Serving the Underserved: Formerly Incarcerated Students and Support Services

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ABSTRACT

This study centered on the lived experiences of five community college students who were formerly incarcerated. Through interviews, the students shared their expectations before entering college, resources they found to be most helpful throughout their enrollment, and what they feel could make them more successful. The research focuses on the areas of academic learning, sense of belonging, and career preparedness. Results showed formerly incarcerated students were very independent when applying for college, but some standard procedures such as, applying for in-state residency for instance, are not streamlined. Formerly incarcerated students experienced difficulty using technology and finding the equipment and a quiet space to study. Active learning, connections with faculty and peers of similar interests, and helpful, trained advisors were all credited as adding to the success of formerly incarcerated students. These findings are discussed in relation to adjustments that can be made by community college administrators.

Keywords: formerly incarcerated students, community college, academic learning, sense of belonging, career preparedness

The mission of the community college, to provide access to education for all, has remained unchanged since its inception in 1901 (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). Just as community colleges provided previously unseen access for women, minorities, and low socioeconomic students to enroll, the time has come again for community colleges to recognize another underserved population: the formerly incarcerated (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). Providing access to meaningful education for formerly incarcerated population benefits both the individual and community (Cooke, 2004; Hope, 2018; Lagemann, 2016; Sheehan, 2018).

More than 10,000 people are released from U.S. prisons each week, with 650,000 released each year (United States Department of Justice, 2020). Between 1980 and 2000, the incarceration rate in the United States increased five-fold (Austin et al., 2018). Many individuals incarcerated during those

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booming years are becoming eligible for parole, probation, or release. It has been well documented that formerly incarcerated people, also referred to as reentry citizens, receiving a formal education produce a multitude of community benefits, including reduced recidivism (Hope, 2018), lessened need for public health services (Cooke, 2004; Sheehan, 2018), strengthening of communal bonds (Lagemann, 2016), and general reduction in risky behavior (Sheehan, 2018). To achieve the benefits of education, administrators must be prepared to work strategically with reentry students to overcome the additional barriers associated with incarceration. Despite evidence indicating a positive impact from education, there is a dearth of literature on effectively serving formerly incarcerated students.

Upon release, reentry citizens have an increased likelihood of facing unemployment, homelessness, poverty, untreated mental health challenges, and stigmatization (Moore et al., 2016). Moore et al. (2016) found that stigmatization, regardless of eventual outcome, has damaging, permanent effects on the behavior of formerly convicted individuals.

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Moore et al. discovered, even perceived stigma, the concept of feeling devalued, "is thought to negatively affect self-esteem and self-efficacy, which ultimately affect expectations about future interactions, coping, mental health, and behavior" (p. 197). Conversely, Brown and Bloom (2018) found a supportive environment, such as an inclusive college setting, can decrease that stigma.

The purpose of this study was to identify formerly incarcerated students' expectations of community collegiate success and determine their perspective on the effectiveness of college experiences in relation to that success. The aim of this research is to assist college administrators to more effectively deliver resources to serve this population.

Relevant Literature

Congressional Research Service (2019) estimated approximately 30% of prisoners want to pursue certificate programs from colleges or trade schools upon their release, with an additional 18% seeking associate degrees, 14% seeking bachelor's degrees, 5% seeking a master's degree, 1% seeking a professional degree, and 2% seeking a doctoral degree. However, Couloute (2018) found only 10% of formerly incarcerated GED holders engage in post-secondary education, with only 1% successfully graduating. Despite their incoming education attainment level, Couloute discovered formerly incarcerated people are eight times less likely to graduate from a college program than the public. This markedly low success rate can be attributed to the various unique barriers (noted herein) faced by this population and how those barriers evolve in the years immediately following release.

Enrollment in a postsecondary institution gives reentry citizens a foothold into a community often different from the one from which they came, with access to services intended to build their social capital. Education has been shown to increase literacy, self-discipline, and motivation (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Flatt and Jacobs (2018) found post-secondary training programs, for all students, are correlated to improvements in cognitive skills, executive functioning, and moral development. These developments are vital for engaging with the public, obtaining and retaining employment, and overcoming the obstacles associated with reentry (Couloute, 2018).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2021) conducted a 10-year study of people released from prison in 2008 and found 82% were arrested at least once within the 10 years post-release with 43% arrested in the first year, 29% arrested by year 5, and 22% arrested by year 10. Research of those who attend educational programs while incarcerated found those prisoners were arrested for supplemental crimes at a rate 43% lower than their counterparts who did not attend in-prison educational programs (Brown & Bloom, 2018). This provides evidence to the fact that without rehabilitation, punitive measures alone (i.e., incarceration) do not provide ongoing societal benefit. Although there is a case to be made that those who attended in-prison education were always on a trajectory to desist from recommitting crimes, the correlative benefits between education and desistance from crime cannot be overlooked. Prisons are very expensive for taxpayers, especially to release a person likely to commit another crime. The Marshall Project estimates the U.S. government spends $80 billion of taxpayer money to support prisons, but many sources estimate that amount to be much higher (Lewis & Lockwood, 2019). The RAND corporation found over a 3-year period $4–$5 was saved for every $1 spent on prison education (Davis & Linton, 2021).

