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Incarcerated Students in Associate Degree Programs: Motivations and Challenges

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

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OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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Abstract

In the United States, recidivism rates remain a significant societal issue, with formerly incarcerated individuals returning to prison at alarmingly high rates. In California, the recidivism rate for formerly incarcerated people is approximately 41.9%. Education has been identified as a key factor in reducing recidivism, with research consistently demonstrating that higher education leads to lower rates of reoffending. In response to this, California has introduced community college education programs within state prisons, following the passing of Senate Bill 1391 in 2014. Despite the benefits of education in reducing recidivism, current research on currently incarcerated students' experiences in higher education programs remains limited, particularly in the context of California's evolving prison education landscape.

This study explored the motivations and challenges shared by incarcerated individuals participating in associate degree granting programs in California's state prisons. The study's aim was to understand what drives incarcerated students to pursue higher education and identify the obstacles they encounter that may hinder their participation or persistence. Having conducted interviews with currently incarcerated adult students, this research can provide valuable insights into their lived experiences, highlighting factors that influence their decisions to engage with higher education and the barriers they face in achieving academic success. The following questions grounded this study:

- (1) What motivates adult incarcerated students to participate in associate degree granting programs?
- (2) What challenges do adult incarcerated students encounter when participating in associate degree granting programs?

This study combined Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000) with Laura Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice (2006) to explore the motivations and challenges of incarcerated students in higher education programs. SDT presents a continuum of motivation ranging from extrinsic to intrinsic factors, emphasizing the importance of autonomy, relatedness, and competence in fostering intrinsic motivation. Supporting these psychological needs are crucial for enhancing motivation and engagement in learning. Findings from this study amplify that interactions with others, whether they be other students in an effort to build community; bonding opportunities with family members; or encouragement from teaching faculty—externally motivated individuals to pursue and/or persist in higher education while incarcerated. Additionally, hope of an early release was an incentive that initiated some students' curiosities about prison education and the various benefits they could gain from partaking in college while incarcerated. While extrinsic motivations spurred students to consider pursuing college degrees in a carceral facility, the knowledge and awareness gained through coursework eventually grew students' innate desire to pursue academics. From aspirations of a brighter future upon release given skills and information acquired, to a desire to change the narrative about the value and potential of incarcerated people for society at large, ambitions to persist turned inward.

Perna's Model of College Choice examines how various factors, from individual characteristics to broader systemic influences, affect students' decisions to pursue and persist in higher education. Incarcerated students' educational choices are shaped not only by personal motivations but also by the constraints and opportunities within the carceral system, including policies, available resources, and institutional support. By overlaying Perna's model on the prison education context, this study found institutional restrictions prevented access to necessary

resources like faculty, college preparation courses, consistent Wi-Fi, and conducive study spaces. Negative interactions with other incarcerated individuals and/or custody staff emphasized many students' resilience and determination to persist in their academics despite the disruptions. These institutional considerations impacted incarcerated students' sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The study explored how the interplay of these factors can influence incarcerated students' decisions to participate in, and persist through, higher education programs.

The findings of this study can contribute to the development, improvement, and growth of educational programs in California's prison system, providing insight for policymakers, educators, and correctional staff to better align resources and support structures with the needs and desires of incarcerated students at the forefront. By addressing these factors, this research aimed to inform strategies that can encourage incarcerated students' participation and persistence in higher education programs, thereby reducing recidivism and supporting successful reintegration into society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Issue

At the end of 2019, the United States had a prison population of 1,430,800 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020). In California, during that same year, in state prisons specifically, there were 122,417 incarcerated adults (National Institute of Corrections, n.d.). Many incarcerated people will eventually transition back into society; during the 2019 calendar year, 37,462 Californian incarcerated people were released and worked to integrate back into their communities (Prison Policy Initiative, 2024). In the state of California, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is responsible for providing opportunities to incarcerated people to help develop skills for living wage jobs upon release, as well as support them as they prepare to reintegrate into society (CDCR, 2024). Reintegration back into society is meant to be a permanent transition, however, individuals tend to reoffend at a 60% rate nationwide, also known as recidivism (Rosales, 2023). The recidivism rate in which formerly incarcerated people return to prison in California is approximately 41.9% (CDCR, 2024).

