A Prison to School Pipeline: College Students with Criminal Records and Their Transitions into Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Very little is known about the experiences of college students with criminal records (CSCR), an underrepresented and minoritized student population. This study utilized a constructivist qualitative methodology to understand the experiences of four CSCRs pursuing higher education. The participant perspectives yielded three noteworthy findings that contribute to limited literature on the experiences of CSCRs. The findings highlight CSCRs' introduction to higher education, their initial feelings prior to pursuing postsecondary education, and background checks that pose as barriers. Based upon these findings, we are able to understand why supportive networks, specialized resources, and academic assistance are needed for CSCRs.

Keywords: college students, criminal records, experiences, transition

A debate exists about the value of higher education in prison and whether it reduces recidivism (Ubah & Robinson, 2003), especially since recidivism is used as a 'gold' standard to measure program effectiveness (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Mastrorilli, 2016). Scholars differ in their views on the benefits of higher education in prison; these opinions range from a belief that prison education reduces the likelihood of incarcerated individuals reoffending (Esperian, 2010), to a perspective that education is solely used as an incentive and a way to control incarcerated individuals (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013). Despite these disagreements, over 700,000 formerly incarcerated individuals return to their communities with little to no education each year (Clear & Austin, 2009; Hagen & Petty Coleman, 2001; Petersilia, 2000).

Very little is known about the experiences of college students with criminal records (CSCRs), an underrepresented and minoritized student population within higher education (Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2013). However, the few empirical studies that do exist suggest that participating in a higher education institution represents the chance for better life outcomes and opportunities (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013), better economic and social mobility (Strayhorn et al., 2013), and a promising life post-incarceration (Livingston & Miller, 2014). Unfortunately, criminal records as a demographic is not collected in the integrated postsecondary education data system (IPEDs) and there is no data indicating the number of CSCRs enrolled within any higher education institution. Despite the absence of enrollment data, we do know CSCRs are enrolled

in colleges and universities across the United States (see e.g., Livingston & Miller, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

With very little research capturing the transitional experiences of CSCRs within higher education, the purpose of our exploratory constructivist study was to understand how a group of CSCRs experience aspects of their college decision, choice, and progress. Specifically, we focused on CSCRs' transitions to, and through, higher education. We chose to include students who embodied various degrees of diversity such as different crimes, genders, ages, sexes, races, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds to authentically represent CSCRs enrolled in higher education. The following research question guided our study: What type of barriers do CSCRs experience when transitioning into college? A full understanding of these challenges requires consideration of the transitions experienced by CSCRs into higher education.

TRANSITIONS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

Research on CSCRs' (often referred to as formerly incarcerated individuals) degree attainment and their transitions to, through, and out of higher education is limited. However, a few studies exist on CSCRs in higher education that highlight some essential factors in the transitional needs and experiences of this marginalized population (Brower, 2015; Girardo, Huerta & Solorzano, 2017; Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2013). One important factor CSCRs face when transitioning into postsecondary educational settings is the stigmas associated with having a criminal record (Van Olphen, Eliason, Freudenberg, & Barnes, 2009; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Many college staff and administrators have negative attitudes and preconceived notions of students with criminal records (Copenhaver, Edwards-Wiley, & Byers, 2007). Some of the negative attitudes may stem from fear, moral judgments of inmates having free education available to them while imprisoned, and visible tattoos indicating their involvement with the justice system (Copenhaver et al., 2007). Many CSCRs are conflicted about the decision to disclose information pertaining to their criminal record due to the fear of being stigmatized and other repercussions, (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Lebel, 2012).

Beyond navigating administrative challenges presented by institutional gatekeepers, CSCRs must also learn to negotiate interpersonal relationships with various campus communities. Halkovic and Greene (2015) and Winnick and Bodkin (2008) reported that CSCRs who chose to disclose their criminal record were often ostracized from their peers and from faculty members, leading to foreclosed academic and social opportunities. For example, some individuals on campus hold negative connotations about 'jailhouse' tattoos, which makes CSCRs an instant target for disenfranchisement and may also result in CSCRs covering them up to appease various constituents such as potential employers and college administrators (Copenhaver et al., 2007).