Education has been considered rehabilitative for offenders since its early adoption within the prison system in 1798 (Brazzell et al., 2009). Education in prisons began as only religious teachings intended to reform convicted criminals (Brazzell et al., 2009). Prisons then adapted to offer secular communications and literature courses before eventually expanding to secondary, post-secondary, and job skills training in 1970 (Brazzell et al., 2009). Between 1970 and 1992, an increase of prisoners from 11,000 to 25,000 accessed the Pell grant, the most popular grant program for low-income students (Congressional Research Service, 2019). With prison populations increasing exponentially between 1980 and 2018, President Obama began a Second Chance Pell Experiment under the Higher Education Act of 2015 (Congressional Research Service, 2019). A snapshot of 2019 shows this limited program included 59 schools and served 6,000 students in one fiscal year for a total cost to the federal government of $22.3 million (Congressional Research Service, 2019). This program has been extended twice since its inception most recently under President Trump in 2020 by inviting an additional 67 schools to join (United

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States Department of Education, 2021). Bipartisan support for the Second Chance Pell Experiment exemplifies the rehabilitative value placed on education and demonstrates the successful trajectory of the first phase of the experiment.

Aside from the Second Chance Pell Experiment, prisons began and have continued trying, through limited government funding, private and non-profit donations, and volunteer time, to redevelop education programs anticipating the increased numbers of prisoners eligible for release in the coming years. In 2005, 98% of federal prisons and 84% of state prisons offered programs in at least one of these categories: adult basic education, adult secondary education, postsecondary education, special education, vocational training, and life skills (Brazzell et al., 2009). However, disruptions in the programs due to regularly interrupted funding, unexpected lockdowns, and inconsistent academic structure led to low participation (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018). Postsecondary education, including those participating in the Second Chance Pell Experiment, also experienced difficulties with securing trained faculty, access to equipment, and maintaining the enrollment necessary to ensure financial viability (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Additionally in 2016, maximum capacity for inmates in the prisons was exceeded in 14 states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, making sufficient classroom space difficult to find (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

However, support for advancement of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated population is not limited to a classroom. In a study of the relationship between gainful employment and school-based training, pre-employment training, and post-employment training, post-employment training led to the highest acquisition and retainment of employment for formerly incarcerated people (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018). Surprising to some, school-based and pre-employment training proved to have little to no impact on the formerly incarcerated student's eventual employability (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018). The Congressional Research Service (2019) showed this is not generalizable to the public, asserting that typically, employment rates increase concurrently with one's educational attainment. Eighty-seven percent of adults with a bachelor's degree were working in 2017 compared to only 60% of adults with a high school diploma (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Employer unwillingness to hire formerly incarcerated people, absence of quality character and work references, and absence of on-the-job skills can all obstruct employability.

Programs and opportunities for support exist at national, state, and local levels to aid incarcerated and newly released citizens. Higher education consortiums, such as Bard Prison Initiative and Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, provide resources and support to assist institutions in providing education in prison and then connect the student to an educational program upon release. Noneducation organizations can also provide high levels of support for formerly incarcerated people. One example is the Pinellas Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition (PERC), respected as the oldest program of its kind in the State of Florida. PERC not only provides hands-on, paid skills training for individuals seeking employment, but they also expend a great deal of effort creating programs and resources for employers, spreading awareness of national support programs such as federal bonding and work opportunity tax credit. Federal bonding is a program that provides 6-month fidelity bonds to employers upon hiring "higher risk" or hard-to-place employees (The Federal Bonding Program, n.d., Employers section). Work Opportunity Tax Credit, also a federally funded program, provides financial tax benefits to employers who hire hard to place employees (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). PERC and programs like PERC also aid in obtaining food and housing, providing medical assistance, and expanding one's social network, which are all challenges that face formerly incarcerated people upon release from prison.

