's to catch up."

Research Question #4: How do previously incarcerated students experience support by their peers as they pursue their degree?

The final topic this study investigated was to look at the support each participant received from their peers and fellow students. Nolon and Rodney shared their different perceptions of support from their peers from which two themes were able to be identified: the presence of teamwork and establishing meaningful connections to foster success. Shaggy indicated that he did not experience any support from his peers during his time in higher education.

Presence of Teamwork

Rodney and Nolon both discussed their experiences and memories, primarily through group projects and assignments, of having good interactions with their fellow students. Rodney mentioned however that it was rare for him to be tasked with group projects in his coursework because,

> The trades are usually one-man jobs, but sometimes we would be put into groups of three for exercises. In these exercises, we each had to purposely mess something up and the other two had to identify and fix our mistakes. When we had these types of assignments, the people in my group pulled their weight and talked things out. Nobody really dominated it, so I always felt like I had room to figure out the mistake myself, talk about it with my partners, and then figure out the best way to fix it.

Rodney shared that he did not openly disclose his criminal history with his classmates, therefore they did not really have the opportunity to treat him differently because of his background. However, he still felt like he was part of a team when working with the people that knew.

> They joked that as long as I didn't do anything to hurt them, they would have no issue with me. I wanted to leave my past as far behind me as I could and they knew that, so they treated me normal. I am just like any other guy; I just made a mistake.

> Nolon's academic programs took place during the day, giving him an opportunity to get more connected to campus life and he chose to become a member of the debate team. Nolon enjoyed being on the debate team and had pleasant memories of his teammates.

> Everyone seemed really committed to the team doing well, but almost everyone who was on the team was either in communications, journalism, or a major that was similar to those so I think that contributed to that mentality. From a professional standpoint, I really enjoyed working with my team. I knew I could always count on them to do what   they said they would do.

He also chose not to disclose his status as a formerly incarcerated person to his peers, and instead focused on another aspect of his identity. "They also didn't treat me differently because I was a veteran, and since they didn't know I was a felon, they couldn't look at me differently for having been incarcerated." His identity as a felon was not easily determined by his peers, so he was able to have connections with them that were unaffected by his history.

Establishment of Meaningful Connections to Foster Success

While Nolon maintained his connections to others at a mostly professional level, Rodney recalled establishing connections through the cohort model that his program used with his peers that would later evolve into real friendships.

> The classes we took had to be taken in a certain order because they were supposed to build off of the classes you took the semester before. The way this was set up meant we spent almost our whole program with the same people. Some people might not like this, but I personally really liked having a long time to get to know the people I was in class with. We got to know each other personally, so like you know when something big is happening in their personal life.

This method of moving between classes as a cohort allowed him to establish relationships that he felt contributed to his academic success.

> I got close with some of the guys that I had classes with, and we all really hyped each other up to help get us through. If one of us wasn't there, we would make sure he got the notes and anything else he needed. If someone needed something, he knew he could reach out and someone would help him.

It also allowed Rodney to have relationships and connections that went beyond being classmates to having real friendships that outlived his time in classes. He contrasted it with his previous education and friends from school.

> Like you know how you have your school friends who you never really see outside of class and then you have your actual friends that you go and do things with? My school friends became my actual friends, and I still see a couple of them pretty regularly.

Knowing these guys had my back and that I had their back made me excited to keep

going and while they helped me while I worked towards my career goals, I was there

helping them work towards theirs too.

Both participants felt supported by their peers as they worked toward their goals. Nolon, more

driven by academic success, felt his interactions were successful as his teammates helped create

a professional and structured learning environment. Rodney and his peers were all working

towards certification, but he found an element of legitimate friendship as he continued to connect

with the individuals in his classes. Regardless of how long the relationships lasted after

completing their degrees, both participants found connections that helped motivate them to

achieve their goals.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the data collected that was coded and analyzed

for themes based on the four research questions. Themes emerged from the participant's stories

often with little or no correlation to their criminal history. The experiences of each participant,

while unique from one another, emphasized themes of support for the participants from at least

one source within higher education. The discussion of these themes, along with implications for

higher education and recommendations for future research will be discussed in chapter six.

Chapter VI

Discussion

This chapter focuses on how the implications of the findings of this research study on the experiences of previously incarcerated individuals when they enroll in higher education programs. It also draws connections between the findings in this study with the preexisting literature around the experiences of these individuals. Implications for higher education practice and suggested future research opportunities are also presented in this chapter.

