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Beyond Recidivism: Positive Outcomes from Higher Education Programs in Prisons

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Abstract

Research on higher education programs in prison focuses on quantitative analysis of reduction in recidivism rates. The current research lacks knowledge on positive outcomes beyond recidivism. This qualitative study examines in-depth interviews with individuals who participated in higher education programs while in prison and identifies positive outcomes beyond recidivism. Participants in the study highlight the development of personal skills and attributes, prosocial networks, and prosocial bonds to social institutions as positive outcomes attributed to participation in higher education programs while in prison.

Keywords: *prison, education, positive outcomes, qualitative research*

Introduction

Higher education programs offered in prison provide individuals with the prospect of earning a college degree while incarcerated. Studies on higher education programs in prisons link positive outcomes with participation in these programs. Predominately examined through quantitative studies, much of the research conceptualizes positive outcomes as reduction in recidivism rates. The primary focus on quantitative inquiry and recidivism rates results in a limited understanding within the literature of how and why higher education programs in prison result in positive outcomes for participants.

This study seeks to address the lack of qualitative inquiry into the positive outcomes resulting from higher education programs in prisons. The exploratory study aims to conceptualize and define positive outcomes from the perspective of participants in the higher education programs. Through interviews with

formerly incarcerated individuals who chose to participate in higher education programs while in prison, this research explores the possible mechanisms that connect college-level coursework with a variety of positive outcomes upon reentry. The study examines the experiences of 18 individuals incarcerated in prisons in one state in the Northeastern United States who participated in higher education programs. In-depth interviews with individuals who completed college-level coursework in prison, some of whom earned multiple degrees in the process, reveal outcomes that extend beyond intellectual gains and even beyond employment attained following graduation. Throughout the interviews, participants consistently highlighted positive outcomes they credited to the higher education programs. They spoke of gaining positive personal attributes, in addition to professional skills that enable them to expand their social networks and connect with prosocial institutions—familial, educational, and employment—upon return to the community.

Literature Review

The predominate literature in the area of higher education programs in prisons relies on quantitative analysis and examination of recidivism rates (Karpowitz & Kenner, 1995; Gaes, 2008; Gray, 2010). Many of the studies find a reduction in recidivism for individuals who participated in higher education programs while in prison (Davis et al., 2013). This finding appears consistently, whether researchers define recidivism as rearrest, reconviction, or re-incarceration (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Quantitative data sources ranging from government administrative records to surveys of participants and staff produce similar findings regarding the reduction of recidivism rates associated with higher education programs in prisons (Pompoco et al., 2017; Kim & Clark, 2013; Winterfield et al., 2009). These results appear throughout multistate studies, meta-analyses, and case studies (Pompoco et al., 2017; Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001; Chappell, 2004) and remain fairly consistent over recent decades (Linden & Perry, 1983; Chappell, 2004; Fogarty & Giles, 2018). Studies identifying variation in recidivism rates related to educational experiences in prison examine the outcomes in relation to the type of educational program (Fogarty & Giles, 2018). Remedial education courses, GED preparation, and vocational training all produce differing outcomes, while studies on college-level coursework remain consistent in their association with recidivism reduction (Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000).

Less frequent than recidivism rates, quantitative studies on education programs in prisons also examine the outcomes of employment and earnings

(Cho & Tyler, 2010; Fabelo, 2002). These studies include a focus on relationships between program participation and increases in securing employment and higher wages or salaries. Duwe and Clark (2014) found secondary-education programs linked with an increase in wages and the number of hours worked, while also decreasing recidivism rates. A study on the association between earnings and a program offered to individuals in prison who read below a ninth-grade level found an increase in job earnings but no reduction in recidivism when released from prison (Cho & Tyler, 2010). A series of studies on post-release outcomes for participants in higher education depicted an increase in employment rates, higher yearly earnings, and a reduction in recidivism (Fabelo, 2002). Although the few qualitative studies on higher education programs in prisons establish likely outcomes beyond recidivism, employment, and earnings, quantitative studies remain focused on these three primary outcome measures.