Despite the internal and external challenges facing the incarcerated population, more than 75% of incarcerated people without high school diplomas say they love to learn new things (Patterson, 2018). However, they are not taking advantage of the opportunities because they (7 out of 10) are having difficulty applying it to their lives (Patterson, 2018). Taking lead from the non-educational support programs available, changes must be made in how education is presented to engage formerly incarcerated students and offer them the greatest opportunity for success. Rahilly and Buckley (2016) believe academic disposition is created by the college environment. They defended the knowledge and skills of those without traditional academic preparation saying colleges traditionally operate under *deficit programming*. Deficit programming assumes the college is whole and anyone experiencing challenges has a deficit they must address before they can succeed (Rahilly & Buckley, 2016). Rahilly and Buckley (2016) adamantly maintained deficit programming is classist, fitting in only with the expectations of an affluent, traditional student, and it does not acknowledge the true skills and abilities of the student. To better recognize the unique abilities of non-traditional populations, the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment is in the process of implementing PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition; Potter, 2016). PLAR identifies, documents, assesses, and recognizes formal and informal learning experience (Potter, 2016).

This allows formerly incarcerated students to take pride and receive credit for nonarticulated programs they completed while incarcerated and for work experience both pre- and throughout their incarceration. This system not only can equate to college credit, reducing the length and cost of the chosen degree, but it also serves to motivate and empower the student by recognizing the unique experience they bring to the college (Potter, 2016; Rahilly & Buckley, 2016). Rahilly and Buckley (2016) explained a college cannot simply offer programs; colleges need to be proactive in identifying student needs and targeting invitations to populations who would benefit the most. Training specific to the needs of students with intersecting identities, such as formerly incarcerated students, can support the efficacy of the programs and resources advertised to this population (Hope, 2018).

Research Questions

The study explored one primary and two secondary research questions to gain an understanding of the experiences of formerly incarcerated students in community colleges.

1. What services do formerly incarcerated college students find most beneficial in addressing their learning needs, employment, and community reintegration?
   a. What factors are necessary for formerly incarcerated college students to determine college support services as beneficial?
   b. Considering learning needs, employment, and community reintegration, where do formerly incarcerated students assess their greatest area of need for support?

Method

This qualitative study, conducted through a phenomenological lens, explored how formerly incarcerated students can be best served by community colleges, given their unique needs and barriers to education. Narratives, such as these from formerly incarcerated students, are essential to help inform new programs and concepts (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Phenomenological studies analyze how individuals recognize and comprehend circumstances through their own subjective experiences (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). A qualitative method is standard for phenomenological studies because qualitative analyses allow the research

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participants to share individual accounts, unique to their perspective, instead of simplifying them to a number (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The researcher synthesized the information given by the participants about their experiences and perspectives to find shared experiences between participants (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

Participants

Participants (or interviewees) were required to be 18 years of age or older and have been incarcerated in a state or federal prison. All participants were previously or currently pursuing a post-secondary education program at a community college in the state of Florida. Participants must have matriculated into their program for a minimum of 1 month at the time of the interview. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to maintain their privacy. Five participants were interviewed in this study. This allowed for the study of multiple experiences but contained the scope of the study to a single community college in Florida.

Data Collection

Participants were solicited by hanging flyers in public locations such as halfway houses, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, addiction treatment centers, and at the Salvation Army, a non-profit organization that serves much of the area's formerly incarcerated population by providing meals, clothing, and temporary shelter. Additionally, I connected with my network of former colleagues at the community college that allowed me to speak at a group meeting for a non-profit, PERC, which supports reentry citizens, and connected me with a large state-wide non-profit email distribution list.

All interviews were face-to-face and held in public, central locations, such as parks, coffee shops, and libraries. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on the interviewee and their desire to share information. The semi-structured interview script (see Appendix A) remained consistent. Field notes were taken at each interview in addition to audio recordings, later transcribed through a program called Temi. The semi-structured interview script and questions were created with the intention of maximizing opportunities for participant disclosure. Iterative questioning was used to ensure understanding from previous questions.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded by a program called Temi, an audio recording app which provides interview transcripts formed by artificial intelligence. This data was then analyzed through thematic analysis, beginning with horizontalization. Horizontalization is the process through which qualitative data is collected and initially viewed as all equally important. The lead researcher began the analysis by providing the interview transcripts to each participant to ensure accuracy, and then those pieces of data were reviewed line-by-line. Significant statements were identified and coded (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Significant statements were identified as those which spoke to the interviewees' lived experiences in relation to the phenomena of attending post-secondary education post-incarceration. Interview transcripts provided a detailed account of the interview. Field notes assisted me in remembering impressions, including body language and changes in energy throughout the interview that could not be captured in an audio recording. Next, I assigned codes to significant statements and impressions. These codes were later grouped into like clusters, developed into themes, and then used to create descriptions of the interviewee experience (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). This method of data categorization allows for the fluidity necessary when reporting the personal experiences of multiple individuals.