However, Todis, Bullis, Wantrup, Schultz, and D'Ambrosio (2001) reported that CSCRs who enroll in community colleges report positive experiences and supports from their institution. Potts and Palmer (2014) found that participation in community college classes improved CSCRs' parole experiences while decreasing the chances of returning to prison. Some CSCRs found the community college environment to be helpful due to small class sizes for personal relationship building with instructors and the easy accessibility of tutoring and computers. Additionally, Potts and Palmer found familial support to be a salient factor as to why students with criminal records were pursuing college. More specifically, most families within the study were involved in the parolees' lives and encouraged enrollment into college, particularly post-incarceration.

A specific challenge faced by students with criminal records from racially minoritized communities and lower socio-economic backgrounds is a vulnerability to the areas that first created the context for their contact with the prison system; these individuals experience difficulty removing themselves from such negative environments (Brower, 2015; Livingston & Miller, 2014). Livingston and Miller (2014) investigated the impact of race and class inequalities among CSCRs at a large state university. One of their findings, of importance for our study, was that CSCRs who came from a middle-class upbringing had access to financial resources and better living conditions than CSCRs who came from poorer communities. The students from a middle-class background were more likely to live closer to campus and only had to worry about studying while CSCRs from poorer communities worried about a place to live, study, and ways to provide for themselves and their families (Livingston & Miller, 2014).

Another challenge that CSCRs must face pertains to background checks and finger print clearances. CSCRs often find themselves in situations where they are required to succumb to a background check or fingerprint clearance to participate in educational opportunities (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013). Some examples include, applying for admissions into certain academic programs, internships, campus housing, or even jobs (Brower, 2015; Weissman et al., 2010). Once their background checks expose their criminal histories, they are often exploited or ostracized from education altogether (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013; Weissman et al., 2010).

While these studies offer rich insight into the experiences of CSCRs, some limitations include the lack of depth related to the explicit barriers these students are faced with in their journey toward applying to and being accepted into higher education, and their transitions from community college to a four-year institution. Our research expands on the current literature, considering the challenges and needs of students with criminal records as they transition out of prison into their communities through higher education. Finally, we contribute to existing literature by acknowledging various types of support and resources which students with criminal records acknowledge needing to thrive in a collegiate setting.

SCHLOSSBERG'S TRANSITION THEORY

To understand the transition to higher education and barriers experienced by CSCRs, we opted to utilize a theory that highlights the role of the transition in an individual's life. Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory was chosen as a theoretical framework because it directs its attention to the unique transitional experiences of non-traditional adult college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010). Utilizing a revised definition, a transition is any "event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). Given the context of this study and the many relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles that are constantly changing for CSCRs post-incarceration, "type, context, and impact of the transition are crucial to understanding the meaning that it has for a particular individual at any given point in time" (Strayhorn et al., 2013, p. 80).

Schlossberg's (1989) model identifies three types of transitions (i.e., type, context, impact) that are integral to understanding CSCRs' transitions and barriers into post-secondary education. First, the model refers to type, which consists of the individual's anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and non-events, which are anticipated by the individual but do not come to fruition (Evans et al., 2010). The next type of transition is context. Context refers to the setting of the individual or that of someone else in which a transition takes place. Impact

is the last type of transition, which indicates the degree to which a transition changes or alters the person's life (Evans et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2013). Transitions can be viewed as positive or negative depending on how the individual views the transition experience (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Schlossberg (1989) also identified four factors (4 S's) individuals use to cope with a transition. The first S consists of situation, which refers to how individuals gauge the transition and their sense of control over what is happening (Evans et al., 2010). The subsequent S is self. Self has two scopes: personal characteristics and psychological resources (Evans et al., 2010), which draw its attention to how individual characteristics influence coping mechanisms. The next S is support, which acknowledges the ways in which caring, affirmation, and positive feedback can facilitate transitions (Evans et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The last S is strategies, which speaks to an individual's ability to facilitate various transitions through one's own behaviors (Evans et al., 2010). Both the type of transition and the factors to cope with that transition helps us to understand how CSCRs are navigating the college going process. Since its inception, Schlossberg's transition theory has been used to study various types of transitions experienced by nontraditional students (e.g., veterans and adult learners). We chose this framework to provide constructs for understanding CSCRs' transitions into higher education as well as the barriers experienced during their transition.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a constructivist qualitative approach. We opted to utilize this method because we believe people create knowledge and meaningful realities as they engage in the world in which they dwell (Crotty, 1998). By utilizing this qualitative approach, we were able to engage with each college student as they constructed their own truths and realities. Additionally, this approach allowed us to maintain the authenticity of each collegian's voice without altering their stories with alternative realities and meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Participant Recruitment and Demographic Profiles

