

‘FIGHTING THE SAME FIGHT BUT WITH BETTER TOOLS’: THE EXPERIENCE AND
IMPACT OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN PRISON

By

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ABSTRACT

Each year, over 600,000 formerly incarcerated individuals are released from prison back into their communities (BJS, 2014a; Carson, 2018), with staggeringly high recidivism rates. As many as two-thirds will recidivate within three years (Alper & Durose, 2018; Antenangeli & Durose, 2021; BJS, 2014b), 79 percent within six years (Alper & Durose, 2018), and 82 percent within 10 years of release (Antenangeli & Durose, 2021). These numbers suggest they are not adequately prepared for return to the community post-prison. As evidence suggests that simply warehousing individuals in prison with little to no access to effective programming is unlikely to result in reductions in one's likelihood of recidivating (Duwe & Clark, 2017), it is important to understand how individuals can best use their time during incarceration to prepare themselves for successful reentry.

Education is one of a number of factors that impacts one's likelihood of recidivism (Latessa et al., 2014), and in recent years there has been a significant push to increase availability and access of college courses for individuals incarcerated in prisons across the United States. Notably, this effort has been nonpartisan and supported by both sides of the political aisle, suggesting a willingness to try something new to address crime in the U.S. As education, especially postsecondary, has been found to be associated with reduced likelihood of recidivism (Gaes, 2008) and studies have found it to have potentially significant cost savings effects (Davis et al., 2013), its expansion in U.S. prisons has the potential for widespread impacts. However, relatively little is known about the experience of participating in higher education in prison.

The dissertation aims to address this gap in our understanding of the experience of higher education in prison (HEP) and its theoretical and practical implications. Using semi-structured, qualitative interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals (N = 31; 20 men, 11 women) who

participated in some form of college education while incarcerated, this dissertation aimed to provide a better understanding of: 1) the motivations for participating in higher education in prison, 2) the barriers toward participation in or successful completion of those courses, and 3) the impacts of such participation. Finally, this dissertation uses Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control and Giordano and colleagues' (2002) theory of cognitive transformation as the main framework to interpret these findings and illustrate how postsecondary prison education can serve as a turning point for desistance from crime.

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For my parents, Shellie & John.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Each year, over 600,000 formerly incarcerated individuals are released from prison back into their communities (BJS, 2014a; Carson, 2018). Given the high rate of recidivism for these individuals, with as many as two-thirds recidivating within three years (Alper & Durose, 2018; Antenangeli & Durose, 2021; BJS, 2014b), 79 percent within six years (Alper & Durose, 2018), and 82 percent within 10 years of release (Atenangeli & Durose, 2021), it is clear that they are not adequately prepared for the various barriers to reentry that they will face upon release. Thus, it is important to develop a better understanding of why individuals fail to successfully navigate the reentry process in order to better prepare them for successful reintegration into the community post-prison. It is also important to examine how to best utilize incarcerated individuals' time most effectively while in prison.

One way to more effectively use individuals' time while in prison is more engagement in programming, and in educational programming in particular. As of 2003, only 11.4 percent of those incarcerated in state prisons had participated in postsecondary education or received a college degree, compared to 48.4 percent of the general population (Harlow, 2003). Further, as of 2008, only 4 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals had actually attained a college degree, as compared to 29 percent of the general public (Couloute, 2018). Given that the number of low-skill jobs has decreased in recent decades, formerly incarcerated individuals face staggering rates of unemployment, and with the added detrimental effects of a criminal record on employment (Pager, 2003), it is particularly detrimental that those released from prison have limited education and the complication of a criminal record. For instance, Couloute and Kopf (2018) found that 27 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals were unemployed post-prison.

Other research suggests higher levels of unemployment within the first three years of release, even when including those who were under-employed or employed in highly unstable jobs (Harding, Morenoff, & Wyse, 2019). To address this issue, rather than spending time idly in a criminogenic environment (Listwan, Sullivan, Agnew, Cullen, & Colvin, 2013), “evidence suggests that we could significantly improve post-prison outcomes by expanding access to education in prison” (Harding et al., 2019, p. 236). Ultimately, such participation in postsecondary education programs during incarceration can help begin to counterbalance the problems associated with a criminal record (Erisman & Contardo, 2005) and improve reentry outcomes.

As previously stated, postsecondary education is one strategy to improve reentry outcomes for formerly incarcerated men and women, and incarceration presents a unique opportunity for individuals to partake in such education. However, few studies have examined motivations for pursuing prison education or the potential of postsecondary carceral education to serve as a turning point toward desistance from crime (Walters, 2018). The few studies that do exist on this topic have explored it quantitatively outside of the U.S. (Delaere, De Caluwe, & Clarebout, 2013; Halimi, Brosens, De Donder, & Engels, 2017), for adult basic education with small subsets of the prison population (Schlesinger, 2005), and in different prison education-related contexts (Runell, 2017, 2018). Thus, qualitative research that examines both the impact of and motivations for postsecondary carceral education is strongly needed.

While some research has examined motivations for pursuing postsecondary education for other non-traditional students (Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016), it is unknown whether those motives apply to incarcerated individuals as well; thus, more in-depth qualitative research is needed to better understand why some participate in postsecondary carceral education while

others do not (Delaere et al., 2013; Halimi et al., 2017). Further, more research is needed to better understand the barriers that incarcerated individuals face in pursuing postsecondary education in prison (Halimi et al., 2017), and how those barriers may differ from those of non-incarcerated individuals (Kimmel et al., 2016). Finally, a significant gap in the literature is the degree to which motivations and impacts of correctional education vary based on gender, as existing studies either focus on male-only samples (Delaere et al., 2013; Schlesinger, 2005; Walters, 2018) or do not examine results by gender (Halimi et al., 2017; Runell, 2017, 2018).

The Current Study

The current study utilizes Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of informal social control, Giordano and colleagues' theory of cognitive transformation, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as its theoretical framework to explore the impact of postsecondary education during incarceration on reentry and desistance from crime. The purpose of the proposed research is to deepen our understanding of the motivations behind engaging in higher education in prison (HEP), as well as how this education impacts the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals. Using in-depth interviews with a sample of men and women who participated in postsecondary prison education programs, the proposed study has four main goals: (1) to explore motivations for pursuing postsecondary education in prison, (2) to examine barriers to pursuing postsecondary carceral education, (3) to analyze how, if at all, postsecondary carceral education serves as a turning point for desistance from crime, and (4) to investigate what other positive impacts postsecondary carceral education has on the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals.

This research is timely, given recent resurgence in the push to expand postsecondary education in prisons, particularly throughout the last five years. Almost three decades ago, the

Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 eliminated Pell grants for incarcerated individuals and led to a substantial reduction in the number of college-in-prison programs (Pens, 1994; Sawyer, 2019). However, growing concern over mass incarceration in the U.S. and “the Obama Administration’s commitment to create a fairer, more effective criminal justice system” led to the announcement the Second Chance Pell Pilot program in 2015, allowing individuals incarcerated at selected state and federal prisons to receive Pell grants to pursue postsecondary education during incarceration (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The Second Chance Pell Pilot program was officially launched in 2015 (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023), and by April 2020, almost 17,000 incarcerated students had participated in the program (diZerega & Delaney, 2020). Also in April 2020, the Trump administration announced that it had renewed the Second Chance Pell program and had invited an additional 67 colleges and universities across the U.S. to participate in the program (Dembicki, 2020; Taber & Muralidharan, 2023). As of July 1, 2023, the new Pell Grant regulations will take effect, allowing all incarcerated individuals in qualifying prison education programs to receive federal student financial aid (Hyder, 2023). Given this expansion of the Second Chance Pell program and access to federal financial aid for incarcerated individuals, it is important to examine the impacts of such postsecondary education in prison.

Results of this research will provide meaningful insights into the motivations of incarcerated individuals for pursuing postsecondary carceral education and highlight strategies to improve productivity during incarceration to prepare individuals for successful reentry. Specifically, the proposed study will address five gaps in existing research. First, it will examine what motivates individuals to participate in postsecondary education in prison. Second, it will examine barriers to pursuing postsecondary carceral education. Third, it will examine whether postsecondary education during incarceration serves as a turning point towards desistance, and if

so, through what mechanisms this process occurs. Fourth, it will examine the other benefits of pursuing postsecondary education during incarceration that are unique to the incarcerated population. Finally, it will examine differences between men and women across each of these aspects.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation utilizes the theories of Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control and Giordano and colleagues' (2002) theory of cognitive transformation to understand the impact of postsecondary prison education on future reentry and related outcomes. Further, it uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model as a framework for understanding and interpreting the motivations and barriers for HEP participation for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Informal Social Control and Desistance

Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control focuses on why some individuals desist from crime, while others do not. They argue that one's social capital is linked to one's propensity for criminal behavior, such that individuals with higher levels of social capital are less likely to commit crime, while individuals with lower levels of social capital are more likely to commit crime. Social capital refers to the positive ties to people and social institutions that one has, including marriage, work, peers, and school. Sources of social capital change over time throughout the life course. In the early stages of life, parents are the most important sources of social capital. As children age into childhood and adolescence, social capital becomes more reliant on school and peers. During late adolescence and early adulthood, sources of social capital shift toward peers, higher education, work, and marriage. Finally, as individuals enter later adulthood, sources of social capital shift toward work, marriage, and one's family. It is the quality and strength of these bonds that impact one's social capital.

Social capital can either grow in strength, or it can be depleted (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Failure to establish social capital early in life can make it difficult to establish social capital later

in life. For example, weak social capital with parents in very early childhood can lead to behavioral problems in school, which can lead to weak social capital with school and peers in childhood/adolescence. Weak social capital at this stage can, in turn, lead to weak social capital in the areas of higher education, employment, marriage, and other problems in adulthood, as well as lead to criminal behavior during emerging and later adulthood. Thus, failure to establish social capital early in life increases the likelihood that individuals will be delinquent and/or criminal. This makes it more difficult to establish social capital later in life, thereby leading to a lower chance of desistance. This is referred to as cumulative disadvantage (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Importantly, however, individuals are not doomed to a life of crime simply because they did not establish social capital early in life. Rather, opportunities for change, or “turning points,” may arise throughout an individual’s life that increase one’s ability to establish social capital (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Turning points are rare, but they can “counteract the influence of early life experiences” (Sampson & Laub, 2010, p. 808). Thus, turning points can assist individuals with escaping the downward spiral of cumulative disadvantage and begin to grow one’s social capital. As previously discussed, during late adolescence/early adulthood and in later adulthood, sources of social control include peers, higher education, work, marriage, and family. Thus, potential turning points at this stage of life include quality education, quality employment, quality marriage, or military service. This is particularly true for justice-involved men: these life events can assist individuals in developing stronger ties to informal social controls, thereby increasing the likelihood of building social capital and, ultimately, desistance from crime.

Importantly, informal sources of social control differ somewhat for women. For example, some research suggests that marriage or cohabitation with a male partner may actually increase participation in criminal behavior for women, rather than serve as a source of social capital that

leads to desistance (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, 2007). In contrast, attachment to children and other family members may serve to enhance social control for justice-involved women and lead toward a path of desistance (Cobbina, 2009; Giordano et al., 2002). While earlier research focused on these familial relationships and their relationship to women's desistance, more recent research indicates that employment and one's identity as a 'worker' may play a more significant role in women's desistance than previously thought (Grace, 2022). Thus, although the mechanisms of social control may operate somewhat differently for men and women, justice involved individuals can and do change according to this theory, with relationships and life events playing an important role in determining whether individuals will persist in criminal involvement or eventually desist from crime.

Education, Employment, and Desistance

In terms of informal social control, education can lead to desistance from crime in two main ways. First, postsecondary education can lead to an increase in one's ability to obtain employment and particularly to obtain meaningful/gainful employment. Second, postsecondary education can assist with replacing some of the informal social capital that is lost when individuals are incarcerated and/or desist.

Two substantial and interrelated barriers the formerly incarcerated often face are lack of education (Freudenberg, Daniels, Crum, Perkins, & Richie, 2005; Luther, Reichert, Holloway, Roth, & Aalsma, 2011) and difficulty obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment upon release from prison (Garland, Wodahl, & Mayfield, 2011; Luther et al., 2011; Makarios, Steiner, & Travis, 2010). Lack of education is routinely cited by formerly incarcerated individuals as one of the most challenging barriers to successful reentry (Freudenberg et al., 2005; Luther et al., 2011). Some of the most rigorous studies of prison education programs have been conducted to

examine their impact on recidivism rates (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Ellison, Szifris, Horan, & Fox, 2017; Pompoco, Wooldredge, Lugo, Sullivan, & Latessa, 2017; Steurer & Smith, 2003). Findings generally indicate that prison-based education is associated with lower levels of post-release recidivism (Davis et al., 2013; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Ellison et al., 2017; Fine et al., 2001; Pompoco et al., 2017; Steurer & Smith, 2003), and this is particularly true of postsecondary education programs (Duwe & Clark, 2014; Fine et al., 2001; Pompoco et al., 2017). Some research suggests those who complete education programs in prison have up to 43 percent lower odds of recidivism than those who do not participate in such programs (Davis et al., 2013; Ellison et al., 2017), and these findings hold for a number of measures of recidivism, including rearrest, reincarceration for a parole violation, and reincarceration for a new offense (Duwe & Clark, 2014; Steurer & Smith, 2003). Further, individuals who complete prison college programs maintain a lower risk for recidivism for at least three years post-release (Fine et al., 2001; Pompoco et al., 2017).

One reason that increased levels of education may impact recidivism rates is because of the impact on employability and quality of job opportunities for the formerly incarcerated. Evidence suggests that obtaining employment reduces the likelihood of recidivism (Makarios et al., 2010; Nally, Lockwood, Ho, & Knutson, 2014; Skardhamar & Telle, 2012; Uggen, 2000) and increases the amount of time that justice-involved individuals remain crime-free after release from prison (Tripodi, Kim, & Bender, 2010). This population often lacks the basic skills necessary for employment and has a relatively low level of educational attainment, particularly when compared to the general population (Harlow, 2003; Ryan & Bauman, 2016; Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001). Without an education, formerly incarcerated individuals often have difficulty obtaining legitimate employment and find themselves falling back into their old ways

of selling drugs or committing economic crimes to make ends meet, thereby increasing their risk of returning to prison (Luther et al., 2011; Pager, Western, & Sugie, 2009; Schmitt & Warner, 2011; Visser, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005). Many justice-involved individuals, even if employed, are only “marginally employed” (Nally, Lockwood, Knutson, & Ho, 2013, p. 64). In other words, they likely earn less than \$5,000 annually, and most employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals are found in the food service or manufacturing industries, which tend to be low-paying and unstable jobs (Harding et al., 2019; Nally et al., 2013). However, those that find steady, skilled work are in the best position to escape poverty, begin to counteract the stigma of a criminal record, and engage in less recidivism, given that they no longer have to go outside of traditional employment to provide a living for themselves and/or their families (Western, 2018).

Postsecondary education can lead to increases in the likelihood of obtaining a job post-prison (Cho & Tyler, 2010; Davis et al., 2013; Duwe & Clark 2014; Ellison et al., 2017). In fact, according to Harding and colleagues (2019), formerly incarcerated individuals with higher levels of education “have the highest probability of finding a job in the formal labor market” (p. 193), and they are also less likely to lose a job, leaving them less reliant on illegal means to support themselves. For example, Duwe and Clark (2014) examined the impact of secondary and postsecondary prison education programs on post-release employment and several related variables, including hourly wage, number of hours worked, and total wages earned. Earning a postsecondary degree during incarceration was associated with a greater number of hours worked and higher total wages. Thus, a secondary degree may help formerly incarcerated individuals “get their foot in the door” (Duwe & Clark, 2014, p. 474), but those who obtain a *postsecondary* degree may be able to secure more stable jobs. Additionally, they may be more capable of

maintaining those jobs due to skills learned in the prison education programs, ultimately leading to the observed higher number of working hours and higher total earnings – in other words, higher quality employment.

Education, Employment, and Social Capital

The second way in which education can lead to desistance, as it relates to informal social control, is through the replacement of social capital that is lost both when individuals are incarcerated and when they desist from crime. Unfortunately, lengthy prison sentences cut off social bonds, such as marriage and ties to employment—reducing the amount of social capital one has, making desistance less likely (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould 2016; Harding et al., 2019). Further, Maruna (2001) suggests that as individuals shed the ‘criminal’ part of their identity during the desistance process, they are “generally abandoned by social support networks. This might be precisely the period when the ex-offender needs the most support” (p.114). Obviously, this loss of social capital can lead to an increase in recidivism, according to Sampson and Laub’s age-graded theory of informal social control. However, theoretically, participation in postsecondary education during incarceration could act as a turning point toward desistance by helping to replace some of the social capital that is lost when an individual is incarcerated and/or “goes straight” (Maruna, 2001, p. 6). Specifically, this is because education can lead to an increased ability to obtain gainful and meaningful employment, and ties to this more traditional source of social capital can be strengthened. Thus, ties to education and/or employment during the initial stages of desistance are important, as they can serve to replenish some of the lost social capital that comes from losing social support both during incarceration and during early desistance.

Cognitive Transformation, Identity, and Desistance

Another way in which education may impact desistance from crime is through shifting one's self-identity. According to Giordano and colleagues (2002), there are four types of cognitive transformations, all intimately related to one another. First, and most fundamental in their view, is a shift in the individual's openness to change. That is, in order for a shift in identity to take place, one must be open to the possibility of change, rather than closed off and unwilling to entertain the idea of changing. Second is related to the individual's exposure to a hook for change. Specifically, what changes in the individual's openness to change may also include the hook's perceived availability and its meaning, salience, or importance for the individual. In relation to prison education, then, if prisons provide the opportunity and ample assistance with applying to and attending college, then incarcerated individuals may be in a better position to pursue postsecondary education than on the outside. Further, this is also why it is important to understand motivations for pursuing education during incarceration: so we can better understand how to change other individuals' perceived importance of education for their lives post-prison. Giordano and colleagues (2002) also note that for hooks to be successful, they must also lead the individual to a new mind state in which the new state of affairs is incompatible with continued offending. In this instance, an individual's need for continued offending may be reduced with the increased ability to obtain and maintain steady and gainful employment, or increased social capital/bonds, thus leading to desistance.

The third type of cognitive transformation they discuss is when individuals begin to envision and create a more conventional "replacement self" that can supplant the one that must be left behind in order to desist. Hooks for change can then provide an important opportunity for creating a new identity during this transformation process. Finally, the fourth type of cognitive

transformation described by Giordano and colleagues (2002) involves a transformation in the way in which the individual views criminal/deviant behavior and lifestyles in and of themselves. They suggest that “the desistance process can be seen as relatively complete when the actor no longer sees these same behaviors as positive, viable, or even personally relevant” (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1002). Overall, Giordano and colleagues (2002) suggest that the cognitive transformation process described here is such that: overall readiness to change “influences receptivity to one or more hooks for change, hooks influence the shift in identity, and identity changes gradually decrease the desirability and salience of the deviant behavior” (p. 1002).

The limited extant literature on this topic suggests that higher education, and possibly higher education during incarceration may shift one’s identity in the ways suggested by Giordano and colleagues. For example, Runell (2018) interviewed formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in some form of postsecondary education during their incarceration. While many cited non-educational purposes as their initial motivations for participating in the courses (an issue to be discussed later in this paper), an interesting transformation took place throughout the progression of these courses. A number of individuals explained that, over time, as they participated in educational courses, their motivations for participating began to shift. In fact, their motives tended to shift toward a genuine desire to learn and pursue long-term career goals. Another participant explained that once he became involved with the educational courses, he “began to view success in higher education rather than violence as a reflection of social status” (Runell, 2018, p. 482).

These individuals expressed a shift in their identity and in what success meant to them as they began participating in higher education, seeing that they were capable of achieving success in school and that there were alternatives to crime available to them (Runell, 2018). Some

expressed that they began to shift their identity from proving how tough they were to instead proving how smart they were, and that education allowed them that opportunity. Many of the participants expressed that the mere act of being incarcerated had sparked a desire to make positive life choices. While they may not have originally attended higher education classes for educational purposes, once exposed, their identity, focus, and goals began to shift away from criminality and more toward education and future success, as well as alternative ways to prove themselves to others. In this way, educational courses in prison “sparked and/or furthered this commitment” to make those changes in their behavior (Runell, 2018, p. 482). They began to believe that this educational opportunity in prison could serve as their pathway toward more traditional perceptions of success and desistance from crime. Some participants noted that participating in education made them spend time reflecting and really think for the first time about their past behaviors, as well as helped them to develop new attitudes toward criminal behavior. Finally, others expressed that participating in education gave them a sense of self-worth, which inspired them to avoid criminal associates during and after incarceration.

Though the literature in this area is limited, it is clear that the participants in Runell’s (2018) study expressed a transformative process similar to that which Giordano and colleagues (2002) describe. Thus, it is possible that postsecondary prison education can serve as a hook for change, leading to overall shifts in one’s identity, which thus ultimately leads to desistance. In short, education may serve as the vehicle toward the “replacement self,” an identity that is incompatible with a criminal lifestyle and leads one toward desistance. As Runell’s (2018) study illustrates, even individuals who were not initially motivated to attend school for purely educational purposes can begin this transformational process. Therefore, it is important to better understand individuals’ motivations for pursuing education in prison in order to increase other

individuals' readiness for change and shift their views on the importance of education and/or desistance.

Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems model is a model of child development that views the child as residing at the center of a complex system of relationships with the world around them. The overarching system operates through five interconnected smaller systems: micro system, meso system, exo system, macro system, and chrono system. The micro system refers to the child and their characteristics that influence their interactions with the environment around them. The meso system, then, refers to these interactions with the immediate environment, particularly in terms of social relationships and connections to others. This may be the child's immediate family or household members. The exo system consists of the child's indirect or local environment, such as schools, the local government or economy, parks, and childcare. Finally, the broader economic, policy, and social issues occurring in society at large make up the macro system, while the chrono system refers to how these structures and overarching culture change over time.

This model has been adapted to the criminal justice system in a couple of ways. First, Arditti (2005) adapted Bronfenbrenner's model to understand children of incarcerated individuals, where the child is at the center of the model and the impacts of the parent's incarceration are placed within the various levels of the model. For Arditti, relevant contexts for the mesosystem include prison visiting areas. The exo system consists of the specific institutional context of the actual incarcerated parent, the institutional practices of that setting, and the influence that being incarcerated and/or returning home will have on the incarcerated parent. Here, Arditti makes clear that the exo system and macro system may not include the child,

despite them being at the center of the model. Rather, in this context, it is the impact of the parent's incarcerative setting that will indirectly influence the child through the parent. Finally, the macrosystem in Arditti's model refers to the overarching institutional patterns and cultural attitudes that influence the exo system. These are particularly relevant given they influence "how children and their caretakers are treated and interact in different types of settings" (Arditti, 2005, p. 252).

Brosens (2013) later adapted Bronfenbrenner's model to explore motivations and barriers to participating in prison programs in Belgium. Replacing the child with the incarcerated individual at the center of the ecological systems model, Brosens proposed a model in which the micro system refers to characteristics of the individual that motivate or discourage an individual from participating in prison programs. Such individual factors may include a personal desire to acquire knowledge or skills, or a lack of intrinsic motivation altogether. The meso system consists of social interactions within the prison, including those with correctional officers, other prison staff, and other incarcerated individuals. In the prison context, Brosens' exo system consists of the characteristics of the institution, such as the prison conditions or institutional practices. Specifically, this may refer to the availability (or lack) of prison programs or the language in which programs are offered. Finally, the macro system refers to the broader national regulations and policies in place at the time of the study, such as national crime policies and regulations or funding for prisons and/or prison programs.

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Motivations for Education

Given that education can lead to a shift in self-identity, increased likelihood of employment, more gainful employment, and lower likelihood of recidivism, encouraging

incarcerated individuals to engage in postsecondary education during incarceration seems like a logical pursuit. First, however, we must better understand what motivates individuals to pursue this type of education. Merriam and Bierema (2014) define motivation as “the drive and energy we put into accomplishing something we want to do” (p. 147). Motivation can take several forms. First, there is intrinsic motivation, in which the motivation comes from within oneself (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Individuals are motivated to learn simply because they find value in the activity itself, enjoy new challenges, and enjoy learning for the sake of learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The second type of motivation is extrinsic, where motivation for an activity stems from external factors (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Specifically, individuals are motivated to act in order to achieve some goal separate from the act itself, such as a better job, external praise, or some other reward that stems from outside the individual engaging in the learning activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Neither form of motivation is better than the other, and often individuals are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although mixed, some research suggests that motivations for education may vary somewhat by gender, such that women may be more motivated overall (both intrinsically and extrinsically) (Brouse et al., 2010; Kusnierz, Rogowska, & Pavlova, 2020), less susceptible to amotivation (Kusnierz et al., 2020), or experience less decline in external motivation than men (D’Lima & Kitsantas, 2014).

Motivation is fluid, and one’s motivation for pursuing learning experiences changes throughout the life course (Fasokun, Katahoire, & Oduaran, 2005; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). While children may be more extrinsically motivated by making their parents proud or avoiding school consequences, adults may be more motivated by career advancement and success (MacKeracher, 2004). There are a number of motivation theories that apply to motivation for

education (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), and several of these may be particularly relevant to those who participate in education during incarceration. In particular, economical/rational and social/human motivational theories (both considered extrinsic types of motivation), and need-driven motivational theories (considered intrinsic motivation) are all represented in the small body of existing literature on pursuing general education during incarceration, though these studies tend to be outside of the United States or quantitative in nature and tend to focus more so on adult basic education.

