

“You’re almost in this place that doesn’t exist”: The Impact of College in Prison as Understood by Formerly Incarcerated Students from the Northeastern United States

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Abstract: *This qualitative study examines the immediate and lasting impact of liberal arts higher education in prison from the perspective of former college-in-prison students from the Northeastern United States. Findings obtained through semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated people are presented in the following three areas: self-confidence and agency, interpersonal relationships, and capacity for civic leadership. This study further examines former students’ reflections on the relationship between education and human transformation and begins to benchmark college programming with attention to the potential for such transformation. The authors identify four characteristics critical to a program’s success: academic rigor, the professor’s respect for students, discussion-based learning, and respectful relationships between college and prison personnel. This study contributes to the growing field of scholarship on the benefits of prison higher education beyond those captured by studies of high-level data, such as the rate of return to prison.*

Keywords: *prison education, reentry, college in prison, adult education, transformative education, qualitative methods, liberal studies, isolation, social justice*

During a break on the first day of a college-sponsored literature class taught in a Massachusetts prison, an incarcerated student stood with his professor at the coffee urn, absorbing the discussion of a poem by nineteenth century poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. This was the first college class this student had taken. When he asked the professor if she knew where he might find a spoon to stir the prison-grade Folgers crystals into coffee, he started, suddenly realizing that neither a spoon nor any other implement that could be considered a potential weapon would be lying around in this medium-security prison. “Oh! I forgot where I was!” he exclaimed and added with a sense of wonder, “The class made me forget I was in prison.”

Almost everyone who teaches college classes in a correctional facility at some point hears something similar to what this student described during his classroom break. Teaching and learning in prison, in fact, seem to depend on creating the conditions for this productive forgetting. After all, to engage educational opportunities in the most meaningful ways, many incarcerated students distance themselves from both the carceral environment and past histories with schooling that have been unproductive at best, traumatizing at worst (Appleman,

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Caliguiri, & Vang, 2014; Pendleton, 1988; Werner, 1997). Indeed, teaching and learning in prison has its unique struggles and rewards and poses challenges for teachers and students that are different from those faced on a college campus. Post-secondary education in a correctional facility entails working within an institutional environment that prioritizes security, control, and containment in the name of safety, even when this limits educational opportunities. To achieve that stated mission of ensuring public safety, the institution deploys techniques of isolation and division, techniques designed to de-authorize or disempower incarcerated individuals and to prevent group formations. At best, what the institutions construe as the education or even “training” of the “inmate” is regarded as a distinct secondary aim. At worst, effective education on the inside operates in conflict with the mission and practices of corrections.

This tension between public safety and the transformations that can occur through education, often formulated in the popular imagination as a choice between the individual and the wider community, is in fact a false duality. Statistics on the high rates of recidivism for the general population, after all, make it clear that serving time generally leaves people feeling less useful, more traumatized, and thus more prone to criminal acts than before their incarceration. This qualitative study of the impact of participating in college while in prison finds that the personal transformation that can result from such participation fully supports a positive correlation between college programming in prison and increased public safety. The authors draw findings from the reflections of formerly incarcerated students on both the transformational impact of college programming and the specific aspects of programs that facilitated this individual change.

Literature Review

The most often cited metric for demonstrating the effectiveness of college in prison, indeed of any educational program offered inside, is a reduced rate of recidivism for those who participate. In the pivotal study of 1975 that fueled the era of mass incarceration that would follow, D. Lipton, R. Martison, and J. Wilks established what would soon become the widely held attitude about incarcerated people that they were wholly unamenable to training, education, or “rehabilitation” due to genetic determinants. In the 1990s, as mass incarceration ramped up, federal funding for post-secondary education in prison through Pell Grants was halted under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (H.R. 3355, Pub.L. 103-322), signed into law in 1994 by Bill Clinton. Since 2000, the pendulum has begun to swing back in favor of supporting educational programs with the growing shift in attitudes about U.S. incarceration rates and prison conditions. Funding for prison education programs, however, has remained scarce but recently saw a change with President Obama’s Second Chance Pell Act of 2016 that effectively lifted the ban for prisoners participating in sixty seven college programs in prison in the U.S. and that has offered a second round of funding again this year. More funding also supported larger and more geographically diverse longitudinal studies that have incontrovertibly demonstrated the inverse relationship between recidivism and education.

The extensive participatory study “Changing Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum-Security Prison” was directed by individuals at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in partnership with several women incarcerated at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (Fine et al., 2001). This study found that college in prison decreased recidivism rates significantly, from the average 29.9% for women without college-in-prison experience to 7.7% for those with college-in-prison experience. Changing Minds also found that college in prison saves tax payer dollars and reduces the cost and burdens of prison management for New York’s Department of Correction (DOC). These findings correlated college in prison with a reduced rate of recidivism, and thus decreased cost to tax payers and the state are amplified in the often-cited 2013 RAND Corporation study, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults” (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders & Miles). The RAND findings were drawn from a comprehensive

analysis of published and unpublished studies released between 1980 and 2011 that examined the relationship between participation in correctional education and prisoner outcomes. Looking at Adult Basic Education, vocational programming, and post-secondary programs, this meta-analysis found that “inmates who participate in correctional education programs had a 43 percent lower odds of recidivating [in the first three years after release] than those who did not. This translates to a reduction in the risk of recidivating of 13 percentage points” (Davis et al., 2013, p. 32). This is a particularly significant data point given that, as the National Institute of Justice reports, current recidivism rates within the first five years after release remain over 75% (2019).

In a study that highlighted the value of education in prison and calls for new research on the specific aspects of such programming, Runell (2016) wrote that evidence of reduced recidivism warranted “the need for more attention paid to the experiences of the prisoners taking college classes” and not simply the programming itself (p. 92). Runell’s study paved the way for additional studies like this one that attend to the specific experiences of students taking college classes. Further review of recent studies on the qualitative impact of higher education in prison align with this study’s finding that the most effective programs are those that authorize incarcerated students as participants in their own education. Beate Buanes Roth’s 2016 study of the relationship between participation in Norwegian prison education programs and a prisoner’s “academic self-efficacy” elaborated on the significance of the concept of “self-efficacy,” a term Bandura (1997) defined as the “perceived ability to succeed” (p. 106) and Gist & Mitchell (1992) defined as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands” (p. 184). Roth’s major finding underscored the importance of the attitude of the learner toward themselves by arguing that academic self-efficacy is essential to academic success inside prison. Roth also suggested that self-efficacy is not global or universal but rather fostered by specific and task-related experiences. Bandura (1986) similarly located the origins of efficacy beliefs in specific “mastery experiences, vicarious experiences (role models), social or verbal persuasion, and self-interpretation of physical/emotional arousal,” all, we might note, experiences that most people in prison are less likely to have in their educational histories (p. 107).