The small number of qualitative studies on higher education in prison identify positive outcomes for participants and explore why these positive outcomes may occur. A mixed-methods study by Michelle Fine and colleagues (2001) engaged women in interviews, focus groups, and narratives to examine the psychosocial impacts of higher education in prisons. Interviewers spoke with 20 participants post-reentry to understand the impact of the higher education program on the women's transitions back into the community (Fine et al., 2001). The research team identified common trends in the participant responses. The study found the education program was a catalyst for enabling the women to engage in "self-reflection, critique, and inquiry," which transformed the women into positive and active contributors to the college community and society, upon reentry (Fine et al., 2001 p. 25).

Building on the Fine and colleagues' study (2001), Spark and Harris (2005) inquired into the experiences of women participating in vocation programs while incarcerated in two Australian prisons. Noting the lack of qualitative research in this area of study, the researchers interviewed 31 women participating in vocational programs while in prison (Spark & Harris, 2005, p. 144). Although this research focused on vocational programming rather than higher education and the impact of the programs only while incarcerated, a theme consistent with the Fine et al. study arose: Educational programs in prison have an impact on the participants beyond receiving academic or vocational credentials (Spark & Harris, 2005; Fine et al., 2001). Baranger and colleagues (2018) conducted surveys and interviews with four women who participated in higher education while incarcerated and three faculty members to explore program outcomes beyond recidivism. The interviews revealed perceived

behavior changes and development of communication skills associated with program participation (Baranger et al., 2018). This area of qualitative research remains limited and reflects the experiences of women in prison.

Overall, the inquiry into the outcomes of higher education programs in prisons remains limited within the academic literature and remains primarily focused on quantitative measures associated with recidivism. Much room remains to understand the positive outcomes beyond recidivism, as identified by people who participate in higher education programs while in prison. The limited prior research serves as a basis for further inquiry into the experiences of participants in higher education programs in prisons, particularly the effects of these programs post-release from prison. This study aims to explore this area of inquiry.

Methodology

The current study focuses on answering the exploratory research question: *How do former participants in higher education programs offered in prisons experience the impact of the educational program while in prison and upon release from prison?*

The qualitative methodology began with a focus group of former students in higher education programs while incarcerated, which informed an in-depth interview process with 18 study participants. Using an inductive approach, the researchers then analyzed the data to establish common themes that arose from the participant responses. The methodology section that follows describes the research process for this exploratory case study, the results section reports the data within the common themes that arose through analysis, and the discussion section suggests connections between the data and broader theories that connect the experience of higher education with post-release positive outcomes, including a call for additional inquiry into these connections. Speaking highly of their experiences, students shared “success stories” they attributed to the higher education programs, which are reflected in the results, discussion, and conclusion that follow.

Sample

A sample of 18 individuals was recruited for this study. Respondents were formerly incarcerated and partook in the higher education program during their period of incarceration. Respondents were recruited from a private organization that oversees higher education programs in men’s and women’s prisons and coordinates the network of former student inmates currently living in the community. The reentry component provides social support, job opportunities, and regular gatherings for social networking purposes. Individuals who work

within the organization agreed to share information about this study with those who were involved in the education program while they were incarcerated. This information was shared at several of the alumni gatherings. Interested individuals contacted the research team to ask questions and express their willingness to participate in interviews. Self-selected, 24 individuals contacted the research team to express interest. The researchers were able to successfully schedule and interview 18 of them.

The age range of respondents was 23 to 56. All the respondents were formerly incarcerated in the New York State correctional system and participated in the college education program during that period. The average duration of incarceration across all respondents was 17 years with a standard deviation of just over 7 years. The range of time spent in prison was 3 to 31 years. Most respondents completed a bachelor's degree in prison. Two respondents earned master's degrees on top of the bachelor's, two earned an associate's but not a bachelor's, and one respondent earned 20 credits during his relatively shorter stint in prison. Every respondent except for two came out of prison over the past seven years. Respondents have been out of prison and living in the community for an average of five years with a standard deviation of slightly more than five and a half years. All respondents currently live in New York. Most live in New York City, and those who live outside the city live close enough to travel to the city for the bimonthly gatherings. See Table 1 for sample descriptives.

The education program has more than 20 professors, the majority of whom have PhDs and the rest have master's degrees. Courses include general education (math, writing, religion, language), social science (psychology, criminology), and courses in behavioral science (methodology, computers in behavioral sciences). Assignments are the same as those on traditional college campuses (essays, exams, presentations), with the possibility of modifications due to the limited resources available to students.