Five participants were interviewed for this study. All five participants spent time in state and/or federal prisons. Table 1 outlines the demographic information and education and incarceration experiences of all five participants.

Findings

The results indicated multiple areas of challenge and opportunity facing formerly incarcerated students and community colleges. Students experienced academic learning challenges beginning with enrollment and continuing throughout their education regarding technology and study environment. The interviewees in this study suggest opportunities to create sense of belonging abound through sharing personal experience and social engagement. Enrollment in postsecondary education for these students was with the intention of graduating with a more stable, lucrative career. To that end, participants indicated seeking career-specific programmatic opportunities and more knowledgeable college advising staff.

Academic Learning and Support

Although each participant enrolled in college with different expectations of workload, academic rigor, level of support, and eventual outcome, each participant spoke about their own personal responsibility in achieving success. Four of five participants felt it was their responsibility to self-advocate.

Victor was incarcerated multiple times for 6+ years and released in 2019. He holds a postsecondary degree from his time before incarceration but was worried about going back to school as an older learner. However, he found college staff and faculty to be helpful and information to be readily available. He stated:

> And it was really easy to do. So that's nice that the process is facilitated. It's clear. It's well spelled out. So, if anybody says "I didn't know", it's just cuz you didn't take the time to learn to figure it out.

Through interviews with each participant, three sub-themes were found within academic

Table 1
Participant Demographic and Experience Information

	Race	Age	Sex	Current Post-Secondary Education Level	Years Incarcerated	Reentry Age	Time between release and college enrollment	Academic Program
Bill	W	62	M	1 year	30	50	2 years	Associate of Arts
Cody	W	31	M	3 years	2.5	28	6 months	Associate of Arts
Isabelle	W	42	F	3 years	5	41	4 months	Associate of Science: Addiction Studies
James	W	53	M	1 year of master's level coursework	5	40	12 years	Associate of Science: Addiction Studies
Victor	W	58	M	Master's Degree (pre-incarceration)	7+	56	2 months	Associate of Science: Addiction Studies

learning and support: a fast-track to enrollment post-incarceration, comprehensive computer assistance, and identifying and providing productive learning environments.

Create a Pipeline for College Enrollment

Cody, a younger student who was incarcerated for 3 years and released in 2019, suggested information about college should be presented to those currently incarcerated, even if those inside do not see the benefit to their life directly. He noted:

Anybody's gonna immediately deny the value because they've heard of people that have degrees or loans, you know, but they don't hear about the success. So, like also they think they're a felon. So, you know, some of them are worried that they are not gonna be able to find a job easily, you know, but promoting like the end goal of like a career they could have along with like clear guidance steps or, or just a, a few reasonable actions to take.

Many participants talked about their time between being released from prison and enrolling in college. From his personal experience, Cody found that due to growing financial obligations and previous social communities, the longer the separation someone had between their incarceration and their enrollment in college, the more difficult it became to enroll. He and Isabelle, a newly released and enrolled student who had been incarcerated for five years, each tried to enroll in community college within a year of release from prison. In the state of Florida, to claim in-state tuition, approximately ¼ the cost of out-of-state tuition, students must provide multiple sources proving they have resided in the state for at least 12 consecutive months. Allowable documents include a signed lease or mortgage, vehicle registration, electric bills, etc. Proof of incarceration in the state of Florida is not an immediately allowable document. Cody explained his frustration by stating:

They wouldn't let me sign up because I couldn't prove residency—even though I was a resident in a Florida state prison, having my prison release documents. So, I had to wait until spring term cause I wasn't able, they weren't able to prove my residency in the, you know, 20 days before [the se-

mester started]. Which, that really set me off because I don't see how you can't prove I'm a resident if I'm a guy here with like a 30-page packet saying I've been in prison this whole time in Florida.

Isabelle also experienced difficulties enrolling due to Florida's restrictions on allowable documentation to prove residency. She noted:

I was like, okay, you know, I'm trying to do the right thing. I'm trying to get back in school. Like, I've found something I'm really passionate about. And now you're telling me that you can't prove that I'm a Florida resident because I don't have a lease for the last 12 [months]. And then we're supposed to come home and become productive members of society. But then if we try to go back to school, it's like almost impossible.