Systemic Obstacles for Previously Incarcerated Students

Overall, there was no indication that any of the participants felt that they were subjected to any significant systemic obstacles in their pursuit of higher education. Each participant was able to obtain financial aid to help pay for their education, whether it be through a private loan, scholarship, or a government benefit program. These different means of obtaining financial aid were the same methods as those regularly utilized by college students who were not incarcerated prior to them beginning their journey through higher education. The criminal status of each participant did not appear to significantly impede their ability to finance their college education, which indicates that there is minimal distinction between them and their non-felonious counterparts on this issue.

A similar trend was found when participants described their ability to secure housing while they were enrolled at their respective institutions. One participant lived with a family member while the other two pursued institution affiliated housing. Neither of the participants that sought out on-campus housing were successful in their attempts, but this was not due to their criminal status. One institution did not have on-campus housing options available to any of their

students, as it was a two-year institution. Since every student at this institution was responsible for finding their own housing accommodations, this participant's criminal status had no impact on the outcome of this issue.

The other participant was granted access to on-campus housing but was unwilling to adhere to the policies and procedures set forth by the institution which prompted him to live off-campus. This was a decision entirely made by the participant; had he been willing to follow the rules and regulations for on-campus housing, he would have been permitted to live on-campus. When any college student signs a housing contract with their institution, they agree to follow the policies outlined in the contract with the expectation that there are no exceptions to these rules. The university's unwillingness to be flexible with their policies for the participant despite his veteran status was expected, as university officials must uphold the standards and policies of their institution for all students. The outcomes of these situations would not have been any different had the participants not previously been incarcerated.

Social Challenges for Previously Incarcerated Students

When asked about their experiences with socialization in higher education, each participant had different perceptions relating to their approach and expectations. One of the participants felt his experience was mostly neutral while another one reflected fondly on his interactions with his peers and instructors with the third participant focusing mostly on an interaction with a professor that he perceived to be negative. That participant had opposing perspectives to his professor on the course material and in turn did not feel supported in expressing his thoughts. In addition to being in opposition to his professor, none of his classmates expressed agreement with his perspective, further alienating him from his peers.

Students who have not been previously incarcerated may also experience disagreements between

themselves and an instructor, and this group of students can also experience a lack of perceived

support from their instructors and classmates. This indicates there may not be a real distinction

between previously incarcerated students and those that were not incarcerated in terms of the

social challenges that may be experienced at the collegiate level by any student.

Existing literature found that the choice to disclose one's criminal status can create self-

inflicted social challenges for students, but the participants in this study did not share any notable

challenges that were created due to stigmatization from their peers or instructors. The two

participants that disclosed their criminal history to individuals they interacted with felt support

that paralleled the support students who have not been incarcerated may experience. The

participant that did not disclose his criminal history to individuals he interacted with made this

choice with concern that he would be stigmatized or perceived differently by his instructors and

peers, as he "didn't want to give anyone the chance to look [at him] differently." This participant

made the assumption that people were going to discredit him due to his felonious background

and in turn did not disclose, so he was unable to know for certain whether or not his criminal

status would be a factor in any social challenges that he experienced at the collegiate level.

Support from Faculty and Staff

Two of the three participants, those who were most recently in higher education, reflected

fondly on their interactions with class instructors and other staff members that were affiliated

with the university. Within this realm, subthemes that included mentorship and willingness

among faculty and staff to help students emerged. Participants that felt supported by their

instructors made the decision to disclose their criminal history for transparency and to explain

potential educational deficits. Instructors and other staff members on the participants' campuses did not appear to take their criminality into consideration during their interactions in any negative way. Instead, they treated participants the same way they treated other students in their classes even being more understanding sometimes of the challenges that they were struggling with. While this data does not completely discredit previous studies conducted on social stigmas against previously incarcerated individuals, it creates questions pertaining to the consistency of stigma among this population of individuals.

Support from Peers

None of the participants expressed they experienced an overt lack of support from their peers. The experiences of participants in this study were categorized as generally being either positive or neutral. Two of the participants expressed they were uninterested in creating and maintaining meaningful connections from their peers, as they were prioritizing their academic wellbeing. The one participant who expressed positive experiences finding support from his peers indicated the connections he made would last beyond his time in higher education, another commonality with the traditional student experience.

It is unclear as to the degree the participants disclosed their criminal history to their peers, but the one participant who established friendships with his peers did decide disclose his criminal history with those he grew closer with. His felonious status did not appear to impact his ability to maintain these friendships, which may show there is no single experience previously incarcerated students are uniformly or consistently unable to make connections with their peers and in turn feel support from them.