According to economic/rational motivation theory, individuals may be motivated to pursue education to maximize their economic standing through higher quality and better paying jobs (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The small body of existing literature on prison education suggests that economic motivations are a main driver for incarcerated individuals undertaking education while in prison. Incarcerated individuals note that undertaking education in prison can help prepare them for life post-prison, notably for post-release employment (Manger, Eikeland, Diseth, Hetland, & Asbjornsen, 2010). In particular, incarcerated individuals believe and/or hope that achieving a higher level of education while incarcerated will make it easier to find a job or provide them with a wider range of options for employment post-prison (Delaere et al., 2013). Others are focused on developing skills to put toward longer-term career goals and hope to not just find employment post-prison, but to find high quality jobs as well (Runell, 2018; Schlesinger, 2005). Thus, clearly many incarcerated individuals are aware of the difficulties they may face in gaining employment post-prison and undertake education as a means to obtain employment or work toward more meaningful, gainful employment post-prison.

Alternatively, while still an extrinsic motivation theory, social/human motivation theory posits that it is the social and emotional aspects that participating in education can provide that

drive motivation, rather than money or work conditions. Attending education classes during incarceration gives individuals an opportunity to congregate with friends or associates they may not see in a typical day in prison (Schlesinger, 2005), and this can be a very strong motivator for participating in education (Manger et al., 2013). Other research, however, suggests that while social factors may contribute to motivations for pursuing education during incarceration, it may not be as much of a driver to participate as other external and internal motivators (Delaere et al., 2013; Halimi et al., 2017).

In contrast to economic/rational and social/human motivational theories, need-driven motivational theories draw from Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. These argue that the "innate, intrinsic human needs are the main drivers of human behavior" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 150). Thus, individuals will be motivated to pursue education to achieve higher order needs rather than to satisfy basic needs that are already met. That is, need-driven theories are more concerned with intrinsic motivations. The extant literature on prison education suggests that incarcerated individuals are indeed also motivated to pursue education for intrinsic reasons. A number of individuals cite the desire to prove something themselves as a major motivator for pursuing education during incarceration (Delaere et al., 2013; Runell, 2018). They felt as though pursuing education would help them feel as though they were truly challenging themselves and were capable of accomplishing something (Runell, 2018; Schlesinger, 2005). Relatedly, they felt a desire to prove something to their family (Delaere et al., 2013) and be a role model for their children (Schlesinger, 2005). In essence, many cited a desire for something positive to come from doing time in prison (Runell, 2018; Schlesinger, 2005). Finally, incarcerated individuals cited an inherent desire to learn (Delaere et al., 2013; Halimi et al., 2017), as well as a desire to improve their own general knowledge and skills (Halimi et al., 2017) as reasons for pursuing

education during incarceration.

An additional area of motivations for pursuing education during incarceration that arises in the literature relates to motivations that are unique to the prison context, and these motivations can take both extrinsic and intrinsic forms. Motivators for pursuing education in prison may be positive, negative, or more neutral in nature. In a positive sense, individuals noted that participating in education made them feel like a regular person during the time that they were in class (Halimi et al., 2017). Additionally, education allowed them “to get away from the most stupid and from the fake machismo for awhile” (Delaere et al., 2013, p. 12), avoid violence in prison (Runell, 2018), and stay out of trouble while incarcerated (Runell, 2018; Schlesinger, 2005).

Others noted more neutral reasons for participating in education during incarceration. For instance, incarcerated individuals note getting out of their cell (Halimi et al., 2017; Runell, 2018; Schlesinger, 2005), taking up spare time (Delaere et al., 2013; Schlesinger, 2005), and giving the days variety so as to make time go faster (Halimi et al., 2017) as reasons unique to the prison context that motivated them to participate in education during incarceration. Finally, it must also be noted that some incarcerated individuals admit participating in education while in prison in order to manipulate the system (Runell, 2018; Schlesinger, 2005). In particular, they may want to engage in misconduct such as exchanging contraband or gambling (Schlesinger, 2005). Others hope that participating in education will increase their chances of release (Halimi et al., 2017; Schlesinger, 2005). Given that prison is a unique setting for pursuing education, it is important to keep these motivators in mind, as well as the general reasons why individuals participate in education outside of prison.

While previous studies have supported these types of motivations for pursuing general

education during incarceration, still very little is known about what motivates individuals to pursue postsecondary education during incarceration. However, the first step is to better understand motivations for pursuing postsecondary education among non-incarcerated individuals. Kimmel and colleagues (2016) examined motivations for pursuing postsecondary education among a non-incarcerated sample across a variety of age groups. Several findings from this study are particularly relevant to postsecondary prison education. First, the authors found that motivations for pursuing postsecondary education varied based on age. Those under 24 tended to be motivated to pursue education due to encouragement from their parents. In contrast, older students were motivated by employment concerns. Specifically, those aged 25 to 34 were motivated to pursue postsecondary education in order to pursue a new career, while students 35 and over were motivated by a desire for a new career or higher pay, or by a desire for more respect from their peers. Overall, the motivations for nontraditional, non-incarcerated adult students for pursuing postsecondary education fell into the economic/rational and social/human categories previously discussed.

While Kimmel and colleagues' (2016) findings of nontraditional, non-incarcerated students' motivations for pursuing postsecondary education fell mainly into the categories of economic/rational and social/human, it is still unknown whether those same needs drive incarcerated individuals to pursue prison education.

Postsecondary Education in Prison

Modes of Instruction

College courses in prisons are traditionally available through both community colleges and colleges/universities, and they may take the shape of correspondence courses and/or face-to-face instruction. Correspondence courses refer to college classes completed via mail or e-mail

when “a campus-based alternative is impractical” (Palo Verde College, n. d.). This has traditionally been a common way for incarcerated people to participate in college courses, as there is no need for anyone to come into the prison and coursework can be completed by the incarcerated individual from within the incarceration setting.

On the other hand, there are also colleges that offer face-to-face, in-person instruction to incarcerated students, especially with recent increases in the number of college-in-prison programs through Second Chance Pell. These courses are run in a similar way to that of a traditional college course – the instructor goes into the prison to teach incarcerated students in a prison classroom. Although the use of this type of instruction slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions appear to be returning to this type of in-person instruction (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023). Other types of in-person programs involve others beyond incarcerated students and the instructor. For example, the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program takes traditional college students into the prison to participate in the class alongside incarcerated students (<https://www.insideoutcenter.org/>), with the goal of breaking down barriers and stereotypes on both sides of the prison wall. Each of these types of courses offer costs and benefits to the incarcerated student, but all entail some degree of college course experience.

Barriers

In addition to motivations, as discussed above, it is also important to understand the barriers to pursuing postsecondary education for incarcerated students both in how those barriers may differ from those of non-incarcerated students, and how, if at all, they are exacerbated or alleviated given the uniqueness of the prison setting. Kimmel and colleagues’ (2016) examined barriers to participating in postsecondary education for a non-incarcerated sample. Notable barriers identified by the participants included the lack of funds to pay for childcare while

students attended classes, lack of funds to pay for college education, lack of transportation, and division of time between school and family (Kimmel et al., 2016). These barriers are notable because, while potentially difficult to overcome outside of prison, prison presents a unique opportunity to render these barriers irrelevant. As Harding and colleagues (2019) have suggested, “education is one way to take better advantage of time spent in prison” (p. 236). In particular they note that access to education needs to be improved, because while obtaining a GED in prison can serve as a stepping stone toward higher education, a GED alone is not enough to significantly improve employment outcomes post-prison. Further, they posit that incarceration presents a unique opportunity for change for criminally-involved individuals. This time, they suggest, can be used as a time of reflection or a break from the challenges of day-to-day life in the difficult environment in which many justice-involved individuals live (Harding et al., 2019).

Taken together with Kimmel and colleagues’ (2016) findings, it is possible that incarceration may indeed be an ideal time for pursuing postsecondary incarceration, because it can serve as a time away from the stress of everyday life outside of prison that impacts individuals who want to pursue postsecondary education. Specifically, given that the universities with which postsecondary education programs are affiliated send instructors to the prisons to conduct coursework, incarcerated individuals do not have to worry about finding transportation to class or dealing with the technology involved in taking courses online (Kimmel et al., 2016). Further, given that incarcerated individuals are already away from their children, incarcerated parents do not have to find a way to provide childcare while they attend class, nor do they have to make difficult decisions about whether to spend time with family or studying for school (Kimmel et al., 2016).

Of course, participating in education while in prison poses its own challenges, and there

is no reason to believe that postsecondary carceral education would not face the same types of challenges. For example, those pursuing education in prison may lack the resources necessary for completing schoolwork, such as internet access, books, pens and paper, computers or typewriters, and other various materials (Osberg & Fraley, 1993; Piché, 2008; Vacca, 2004). Further, prison-related characteristics can also make it difficult to engage in educational programs. Prisons are often noisy and overcrowded; prison administrators and correctional officers may be unsupportive of education programs, especially college courses; and lockdowns, head counts, and meetings with lawyers can prevent incarcerated students from attending classes (Osberg & Fraley, 1993; Piché, 2008; Vacca, 2004). Incarcerated students may also face peer pressure discouraging them from participating in educational programs (Piché, 2008; Vacca, 2004) due to the “inmate subculture” of prisons (Rose, 2004, p. 94), and incarcerated women in particular may be unmotivated to participate if they do not have support from their peers (Rose, 2004).

Despite these challenges, providing incarcerated individuals with educational programs, including college courses, is a worthwhile pursuit. Research suggests that engaging incarcerated individuals in programming during incarceration leads to better reentry outcomes than simply ‘warehousing’ (i.e. simply locking individuals up in prison versus providing them with programming) them (Duwe & Clark, 2017, p. 50). Those who participate in education during incarceration have lower involvement in prison misconduct (Latessa, Lugo, Sullivan, & Wooldredge, 2017; Pompoco et al., 2017), and this is particularly true for those that participate in college courses (Latessa et al., 2017). Most importantly, preliminary research from the Bard Prison Initiative, one of the leading college prison education programs in the U.S., indicates that even after accounting for selection bias, participation in high quality postsecondary prison

education is associated with significant drops in recidivism, a finding that holds true across race and gender (Denney & Tynes, 2021). Specifically, the more credits taken and/or the higher the degree obtained, the more recidivism reduction was observed: for every 12 credits taken, recidivism is reduced by 1.3 percent, with no Bachelor's degree recipients returning to prison for a new felony.

Beyond the promising impacts on misconduct and recidivism, one qualitative study with prison officials found that staff believe that college courses give incarcerated individuals something besides the prison to focus on, making the prison environment more manageable, more peaceful, and less prone to violence (Fine et al., 2001). Given that incarcerated students do not have the barriers to education that many outside prison walls face, prison may be an ideal time for justice-involved individuals to pursue postsecondary education.

Ultimately, if given the opportunity to participate in postsecondary education while in prison, incarcerated individuals will be better prepared for dealing with issues of reentry. In particular, they will be better poised to obtain employment and, particularly, meaningful and gainful employment. They will have an increased ability to cut ties with criminal others, as sources of social capital will be replaced with employment and non-criminal others through traditional work. Finally, they may leave prison with a transformed sense of self-identity that is incompatible with a criminal lifestyle. Given these benefits of postsecondary education during incarceration, participants in postsecondary prison education programs are potentially in a better position to desist from crime than those who do not participate in such programs.

Studies have begun to explore the motivations for, and impact of, prison education quantitatively outside of the U.S. (Delaere et al. 2013; Halimi et al., 2017), for adult basic education with small subsets of the prison population (Schlesinger, 2005), and in different prison

education-related contexts (Denney & Tynes, 2021; Runell, 2018). However, few studies have substantially grounded their arguments in theory and, more specifically, few studies have examined whether and how higher education serves as a turning point for desistance from crime (Walters, 2018). This study will address this theoretical gap by bringing together Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of informal social control, Giordano and colleagues' theory of cognitive transformation, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to better understand the benefits of postsecondary education for justice-involved individuals.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experience of postsecondary carceral education, including the motivations and barriers to participation, as well as the post-prison impacts of participating in this type of programming. To do this, I conducted in-depth interviews with 31 formerly incarcerated men (N = 20) and women (N = 11) who participated in various types of postsecondary college courses in prisons across the United States. Using techniques from grounded theory methodology, I then conducted a systematic comparative analysis of the motivations, barriers, and impacts of postsecondary carceral education.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer four interrelated research questions:

- 1) What motivates incarcerated individuals to pursue postsecondary education during incarceration?
- 2) What barriers or challenges do incarcerated individuals face in pursuing postsecondary education in prison?
- 3) What are the impacts, both positive and negative, of pursuing postsecondary education during incarceration?
- 4) How, if at all, does postsecondary education in prison serve as a turning point for desistance from crime?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, research suggests that incarceration and reentry experiences are qualitatively different for men and women (Cobbina, 2009; Grace, 2022). Thus, I also made gender comparisons across each of these research questions.

Sampling Strategy & Recruitment

There were two main criteria for inclusion in this study. First, individuals were eligible to participate in the study if they participated in *any* college education while incarcerated in prison. Specifically, individuals with any level of participation in college in prison were invited to participate, as research has shown that any participation in college courses during incarceration is associated with lower recidivism rates (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Second, individuals were eligible to participate if they had been released from a U.S. prison in the last three years.¹ A three-year window of release was selected because over two-thirds of individuals are rearrested during this time frame (Alper & Durose, 2018; Antenangeli & Durose, 2021; BJS, 2014b), and having insights from individuals at various stages within this critical time frame should yield more robust understanding of how, if at all, postsecondary prison education can serve as a turning point for desistance from crime.

I recruited participants for this research by sending out a recruitment flier (see Appendix A) via three higher education in prison (HEP) listservs:

- 1) the Higher Ed in Prison listserv, a listserv maintained by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison that reaches many individuals (both students and program administrators) involved with prison college programs across the U.S.,
- 2) the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network, which includes over 1,000 members, many of whom participated in college courses *during* incarceration, and
- 3) the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program listserv, which reaches instructors in over 37 states and 50 colleges and universities across the U.S. (The Inside-Out

¹ Time since release ranged from 2 days to just over 3 years.

Prison Exchange Program).

Most participants stated that a college-in-prison instructor had alerted them to the study opportunity. Additionally, participants were encouraged to send the flier to other formerly incarcerated individuals that met the inclusion criteria.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom in May and June 2021. I conducted 27 interviews myself, while 4 additional interviews were conducted by undergraduate research assistants² who received training on qualitative interviewing skills by me prior to conducting the interviews. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, advised of all rights to confidentiality, and given an opportunity to voice any questions or concerns. Participants were then asked to give verbal consent to continue, in lieu of signed consent, as an added measure of confidentiality.³ No one declined to participate after going through the informed consent process. Interviews then proceeded with a brief survey followed by audio-recorded, in-depth interviews.

Survey

Interviews began with a brief survey focusing on three main areas: 1) demographics, 2) educational attainment, and 3) self-reported experiences with the criminal justice system. To complete the survey, the interviewer asked the participant each question and recorded their response. First, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information, including age, race, gender, current education level, marital status, number of children, employment status currently and prior to the most recent incarceration, income level, and location. The survey also included questions about prior educational attainment. Participants were asked about their

² All members of the research team were White women.

³ This method of obtaining informed consent was approved by the Michigan State University IRB.

highest level of education achieved prior to their first incarceration, highest level of education achieved prior to beginning any college courses in prison⁴, and whether individuals were in school at the time of their most recent incarceration. Additionally, participants were asked about their experiences with the criminal justice system and educational experiences while incarcerated. Specifically, participants were asked to provide the charges that led to the most recent incarceration, how much time they had served in jail/prison throughout their life, and what types of programs they participated in while incarcerated. Finally, participants were asked if they had been convicted of any crimes since their most recent release from prison. (See Appendix B for the full survey/interview guide.)

In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews aimed to gain further insight into the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in voluntary, postsecondary carceral education. The interview guide was semi-structured and contained open-ended questions to allow for considerable probing (Berg, 2009). Interviews began by asking participants to discuss their early experiences with education. Specifically, I asked participants to discuss their earliest school memories, why they did or did not enjoy school as a child, and how their families felt about school when they were growing up. Participants were also asked whether they had ever been suspended or expelled, and those who had been were asked to provide additional context. Finally, participants were asked to recount their most recent experiences with education prior to being incarcerated.

I then moved on to questions regarding participants' experiences with prison-based education. Participants were asked about how they first learned of college opportunities in prison

⁴ This question was asked because some college courses offered in prison, such as Inside Out, do not require a high school diploma or GED to participate.

and how they felt about those opportunities. I also asked participants to describe the person they were prior to beginning college in prison. Participants were then asked to discuss their motivations for their initial participation in prison college programs and if any specific people motivated them to pursue college in prison. Participants were asked to describe a typical day in prison when they were participating in college courses. They were questioned about how the professors interacted with students, how the students interacted with one another, and the positive and negative experiences they had with college courses in prison. Participants were also asked if they had ever gotten into trouble during these classes. Next, interviews then asked participants how they thought the correctional officers felt about the college program. Interviews also asked about different types of barriers to pursuing college courses in prison. Specifically, participants were asked to discuss what difficulties they faced in pursuing college in prison, whether they faced any financial barriers to participate, and, finally, if there were any other difficulties they faced in completing coursework or studying while in prison.

The final portion of the in-depth interviews aimed to explore how postsecondary carceral education impacted formerly incarcerated individuals' lives post-prison. Participants discussed the positive and negative impacts of their prison college experience on their lives since being released, including whether their participation in college in prison had any impact on their employment or views of crime and criminal behavior. Participants were also asked to describe the person they were now, and whether or not they were currently planning to pursue more education. Finally, participants were questioned whether they believed they would be successful in not returning to prison and why, as well as their perceptions of their college peers' ability to succeed post-prison. Interviews concluded by asking participants about the most positive impact of participating in college in prison, what advice they would give to other incarcerated

individuals considering participating in college in prison, and offering participants the opportunity to add anything else that had not yet come up. Participants were given the opportunity to ask me any additional questions prior to concluding the interview.

Procedure

Interested participants contacted me by phone or email. I screened potential participants to ensure they met the criteria for inclusion. I then scheduled their interview and sent a private, password-protected Zoom link for the interview. Upon beginning the interview, I read the informed consent to the participant, gave them the opportunity to ask questions, and asked for their verbal agreement to participate. We then completed the survey. The audio-recording began after the survey was completed, and we completed the in-depth interview. The in-depth portion of the interviews ranged from 32 to 145 minutes, with a mean of 68 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were paid \$20 for their time.⁵ Participants were asked to alert others to the interview opportunity if they could, and I emailed a copy of the consent form to participants following the interview.

Qualitative Data Analysis Plan

I wrote a memo immediately following the conclusion of each interview, taking care to note anything that stood out, was surprising, or contradicted or reinforced statements made by other participants, among other observations.⁶ Interviews were then transcribed verbatim by either a transcription company, myself, or an undergraduate research assistant. The data were analyzed inductively to allow themes to be developed from the data. The analysis process for each research question was as follows. First, the data was compiled into two relevant text

⁵ Participants chose their preferred method of payment from the following options: Venmo, Cashapp, Zelle, Amazon E-gift Card, Other E-gift Card, or Cashier's Check. Two participants opted not to be paid for their time, and one participant asked for her payment to be donated to a women's shelter.

⁶ For interviews I did not conduct, I listened to the interview in full and wrote a memo immediately afterward.

documents, one each for men and women. This resulted in six Word documents for analysis.⁷ Next, I read through each set of relevant text and developed an initial codebook, consisting of codes and their definitions, that captured repeating ideas expressed by participants. I re-worked codes as needed as I read through the remaining text. I then read through each set of relevant text again, coding by hand from the codebook I had developed. For each research question, I began with the women's relevant text. Then, I used the women's codebook to begin coding the men's relevant text, adding to the codebook where necessary, and removing unused codes at the conclusion of coding to produce the final men's codebook.

An undergraduate research assistant served as a second coder to enhance the reliability of the findings. Using the initial codebook, we coded several cases independently. Afterward, we met to discuss our initial codes, identify and resolve any inconsistencies in our codes, and revise the codebook. We then independently coded the remaining cases before meeting again to review and discuss any inconsistencies in our codes. For any inconsistencies, we again talked through our reasons for our codes and worked together to determine which codes best fit the data in question. We repeated this process until we were satisfied that we had accurately coded each set of relevant text.

Next, I followed Yin's (2011) process for reassembling the data. First, I organized the codes into themes for men and women independently of one another. However, the themes I identified for men and women were generally the same, with variations in the codes (or repeating ideas) that fell underneath each theme. I also noted how common each code and theme was before situating the themes into the overarching conceptual or theoretical framework relevant to that research question. Finally, I made comparisons between men and women and paid particular

⁷ For example, (1) men's motivations, (2) women's motivations, (3) men's barriers, (4) women's barriers, and so on.

attention to how the codes and themes differed between men and women, which also strengthens the internal validity of the findings (Silverman, 2006; Strauss, 1987). Importantly, after constructing these themes arising from the data, I identified Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model as an appropriate framework from which to discuss and understand participants' motivations and barriers for participating in postsecondary prison education.⁸

The findings reported in the following chapters reflect the most commonly identified themes in the data, as well as reports of deviant cases in the data (Yin, 2011).

Validity and Reliability

To increase the validity of my findings, I took a number of steps. First, while I was unable to pilot my survey and interview guide before beginning interviews (Berg, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018), I used the first five interviews to revise the survey and interview guide to ensure that the questions captured the information I wanted to know. There were no major revisions that changed the main content of the interview guide; rather, revisions focused on wording and order of questions. Then, the remaining 26 interviews were conducted with the final survey/interview guide.

As previously stated, I also engaged in memo writing immediately after conducting or listening to each interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2011). This allowed me to make note of what stood out from the interview and to establish connections between concepts or to other participants. In particular, I made note of what surprised me from interviews or ideas that seemed to come up repeatedly from participants. These memos also allowed me to more easily identify when I had reached the point of data saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I chose to finish interviewing men after I had interviewed 20 male participants and no new information

⁸ That is, Bronfenrenner's model was not used to develop the codes or themes presented in this dissertation; rather, themes were applied to the model after construction.

was being elicited from subsequent interviews; this allowed me to then focus my efforts on recruiting more women for the study. I continued recruiting women until I had 11 female participants, at which point data saturation seemed to have been achieved.

Finally, the comparative approach I used to analyze the data also increased the validity of my findings (Maxwell, 2009; Strauss, 1987; Silverman, 2006). I compared results both within and between the male and female participant groups. Finally, I noted deviant cases, or those that seemed to be in opposition to the majority of participants, or to capture those ideas that were only identified by one participant (Charmaz, 2006; Maxwell, 2009; Yin, 2011).

Reliability was strengthened through repeated readings of the relevant text and the use of a codebook and second coder (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2011). First, I created the codebook after multiple readings of the data, refining the codebook until it fit the entirety of the relevant text. Then, my undergraduate research assistant served as a second coder to ensure that the codebook was clear and allowed us to consistently code the data. Finally, I refined the codebook as needed when our codes were inconsistent.

Description of Sample

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the full sample. Women were oversampled for this study and comprise about one-third of the total sample. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 69, with a mean age of 42.8 years. The sample is racially diverse, with just over half of the sample being white and 22 percent being Black, with the remainder being comprised of Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, Asian, and individuals of two or more races. The majority of the sample was single. Over half of the participants had children; the number of children ranged from one to four, with a mean of 1.7 children for those who did have children.

Almost 40 percent of the participants had a GED or high school diploma as the highest

degree earned, while close to 36 percent had an Associate's degree. Approximately one-fourth of the sample had a Bachelor's degree or graduate education. About two-thirds of the participants were employed at the time of the interview, with a wide range of income from less than \$15,000 to \$74,999, and over half of the participants had been employed prior to their most recent incarceration. In terms of time served in prison throughout the course of participants' lives, the mean was 196.5 months (16.4 years), although there was great variation in total time served, from 36 to 492 months (3 to 41 years). Finally, none of the participants had been convicted of any offenses since their most recent release from incarceration.

Table 1. Full sample demographics (N = 31)

	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	20	64.5
Female	11	35.5
<i>Age</i>		
Mean	42.8	
Range	25-69	
<i>Race</i>		
White	16	51.6
Black	7	22.6
Hispanic/Latinx	3	9.7
Native American	2	6.5
Asian	1	3.2
Two or More Races	2	6.5
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	18	58.1
Married	5	16.1
Cohabiting	2	6.5
Widowed	1	3.2
Divorced	5	16.1
<i>Children</i>		
Yes	18	58.1
No	13	41.9
<i>Number of Children</i>		
Mean	1.7	
Range	1-4	
<i>Highest Level of Education Achieved</i>		
GED	4	12.9
High School Diploma	8	25.8
Associate's Degree	11	35.5
Bachelor's Degree	6	19.4
Some Graduate School	1	3.2

Table 1 (cont'd)

	N	%
Obtained Graduate Degree	1	3.2
<i>Current Employment Status</i>		
Employed: Full-time	17	54.8
Employed: Part-time	5	16.1
Unemployed	9	29.0
<i>Current Income Level (Employed)</i>		
<\$15,000	6	27.3
\$15,000-\$29,999	2	9.1
\$30,000-\$49,999	9	40.9
\$50,000-\$74,999	5	22.7
<i>Employed Prior to Most Recent Incarceration</i>		
Yes	17	54.8
No	14	45.2
<i>Total Time Served in Prison (Months)</i>		
Mean	196.5	
Median	168	
Range	36-492	
<i>Conviction Since Last Release</i>		
Yes	0	0.0
No	31	100.0

Table 2 presents the full demographic characteristics of the sample when broken down by gender. Of note, male participants were more racially diverse, with only 45 percent being white, while almost two-thirds of the women were white. Women were more likely than men to have children (72.7% vs. 50.0%, respectively), and they had, on average, more children than did the men (2.0 vs. 1.5 children, respectively). Women were also more likely than men to have been employed prior to their most recent incarceration (72.7% vs. 45.0%, respectively). Finally, men served more than twice as much time in prison throughout their lives, on average, than did women (246.0 months vs. 106.4 months, respectively).