Comprehensive Computer Assistance

One helpful resource noted by three of the five participants was a free course, offered by the college to enrolled students, which taught basic computer skills and provided students with an electronic tablet upon completion of the class. Jimmy, a student incarcerated for 10 years in the early 2000s, found the course to be helpful. He stated:

This is easy as, you know, easy 4.0. But if you can't navigate the computer, then you're screwed . . . . At [the college], there was no credit for this class, but, but they were giving away, you know, a free computer if you took it. So, I took it, and it was basically more about, you know, how to study in college. I think that every new student needs to take that course. And a big part of that is so they can navigate the website.

Bill, a student incarcerated for over 40 years, also took that course, but he felt much further behind the other students. He remarked:

Well, by the time I learned how to do the computer, all the rest of the book was completed. So, I believe that they would've had any beginning, a real real beginning beginning computer course. Cause nowadays kids are telling you, they come out with a computer. But an

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older person comes to college—they should have a, well, "this is how you turn it on, how you do it".

Study Conditions of Diverse Populations

Through the interviews, each participant shared their personal living situation and its impact on their academics. When Cody was released from prison, he moved into his mom's house where he currently lives with his mom and girlfriend. Working 50 to 55 hours each week, he struggles to fit in study time. He noted:

Like where do you do school at? Can you always come to the library? Like, I do, but then the library closes at eight. Well, I need to study until midnight. Like, I don't even sometimes start studying until late . . . . Closed on Sunday? It's like why would you close on Sunday? Like, that's the best day to study.

Bill expressed a similar desire for longer library hours, explaining that his lack of personal technology prohibited him from completing coursework when the college was closed.

It might be common for students to study late and on weekends, but Victor, a current student living in a halfway house after being released from prison in 2019, had to withdraw from his public speaking course because he was not allowed to record his speeches from where he was staying. Even if he had been able to record, the central location of the computer makes it impossible to have quiet time to focus. He noted:

When I have time in front of the computer, there's usually a lot of guys around and I have to tell 'em "Hey! Can you guys please just hold it down a little bit?" I don't like to have to do that, but uh, it's really, really tough . . . but I have to have quiet. I have to have reflection time. I'm not brilliant. I'm a good student, and I'm a decent level of . . . but it's hard to read some of these research papers.

Deficits in Belonging

For most participants in this study, engaging with the college experience post-incarceration was a foreign culture. The students interviewed identified two aspects of their college experience that made a difference in their feelings of belonging on campus: encouragement to share personal experiences and opportunities for social engagement with peers.

Sharing Personal Experience

When every participant was asked about their academic coursework, each brought up valuing the opportunity to give their own opinions and unique personal experiences, with prison and otherwise, on the coursework. Isabelle stated, "I have a different perspective because I think that I walked in both sets of shoes. So, I can kind of see things from a different perspective than someone that hasn't actually experienced it." Jimmy concurred with the sentiment, feeling as though discussion posts were a chance for him to educate his peers.

It is not simply the opportunity to share experiences for the students, though. The students interviewed also shared that the feedback they received from professors and classmates took away feelings of exclusion, connected them with others of similar background, and affirmed their academic ability through good grades from their professors. In a speech class, Bill was encouraged privately by his professor to share his incarceration experience. He remembered the encounter fondly, saying, "I did that. And then afterwards people were a little more understanding of me. And instead of looking down on me, they were nice. And a couple people said 'Yeah, I went through the same thing.'"

Victor, though he disparaged his own academic ability throughout the interview, showed pride in the perfect scores he received on his discussion posts where he married academic research with his opinions and experiences. He shared, "And then I'll put in my own opinions and experiences and stories and stuff like that. I would say that I get a hundred on all these . . . because I put that kind of effort into it."

Social Engagement

None of the interviewees made close friends through their time in college. Through the interviews, there were a variety of factors given for this lack of connection, including COVID-19 quarantines, being a "loner," age, lack of similar interests, distance from the campus, transportation difficulties, and little available leisure time. While most interviewees expressed a desire to keep peer-to-peer relationships purely professional, they also made comments indicating the possibility of a missed connection and what prohibited it.