Implications for Higher Education

It is beneficial for higher education administrators who interact with diverse student populations to understand what resources they can provide that would give students the strongest likelihood of being successful in their collegiate journey. Previously incarcerated college students are a population that is often overlooked for numerous reasons, though findings from this study indicate that some of the most effective ways to support these students are in ways that parallels the needs of college students who have not served an incarceration period. Their status as previously incarcerated is not a major factor when needing support from faculty and campus staff.

Ultimately, previously incarcerated college students have the same needs and would benefit from the same resources that traditional college students benefit from. Rodney made a comment in his interview that he was a regular guy that made a mistake, and the findings of this study support this perspective on this population. None of the participants had experiences in their collegiate journey that were entirely reliant on, or defined by, their criminality. Instead of defining this group of individuals with the perspective that they were previously incarcerated, faculty and student affairs administrators would benefit from investigating what other identity categories may be more applicable to the students' needs, and better serve this population of students using that approach. There is clearly a strong element of intersectionality among this population of students, so rather than focusing on the singular fact that a student was incarcerated, higher education administrators may be more successful if they focus on the other components within the intersectionality of these students to determine what services may best benefit them.

This study included two adult-learners and a student veteran who was closer in age to traditional students. These populations of students each have needs that differ from those of a first-year college student that is coming straight from high school. Sometimes, adult learners have technological deficits and require extra assistance in navigating online platforms. This type of training would have been beneficial for both of the adult-learners. As one participant also had a learning disability, he could have benefited from the services provided by the disability support office on-campus that supports all students with needs and who ensures they are receiving the accommodations they need to succeed.

Students who are older, or with more expansive life experience may decide against living on-campus because they feel constrained to an set of rules designed for traditional students such as having to adhere to student curfew and being unable to enjoy certain amenities because they are prohibited in the housing contract. These students may benefit more from housing options that are geared towards older students, as well as providing opportunities to connect with other non-traditional students such as adult learners or veterans. Despite that students may be uninterested in making more traditional connections with other students, having connections to like-minded students who understand the challenges that come with transitioning from military-life to college-life could encourage these students to be more open to the idea of making connections with peers that would have turned to friendships.

Given the lack of significant difference between previously incarcerated students and students that have not been incarcerated, a suggestion from these findings would be to better train higher education professionals on how to more positively interact with these students when they either choose to disclose or the staff is notified of the student's status. There is no training

or handbook that equips academic professionals with step-by-step instructions on how to effectively interact with previously incarcerated college students. However equipping those professionals who work with college students with training on effective communication and utilization of soft skills can help them better work with this group of students and better understand how the other components on their identity that may have greater influence regarding their needs or what resources would be highly appealing to them. Knowing how to have conversations with this group of students that demonstrates genuine interest and willingness to provide support will not only help academic professionals build rapport and connect with these students, but it can also help them discover key pieces of information that can allude to factors students may neglect to mention.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is important to note that this was a small, qualitative study; by no means does this study encompass the experiences of all on-campus college students post-incarceration. As stated previously, this is a population that is under-researched and underrepresented given how many people in the United States have been incarcerated at some point in their life. This study focused on three participants with different criminal backgrounds, creating several opportunities to conduct additional research to broaden understanding of the needs of this population.

The first suggestion for further research is to diversify the population. All three participants in this study were white men. This was not intentional, but it must be acknowledged. Minority populations still face discrimination and injustice at the systemic level, and this discrimination is heightened in the United States criminal justice system (Muller, 2021). Having an intentional focus on racial and gender diversity can better encompass the experiences of all

college students pursuing degrees on-campus after serving an incarceration period. For example, conducting a qualitative study on Black men pursuing higher education post-incarceration.

Another research opportunity that could stem from this study would be looking at a population that went to school in the same time period. This study had an individual that was exposed to the penal system and enrolled at a higher education institution in the 1970's and early 1980's, as well as someone who was incarcerated and enrolled at their institution as recently as 2019. Due to social changes and new developments in education and technology, it is inevitable that there would be stark differences in these participants' experiences. Having participants that were all enrolled in higher education at roughly the same time may allow for the emergence of new themes or findings. This would also allow for consistency in the findings to enforce the accuracy of themes that were discovered in this study and studies conducted prior to this one. For example, having participants who were enrolled at a higher education institution within the last five calendar years.

Having participants who all attended the same type of institution may also serve as an opportunity to further develop the existing research. Participants from this study had experience in a vocational school, two-year institutions, and four-year institutions. Focusing on one type of institution could help provide new insight to this topic, as well as assist in creating consistency among the learning environments of the participants. Different types of institutions will provide their students with experiences that are distinctive from dissimilar institutions. Looking at participants who all enrolled at a four-year university, for example, can better showcase the experiences students have attempting to earn their baccalaureate degree post-incarceration and identify themes and experiences that may be more relevant to that part of the population.