Education has been empirically proven to reduce recidivism rates for formerly incarcerated persons (Bozick, et al., 2018; Davis & Linton, 2021; Esperian, 2010; Stickle & Schuster, 2023; Taliaferro & Pham, 2017). “Higher education imbues a knowledge and sense of critical thinking that is beneficial to rehabilitation” (Evans et al., 2018, p. 273). The higher level a degree, the lower the rate of returning to prison; consider those who earn a bachelor’s degree and reduce their rate of recidivism from 60% to 5.6% nationwide versus those who do not (Rosales, 2023). Given rates of recidivism decrease when education increases, it behooves the state of California to provide educational opportunities to those currently incarcerated. Research literature from a wide range of academic institutions, non-profits, and state offices note the

benefits of education in reducing recidivism rates (Bozick, et al., 2018; Davis, 2013; Davis & Linton, 2021, Esperian, 2010; Stickle & Schuster, 2023; Taliaferro & Pham, 2017). Focusing on the high number of incarcerated people in state and federal prisons along with county jails and juvenile facilities, incarceration can serve as a prime opportunity to provide educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals. Recidivism is a societal concern, and education can be part of the solution. While it is imperative to understand how to increase access to education in carceral institutions, it is just as important to understand, on an individual level, what incarcerated people need and want in an effort to participate and persist in college while incarcerated.

Community college prison education programs are fairly new in California. With the passing of Senate Bill 1391, Chapter 695, Section 84810.7 in 2014, the CDCR opened the door to higher education institutions to provide instruction to incarcerated people in carceral settings (Senate Bill 1391, 2014). Not long after college programs began to show up in California state prisons, Proposition 57 was passed in November of 2016. Proposition 57 allowed implementation of the Milestone Completion Credit that provides opportunities to “incentivize incarcerated people to actively participate in rehabilitation (to include college programming), while earning time off of their sentence” (CDCR, Prop. 57). Current and future prison education programs may benefit in understanding the challenges that inhibit incarcerated people from participating and/or persisting in higher education, along with what motivates them to consider, and succeed in, college coursework. The Legislative Analyst's Office of California recently published a report that assessed community college programs at state prisons and noted, “term-to-term persistence rates for CCC (California Community College) students at state prisons are much lower than for CCC students overall” (Petek, 2024, p. 3). Given the number of

incarcerated, and the percentage of those who will reintegrate into society in the state of California (30.61% given the aforementioned 2019 data), this study can help identify ways in which law enforcement, educators, and policymakers can invest in, support, and create contexts and/or strategies within prisons that will appeal to incarcerated people to help drive participation and persistence in college-level programs up by better understanding their motivations and challenges.

An individual's desire to learn and/or acquire some level of competence is one of the many motivations formerly incarcerated individuals mentioned in existing literature (Petrich, 2020). In contrast, McKinney and Cotronea (2011) note some students are mandated to attend various educational opportunities, resulting in more of an extrinsic motivator. Comparatively, challenges noted in the literature include, but are not limited to: needing necessary resources/tools (i.e. textbooks, computer access; etc.) (Zitko, 2021); limited access/space in prison education programs; prison transfers impacting a student's progress; high level of security in the institution (Kaiser et al., 2024); as well as lack of support from officers and/or prison staff (Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019). Most experiences documented in the literature come from formerly incarcerated individuals in addition to a few surveys administered to and collected from, currently incarcerated students.