In a study of self-efficacy among students in an “Inside-Out” classroom that combined “outside” university students with “inside” incarcerated students, Allred et al. found an increase in beliefs in self-efficacy over the duration of the semester among incarcerated students (“The Inside-Out Center, 2019; Allred, Harrison, O’Connell & Martin, 2013). Allred defined self-efficacy in an academic context as referring to “subjective convictions that one can successfully carry out given academic tasks at designated levels” (p. 213), usefully distinguishing it from other forms of self-concept such as self-esteem and self-worth that measure the value one finds in oneself (Staples, Schwalbe & Gecas, 1984). Parker’s study of 375 men participating in a college program in a prison in New York similarly differentiated between these modes of self-concept (1990). The results of Parker’s study somewhat surprisingly suggested that although the relationship between involvement in college programs in prison and both self-esteem and social competence is significant, the relationship between such involvement and self-efficacy does not appear to be statistically significant. However, the study acknowledged that this lack of statistical significance could be due to the confounding variable length of time served, which may influence the relationships in question: how long and how consistently were subjects involved in college courses; was the program credentialed beyond course credit and cohort-based; and did the sample include people whose college experience was in the distant past. In Brasel’s study of her own college-in-prison classroom, she defined the successful classroom as one that fosters students’ abilities to engage in self-discovery and self-reflection, perhaps for the first time in their lives (1982). Increased skills of introspection and self-understanding, coupled with an increased ability to express care for others, becomes for us an important metric for assessing the value of the classroom experience. The qualitative study

presented here contributes to this growing field that explores the benefits of prison higher education beyond those captured by studies of high-level data, such as the rate of return to prison.

Method

Through semi-structured interviews with former college-in-prison students, this qualitative study examined the impact of higher education in prison from the perspective of formerly incarcerated men reflecting on their past experiences. The authors examined ways that these former students articulated the immediate and lasting changes brought about by their college experiences. In addition to interpreting the impact of these experiences on the individual, this study examines what specifically about the program experiences fostered this impact. To glean this information, the overarching question was twofold:

1. What can we learn about the relationship between education and human transformation from former participants' reflections on the impact of college in prison?
2. How might we imagine building educational programming inside prison with attention to the potential for such transformation?

Sample

This study entailed semi-structured interviews with 8 men, each given a pseudonym by the authors, who participated in various college degree-granting programs in medium- and maximum-security facilities in the primarily northeastern United States (see Table 1). The sample consisted of four people who identified as exclusively Black or African American, one who was also African, one Hispanic, one Native American, and one who identified exclusively as Caucasian. Before entering prison, the sample had completed a level of schooling that ranged from grade nine to community college coursework. Participants' ages at the time of the interviews in the summer and fall of 2017 ranged from twenty five to sixty seven years old. The study participants spent between two and twenty four years incarcerated, and the number of incarcerations for each participant ranged from one to three, with most participants experiencing only one incarceration. The participants' first incarceration spanned the ages between fifteen and twenty eight. At the time of the interviews, these people had released from prison anywhere from twenty two days to fourteen years beforehand. Although only one participant took enough classes while in prison to earn his college degree, two others came close, and all participated in a degree-granting program. It is important to note that any limitation on the number of courses each was able to take was not a matter of his own choosing but rather a result of prison-related, sentence-based, or college program logistics. After being released, a minimum of four participants either completed or are still continuing their degree work, three from the same colleges they affiliated with inside and two from two of the world's top-ranked or Ivy League universities.

Table 1

Summary of Study Participants

Student	Courses Taken	Education Before Incarceration	Time Served (years)	Age at Interview ^a	Race/Ethnicity	Convictions
Lawrence	27	Less than High School	17	44	African American	1
Zahir	32	High School	13	37	Black and African	1
Eessa	4	Some College	16	49	African American	1

Morris	11	Less than High School	18	33	African American	3
Ralph	12	High School	24	54	Caucasian	1
Jamal	>25	Less than High School	9	25	Black	2
David	15	Less than High School	17	37	Black and Hispanic	1
Andy	15	Less than High School	20	67	Native American and Black	1

a. The average age at time of incarceration was 19.63 years.

The small sample size and selection process presented limitations to our findings and thus deserve comment. Most glaring, only men were included as subjects. This was partially an effect of the researchers' developing plans to create a college-in-prison program that they knew would be launched in a male facility. Additionally, when this study began, there were still very few college-in-prison programs and only one in the researchers' state. These programs tended to be small, and communication with participants post-release was inconsistent at best. Indeed, the formerly incarcerated constitute what researchers designate a "hard-to-reach" population that is likely to experience on-going and severe socio-economic strains and to be distrustful of perceived authorities, making it hard for researchers to recruit and follow participants (in the case of longitudinal studies) (Western, 2016). In many states, these factors creating communication barriers are reinforced by Department of Correction no-contact policies for volunteers, policies that prevent anyone working behind the walls, as was the case with our lead researcher, from communicating with the same people post-release.

Researchers offer several suggestions to address this specific hard-to-reach population, including snowball sampling. Accordingly, this study used several informants who assisted us with the recruiting. Without this introduction, respondents would have been difficult to identify and more hesitant to speak with a random researcher. Snowball sampling is highly networked and relies on a certain level of social security among individuals who remain connected with peers. The relative success in employment and re-entry of the majority of study participants at the time of the study may be partially an effect of this recruitment method, since remaining in communication with others is both a means to social security and its indicator. It is important to note, however, that while individual successes are mentioned – such as prestigious university, graduate, law school plans, and health care jobs – some study participants only achieved low-skilled jobs such as bus driving, and three interviewed have since stopped communicating with the researchers' network altogether. Of these three, one who had taken only one college course in prison moved and stopped communicating with the researchers and his employer before the study was completed, resulting in his removal from the study sample, shrinking it from nine to eight.

All of these barriers to sample size and recruitment limited the study's ability to provide extensive generalizable knowledge about the effects of college in prison. However, the more focused goal of this particular study was to contribute a nuanced and more in-depth discussion of personal transformation to the growing cannon of research on personal impact. Even with a small sample size, this study's focus on personal impact benefited from in-depth discussions with individuals that the sample size made possible.

Instrument and Aims

The research team identified participants through previous personal connections and through referrals by participants or staff members from different college-in-prison programs.

Interviews were completed by the same researcher and took place in a public space, most often a city library conference room. Interviews lasted between one and two hours each.