Table 2. Sample demographics by gender

	Men (N = 20)		Women (N = 11)	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Age</i>				
Mean	43.1		42.5	
Range	29-69		25-59	
<i>Race</i>				
White	9	45.0	7	63.6
Black	5	25.0	2	18.2
Hispanic/Latinx	3	15.0	0	0.0
Native American	2	10.0	0	0.0
Asian	0	0.0	1	9.1
Two or More Races	1	5.0	1	9.1
<i>Marital Status</i>				
Single	13	65.0	5	45.5
Married	5	25.0	0	0.0
Cohabiting	0	0.0	2	18.2
Widowed	0	0.0	1	9.1
Divorced	2	10.0	3	27.3
<i>Children</i>				
Yes	10	50.0	8	72.7
No	10	50.0	3	27.3
<i>Number of Children</i>				
Mean	1.5		2.0	
Range	1-3		1-4	
<i>Highest Level of Education Achieved</i>				
GED	4	20.0	0	0.0
High School Diploma	3	15.0	5	45.5
Associate's Degree	8	40.0	3	27.3
Bachelor's Degree	3	15.0	3	27.3
Some Graduate School	1	5.0	0	0.0
Obtained Graduate Degree	1	5.0	0	0.0
<i>Current Employment Status</i>				
Employed: Full-time	11	55.0	6	54.5
Employed: Part-time	4	20.0	1	9.1
Unemployed	5	25.0	4	36.4
<i>Current Income Level (Employed)</i>				
<\$15,000	4	26.7	2	28.6
\$15,000-\$29,999	2	13.3	0	0.0
\$30,000-\$49,999	6	40.0	3	42.9
\$50,000-\$74,999	3	20.0	2	28.6

Table 2 (cont'd)

	Men (N = 20)		Women (N = 11)	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Employed Prior to Most Recent Incarceration</i>				
Yes	9	45.0	8	72.7
No	11	55.0	3	27.3
<i>Total Time Served in Prison (Months)</i>				
Mean	246.0		106.4	
Median	240		84	
Range	36-492		58-258	
<i>Conviction Since Last Release</i>				
Yes	0	0.0	0	0.0
No	20	100.0	11	100.0

CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN HEP

The main goal of this dissertation is to analyze the ability of postsecondary carceral education to act as a turning point for desistance from crime. However, given the extant literature that suggests education, and especially higher education, is associated with reductions in future criminal behavior (Duwe & Clark, 2014; Fine et al., 2001; Pompoco et al., 2017), it is important to first explore the motivations for participating in prison education. It should be noted that while many researchers explore the impacts of participation in prison programs, the factors that drive engagement remain overlooked in the literature (Brosens, 2013). However, motivations to participate must be better understood if we are to encourage more incarcerated individuals to do so, and by better understanding these driving forces for individuals who have *actually* participated in prison education, we will be better able to motivate more incarcerated individuals to pursue higher education in prison. Specifically, by developing a better understanding of what types of motivations lead individuals to follow through on participation can equip prison program staff, as well as college faculty and recruiters, to more meaningfully engage with potential incarcerated students to encourage them to participate in college courses in prison.

As previously discussed, motivation is not fluid, but rather changes throughout the life course. Thus, it is important that we understand why individuals are driven not just to pursue higher education, but specifically why they are spurred to do so *while* incarcerated. By capitalizing on these motivations, we will be better able to encourage more individuals to participate in prison education, consequently extending the benefits of postsecondary education to more incarcerated individuals. Additionally, the findings are presented here within the ecological model, as it is important to understand the context in which these motivations are present, particularly when discussed in relation to barriers, as the next chapter aims to do. The

aim of the current chapter is to discuss the motivations for pursuing postsecondary prison education for participants who were actually able to do so, and to situate these findings within the ecological model.

I identified six main themes from participants regarding their motivations for pursuing college education in prison. These themes are the same for men and women; however, the repeating ideas that fall under each theme differ slightly based on gender. These differences will be highlighted where appropriate. The six themes that were identified include: coping with prison, being motivated by others, enjoying prior experiences with school, improving one's life circumstances, pursuing a goal of self-improvement, and changing one's life. As expected from prior research, most of the reasons participants gave for engaging in higher education in prison fell under the micro level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. However, themes and/or individual repeating ideas fell under all four levels of the model, as will be discussed below.

The Macro Level

The macro level refers to public policy and relationships between organizations, namely the Second Chance Pell pilot program and prison-university partnerships, which made college both more accessible and affordable for those with criminal records. Thirty percent (N = 6) of male participants noted that once they were given the opportunity to participate in college while in prison, they chose to take advantage. For some of them, this was the opportunity to do something they had wanted to do, while for others it was an opportunity to finish what they had started. This theme overlaps with the motivations on the micro level, as it was the individual desire within themselves driving them to pursue college prior to prison. However, until policy changes were made at the national level, they had not had the opportunity to do so. Once the

Second Chance Pell pilot program was implemented, higher education programs in prisons across the country became somewhat more available to incarcerated people. For Troy, the idea of being able to participate in face-to-face college courses while incarcerated was novel. Upon hearing of the opportunity, Troy

thought it was dope. I thought it was so cool. And this isn't my first time in prison. So it's like, I've never seen that happen before. I've heard of it, like corresponding classes that you take correspondence, but I've never heard of [face-to-face classes in prison]. And it was a local school for [State] so I was like, "All right, cool, hell yeah, why not?"

While correspondence courses had not been interesting to Troy, the opportunity to try something new in prison was intriguing enough for him to take advantage of the opportunity he was being afforded.

For Mateo, prison had seemed to present a barrier to reaching his goal of pursuing a college degree: "I knew that I was interested in college. I already knew that I wanted a degree. And those were all still my goals. So as soon as someone came and said, 'Hey, we've got education here,' I said, 'Okay, well, I got a diploma. I need a degree.'" It was only upon the new opportunity to attend college in prison that Mateo felt he could continue working on the goals he had set for himself outside of prison. Joseph echoed a similar sentiment, stating: "It brought me back alive, like, 'Yes, now I can do it.' That resentment I have for dropping out went away. I was like, 'this is what I always wanted to do, this is what I wanted to do.'" For Joseph, the opportunity to finish his college education from prison helped him achieve something he had long resented in his past and wanted to correct.

For David, the opportunity revolved more around the financial aspects of pursuing a college education. David observed, "I think a lot of the time most people keep themselves from doing education because it costs a lot of money to go to school." In the past, not being able to pay for college had been a difficulty for him. However, after discovering a grant for which he

was eligible, he found himself in a different situation: “Once I was provided with that option [to go to college in prison], then I applied for the grant and I was granted the grant, [and] for me that was like one reason why I was so excited about pursuing my education.” Once this obstacle was removed from his path to higher education, David jumped at the opportunity to participate while in prison.

Ben’s situation was complex. He did not have the innate desire to attend college outside of prison, due to his personal circumstances:

I didn't think it was something that I would want to pursue. I didn't think I would want to come home, almost 30-years-old, starting as a freshman. It didn't sound fun to me. It didn't sound like it was something I wanted to do. I thought I would rather make my way in like a myriad of other ways. But a big motivational thing was when it did become an option, and I did see that there was light at the end of the tunnel. I was like, “holy crap, I can use my last two years of incarceration and go home with an Associate's degree. That's amazing.” So that was, that was a big thing, like in and of itself.

For Ben, there was discomfort in being a non-traditional student in a traditional college setting.

He felt his age was holding him back from attending college outside of prison. However, once he learned about the opportunity to participate in college while in prison, his mindset shifted:

I was excited. I was pumped. I really didn't think it was going to be an option for me. At that point I'd already been pretty serious about higher education for like three years. I just didn't think that I was going to be interested in actually going back to college that late in life. I was picturing myself becoming more of like a self-made individual, and utilizing that knowledge, like in a myriad of different ways other than education, so having the option to attain an Associate's degree before coming home from prison was a really big deal to me because it kind of just changed the game. It took something that, like, I wasn't going to pursue and made it something that I wanted to pursue.

In Ben’s eyes, going to college in prison was a unique opportunity for him to pursue something positive in a setting where he did not feel constrained by the typical inhibitions he had about pursuing college on the outside. Rather than feeling out of place in a traditional college setting, he was able to find his place in a non-traditional setting for school in prison. This shift in setting

turned out to be exactly what Ben needed to finally put his desire to pursue higher education into practice, and the ability to actually earn his degree along the way reinforced this choice. Indeed, this is precisely what Harding and colleagues (2019) speculate—prison may be an opportune time for justice-involved individuals to earn a higher education.

The Exo Level

At the exo level of the ecological systems model, motivations are concerned with factors at the institutional level. Very few motivations for pursuing college in prison fell under this level of the model. However, 30 percent (N = 9; 3 women, 6 men) of participants noted that participating in college in prison helped them to cope with the direct prison environment.

Coping with Prison

Prison is a stressful, bleak, and potentially dangerous environment to reside in, one in which individuals are regularly dehumanized and/or reminded of their wrongdoings. For some participants, participating in college provided an escape from the misery of the day-to-day life of prison. For Mary, college was a way to reduce the negative impact of her environment. Referring to prison, she said, “I mean, I had to be there, but I felt like I didn't have to be miserable.” Similarly, in regard to the opportunity to participate in college while incarcerated, Megan “was really excited, because that was something that helped me get through my time and gave me a purpose, something to focus on.” College was a way for some to get through their prison sentence in a more manageable way. Other participants more explicitly discussed the escape they found through higher education in prison. Of his time in college, Tyrone stated:

The actual school I enjoyed. The focus and effort could have been much, much better. But I stayed in college and that's the only place in prison that I felt normal, or—when I say normal, I mean that I was achieving anything. [Being] in prison wasn't so bad when I was in the college courses, in school. I could endure it more. I don't know if I'm explaining this right but I felt normal. Or not a prisoner.

The feeling of normalcy in an otherwise dehumanizing environment was important for some. For example, Scott asserted that, “college was the escape. College was the drug escape. While dudes would get high, smoked weed, get dope, whatever they do, I would go to school [to] get high.” For these participants, participating in college while incarcerated provided them with the opportunity to transcend the immediate environment for a time and allow them to feel normal, as though they were not incarcerated.

Other participants noted more instrumental benefits to participating in higher education while they were incarcerated. Richard asserted that college courses “filled hours in the day. The programs were chunks of the day.” Beyond just taking up time, however, college courses provided an opportunity to stay out of trouble in prison. For Troy, who still had an additional case he was fighting while already in prison, college was part of his way to do “my best to stay out of trouble. I’m working, I’m taking two vocational classes. I’m taking one vocational class right now too, let me add this onto my plate, too.” Staying out of trouble did not only refer to misconduct, however. Taking college courses in prison was a way to ensure the safety of incarcerated individuals. As Richard stated:

I think it gave me an opportunity to network with other people in the prison. I think networking is critically important. Survival, safety, all that stuff—the more of an intersection you have with the people on the compound or on the campus, the better chance you have of being safe and secure every day. So it was an opportunity to be safe.

This opportunity for safety was reiterated by Tyrone, who faced even more potential danger due to his age: “When I went into college, I was very young and I looked even younger. So it’s a whole different environment in college. The predators were out, the jackers were out, and I have to deal with all that.” One way that Tyrone navigated prison life was by going to college, which provided refuge from the dangerous environment for at least part of his day.

Other participants used college as a way to cope with parts of prison that are not influenced by the subculture of the prison, but rather by the regulations and policies of the prison themselves. When Carlos was originally approached by his prison's chaplain to participate in college, he declined the invitation. He had already been working on a degree in ministry, and he had a number of other activities in which he was highly engaged while in prison, so moving to a new prison facility to take part in another college program was of no interest to him. However,

When the second [opportunity] came around, I had been moved to another facility, which was probably one of the worst ones in [my state], and I can't lie that it became way more appealing because it was a means to get out of that prison.

When he was approached the second time about participating in a college program, Carlos was more intrigued because he wanted to be moved to a better prison. Using college to avoid undesirable aspects of prison was not uncommon, as pursuing higher education while incarcerated allowed participants to get out of undesirable prison work assignments. Justin explained:

When you're in a prison, they have jobs for you. Now, if you go to school, that's your job. Even with GED stuff, if you go to take the GED class, that's your job, so you don't have to work or whatever... So that's what was my main concern. I didn't want to clean up, you know, like, clean up the commodes after guys. So that was a way better option, I'd rather go to school to try to learn something... So, it was more like just getting out of work, you know, unfortunately.

Tyrone, too, capitalized on the opportunity to attend college in lieu of work after a work accident within the prison:

If it were more pay or better conditions, I would have stayed at that factory, but I dropped a really big log on my toe and I broke it. And they were like, "Okay, just, we're not going to pay you, just you laid off until you get right." I said, "Man, I'm not going to go through this process. I'm working too hard, I'm not getting paid. I could be in college right now. And I quit that job and I entered [the] college program.

Thus, college participation was a means to cope with a non-ideal environment for almost a third of participants in this study. Whether participants sought ways to escape the prison environment for just a bit of their day, ensure their safety, be moved to a better prison, or avoid undesirable work assignments, they were all seeking ways to cope with the environment created by the prison institution and the subculture that prison creates among incarcerated individuals.

The Meso Level

Motivations at the meso level include interactions with others that inspired them to participate in higher education in prison. For incarcerated individuals, these interactions are mainly limited to correctional officers, prison program staff, other incarcerated individuals, and friends and family members outside the prison with whom incarcerated individuals are able to maintain contact while incarcerated. Many participants in this study noted that other people in their lives were motivators in their decision to pursue college in prison. Indeed, fully 60 percent (N = 18) of participants, including half of the women (N = 5) and 65 percent of the men (N = 13) reported being inspired by other individuals in their lives to participate in college classes in prison.

Motivated by Others

Others in the Prison Environment

In total, six participants (N = 2 women, 4 men) stated that encouragement from staff, including college program staff and prison programming staff, was a motivating factor in their decision to pursue college while incarcerated. Joseph recalled an interaction with a recruiter for a new face-to-face college program that was being introduced to the prison in which he was incarcerated:

I remember Mr. Higgins said, “Hey, do you want to try college? Because you're gonna like it.” I said no, because I’m too old. He says, “just give it a try, man.” So

I gave it a try. I loved the interactions; this time it was different... If it wasn't for his nudging me towards that direction, I wouldn't have [tried it]. I had already gave up because of the experience that I had in school [earlier in life] and I was like, this is just not meant for me.

For Joseph, without the gentle encouragement of a program recruiter, his past negative experiences with education would have held him back from even trying to participate in college now. He credits his decision to give college a try solely to Mr. Higgins. Rebecca had a similar experience, although the staff member in her case was more persistent than Mr. Higgins had been with Joseph. After Rebecca had taken a couple of particularly difficult college courses, "I didn't want to go back to college. I was like, 'I can't.' I started not believing in myself again. I started to say, 'I can't do it. It's too hard. I can't do it.'" However, Rebecca was soon transferred to a new prison, where a program staff member decided to put her to work in the program building and enrolled her in reentry classes. Eventually, the staff member approached Rebecca about participating in a college program designed specifically for incarcerated individuals:

She said, "What do you think about taking Ashland?" I was like, "I don't qualify for it." She was like, "How about if I tell you I can work it out where you can take it?" Then I was like, "No, because I won't pass the locators test." She was like, "You don't know that. Just try it..." I went in there and I took it. That's how Miss June is, she's really good at it. She has a good eye for people she knows is going to go all the way through. She believes in second chances. Anybody comes in, she always encourages them to take a class in her building. I'm not going to lie, I was scared to death. But Miss June was like, "You can do it. Just go in there." I went in there, and I did good. Then I just didn't stop. I just kept going, and kept going.

Without Miss June's gentle yet persistent encouragement, Rebecca may have allowed her earlier negative experiences with college in prison to stop her from pursuing any further education. Instead, because of Miss June's persistence and unwavering belief in her, Rebecca was able to give school another chance and find that she was, in fact, capable of succeeding. Encouragement of program staff, then, whether gentle or persistent, was particularly important for some participants.

Program staff were not the only people in participants' immediate prison environment that motivated them to pursue college in prison, however. Other incarcerated individuals were also an important source of motivation and encouragement for participants. Six participants (N = 2 women, 4 men) stated that other incarcerated individuals played an important role in motivating them to go to college in prison, albeit in different ways. When asked if there were any individuals who motivated him, Mateo stated,

...the inmates that have received their degrees inside prison, that worked their way all the way up. And they went to the Reception where I went. And they got placed by the system into the high school class. They either got their GED or diploma, and they moved forward into another course through college and got their degree. And there's in-house lawyers. I mean, people that like to really study and learn stuff. It's motivating, it really is.

Simply seeing other incarcerated individuals receive their degree in prison or enjoying the process of school and studying inspired Mateo to try his abilities with school, seeing that they started in the same place as he had and come out of it with a degree. For other participants, it was specific incarcerated individuals that motivated them to pursue college. Anthony stated,

Who encouraged me really to kind of go into college classes was my cellmate. Because I've always had good conversations with him... But I didn't have no formal education, other than the GED. And he was one of the big ones that encouraged me to get in [to school] and from there I started my first college class... And because I was so new to it, he guided me through the process. And he did all the guiding. He said, "do this, fill this out, submit it. I'll get you the book, we can figure out the transcript." So my cellmate actually kind of provided lots of resources and understanding when it came to community college through correspondence because at the time there was only correspondence.

For Anthony, his cellmate was instrumental in not only sparking his desire to participate in correspondence courses, but also in assisting him with all of the steps along the way to enroll, get the book, and to actually engage in correspondence courses. David's experience was similar to Anthony's, in that another incarcerated individual proved to be essential to his pursuit of college in prison:

I had a mentor in prison, a guy who took an interest in me. He was a very religious person but also very educated and he was involved in the college programs in prison before they left. And so, he began to pursue correspondence education because he wanted to finish his degree. He graduated college, so he [was] always... in my ear about it. He left his son when he went to prison. His son was three years old when he went to prison. So, he felt like he missed out on that opportunity. So, every time he saw me because I was so young and he was a little older than me, he felt like he could be somebody who can guide me through not only the prison system but also guide me through emotional things and things like [college].

For David, not only was his prison mentor motivating him to pursue college in prison, but he also provided emotional support for getting through both prison and college.

Megan also emphasized the importance of other incarcerated students in her motivations for participating in college in prison. When asked who, if anyone, motivated her to pursue college in prison, she stated, “Probably just my other colleagues in school. There was a handful of us that went to every single class. We just encouraged each other... all of the encouragement just came from the other students.” Though not common, a few others were motivated to participate out of a desire to *help* other incarcerated women. Olivia said, “I became interested in paralegal studies because there were women in [prison] who were losing their children a month before their release date. And I wanted to know more about the law. I wanted to know how to research the law and see if that was actually legal.” While her motivation for participating in school was derived from other incarcerated individuals in a different way, she was motivated by them nonetheless. For Olivia, it was witnessing the impacts of the criminal justice system on others in her immediate environment that sparked her motivation to educate herself and see if she could make a difference for them, rather than direct encouragement or motivation from cellmates or other students.

Family: Inspiration and Pressure

Unsurprisingly, family was also an important motivator for incarcerated individuals at the meso level. Participants were motivated by relationships with their children, parents and grandparents, siblings, significant others, and family as a whole. Three male participants noted their child(ren) as a main source of motivation for pursuing education in prison. This finding was particularly interesting, given that none of the female participants spoke of their children as a motivator for participating in college classes in prison despite being more likely than men to have children. The men who did note children as a source of motivation were at varying stages in their relationships with their children. For instance, Troy found out that he was having a child while he was incarcerated. His thought process during that time was: "I gotta change, I'm having a child so I have to change... I have a child now, and she's a girl. So good little girls need their fathers, I need to be there." Similarly, Richard's motivation for participating in college in prison was all about:

My kids. My kids, everyday. They don't want me sitting around watching Jerry Springer. That's not a good model for them. Every day, I said, "I'm still your dad. I'm not dead. I'm coming back and I'm going to be the same person I was after the experience as I was before." So it was important for me to do things consistent with my belief system so they could see that and see that even the toughest situation aren't going to break you.

Some fathers in the study emphasized the importance of setting a good example for their children.

For Jimmie, pursuing higher education was about fighting for his rights to see his child that had been born while he was incarcerated. He felt that his criminal justice involvement would negatively impact his parental rights, and he felt the need to prepare himself as best as he could to fight for those rights. He said:

I felt like I was gonna have to fight for visitation rights and things like that with my daughter. That's why I earned the paralegal certificate. So, I put all this effort

in, and we went to court, I got my parenting time awarded from prison actually so that the courts sided with me [and said], “yeah, you can't not give her the mail, give her the phone calls,” things like that. And so, the motivation, it's to better myself, but also for the sake of my daughter... I see her now, every other weekend, and every other Wednesday, and we're building this relationship... The motivation for the college now stems from all that.

While Jimmie's main motivation initially was about securing the rights to see his daughter, the victory that came with winning visitation rights sparked more motivation to continue with school.

I saw the effort could pay off... I felt like with the college degree versus without, when I got out of prison, was going to determine what kind of a life I provide for myself and for my daughter, because I want to be there. I want her to have her own room in my house. When it comes time to get her a car when she's 16, I want to be able to afford these things, and put her through college and things like that. And, you know, setting an example for her too. So, I guess it's very centered around family, trying to try to build a different version of a family than what I had growing up. I want to try to create a different family for myself, and I had to lay the foundation of the education and things like that.

So while Jimmie's motivation was initially about gaining rights to see his child, he realized that he could do much more for his daughter if he continued his education. Pursuing college in prison and coming out with a degree would allow him to provide the type of life he hoped to provide for his daughter.

Other family members also played an important role in inspiring both men and women to pursue college in prison. Overall, 11 participants (4 women, 7 men) noted that they were motivated by their family members beyond their children. For example, Taylor hit a breaking point in prison after being forgiven by the mother of one of her victims. After this, she found the motivation to begin her college education: “I guess I didn't get my motivation like traditionally from myself... I felt like, ‘Okay, I want to do better—for myself, my family, and I want to be able to continue my education.’” Likewise, Ben's family offered a great deal of support, which was highly motivating:

[My mom has] always been like one of my biggest advocates – my whole family really, not just my mom. My dad, my younger siblings. I am one of the blessed dude. I probably had the best support system in the entire DOC. It was kind of surreal, actually, the amount of support and love I had. And that's just something that you don't see very often. So yeah, I guess I did have a lot of motivators and a lot of positive people in my corner, not only parents and siblings, but also aunts, uncles, cousins...

Carlos was in a similar situation. When asked what motivated him to engage in college education courses in prison, he stated:

There were just family members who I had talked to about it before, [they] would kind of bring it up occasionally and talk about how good it would be. Especially, like, my mom and because none of them [parents, older brother, and younger sister] had never been to college. So that was something [that] if it was available, they wanted me to take advantage of. And so, there were just positive voices trying to spur me on.

For Carlos, his family was particularly encouraging him to do something that none of them had done and to take advantage of the opportunity while he was incarcerated, if he had the opportunity to do so. While Carlos' family members were able to encourage him while he was incarcerated, it was a different situation for Eliza. She had initially participated in culinary arts classes in prison, and her mom had been "really happy that I was just doing something" while in prison. After her mother's passing, Eliza chose to continue on to participate in postsecondary education in prison as a way "to do right by my mom who was no longer there." Overall, family members inspired these participants to do something that they had not been able to do or to participate in college because it was a positive activity to do while incarcerated.

Other participants looked to their family members' own experiences with higher education as a source of encouragement for HEP. For instance, Rebecca's sister "encouraged me too. She was in her 30s going back to college. I was like, 'Wow, if she can be that old and go, then I know I can do it too.'" Similarly, this concept extended to Mateo's grandmother who "had a really good job, but she stays in school. I mean, I think she's working on a master's degree

right now. And this is my grandma, so I'm like, 'This is just motivation.'" Other loved ones were influential as well. Jeremy noted, "my significant other now had encouraged me and gave me a great example. She was going to school and ended up finishing school and encouraged me to." Regardless of who these motivations came from, it is clear that being inspired by loved ones, whether through encouragement or setting an example of their own, was an important motivator for a number of participants.

However, it must be noted that family could serve not only as a motivator because participants were inspired by their family, but also due to the pressure that was felt due to other family members' success. Specifically, Eliza spoke of this pressure she felt to live up to the rest of her family's academic achievements:

My brother has a Master's— the one that thinks I'm so stupid. He has a master's degree in sports medicine. He's an executive with [an insurance company]. He's really smart about the human body. Then his daughter, his oldest daughter, has a Master's in child social work, and the youngest one started [a] doctoral program for physical therapy. My younger brother— they're both older than me— his oldest [child] is a lawyer. And then, my nephew just has a Bachelor's, but he does some kind of estimating of big construction projects. Anyway, so they're all, you know, a whole family of overachievers. My one brother that doesn't have an advanced degree, has an extremely high IQ; he's just really smart. I have a sister also that died in 1986, she was smart too. So I just thought, "I got to do something else." I had this big family of overachievers, and that's another reason why I kind of kept [that] I was going to [College] to myself. My niece, the lawyer, graduated from Ann Arbor, and then got her law degree from Wayne State, and it would be like, they thought of Dearborn as like bootleg U of M. You know, it wouldn't have counted anyways because it's bootleg U of M so I just thought, "I want to go there. That's where I want to go."

For Eliza, having successful family members created pressure for her to do something herself. However, given that her whole family was comprised of high achievers, she worried that they would not see her college pursuits as worthy as their own endeavors. This perception led her to keep her academic pursuits to herself. Thus, having family members who had gone to college

could be a motivator in some ways, as it had been for Anthony, Rebecca, and Mateo, but it could also cause pressure and fear of mocking, as it did for Eliza.