While Isabelle felt the college was a mixing pot of ages in which she blended, Jimmy and Victor each expressed their discomfort in feeling older than most of the students in their classes. Jimmy, in his mid-50s, commented that he felt more like a parent to the younger students than a peer. In one of Victor's online courses, his professor emailed the class about making social connections with one another. The professor discouraged classmates from sharing personal contact information and to use only the school email when necessary. Victor explained his understanding of the professor's warning. He said:

And I think that some students could be

new students, could be young, barely teenagers and stuff like that. And so there's, there's uh, the caution is well founded because it's, there could be some risk yeah... and you know, this is the standard. This is the protocols. You [Faculty] follow these. And as students, you should know what they are, and you should follow them as well.

However, after the interview recording was turned off, Victor continued to reflect on his professor's guidance. He said he had not thought about it before consciously, but now that he was, he realized that upon hearing the warning he thought the professor was talking about him as a formerly incarcerated man in his late-50's. He saw himself as the potential threat his professor warned the class about, and this discouraged him from contacting any of his classmates, even through their college email addresses.

Jimmy, who was clear about not wanting to foster personal relationships, conceded that his one synchronous online class was a positive experience. He said:

> It was Zoom. So we met every week. Um, and I looked forward to that. And for three weeks we didn't meet because, you know, we were ahead in all the requirements, stuff like that. But, I missed it. . . . Yeah, I missed it.

Career Preparation

All five participants interviewed indicated their reason for entering college was at least in part motivated by finding a better job or beginning a new career. Four of the five participants indicated career preparation and/or placement as their primary reason for enrolling. The participants identified two ways the college could offer better support as they prepare for their new careers: training career services staff to understand career needs specific to the formerly incarcerated population (e.g., licensure, federal bonding, etc.) and offering opportunities focused on the students' career goals.

Career Services Staff Training

When he first enrolled in college, Cody was very driven to find a career that would allow certification for a previously incarcerated person. He was proactive in reaching out to advisors but struggled to find anyone who could help. He recounted his experience:

> In this education system, I ask everybody—advisors, career advisors,

teachers, whoever. I'm like, "Hey, I have a felony. Can I get, what can I do with this felony?" And everybody's like "Mmm, I don't know. I know felons have done stuff before."

Finally, Cody was connected to an outside organization, the Pinellas Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition (PERC), who was able to help him understand and navigate the certification process. Cody encourages colleges to have at least one advisor who knows about the reentry population. He expressed that formerly incarcerated students often had similar needs to one another that could be more easily addressed with a knowledgeable advisor. He cited those needs as use of technology, career certifications/licensing restrictions, and disability resources.

Bill was former student of mine (lead researcher) when I worked as a career advisor. I assisted him with his first résumé post-release. He described how the experience made him feel and remarked, "That was uplifting. But I didn't have much to put down, but then you explained to me to use what I learned in prison and that put a different perspective on things."

However, when Cody actively sought out any college resource he thought would be helpful, he had a different experience. He was eager to start his first career and signed up for a mock interview. As Cody recounts the story, he showed up in street clothes to the interview, and the career advisor yelled at him. Cody was newly released from prison and did not own a suit or any business clothes. I asked him how that made him feel. He said:

Broke? Yeah. A good old American. I feel like an immigrant sometimes. Like I work my way, you know, came to this country with nothing. Like, I got no rights. I have nothing. I have to like piece it all together. Like go through the extra hours. Like when other people are like, have it easy and complain, I have to suck it up and push harder. I mean that just happens... when you get outta prison with nothing.

Major Specific Career Opportunities

Just as students were more likely to connect to peers with shared interests, the students interviewed also preferred their career opportunities (e.g., job fairs, speakers, internships) to connect directly to their intended career. Isabelle explained that the

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opportunities available in her career-focused program have kept her enrolled and engaged. She will be participating in an internship this fall and has attended many seminars organized by her professor featuring professionals and alumni now working in the field. Many of the faculty in her program are connected to the professional world, and she expressed how interested she is in the "real-world" stories shared and the connections she has been able to make. Victor, in the same program as Isabelle, is also motivated by all the guest lecturers and career opportunities. However, Victor lives more than an hour from the closest campus and completes his schoolwork from a shared computer in a halfway house, so it is difficult for him to attend the events in person or virtually. Even if he is unable to attend, knowing the events are taking place gives Victor confidence that the college will be there to assist him when he is graduating and looking for a job.

Bill, when enrolled, was taking only a couple of classes each semester. So, with graduation further in the distance, Bill was more concerned with finding a job while he was enrolled in school. Though he attended many job fairs, a combination of health issues, his criminal background, and his school schedule prevented him from finding a good fit. Many students who need flexible work hours while in school seek student employment working for the college. Bill says he applied for various campus jobs, but the college would not accept his criminal record. He was eligible to attend class but not to work on campus.