Participants were selected using a criterion sampling approach where individual participants within a study "meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 1990, p. 176). To participate in this study, prospective participants had to be currently enrolled as a CSCR and be able to provide proof of their previous incarceration. To achieve this, we worked with an administrator at a large research university who assisted with recruitment of potential participants. The campus administrator acted as a liaison between prospective participants and the lead researcher (LR). Additionally, the campus administrator distributed recruitment materials to prospective participants who, in return, contacted the LR directly expressing their interest in participating in the study.

Materials for this study included a flyer with the LR's contact information and incentives offered as well as an informed consent form detailing the study's aims, procedures, and confidentiality agreement approved by our institutional review board. Prospective participants (N=3) who contacted the researchers agreed to participate in the study and were able to provide proof of incarceration using certified court documents and depositions. Through additional recruitment efforts, the LR was able to recruit one additional participant for a total of four participants (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Profiles and Demographics

	Participant			
Characteristic	**Olivia**	**Edgar**	**Daniel**	**Marco**
Demographics				
Age	45	66	37	59
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male
Race/Ethnicity	Native American	Chicano	White	Chicano
Living Situation	Homeless	Homeless	Homeless	Homeless
Employment Status	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed
Crime				
Crime(s) Committed	Drugs	Burglary, Drugs, Murder	Burglary, Drugs, Murder	Drugs, Forgery
Length of Last Incarceration	21 days	34 years	1 year	10.5 years
Time Since Last Incarceration/Arrest	8 years	8 years	5 years	6 years
Education				
Attended Community College	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time Spent at Community College	3 years	5 years	5 years	4 years
Current Classification at 4-Year Public University	Senior	Junior	Senior	Junior
Current Major at 4-Year Public University	Social work	Social work	Social work	Social work

Participant Perspective Collection Process

Information gathering consisted of several steps. The first step was to collect artifacts from participants to verify their incarceration. Participants brought in various items such as court documents, depositions, and newspaper clippings detailing their crimes. All prospective participants were also asked to complete a pre-questionnaire form, which included closed-ended questions pertaining to individual demographics, additional information about their criminal history, and their educational background. The final step consisted of four unstructured interviews per participant. Each individual interview focused on a single theme: (a) criminal background, (b) process of applying to college, (c) experience during college, and (d) identified needs and resources.

Each individual participant participated in each of the four interviews, which resulted in a total of 16 conducted interviews. Each interview averaged 45 minutes (range=25-90 minutes), and the entire information gathering process took place over a 30-day period in Spring 2016. Moreover,

each interview had one central question to stimulate dialogue about participants' experiences as they transitioned through various phases of their life. Questions such as, "Can you tell me about your experience while incarcerated," (Interview One) or "What are your experiences like as a formerly incarcerated student" (Interview Three), are examples of the questions asked during an individual interview.

As an aside, we opted to utilize the term participant perspectives in place of the term data for two reasons. First, data usually consist of some form of textual or numerical value that is used to solicit evidence for the study (Golafshani, 2003). At times, it can have little to no regard for the people or voices that provided the "evidence" for the researcher's use. Secondly, people within penal institutions in the U.S., such as the participants within this study, are assigned and identified by a number to dehumanize them (Stanko, Gillespie, & Crews, 2004). Therefore, to humanize the participants within this study, we opted to provide a term that was reflective of our methodology and way of thinking.

Participant Perspective Analysis Process

Participant perspectives were analyzed using a thematic analysis. As described by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008), the process of analyzing qualitative "data" can be done deductively, where "codes are identified prior to analysis and then looked for in the data," inductively, where "codes emerge from the data," or abductively, where "codes emerge iteratively" (p. 565). For this study, we chose to analyze participant perspectives using the inductive process where our codes emerged from the participants' transcripts.