The authors set about this project hoping to learn more about how people make sense of their past college-in-prison experiences once they are out and how they feel it impacted them both while incarcerated and after release. A further aim was to understand what these men found frustrating and what they found most valuable during their program participation. What did they value most about their college program experience and what did they recommend for the development of college programming inside. To this end, the interview schedule was designed to elicit discussion on the themes described below in Table 2. These themes were coded and analyzed for concepts also included in Table 2.

Table 2

Description of Coding Scheme by Theme

Theme	Concepts and Codes
Personal Development in College Program	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-concept
	<input type="checkbox"/> Relationships with faculty
	<input type="checkbox"/> Relationships with family and friends outside
	<input type="checkbox"/> Outlook on personal capabilities and future possibilities
	<input type="checkbox"/> Experiences of re-entry and the role of college experience
Perception of Impact on Prison Culture	<input type="checkbox"/> Relationships with classmates
	<input type="checkbox"/> Relationships with correctional officers and administrators
	<input type="checkbox"/> Changes in ways time was spent outside of class.
Frustration with College in Prison experience	<input type="checkbox"/> Access to text and materials
	<input type="checkbox"/> Academic Support
Suggestions for Improvement	<input type="checkbox"/> Pedagogy or curriculum
	<input type="checkbox"/> Classroom Experience
	<input type="checkbox"/> Institutional Support

The interview schedule allowed plenty of time for open discussion initiated by participants but divided the discussion into three time periods:

1. Background and pre-program involvement in education
2. Program experience
3. Program impact

The following questions are a few examples of those most participants addressed in their interview conversations:

1. What were your impressions of college before you enrolled? Did you plan to go to college before your incarceration? Once incarcerated, what were your impressions of your specific college-in-prison program before you enrolled?
2. What were you most excited about while you were in the program? What were your favorite and least favorite aspects of the experience at the time and why?
3. Did you notice any changes in your use of time and relationships with others outside of the classroom when in the program?
4. Do you ever find yourself reflecting on this experience? What do you think about

most?

5. Can you describe any changes in yourself that may have occurred as a result of your participation in the program? Do you regard yourself differently in any notable way now as a result of your participation in the college program?

The following themes were then identified and coded in interview transcripts for this report's analysis:

1. Personal development outcomes of college program involvement
2. Frustrations with college-in-prison experiences
3. Perception of impact of involvement on prison culture
4. Suggestions for program design and development

Although the sample size is small, the authors found enough significant points of saturation that we were able to draw some conclusions from the interviews about personal impact and thus to extract several guiding principles for program design and assessment. The *Results and Discussion* section includes quotations from interview subjects, organized around three major findings based on multiple participants' perspectives: no finding listed in the results section is shaped by fewer than six of the eight participants, and no finding is countered by anyone who did not support the finding explicitly. After presenting and summarizing these qualitative findings on the personal impact of educational experiences, the authors discuss how this new knowledge might be used to benchmark high quality in-prison college programming, ultimately with the hope of facilitating the development of more high quality programs. A larger separate study that provides additional information to this end was being run simultaneous to this one by researchers and practitioners through the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (AHEP); their study, "Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison," supported many of our findings and guidelines for high quality program development, though with less qualitative and higher level data collection (AHEP, June 2019). Unlike the larger study, our study aimed to foreground the immediacy of the transformational impact of college-in-prison experiences by quoting extensively from former students.

Results and Discussion

The following results section is divided into a discussion on educational impact and a discussion on benchmarking best practices. Each section is also further subdivided.

A. Reflections on the Impact of College in Prison

The requirement that incarcerated students must navigate the ideological and psychological distances between the prison context and a college classroom (Lagemann, 2017) makes many aspects of the learning experience disorienting and difficult. However, continually traversing this in-between space also contributes to some of what makes this experience valuable for people serving time (Richard, Futrell, Ali & Klasik, 2017). Though often fraught with psychic, emotional, and sometimes physical pain, the simultaneous experience of the two worlds ultimately provides many in prison with the opportunity to undergo changes (Roth, Absjornsen, & Mangers, 2016) that contribute to both individual and communal transformation. The authors found that successful programs were those that cultivated this transformation in three areas:

1. Student's ability to reflect and think critically about themselves
2. Student's interpersonal connections
3. Student's perceived role and sense of responsibility beyond self to society at large through a greater capacity for civic engagement

The following discussion of the three most statistically significant findings about the transformative potential of college in prison is therefore organized below under the following three

headings:

1. Self-confidence and agency
2. Interpersonal connectedness
3. Capacity for leadership

Self-Confidence and Agency

The one constant among all participants' perceptions of what they gained from the college-in-prison experience was what each called "confidence." The language of "confidence" that former students used to describe their college experiences widens the definition of academic self-efficacy beyond the scope of the important studies by Roth (2016), Parker (1990), and Gist and Mitchell (1992) to include an increased sense of self-worth as well as the joy that self-efficacy proffers. The development of this new sense of confidence seemed to begin with the competitive process of gaining a scarce slot in a college program. One participant whom the authors refer to as Jamal, a student who was younger than most and has continued his education at a top-tier university since he's been out, reported with a sense of pride, "I studied for that admissions exam all the way up to the morning of the test." Over the course of months or years, many of the participants watched as applicants were turned away from these selective programs and understood the competition was steep. Lawrence reported a sense of self-confidence that resulted from his participation in the selective college program inside: "I got to have something going on up here because I got into the Honors Society... so it does build confidence. You know, you feel like, I got this!" Another participant, Eessa, summed up, "[S]elf-esteem, you know. That's what prison education does, it gives you a sense of self-esteem." In a statement that confirms Roth's finding that academic self-efficacy builds on itself, Zahir stated, "The more you do well at [your coursework], the more it makes you feel, like I said, empowered." He continued,

After my first semester, I got straight A's 'til I graduated because I took it seriously, and I realized I could do it. I ended up being the valedictorian of the class.... It gives you a sort of confidence and hope that you can do something with yourself when you get out.

Notably, in addition to becoming a public speaker on behalf of criminal justice reform, Zahir has since become a small business owner.

David, who has now completed his bachelor's at an Ivy League institution and has applied to law schools, understood college as the way he came to terms with being incarcerated:

[I]t was like the world telling me, you know, no. Everything you had envisioned, that's not gonna come into fruition. And this was like, well, I have college now. I'm gonna use that to really become that person I want to be. You know, become successful... That's why I wasn't content with a ninety three. So, it was sort of competitiveness, maybe, or a little bit of a trick, maybe, that kind of pushed me to be so demanding of myself when it came to this college program.