Instrument

Qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews was undertaken for this study to give respondents the space to discuss their feelings, perceptions, and experiences with higher education in prison, returning to society from prison, and rebuilding their post-incarceration lives. A focus group of six individuals was convened to inform interview questions and generate topics of interest. These six individuals had been involved in higher education programs during a prior period of incarceration and were recruited from the same private organization that oversees the education program. The focus group consisted

Table 1: Sample Descriptives

Number of respondents	18
Sex	
Male	18 (100%)
Race	
Black	8 (44%)
Latino	5 (28%)
White	5 (28%)
Age	
Range	23–56 years
Median	45 years
Length of incarceration	
Range	3–31 years
Average Length	17 years (S.D. = 7.05)
Highest degree earned while incarcerated	
None	1 (5%)
Associate's	3 (17%)
Bachelor's	7 (39%)
Master's	7 (39%)
Employment status	
Employed	13 (72%)
Unemployed/Looking for Work	5 (28%)*

*One respondent was offered a job the morning of our interview.

of conversations between the researchers and former higher education participants about their thoughts on the most important ways in which higher education affected their lives. The research team took notes during the focus group and used the notes to inform the semistructured interview guide. Questions included positive and negative effects of higher education received in prison, how education influenced their worldviews, relationships with family and significant others, current employment and housing status and the effect of prior incarceration and education on them, and their psychological state, including self-confidence and self-esteem. Five of the focus group participants subsequently participated in the in-depth interviews for this study. See Appendix A for question items. Respondents were not asked about their criminal history.

Procedure

Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could end their interview if and whenever they chose to. A consent form indicated their rights as participants. All respondents signed the consent form to indicate their voluntary participation prior to interviews commencing. Some respondents expressed time or mobility constraints so we gave all respondents the option to complete interviews in-person or via telephone. Interviews took a minimum of 45 minutes and a maximum of two hours and were conducted over the phone or in offices and conference rooms to ensure privacy. The semistructured interview method meant that although respondents were asked mostly the same questions, some follow-up questions differed depending on the direction in which respondents answered each question. The research team recorded each interview and transcribed them. Respondents received \$20 for their participation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began following the focus group. The researchers ascertained primary themes from the focus group, and from these themes they created the interview protocol. Members of the focus group reviewed and provided feedback on the interview protocol before its use. The researchers initiated data analysis while transcribing interviews and continued analysis during data coding. The analysis focused on respondents' experiences in the higher education program and how education has affected their lives. Three researchers coded every interview transcription based on the common emerging themes from the data. They drew from grounded theory to ascertain themes from participant interviews (Charmaz, 1983) and color coded each theme for organizational purposes (Carney, Joiner, & Tragou, 1997). The categories that emerged from the data included direct benefits gained from the higher education program, development of personal skills, and connections to foundational social institutions.

Results

The interview data revealed commonalities among participant experiences with higher education and its impact on reentry into the community following release. In the higher education program, the participants made connections to peers, improved their communication skills, and developed integrity and confidence. Upon reentry, these relational attributes enabled participants to connect to social institutions that have provided them with employment

opportunities, access to prosocial networks, and the ability to have a positive influence over others. Participants spoke about socio-emotional skills they gained through the education program, which they carried with them into their reentry experiences. They explicitly connected their educational experiences to opportunities during reentry.

Direct Benefits of Higher Education

Study participants spoke most frequently about courses that promoted a greater understanding of the human condition. Through coursework, participants connected their life experiences to a larger human context. Courses in history, sociology, criminal justice, behavioral science, financial management, seminary, and others developed participants' critical-thinking skills, public speaking ability, and writing competence. Participants noted that the courses provided foundational knowledge and skills that do not become outdated, unlike many skills taught in prison-based vocational programs.

Many participants felt critical-thinking skills were the most important direct benefit gained from the higher education program. Critical-thinking skills enabled participants to analyze themselves and the world around them. Course essay assignments and research papers developed writing skills, while class conversations and presentations offered opportunities for students to gain public speaking skills. The professors who taught the courses had a positive impact on the learning experience of many of the participants interviewed. Professors encouraged students to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and interacted with students "on a human level" (Dan), unlike the more authoritarian and hostile interactions the many participants expressed having with prison personnel. This encouragement from professors gave students motivation and hope.