Finally, having participants that all committed the same type of crime could provide new research on this population. This study had violent offenders, but there was variance in the charges each participant faced. If all participants were only convicted of burglary or larceny for example, the lived experiences may differ in that the nature of their crime is different than that of someone who was convicted of manslaughter or assault on a police officer. This could provide new perspectives, as well as show the distinction in experiences between different types of offenders if findings from that study were compared to previous studies.

Conclusion

Being aware of the obstacles a previously incarcerated college student may have to overcome if they are completing their degree after serving a prison sentence can be advantageous in helping higher education administrators understand how to best support this population of students. This study has provided several key takeaways and findings on this unique group of students that are often under researched and overlooked by higher education administrators. The most prominent finding of this study being that previously incarcerated college students have similar motivations and needs to students that have never experienced incarceration, meaning that the obstacles faced by this population are unremarkable compared to the barriers faced by their non-felonious peers. Beyond instances of self-inflicted stigmatization, criminality was not the sole factor that impacted the experiences of the participants in this study, in fact for most of them, it was not even a major factor. Participants were all able to take advantage of commonplace sources of financial aid, and none of them had academic experiences that would have had a different outcome if they were not previously incarcerated.

These findings can improve the work of higher education professionals as they demonstrate that this group of students do not, as a general rule, need to be treated differently than other students. There is likely more significant intersectionality of their identities among these individuals, and so the other components of their identity may dictate specific assistance or resources that would be more beneficial as they attempt to navigate higher education. Instead of focusing on the fact that these students have served incarceration periods, higher education professionals should look at what other factors contribute to individuals in this population needing assistance. Previously incarcerated students are comparable to any other student that may enroll at a college or university; they are there to learn and better themselves. This population of students have needs that parallel the needs of non-felonious students, and often could benefit from the services and resources that are offered to traditional students. Higher education professionals should work to provide these students with as much support and resources as they find necessary, regardless of the fact that they were previously incarcerated. Professionals should treat these students with the same support and respect that all students are entitled to and may anticipate as they embark on their collegiate journeys.

Higher education professionals should recognize that these students are just as capable of, and deserving, as anyone else of obtaining their college degree. On-campus college students decide to come to college to learn new skills, make themselves more marketable when looking for a certain career, and for overall self-improvement. Creating a supportive space for this group of students not only benefits institutions as it assists with their enrollment numbers, but it creates new opportunities to have a promising future for students who may feel that those dreams are

unattainable because they have been ignored and disregarded in places of higher learning for so long.

College is not for everyone, but the assumption that someone cannot succeed in college solely because they have faced incarceration is ludicrous. Humans make mistakes; that is inevitable. This group of students simply made mistakes that were more severe than the average mistake, yet they still want to persevere and obtain their degree the same way any college student hopes to do. More can be, and should be, done to recruit this population into higher education and provide them with the proper resources and support to ensure that they can have the future they are hoping to build for themselves.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Facebook Post

PARTICIPANTS WANTED

Hi Everyone!

My name is Taylor Comer. I am currently a graduate student in the College Student Affairs Program at Eastern Illinois University. I am writing a thesis on the experiences of on-campus college students after they have served a prison sentence. My research for this study will be facilitated by my thesis advisor, Dr. Jon Coleman.

If you served at least 12 months in a correctional facility and are either currently or were previously enrolled at a two- or four-year college or university in an undergraduate program, I would be immensely appreciative if you would consider participating in my study. I am looking for six individuals that are willing to participate in a semi-structured interview of approximately 45-60 minutes either on Zoom or by phone. This interview would be an opportunity for you to tell me about your experiences navigating higher education as someone who was once incarcerated. An alias will be used for each participant to guarantee anonymity in all reporting of the findings from this study.

Your participation would be greatly appreciated. If you have any additional questions or are interested in participating in my study, please do not hesitate to email me at tjcomer@eiu.edu. Thank you again for your consideration!

Best Regards, Taylor Comer

Appendix B

Consent to Participate in Research

An Examination of the Experiences of On-Campus College Students Post-Incarceration

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Taylor Comer and facilitated by faculty sponsors Dr. Jon Coleman, Amber Webb, and Danessa Carter from the College Student Affairs Program at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you served at least a 12 month incarceration period for a felony charge, you are at least 18 years old, and you are either currently enrolled, or were previously enrolled, in an on-campus undergraduate program at a two- or four-year college or university.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand the experiences of on-campus students enrolled in an undergraduate program at a two- or four-year college or university in post-incarceration.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to: sit down with Taylor Comer and engage in a semi-structured interview. Questions will range from the experiences of the participant to the type of support they received and recommendations they have.