There is a lack of qualitative research exploring currently incarcerated students' experiences as they participate in higher education. While a United Kingdom (UK) based qualitative study was published in 2023 from The Howard League for Penal Reform, it examined currently incarcerated individual perceptions of prison education from those who were not engaged with any academic program (Slater, 2023). Additionally, there was a recent 2024 quantitative study of students' motivations and challenges participating in various prison-

sponsored programming, to include college education opportunities without de-aggregating the data by program (Kaiser, 2024). Perspectives of formerly incarcerated are only so useful in addressing the constantly changing landscape of prison education in California state prisons, current experience is more effective than retrospection as memories can fade over time. Additionally, formerly incarcerated individuals have been granted their freedom back, whereas those who are still incarcerated are using their time in a myriad of ways, to include, pursuing education. To allow policy makers, educators, and prison staff to generate relevant and real-time opportunities and resources for incarcerated students, examining currently incarcerated students' motivations and challenges is important so resources and opportunities can be aligned to the population's current desires to encourage the pursuit of, and persistence in, higher education.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Given the lack of literature from the United States revolving around currently incarcerated student experiences, the purpose of this study was to better understand what motivates incarcerated students to pursue courses in higher education leading to an associate's degree. Additionally, this study aimed to determine challenges incarcerated people may encounter that serve as a deterrent to pursuing, or persisting in, college courses while incarcerated.

With college education programs increasing in California's state prisons, it is imperative that academic institutions assess the various programs offered, as well as speak to incarcerated students about their experiences and what they would like to see education-wise, to be able to develop and/or improve program and course offerings. Interviewing currently incarcerated students provides an important perspective that is missing from contemporary, academic

literature. Considering the bureaucracy to enter a secure and confidential facility, along with the vulnerability of such a population, it is not surprising data is lacking, especially of the qualitative kind, relating to the experiences of incarcerated students.

The study's research questions were:

1. What motivates adult incarcerated students to participate in associate degree granting programs?
2. What challenges do adult incarcerated students encounter when participating in associate degree granting programs?

Chapter 2: Theoretical/Conceptual Frameworks

This study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000), along with Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice (2006) to consider both motivations and challenges from an individual perspective, as well as components from both the carceral and higher education systems.

Self-Determination Theory

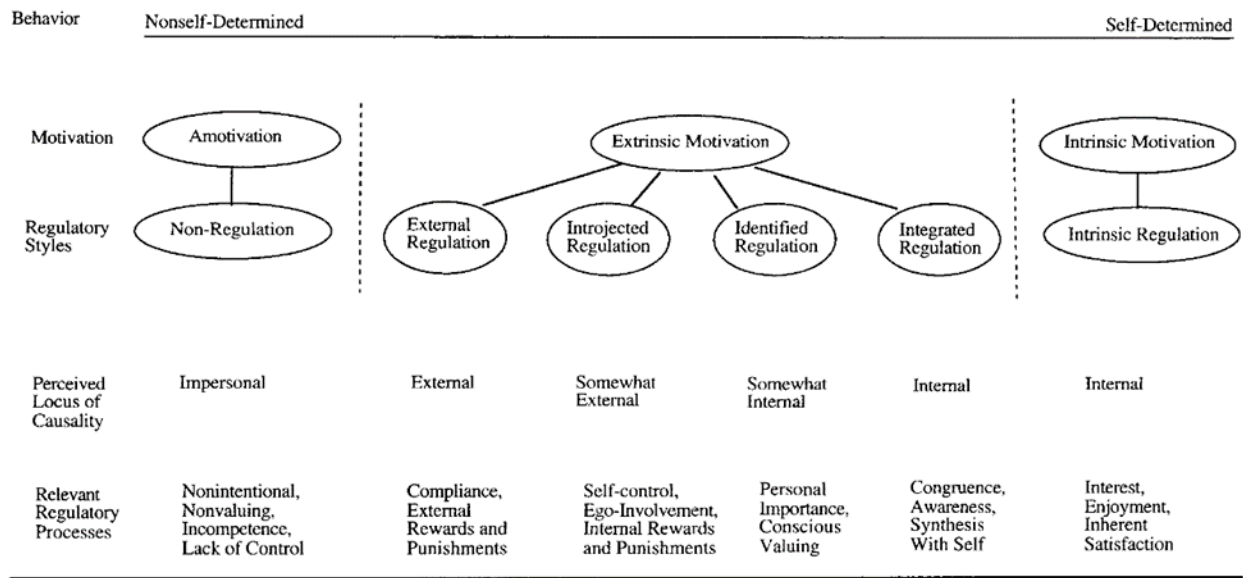
SDT provides a visual of a motivation continuum, with one end being extrinsic motivators, moving to the other end in varying forms of external motivators until it fully outlines intrinsic motivation.