Development of Personal Attributes and Skills

Through experiences within the higher education programs, participants gained personal attributes and skills, including communication skills, increased confidence, leadership skills, and positive self-image. The higher education programs provided students with foundational communication skills—writing, speaking, and advocating—that fostered their development of confidence, leadership, and positive self-image, as described by study participants. These academic skills benefited their communication and translated to their personal and professional lives.

Dan explained that his ability to remain calm during conversations involving conflict developed through the higher education program, and Carl, among others, shared that communication skills allowed for productive

conversations with family members. Brandon reflected on the change in communication style as a result of the higher education program:

[I] was extremely quiet, never talked. It pushed me out there, made me confident in my public speaking skills, and honed those public speaking skills as well. A great example of that would be the fact that I am now an instructor, which is something that five years ago anybody that knew me would [have told] me it would never happen.

Confidence. Many of the participants credited improved communication skills to an increase in confidence. Tim shared:

Even to this day I don't like speaking to crowds, a class, or stuff like that, but the education program gave me somewhat of a confidence to do it. Although I don't like it, I am able to do it. Being able to stand before the class and present a presentation, it made me feel good to do that. It increased my confidence.

Mike discussed the role of confidence in speaking with people of differing backgrounds:

I think the more that you continue on your academic path, the more confidence you build and with more confidence you are able to communicate more effectively with other people and so you're just more willing to talk with other people despite the differences in culture or background.

Others credited the entire educational experience with improving confidence, often simply citing confidence as a foundational benefit of the higher education program. As a few examples, Dan stated, "On a personal level, I developed a sense of confidence in myself." Mark stated, "I got a great great level of self-confidence as a result of education." Logan stated education provided "certainly the credentials and the confidence to go in on those job descriptions." Brandon noted that confidence developed through involvement in the higher education program, not just as a result of gaining the degree:

I had none ... I had none. I couldn't find one thing about me to believe in. I couldn't find one thing about me to be confident in. [...] The further I went into my education journey the more confidence I started to build up.

Matt summarized the experience many participants expressed:

It also gave me a lot of confidence going forward ... I wouldn't be on a level playing field [along with] everyone else making a transition to society. At this point, [I have] my second adult conviction, and I come from the economically challenged family. All of these things you can take in consideration; I have to prepare myself ten times to be more complete than those who aren't labeled [as a felon].... [The education] gave me a confidence and a network. I always have to put my best foot forward and find strategic ways around [the challenges].... It's a lot in the education process [that allows the continued search for employment].

Leadership. Nearly all respondents from the higher education programs said they gained leadership skills. Some earned bachelor's degrees in organizational management. Others earned certificates in areas such as recreational leadership or participated in leadership workshops administered through the higher education programs. Even students who did not take coursework specific to leadership development gained leadership skills. Interviewees often listed leadership as a primary outcome of the higher education programs and spoke of leadership roles they held while in prison. Dan recalled the program asking him "to participate in the program as the one who's leading the program," and Geoff shared that the men and women in prison "view me as a mentor or as a leader" as a result of the higher education program.

The leadership and public speaking skills participants gained through the higher education program enabled some to offer prosocial messages to high school and college students. Tim described an experience he had giving a talk to a high school:

We did 4 sessions of 45 minutes each with the entire student body, right? So they had the whole auditorium filled 4 times, and we did one after the other. At the end, the principal approached us and said, 'I don't know if you noticed or not, but none of the kids went to the bathroom while you were talking.' I go, 'So?' He goes, 'That never happens.' He said, 'Never once can you have an auditorium full of kids and not one person goes to the bathroom.' He said, 'They were listening to you guys, and they were locked in.... You guys definitely have to come back and do this again.' So that's the credibility part [the high school students] see these movies and

hear about these things, and then here you are, in the flesh, looking like this, being successful and telling them that's not the way to go.

Positive self-image. Participants interviewed for this study reported an increase in positive self-image. They reflected that the program changed how they "carried" themselves and how they viewed themselves. Separating self-esteem from self-confidence, participants credited the higher education program with providing a vehicle in which they were able to better see positive aspects of themselves and grow their sense of intrinsic worth. Often participants began the higher education program with low self-esteem and credited education for improving it. Brandon recounted:

I had no self-esteem whatsoever, and it took me many years before I could admit that to myself and another couple years before I could admit that openly to anybody else. [...] I think the education [...] was a way for me to begin to start believing in myself. [...] I did get a degree but at the same time I found myself. I started to find out who I was as an individual. I started to find out all the things I had to offer to other people.