In this study, the researcher is sitting down with four to six individuals that have experience at a two- or four-year institution in an on-campus undergraduate program. The researcher will be conducting interviews that will take no more than one hour. This interview will be a one-time commitment. All interviews will take place via Zoom or phone call, and will be taped on an audio recorder with participant's permission.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Your participation in this study is not expected to cause more than minimum risks. Participants may have difficulty recalling certain experiences or may feel discomfort when talking about negative experiences that you had on their campus.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

College students that are completing an on-campus program post-incarceration could benefit from this research by discovering their experiences may be shared by others and in turn they may

feel less isolated. These individuals could also benefit from the critical thinking required to adequately reflect on their past experiences. Finally, faculty, staff, and administrators at two-four-year colleges and universities could benefit from this research because it can allow them to better understand the experiences of this population of students, as well as become informed on ways that they could improve aspects of their campus to better support on-campus students post-incarceration.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by deleting all audio used to record the interviews, and typed transcriptions will be permanently deleted as required by law. Recording of the interviews will only be reviewed by the investigators and all identifying information will be kept separate from the data.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also opt to not answer any question that you are uncomfortable responding to as you complete this interview.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Taylor Comer   Dr. Jon Coleman
tjcomer@eiu.edu   jkcoleman@eiu.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920

Telephone: (217)581-8567

E-Mail: eiuirb@eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the university community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

1. Welcome and thank the participant for their willingness to participate in the study.

2. Ensure that participant is in a comfortable environment with stable phone or internet service and complete informed consent with each participant. Take extra time to answer any questions they may have.

I: Do I have your consent to take an audio recording of this interview?

I: You have been sent an informed consent document that goes over your rights as a study participant. Did you receive it? Did you have any questions about the study or your rights as a participant? I want to confirm with you that you understand that you have the right to not answer any question that you do not wish to answer or to withdraw from the study at any time you wish. Can you confirm your consent to participate in this study?

I: I am going to ask you a series of questions that will be used solely to gather demographic information. We will be asking these questions of all participants, and they will not be used to identify you in any way?

1. For reporting, an alias will be used with your answers. You can choose a name that will be used in this study or I can assign you one. Do you have a preference?

2. How old are you?

3. How do you define your racial identity?

4. How do you define your gender identity?

5. What felony charge(s) were you convicted of?

6. How long were you incarcerated for in a correctional facility?

7. Are you currently enrolled in an on-campus undergraduate program at a two- or four-year institution?

8. Were you previously enrolled in an on-campus undergraduate program at a two- or four-year institution?

9. What state was the institution you attended in?

10. Was your institution public or private?

11. Did you complete your Associates degree, Bachelor's degree or a vocational/technical degree or certification?

   a. If you did not complete your degree or certificate, how many years of undergraduate education did you complete?

   b. If you did not complete your degree, what provoked you to discontinue your education?

Open Ended Questions

I: I am now going to ask you questions that will help me better understand your experiences as an undergraduate student at a four-year college or university post-incarceration:

1. First, why did you choose to pursue a college degree?

2. Did you disclose your criminal history to anyone at the institution?

   a. What influenced your decision?

3. As a previously incarcerated student, what were your experiences on-campus with employees of the institution?

   a. Did your experiences differ based on the type of employee you interacted with?

   b. (If answered "yes" to a) How so?

4. What was it like to attempt to make connections with your peers and classmates as a student that served an incarceration period?

5. How do you think your criminal background impacted your overall college experience?

Support or Challenge

6. Who on-campus was part of your support system as you navigated higher education post-incarceration?

7. Tell me about a time where you felt challenged by faculty, staff, or administrators at your institution.

   a. Do you have any other experiences you would like to share with me?

8. Tell me about a time where you felt supported by faculty, staff, or administrators at your institution.

   a. Do you have any other experiences you would like to share with me?

9. Tell me about a time where you felt challenged by your peers at your institution.

   a. Do you have any other experiences you would like to share with me?

10. Tell me about a time where you felt supported by your peers at your institution.

    a. Do you have any other experiences you would like to share with me?

11. What did your university do well to help promote a positive college experience for you?

12. What could your university have done better to provide you with a more positive college experience?

13. I would like to give you the opportunity to share with me any last thoughts or experiences that may not have been discussed throughout this interview that you would like to share about your experiences with higher education.

I: Thank you again for taking time out of your day to talk to me about your experiences in higher education. I know your time is valuable, and I am so appreciative of your willingness to participate in this study. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me!