Non-Incarcerated Friends

Finally, two male participants noted that friends outside of prison were motivating factors in their decision to participate in college courses while in prison. For Ben, it was “close friends of the family” that led him to pursue college in prison. In contrast, Miguel made a friend on the outside who inspired him while he was incarcerated. He explained, “I have had the opportunity to meet people during my incarceration on the outside, who kind of motivated me, gave me that extra push.” These new individuals came into his life at a time when his parents were struggling to help him with his legal case:

We started to reach out to people and came in contact with people. And I'm very fortunate that one person – the friend of mine – at that time, he didn't know me. He became aware of my case, looked into my case, and saw that there were some – not illegal [things], but it was like some discrepancies, and it was quite unfair. And he became invested in trying to help. He had an education; he has an education. So, he kind of started promoting that in me as well.

Miguel’s chance meeting with this individual, spurred on by his parents’ desire to help him achieve some “legal resolve” with his case, led to a new friendship in which Miguel found motivation to pursue his own education. Regardless of the nature of the relationship, it is clear that other people were important motivators in deciding to pursue college education in prison for almost half of the participants in this study.

The Micro Level

Similar to past research, the majority of motivations cited by participants in this study noted micro level motivations more so than motivations at any other level. Thus, most of the motivation themes fell entirely or mostly into this level. Most motivations at this level were unrelated to the individuals’ present circumstances (i.e., being incarcerated). Rather, most of the

motivations that fell under this level of the ecological model refer to a desire to better one's position in life (i.e., improve work life or work on their legal case), the intrinsic joy of school, and a desire to change one's life and oneself for the better. However, there were also several motivations that overlapped with earlier themes that appeared in the exo level.

School Success/Joy of Learning

In the study, five participants (2 women, 3 men), were inspired to pursue a college education while incarcerated due to earlier success or positive experiences with school in prison. Anthony, who was unable to read upon arriving in prison, said, "Once I learned how to read and I developed the confidence in my capability, then I was definitely self-motivated but prior to that it was a lot of fear-based rejection of education." For Anthony, school had been intimidating due to his illiteracy. Anthony is not alone, as almost 20 percent of incarcerated individuals are illiterate, while 60 percent are functionally illiterate (Karpowitz & Kenner, 2003). Learning to read was an important part of Anthony's educational journey in prison, but once he was able to read, he felt confident enough to continue his education and pursue higher education as well.

Others saw success in other educational pursuits that spurred a desire to continue their education with college. For Eliza, success in the form of good grades was particularly encouraging: "I got into school and I couldn't believe it! I was getting all A's, I was really excelling, I loved it. It was exciting; I couldn't wait to do more." This initial success in her prison classes helped build her confidence in her academic abilities. She said, "For me, it was just wonderful. As time went on I decided, 'I think I will get an Associate's degree.' Then it's like, 'should I go get a Bachelor's and have all these graduates of math and chemistry?!'" All it took for Eliza was seeing that she could, in fact, do well in school. Jimmie summarized this succinctly, stating, "I saw the effort could pay off."

Other participants emphasized this idea about early efforts paying off. Joseph found that college was not as challenging as he had initially thought, and it was motivating for him to want to keep going:

So I said, “okay, well I'll finish the college. I'll do it. I'll go ahead and get my AA, maybe my BA,” and I was all in. I was like, “this is it, man, let's do this.” Then I did really good in the classes. It was not difficult to get As. I said, “man, this is all this is all college is?” I said, “I could do it with the snap.” And that's what motivated me to select the second time. I was like, “let me go ahead and keep on doing this.”

Rebecca, too, had the desire to continue the momentum she had found in taking earlier vocational classes in prison. After her success in the culinary program in her prison, she said:

Well after that, I took [University], because I said, "Well I'm going to keep continue going." You know that saying, they say, "If you sit out a semester, then you're just not going to go back, because you're going to be like, 'Oh, I don't even want to go back.'" Well, that's what I was thinking in my head. I was like, "You know what? I should sit out a semester," but then I was like, no. I'm taking two classes, which is college algebra and biology. It was so hard.

For other participants, it was not initial success in prison education, but a joy of learning that encouraged them to participate in higher education in prison. Jason, who was particularly young when he went to prison, said:

I thought it was interesting, something that would be a good path for me to go on. I was young, so I probably wasn't as entered into the system... it was interesting, and I thought it'd be something I would enjoy. So that's why I pursued it.

Although Jason was young, he was not alone in thinking that he would enjoy the experience of higher education in prison. Phil spoke of his time in higher education in prison as the desire to learn from specialists and develop his own research skills:

I think it's just the ability to learn just different things and that was my only goal. I didn't see myself then in a BA program, one didn't exist at the time. So, I was just here for the journey of education, period. Just wanting to know. So being able to learn from professors who specialize in these fields. Anything that they have to offer is based on studying. And that's why I want to be around like to develop those types of studying [skills] and do research at a level. I believe level whether

just professionally or just for my own personal growth, I would like to know, learn these methods and process[es].

Scott also spoke of the process of higher education in prison:

At the end of all that, I've come to realize it was in the process itself that I got sucked in, because for me it was not a particular result. Because there was no end game... I didn't even graduate, and one of the reasons why I didn't graduate is... I only take classes I really like. I didn't care about a degree. I could have got my Bachelor's degree years ago, but I only liked certain professors and talk to them, so for me it was like hanging out.

For all of these participants, then, it was the journey of earlier education that allowed them to develop the motivation to continue their journey into higher education. Rather than any specific end goal, they found worth and enjoyment in the process itself and that was enough to make them continue on to college courses.

Coping with Prison

The theme of using higher education as a means to cope with the prison environment applied to two of the levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. As discussed previously, participants used higher education as a means of coping with the prison environment that was a direct result of being in the institution itself. The ideas presented here as part of this theme relate to the individual, rather than the institution and its policies and practices. Specifically, seven participants (N = 3 women, 4 men) noted that participating in college while incarcerated allowed them to make the best use of their prison time as well as provided them with much-needed mental stimulation (N = 3). These ideas are presented here, under the micro level, because they are unique to the individual.

Prison can be boring, and incarcerated individuals must find things to do to pass the time. For Richard, the typical activities in which incarcerated individuals participate were not of interest:

If you look at what people do when they're in prison, they sleep and watch Jerry Springer. I had no interest in sleeping and I don't like Jerry Springer. The courses were a good option for me to do something productive. It also added value, especially the Inside Out work with the kids. It was important for me to do that kind of stuff, to be involved and lead courses as much as I can.

This desire to *do something* was common among participants in this study. Mary, too, was “determined to make the best use of my time.” For Jenna, the opportunity to pursue higher education “gave me a sense of here's something constructive I can do with my time while I'm [in prison].” Rather than idly spend her time in prison, she wanted to do “something constructive while I'm on a timeout and can't participate in anything else in society.” This desire to spend time in prison wisely, rather than waste time, was reiterated by Jimmie:

I was really excited. You know, doing over 10 years in prison, I wanted to walk out of there and feel like it wasn't a total waste of time. Like maybe I can have something to come out of here with, something to show for it. You know, there's my degrees right there.

Each of these participants felt a desire to accomplish something with their time. Rather than losing years of their life to the prison system, they could do something productive while in prison and walk out with something to show for their time spent incarcerated. Several participants noted that this was a particularly strong motivator once they realized they had enough time to not only participate in college courses, but to actually leave prison with their degree. Miguel, who was facing a particularly long sentence, said:

Well, I can do something with my time, right? It doesn't fully sink in at the time, especially since, for me, I had my original sentence of 55 years at 100%... So, like, it was still a psychological battle, trying to accept this sentence, then basically translate it to a life sentence. And at the same time, trying to hold onto, “Okay, well, what can I do during this time?” Maybe there's a way for me to hold on to some sort of hope, learn some skills, maybe gain some type of legal remedy in the future... you know, like this is something that I can show for [my time].

Even though he was facing a lengthy prison sentence, Miguel viewed higher education as a way to maintain hope throughout his time and feel as though he was not wasting his entire life, but

could at least have something to show for his time. His hope of eventually getting out of prison kept him able to pursue positive activities, rather than dwell on his sentence. Scott, on the other hand, was not interested in pursuing a degree while incarcerated, due to his life sentence. Instead, Scott chose to participate only in courses he found personally interesting and did not concern himself with whether he would earn a degree while in prison:

I had a life sentence. And life in [State] was life means life—there's no parole or anything like that. So, even though I was going to school, there were times when I was thinking, “For what? What am I doing this for? I'm not getting out of prison.” And even then, though, I still chose to participate because, if for no other reason, the conversation was so stimulating with these professors. I wanted to go have a conversation. So that had a lot to do with it... I [would] go to class, do the papers, and talk to professors like, “yo, man, what do [you] think about this?” Philosophy especially. And motivation was the continuum of the conversation, you know. That would inspire me.

Having something such as a college degree to show for his time in prison was of little interest for Scott because he thought he was never getting out of prison. Instead, participating in college courses provided him with a much-needed opportunity to engage in stimulating conversations with professors that he found interesting.

Other participants also discussed this desire for some type of mental stimulation within their environment. Because prison can be a monotonous place with minimal intellectual stimulation, incarcerated individuals often find ways to pass the time that are not necessarily constructive. Megan expounded on this, stating, “I needed brain activity. I needed more than a television and gossip all around me. The books in the library were either fiction or out of date.” With so little else in the environment to provide her with the needed ‘brain activity’, she looked to higher education as a means of finding it. Similarly, Justin said, “I like to learn. I like new challenging stuff, mentally, you know what I mean? And unfortunately, it's very boring in prison. So, anything to keep my mind occupied on something else was cool.” Thus, having the opportunity to participate in higher education was very important for some participants, as it

provided them an opportunity for intellectual curiosity and thoughtfulness that they were unable to find in other places in the prison setting. Indeed, it gave them a brief reprieve from the mindless activities of watching television or participating in gossip, and instead allowed them to do something constructive with their time, whether or not they would receive a degree or be released from prison.

Work/Court Case

While motivations in the previous theme reflected the joy inherent in the process of higher education in prison for some participants, other participants (N = 5) had very specific, tangible goals that encouraged them to pursue college in prison. For these participants, higher education was a means to obtain a certain job upon release (N = 3; 2 women, 1 man) or to assist them with their current legal case (N = 2 men)—both goals that would help them in their current or very near circumstances.

Three participants (2 women, 1 man) spoke about pursuing higher education in prison as a way to obtain a better job or a new career post-prison. For Eliza, pursuing higher education in prison was a natural add on to her culinary vocational education:

Just prior to reading that flyer, I contacted a friend that lives at home. Because I was in the culinary arts class, I had decided to become a research and development chef: somebody that creates recipes/ works in a test kitchen. I didn't want to do the whole— I used to waitress. I know how busy they are in restaurants. I did not want to work that hard. So I asked my friend Tina and I said, “hey, will you research what's required to become a research and development chef?” There was no real strict criteria, but it said some chemistry and some math would be useful. So I thought, all right, with the culinary arts vocation and if I could get a math and chemistry class by the time I get out of here, I'm good to go. So that was my original thought, to get the math and the chemistry.

Eliza felt that through obtaining a higher level of education she would be able to pursue a career she would enjoy, but in a less physically demanding and exhausting capacity than what she had done in the past. Specifically, she wanted to avoid a demanding but low-paying job. Thus, her

desire to pursue higher education while incarcerated was to position herself in such a way as to improve her ability to obtain a more comfortable career path. However, for Eliza, it was not simply just a cushier job she hoped to obtain, but she needed to find a new career, as her old career was tied to the charges for which she was serving time:

I knew I had to be something else, you know? Twenty-five years in the travel industry, I was already 50 at the time, and there was nothing in my sentence that said I couldn't continue to be a travel agent, but I owe a boatload of restitution. And it would be a PR nightmare, you know, if I were trying to sell trips again. To be quite honest, in that 25 years, and now it's like 33, how things are done in the travel industry is completely different. I didn't enjoy it anymore.

Shannon also spoke of the desire to obtain a less physically demanding, more lucrative job: “I didn't want to be a janitor or a groundskeeper. I wanted to have a decent life, a good life, go back to school, make something of myself.” This drive to find a new job or career was important, as formerly incarcerated individuals in the study had experienced the types of jobs for which they were already qualified, and they wanted to pursue new opportunities, which required a higher level of education.

Beyond improving future job opportunities, two male participants spoke of their desire to work on their current circumstances, in the form of working on the case they were currently fighting. Miguel hoped that his participation in higher education in prison would lead to “some type of legal remedy in the future.” Similarly, Walter hoped that his participation in school would help him “become a little more knowledgeable about the law, because I wanted to work on my own case.” He went on to explain,

[Prison had], I considered it a derogatory term, but they call them ‘legal beagles.’ Jailhouse lawyers. I was familiar with quite a few well-known ones, and they were telling me, “We'll help you, but you're going to have to help yourself.” So, I started hanging ‘round with them. Learning a little bit more about how to file briefs and whatnot. And I just decided, well, maybe if I just go get a degree in this, I'll learn what I need to know.

Whether the desire was to work on one's case or improve their job prospects in the future, motivation to pursue college in prison was tied to a tangible goal of improving their current or very near life circumstances.

Change Life

A number of participants voiced motivations for participating in higher education in prison that were part of an overarching goal of changing their lives or securing a new sense of success that had previously escaped them. Overall, 13 participants voiced motivations that fell into this theme. Both men and women discussed motivations of this type, although men were slightly more likely to discuss motivations of this nature (50% of men vs. 30% of women).

Several participants noted that their desire for higher education was part of a desire to contribute to the world at large upon release from prison. For instance, Megan said, "I was just eager to maybe even be part of the world, and I had no idea if or when I would get out, but if I did get out, I wanted to be able to build something for myself." Jeremy echoed a similar sentiment, stating that he:

wanted to understand the world, the world that I wasn't a part of yet, nor had had the chance [to be] because I was pretty much arrested when I was 17. So I've never really been an adult... I just started looking for a foundation, you know, like a trade and found it.

This desire to be part of the world, one that they felt they were not part of while incarcerated, was strong. For many participants, the chance to participate in higher education was a way to open doors to future opportunities. As Shannon stated, "I was just so excited for the opportunity. I just thought if I could get into school and start doing well in school that it would open so many doors for me." For Connor, the need and desire to open doors was even stronger, because his incarceration had eliminated the future he had originally seen for himself:

Of course, getting locked up, I got discharged out of the military, and that was a huge thing for me because it was the only thing I wanted to do. So I got to this

point where I have to do something. My life's not over, but what do I do? Education was kind of that doorway for me to be able to say, "Okay, well, this is what I'm interested in. This is what I can do with my life. I have to rebuild a brand-new life for myself because the one that I originally planned to have is completely gone and I can't go back to it." College seemed like the way to [do that].

Thus, Connor's drive to participate in higher education in prison revolved around opening doors to new opportunities to do something with his life to replace the old goals he had but was no longer able to pursue.

Along these lines, others voiced a desire to make progress in their lives. According to Taylor, "I was at that point where I did want to start making progress, and stop being stagnant, so I was in a positive mindset." She felt ready to pursue higher education in prison once she got to a positive place and felt truly ready to move forward in life. For Connor, on the other hand, making progress was more about keeping up with those on the outside and not feeling left behind, although he also recognized his current status with a criminal record:

Of course, I still have friends outside of jail that I had grown up with that were still moving forward with their lives. I had a few friends that were graduating from their bachelor's, working on their master's. I had friends that went to law school, and it's like, "I'm stuck here, not being able to do anything with my life. I want to move forward, but I'm not getting this opportunity." When I heard about the college program, I thought, "Well, this is it. This is the way I can move forward in my life, make it to where... I'm a convicted felon now, so I've got that against me. I've got to do everything in my power to be able to overcome these barriers and still build a fulfilling life for myself." When I heard about the college program, I thought, "That's the best way to start."

Other participants voiced this desire, too. For Jimmie, "[school] was the only way to really change the trajectory of my life." David also felt the need to change his life, stating: "I went to prison at a very young age, and I felt like I needed to change some things in my life, and I needed to pursue education. As a means to just become educated, become a better person." He did not want to allow the things he had done at a young age dictate the rest of his life, and education was one way to begin making those changes.

Three male participants voiced a specific desire to be successful and noted that as a primary reason for attending college courses in prisons. Participants particularly spoke of the desire to be successful to overcome their criminal history. Connor said:

Especially with being a convicted felon and being brought into the criminal justice system, it wasn't something that I ever thought would happen in life... For me, it was just something that, "I've got to overcome this negative part in my life. I've got to find a way to make things better, not only just for myself, but for my family and for people around me and just to overcome what I did."

For Darius, the desire for success was particularly important in his post-incarceration plans. For him, participating in higher education in prison was about:

simply wanting to be ready to hit the ground running when I came home. That was my motivation, to give myself the best chance at having a healthy transition post incarceration... My idea was to come home and be ready to take advantage of whatever opportunities that I could create for myself.

Carlos elaborated on this notion, speaking directly to the link between education and recidivism:

I feel like a lot of times, the lack of education is a huge factor in recidivism, so I really felt it was vital. It was very important for my success and coming out, especially being in so long, lacking so many life skills, which definitely made it very hard to kind of reintegrate back into society. So even though it started off kind of as a means to, to better my environment, being in it and really seeing the value in that education that [University] was offering it quickly changed the way I viewed the education they were giving us, and felt very fortunate to be a part of it.

Carlos' observation of the lack of education being a factor in recidivism is reinforced by statistics. As we know, participation in any college education is associated with a decrease in future criminal behavior (Davis et al., 2013; Karpowitz & Kenner, 2003; Pompoco et al., 2017). Thus, the importance of getting an education in prison was not lost on Carlos, and despite his initial reasons for participating in school, he also recognized the importance of participating because of the impact it would have on his future likelihood of success, both in life generally and on parole.

Self-Improvement

The final theme for motivations for pursuing higher education in prison centered around a desire for self-improvement. Almost half of the participants (N = 13) discussed a desire to achieve a degree of self-improvement: to better themselves, to attain a sense of accomplishment, to prove something to themselves or others, and to find themselves.

Almost one-fourth of participants (N = 3 women, 4 men) voiced a desire to better themselves while incarcerated, and participation in higher education was one way in which they were able to work toward that goal. William said,

I decided I want to walk out of prison a better person than when I came... I wanted to right away start rehabilitating myself to become a better person. So, I looked for opportunities that I wanted to do. One of the first opportunities I found was college.

Similarly, Taylor noted, "I wanted to change... I wanted to grow from my experiences. I didn't want to be another statistic, like being incarcerated and not really doing anything with myself."

David elaborated on this notion as well:

I went to prison with a different mindset. I wasn't really trying to get an education. But the more time I spent in prison, and the more I realized that I needed to do something with my life, and not only that I went to prison at a very young age. I felt like I was going to miss out on a lot of experiences that was going to help me grow as an individual. So, I felt like education could be a tool for me to sort of become more mature and grow and have some knowledge about the world and how it works, you know. So that was my mentality. I was very excited about taking college classes.

Interestingly, David did not have higher education in his sights initially, but it was through his incarceration experience that he realized there was a need for him to become more mature and grow from his experience. As with Taylor, David wanted to find a way to learn from his experience, especially being so young when he had been incarcerated.

Along these lines, several participants noted that they hoped to achieve a sense of accomplishment or prove something to themselves or others by participating in college in prison.

For Tyrone, concern over keeping up with peers outside of prison was a powerful motivator, particularly because he felt a sense of accomplishment in being able to do so from prison:

I entered the college program. And I was kind of proud of myself because I was still on track with my peers in the street. I'm like, "okay, they would be doing this right now. They will be in a second year," so I graduated right around the time that my classmates were graduating in the streets. So that was very important to me. And then I went to [University] who were offering courses to continue towards a Bachelor's after you graduated with your Associate's. And I felt a sense of achievement and accomplishment by being in these courses, by being right around the same timeframe as my classmates in the streets. So, I really enjoyed college.

Scott noted similar motivations for participating in higher education in prison, although his aim was to prove that he was as smart as other guys in prison that he saw participating in college courses:

I guess it was my ego man, because there was a guy who's taking classes and I said, "man, I'm smarter than that motherf*cker, man. He don't know what the hell he's talking about." It was stuff like that. This guy's around going to college [saying] "yeah, I'm studying this," and I knew he was paying some dude to do his work for him. And I was like, "he was a fucking fraud, man. I'm going to college, watch, I'm gonna go do this."

The desire to prove he was smarter than another incarcerated individual was a strong motivator for Scott, who entered the college program to prove something to himself. However, as noted earlier, once Scott was involved in the process, he found he truly enjoyed it.

In contrast, some found that higher education was a way in which they could prove something to *themselves*. Tyrone said: I was completely embarrassed by everything I've done so far in my life... So my primary thing with me was like, "You're not a total failure Tyrone, you can achieve on certain levels even in the midst of all this madness." And that was just to prove to yourself that you weren't a total failure." Similarly, Anthony said that he engaged in postsecondary classes because he was "trying to see something else other than criminality. I knew what was there... My motivation for even attempting to kind of start a college class is [to]

see whether I was capable of actually completing one. It was a challenge, essentially.” This sense of wanting to challenge oneself, to prove something to oneself or feel a sense of accomplishment, was a strong motivator for a number of participants.

Finally, two participants voiced a desire to find themselves and used higher education in prison as a way to do so. Prior to prison, Heather was in an abusive relationship that she credited as the reason for ending up in prison. Once she was incarcerated and away from the relationship “I was able to find my motivation and reignite who I was, instead of being told who I was and how to act and what to say. It was just re-finding myself. Like, oh yeah, I do like school. Wow, I am good at this. You know? I'm good at that. It was just really re-finding myself.” For Ben, too, participating in higher education in prison was a way to find himself and explore who he was without being under the influence of substances:

I was pretty self-motivated at that time. I was kind of high on life and applying myself in all these new ways and really reinventing myself. I was a really big pothead before I went to prison, and not that that's a horrible thing, but it was for me because I was smoking like 10 grams a day. So when I went to prison, I quit smoking weed for the first time since I was 15-years-old, so I was like 22, and my mind is just getting clear. I felt like I had a superpower. It was unreal. I was like, “I can think and articulate and speak...” I liked actually applying myself instead of just letting life happen to me, like I had for so long.

Ultimately, going to prison allowed Ben to achieve a clear head for the first time in a long time, and the ability to participate in higher education allowed him to truly apply himself for the first time, as well as focus on finding and reinventing himself. For each of the participants here, higher education allowed them to pursue important goals, including changing their lives for the better and improving themselves.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the motivations for pursuing postsecondary education in prison for formerly incarcerated men and women. I situated these findings within

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as adapted to the prison setting (Arditti, 2005) and prison programs (Brosens, 2013). Unsurprisingly, the majority of individual motivations for pursuing higher education in prison were located in the micro system; in other words, most motivations were derived from the individual, with a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations present. Participants voiced a desire to continue school after initial success or out of a joy of learning, obtain better employment opportunities, work on their legal cases, change their lives, and improve themselves.

However, it is also important to highlight the role of the meso system, or the relationships incarcerated individuals have with those with whom they have direct contact while incarcerated: correctional and university staff and/or faculty, other incarcerated individuals, and non-incarcerated family and friends. Although the majority of motivations were found to lie at these levels, both the exo system and the macro system remain relevant. Specifically, incarcerated individuals participate in higher education in prison at times to cope with the physical environment of the prison, and a number of incarcerated individuals previously wanted to participate in higher education but encountered a barrier in doing so when they went to prison. For those individuals, having the opportunity to participate in college in prison allowed them to pursue goals they held prior to arriving in prison. In these cases, individuals were able to make good use of their time in prison and work toward achieving their goals, rather than feeling as though they were wasting years of their lives while incarcerated. The next chapter elaborates on the barriers incarcerated individuals face in successfully participating in or completing higher education in prison.

CHAPTER 5: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATING IN HEP

For both men and women, barriers to participating in, and successfully completing, college courses in prison emerged in five related themes: prison logistics, lack of resources, institutional personnel, other people in prison, and the reality of the prison environment. However, within these themes, there are both similarities and important, notable differences in how these barriers manifest. While in the previous chapter, motivations for participating in higher education in prison were mainly located at the micro level, the barriers to participation in college in prison are mainly present at the exo level, with (unsurprisingly) very few barriers present at the micro level.

The Macro Level

The macro level refers to national policies and regulations. For the purposes of this chapter, this mainly refers to the Second Chance Pell program and FAFSA regulations, which address access to programs in two different ways. First, the Second Chance Pell pilot program increased the number of colleges providing education to incarcerated individuals. Prior, individuals were commonly limited to volunteer classes or correspondence courses. Second, the changes made to FAFSA regulations/policies increased the ability of incarcerated individuals to access these courses because many incarcerated people qualify for such aid based on income.

Finances

To begin, a discussion of barriers to participating in college in prison must include a brief mention of potential barriers to financing one's college education in prison. The majority of participants (N = 19) stated that there were no difficulties in financing their education. This is because most participants received financial aid through Second Chance Pell or other scholarship and grant opportunities that allowed them to pursue college in prison with no financial barriers,

they participated in higher education programs that received outside government funding, or worked with private donors to finance the education of individual incarcerated students.

However, a few participants discussed difficulties in financing their higher education while in prison prior to the changes to Pell Grant and federal financial aid funds. Specifically, four participants (N = 2 men, 2 women) noted that at one point or another, finances prohibited their participation in college courses. In regard to participating in college classes in prison, Tyrone's only "negative experience was just when the funding stopped, and I wasn't able to continue towards my bachelor's degree... [It] was really heartbreaking that I couldn't continue my own college career because of funding." Joseph similarly noted that his educational pursuits were put on hold because of finances, stating: "In [my state], they didn't have college [in prison]. You either have college by paying for it through corresponding courses, or if you had money, you could do it through family." Jenna faced even more difficulty, as access to any college was especially difficult from her prison:

...so many colleges anymore aren't even doing correspondence courses. And [in the prison I was in], we don't have internet so I can't do online classes. So even if I had wanted and been able to take college courses somewhere, that wasn't a choice.