Figure 1

The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation With Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes

Figure 1

The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation With Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes



Note. The figure above outlines SDT's continuum of motivation from "Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being" by R. Ryan & E. Deci, 2000, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), p. 72

(https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf).

Extrinsic motivation can be defined as "behaviors done for reasons other than their inherent satisfactions" (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 3). In contrast, intrinsic motivation can be described as a "natural inclination toward assimilation, mastery, spontaneous interest, and exploration that is so essential to cognitive and social development and that represents a principal source of enjoyment and vitality throughout life" (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Ryan, 1993, as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). The continuum offers up considerations that may impact specific motivations, becoming more personal and/or innate the closer to intrinsic motivations

one moves. Additionally, SDT outlines three psychological needs that lead to an individual being more intrinsically motivated: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

McKinney and Cotronea (2011) in their article, use the following definitions for autonomy, relatedness, and competence:

- Autonomy: one's desire to direct their own decisions and life choices.
- Relatedness: "the universal need to interact with others and to feel connected to the group as a whole" (Baumesiter and Leary, 1995, as cited in McKinney, 2011, p. 178).
- Competence: "being effective in a given situation and/or environment" (Filak and Sheldon, 2008, as cited in McKinney, 2011, p. 178).

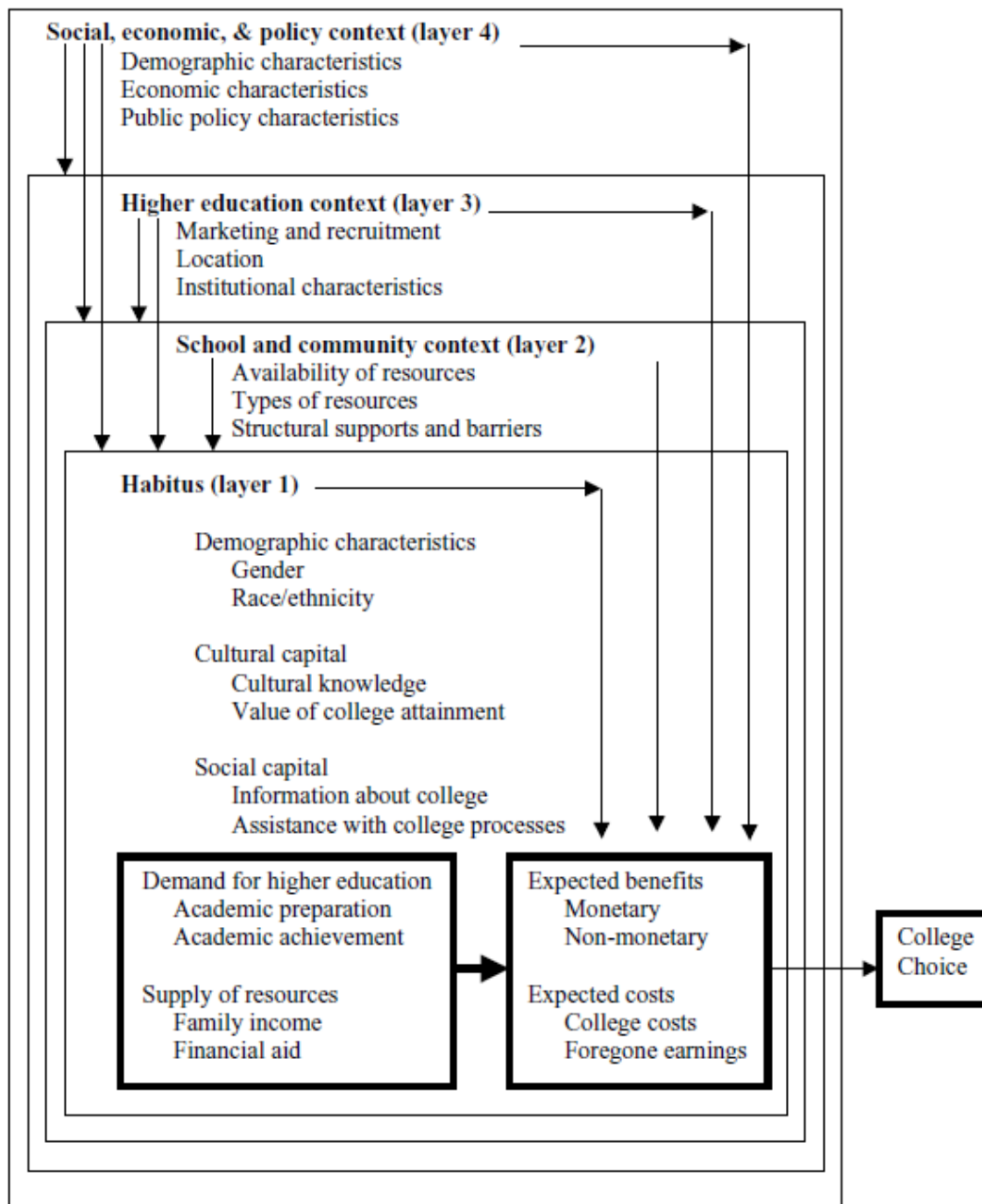
Some studies, as they relate to SDT, explored conditions in which those three needs were met by fostering and developing social environments to enhance an individual's motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, prison educators can consider integrating curriculum with materials that "incorporate students' life experiences, background knowledge, and cultures into their readings, exercises, and discussions" (Novak, 2019, p. 64). Volunteer prison educators' reflections of their time