First, the LR read through each transcript and jotted down initial thoughts and codes that seemed to emerge. Then, the LR and co-investigators reviewed participant transcripts independently. Each researcher reviewed eight interviews in total. The researchers labeled the transcripts with initial codes and descriptive information. Coded transcripts were returned to the participants for review (each participant reviewed all four of their transcripts) with proposed themes from their individual transcripts. Each participant confirmed or denied themes and meanings that were provided to them. The researchers took the feedback from the participants and made the necessary changes to reflect the participants' perspectives. We then compared each transcript against the other transcripts and chunked segments with similar codes. Once all the transcripts were coded and grouped, we generated themes that were reflected across all the transcripts. This process continued until a point of saturation occurred and no new themes or codes were generated (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Trustworthiness

Throughout the entirety of the study, we applied Krefting's (1991) four strategies of credibility to establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility was achieved through member checking with each participant and each researcher. We provided initial themes, derived from the interviews, to each of the participants so we could check for clarity and understanding. We also encouraged participants to review their transcribed interview as well as provide feedback about the themes we found. We used transferability by creating a thick and rich description of the participants and methods used to create the study. For dependability, we used Krefting's code re-code method during the analysis phase. He proposed coding and then waiting two weeks after the initial coding process to code again to compare results. We waited almost four weeks after the initial coding process to code again. The final strategy consisted of conformability in which we utilized a reflexive process to acknowledge our individual influence over the participants' perspectives.

FINDINGS FROM PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

As the LR engaged with each participant about their process of applying to college, probing questions were asked about their transition experiences back into the community and how those experiences led them to pursue an education. For this study, we focused on the following three themes that emerged as a result of our analysis. The first theme, *Somebody Told Me*, speaks to various individuals who arbitrarily introduced higher education to the participants. The next theme, *The Feelings I Feel Inside*, focuses on the initial feelings and emotions the participants' experienced once they decided to pursue higher education. The last theme, *Because Of My Background*, draws its attention to the challenges of dealing with background checks in higher education as a CSCR.

Somebody Told Me

After being released from prison, Olivia, Daniel, Edgar, and Marco were homeless and unemployed with no means to take care of themselves or their families. Each reported they were often forced to stay in random halfway houses until they were removed for not paying rent. Except for Edgar, who did not have to report to parole or any treatment facility due to time served, the participants were required to attend various outpatient treatment programs as well as participate in random drug testing with their parole officers. All the participants were released back into the community with no resources and no adequate transition plan to stay out of prison.

While participating in various treatment facilities, halfway houses, counseling programs, and being back on the "streets," Daniel, Edgar, and Marco reported being encouraged by their peers and various support systems to pursue a degree at a local community college. A reluctant Marco expressed how a counselor encouraged him to attend a community college:

> *I get out and my counselor, the psychologist, she tells me, "Why don't you go to a [name of community college redacted]? "Go to school, what do I know about school? "You got a GED, you've tried a couple times to go to college while you were doing time, so there's something there." This is what made me, up to this day I still look to it, she tells me, "Listen. Go to school. Even if you don't know nothing, be present. When you're present, you can learn. If you're not there, you can't learn."... My mom kind of similar told me the same. You know what I mean? If you go, all you can do is learn.*

Daniel also expressed how his support system (his girlfriend and the mother of his child) was the reason why he pursued an education. He talks about how he had started thinking about going to school when he kept running into employment barriers. He said,

> *When I started thinking about wanting to come back to school... I didn't want to be this way, how I was, selling drugs, going in and out. By then my daughter was one and it was scary because I didn't know how to be a normal citizen. I didn't know how to do that. It was the scariest thing I've ever done. I cried in my daughter's mother's arms before it even happened and I told her, I don't want to be like this no more. I remember clear as day, her telling me, Daniel if you really don't want to be this way no more then it's up to you to do something about it now. A few days later I found myself registering for school.*

Another example comes from Edgar, who explained his reasons for attending a community college. He said, "Somebody told me at the [name of food bank redacted] next to the [name of homeless shelter redacted], Why don't you go to community college? Sign up for community college!" That "somebody" happened to be two ladies from the homeless shelter who were also attending the local community college. He mentioned that the women informed him about the FAFSA program and how he could receive money for things he needed such as paying for his schooling, his books, and taking care of his own personal needs with whatever money remained. He was sold at that point.