Even for participants who did have the option to participate in face-to-face college courses in prison, however, finances were still an obstacle to overcome prior to changes to federal financial aid policy. Mary explained, "When they very first offered classes from [College], it [was] \$700 a credit hour. So, a three-credit class... I didn't even ask my family for help, but when they put the Pell Grant back on the table, I immediately jumped [on] it." Thus, not only was access to college limited due to changes in federal financial aid for incarcerated students in the 1990s and changes to the way in which distance learning is handled by many

colleges, but financial obstacles were present even for those who did find a way to participate in college from prison.

Whether or not finances were a barrier at some point in participants' educational journeys, they all found a way to eventually participate in college courses from prison. However, even after overcoming that initial obstacle, participants next had to contend with a variety of barriers to successful completion of college courses at the other levels of the ecological system. This included logistical constraints of the prison, lack of resources, unsupportive and ever-changing prison staff and/or administration, as well as the harsh realities of the prison environment.

The Exo Level

The exo level here refers to the institutional policies and practices that guide a prison. Several themes were identified that fit fully into the exo level of the ecological systems model. Specifically, prison logistics and lack of resources were grouped entirely under this level. Additionally, some of the repeating ideas from the Institutional Personnel and Realities of Prison Life themes fell under the exo level of the ecological model, although these overlapped with the meso and micro levels of the ecological model, respectively.

Prison Logistics

The first theme that emerged among barriers to participating in and completing college courses in prison that fell into the exo level was that of prison logistics. Fully two-thirds of the sample (N = 20; 7 women, 13 men) noted concerns in this area. Specifically, the rules and regulations put into place by the prison to govern the course of a typical day (e.g., scheduling processes, counts, staffing of rooms, etc.) negatively impacted incarcerated men and women's

ability to participate in college courses in prison. Additionally, incarcerated individuals noted difficulties in accessing classes and regarding lack of support from professors or student peers.

According to Jenna, navigating the various challenges of participating in college courses in prison “can just be a logistical challenge.” Incarcerated students must contend with the rigid schedule of the prison, unexpected lockdowns, understaffing, and prison regulations restricting college participation due to offense characteristics, security level, or time left on one’s sentence. Disruptions to daily life are common in the prison environment. Most notably, lockdowns created difficulty in consistently participating in college courses. According to Troy, “the prison might be locked down and the teachers can't come in, which has happened.” The uncertainty surrounding lockdowns was particularly challenging to manage. Darius stated:

You never know how long those lockdowns are gonna last. So, a lockdown in [State] Department of Corrections is when they shut all normal operation down, that means all programs cease. And, you know, that could last a couple of days to a couple of months, and sometimes longer. I've seen lockdowns go nearly a year. So yeah, those are sort of institutional realities.

Lockdowns pose a complicated barrier to college courses due to the surprising and uncertain nature of them, and even the professors coming into the prison for college courses have no control over them, much less incarcerated students.

Even when the day ran smoothly without unexpected lockdowns, participants noted challenges in getting to their classes due to limited staffing. Eliza recalled recurring challenges to getting a correctional officer to open the building in which her class took place:

...nobody ever opened the school. It would be snowing and they'd make us stand outside and sometimes it'd take a half an hour or an hour. For some reason they didn't put that on the list of places they needed to assign an officer and have that building open. It happened every week, all but like two weeks.

Staffing challenges were present in more ways than one. While it was frustrating that correctional officers (COs) would consistently leave the students out in the cold or take their

time in unlocking buildings or classrooms, it was even more frustrating for some students to have facilities within the prison complex that would help them with school, but not have access to those facilities due to prison staffing shortages. When Heather was incarcerated, she said the prison had “a computer lab [but] unless you have a staff person in that computer lab, with cameras, you are not allowed to use it. The last place to be staffed is that building [with] the computer lab.” As will be discussed shortly, many incarcerated students did not even have access to computers to complete their coursework, so having a computer facility in the prison, but not having adequate staff or choosing not to prioritize staffing to take advantage of the facility, was particularly frustrating.

On their face, correspondence courses seem like an optimal way for incarcerated individuals to pursue college education from prison with minimal disruptions to the prison environment. Indeed, correspondence courses have traditionally been a way for incarcerated individuals to access college courses. However, as noted by Richard, it could be very challenging to get prison officials to agree to facilitate these courses:

Richard: People wanted to take degrees all the time for mail in or correspondence courses. That was shot down 99% of the time.

Interviewer: Really?

Richard: Because you had to have a staff member facilitate for you and receive your materials and proctor exams and submit activities. There just wasn't an appetite for that.

In Richard's experience, it was tough to even get cooperation from prison officials to participate in correspondence courses due to the logistical issues it posed. However, even when participants were able to participate, the mailroom caused a new type of frustration. As Miguel explained, “the mailroom is horrible, especially if you did the correspondence courses.” For correspondence courses, incarcerated students rely on the mailroom to both send out work and receive feedback

from professors. When the mailroom was backed up, it was challenging because, as Miguel went on to explain, “you have X amount of time within which you got to complete the whole course. [They] usually give you about eight months, depending on the school. And the mailroom sometimes will be backed up a month, or over a month.” These delays in mailroom processing would then put students behind in finishing their courses, causing further delays in completing coursework.

William elaborated on another related problem with using correspondence courses as a main delivery mode of college courses, namely, that the work one does “just disappears.” He continued:

Being in correspondence, you can't make copies of any of your homework. You have to put it through the mail. And so, you did all this work, and the teacher would write back, in the middle of the progress report, "Oh, I never received any of your homework, so I dropped you." Or, "You're missing assignments, and so you're getting a B."

Students then could not prove they had done their work, and even if the work was received by professors, they may never get their work back after sending it out to be assessed. This, in turn, created problems later for students who were taking courses consistently. As William explained, “let's say you're taking a class, and let's say it's accounting one. And you need to take accounting two and three. Well, that's building a foundation for these other classes that you would need your homework for a resource material.” But without being able to get work back from professors after assessment in a timely fashion, or at all, continuity in learning through correspondence courses became difficult.

Eligibility criteria established by the prison determining who was able to participate in college courses also caused difficulty for several participants. Specifically, participants' time remaining on their sentence, security level, and offense, all factors over which incarcerated students have no control or capacity to change, could impact whether or not individuals were

eligible to participate in college courses in prison. Eliza recalled an exchange with an incarcerated worker in her prison's education program:

She says, "Oh, I was about to tell you. You don't qualify... you have to have at least two years left to be able to qualify for the program" and I was like, "I don't have any recommendations. I have nothing to do."

Eliza then asked the incarcerated worker to "play dumb" and submit her paperwork anyway to see what would happen, and to her surprise, she was accepted into the program. Had Eliza or the incarcerated worker abided by the stated eligibility requirements and not submitted her application, she would have had no way to know that the eligibility criteria were flexible, and she would have missed her opportunity to participate.

Another potential barrier to participation included one's security level within the prison, as some prison policies bar individuals with higher security levels from participating in these types of programs. For example, Darius explained that a major barrier for him was, "my security level in the prison. If your security level was too high, that tended to determine your access to certain educational programs. If it was too high, you may not even be able to take some academic programs." Security level was only one eligibility factor of which Darius was aware. Certain offenses also prohibited incarcerated individuals from participating in college classes. While Darius did not personally face this challenge, he observed: "There are also, in some cases, challenges in regards to your offense... [for] some offenses, like sex offenses, they will put a certain restriction on that." Thus, prison regulations and restrictions for things like the time remaining on one's sentence, security level, and offense characteristics were additional barriers that must be overcome if one is to participate in higher education in prison.

Another logistical challenge participants noted was that of conflicts in the daily schedule for incarcerated individuals. These conflicts took several forms. For David, the main challenge was attempting to both work and attend college classes while incarcerated. According to David,

They didn't want us to take classes because we were workers. It's either work or school, you have to choose the scene. We were a group of students, and I advocated for having classes in the evening, and we talked to the schools, and we tell them, "Look, we work during the day, we don't want to quit our jobs, and we don't want to choose between school and our jobs. So can you please maybe be more flexible, maybe provide the classes in the evening?" So that they did that; that was really helpful for a lot of us.

Indeed, many prisons force incarcerated individuals to choose to either work or participate in school. David was fortunate in that the university was flexible enough to adjust the class schedule and the prison acquiesced to the request. However, this is not the reality for most incarcerated individuals wishing to both work and go to school in prison.

Another challenge over which incarcerated students had no control was being assigned to be in multiple locations at once (for example, assignments to both a classroom and medical appointment at the same time) and trying to avoid getting into trouble for not being where they were supposed to be. This proved difficult, as many had no real understanding of which call outs to prioritize. According to Mary,

They would just assign you sometimes to be like four different places at the same time... in theory, you're not supposed to pick and choose – you're supposed to be at all of these places... And sometimes you get in trouble for not being able to be all places at the same time and usually, if you had to give up something it would be the class, which sucks because, in our opinion, that was the most important thing we had going.

Avoiding getting into trouble for being out of place was important, but seemingly unavoidable at times. Abiding by the schedule and being where one is assigned to be is crucial to maintaining order security in prison. In prison, "everything is on schedule," Patrick said. Particularly challenging to contend with is the visitation schedule, as that takes priority for many incarcerated individuals. According to Patrick:

There are some people who would get visits with their families. Visits were on a certain timetable on certain days and stuff and then if you have college classes, you know, a lot of times people are going to choose your family obviously,

especially in an environment to see them as much as you can see them and they would choose them and miss out on school.

As can be seen here, logistical complications due to prison policies and regulations were a substantial barrier to participating in HEP, even for students who did successfully complete college classes in prison. The logistical challenges, including disruptions in daily life in prison, staffing shortages, mailroom delays, eligibility criteria, and schedule conflicts present a substantial barrier with which all incarcerated students must contend.

These logistical challenges were not the only barriers at the exo level to fall under this theme, however. Participants in this study also noted that there was a significant lack of access to courses, professors, and peer support in prison due to the regulations and policies of the prison. Regarding accessing college courses, both men and women noted difficulties. For incarcerated men, so many wanted to participate in college courses at their institutions, but classes were typically capped at around 20 students. This led to competition among students. As Phil noted, “the competition was so high.” Jimmie explained how this was problematic for him, as he wanted to finish his degree while incarcerated: “Certain classes would fill up fast, classes that people need. And with the time constraint that I was under—I was trying to graduate before I got out—I needed certain classes. I needed to be on these lists.” Similarly, Richard noted the irony that existed in offering college courses, but in such a small quantity, stating, “If guys want to get better, guys should be given the opportunity to get better. It shouldn't be a popularity contest. There should be enough slots for everybody.”

For women, even getting college courses to be offered in their prisons in the first place was difficult. According to Taylor, an advocate for college courses at her institution:

In the beginning, we didn't really have access to college. There was a couple of us that wanted to continue our education, and there was just nothing really coming over. We'd get like one college class here or there, which we were super grateful for, but we wanted it to be consistent.

Taylor continued, noting the lack of autonomy women faced in her prison when it came to choosing their college courses: “[They] enrolled us in our classes, and so we didn't really have much of a say if we wanted to do this class as opposed to this class.” Strained by the limited course offerings within women’s prisons, this resulted in very large classes for female participants. Megan explained,

Megan: As much as I was excited everyone was going to school, it's a little bit too full.

Interviewer: How big were those classes, when you noticed they started to get to be too much?

Megan: Probably 30, 35... There were two classrooms, and we separated the walls and filled the whole thing. It was more than even high school students.

Interviewer: That is quite a big class.

Megan: Yeah, 35 is a lot. A lot. People sitting on the ground. I should have been really, really happy that it was so many people interested in school, but it needed to be smaller so they could get the learning.

Based on Megan’s observations, there was clearly a demand for more college courses in women’s prisons, but at the time, limited opportunities to actually participate, creating more barriers for incarcerated women who wanted to pursue higher education while incarcerated. However, this is not unusual for incarcerated women, given that all types of programming tend to be offered more consistently and expansively in men’s prisons.

A final barrier due to prison logistics was the limited academic support to which they had access while in prison, specifically in regard to accessing the professor and peer support. Both men and women noted that lack of access to the professor outside of class time was a particularly difficult barrier to navigate. Unlike outside of prison, where students have easy access to email and can attend office hours or schedule meetings with instructors to receive additional help, incarcerated students’ only access to their professors was during class time. As Megan explained,

“We had them when they were in class, and that was it. So that was tricky... because communicating with the professors, I don't think that can be solved because we're not allowed to have phones and internet and things like that.” According to David, “there's a lot of issues with the feedback. So when you have the classes during the week, the professor will leave and sometimes you struggle a little bit with certain subjects and you have questions for professors. So they're not going to be able to answer those questions.” This problem was especially magnified for those taking correspondence courses from prison. This was particularly frustrating for William:

If you have a question about one of the assignments or something, by the time you get feedback or if you get feedback, by that time it's already done. It's over. It's passed. So, they give you a textbook. And if you don't get it, you don't get it.

Outside of prison, if students do not want to approach the professor for clarity or assistance, they may initially reach out to classmates for assistance, either to study or to get help in understanding a topic. However, two women noted that, at least in the prisons they were housed in, this was not a possibility. Megan lamented:

We couldn't ever do group projects or study together because we were spread out. Our housing units were spread out over the campus, and we couldn't get together. Only for the actual classes, but not study groups or anything. So sometimes we would ask questions to each other through a fence or do what we could, or write notes to each other, which was against the rules, no matter what the note was about. You weren't allowed to write each other, and we would have to send these secret notes to each other so we could help each other out.

Thus, incarcerated students were risking receiving misconduct tickets in order to get assistance on college work because additional assistance from a professor, teaching assistant, or study group was unavailable. Megan was quick to offer a solution, though, noting the necessity of having more academic support in some capacity:

I think because we don't have access to the professors, that should be more of a reason for us to be able to gather together. Sometimes we were able to do that.

Sometimes, but they always thought there was something nefarious going on, like we were meeting for other reasons.

Given the limited access to professors, due to the logistics regarding phone and internet access in prison, it would make sense to allow students more opportunities to work and study together. However, as elucidated above by Megan, prisons made even this type of collaboration and support challenging. This resulted in a significant barrier for a number of participants in the study.

A related category of barriers is the lack of resources available to incarcerated students to successfully complete their college coursework. While related to the logistical constraints of the prison, these barriers differ slightly from the ones discussed in this section because they are concerned with how the rules and regulations of the prison restrict the resources to which incarcerated individuals have access. It is these barriers with which the next section is concerned.

Lack of Resources

The lack of resources, including materials and supplies needed to complete coursework, and lack of (access to) technology, were noted by about half of the participants (N = 15; 6 women, 9 men) as a barrier to successfully completing college coursework, though women were slightly more likely to note these concerns. It is important to note that these resources were unavailable or lacking generally due to strict prison regulations purported to maintain the security and control of the prison. However, as this section illustrates, these regulations and restrictions can make it quite difficult for incarcerated students to work to their fullest abilities.

Participants noted the difficulties in dealing with prison regulations from the moment college instructors arrived at the prison. According to Meredith, the prison “made it very difficult for the instructors to come in and bring our supplies.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, prisons restricted the types of materials instructors were able to bring into the prison, and these regulations

restricted the types of courses in which incarcerated students could participate or how effectively instructors were able to teach their courses, at times having to resort to now-antiquated technologies. Scott explained, “[In] science courses you couldn’t do lab work, or they limited what you could take into the prison. The professors giving presentations had these antiquated transparency slides for overhead projectors. They couldn’t bring their laptops in and do this, do that.”

While instructors are often creative and figure out other ways to effectively teach students in prison, incarcerated students must navigate the challenge of trying to do coursework without the necessary materials. Participants particularly spoke of the lack of research materials (i.e., books, reference materials, internet search capabilities) as a challenging barrier to completing college coursework. Regarding textbooks, Meredith explained:

It wasn't really the school that was negative, it was the situation of getting our supplies. Having the books and material was always an issue. We'd start the semester and we might be three or four weeks into it before we got our materials... A lot of times, the instructors would have to just photocopy the books and bring in the sheets of paper, so the supplies was an issue all the way ‘til the end, what the prison would allow in.

Difficulty with getting appropriate materials was not limited to course textbooks. It was also a challenge for incarcerated students, who generally have minimal, if any, access to the internet, to find relevant and timely information to complete research papers and other assignments. Eliza said, “There weren't enough reference books, textbook type reference books to look up stuff.”. For Justin, it was the out-of-date materials that were a challenge: “We'd have to go to the library [to research] and the library was limited... So, it was more of that stuff, like the supporting tools were outdated.” David noted that the time restrictions incarcerated students face were yet another challenge in doing research for course assignments:

There were also times when you didn't have enough time for research. So if you had to do a paper, you have to figure it out how to find research. I mean, we don't

have access to [the] library, to computer libraries, things like that, so you had to go to the library and find books and articles that were very old and didn't provide a lot of insight into certain topics. So doing research was definitely difficult to do like that.

This problem of limited research materials is common, and some prison education programs have developed strategies to overcome this challenge. Ben described the process that was available to him:

Doing research papers sucked because you can't do your own research. So, you would have to fill out a slip and send it to the College Library and then whatever that library chose to find for you, off Google or whatever, and send to you, that was the research that you had to use. So I guess the hardest part would have been like if you wanted to write a really good research paper or finding the information and the resources to do that with.

Some incarcerated students who had the means to do so attempted to navigate this challenge by ordering outside research materials to be delivered to them in prison. However, this posed additional challenges related to slow processing times from the prison mail room. Eliza explained:

I was gonna write about Cuba on this [assignment]... So I said I'm gonna need a book, just an overall book about Cuba. And I didn't really know where we were going with the class. I had to pick it, it's going to be about Cuba and [my mom] sent me a book right away that day. And it takes sometimes like one or two months to get something. One time it took seven months to get a book my mom sent.

Despite mailroom processing times, having research materials purchased by family outside of prison seems like a good strategy for navigating this challenge on its face. However, incarcerated students often also have to deal with stringent prison regulations on what they can have in their cell, including a limited number of books, which particularly impacts incarcerated students. Megan recalled how difficult it was to balance effectively completing schoolwork with compliance with prison rules to avoid a misconduct ticket. She explained,

We were allowed 15 books in our cells. That would include even if you were borrowing five books from the library. We had a lot of books as students. They

would take them away or give us a write-up or something, which would be difficult if you got too many of those. Then you would have your privilege time taken away. That privilege time is the only time you go to college. So you were getting in trouble for having too many books.

As illustrated by Megan's statement, incarcerated students were essentially being punished for doing their best to succeed in school. Ironically, by attempting to be good students, they were putting themselves at more risk of getting in trouble and receiving a misconduct ticket. While many prison regulations logically make prison safer, restricting the number of books incarcerated students could have, including books brought in by professors, borrowed from the library, or sent directly from secure sources to incarcerated students, seemed nonsensical to many.

Although difficulties with research materials was one of the main challenges noted by participants in this study, difficulty procuring the supplies necessary to actually do coursework or make their lives a bit easier was also taxing. Consider that, as Megan previously explained, college students have many books, incarcerated or not. Small conveniences, such as a bag in which to carry one's books, were unavailable in prison. Megan said, "We were asking for bags of some kind to carry these books, and they were just so rude about what we needed, the supplies we needed to perform at our best." Although prisons must maintain the safety and security of the institution, a bag to carry books is not, on its face, a security risk. Many prisons across the country allow staff or visitors and volunteers to carry clear plastic bags with them, if the bags are entirely see-through. While such a solution would have both solved Megan's complaint and allowed the institution to maintain safety, it was not a solution implemented by the prison.

Other necessary supplies, such as pens and pencils, highlighters, and paper, were in high demand but abysmally low supply or carried with them similar restrictions as books. Megan explained, "It was like pulling teeth to get a blasted highlighter, because they thought they were going to use it for tattoos or something." Meredith also noted the administration's refusal to

allow students to have highlighters, although she was a bit more understanding of the prison's side of the issue:

I was like, "Why is highlighters a problem?" And I'll tell you what their response was and it's true, it happens, but anything that's unique inside of the prison is valuable. So you can trade a little 99¢ highlighter for a \$20 item, and there's not supposed to be trading going on.

Prisons also tend to restrict other types of supplies, including pencils. This may not seem like such a challenge initially. However, as Megan explained, "because we didn't have access to the school's library, and we just had to handwrite everything," this was indeed problematic. It would be inconvenient for any student writing a long research paper, but in prison, this pain is amplified because, as Megan went on to explain, there were many regulations "against what kind of pencils we could get, and we had to write all of our papers by hand in pen, because they weren't allowing us to use pencils." As one can imagine, not being able to use computers to type papers, and then not being able to use pencils to handwrite papers, is quite a challenge for any college student.

Further complicating the issue of having to handwrite assignments because of a lack of access to computers is the necessity of paper. As with everything else in prison, the amount of paper to which incarcerated individuals have access at any given time is typically limited. Heather explained, "When you're expected to type your papers and you don't have access to the computer lab, you're screwed. You've got to type, or write them up, and you got to write them up neatly." Jenna elucidated how much of a difficulty this could be for incarcerated students with minimal financial means and/or outside help:

If you can't afford to buy paper and they don't provide you paper, how do you write up your assignments? We don't have computers, we don't have typewriters. I'm having to hand write all of my assignments. Oh, but they want it typed and double-spaced? That's not going to happen.

As these participants have illustrated, research papers and class assignments can be difficult to complete on time, with proper reference material, and these assignments are complicated by the

inability to type papers, instead having to resort to handwriting assignments and re-write for clarity, while simultaneously attempting to conserve resources like paper and minimize mistakes when using pens to write.

A final frustrating barrier to completing coursework in prison was the access, or lack thereof, to technology. As we have already seen, incarcerated students are at a disadvantage due to the inability to access the internet or online databases for research purposes, as well as being unable to type assignments, instead having to resort to handwriting assignments. Justin noted this, stating: “College is really done with a lot of computers, you know? I mean, we didn't have the tools, we didn't have computers and stuff in there.” While this complication is certainly exasperating, it was also frustrating for students who *did* have limited access to technology, yet had to share those resources with other students or navigate other aspects of the technology.

Carlos recalled his experience:

Initially we had some laptops and we had to share them, and so trying to do papers... was really difficult because of the lack of resources. The availability of those resources made it really hard... Though we did end up [with] everybody getting their own laptops and being allowed to take it and keep it in our cell and take it back and forth from class to the housing unit. And then just coming up with a system to order books from the main campus so that we had everything that we needed. It was initially a work in progress, trial and error type of thing, but [the University] worked really hard to just give us everything that we needed.

Carlos' university was well-funded and able to provide its incarcerated students with technology that is unavailable to most students participating in college in prison. However, with technology afforded to incarcerated students, other unanticipated problems would arise at times. Shannon explained how having tablets worked in her program:

We didn't have Wi-Fi. So, in order to get our assignments, to download the videos—we didn't have textbooks. You downloaded everything from [University], and then you had to upload your assignments, and if you wrote your teachers then you had to plug in and constantly sync your tablet [to get their response].

While tablets that could be synced were a good compromise in some ways, Shannon noted that “technology was an issue sometimes with our tablets. And that created social problems because we had to wait in line to get our tablets plugged in and synced.” Thus, an unanticipated consequence of allowing incarcerated students to have access to some form of technology was the social problems it created with the minimal resources available to use that technology, such as having to wait for others to use their tablets.

A final problem with technology was explained by Darius, who had access to some technology, but acknowledged other difficulties many folks in prison have. “Even if you had access to computers, to not be able to operate them intelligently” caused other problems, he explained. Ultimately, many participants reported lack of technology as a barrier to completing coursework, but even when some technology was available to them, other prison regulations restricting its use or one’s own lack of computer fluency complicated matters further.

While participants lamented the challenges that the prison created in restricting necessary supplies and materials for college courses, it should be noted that a surprising number of incarcerated students were sympathetic to the prison’s mission of keeping the environment safe and secure, and they could understand why there were restrictions on the materials they could possess. However, at the same time, participants acknowledged how challenging it was to successfully complete college coursework within those restrictions. About her college in prison experience, Megan noted, “[The] only other negative things were based on the prison's strictness. I get it. They wanted us to be safe, but it was a little bit over the top.” She continued:

It was hard for me to navigate, but I really don't think that a paperclip, which they hand out all the time in classes, or something stapled, is going to go towards a tattoo gun if the inmates that are going to school receiving these items have really good records, not getting in trouble or anything. I believe that they should at least be able to use them while they're at the school, but we couldn't do that or take it home for a long time.

Jeremy similarly acknowledged that the prison had regulations for a reason, and he understood where the administration was coming from. In terms of “security protocols, I guess you could give them that. They knew what would work, what would be taken advantage of, what wouldn't.” Still, however, severe restrictions on what supplies and materials could be used by incarcerated students was a barrier that had to be overcome.

Realities of Prison Life

Overall, almost half of the participants (N = 14; 8 men, 6 women) noted concerns regarding the realities of prison life at the exo level that were barriers to participating in college in prison. Two broad categories emerged in this area: difficulty focusing on schoolwork, particularly because of how noisy prison is; and the threat of violence that is present in men's prisons. Women were more likely than men to report difficulty focusing on schoolwork and the noise of prison as barriers to participating in HEP (55% vs. 25%, respectively). According to Shannon, “It was hard to focus sometimes, when there was all the distractions and drama going on, or fights or gossip or whatnot.” Similarly, Jimmie noted that while the material was not difficult to learn, what proved challenging was “getting rid of distractions... in the prison environment, where I was at, it's one building with 160 guys under this roof. And let's just say it's the NBA Finals, and they're playing on the west coast, and they're up 'til midnight, one, two o'clock in the morning, while they're watching the game, everybody's riled up.