Mark and Chris shared similar thoughts on the irrevocable benefits of higher education and their impact on self-esteem. Chris said:

[The] experience really affected my self-esteem because I feel like now I have so many more tools. I have so much more that has been poured out into me from these professors and from my fellow collegiate body of students that my self-esteem has definitely risen because of that experience. It's because now I feel like knowledge is something that someone cannot take from you; they can take whatever else they want to or desire to, but knowledge is something that they can't take.... That in itself really brought my self-esteem to a higher level.

Mark said, "Because of education, I have other options. That feels good—a future with such optimism and no one can put me in the position to be a victim of somebody else's ignorance." Carl cited learning to express himself and knowing that his voice matters was a powerful transformation toward positive self-esteem, and Kevin said he has the education program to thank for increasing his self-esteem: "It totally rebuilt me."

Social Networks

Participants in this study reported expanded social networks that developed during the higher education program. Students worked together to complete assignments, learn material, and encourage each other. As a result of the higher education program, participants gained a pro-social peer group, respect from others who were incarcerated, and connections to job opportunities (albeit low paying) within the prison. Further, some participants used their academic experience to advocate on behalf of others in the prison. Their social networks expanded during reentry to include professional networks in addition to personal networks.

Dan said those who participated in the higher education program, “developed a brotherhood that’s really strong.” Stacey emphasized that students in his program, “act as a support system for each other. We act as a mind for each other. We act as help for each other. We act as a system to each other.” This support extended beyond release from prison. Brandon praised his former classmates, “We have always stayed in that circle between the guys that have graduated and the guys that I have worked with to encourage to do the program. It’s kinda cool, you know?”

Following reentry, participants connected with social and professional networks that include, but also extend beyond, their classmates from the higher education programs. Through the professional networks, participants gain entrance to industries, jobs, and related professional opportunities. Bryan describes his social and professional circles as “like-minded” people:

I hang around like-minded friends and people that I know. I know a DA, I know lawyers, I know doctors and I am able to sit with them in a room and hold a conversation and not feel ashamed that I can’t bring nothing to the table.

Participants reflected on personal social networks that encompass persons with professional degrees. Brandon said, “My social circle now is executive directors, lawyers, psychologists, and department heads.” Tim described a group of friends that act as a professional network to do fund-raising efforts: “We talk to these funders, we go to these foundations, we talk to the board of directors. We do these things in that circle of friends.” Chris succinctly stated, “So now my social circle consists of people who are thirsty for knowledge and understanding.” Brandon credited higher education with

a professional network that provides him with multiple types of opportunities and connections:

Now I have lunch once a month with a partner from the law firm.[...] I'm getting invited to galas, speaking engagements. Actually I just was asked today to do a speaking engagement for prison fellowship to talk about the impact their programs had on me following my incarceration. One of the reasons why they said they asked me was because of my education level and the way I carry myself.

Participation in the higher education program gave students respect from others and opportunities within prison. Stacey explained that the program "put me with a group that commanded respect." Kevin discussed the role of education in securing jobs within the prison.

[Education] separated you and they single you out automatically—like counselors or trainers or facilitators—to take the positions and snatch you. They will offer you the job, and although they didn't pay much, in the end it gave me a better understanding of what I was meant to be in life.

Dan became an individual whom others sought out for advice or help, and as he shared, "it changed the activity I did [in prison] because once I got into the mode of being a helper or an aid [...] it became part of my identity." Mark gained an administrative assistant position within the higher education program while incarcerated and Stacey worked in an inmate program assistant position—both as a result of participating in the higher education program. Mark worked "with young men who didn't have a high school diploma or a GED, and I started teaching writing classes and doing workshops to help men trying to get prepared to complete a general equivalency [GED] on the inside." In addition to work positions in prison, the participants recounted numerous examples of engaging in advocacy work on behalf of others while incarcerated. Carl stated that his participation in the higher education program allowed him to "communicate for the inmate body with the staff," and Dan engaged in legal advocacy: "When I was inside I did a lot of legal work because of my writing skills. I did a lot of legal work for people. I actually got some people out of prison in the time that I was in there."