David's experience being incarcerated was intricately related to the educational transformation he experienced, the "push" and sense of agency he developed through "competitiveness" or as a "trick" of the mind. Similarly, Morris, who has since secured a job in the healthcare field, found in his college experience an opportunity to dedicate himself and develop what he called character as well as confidence:

The benefit that I emotionally gained ... was the fact that, okay, this is *my* hard work. This is *me*, this is me putting all my effort in to see what I can get out of it. If I get a lower grade than what I'm looking for, or I don't get the results that I'm looking for, I know I put in the effort by myself. So it was building character, that personal character, and self-confidence that I was gaining.

Zahir qualified the terms of this new confidence: “[I]t’s not like a delusional type of empowerment. . . You actually start to believe in yourself. And believing in yourself, I felt, is the ultimate step towards being whatever you want to be.”

This academic self-efficacy thus extended to a wider sense of agency beyond the classroom, the ability to, in Zahir’s words, “do something with yourself when you get out.” More specifically, each of the study participants described a new ability to imagine a different self and a different future. Morris stated explicitly that the confidence he gained through college enabled him to imagine himself in the future: “I felt: I have something to live for now. I don’t need to live for the high; I don’t need to run back into the darkness.” He explained further,

What I learned in those classrooms and [from] college experience was, like, it rebuilt who I was. It’s like cutting all the weeds away from the flower so the flower can grow again and be strong. My life was so damaged as a teenager, as a kid growing up. What I got from that program, and what I learned was, it put me back on my two feet. It gave me enough mental strength to be strong again, to say no to all outside influences because I know now that I can do better. I can be better.

Significantly, Morris regarded the “flower” of the self as *preceding* – rather than as a *result* of – the college experience. The flower was there all along but had simply, or not so simply, become over time buried by the tangle of “weeds,” the “damage” and subsequent susceptibility to “outside influences.” This former student thus framed his personal transformation as a re-discovery of his own beauty and strength through educational practices that he masterfully figures here as a cutting away.

Over and over in these interviews the authors heard that the college experience expanded participants’ sense of personal possibility and ambition. With his graduate degree and career in healthcare now secured, Lawrence reflected, “[College] opened up my thinking” and “gave me the feeling that I had more options.” He described the way school also changed his relationship to his sense of community: “I think school just opened up like a whole other world. . . the things I used to see when I was younger I don’t feel a part of that any more. You know, my friends from the old days. . . .” This perception of a new self and future was consistently echoed among participants as the most characteristic and lasting effect of their prison education experiences.

Eessa, who was approaching fifty at the time of the interview, and who had served sixteen years, remembered the challenges of his own re-entry into society. He qualified both what is and what is not gained from a college program by the incarcerated student:

Prison education isn’t going to help with your parole. Your parole officer doesn’t care how educated you are, he doesn’t. Prison education isn’t going to help you find an apartment. It doesn’t deal with the tangibles of getting out. The only thing it does internally is give you the confidence to be able to face the world that’s changing around you, which is huge; it’s huge.

Whether college participation helps a person achieve a positive parole outcome likely depends on the individual personalities sitting on those boards, but this remains a looming question for all students eligible for a hearing. Eessa made it furthermore clear that once out on parole, the struggles of re-entering a society when one is severely restricted in civic status and employability are in no way fully mitigated by a college education. Indeed, the modifier “only” in “The only thing it does. . . .” underscores its lack of utility in addressing the practical challenges of release and re-entry. However, feeling that you can “face the world that’s changing around you” was notably valued here. This particular claim about the value of this new sense of confidence in facing what is unknown in fact resonates in many current university mission statements that pledge to provide students with the confidence and skills to face a changing world post-college as the basis of the most worthwhile of post-secondary educational benefits. In prison, however,

this ability to face the world anew is even more meaningful, as the following comment by Zahir suggested: “Education, the confidence that came with it and that tenacity, it helps you circumvent whatever difficulty you run into, and I can attest that I ran into a lot.” Zahir too faced numerous challenges upon re-entering society, but he has been nonetheless highly successful in a line of work he remains proud of. The extent to which his college experiences enhanced this success are difficult to determine but, like Eessa, Zahir identifies as an effect of his educational experiences the “confidence” and “tenacity” that helped him navigate the challenges.

Interpersonal Connectedness

In coding for the themes of personal development outcomes, frustrations, impact on prison culture, and suggestions for program design and development, an additional theme emerged. Each participant foregrounded the role of *relationship-building in the prison educational experience*, a theme that ultimately grounds this study’s findings about both the value of higher education in prison and the meaning of educational transformation. In the discussion below, the authors distinguish between types of relationships, those with others in the student cohort, with members of the incarcerated community generally, with family members, and with prison staff.

Relationships with Other Students. Each discussant foregrounded the role of relationships with various groups, but relationships with peers in the program was among the most frequently and energetically discussed topics in the interviews. As Lawrence reported, overcome with emotion while reflecting several years back on his college graduation outside of prison, “Wow, I came a long way, and when I walked across that stage, three or four people who also did college courses in prison walked that day.” In this man’s memory of walking the stage, his sense of pride extended immediately beyond the self; success was something shared, something perhaps only fully experienced through relationship. As Eessa described his group of classmates, “We were set aside. That was the gift of college in prison, the separation... it didn’t make us special, but it gave us, it gave me... a sense of being greater than my circumstances.” Zahir described this coincidence of the sense of community and educational transformation as follows:

It’s like a close-knit group of guys who went through the program... many of us have come out and some of us are still in there and we’re all still like a band of brothers... and that never goes away I think... I mean you experience a metamorphosis with somebody alongside you, you kind of don’t forgot that you both went through that together. It never, never changes.

Zahir underscored the role of relationships with peers in the very “metamorphosis” enabled by the college experience. Indeed, this sense of being in community with one’s peers never leaves, even when students complete, graduate, or return home. A lasting sense of being part of a group thus appeared to be an invaluable aspect of this experience, one that, as several participants remarked, being part of this study further underscored.

Jamal similarly prioritized the relationships among fellow students as essential to the transformational capacity of college programming:

Once the college people leave, you immediately realize you are indeed a prisoner once again, and that is the social stage you occupy. But you’re almost in this place that doesn’t exist, and now you have people who can actually allow your voices to be heard or at least amplified in a way that’s meaningful to bring about some changes.

This paradoxical formulation of being somewhere “that doesn’t exist,” somewhere that exceeds existence, describes the complex doubling of the world in prison for college students, even when “the college people leave.” This new space is ultimately characterized by a change in the mode of interpersonal relating cultivated by the students themselves. After all, as Jamal explains, “now you have people who can actually allow your voices to be heard.” This new

mode of relation among the college students is characterized further as “meaningful to bring about some changes,” as potentially resulting in the capacity for civic leadership, this study’s third major finding. As Jamal’s statement suggests, once in the college program, students’ relationships with their peers operate increasingly as a place of listening, where individual “voices” are “amplified” by one another. Moreover, relationships provide opportunities for individuals to reflect and reconstrue one another in ways that may “bring about some changes.” While the relationships may not be wholly new, they are newly enriched and newly supported.