Not only is it difficult to manage the noise of prison in general, but it can also be difficult to get away from others for a time. Unlike outside of prison, where most students can retreat to their room or a study space on campus to be alone and focus on studying, no such opportunities are available in prison. Phil explained, “I guess being in a dorm with 100 other people... some people are just not into respecting people's space and quiet time. If they see you studying, they

don't care." He continued: "So you develop a whole 'nother type of coping mechanism. For me, I can put on headphones and drain the headphones. I will [put on] music, block all the other noise off, and then I can focus on my reading assignment." Phil was not unusual in this regard. Olivia also experienced challenges in getting others to leave her alone so she could focus on schoolwork:

Just because you're sitting there studying, you can have your ear plugs in, someone's still going to come over and ask you a random question to disrupt your focus. It's like, all these other people, you could talk to them but you're here for me. I was on the bottom bunk, so I would put a blanket, like make a tent on my bed. Which I wasn't supposed to do. But it was kind of like my way of letting them know I didn't want to be bothered. And that would only last for about maybe 45 minutes before somebody was there moving the sheet back. "What are you doing? Can you talk?" "No, I'm studying, I don't want to be bothered." So, just finding the quiet to focus [was a challenge].

Mary, too, articulated that, "If you were one of those people who need quiet to study, I just don't even know how you would exist... I lived with seven other people in a room the size of most people's dining room. So that's just loud, and we all got along, but it's not a quiet situation." The reality is that the chaos of the prison environment makes it nearly impossible for incarcerated students to find a quiet space to study and focus on school.

Difficulty focusing on school work was also a challenge for a number of male participants who noted the violence and chaos going on around them in prison, even when they were simply trying to study. For example, Jimmie recalled an instance in which he was reminded of his position as a college student *in* prison:

There's a lot of violence and drama, things like that, that go on just in the prison environment itself. Like people fighting... I can remember, I'm on my bunk, here I am studying management, or accounting or whatever, and then I look over and there's two or three guys with locks beating somebody... It happened numerous times. So, I have on one hand my schoolwork, and on the other hand prison. It's a juxtaposition there, and it's a challenge to try to navigate that.

Tyrone also experienced this conflict of attempting to be a college student in prison. He explained:

...it is very difficult to concentrate, to give that particular book or assignment your undivided attention because you were dealing with real stuff [in] prison. Things that most people can't even fathom. Like someone wanting to have sex with you, or wanting your property, or saying you owe them money, or, you know, just all of the whole gamut of stupidity that goes on in prison. No one cares that you have to have this paper written by Tuesday, you know?

The chaotic nature of prison is unsurprising. However, what is tricky is trying to be a successful college student, while at the same time attempting to navigate the prison culture in such a way as to not become a victim of the violence that is present in prison. Patrick particularly noted that the “politics of the prison, noise, [and] distractions” all made it difficult to focus on one’s school work while incarcerated.

Indeed, men’s prisons are known for being potentially violent, dangerous places in which to live, and the environment is not generally conducive to learning and growth in a traditional sense. Consider Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in education. The need for safety is the second most basic level of needs, only after physiological needs are met. However, incarcerated college students are attempting to learn despite not having a true sense of safety. Five male participants noted that the threat of violence or engagement in “extracurriculars” in prison made it challenging to participate in college in prison. As Patrick alluded to prior, the ‘politics’ of being in prison sometimes divert incarcerated students’ focus from coursework. Troy expounded on this, further explaining:

We also have to be mindful of the politics in prison. It’s political in there. You’re going to be involved in the politics regardless if you’re in prison. But if you’re a little bit more involved in the politics, heavier than other people, this could be difficult because then you’re going to be challenged with facing certain issues that may require your tending to.

Troy's explanation of prison politics is important because, while outside of prison students may have the luxury of being college students first and foremost, in prison, incarcerated college students must always remember where they are and keep in mind what is necessary for survival.

Ben explained:

There's a really big prison mentality where you need to have your faculties on you at all times. Like, you can't ever have both earplugs in because somebody might come and try to sneak you, so you got to have one out, you have to be aware. I never really fell into that because I didn't make enemies... I just wasn't that kind of person, but there were a lot of people that felt like they couldn't fully study or get enmeshed in a silent space because they were afraid of the environment that was around them. Or what could happen if they took that much consciousness away from [the] external and put it into the task at hand.

While Ben noted that he was able to avoid much of the prison politics that some other participants discussed, he observed other incarcerated students struggling more with those issues.

Tyrone further elucidated the juxtaposition of two seemingly competing identities: college student and incarcerated individual, stating:

When you walked out that door you were a prisoner again. So, if you had some type of assignment or homework or reading to do for college experience, you had to try to get it in, in that really hectic environment of prison, and it's not conducive to getting your best results. You try to stay alive in prison. You're trying to maintain who you are. And like I said, I'm being really blunt with you. I was in my teens, but I looked like I was 12. And for the sexual predators in prison, that's not [a] good look. So I had to deal with that and go to school and all the other things that are associated with prison.

Tyrone's experience is important, as it illustrates the complexity of managing two somewhat competing identities while one is incarcerated. Despite wanting to participate in college in prison, Tyrone had to first and foremost focus on his safety, particularly due to his age and appearance when he was first in prison. He summarized his (and many other incarcerated students') situation succinctly: "The prison experience was stronger than the college experience, because [the] prison experience could turn deadly at any time. And we fit the college experience

in where we could. But I was definitely still a prisoner, dealing with everything associated with that.”

Institutional Personnel

About one-third of participants (N = 11) noted challenges with participating in HEP or completing coursework that were associated with personnel within the prison. While most of these interactions were associated with the meso level of the ecological systems model and will be discussed shortly, several aspects were situated at the exo level. Specifically, four participants noted that, at times, COs did not allow them to go to class or administrative changes higher up in prison management negatively impacted their experience of college in prison. Of his interactions with COs, Connor recalled, “Sometimes they’d actively do things to try to stop us, like one class would be canceled, but we’d have two going on and they’d say, ‘College is canceled for the night. They canceled that class.’ We’re like, ‘There’s two other classes.’ ‘No, class is canceled. Turn around and go back.’” Not only would some COs actively try to stop some participants from attending class, but as Eliza recalled, they would blatantly not follow policy. She said:

We would have to eat before we went to class, and some of them would refuse to sign us a pass to what they call “early chow,” because the units get called as a group. And they say “no, you got to eat with the unit.” And policy said if you had a call out—and I showed them the policy—then you’re allowed to go to early chow on your way to that call out. Then they’re like, “then you got to come back,” when you don’t have to come back. But anyway, it was always this big argument. Some of the officers would refuse to let you go to chow.

For both Connor and Eliza, interactions with COs were aggravating and made it seem as though the COs were trying to give them a hard time about going to class. As Connor noted, “That’s definitely the biggest problem, was the cooperation with staff.”

Cooperation from staff, however, was somewhat based on the attitudes of those at the higher levels of administration, at least in the eyes of several male participants. When the overarching administration was less receptive to college courses, institutional personnel tended

to follow suit and make things difficult for incarcerated students. Note David's experience with a change in his prison's administration:

They became really aggressive, I would say, because they started to take a lot of things from us. We were a privileged block, supposedly, because we worked and went to school. So they let us be more free, and they are more flexible with us. But when this administration became more oppressive, they started to just be concerned about things that weren't concerned in the past. Like mechanical pencils—we were able to have mechanical pencils and then he came in and he took mechanical pencils away. He didn't want us to have access to computers. So, he began to change a lot of rules.

Clearly, the prison administration's attitude toward higher education in prison can have a major impact on the rules and attitudes regarding HEP programs.

Carlos' experience with his program was more positive, reflecting a prison administration that was more receptive to working with the education program to help incarcerated students have the tools needed for success. Carlos was still in contact with administrators from his college prison program and was able to explain that in his former prison, "they actually are being allowed for the first time in [the prison's] history to have internet access for the students." Obviously, internet access for incarcerated students is unusual, as earlier portions of this chapter have discussed, but the administration and college personnel were working together to best meet the needs of the students. Carlos continued, "While I was there, they allowed us to get laptops in our cell, which had never before been possible. So they were fighting really hard, and we had a Warden that was just so awesome and working with [the city] to try to make these things happen." Given that prison administration can make or break the college in prison experience for incarcerated students, it is important that they work with college programs providing classes to incarcerated individuals to ensure that students have the necessary resources to succeed.

The Meso Level

For the purposes of this study, the meso level refers to the interpersonal relationships and interactions with those in the participants' immediate environment. Specifically, findings at this level relate to COs and other incarcerated individuals, both students and non-students.

Institutional Personnel

About one-third of participants (N = 11) noted that there were difficulties in working with correctional officers that manifested in ways that made it difficult to participate and successfully complete their college coursework. As with interactions at the exo level, concerns over interactions with institutional personnel at the meso level were reported by significantly more men than women (45% vs. 20%, respectively). However, both male and female participants in this study noted that correctional officers often interacted with incarcerated students in very negative ways, leading participants to believe that COs were jealous of the incarcerated individuals' educational opportunity and had negative attitudes toward the programs and students. Anthony recalled comments he would hear from COs regarding the HEP program in his prison: "One thing you would always hear would be, even with the ones that are cool with it, like, 'Damn, I gotta be an inmate to get a [free] college education.' Like, they kind of hated on it." Similarly, Joseph recalled an interaction with a CO at his prison. He said,

I remember this because other officers were so angry when the population, the residents of the institution, were given the opportunity to go to college for free. And I remember Mr. Brown, telling me like, "I don't think that's fair. Why should you piece of sh*t have a free education while I have to pay [for] my children's education?"

Meredith also observed this attitude from COs who seemed resentful of the opportunity incarcerated students had to get their college education in prison. She explained that "there was actually a lot of resentment from the guards that a lot of [COs] were going to school and they were paying for their education, and so they resented the fact that we were in prison and getting

the so-called free education.” This animosity by COs resulted in hostility toward the incarcerated students. Connor remembered instances when he would be leaving class and,

...one of us wouldn't have our shirt tucked in or we wouldn't be walking in a perfectly straight line. A lieutenant would go, "Tuck your shirt in. You guys are supposed to be effing college students. You're supposed to be smart, but you guys aren't smart enough to walk in a straight line.”

Negative comments like this were unfortunately commonplace, as illustrated by these experiences. As Eliza put it succinctly, there “was a lot of, in my opinion, disrespect about our effort... it was so hard to get the officers to cooperate to help support your effort.”

Miguel explained his interpretation of the officers’ attitude, stating, “You would think this is something that will be promoted, but actually sometimes they see it as extra burden, something more that they have to do. They don't care if it's good or bad. They just don't want to deal with extra work.” This belief that the officers were unsupportive of the HEP programs was not uncommon. In fact, Troy believed that while “the students [were] eager and driven for change, the officers were just as eager and driven to prevent that transformation from happening.” Anthony, too, felt that,

a good portion of the correctional officers, they didn't approve of it. They just would kind of like scoff at the idea that inmates would be able to get college educations. So they weren't supportive and there'd be times where they would attempt to sabotage a class, or be very strict and very rude, even to the professors. And rude to the classmates too because we at the end of the day we were inmates. They were in authority.

A number of incarcerated students noted that COs seemed to target them for misconduct tickets as a means to sabotage them and potentially get them removed from their college courses.

For example, Carlos articulated:

In prison, there's literally a rule for everything. You cannot exist in prison without breaking rules, no matter how hard you try. The system is set up such that, in regards to being totally in line with rules, it's almost impossible. And so, the officers have so much ammunition that they can pick from this plethora of rules

and write you a ticket for anything... They would target us with misconduct tickets, utilizing rules that perhaps other officers never enforced on anybody else.

David also “noticed that some people that were involved in education programs got in trouble for little, small things like that. And they were removed from the program because they were put in isolation, so they couldn't participate.” However, even worse than using insignificant rules that were rarely enforced on others, was when COs would purposefully try “to incite people in order to get them kicked out,” as Carlos observed. He felt that the COs “wanted to see us fail, and so they actively did that. They would sit at the desk and just say things, just out loud that were just very offensive to us. They would say things, ‘all you think you're entitled and all this and that because you're in [College's] program.’” Thus, many COs with whom incarcerated students interacted displayed negative, sometimes antagonistic, attitudes toward the students, creating a highly negative atmosphere.

Given the other difficulties and challenges incarcerated students face in participating in college courses in prison, it is disheartening to also have to deal with negative attitudes from those in authority (i.e., COs). As Carlos explained, “You really felt helpless, because they had a grievance system, but it was a joke. They pretty much could do whatever they wanted, and there was little you could do. And if you attempted to address the issue, then you would become more of a target.” Thus, participating in college in prison could lead to becoming a target of COs' contempt for the program, leaving incarcerated students in an arduous situation to navigate.

While most COs, in the participants' perspective, held negative views of the HEP programs, it is important to note that some participants did identify some supportive COs. For example, Jimmie spoke of how many COs were unsupportive of the education program, but he could recall one specific officer who was supportive of college courses and actually worked to help out the students. Jimmie recalled:

There was a lot of flak, so to speak, from some of the officers. Maybe not all, because there's one, you have one particular officer that worked the school buildings, and she was a regular. She was very supportive. So if we needed supplies or something she would email [the program director], "Hey, we need more stuff down here." And so, she was really helpful. But then others oftentimes weren't... I wouldn't say half and half, it's more like a third are supportive, a third aren't, and the third just don't care.

Thus, despite overwhelming negative experiences with COs overall, there are some supportive institutional personnel, including COs. However, most COs seemed to either actively work against incarcerated students or to be so indifferent as to be detrimental to the students' experience in HEP.

Other Incarcerated Individuals

Interestingly, it is not only the COs or prison administration that cause difficulty in pursuing and completing one's college education in prison. Rather, six participants noted that other incarcerated individuals were at times barriers to successfully participating in or completing college coursework. Specifically, 36 percent (N = 4) of female participants, compared to only 10 percent (N = 2) of male participants, noted that conflict with other incarcerated individuals sometimes negatively impacted their HEP experience.

Megan noted that her college courses were sometimes quite large and included students who were less serious about their education than she was, and it was these other classmates that made it difficult to participate. She explained, "I didn't really like overhearing disrespectful comments about the teacher's outfit... [other incarcerated students] weren't generally, as a whole, as respectful as I feel like they should have been or what I was used to." For Megan, those who did not take the course as seriously as she did negatively impacted her experience, because "you either have to ignore it or you're going to cause a conflict of some kind... You want to be the mouthpiece for [the professor]. But then when school is out and you go back to your housing units, all these people, they never leave." Thus, participating in college courses forced Megan to

bite her tongue, rather than stick up for the professor to other incarcerated students, in order to avoid causing conflict for herself.

For most participants, however, it was not other students who caused conflict, but rather other incarcerated individuals who were not college students. For female participants, these conflicts tended to revolve around resources and materials. For example, Shannon explained how the need to check for emails from professors caused her to be “pretty high strung” at times, “and so there was a little bit of conflict with the other inmates, because they needed to use [the] machines, too.” Similarly, Jenna explained that other “people steal your books, they steal your paper,” and that could cause more conflict among one’s peers as well.

In contrast, the conflict with other incarcerated individuals took a slightly different tone for male participants. Tyrone explained that other incarcerated non-students “definitely didn’t care anything about you trying to go to class, or trying to go to college. That made an even bigger target on your back, because some people say, ‘Oh you think you better than the rest of us.’” This perceived animosity toward incarcerated students was also felt by Joseph, who felt as though his efforts to better himself brought about resentment from other incarcerated individuals. Joseph asserted:

I think the thing for me was just my cell mates pretty much kind of being jealous and envious of me striving forward... I remember when I used to do my classwork, I didn't pay attention to it, but I felt that it was some type of uncomfortableness from other prisoners because I was trying to achieve something, and maybe they couldn't do it. Maybe they wanted to do it, maybe they just felt some type of way because someone was moving forward, and they were still in the same place.

These negative interactions with other incarcerated students and non-students created more complications and challenging situations that incarcerated students must manage. Some COs and other incarcerated non-students alike were perceived as being jealous of participants’ college

experience, and as such, students had to navigate those interactions to successfully participate in HEP programs.

The Micro Level

The micro level of the ecological systems model refers to individual characteristics, including psychological variables. In this study, the main challenge incarcerated students faced at this level was one's personal life stress that must be managed on top of other concerns during incarceration, which fell under the theme of the realities of prison life. Here, we turn to how this theme played out at the individual level of the model.

Realities of Prison Life

Approximately 20 percent (N = 6) of participants noted life stress that made participating in college courses difficult while incarcerated. Of course, all college students, incarcerated or not, face life stress and challenges during the course of their education. However, for incarcerated students, this life stress can be amplified, because they have less control over the situation and minimal autonomy to do anything about many of the problems that can arise.

Darius explained this challenge, stating:

Sticking with all the mental and emotional challenges of being incarcerated—missing your family, hearing difficult news from home, dealing with heartbreak, certain discontent, you know it takes a lot. Not to take anything away from folks who go to school who are not incarcerated, I'm sure that's challenging for everybody, everybody goes through those things, but it's particularly challenging when you are an incarcerated citizen because your freedoms are limited in many important respects.

Rebecca faced a series of challenges similar to those described by Darius, beginning with her father's death while she was incarcerated, followed by her son's hospitalization, and her mother's increasing age and declining health. What made these events manageable for her, however, was the concern her college site director and professor showed her. Rebecca recalled a

specific instance when life stress concerning her mother's situation made her fall behind in coursework:

They always try to go their way to make you comfortable, because they don't want you to drop... Like when my mom had surgery, and I was so stressed out I couldn't do my work, and it was late. My professor gave me an excuse, and I had like two weeks after the semester ended, the last day of school to turn it in. It was lenient on you, but you have to be honest. You can't every week have a late assignment. Usually, they'll be like, "What's wrong? Rebecca didn't turn her assignment in." I'll sync my tablet, and then I read the emails and I email them back. Then they were like, "Okay. It's understandable. We know you guys are under a lot of pressure in there."

Incarcerated students must find ways to manage the illness or death of loved ones and disappointment or discontent just as any other college student, but with the added challenge of limited autonomy to do something about these issues. While life stress is a challenge for all college students, it can be particularly troublesome for those who have minimal control over their situation and minimal ability to change their circumstances.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the barriers or challenges that participants in the study faced in participating in, or successfully completing, college courses in prison. As with motivations, I situated these barriers within Bronfenbrenner's ecological model framework, as adapted to prisons by Arditto (2005) and Brosens (2013). Unsurprisingly, most of the barriers identified by participants in this study were located at the exo level of the ecological systems model, or those that are present within the prison environment because of the policies, regulations, and prison culture created by the former. This is particularly interesting, given that participants' motivations were mainly located within the micro level of the ecological systems model. Given that all participants overcame the barriers to participate in HEP, as is clear by their participation in this study, it is particularly important to note where the barriers they did face arose from, as these are

barriers that most incarcerated folks attempting to participate in higher education in prison probably face as well, regardless of their own personal motivation level for college education.

At the macro level, participants noted that college had been difficult to access or pay for prior to changes to federal financial aid policy. However, once those changes were made, these barriers were no longer present. Rather, most of the remaining barriers were present at the exo level. At the exo level, participants faced a number of challenges that impacted their ability to participate and succeed in college courses. Specifically, incarcerated students face challenges to participating in college education due to prison logistics and lack of school-related resources to which traditional college students have access. Further, the logistical problems created by prison regulations are challenging for incarcerated students to navigate, as they have no power to do anything about them.

Additional challenges at the exo level relate to the realities of prison life, in which incarcerated students face difficulty focusing on schoolwork, particularly because of how noisy prison can be, as well as the potential for violence in men's prisons. As discussed by a number of participants', these elements of the prison environment made it difficult to concentrate solely on one's education. Additionally, institutional personnel generally impacted incarcerated students in negative ways, barring them from attending class or making it difficult to do so. However, not all institutional personnel were negative, as some participants were able to identify prison staff that actually helped incarcerated students get needed supplies.

At the meso (i.e., interactional) level, perceived jealousy from COs and non-students was a challenge with which incarcerated students had to contend. COs' attitudes and behaviors toward incarcerated students were particularly frustrating. However, these challenges were particularly prevalent for men. Women, on the other hand, faced more barriers at the meso level

related to other incarcerated students and non-students. Paradoxically, while access to some technology made the lives of incarcerated students easier in regard to school, it could also cause tension with other incarcerated individuals.

Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, barriers at the micro level were the least prevalent. This is likely because participants were all students who had successfully participated in college courses in prison, and thus they were already highly motivated to participate and had fewer internal barriers. Still, life stress was an important challenge with which all students, incarcerated or not, must contend, and it can be particularly difficult for incarcerated individuals who are at a disadvantage in coping with those challenges due to the nature of their circumstances. While all college students must face life stress, it is particularly important to find ways to support incarcerated college students through times of stress, as they tend to have limited resources available to them to cope compared to non-incarcerated students.

Importantly, the themes of institutional personnel and the realities of the prison environment overlap with the exo level and other levels in the ecological model (meso and micro, respectively). That is, these themes play out in different ways at multiple levels of the ecological model, highlighting the need to address barriers across all levels of the ecological system. It is not enough to remove barriers to HEP at any one level of the system; rather, barriers at *all* levels of the ecological system must be addressed if we are to effectively remove the barriers to participating in, and successfully completing, one's college education in prison.

Several gender differences were also identified regarding barriers, likely due to the differences between men's and women's prisons in terms of prison culture and program availability. Specifically, women noted more challenges related to prison logistics, including limited access to classes, which is likely due to fewer programs being available in women's

prisons in general. Men, in contrast, noted more contention with prison staff and administration, as well as the 'politics' and violence of prison. In all, barriers to participating in college in prison were present at each of the levels of the ecological model, and barriers at each level must be addressed to improve the experience of higher education in prison.

CHAPTER 6: IMPACTS OF PARTICIPATING IN HEP

In the HEP literature, the impacts of participating in college programs while incarcerated are perhaps the most widely studied of the research questions in this dissertation. However, studies are typically based on quantitative analyses of post-prison recidivism rates using re-arrest or reincarceration data. Less research has given attention to impacts beyond recidivism. As all participants in this study self-reported that they had no re-convictions since their most recent release from prison, this chapter specifically aims to explore the impacts of participating in HEP outside the realm of recidivism.

In this study, participants were asked about the positive and negative impacts they experienced as a result of their participation in college education while in prison. Findings drawn from the full sample of 31 participants indicated that they experienced mostly positive impacts⁹, and these impacts were related both to social capital and to cognitive transformation. Specifically, themes related to social capital were developed regarding the development of a community and networking opportunities, new knowledge gained through HEP, staying out of trouble in prison (women), and furthering one's education and/or career (men). In relation to cognitive transformation, themes were identified related to HEP opening one's eyes to new possibilities and perspectives, allowing one to develop a strong and content sense of self, cultivating the desire to do good (men) or make a difference in others' lives (women), helping one set and achieve goals (women), and fostering the development of new, positive attributes (men). Together, these impacts shed light on the ability of HEP to increase one's social capital and begin the process of cognitive transformation.

⁹ Two participants reported no impacts post-prison, positive or negative, of participating in HEP.

Increased Social Capital & Informal Social Control

As previously discussed, Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control posits that individuals with higher levels of social capital are less likely to engage in criminal behavior. Social capital refers to the positive ties one has to prosocial people and social institutions. For adults, social capital is derived mainly from marriage, work, peers, school, and family. In this study, participants noted a number of positive impacts from participating in HEP that directly impacted their relationships and ties to peers, work, and school, thus increasing their levels of social capital and therefore strengthening informal social control.

Community & Networking

One of the main themes identified in terms of the positive impacts participants experienced as a result of participating in college courses in prison was the "opportunity to be a part of something," according to Jeremy. Indeed, just under half of the participants (N = 14; 10 men, 4 women) discussed the opportunity to be a part of something through developing a sense of community and/or the networking opportunities that were afforded to them by participating in HEP.

In terms of community, several women spoke about the positive relationships they formed while in college courses that then carried over out of prison. Mary explained, "when I first started, it was a really small group. We're all still in touch. I think that we probably will remain in touch." This sense of community was important to Jenna, too, as she found it to be a way to surround herself with non-criminal others. She said, "In general, it has been supportive people who are definitely the right kind of people. They're prosocial relationships with people who aren't living a criminal lifestyle. So they're developing a more positive, healthy idea of what

life can look like.” These positive relationships with prosocial others are a direct source of social capital, and it was through college courses they were able to find these communities.

Men also noted the importance of the community they found through HEP. However, for several of these men, this new community also provided them with a source of emotional support, both in and out of prison. Joseph, for example, explained how “the biggest impact is the human interaction with the professors, the staff.” He continued to say, “the way they treat us, or me, has the biggest impact because they reach out and they say, ‘How are you doing? I haven’t heard from you. How can I help you?’” For folks in prison, this simple care can go a long way in making incarcerated individuals feel less alone or ostracized from society.

Post-prison, emotional support from one’s community can be even more important. Reentry is a difficult and stressful time for returning citizens, and without a support system, it can feel overwhelming, causing individuals to entertain the idea of returning to prison. As Carlos recalled, “there were even moments where I thought about committing a crime to go back to prison because it was so difficult.” However, the support provided by his college program, even upon release, was invaluable. He explained,

They had different counselors from the school to talk to us, to see where we were at. And just finally being able to express myself to them, how I was struggling... They were more than willing to help me. They helped me get somebody to talk to, they [told] me if I needed a break from classes to go ahead and do that, but focus on succeeding... [They said,] “When you’re ready to come back, we’ll be here, and you’ll be able to start again.” So they were very supportive, and they were there, and they wanted to see me succeed. And they did everything they could to help in that.