Discussion

This study revealed that four of five formerly incarcerated students interviewed had very low expectations of how the college would support them. Many of the current practices at this Florida community college are offering great support for these students, but there were also challenges revealed that proved difficult to overcome. Given the historically low graduation rates of formerly incarcerated students, overcoming these challenges, and fostering helpful resources is of very high importance (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018).

Participants experienced trouble with residency paperwork when enrolling in college. To combat this, colleges could have greater interaction with the prisons to motivate students to attend and eliminate barriers once they have been released. Through this interaction with colleges, students would be aware of the need for special residency approval and be able to plan to seek that approval.

Hope (2018) posited having a continuation of support from incarceration through the release process would provide necessary stability for formerly incarcerated people to better fill their basic needs. Most interview participants enrolled in college within 1-year post-release, and having a class schedule provided

structure at a time they needed it most. Responsibilities for reentry citizens grew as they became further detached from prison. Enrolling in college immediately can prevent one's path from diverging so far it is hard to get back on track or from having feelings of regret for wasting time. National organizations, like the Bard Prison Initiative and the Alliance for Higher Education in Prisons, and smaller state-specific programs, like the Community Education Program (CEP) at Stetson University, are currently working in prisons to provide education and bridge the gap. Community colleges, like the one discussed in this study, should connect with these organizations to gain a better understanding of the workings of a college/prison partnership and utilize resources developed by the organization(s). The greatest academic issue faced by participants of this research was technology. The older the interviewee and longer the sentence, the more trouble in adjusting to the college's use of technology. The research in this study supports Miller et al.'s (2014) determination that the technology provided in prison, if any, is outdated, inadequate, and leaves students feeling unprepared for life post-release. Once they can overcome the technological barrier, this data suggests students are highly motivated by engaging with and receiving positive feedback from faculty and peers. This is in alignment with the research from Miller et al. (2014), which suggested that curriculum has a greater impact when it is inclusive and intent on diminishing the culture deficit and creating confidence. The participants found strength in sharing their personal experiences with career advisors, classmates, and faculty.

Sinko et al. (2020) explained that people of marginalized identities, like formerly incarcerated students, often face feelings of external and internal stigma which discourages them from identifying publicly as having been imprisoned, leading to less ability for support, fewer connections, and a disassociation with the community. Overwhelmingly, this research found otherwise. In alignment with Brown and Bloom's (2018) research, the participants in this research study disagreed with Sinko et al. (2020) and found strength and confidence in sharing their personal experiences with career advisors, classmates, and faculty.

The findings indicate a need for advisors to be trained to recognize and understand the needs of formerly incarcerated students. Formerly incarcerated students face a litany of barriers to becoming employable. From specialized rules for licensing and employment credentials to recognizing students' limitations with purchasing business clothes, formerly incarcerated students face unique complications and can waste a lot of time and money if they are not working with an informed staff member. Additionally, the findings show a need for faculty to be trained on the possible socio-cultural implications of assignments and directions given in their courses. Although many

interview participants had great faculty experiences, situations like those with Victor being warned about communication with classmates can severely impact the formerly incarcerated student's educational experience.

Implications for Practice

The results from this study present several implications for future practice. First, college administrators must examine the processes for accessing their institution. Administrative impracticality, such as residency paperwork, can slow down a student's motivation and deter them from enrolling. Considering a streamlined process for formerly incarcerated students can ensure there will be a clear path for students to have a timely matriculation. Creating collegiate consortiums which connect with the state and federal prison systems can further streamline this process. Additionally, colleges should seek to capitalize on relationships with community organizations, like the Pinellas Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition (PERC), to provide a greater depth of support.

Challenges to institutional access do not end after enrolling in classes. This study showed one of the largest problems faced by formerly incarcerated students is access to and use of technology. While many colleges offer basic computer courses, college administrators should consider expanding these programs to be ongoing and more inclusive of all learning styles and current levels of expertise. Additionally, laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot rental programs or other pathways to access the technology off campus would allow students more flexibility in their day to complete schoolwork alongside work and/or family responsibilities. It is important to note that multiple participants in the study stated that home was not conducive to completing coursework, so further consideration should be given to providing students with safe study spaces for late-night and weekend learning.