Prosocial Bonds to Social Institutions

Participants developed prosocial bonds with social institutions upon reentry as a result of participation in the education program. Prosocial bonds facilitated improved relationships with their families, motivation to pursue education, and preparedness for employment opportunities.

Family. Many participants reported improved relationships with family members upon reentry. As a result of the education, their family members respect participants and see them as role models for achieving a college degree while experiencing the adversity of incarceration. The higher education experience enables participants to give their families hope for better futures.

Carl shared that his family now treats him with “the utmost respect” and that they now have “a reciprocal relationship.” He credits improved communication skills as the foundation for their positive relationships, and stated: “It helped me to be more confident to talk more towards them—that they can give me respect about stuff and [I] become a functional member of the family.” Others echoed the same sentiments. Chris noted his family now views him as:

[S]omeone who is a survivor, who’s a pusher, who’s a driver, and that no matter what situation I get in ... they’re always hopeful now. And they’re always encouraged now that I’m never going to be a quitter, and so their dynamic has definitely changed ... for the better.

Chris also sees his accomplishments in the higher education program as a legacy he can leave for his family and kids in the future. Mike commented that generally family members of participants in the higher education program have “more positive expectations of a better future” as a result of the program, noting participants gain respect “for your courage, your willingness to change and to pursue something that is not only beneficial to yourself but to your loved ones. So with that comes more respect for the person you are and are becoming.”

Education. Beyond encouraging and inspiring family members to pursue more education, the higher education program strengthened participant bonds to educational institutions. Some participants teach classes and others continue to further their education. Brandon reflected, “I am now an instructor, which is something that five years ago, anybody that knew me would [have thought] it would never happen.” Kevin discussed students he has taught, stating, “[S]ome of them are working for their PhD and some of them are working on

their master's program.... Some of them already have a master's.... [T]hey were my students and now they are the teachers."

Some participants continued to pursue education beyond the education program in prison and many encouraged their family members to do the same. A few entered programs to earn a master's degree and some reported engaging with educational coursework merely to continue learning. Speaking about an online resource for college courses, Mark shared:

I'm encouraging others and not just family members to take some of these courses online just to increase [their] knowledge in various courses, and they were blown away ... They registered and they are doing well in schools ... I have been championing education for a long time and believing in that.... I always look for new courses that come out and see what is interesting and take something.

Similarly, Steven said, "I wanted to set an example for my son and he started this year down at [a university], so you know he's pursuing his education." It is "something that he could always look at and say, 'Hey, dad's going through school too.'"

Employment. The higher education program helped participant access to employment opportunities following reentry. The writing, speaking, and relational skills participants gained in the higher education program helped them to build reciprocal connections to professional networks and pursue employment. Participants shared experiences of securing jobs for positions higher than the ones for which they originally interviewed. For example, Tim shared:

When I went and spoke to [the] manager in the Production Department, I gave him my résumé and when he looked at education he went, 'Okay I think you need to go to the Quality Control Department. Let me take you to the manager because obviously you have a brain.' ... When I met the quality control manager, he looked at my résumé and he's like 'Oh, can you take a test?' and he gave me like an informal test. [After the test,] he was like 'Oh, this is great, when can you start?' ... Having the education there opened that door for me.

Similarly, Mark recounted receiving a job offer as a result of a public speaking engagement. At the speaking engagement, a CEO of a youth-serving program

who sat in the audience asked the participant to speak with youth from her program. The participant spent the day with the youth, and at the close of the day, the CEO “was really impressed with the impact I really made on them in just several hours. And as a result she gave me a job [as a] behavioral coordinator [for the program].” As a final example, Kevin pursued a direct-service position in an organization and through the interview process was offered a higher level administrative position. He stated, “I spoke to the [HR] person, who practically told me her supervisor was impressed ... It’s not just because of my education. It’s because of how I carry myself.”