teaching in prisons echoes and supports SDT as noted in "Making Meaning: Reflections on the Act of Teaching in Prison," via the direct quote, 'Teaching must not be something done *to* the incarcerated student, nor misconstrued as something done *for* the incarcerated student, but *with* them' (Scott, 2003, as cited in Novek, 2019, p. 61). The "with them" ending to the aforementioned statement infers an individual's desire to make decisions, to interact with others and build connections, as well as show one's credibility and worth in conversation and interactions with others.

Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice

While SDT focuses more on an individual's pursuits, Perna's Model of College Choice (2006) outlines various influences that impact a student's choice of college enrollment and in turn, persistence, to include system considerations. Carceral institutions are their own micro-environments with imposed restrictions, security measures, and other ingrained ways of operating that may impact an individual's motivation to pursue higher education while incarcerated. Perna's nested model also considers macro-influences of student college choice such as policy impacts and economic influences (layer 4), to the micro-level of the individual (layer 1) and their demographic characteristics and academic preparedness, along with their expected benefits of obtaining an education (Perna, 2006). This model of college choice considers both economic and sociological individual and systems perspectives to examine enrollment decisions based on one's situated context (Perna, 2006).

Figure 2

Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice



Note. The figure above illustrates Perna's Model of College Choice and its four-layer nested framework. From "Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model" by Perna, L. W. (2006), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (pp. 99-157). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

One of the highlighted considerations in Perna's nested model is expected monetary and/or non-monetary benefits of college enrollment which could also be considered motivating factors. Situating this nested model next to SDT, an incarcerated student's motivations and

challenges can be viewed through the lens of the system in which they find themselves in, the educational opportunities they have available and can access, and the benefits they can garner by participating in said educational opportunities.