This sense of the community of college participants became apparent to many outside of the classroom as well: Ralph, an avid reader who has found employment through the college program he attended while serving time, reported,

Everybody reads fiction and Stephen King, but here we are in the yard discussing different topics you never hear in the yard. It’s always ‘who won the game last night? Who got stabbed in B-block? Did you hear the latest legal proposal, they’re gonna take away our trailer visits?’ ... But now we’re out in the yard, but we’re amongst ourselves.

For Ralph, the yard was transformed and a new community “amongst ourselves” became apparent. Eessa described the yard in similarly communal terms: “I remember walking, we had night courses... you’d be yelling across the quad about studies... because it was a shared mindset.” The felt need to protect the program in the eyes of other prisoners and staff contributed to students’ identification with and investment in this newly “shared mindset” cultivated by the presence of a college program. This group investment, the authors heard from all participants, contributed to the great extent to which students threw themselves into these educational experiences, took the risks required to try their hardest, and guarded any peace they found outside of class that supported their studying and success, contributing to the program success.

Relationships with Non-Students. In addition to this “shared mindset,” relationships between inside students and other incarcerated people changed dramatically as a result of college. They both contributed to and served as a measure of students’ transformations. “I think your relationship with other inmates changes,” Zahir explained, because “you start to know them.” Zahir implies that there was a new level of intimacy with others stirred by the personal development college participation inspired. He continued,

I’ve had guys say, ‘Every time I see you, you always walking like you have somewhere to be and I’m like, yeah, I do have somewhere to be.’ ... There’s also people who would say, ‘He thinks he’s better than us,’ but then there’s people who would say, ‘Whatever he’s doing, like, it’s working for him; I want to try it too.’

Antagonism from other incarcerated people was in each case taken as a sign of jealousy and ultimately unimportant to the college experience. Zahir’s comment above reframes this response as he indicated that his participation in college clearly evoked hope for others and encouraged others to become interested in earning their high school equivalencies with the aim of enrolling in college. As Zahir theorized,

[I]f people respect you and they see you doing something, a lot of times they just, they want it too ...because they saw the level of respect, they saw the accomplishments, they want to do it too and then they get hooked... in a good way!

Notably, half of the men in our study independently introduced the tremendous value they found both in being mentored and in serving as unofficial mentors to others. In fact, when asked what was the most significant aspect of his college experience inside, David reported without hesitation being a mentor to others. In an effort to keep the near-adolescents serving time at the maximum-security prison “out of the yard and doing something constructive,” David explained,

We put together the ‘Prison Community Awareness Program.’ And we basically were mentors for these guys and got some of them involved in the college program Some guys may be fresh out of a GED class or younger. [We paired] some of the younger guys with some of the guys [who] are more advanced.

The altruistic act of helping men get their GED’s was also described by Zahir as personally meaningful: “I had selfish reasons, because it just made me feel good to help It was great seeing a lot of guys want to do it because they realized they don’t want to be in the yard.” Morris described the value of mentoring in personal terms:

I saw myself inside of them at twenty two, twenty three years old. ... I *was* those kids sitting in that room, looking for help but not knowing how to get it, and in turn ruining my life because I didn’t understand my circumstances. The world was bigger than me, but I wanted to be bigger than it. And I tried to take it on. ... I seen a lot of young children heading in my direction. And here I am trying to put a brake on it, saying, ‘No listen, I’m you. You know, *there’s only one more poor choice or decision between me and you.* Please don’t make it because you’re mad at your family... [D]on’t ruin your life.’

The psychological identification Morris described as the meaningful basis of mentoring underscores the way that building relationships with others serving time contributed significantly to the extensive personal transformation that college participation can inspire, independent of college personnel. As Andrew also described: “Mentoring is what I would do with a lot of people. We’d sit outside together, in the library, in the yard, and we’d talk about a path forward. We’d talk about a path *home*.” This statement captures the power of mentoring, in many senses the power of relationship, to cultivate for both mentee and mentor a new and simultaneous sense of hope, the future, and home. Certainly, being able to imagine a future outside of prison life is the first step toward getting there. This ability to imagine the future differently was seen by many participants as inspired by the relationships – the official and unofficial mentoring – that our participants valued so highly.

Relationships with Family Members. Participation in college programs also contributed to an increased sense of being in community with people outside of prison, namely students’ families. As Zahir theorized, “[O]ne of the things that I’ve always said was that prison is designed to isolate you. ... [I]t’s designed to break you and your family up too because of the constraints that they have to deal with in order to be able to see you.” Two of our participants discussed the impact of what they learned in classes on these family relationships. Zahir explained referencing the wider impact of learning the “class material:” “[W]hen you have some knowledge behind something or the historical attachment to an issue, it helps you understand it better, and I think it’ll help you navigate through situations better.” Because of the historical and sociological material he was learning, he developed a new ability to read critically that enabled him to relate to his family differently. Specifically, he could look at the “roles or what’s expected of people” and “was able to attribute [behaviors of his father] to his [father’s] culture, his upbringing... what *he* dealt with.” The impact of gaining a wider, sociological and historical perspective from class materials and learning activities has the capacity to nurture some of the most important already existing relationships, those with fully or partially estranged family members. Zahir summarized the impact of his new learning: “It helped me understand my father.” And this new understanding clearly reflected a new capacity for empathy. He said about his entire family: “I learned how to forgive them because you start to understand.” It is hard to imagine a more important outcome of a college course than increasing the capacity for empathy, critical for any relationship but especially significant for strengthening connections with family members. This aspect of the college experience especially benefits those whose relationships with their families are additionally complicated by direct involvement with the criminal justice system.

Relationships with Prison Officials. Although generally the authors found far more consistency than inconsistency of opinion among our contributors about changes in relationships resulting from college education in prison, this was not the case when it came to discussions of relationships with prison officials. The opportunities for developing mutually respectful, and thus productive, relationships between prisoners and prison staff are different in every institution given that each facility has its own culture, rules, and traditions. As Lawrence described,

[N]ot too much changed my relationship with the correctional staff because you have correctional staff who embrace the program -- kinda like, 'ah good you going to school' -- and then it's some other ones like 'ah, what you gonna do with that.' So ...you kinda like try not to worry about others' opinions... you gotta do what's best for you.