The second implication for practice is working to create active learning courses. Every participant in this study noted their preference for the courses where they were able to share personal thoughts and experiences. Active learning activities are assignments embedded into the curriculum which encourage students to engage in dialogue, discussion, applicable case studies, etc. Allsop et al. (2020) found that active learning courses not only increased student engagement, participation, and learning, but also provided the benefits of communication and interactivity, com-

munity and connectedness, satisfaction, and flexibility. Faculty with experience building an active learning curriculum can provide guidance and mentorship to unfamiliar faculty. Implementing active learning into required courses students take early in their program will encourage students to stay engaged with their faculty, classmates, and the institution. Furthermore, faculty training specific to teaching formerly incarcerated students would ensure the active learning curriculum is sensitive to student differences in willingness and ability to share and connect.

Students in the study noted that for both community belonging and career preparation, they desired to be in contact with like-minded individuals. By sharing passions with one another in active learning class activities, the formerly incarcerated student can begin to identify their network and build their social capital. Active learning can identify student needs, for instance, guest speakers or service-learning opportunities, and help the student to navigate to the most useful resources.

The final implication drawn from this study is the need for advisors to be trained on the common needs of the formerly incarcerated student. This study showed that needs of reentry citizens are different depending on the length of time separated from their incarceration, but some needs, like understanding employment licensing restrictions, are pervasive to the entire population. Inviting in a formerly incarcerated student who has graduated or a representative from a non-profit organization working with this population will provide insight to advisors on both the pervasive needs of the population and on the needs that vary depending on other factors of incarceration (e.g., length of time incarcerated, time since release, age upon release). From the data collected in this study, formerly incarcerated students are more likely to self-identify when they feel the person can actually help them. Arming advisors with the tools and understanding to provide tangible support will give students more confidence to disclose their past.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had limitations which should be noted. First, the size of this study is an obvious limitation. Though many of the sentiments aligned, five interviews do not give an expansive view of the formerly incarcerated student population. Additionally, all five students interviewed are either

> This study showed that the needs of reentry citizens are different depending on the length of time separated from their incarceration, but some needs, like understanding employment licensing restrictions, are pervasive to the entire population.

currently enrolled in or previously enrolled in the same Florida community college. Moreover, there was no representation of racial or ethnic diversity. All interviews conducted for this study were with individuals whom the prison system considered White or Caucasian people natively from the United States. Given the disproportionate number of incarcerated Black men and the additional difficulty that arises from that intersectionality, a study proportionally representing the make-up of either the prison system or reentry student population would better serve to capture the experiences of formerly incarcerated students.

An unforeseen limitation of this study was COVID-19. Although all the interviews were able to be conducted in person, four of five interviewees attended the community college solely or mostly enrolled in online classes. This likely places an extra emphasis on the need for technological support and severely limits the opportunity for connecting with classmates.

Finally, all the participants suggested that this research was focusing on the wrong point in their re-entry experience. The real concern heard many times over was the span of time between when a person walks out of prison and when they walk through the door of a college. The recommendation of increased communication between the colleges and prisons begins to address that concern. Further research must be done to provide the highest level of support as reentry citizens seek initial community reintegration.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the dearth of current research about formerly incarcerated students. As colleges become increasingly diverse, it is vital college administrators pay attention to this distinct population and their specific and unique needs. This study is meant to serve as an initial evaluation of student needs in the areas of academic engagement, sense of belonging, and career readiness. The findings in this study demonstrate the independence of the formerly incarcerated student, but also where they found or needed support and community throughout their time enrolled. The understanding of specific needs of formerly incarcerated students provides campus administrators with a guide to weaving in these support systems with their existing student resources. As access to education continues to increase for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, opportunities abound for additional research in the areas of academic engagement, belonging, and career readiness.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Demographic Questions
1. What college are you currently attending?
2. How many different colleges have you attended? Which ones?
3. What degree are you pursuing?
4. How long have you been enrolled?
5. When do you think you will graduate?

Substantive Questions
1. Tell me about your college experience so far.
2. Before you enrolled in college, what did you think it would be like?
3. Describe how it has been to go back to school and learn again.
4. Tell me about any services on campus you have used that have helped you to be successful in your classes.
5. From your perspective, how does your learning style compare to your peers?
6. Tell me about your optimal learning conditions.
7. How is the college meeting your learning needs?
8. Where do you feel you could use additional support?
9. How is the college helping to make sure you are ready for your career when you graduate?
10. Describe how your experience in college makes you feel about entering a new career.
11. Tell me about what services are provided on campus to help you prepare for your career.
12. What do you feel you need from the college to be ready to start a new career when you graduate?
13. Describe to what extent you feel like you belong on campus.
14. Tell me about your interactions with your classmates.
15. Tell me about the time you spend on campus each day.
16. Beyond attending classes, what other activities do you do on campus?
17. Do you have any friends you have met in college?
18. When and where did you meet them?