Many credited higher education programs with providing them with the confidence to pursue employment opportunities despite barriers and challenges that accompany securing employment following incarceration. Brandon discussed the role of confidence in his job search: “My confidence is up. I’m not afraid to take chances, I’m not afraid to step out, I’m not afraid to speak up.” He provided the example of a conversation during a job interview in which the interviewer said she had to pause to think of additional questions to ask; she stated she did not think Brandon would be able to answer the initial questions as well as he did. Brandon continued, “There was a time where I would’ve answered the questions with two to three words, just out of my own fear, just so I could be quiet and stop talking. I think my confidence has shown in the interviews.” Jordan said, “I applied to some jobs that I probably wouldn’t’ve applied for before I went to jail.” Mark said, “I stand out. I know it’s because of education, because I’m not just a charismatic person. The education really distinguishes me.”

Discussion

This study explores the experiences of individuals who participate in higher education programs while in prison. Through qualitative data collection and analysis, consistent patterns emerged identifying positive outcomes from higher education programs in prison: personal attributes and skills, including confidence, leadership, and positive self-image; expanded prosocial networks, within and outside of prison; and prosocial bonds to “traditional” social institutions—family, education, and employment. While each of these categories of outcomes may contribute to reduced likelihood of recidivism (see Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Vacca, 2004), each category also stands alone as a valuable positive outcome for the participants and society.

The mechanisms by which participation in higher education programs in prison result in these positive outcomes warrants much more inquiry; however,

the results from this study indicate a possible connection with the development of self-efficacy through the academic learning process. Bandura (1977) theorizes self-efficacy as an explanation of behavioral change in which, "cognitive events are induced and altered most readily by experience of mastery arising from effective performance" (p. 191). The process by which participants in this study experience academics as a process for developing mastery—with participants citing development of self-confidence and positive self-image through educational activities—indicates a self-perception of mastery that allows them to establish prosocial connections upon reentry into the community. Prior studies on academics outside of prison establish a connection between educational experiences and the development of self-efficacy (see Staples, Schwalbe, & Gecas, 1984; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). Further, a quantitative study on self-efficacy of students who participate in a comparison study of college classrooms comprised of students who were incarcerated and those who were not incarcerated (an "inside-outside" model) established a statistically significant increase in self-efficacy only among participants who were incarcerated (Allred, Harrison, & O'Connell, 2013). The findings from this study support the need for further inquiry into the development of social efficacy resulting from participation in higher education programs in prisons.

Conclusion

Overall, this study establishes that the singular focus on measures of recidivism greatly impedes the identification and understanding of outcomes relating to higher education programs in prisons. Consistent with limited prior research, the voiced experiences of individuals who participate in these programs highlights outcomes supporting, but also reaching beyond, recidivism. Delving further into the processes by which higher education programs in prisons generate positive outcomes will help illuminate the pathway between academic learning and the positive, prosocial experiences voiced by those reentering the community following incarceration.

Further, the findings from this study support the expansion of higher education programs in prisons. The outcomes of higher education programs in prisons extend beyond classroom learning and academic achievement. The development of personal attributes and professional skills through higher education connects individuals with larger social institutions and prosocial networks. These skills derive from the foundational components of higher education, such as the critical thinking and communication skills, and grow through the classroom engagement with professors and classmates, also a

central characteristic of higher education. Individuals in the higher education programs leave with the ability and confidence to navigate the challenges of reentry with social support. They develop the ability to positively contribute to society and support family members in making prosocial decisions.

More research along this line of inquiry would allow for a better understanding on the nexus between higher education programs in prisons and positive outcomes upon reentry. A larger qualitative study and a more diverse sample of participants would provide more information on the consistency of the current findings across different prison populations. While this case study focused on broad outcomes of program participation, each topic identified in this study may serve as a foundation for future research. Additional qualitative and quantitative research would help to establish long-term impacts and more precise measurements of the development of social efficacy through participation in higher education specific to individuals incarcerated.

The limitations of this study point to the need for additional research on the outcomes of higher education programs in prisons. The study contains a limited sample, focusing on male respondents and one geographic location in the United States. The vast majority of participants had all left prison and completed their coursework for the higher education program relatively recently prior to the interviews for the study. The study only included one participant who exited the higher education program (because of his release date) before completing the coursework. The study also did not include the group of individuals who did not participate in a higher education program while incarcerated. This comparison group may offer additional insight into the impact of higher education programs in prison. While this study has limitations, it does provide an understanding of the positive outcomes derived from participation in higher education programs in prison.

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