Andrew posited a rationale for those officers who disapproved: "[T]he lower-line staff don't [see the benefit of the program], because they haven't been taught that. They don't have sensitivity training." He qualified, "[T]here are some who... would converse with you and... you would realize wow, except for the fact that he's in a uniform and I'm a prisoner, we're just two guys talking about a subject that just warrants this kind of discussion." Zahir referenced his discussions with officers who resent prisoners for receiving education through these programs:

I've had COs [correctional officers] tell me... 'I have to pay this amount for my kids to go to school [and you get it for free].' And I said, 'You know what, you're right. ... [T]he idea that you have to pay that amount for your kids ... to go to school, that's another issue that needs to be dealt with at a higher level ... but the second thing is, *this is not free*; some of us are paying for it with our lives.'

It is worth noting that this not uncommon point of contention with prison staff about "free" education inside occurred in the context of a conversation, a conversation instigated by the educational opportunity. Moreover, the difference in perspectives manifested as respectful dialogue rather than conflict defined by paramilitary prison codes enforced by the threat of punishment as isolation or even physical violence. On the theme of empathy, Zahir does not simply oppose the COs' position here, but rather, he acknowledges and identifies with him, enabling the CO to feel understood and consider a different perspective rather than feeling the exclusive need to press his own point.

Even if the dialogue prompted by college opportunities for people in prison involves disagreement between students and prison officials, it still appeared to contribute to the relational quality of the inside students' experience of prison beyond the college cohort and incarcerated community. Eessa registered the change in this relationship with the prison when he explained, "[Y]ou found different ways to navigate the prison system in a positive manner ... you had to shift the way you dealt with COs ... instead of getting angry ... you had to humble yourself." Even if it was difficult, as Eessa's comment implied, membership in the college program seemed to increase one's ability to transform behaviors as a result of seeing oneself as existing simultaneously within and beyond the prison walls. And doing so could make relating to correctional officers – and other incarcerated people – easier.

Capacity for Leadership

Through their college-in-prison participation, these former students experienced increased self-confidence that resulted in, and resulted from, the development of new and changing relationships with different individuals and groups. The third most commonly discussed benefit of college in prison was a desire to give back by engaging in action that extends its positive impact beyond the scope of the individual. This new capacity to serve as a leader with altruistic and communal aims occurred even before participants were released through their participation in official and unofficial mentoring. These civic values were reported by partic-

ipants and in almost every case enacted post-incarceration. Morris, for instance, was working as a practitioner in the healthcare field, supporting low-income people, as was Lawrence, who was putting to use his master's degree in the health sciences while considering pursuing a PhD that would enable him to do more in the field of research. Andrew runs a non-profit dedicated to supporting incarcerated individuals pursuing college education. David was completing his university degree at an ivy league institution and preparing for graduate work and a career in criminal law to serve the populations most impacted by arrests. The most recently released participant, Jamal, is now completing his degree at a top-level university, situating himself for civic impact.

Each participant also regularly makes time to speak to various publics and to offer their critical analyses of incarceration, justice, and education. As Ralph reported,

I'm trying to make an impact, trying to show that at some point, these are people who are gonna change and change forever. And this is where my argument for presenting college for prison is. ... Someone can present an argument to you and you can break it down ... and I think a lot of our public doesn't do that today. ... I think we are [all] poorly educated.

The college impact Ray framed as civic education: a new analytical lens enabled students to critique and thus engage with the wider world in a way that currently the uneducated or nontraditionally educated public often does not.

Conversations with our participants revealed the extent to which this civic-minded sense of responsibility for more than oneself emerged from learning through college experiences in prison. As the oldest participant, with a long perspective on criminal justice and incarceration, Andrew's historical-biographical analysis of his college-in-prison transformation demonstrated the value he places on civic involvement. He was incarcerated in an era earlier than those of the other contributors, first in the 1960s and second, after having escaped and lived freely for over 15 years, in the 1990s. Comparing his experiences inside during these two different periods of incarceration, Andrew described a shift in prison culture, one that mirrored the shift familiar outside of prison as well:

The prison culture had changed. And for me, it was a question of how do you fit into this new particular brand of incarcerated people who were out for themselves? ... When I was 18 and I went in, everybody... galvanized behind the cause, like, "we don't have rights, [the DOC is] reading our mail, we don't want you reading our mail, you're redacting our mail, you're censoring our mail, we don't want this, we don't have telephones..." So, [we] grouped up like that, and together went against the system hoping to accomplish those particular things. When I came back, it wasn't about all that. It was about "If I can steal your sneakers, I'm gonna steal your sneakers..." They were more self-centered rather than collectively-centered around the needs of the group.

Not being "collectively-centered around the needs of the group" was driven in part by a lack of role models and leaders. In his earlier period of incarceration, Andrew explained,

[Y]ou had the Muhammad Ali, you had the Malcolm X's, you had the Martin Luther Kings, you had the Bobby Kennedys. You know what I'm saying? So you had people that were like, "This is what we do." We had the Black Panther movement [saying], "This is what we do, we fight against oppression." And even though many of the ways of fighting weren't the best ways, you had the Angela Davises... saying, "This is wrong, we don't like it, and this is all I can do to have a voice. You may not like what I'm doing, but this is the voice that I have."

Andrew's analysis assumes leaders are the critical foundation for communal or civic involvement and collective transformation, valued here over the individualism of the 1990's. He used

Angela Davis to read the agency or “voice” of the dis-empowered as dedicated to a collective and civic purpose even if “many of the ways of fighting weren’t the best.”

Without a sense of belonging to a collective movement for human rights, a movement for equality and legal and economic justice, many primarily poor youth then and now who have lacked those leaders have found a sense of belonging in gang “families.” Andrew explains,

Over time, as... the Andrew Youngs, as the overseers of movements, as they got older, nobody really picked up the mantle. It became the me generation, where “Gee, what do I *have* and how do I get it? Well, if I have to steal, I don’t care what people think of me as long as I have those sneakers... So, with that generation, it changed, it wasn’t collectivity. It was... the void after the civil rights period... You could say to a kid [in the 1990s], “Who are you following?” [He’d say,] “Well, I don’t know, who should I follow?” [and he would think you meant,] “Are you a Blood or a Crip?” You know, like that. There was nothing.

The type of collectivity that values loyalty to a group over the critical capacity or ethical agency of the individual cannot provide the basis of human transformation that participants described as engendered by college-in-prison. The context offered by Andrew situates college-in-prison as an alternative to gang membership and to what he calls the “void” that followed in the aftermath of the 1960s-70s. Educational transformation thus effects both the collective and the individual voice and ethical agency. Without this integration of individuality and relationality, loyalty hardly results in the productive sense of belonging and the capacity for civic leadership that a genuinely collective aim can provide and instead often leads to the profound isolation of incarceration or even death.