The theme *"Somebody Told Me"* reflects the various introductions to higher education after prison. Each of the participants, except for Olivia, expressed how various people in their self-described support network encouraged them to pursue a college degree when all other opportunities and resources presented barriers. Though there were variances in "who" told them about college, college was presented as the ultimate resource that would hopefully help them attain their employment goal and allow them to live a life that they envisioned as different from their past experiences.

The Feelings I Feel Inside

Throughout each of the interviews, participants discussed their initial feelings about returning to higher education after seeking and failing to obtain other resources (e.g., housing and employment). Some of the participants discussed their initial "hesitations" while others expressed their "fears," "irritations," and "excitement." For example, Edgar expressed his initial hesitations as well as his excitement to pursue college. He stated, "I was kind of, a little hesitant but at the same time it was kind of like, kind of exciting going, because this is a new journey that I never been through, I never done." Although he obtained a GED in prison he was not afforded an opportunity to advance his education in prison because he was considered too dangerous. Olivia also talked about her hesitations after being out of school for almost 20-years. She stated,

> *When I first decided to go back to school I had been out for like, oh gosh, 15-20 years and so when I decided to go back I was hesitant at first because I guess I was intimidated and I didn't know. I felt stupid because I was going and I'm going to ask what do I do? I guess that's the start of anything really. I took the bus down to [community college] was where I started in 2009. I passed the [community college] three times before I finally got the courage to get off to go.*

Like Olivia, the other participants were also intimidated by the length of time they had been away from an educational environment either because of the length of their incarceration or because they were in and out of jail on a consistent basis. While Edgar and Olivia expressed their hesitations, Daniel and Marco expressed their irritations and fears of pursuing an education after incarceration. For instance, Marco, who also obtained his GED while incarcerated, mentioned his irritations. He stated,

> *I get this, I don't know, there's something in my stomach that just turns and it irritates me, it bugs me, because I don't see it, you know what I mean? I want to see it. I come over here every day with my books. I read. I try to write. I try to do everything academically, you know what I mean? I just don't see it man, you know what I mean? I don't know what it is. Is it every time I close ... you know ... I'll see it, and then I start thinking of the future or what's going*

> *... the future's not nothing promising. I know we don't have nothing*
> *promised, but at least besides going to school.*

Daniel expressed his fears of pursuing an education because he didn't know anyone like him that was able to do it. He stated,

> *It was scary. It was scary, even thinking about it now, I get ... It*
> *was scary. It was one of the scariest things I've ever had to do. I*
> *don't know anybody who did it before. There was nobody I could*
> *ask, is this normal to feel this way? Anybody in general. I don't*
> *know anybody who went to school. I don't know anybody who did*
> *that. There wasn't nobody I could ask to say, should I be this*
> *scared? Should I be this nervous? Is this okay? Look at what I*
> *signed up for. Just look at it and let me know if I'm okay.*

Though they had fears and irritations of pursuing an education, Daniel and Marco decided to go through with it. In fact, each participant decided to face their initial feelings about pursuing a college education and decided to move forward in the process. Though they are still leery and uncertain about their outcomes after they graduate, they are hopeful that all this work will lead them to employment and a better life.

As a final synopsis of this theme, participants left prison and entered society with the sole intention of pursuing employment and housing. In preparing to leave prison, their primary concerns were of their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their families and each saw employment as an immediate solution. When the participants tried to seek employment, they were either denied the opportunity to work because of their criminal backgrounds or because they lacked the skills needed for a job. As a result, each of the participants turned to education hoping this resource would get them closer to employment. This theme, *The Feelings I Feel Inside,* demonstrates the various expressions and emotions, anchored in fear and anxiety, experienced by Daniel, Edgar, Marco, and Olivia when they first sought out educational opportunities.

Because of My Background

Background checks are not only used to find employment within the community, they are used in higher education settings to determine admissions, work-study employment eligibility, on campus housing eligibility, and a host of other areas. Background checks within the higher education system serve as a major barrier for people with criminal records. One of the ways in which the participants talked about how the backgrounds checks served as a barrier is when they tried to apply for housing and job opportunities both on campus and within the community. Olivia went as far to say, "Because of my background I have a lot of barriers as far as housing, certain places won't even look at me once I bring that up." She continued by stating,

> *Jobs, I know that I'm very limited for jobs which is one of the*
> *reasons why, again, I went back to school was to better myself and*
> *become educated and learn about different things and be more*
> *marketable with my education. Even then it's like it's not enough.*