This type of emotional support is invaluable for individuals reentering the community post-prison. Anthony explained how the support of his HEP program carried over out of prison, explaining, “I would say the biggest [impact] is the support I’m receiving now... It’s a support resource that I’m able to get through [the program]... That’s been a big positive for me and a lot

of the encouragement comes from them as well.” Thus, not only is a sense of community an important positive impact of participating in college education in prison, but that community can then also play a vital role in connecting returning citizens to important sources of support to help them through the difficult time that is reentry.

These supportive communities were also an important source of networking opportunities for incarcerated individuals, particularly during reentry. Walter recalled, “my brother even said, ‘Walter, you couldn't have sat in that cell and dreamed to be in this situation now.’ And he's right. I've met presidential candidates. When Kamala Harris had a thing down at the barber shop, I was one of the ones invited.” Walter continued to say,

I've been appointed to several boards. I'm on the Community Corrections Advisory Board with pretrial services. [I was asked to] be a member of [the] Racial Justice Advisory Board... I'm personal friends with a lot of people on the Board of Commissioners, City Council members. I meet with the Governor's Office bi-monthly. Things that I never would've imagined was possible.

Networking opportunities also allowed participants to organize and make change through these new groups and connections. Thinking about the women in her college education program, Eliza explained, “because we're coming out of prison educated and motivated to do well and have a better rest of our life, we've sort of like organized.” Indeed, a number of participants explained how they were using their experience and new connections to make change for other justice-involved individuals. Troy discussed his experiences since being released, stating, “I've been on local radio. I've been on a podcast with a County Commissioner. I testified on Senate bills for the state to be able to gain minimum wage for employment for prisoners in [State] for every single job that they attain, instead of just getting pennies on the dollar for their labor...” Troy's work did not end there. His efforts to make change extended to his college as well: “I've helped organize an event we're bringing a major celebrity and entrepreneur to our college to speak to our students... You know, things like that, being engaged in things that I never used to do, get

involved in the community.” Through this expansion of one’s community, as well as networking opportunities seized through HEP, incarcerated individuals are able to associate with prosocial people engaged in prosocial activities, ultimately allowing them to develop social capital.

New Knowledge & Skills

About half of the participants (10 men, 5 women) discussed the new knowledge and skills they gained through participation in college courses while incarcerated. Specifically, participants expressed an improved overall understanding, technology skills, and soft skills, as well as how the new knowledge and skills allowed them to use their education to facilitate conversations with prosocial others. All of these positive impacts allowed participants to be better situated to communicate with others and apply their skills to work and educational settings.

A number of participants described the increased “understanding” they felt they had after participating in higher education in prison. Mateo explained how his overall increased understanding allowed him to continue to learn more. He explained,

I think the most impactful thing is just learning something... If I'm on a certain subject, and something else that I didn't know is brought to my attention, then I could actually dig deeper into that and research it... It's like opening a door and then just walk through it, and it gets to where you got to go.

Olivia, too, elaborated on how her prison education helped her learn better how to use the resources to which she had access to find needed information: “I understand how to navigate more, rather than just putting things in Google—what to specifically look for when I'm looking on web pages. It definitely has impacted me and made me more proficient in being able to help.” Along with this improved overall understanding about how to find information, some participants also described new technology skills that came from using technology to participate in their education. Without being involved in HEP, “I wouldn’t be where I’m at today for

technology-wise,” Heather said. For Rebecca, the technology skills she learned while participating in her college education program in prison were especially beneficial, and part of why she recommended the program to other incarcerated women. Imagining herself during reentry had she not been involved in HEP, she explained:

I would have never known how to use a computer or nothing... Out here, if you don't know technology, you would never make it in life. I tell people all the time, "Hey, take advantage of [College]. They prepare you for when you come home to technology. They literally prepare you." I said, "You could work a tablet, you could work a phone." I said, "Anything you work with now, it's technology. Any job you go to, it's technology." It prepared me, and it helped me. I see people come to work, like the elderly people, and they don't know how to work a scanner, operate a scanner. I think of myself and I laugh. I would have been like, "That's me when I would have come home." They would have been like, "Look at her. She's young, and she don't know how to work it."

Rebecca is not alone. Many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals struggle to use technology that has developed while they were incarcerated (Reisdorf et al., 2022). In an increasingly technologically-dependent world, these skills are of the utmost importance.

Participants also noted a number of soft skills they cultivated while in college courses in prison. Among these skills were increased problem-solving skills, time management, and goal setting. Especially important to participants were increased critical thinking and communication skills. Of his time participating in a college course, Phil said, “I think it's always been an advantage [being] enrolled with the Inside Out program. It has forced me to develop some type of communication skills... I think that did me a real service.” These communication skills were also helpful for Heather, who explained that her college courses were “able to help me overall with other people. Especially trying to better gain understanding of how they communicate with others, too.” Improved communication skills are important because they improve individuals’ ability to communicate with others, whether generally in life or in specific settings such as work or other higher education.

Participants also spoke highly of their experiences with HEP that impacted their critical thinking skills. According to Darius, “Part of my maturation process was learning how to think, not what to think.” This idea, learning to think rather than what to think, was very important for several participants. “It pushed me to become an independent thinker, and to push everything, push back on everything,” Troy explained. He continued,

Then question things, process things, and really analyze, and then go ahead and give a response. Which is the most intelligent thing a person can do, because one of the foolish things that a person can do is be able to speak without actually have listened and analyzed what this individual you're having a conversation with has just said, instead of just spurting out what you want to be heard. Instead of giving him an intellectual response. So that's what I've learned for sure.

Taken together, this new improved understanding, along with technology skills and various soft skills, led participants to be able to engage with others more comfortably and effectively. In fact, participants spoke about their educational experiences as providing them with a “conversation piece” to use to engage and connect with prosocial others. Scott explained, “it's impacted me tremendously with my ability to talk to people on a level that they wouldn't expect.” He recalled one instance while working at a gym in which he encountered a man who was reading a book Scott had read. He said,

We started talking about the book and the concepts and all this stuff, and he ended up inviting me to a Christmas party. But the thing was, there's no way that he thinks that the guy at the desk at [the gym] is talking about concepts having to do with sociological theories on why people do what they do and stuff.

This sense of satisfaction by surprising others with their new knowledge was common among participants. Further, participants were pleased with how their new knowledge and communication skills allowed them to interact with others and show a new side to themselves. Miguel explained how his participation in HEP allowed him to engage in intellectual conversations with others whom he may not have interacted with prior. Further, his new conversational knowledge and skills had the surprising effect of getting others to listen to his

thoughts and point of view more effectively. He explained, “Once you sit down and you can actually have a decent conversation with them, they are more open to hear your critique or your different perspective on things, once they see that ‘okay, he’s actually a little educated on the subject or knows how to convey an idea or knows how to make an argument.’” Even more rewarding for Miguel, however, was the realization that, “even if I met them and interacted with them, and then they find out I’ve been to prison, especially for that amount of time, they would have never guessed it.” Thus, improved general knowledge and soft skills gave participants a sense of being more confident in their interactions with prosocial others and/or in work and educational settings in which they may not have been comfortable previously, because there are more ways to connect to those others than were previously at their disposal.

Furthering One’s Education and/or Career (Men)

The next theme identified was the positive impact that participation in higher education in prison had on one’s future educational and career endeavors. Almost half of the male participants (N = 9) discussed positive impacts that fell under this theme. First, participants discussed the way in which HEP cultivated a desire to continue their education upon release from prison. For Patrick, it was the positive reinforcement he received through his participation that made him desire more education. He explained, “It pushes you to want to go in that direction right and it gave me the spark to want to go and do more education.” Patrick continued: “if you take the class, you succeed in it, you get positive feedback, you see the grade that’s a positive grade, it gives you more encouragement, gives you the motivation to want to learn more. Gives you that drive, that hunger, to want to do more.” Similarly, Jimmie recalled his efforts to continue his education immediately upon release from prison, stating, “I wanted to keep that momentum going... And so, the first six weeks out, I made it a goal to pick my college, apply,

get approved, and get registered for a winter class that would start in January.” For these participants, then, initial success and momentum in prison college courses cultivated a desire to continue that education upon release from prison.

Not only did HEP create a desire to continue one’s college education, but for some participants, it also *helped* them to do this. Some participants noted that participating in HEP was instrumental in being accepted into college post-prison. For example, William explained that, “just to have [college courses] in a resume got me into [University]... To me, that's a life changing opportunity.” Ben similarly agreed. He stated, “I would not be the same at all if I didn't go to [College in prison]. I got accepted to [University] with a full ride before I was even home, months before I was even released. So if I didn't go to college, that would never have happened.” While participating in college courses in prison allowed these participants to continue their education post-prison, it was not as easy for Justin. His criminal record was a barrier to continuing his education outside of prison, but because of the connections he made while in college courses in prison, he had a professor ready to advocate for him upon his release. He explained, “One woman, when I took the inside out class, she helped me because there was a couple of hurdles I had to cross.” Justin continued on to explain the way this professor advocated for his acceptance to the university, despite his criminal record, upon his release from prison:

When I signed up to go back to school, they were like, “Well, you were incarcerated, you had your felony, [which] rules you out.” Like, they've tried to rule me out. So she kind of went to bat and wrote a letter I had to write to the President of [University]. She was like, “Here, we are trying to go into prisons to have degrees for guys. But here's a guy that's free now, wants to continue his education, and our bylaws rule him out. What sense does that make?” So, she's been instrumental in me going back. If it wasn't for her, I probably wouldn't have stuck with it as long as I did. Or had the patience or know who to contact.

Thus, while several participants had an easier time being accepted to college upon release because of their participation in college in prison, this experience also allowed participants to make connections and find advocates for when barriers toward continuing their education arose.

Several participants noted that participating in college education in prison allowed them to continue their education upon release because they were able to show academic success that earned them scholarships. According to Jimmie, “I made it a goal to graduate with a 4.0 GPA. So that earned me a scholarship from [College]. So, that afforded me opportunities to continue to go because I'd put [in] the work and got the good grades.” While many participants received free college education in prison, either through grants or because the courses offered were free themselves, upon release students must still figure out how to finance their college education, and the HEP experience gave them the opportunity to prove their academic abilities and earn scholarships they may otherwise have not been able to receive.

Finally, a couple of participants discussed the role of HEP played in developing their career prospects. As Ben explained, “I'm about to be hired at [University], I have career options in front of me. I don't see any of that happening without the opportunity to go back to school while incarcerated.” For Scott, the development of career prospects was more centered around improving his ability to obtain employment generally. He explained,

I just got a job because I know, through my classes with debate and rhetoric and how to give a presentation, about outlining your talk, outlining your presentation, your speech. And so, I sat there and I talked to somebody and presented myself in a particular way. And I thought about it, specifically, “Do I want to appeal to this person's emotional side? Do I want to appeal to this person's intellectual side? What do I want to appeal to?” And as I'm in the interview, in the conversation, I'm actually assessing all that, taking inventory, and changing my tactics midway through, which is something I would have had no idea to do, or how to do, if I didn't take that class with a particular professor.

Thus, as illustrated here, participating in HEP was instrumental for a number of male participants in cultivating a desire to continue their education or in helping them to do so. Without their

participation in prison, it may have been much more difficult, or simply undesirable, for them to pursue a college education upon release from prison.

Staying Out of Trouble (Women)

For women in this study, participating in higher education in prison allowed them an opportunity to begin desistance in prison and continue that behavior (or lack thereof) into reentry. For about two-thirds of the women in the study ($N = 7$), higher education allowed them to stay out of trouble *in* prison, as well as help them continue to stay out of trouble once they were *out* of prison, through their continued involvement in higher education.

In Prison. Five women discussed how higher education in prison allowed them to stay out of trouble, and it gave them something to focus on and/or act as a form of escape for them while incarcerated. Megan explained how HEP “gave me something to focus on so I didn’t get caught up in anything else.” Meredith, too, observed how college courses in prison were “a focus. A lot of the girls, they drift and you get in trouble out of boredom [in prison].” For women who had the opportunity to participate in college courses in prison, it gave them a way to avoid misconduct, which is associated with recidivism post-prison, such that incarcerated individuals who engage in misconduct while incarcerated are more likely to recidivate upon release (Cochran et al., 2014). In contrast, individuals who do not engage in misconduct, or who engage in less misconduct, are less likely to engage in criminal behavior post-prison. Mary also explained why she believed HEP was beneficial:

Prison is a really dark place sometimes, and giving yourself something positive focus on, the projects, to work towards a good goal, is a good way to get through that. It's easy to get stuck and start getting in trouble... I hear the girls who have some time, it's really easy to start breaking all the rules and just doing whatever you want because there's no positive reinforcement there's only negative reinforcement. So, the college classes, [for] the girls who are in that program, it was a definite branch in the road, and it was really good for them you could really see the change.

Eliza further explained how the college program in her prison set the students apart, in some ways, from other incarcerated women: “You'd see people hurrying to get to chow and they were carrying their books. You knew who the college students were even if you didn't even know who they were, you know?” For her, the program acted as a badge of honor. She explained,

People started to aspire to be like the ones people were watching and paying attention to, and so I think it really changed the overall dynamics of the behavior in the prison when they implemented the college program... the things you would maybe have risked if you weren't in school stopped being worth it. That was a big, big change in the overall environment in the prison... it seemed to really change the mood and the behavior in prison. Once people got into it, they loved being in the program. Nobody wanted to be bounced.

Thus, for Eliza and other women, not only did HEP give them something to focus on, but it also gave them a sort of status within the prison and something to lose if they did engage in misconduct while incarcerated. This set the tone for the students that took school seriously, and they wanted to stay out of trouble while in prison in order to not be removed from their college courses.

Post-Prison. Not only did college courses have an impact on the women's behavior while they were incarcerated, but school also impacted some of the women's behavior post-prison. While most women discussed HEP as something that allowed them to stay out of trouble while incarcerated by giving themselves something to focus on, two women specifically discussed higher education as a way to continue filling their time and helping them maintain recovery from substance use disorder once they were *out* of prison. Thus, higher education that continued into the reentry period allowed these women to continue staying out of trouble post-prison. Meredith explained how, “A lot of girls... got their addictions because they didn't have any focus, they didn't know how to handle situations and I think when you get in college and you're given deadlines and assignments and just a structured routine and all of that helps, it's really having focus, something to move forward towards.” Shannon reiterated this observation,

speaking about her own experience with substance use and recovery. She explained that higher education had “been huge for me in my recovery. The two things have gone hand in hand, my recovery from SUD and school, and it has become a lifeline that led me out of there, that life.” Clearly, higher education is a tool that can be used not only to stay on the straight and narrow in prison, but once they are back in the community as well.

One reason that higher education allowed women to stay out of trouble post-prison, as specifically noted by four female participants, was that continuing their higher education during reentry allowed them to develop a type of safety net. For Shannon, “It was so valuable to me to have a blueprint of what to do, because I would ask myself, ‘what am I going to do now?’ [And] be like, ‘just don’t worry about it right now, you have schoolwork to do.’ So, it was a lifeline for me.” Other women found that school was helpful in developing a routine. As Rebecca explained, “Coming home, I was scared to do anything, but my comfort was school. When I opened up my laptop, I was content. I shut everything around me off, and I didn’t [have] anxiety no more.” This relief from anxiety over her reentry situation was a huge blessing. She continued,

I had anxiety so bad from coming home after 20 years. It’s like, everything’s new, so I had real bad anxiety. Then when I opened up my laptop, it’s like I’m in my own little world with school. It started teaching me to be in a routine. If I need this peace of mind and that’s the only way I could find it, then I’ll go in there and look up old lessons and all that.

Heather also found that college helped her with both mental health concerns and in keeping her going when things were tough during reentry. She explained her thought process upon coming home with no job or anything she must do during the day: “I can go through my spouts of being depressed or I can go outside, I can walk the dog. But what do you do productively with your mind?” By having school to fill her day, Heather explained how it helped to “hold me accountable. If I don’t get it done, then there’s going to be repercussions. And I’d have to just do another semester, another class. That’s not what I want to do.” Thus, having school as a way to

fill her time post-prison helped her to not only fill her time but also to give her something to do to keep her mind occupied and her mental health in check.

Finally, but importantly, one woman spoke of the instrumental support that being enrolled in higher education post-prison provided her. Meredith explained, “When I lost my job, there was food banks that happen at school, and we didn't have any dental for five years, so I was able to get dental assistance at school.” While this assistance can be helpful for any college student struggling to make ends meet, it was particularly helpful for Meredith’s situation with her reentry process:

The support system of the school has really helped with my reentry because all the supports that they supply to students were things that I really needed. They have job assistance, they have dental assistance, medical assistance. They had mental health counseling if you need that. They have help with resume writing. So it's not just your classes, but all the programs that the school offers as you reenter that help you get back into society.

Clearly, higher education in prison can help women avoid misconduct during and after incarceration, and the support offered by colleges for individuals who are reentering the community after a term of incarceration are a lifeline for those who may otherwise have to resort to criminal behavior to make ends meet. For the women in this study, college provided incredibly important sources of support and accountability.

Identity and Cognitive Transformation through HEP

Giordano and colleagues’ (2002) model of cognitive transformation states that, in order for desistance to occur, an individual must be open to change and gain exposure to a hook that provides them with the ability to achieve that change. Then, individuals begin to imagine a more conventional ‘replacement’ self. The desistance process is considered complete when individuals no longer see themselves as capable of engaging in those past criminal behaviors; rather, this new replacement self is more conventional and prosocial in nature. As the following will

illustrate, higher education in prison provides one potential hook for change at a potentially critical point in justice-involved individuals' lives.

Opened Eyes to New Possibilities and Perspectives

In order for cognitive transformation to occur, individuals must be open to change as well as gain exposure to some sort of hook that provides an opportunity for that change to occur. By the very nature of choosing to participate in HEP, incarcerated students illustrate their openness to change and, as discussed in chapter three, some incarcerated individuals are very motivated to advance their education for a variety of reasons. In the context of the current study, higher education then provides an opportunity for incarcerated individuals to challenge pre-existing notions and explore new perspectives to which they may not have been previously exposed.

Over half of the participants in the current study (N = 17; 5 women, 12 men) expressed how HEP opened their eyes to new possibilities and perspectives. According to Shannon, in prison, "the bigger picture didn't exist... the ability to weather all kinds of storms, kind of block them out and focus on one thing was huge." Similarly, David expressed: "being introduced to different perspectives has helped me navigate this culture and helped me understand what I want in life." Rather than being bogged down by the challenges and struggles of life, focusing on the larger picture through education allowed these participants to begin redefining what life could look like for them post-prison.

Others echoed this sentiment, noting that the future could look different than they had previously thought. For example, Anthony explained how "my perception and my outlook on myself, others, and everything else" began to change as his education progressed. Justin explained that this happened because, "college education opens up your eyes to other things you can do to be successful in life." Eliza elaborated upon this idea. She explained:

[College has] opened up a world of possibilities... When the people around you are drug addicts and they don't work and there's nothing to aspire to, that's exactly what you do—you don't aspire to anything. So I think that, especially for the people that came from those kinds of backgrounds, when they started having the world open up to them, they started developing dreams. You can't dream if you don't even know what the possibilities are.

Eliza makes an excellent point. It is difficult to imagine a different kind of life for oneself if one has never experienced or been exposed to that way of life. College courses may be the first time individuals are exposed to these other ways of living and being, that there is not one specific path they must take.

For other participants, college provided the means to do more and to sustain a sense of optimism. As Patrick expressed, attending college in prison is “something that's positive, that gives you the tools to be successful and the tools to give back, the tools to try to make amends for some of the mistakes [you made].” Rather than remaining stagnant, HEP allows individuals to become “more well-rounded, more open-minded” and, as a result, more open to cognitive transformations that lead to prosocial changes. Importantly, too, HEP provided participants with a sense of hope and positivity. For Jeremy, “[college in prison] gave me hope, rather than distrust. And hope is needed.” Indeed, in an environment as dangerous and challenging to navigate as prison, hope for the future is necessary for folks to change.

Strong & Content Sense of Self

Participants explained that, as they attended college in prison and new perspectives and possibilities were presented to them, they began to develop a new, stronger and more content sense of self that they had not felt prior to their college prison experiences. Fully two-third of participants (N = 20; 7 women, 13 men) expressed feeling more confident, increased self-worth and self-awareness, and a strong sense of their own identity. For example, Tyrone explained that participating in HEP has “given me a confidence to assert myself and to believe in myself,”

while Meredith similarly expressed that HEP had given her “a sense of self-worth, because I know I’m accomplishing something.” This notion was reiterated by a number of participants. Many had not felt a sense of accomplishment comparable to achieving success in college. For instance, Patrick expressed how in the past, “I wasn’t able to achieve a lot of things... but [college] is something that I did, something that [I] feel good about.” This sense of personal success allowed participants to see their own personal growth, which, as Carlos noted, “has been the most important, because it is the foundation for the rest... whether it’s in life, in work, or in your education.”

This personal growth seemed to set the stage for the formation of a strong new identity, both in and out of prison. For David, the sense of fulfillment he got from participating in HEP allowed him to feel as though he “spent [his] time in prison wisely.” Similarly, Richard found that HEP “made me maintain myself [in prison]. It was true to self... and it allowed me to remember who I was and what I was doing.” While Richard found that education provided him with a way to maintain a sense of identity rather than succumb to the prison mindset, Shannon found that this sense of self provided by HEP actually carried over into her reentry process. She explained, “[HEP] really gave me an identity, something to hold on to when I was released.”

Some formerly incarcerated and justice-involved individuals feel a sense of shame or stigma from their experiences, or otherwise choose not to reveal their criminal justice involvement for various reasons. However, having this strong sense of self from participating in college courses while incarcerated helped participants to speak up and be heard when they may normally not have. As Megan explained, “I do have a voice, and it can be heard... I can express myself in a healthy atmosphere and know there’s validity in it.” Another participant explained that now, “I share my story... I don’t hold back.” In essence, participating in higher education in

prison allowed participants to develop a stronger sense of self and more belief in themselves and their abilities. As Tyrone explained, “I was able to completely transform myself in an educational environment... it’s given me a new platform, a second lease on life.”

Desire to Do Good (Men) & Desire to Make a Difference in Others’ Lives (Women)

About one-third of participants (N = 10; 4 women, 6 men) discussed the desire to contribute to the world in a positive way after their participation in college in prison. Although participants described this desire in slightly different ways, where men felt more of a desire to generally “do good” while women specifically felt the need to “make a difference in others’ lives,” their statements generally reflect a desire to give back to the community in a variety of ways. For example, David felt as though “[now] I can be a contributor to my community. Through my incarceration, I found really good people who were willing to invest in me, and I felt like I needed to give back and, if I can, invest in other people as well.” Walter explained how he was similarly positioned to help others and reap the rewards, stating, “I was in charge of giving out micro grants, and that was gratifying. It’s having a positive impact on people just coming out.”

Similarly, Megan was inspired by her ability to inspire *others* through her own educational journey. She explained, “I really enjoy feedback from other people who were inspired to go to school because they saw me working so hard on it.” Along these lines, there was a sense that individuals coming out of prison having participated in college while incarcerated are a force to be reckoned with. As Eliza explained, “we’re coming out educated and we’re affecting policy changes.” Walter further elaborated regarding his contribution: “I have a job now with a social justice reform organization, and we’re doing good in the community.” Clearly, this desire to do good and make a difference in the lives of others is a

strong indication that the new ‘replacement self’ participants were developing were no longer compatible with a perception of themselves as someone capable of committing crime.

Set & Achieve Goals (Women)

Importantly, women in this study noted that HEP assisted them with developing the ability to set and achieve goals, which, in turn, allowed them to set and achieve *new* goals unrelated to education. As Meredith explained, “[college has] given me focus to stay with a routine... I’m sticking with my schedule.” Now with a more concrete schedule and routine, it was easier to begin setting goals. As Shannon elaborated, “[it helped me by] learning how to do long-term goals, and how to forgo short-term pleasures in pursuit of a bigger goal.” Of course, this ability to delay gratification is an important quality for desistance from crime. Other participants continued this line of thinking, explaining how HEP gave them the motivation and/or desire to keep up the learning and changing their lives. As Rebecca put it, “I’m so driven now, school gave me the boost I needed.”

New Positive Attributes (Men)

Men also noted that HEP impacted them positively, specifically in the form of new positive attributes they developed as a result of their participation in HEP. Like women, men expressed how HEP allowed them to establish a routine and, as a result, develop more discipline and drive. Jimmie explained how, upon reentry, “a lot of people go wild with all the extra freedom. Leading up to my release, I reflected on the fact that I need to maintain a high level of order to have a successful transition.” Following that line of thought, a number of men expressed how HEP had helped them similarly “develop the discipline that’s required to see [college] through.” Others simply explained that HEP had “given me a lot of ambition.” Finally, men in the study noted that HEP increased their compassion and acceptance for others and the

community at large. As Ben explained concisely, “everything belongs, there’s room for everything... life is what you make it.”

Negative Impacts of Participating in HEP

Overwhelmingly, participants in this study noted that there were no negative impacts on their lives as a result of participating in college education in prison. However, several were able to note negative aspects that stemmed from these experiences that, while not actual impacts of their experience, left them feeling frustrated in some way. Most notably, participants discussed the lack of technical assistance they had when attempting to continue their college education post-prison. Several participants also noted negative side effects of HEP that they had to contend with concerning others’ perceptions of them as incarcerated students, as well as the amount of time college took up during their reentry process. While these were not negative impacts of their carceral college education in the traditional sense, they were difficulties participants had to manage as a direct result of their HEP or continued education post-prison, and thus are worth discussing here.