B. Benchmarking College in Prison to Facilitate Individual-Collective Transformation

The educational quality of college in prison varies tremendously – and not simply based on the reputation of the college. The specific organizational processes that this study’s participants described as facilitating their transformations provide the basis for benchmarking some best practices for college-in-prison programming. It is worth noting here, however, the potential hazards of generalizing any recommendations. After all, as Erving Goffman’s theory of agency and Glenn David Macken’s analysis delineated, the emergence of “selfhood” is always an effect of a tangle of specific organizational processes that can never ultimately be generalized without denying the potential for novelty or change that might occur in a person’s future. Moreover, each program has a different set of material conditions it works within, given the specific prison institutions, rules, individuals, and cultures, as well as the specific college cultures and variously allocated resources. Benchmarking also risks ignoring the important point that effective education on the inside is often very similar to effective education on a college campus. And yet, what we consider best practices in higher education are not necessarily possible behind the walls or desirable from the perspective of a prison administration. This study identifies the most often noted program aspects that facilitate the kinds of transformations the study participants described in their reflections on impact as discussed above. Specifically, this study found that the strongest programs develop their structures and practices based on understanding the following four conclusions drawn from statements by multiple participants about the critical importance of: 1.) academic rigor 2.) the professor’s respect for students 3.) discussion-based learning and 4.) a productive relationship between college and prison.

Academic Rigor

Each former student addressed the value of academic rigor, often tying this to the relationship with professors. Lawrence said about his favorite class that “everybody was on edge in that class” and about the professor, “I appreciated, you know, how hard she pushed us.” He described receiving a paper the professor had returned and how he would “just hold it up and look at all the green lines and corrections and ‘more detail about this part’ – so she really like

made you work.” She “made you really go harder and want to put more and more detail into your work.” Zahir similarly referred to the “classes that worked” as those “where the professors challenged us.” And we heard from David that “[a]nother thing [he] very much appreciated were advanced courses.” He also suggested that frequent “quizzes that involve commentary” were crucial “because I think you want to know that your students are really grasping the material.” Being held accountable by the professor was something each participant referenced, in two cases with the recommendation that professors insist on participation in class and, in Lawrence’s words, “pick you out if you were quiet.”

Zahir reported having demanded rigorous intellectual expectations from his professors in the following way:

If I earn an A and I [get out and] go on campus, would I have gotten the same grade? Or, are you putting on a little curve there because you feel sympathetic to that cause because I didn’t go to a great school growing up, because I was in a poor neighborhood? Because now you’re giving me a false sense of where I really stand in the world.

He continued, referring to his professors, “We need to know the real deal. So they assured us of that.” For Zahir, the “real deal” meant knowing where he and his peers stood in relation to non-incarcerated university students. A program’s insistence on rigor enabled the college-in-prison student to revise the assessment he had of his own ability going into the program. Notably, since working hard was always presented as a matter of “we,” it appears to have impacted the participants’ sense of the group.

Professor’s Demonstrated Respect for Students

Closely related to this insistence on the value of high academic standards was the importance participants placed on the way professors saw their students’ abilities. Each of our participants were very aware of professors’ perceptions of them. As Eessa explained,

What always astonished them was how smart we were, how intelligent we were. And the thing is, they always said here are guys who are hungry for education and can’t get it, and then you have the privileged out there who have an opportunity for education and don’t want it.

The value participants placed on academic rigor was clearly rooted in the value they placed on relationships between professor and student. For our participants, there was general agreement that, as Lawrence stated, “professors make the program.” Each contributor recognized as central to the program’s effectiveness “definitely passionate professors.” Lawrence continued, “[P]eople can tell if someone is just going through the motions.” Similarly, in response to being asked what made the experience so meaningful, Jamal explained, “I think it’s not the material but maybe it’s the instructors. Maybe they cull the best talent and bring these incredible individuals.”

In addition to the respect for students’ abilities communicated in professors’ high academic expectations, relationships with faculty were clearly critical to the educational endeavor, the learning “content” ultimately inseparable from its method of delivery. According to Morris,

My best teachers were the ones that never taught me what to think; they just taught me the ability to think, to use your own life, be creative with your own beliefs and your own understanding of the material... When people force you how to think... it places you in a box. So, my best teachers were the ones who... allowed me to be me.

Morris’s statement reflects the importance of recognizing student independence; the student must be seen as different, not as known or even ultimately knowable, but as someone always yet to be known differently by both the professor and the student himself. Morris explained further, “You’re throwing us that life raft,” but the raft in these formulations is clearly a tool

with which the students save themselves, granting priority and agency once again to the student as author of his own educational transformation. "Because [the student] is putting in the work," Morris described further, "it's you.... You're gonna swim back to shore. You know, it's your hard work that's gonna do this." Professors are not figured here as the life raft, the – often white – saviors, and the best professors were those that understood this and treated students accordingly with the respect that such treatment entails.

Discussion-based Learning

As Zahir recalls, "I remember conversations more than I remember what I watched; I don't want to watch a lecture." Similarly according to Andrew, "The classes that allowed open discussion with varying points of view were great." Eessa recommended that professors "open it up for discussion and not so much lecture" and continued, "You'll really be surprised at what guys with time do to think. Discussions were lively because you didn't have the professors teach us... I mean they taught but ... we had ideas just as much." Insisting on "open-ended questions" from the professor, Morris urged, "Allow the student to engage in the material the way that they do it... it challenges the teacher [and makes] the student engage with the material below the surface." Rather than simply accept information at face value, these students recognized that through discussions they were being asked to "dig." And by authorizing students in this way, the classroom facilitated transformation. Zahir analyzed discussion as follows: "[W]e were forced to challenge our own bias. Discussion forces us to kind of look within ourselves, take a look at our surroundings, and start to observe things differently... it just changes your perspective and your outlook." Individual transformation was linked with changes fostered by active student engagement in discussion.

Evaluating the significance of student-centered and specifically discussion-based education in prison from a higher analytic remove, Eessa explained,

I think that ... prisoners are always being taught without having a voice, and that was one thing about prison ... it took away your voice. You don't have a voice at all. But to be able to express your opinion, to be able to share your thoughts, allows you to have a voice. So if I was going to design a program, I wouldn't want it where I'm doing the talking Listen to them.

This formulation serves as a valuable reminder to educators that through the interpersonal relationships built through discussion, both with the professor and at least equally critically with peers, the individual emerges with a new sense of agency and capacity for leadership. David qualified his own enthusiasm about discussion by articulating the critical role of the professor:

Discussion is important absolutely ... but should be controlled. So, you don't want one student taking control of the whole class ... and if you have a guy in the room who is quiet, maybe you should call on him ... so guys don't think they can come in and just cruise through the class on a given day ... 'cause it can be that you have three guys who really control the class... and you don't want that.