This notion of education being a springboard for better opportunities is one of the many reasons why the participants pursued an education. However, the participants began to experience how difficult it was going to be when they had to encounter background/fingerprint checks on a continuous basis. Edgar shared a unique perspective about his record preventing him from obtaining a license as a social worker. Edgar's perspective reverberated across all the participants' narratives:

> *I find out later at school, the only thing that's going to block me from me achieving [my goals] and they would come out with my record or say something about my record, is when I have to go get my license to be a social worker, or at that time, a counselor. When I apply for those licenses they're going to, 'Hey you got a felony you can't get it,' then you got this, the highest felony you can have. That's where I was in my mind, because I got the highest felony, I have to go through a lot of loop hoops.*

Another way that background and fingerprint checks served as barriers within post-secondary educational settings was during opportunities for students to work on campus, a program for which all the participants within this study were eligible. The participants talked about how hard it was to find employment opportunities as well as scholarships because many on campus work opportunities required background checks and considered an individual's criminal history. However, before participants could apply for employment opportunities on campus, they would often have to complete fingerprint clearance and background checks to determine how "safe" they were. Olivia stated, "All I need is this level one [fingerprint clearance] and this tells people that I'm safe." Even when the participants would receive clearance their applications were still denied because of their criminal history. One example comes from Edgar who shared his experience applying for work-study opportunities:

> *It's been real hard for me to find scholarships, even work-study. I wasn't granted work-study. Everybody tried to look at it positively, that, oh, it might not be for that reason. I know it's the reason ... my record and my age ... that I can't get work-study. Because I qualify. I have passed the interviews real good, but I don't qualify for that position that I put in for. When you see the applications for that interview, it says that, 'We will train you or show you what to do.' Okay, I don't know how to do some of that stuff, but what happened to, We will show you and train you? All of a sudden, I don't qualify. Why? They won't tell me... I think it was my background. That person knew about my background.*

Throughout this section, we highlighted the various ways that background checks have served as a barrier or prevented the participants from engaging in educational opportunities. Despite these barriers, all the participants are still persevering through their academic journey. While it may be easy to assume that with time they will overcame these barriers and obstacles, as of now, all the participants are still having issues with background checks in higher education settings.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this exploratory constructivist study was to understand how a group of CSCRs experienced aspects of their college going decision, choice, and progress. The major perspectives from this study highlighted three important themes: *Somebody Told Me*, *The Feelings I Feel Inside*, and *Because Of My Background*, which provided some insight into CSCRs' experiences when pursuing some form of post-secondary education after incarceration. Because there were only four participants, it is important to understand that the participant perspectives within this study cannot be generalized to all CSCRs.

We used Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory to understand CSCRs' transition into post-secondary education. This theory helped us understand the ways in which CSCRs embarked on their

educational journeys post-incarceration. This theory also contributed to our understanding on the various types of transitions that CSCRs experience when pursuing higher education and provided a unique lens that helped us understand how transitioning into college as a CSCR contributes to changed behaviors and norms.

Numerous researchers highlight the importance of allocating resources and organizing learning opportunities and services in higher education institutions to ensure the success of their students (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011) especially since more diverse people are coming to college (Keller, 2001). However, there is a need for future research to focus on ways to cultivate more inclusive environments that include CSCRs on traditional two- and four-year college/university campuses. Many people with criminal backgrounds who have spent a significant amount of time incarcerated lack the appropriate educational and social competency to sustain themselves, let alone thrive, on a college or university campus (Albright & Denq, 1996).

Designating an advocate or a liaison position that specializes in assisting CSCRs' transition into the academic setting can help CSCRs navigate the college experience. Minoritized students, including CSCRs, need to feel supported in places where they are not the majority (Klem & Connell, 2004). It can be a difficult task navigating the academy with a "criminal" status. Thus, an advocate could be helpful in brokering relationships between CSCRs, prison education, and the higher education institution. If student affairs, academic affairs, and prison educators are not equipped to help CSCRs with the necessities of college such as providing proper advisement, financial support, and supportive networks, someone who is trained in these areas should be available for CSCRs to ensure their success at the school. To do this, institutions of higher learning must include CSCRs in the conversation of diverse student and invisible populations. Additionally, they must consider outside expertise if the expertise does not currently exist on their campus or in an associated department.