Lack of Technical Assistance Post-Prison

For several women, re-enrolling in college post-prison was difficult. Jenna’s struggle with financial aid due to her incarceration was a barrier to re-enrolling in college upon her reentry into the community, particularly because she was attempting to re-enroll during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the federal government paused student loan payment obligations. Jenna explained, “So I come out of prison, and obviously my student loans are in default. Okay, no problem, I get that. Except that now because of COVID, [the] Department of Ed is not going to work, Cares Act has said that we don't have to make student loan payments. So if you're trying to rehab a loan right now it's a nightmare.” Because she was not incarcerated

at the time, Jenna had to figure out how to deal with her loan repayment on her own. She continued:

Jenna: So I finally, finally got my rehabilitation agreement, but you're supposed to make payments for six months. Except that the Cares Act says I don't have to make student loan payments right now. So I have my rehabilitation agreement, but [Community College], where I want to go back to school, has to have a letter stating that my loans are out of default, which I can't get.

Interviewer: Right, and this is because of COVID?

Jenna: Right. It's a nightmare. So I can't enroll in school, because my loans are still in default. So I could fill out my FAFSA... I still qualify for my FAFSA, it would be loans, but I can't re-enroll in school because my loans are still in default, even though I have a rehabilitation agreement.

And better still, the entire time my loans are in default because they say I wasn't in school, I was earning college credits through the [Another Community College] the entire time I was in prison. But [they say] I wasn't in school. How was I not in school if I'm earning credits at [Another Community College]?

Jenna's situation is somewhat unique, because of the timing of her attempt to re-enroll during a worldwide pandemic. However, given that many individuals were out of work during the height of the 2020 pandemic, it was an ideal time to attempt to pursue college education, and the logistics of her situation constituted a major barrier to doing so. Without having a contact person to assist her with navigating the complex financial situation in which she found herself, she was unable to re-enroll in school at a time when school would have been an ideal pursuit.

Other participants noted similar challenges in managing school logistics, particularly influenced by one's site director. "[Site directors are] basically your everything. Your advisor, your counselor, your financial aid, everybody," Heather explained. "My site director [now] is not as efficient as the other site director. I actually just learned last week that I got my associate's degree last August. I didn't even know that." She continued to explain the myriad challenges in communicating with her new site director, difficulty in withdrawing from courses as needed, or even ordering copies of her transcript. Justin noted similar challenges, in that having to complete

the duties previously completed by site directors posed a challenge, as he was not familiar with technology. He explained, “trying to learn how to schedule online when I haven't used the computer” added a new layer of skills to be learned in order to continue his education. Joseph similarly recalled, “I'd spent so much time in prison. I'm not used to technology... so I told my professor, ‘not only do I have to learn the lesson but I have to learn the technology at the same time.’” This was particularly frustrating for Joseph, because, as he explained, “I understand the material. What I don't understand is, how do I *get to* that material? How do I send that material *to you*? And it took a couple times until he understood what I was talking about.” These participants’ experiences in managing complicated school logistics reiterate the need for more resources and assistance for those formerly incarcerated individuals who want to continue their postsecondary education upon release from incarceration, as it can be overwhelmingly challenging to navigate on their own.

Negative Aspects Related to Earning Degree in Prison

Notably, two male participants explained how the only negative aspects of their higher education experience in prison were related to the fact that their education was actually obtained *in* prison. Walter discussed the vitriol he experienced from other incarcerated individuals who were not involved in college courses: “It was like, ‘Motherf*cker, you've got a million years to do. What the hell you going to do [with] a degree? White folks' education and all that.’ It was a lot of that pushback.” While it did not discourage him from continuing his education, it was still an unpleasant experience with which he had to contend.

While Walter’s negative experience came while he was in prison, Darius experienced some negativity regarding his degree only after he was released from prison. According to Darius, “I've heard some whispers right in certain circles like, ‘oh well, you know this guy, he

got his degrees while he was incarcerated,’ as if that somehow minimizes them—because of *where* I achieved them as opposed to *that* I achieved them.” Although these whispers did not impact his reentry experience, Darius still had to cope with them and remind himself that his degrees were not invalid or inferior because of where he had earned them.

Takes Up Time Post-Prison

Interestingly, while some women in this study spoke positively about higher education taking up time and keeping them busy post-prison, this was actually a negative aspect of higher education for a couple of the men in the study. Phil explained how school “just tak[es] all my time, that’s the only complaint I have. I have to devote a lot of time to education.” He had only been out of prison for several days, and found his family commitments and educational commitments were difficult to balance. Joseph, too, found it difficult to manage school now that he was out of prison “because I’m still working on it. It’s more stressful now than in prison.” This was likely due to the fact that,

In prison you have nothing else to do but to do what’s in front of you. So, in other words, college was all I really cared about, and I dedicated myself to it, wholeheartedly and 24 hours a day. Out here, it’s different because you got a job, you have car payments, versus in [prison], all you had to think about was schoolwork.

These competing demands for previously incarcerated individuals can indeed make it more difficult to continue one’s postsecondary education. Thus, for those who do not finish their college programs while incarcerated, it may be more difficult to do so upon release. As Harding and colleagues (2019) suggested, then, the ideal time for college education for justice-involved individuals is likely *while* they are incarcerated and can devote more time to their academic pursuits.

Conclusion

Participation in postsecondary education in prison leads to a number of positive impacts, both positively impacting one's social capital and aiding in the process of cognitive transformation leading to the development of a prosocial replacement self. Specifically, by participating in higher education while incarcerated, participants explained that they increased their social support through developing a HEP community and networking while involved. They also gained new knowledge, which was beneficial both generally and in specifically allowing them to further their education and/or career, as well as providing a conversation piece to allow them to more easily interact with others.¹⁰ Finally, women in particular noted that participating in college courses while incarcerated provided them with a way to stay out of trouble while in prison, as well as a way to fill their time and keep from relapsing into substance use disorder.

Cognitive transformation processes are clearly at play as well. What is particularly notable is that it was not one gender, race, or age group (to name a few) that were privy to this process; rather, many participants discussed this process. Specifically, individuals noted that participating in college courses allowed them to open their eyes to new possibilities and perspectives of those around them. Throughout these experiences, they came to develop a new, stronger sense of self. For women, this included developing the ability to set and achieve personal goals, while men noted the development of new, positive attributes. Importantly, these developments led to the formation of a replacement identity, one that is incompatible with the old way of being, as illustrated through the desire to do good for society and make a difference in

¹⁰ Although this study expected to find significant impacts on employment outcomes for participants, only a portion of participants noted that participating in college in prison impacted their employment prospects post-prison. While this finding might typically be surprising, these data were collected at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in May and June 2021, a time when overall employment in the U.S. was as high as 11-13.2% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Thus, employment-related impacts are likely less significant here than at other points in time.

the lives of others. For these individuals, this shift in identity coupled with increased social capital seems to have led to desistance from crime.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study used qualitative, in-depth interviews with 11 formerly incarcerated women and 20 formerly incarcerated men in order to answer four interrelated research questions examining the motivations and barriers for pursuing college in prison, as well as the impact(s) of participating in HEP beyond simply that of recidivism. In regard to motivations, findings from this dissertation suggest that motivations for participating in higher education in prison tend to stem from within oneself; that is, motivations come from the micro level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Incarcerated individuals are motivated to participate in college courses as a means of coping with the prison environment, of improving one's life circumstances, and of changing one's life. Others were motivated out of a desire to pursue a self-improvement goal or simply because they enjoyed education experiences in the past. Regardless, these motivations all tend to come from within an individual. However, relationships with others are key in that some incarcerated individuals reported being motivated to pursue, or complete, HEP because of encouragement from or admiration of others.

Barriers to participating and/or completing HEP, on the other hand, tend to come from forces outside of the incarcerated individual. Specifically, barriers tend to exist mostly outside of the micro level of the model, such that barriers are mostly out of one's control. Rather, these barriers exist because of macro level policies, such as the availability of HEP programs (or financial aid for such programs) to incarcerated individuals. Even when those aspects are overcome through macro level policies, challenges can arise from within individual correctional institutions. Individuals who work within prisons, such as correctional officers, prison administrators, or other prison staff, operate at the exo and/or meso levels where attitudes toward HEP, lack of resources, and logistics of the prison (i.e., count, lockdown, classroom/study space)

can make it particularly challenging to go to class or adequately complete coursework or studying.

Studies exploring the impact of carceral education typically use recidivism—whether measured as new criminal justice contact, rearrest, or reincarceration—as the outcome measure of interest. In the current study, participants were asked to self-report whether they had been convicted of any new crimes since their release; however, none of the participants reported reoffending in the time since their release from prison (recall that time since release ranged from one day to just over three years). As such, this dissertation now turns to the final research question: How, if at all, does postsecondary education in prison serve as a turning point for desistance from crime?

For the purposes of this dissertation, findings suggest that the impacts of participating in higher education while incarcerated are twofold. Specifically, HEP results in (1) increases in one's social capital, and (2) cognitive transformation, and these impacts apply to both men and women. Together, increases in one's social capital and the process of cognitive transformation lead individuals to desist from crime. That is, as an individual develops a community or network of prosocial individuals and gains new knowledge that allows them to succeed in the workplace or at school, their level of social capital is increased, as there is now more at stake if they were to return to crime. At the same time, higher education allows incarcerated individuals to experience new points of view, interact with new people, and challenge themselves in potentially new ways. Throughout these experiences, individuals are able to explore and refine their own sense of self and set goals for the future, ultimately leading to a desire to do good in the lives of others or give back in similar ways to how others gave back to them. This desire to do good, or to give back, is a signal that the cognitive transformation process is relatively complete. An individual who

wants to give back to the community and do good no longer sees themselves as capable of committing the same types of offenses as in the past. In this way, then, higher education in prison serves as a turning point for desistance from crime, as individuals who are motivated and able to overcome barriers to participation and/or completion of college programs engage in a process of cognitive transformation, while at the same time building their social networks and increasing their social capital. The culmination of these processes is desistance from crime, as individuals are released from prison determined to give back to their community, to do good in the lives of others, and not return to prison themselves.

In essence, the cognitive transformation process begins with an individual's openness to change. In other words, is the individual open to change and motivated enough to take part in the opportunity that has been presented? If so, the mechanism for change (in this case, college in prison) must be perceived as being available and meaningful. Availability in this sense is simple, as it is affected by federal and state policies regarding college admission and financial aid policies. If the opportunity is available, finding meaning in the opportunity can be quite individualized—for some, the opportunity to stay out of prison may be meaningful enough to encourage them to participate, while others may need to see more benefit to such an opportunity prior to choosing to participate.

As individuals participate in HEP, they begin to see new possibilities available to them, allowing the construction of the new self to begin. Even individuals who were not motivated to participate in school for prosocial reasons are susceptible to this change process (Runell, 2018). Throughout education, social capital begins to increase as individuals are exposed to prosocial people and opportunities, which continues throughout the HEP experience and potentially beyond. Once this process is complete, individuals feel a desire to do good (Maruna, 2001), or to

give back to the community from which they came, and no longer see themselves as capable of engaging in the same acts as they did prior to prison. Ultimately, higher education in prison has the ability to serve as a turning point for desistance from crime.

Implications for Policy & Practice

Given these findings, there are a number of implications for policy and practice. Increasing the availability of and access to higher education in prison is paramount. The criminal justice system is always at a deficit when it comes to resources, especially financial, and the cost savings of HEP are substantial. For example, Davis and colleagues (2013) from RAND found that every \$1 spent on prison education saves \$5 in future costs of crime and incarceration. This alone should be encouraging, but with recent changes in legislation to allow incarcerated individuals to receive federal aid for prison education again, along with changes to financial aid policies that limited aid for individuals with drug offenses, now is the time to continue expanding and capitalizing on these policy changes. All 31 formerly incarcerated individuals, ranging from 1 to over 1,000 days post-prison, reported no recidivism in the time following their release from prison, and research supports this notion. Studies indicate that recidivism risk is reduced through exposure to and engagement in higher education (Davis et al., 2013; Gaes, 2008).

Given the potential cost savings both in terms of real financial costs and in future costs to society, correctional staff who work with incarcerated individuals should use motivational interviewing techniques, capitalizing on extant research on motivations, to encourage more incarcerated individuals to take advantage of these educational opportunities. Additional career counseling or exploration could also be beneficial, as many individuals are not aware of the vast expanse of vocational opportunities available to them. Staff should work with individuals to

identify the most motivating factors for participating in HEP and then use that knowledge to encourage participation in HEP.

At the same time, it is important that institutions work to reduce the barriers to participating in HEP. For example, as other incarcerated individuals may act as a barrier to successful participation, students in college programs should be housed in separate units from the general population to the extent possible. Similarly, as correctional officers' attitudes toward HEP vary greatly, it is important that those separate units or any education buildings are staffed by officers who display attitudes more conducive to behavior change. Additional training for correctional officers who supervise those units would also be beneficial. Specifically, core correctional practices and motivational interviewing skills are also key in officers' daily interactions with incarcerated students.

As the cognitive transformation process appears to be key to the desistance process, it is important that institutions and individuals working with prison populations encourage cognitive transformation. This may look like providing additional cognitive behavioral programs or groups on the unit to address antisocial or unproductive thinking. Alternatively, college programs operating in prisons may consider including reflective aspects into the formal education in the form of journals or a thesis/capstone project that reflects on one's change throughout time in the educational program. Informal study groups, career counseling, and educational exploration are all additional services for institutions to consider in support of their incarcerated students. To further encourage the cognitive transformation process and generativity, institutions should develop ways for individuals to give back while incarcerated. This might take the form of serving as a peer tutor for other students, teaching assistants selected from within the incarcerated student population, or development of a prison writing center run by incarcerated

students under supervision of a staff member. Any of these options would allow individuals who are so inclined to give back even while still incarcerated, as this should begin solidifying the cognitive transformation process.

Finally, it is important that educational programs in particular work to develop and/or strengthen transitional services for incarcerated students who want to continue their education post-prison, whether in the same program/university or at another. For instance, prisons may designate a staff member to serve as a guidance counselor to help with exploration of programs for post-prison engagement or to identify a counselor at the student's chosen university with whom he/she can connect prior to leaving prison or immediately upon release and who will take responsibility for assisting the individual with getting enrolled and set up for success upon release from prison. Universities should also consider developing support groups or centers that can provide specialized assistance for returning citizens pursuing college, as well as compiling resources and providing networking assistance for those students who will be graduating and looking for work with the stigma of having a criminal record.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research. This study has several potential limitations. As with all qualitative research, the generalizability of the findings presented here is limited. In particular, selection effects are noteworthy and warrant caution in drawing generalizations, and also warrant future research to better understand the impacts. This study included only individuals who had been released from prison and, although not by design, individuals who did not report any recidivism post-release from the most recent incarceration. Future research should explore the experiences of those who are incarcerated and currently involved in HEP, especially motivations and barriers, as those need more immediate attention to allow for the education to take place. Similarly, research should seek to understand why those

who have access to college in prison choose not to partake, as this will likely shed additional light on motivations and barriers. Future research should also make efforts to identify and involve individuals who participated in HEP but recidivated post-release to better understand how their paths diverged from those who did not recidivate. Further, although self-report data can be reasonably relied on for recidivism data for some individuals (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2018), future research should seek to confirm recidivism data for HEP participants.

Future research should seek to explore how these findings may differ by age, race, and/or other relevant personal characteristics and demographics, as well as offense type or security level. For example, race can have significant implications for how individuals are treated within prison settings. Non-White participants may face additional structural barriers, while some motivators (i.e., support from officers, education and programming staff, etc.) may be less relevant as support received may differ than support offered to White incarcerated students. Similarly, individuals convicted for varying offenses or incarcerated in facilities of differing security level may have different motivations and especially barriers for participating in college courses while incarcerated. Furthermore, the impacts of education on these individuals may differ from the findings presented in this study,

Finally, future research should seek to better understand the nuances of the cognitive transformation process and how postsecondary prison education interacts with that process. While this study included individuals who participated in any type or amount of college education in prison, future research should pay close attention to the amount of college education received in prison and how those different dosages of postsecondary education impact recidivism and the cognitive transformation process. Although even one college class can impact recidivism, it is likely that the effect of the impact varies by the dosage and type of college

experience received. Similarly, this study seems to suggest that participation in college education in prison can impact one's identity; however, it is likely that this is a reciprocal process rather than a linear one, such that while education impacts one's identity, one's shifts in identity also lead to shifts in the meaning attached to HEP, further impacting participation and meaningfulness of the hook. Additional research should seek to better understand the reciprocity within this process.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to better understand the motivations and barriers for participating in higher education while incarcerated and how such participation impacts one's life both in prison and post-release. It further sought to understand how HEP can serve as a turning point for desistance for justice-involved individuals, and how this process plays out with regard to gender differences, if any. Taken together, findings from this study suggest that motivation comes from within the individual, but barriers stemming from factors outside of the individual's control, such as other people in the immediate environment or the physical setup of the prison facility, can impact incarcerated people's ability to effectively participate or complete college education. When participation is possible, however, there are significant positive impacts on one's social network and, ultimately, one's social capital. Further, HEP can trigger the process of cognitive formation as individuals are presented with new ideas, people, and ways of thinking, leading to the formation of a new self-identity. Through this cognitive transformation, justice-involved people come to see themselves no longer as individuals who are capable of causing harm, but rather as individuals with the capacity and desire to give back to society.

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Figure 1. Recruitment Flyer



If you've been released from a U.S. prison within the last 3 years AND took at least 1 college class while incarcerated, then I want to hear about your experience with college in prison!

Interviews will be conducted online via video call!

- Scheduled at a convenient time for YOU
- From wherever is convenient for YOU
- Completely voluntary and confidential
- One-time, no follow-up



School of Criminal Justice
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Contact Ashleigh:
Call/text: 269-235-9990
(It will ask for your first name)
Email: lacours5@msu.edu

APPENDIX B: SURVEY AND INTERVIEW GUIDE

Survey and Interview Guide

Date: _____

Subject #: _____

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview. I want you to feel comfortable and relaxed. Your opinions and feelings are important to me. I will be asking you some questions to guide our discussion. However, I hope you will feel free to talk about your experiences fully even if or when a question does not specifically relate to what you have to discuss. There are no right or wrong answers. Please ask me to repeat or rephrase a question if I am not making myself clear. In the first part of the interview I will ask you a set of questions and I want you to give me an answer. The second part of the interview will be more conversational and we will discuss some things in more detail. Do you have any questions before we begin? OK, let's get started.

BEGIN RECORDING.

Demographics

1. Age: _____

These next couple of questions ask you to self-identify your race and gender identity.

2. Race/ethnicity (check all that apply):

☐ White (Caucasian)

☐ Black (African American/African descent)

☐ Hispanic/Latinx

☐ Native Nations (Native American/Alaskan Native)

☐ Middle Eastern

☐ Asian/Asian American

☐ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

☐ Other (please specify)

☐ Do not want to answer

3. Gender

☐ Man

☐ Woman

☐ Non-binary or genderqueer

☐ Other

☐ Do not want to answer

4. What are your preferred pronouns? _____

5. Highest level of education **achieved (at this time)**:

☐ Graduated high school

☐ GED

☐ Associates' Degree (2 yr degree)

☐ Bachelor's Degree (4 yr degree)

☐ Some graduate studies

☐ Obtained graduate degree (Master's, Ph.D., J.D. M.D.)

6. Are you currently in school? ☐ Yes ☐ No

a. If yes, what level? _____

b. If yes, what do you study? _____

7. Marital status:
- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| ☐ Single | ☐ Separated |
| ☐ Married | ☐ Cohabiting |
| ☐ Widowed | ☐ Do not want to answer |
| ☐ Divorced | |
8. Do you have children? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- a. If yes, how many children? _____

- b. What are their ages? _____
- c. Did you have custody of all your children prior to your incarceration?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Some
9. Employment status:
- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Unemployed | ☐ Retired |
| ☐ Employed Part-time | ☐ Do not want to answer |
| ☐ Employed Full-time | |
10. If employed, current employment/occupation: _____
11. If employed, what is your current level of income?
- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Less than \$15,000 | ☐ \$75,000 to \$99,999 |
| ☐ \$15,000 to \$29,999 | ☐ \$100,000 to \$149,999 |
| ☐ \$30,000 to \$49,999 | ☐ \$150,000 or more |
| ☐ \$50,000 to \$74,999 | ☐ Do not want to answer |
12. Were you employed prior to your last incarceration?
- ☐ Yes
☐ No
- If yes, what was your employment/ occupation? _____
- If no, were you looking for employment?
☐ Yes ☐ No
13. What city/state do you live in? _____
14. In what prison did your college experience take place? (If more than one, specify which was most recent) _____
- a. What was your release date? _____

Educational Background

15. What was your highest level of education achieved prior to your **first** incarceration?
- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Some elementary school | ☐ GED |
| ☐ Graduated elementary school | ☐ Associates' Degree (2 yr degree) |
| ☐ Some high school | |
| ☐ Graduated high school | |

16. What was your highest level of education achieved prior to beginning the prison college program? ___ Some elementary school
 ___ Graduated elementary school
 ___ Some high school
 ___ Graduated high school
 ___ GED
 ___ Associates' Degree (2 yr degree)
17. Were you in school prior to your most recent incarceration? ___ Yes ___ No
 a. If yes, what level of school were you in? _____

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about your experiences with the CJS.

18. What offense(s) were you charged with that led to your last incarceration? (If the offense was a parole violation, what was the parole violation? What was the original charge?)

19. How much time have you served in prison throughout your life? _____

20. The last time you were in prison, did you participate in any educational programs?
 ___ Yes ___ No

If Yes, what programs? _____

If No, did you have the opportunity to participate in any? ___ Yes ___ No

If Yes, why didn't you participate? _____

21. To the best of your ability/memory, how many college-level courses have you taken **while in prison**? _____ (specify a number)

22. Have you been convicted of any crimes since you were last released? ___ Yes ___ No
 a. If yes, how many times? _____
 b. If yes, what were you convicted of? _____

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Now I'd like for us to be able to have a conversation about some things in greater detail. In order for us to talk without my taking lots of notes and to be sure to get everything you say, I will be recording the interview. You may ask me to turn off the recorder at any time. When I write up the final report of the study I may quote certain things that you say, but I will not identify you specifically. So, is it okay that we keep going with the interview?

DOUBLE CHECK THAT OTTER IS RECORDING/TRANSCRIBING.

First, I would like to begin by talking about your early experiences with education.

1. Can you tell me about your earliest experiences with school?
2. Did you enjoy school as a child? Why or why not?

3. Growing up, how did your family feel about education?
4. Were you ever suspended or expelled from school?
 - If so, can you tell me what happened?
 - What was going on in your life then?
5. Can you tell me about your most recent experiences with school prior to being incarcerated?

Now I want to talk about your experiences with education in prison.

6. How did you first become aware of the option of participating in college classes during prison?
7. Can you tell me about your thoughts and feelings upon learning of the opportunity to participate in college classes while you were incarcerated?
8. How would you describe the person you were prior to beginning the college classes?
9. What motivated you to pursue college education while you were in prison?
10. Who, if anyone, motivated you to pursue education in prison?
 - How did they motivate you?
 - In what ways were they supportive/encouraging of your decision to pursue education?
11. What was a typical day like during your college education in prison?
12. How did the professors interact with the students?
13. How did the students interact with one another?
14. Can you tell me about the classes you particularly liked? Why did you enjoy them?
15. Can you tell me about any of your positive experiences while in the program?
 - What happened?
 - Who was involved?
 - What made this a positive experience?
16. Can you tell me about the classes you didn't particularly like? What made them less enjoyable?
17. Can you tell me about any negative experiences while in the program?
 - What happened?
 - Who was involved?
 - What made this a negative experience?
18. Did you ever get into trouble during your prison college classes?
 - What happened?
 - Who was involved?
 - What were the consequences?
 - How did you feel about what happened?

19. How do you think the correctional officers felt about the college program?
- What made you think this was how they felt?
 - Did you ever hear COs make comments about the program or the students in it? If so, what would they say?
 - Were you treated differently because of your participation in the program? If so, how?
20. Some people may face difficulties in pursuing college classes while incarcerated. Was there anything that made it difficult to pursue your education while in prison?
- If YES, what were those difficulties?
 - How did you cope with those difficulties?
 - Was anyone else involved in helping you through these difficulties? Who? How did they help?
 - If NO, what do you think might make it difficult to pursue education during incarceration? What would make it difficult to complete your coursework while incarcerated?
21. Did you face any financial burdens for pursuing school while in prison?
- If YES, how did you overcome those burdens?
 - If NO, how did you finance your education?
22. What types of difficulties were there in completing your coursework or studying while in prison, if any?

Now I'd like to talk about how your education while in prison may have impacted your life since you've been released from prison.

23. How would you describe the person you are now?
24. Do you think your prison college experience has had an impact on your life post-prison?
- If YES, how so?
 - If NO, why don't you think so?
25. How, if at all, has your prison college experience impacted your employment post-prison?
26. How, if at all, has your prison college experience impacted your views on crime and criminal behavior?
27. What positive impacts has your prison college experience had on your life post-release?
28. What negative impacts has your prison college experience had on your life post-release?
29. At this time, are you planning to pursue more education?
- If YES, can you tell me about your plans?
 - What's motivating you to pursue this additional education?
 - Are there any barriers to pursuing your educational goals? How are you working to overcome them?
 - If NO, can you tell me about why you don't plan to pursue more education?
 - Are there barriers that are keeping you from pursuing additional education? What are those barriers?
30. Do you think you'll be successful in not returning to prison? Why or why not?

31. Do you think other students in the program will be successful in not returning to prison? Why or why not?
 - If YES, how, if at all, do you think the college program will contribute to their success?
32. Overall, what is the most positive impact that participating in college classes while in prison has had on your life?
33. After your experience with the prison college program, what advice would you give to other men/women in prison that want to pursue college education while in prison?
34. Is there anything else you want to add or think I should know?
35. Is there anything you want to ask me?

Thank you for your participation in this research. TURN OFF RECORDER.