The interviews made it very clear that students think a lot and feel strongly about class dynamics, which are different from those on a college campus where students may or may not know one another outside of class and can choose to be apart or get together when class is over. Given that in prison very often students know one another well, at least in certain ways, before the classroom experience commences, Andrew cautioned,

When you put [students] in a classroom setting together ... there's a lot that the teachers don't know. ... Just because you're in a classroom setting, it doesn't change the prison rules. If I don't like you because [of your crime], I don't want to sit next to you... or it could be you're an opposing gang member That's prison code Let people pick their own partners.

Understanding that conflict may exist even when it is not visible in the prison classroom remains crucial for professors who will always, to some extent, be outsiders. As several participants described, the facilities and state Departments of Correction that were amenable to developing a special housing unit exclusively for the people in college seemed to go a long way toward more fully reconstructing prison culture as conducive to learning. Though unusual, collective college housing units foster spaces for discussion among cohort members. David described this in the maximum-security prison where he served time as including not only individual cells but “a dayroom” which the Deputy Superintendent had “built with tables and a little library for guys to study together.” The prison administration’s willingness to support opportunities for communal learning even when those involved a cultural shift and the allocation of resources were clearly advantageous in these cases. This space created a different social dynamic that facilitated even more effectively transformational experiences for students inside. Such support goes a long way toward resolving the challenges of what Jamal described as “being almost in this place that doesn’t exist.”

Productive Relationship Between College and Prison Personnel

The last consistent recommendation for program development that may be drawn from participants’ perspectives on what facilitated genuine educational transformation is that the relationship between the college program, the prison, and the state DOC be mutually respectful. Without this, every aspect of the college program remains at risk. As Eessa explained, “You can’t do it without the [prison] administration. You just can’t shut them out.” Simultaneously, David explained that the college must remain primarily responsible for the program because this impacts the way that incarcerated people think about the program and affects their investment. Eessa argued similarly that the college should have control over admissions: without that, the prison will potentially

... pick favorites and then you’ll isolate people; you’ll separate groups or you’ll cause violence because people will say, “Oh, you can get this and I can’t....” If you don’t open it up for all... it creates a danger for those who get in.

David explained the administration of a college-in-prison should work toward “[m]aking security feel involved, because... most of the opposition comes from the security’s side.” He specified later,

[S]omeone talking in the hallway or being out of place should not result in the type of misbehavior report that has them taken out of the college program, because that results in officers being allowed to simply harass guys. You don’t wanna empower them in that regard.

A productive and collaborative relationship between the college and the prison is thus critical to not only the educational experiences but also the safety of the students.

The necessity of partnership between the two institutions is especially important when it comes to organizing events that involve outsiders, such as graduations, events that support in some very important ways the educational transformations of individual students. As Eessa described the value of these events,

Those [incarcerated] who are taking the right steps should be acknowledged... by their families and prison officials... [G]ive them that acknowledgment that plays a part to the whole self-worth aspect. There’s a lot of guys who have children. And the kids seeing daddy... *that* is beneficial.

Jamal, a young father himself, suggested that colleges should create more opportunities than just graduation for this kind of community experience that involves prisoners’ children, a program component that would clearly rely on the prison’s willingness to recognize the value of these relationships to the parent’s educational transformation. The resources and goodwill to

support educational services like these are often limited in part because their connection to education seems unclear, tangential, or “soft.” The authors heard repeatedly that these events that include outsiders are critical to the mission and experience of transformational education, even if they are not explicitly accomplishing the more measurable or data-driven goal of credentialing that seat-time hours does. All of this study’s participants understood that a positive relationship between corrections and college that can facilitate events such as graduations, debates, restorative justice circles, and others where visitors are brought in, was essential to the individual transformations that ultimately have enabled people to avoid returning to prison.

Summary of Results

By examining the structure and impact of college programming in prison, this qualitative study affords a unique opportunity to better understand why personal transformation occurs, what it consists of, and to re-prioritize accordingly some best practices in higher education. In examining the impact of individual participation from the perspectives of formerly incarcerated participants, the authors found the following three interrelated outcomes and sub-themes which were supported by almost every interview discussion. The most immediately and consistently reported was the increased sense of self-confidence and subsequent ability to re-imagine one’s future in a more optimistic light. All study participants also recognized the transformational effect of an increased sense of interrelatedness created by the development of various relationships stemming from program participation – relationships with families, fellow students, the wider prison community including prison staff, college professors and other personnel. These relationships fostered a new sense of communal belonging and made evident a new capacity for empathy. The newly organized sense of academic efficacy and self-confidence garnered by these relationships fostered an increased sense of agency that the authors and participants have figured as a capacity for leadership stemming from a new sense of civic responsibility.

In summary, the results of our project demonstrate that college-in-prison participation facilitates the following individual changes:

1. *Increased self-confidence*, demonstrated by optimism, consideration of long-term plans, and confidence about expressing individual ideas.
2. *Increased sense of connectedness*, demonstrated by feeling included in a community, increased empathy, and an increased ability to navigate differences through dialogue.
3. *Increased leadership / civic goals*, demonstrated by a sense of collectivity and responsibility for others

Understanding more specifically how former students see their own educational transformations also provided the grounds for the articulation of three basic program development benchmarks delineated below in Table 3.

Table 3

Recommendations for High-Quality Higher Education in Prison

Recommendation	Example
Program Design	maintain academic rigor; emulate standards of college-level courses outside
Pedagogical Strategy	utilize discussion-based, reflection assignments; cultivate respect of student’s ideas and independent learning/thinking; foster mentorship

Institutional Support	cultivate respect from professors; academic support; positive relationship between prison administration/staff and college administration/staff
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The authors would add as an additional recommendation that maintaining a dialogue with students during and after program participation structured around personal impact and programmatic assessment both improves the program and supports the agency of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Education that is civically-oriented engages students as leaders of one another, leaders of themselves, and leaders of the program itself through on-going assessment. Ultimately, on-going organizational change is critical not only for participants but also for the educational and interventional quality of any college-in-prison program. Angela Davis wrote pressingly, “We have to begin to think in different ways. Our future is at stake” (2012, p. 30). The kind of work that facilitates a different future includes increased self-efficacy for incarcerated people whose voices must be recognized and “amplified,” often in place of our own. This study underscores the importance of remaining in dialogue with the experts at every stage. After all, educational transformation and a new future for all occurs through just such relationships and thus involves changes in both student and teacher, prison and college, alike.

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