Participant perspectives collected in this study help us to understand a much larger and complex issue and one that reveals the general lack of institutional preparation for CSCRs attending college. Why are we enrolling CSCRs in college if they are not provided adequate resources to be successful? A great deal of research speaks to the role of supportive networks (McGowan, Palmer, Wood, & Hibbler Jr., 2016; Strayhorn et al., 2013), healthy campus climates (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006), experts and professionals (Kuh et al., 2011) to ensure all students' success as they transition into higher education. If research supports these notions for any student, then what are faculty, student affairs professionals, academics, and prison educators doing to collectively work together to ensure every CSCR's success?

Very little is known about campus environments and their impact on students with criminal histories (Strayhorn et al., 2013). First, there is a need for extensive research that identifies and investigates campus cultures as they relate to CSCRs' presence on college campuses. Second, there needs to be an acknowledgement of barriers that makes the transitions to and through higher education difficult for CSCRs. If there is not an effort to recognize, acknowledge, and address the barriers that often stigmatize this population, CSCRs will continue to experience challenges while transitioning through the educational system. Finally, research about available resources across various academic, student, and social environments, which cater to certain types of students, should be conducted to understand how resources can benefit multiple student identities (seen and unseen) and perspectives that differ from the "normal" or "ideal" student.

Practitioners within the field of higher education and student affairs professionals play a significant role in the experiences of college students. The participants in this study hinted at the need to create spaces and atmospheres that include various perspectives, identities, and cultures that may differ from the types of students that faculty and staff on a traditional campus might interact with on an everyday basis. Moreover, questions remain about how, when, and if CSCRs will self-identity and whose responsibility it is to initiate such disclosures. Many universities rely on the college application

to obtain demographic information and to track the types of students enrolling in their institutions. More specifically, the college application asks (and in many cases, requires) students to disclose their criminal histories and in return, prospective students experience various forms of discrimination and alienation depending on the nature of the crime and the higher education institution (Weissman, Rosenthal, Warth, Wolf, & Messina-Yauchzy, 2010). Effective ways to safely identify CSCRs should be identified so that adequate resources, support, and help can be provided to this vulnerable population as they transition into college settings.

Finally, prison higher education and public higher education (i.e., community colleges and universities) need to work together to ensure students leaving any penal institution are prepared and knowledgeable about college opportunities after incarceration. Transition programs like what is offered between community colleges and universities should be evaluated and revamped to ensure successful reentry back into society. Simply offering courses to incarcerated individuals, which is not afforded to every incarcerated individual (Tewksbury, Erickson, & Taylor, 2000), and with no strategic plan afterwards, is detrimental to CSCRs' success.

Limitations

One of the recognizable limitations of this study is the number of participants. While the use of only four CSCRs' perspectives might be a cause of concern for some, for us, as researchers and scholars, any amount of CSCR perspectives and experiences lends a useful and necessary lens to understand their needs and transitional experiences within a broader context, especially since we don't know how many students possess a "criminal" record.

Another limitation to this study is the absence of formerly incarcerated juveniles' perspectives. This study solely focused on the experiences and perspectives of CSCRs coming out of prison and not a juvenile detention facility. Having the voices of younger individuals with criminal histories and who are at the age where they should be college-ready could provide alternative and valuable perspectives. However, due to the complexities of obtaining consent for juveniles under the age of 18, our study reflects adults and only non-traditionally aged students over the age of 24.

Lastly, the absence of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and other salient identities in our findings is a limitation to this study. The researchers did not ask any questions pertaining to race/ethnicity although we do consider our study to be diverse in terms of our sample. Had we considered various intersections of identities, the participants might have provided different insights and experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study used an exploratory constructivist methodology to understand the transition experiences of four CSCRs in higher education. The CSCRs who participated in this study reflected on their introductions to higher education after incarceration, their initial feelings prior to pursuing college, and some identified barriers. The participant perspectives, categorized through three major themes (*Somebody Told Me, The Feelings I Feel Inside,* and *Because Of My Background*) revealed their unique experiences and the complex issues that CSCRs encounter while on college campuses. Though some research exists on CSCRs in higher education, this study argues that there is still more research needed to fully understand and support CSCRs in their collegiate endeavors in the future after incarceration.

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