This study aimed to consider how the different components of Perna's model, overlaid on a carceral institution, impacted an incarcerated student's autonomy, relatedness, and competence when reflecting on their prison education experience(s). Both SDT and Perna's Model of College Choice offer valuable frameworks for understanding the complex motivations behind educational pursuits, particularly in challenging environments such as prisons. SDT highlights how motivation exists on a continuum from extrinsic to intrinsic, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence to enhance student engagement, and in turn, cultivate intrinsic motivation. Perna's model provides a broader perspective, considering both individual factors and systemic influences that may impact educational choices. For incarcerated individuals, factors such as institutional restrictions, economic barriers, and personal goals intersect to shape their motivations to pursue education or not. By integrating insights from both SDT and Perna's model, educators and policymakers can better understand and address the needs of incarcerated students, creating more supportive and motivating learning environments that promote long-term success and rehabilitation.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

Per the CDCR mission statement, part of the correctional institution's role in the state of California is to provide rehabilitative services and programs to the incarcerated population. Some of these programs are mandated, while others are voluntary. Education avenues in the form of general education development (GED) completion, vocational training, and higher education are usually the options one has within a carceral institution. Class options via higher education institutions (two and four years) continue to grow each year in the state of California as resources are allocated and interest continues to be strong.

Higher education could be considered a triple threat in terms of benefits to not only the prison system, but also the individuals who capitalize on these opportunities while incarcerated. Firstly, prison education has been thoroughly researched to be a less costly alternative than repeated incarceration (Hwang & Duara, 2024). Secondly, various scholars have asserted that providing prison education programs is a benefit to society and also encourage policy makers, sociologists, educators and the like, to consider the benefits to the individual and support education for those incarcerated as a human right versus only a tool (Esperian, 2010; Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019). Rod Clark (2016), in “How Education Transforms,” writes that prison education should support an individual’s personal development needs rather than only focusing on employability. Lastly, education has been empirically proven to reduce an individual’s return to crime, and thus, the prison system, also known as recidivism (Bozick, et al., 2018; Davis & Linton, 2021; Esperian, 2010; Stickle & Schuster, 2023; Taliaferro & Pham, 2017). Scholars have determined that one of the main reasons education reduces recidivism is due to the work-related skills an individual gains when participating in vocational and/or college programs.

Gregory Magee (2021) notes, “One of the top leading causes of crime and recidivism is unemployment” (p. 177). Education offers incarcerated individuals the opportunity to develop employment skills, which then allows them a better chance at finding a job and maintaining employment upon release, which in turn decreases the need, desire, and/or desperation to engage in criminal activity.

Education Reduces Recidivism Rates

Education and its many benefits, including employability skills, and has been studied at length in a variety of contexts and with multiple populations, encompassing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Of the many studies that have been conducted, the RAND Corporation is at the forefront of investigating prison education with support from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance, with leading experts Lois Davis and Robert Bozick having pulled together multiple meta-analyses. In their 2013 meta-analysis, Davis and Bozick’s team searched for scientific literature published between 1980 to 2011 to synthesize studies and their findings about the effectiveness of prison education (focusing on academic and vocational programs), specifically in correctional facilities, and the impact of those programs “in helping to reduce recidivism and improve employment outcomes for incarcerated adults within U.S. state prisons” (p. xv). The literature produced was rated using the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale and the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse rating scheme. As a result, Davis and Bozick’s team found a relationship between correctional education programs reducing an individual’s risk of recidivating. Specifically, Davis and Bozick note, “inmates who participated in correctional educational programs had *43 percent lower odds of recidivating* than inmates who did not” (p. xvi).

In the article, “The Effect of Prison Education Programs on Recidivism,” John Esperian (2010), argues that it is more cost efficient for states to focus on prison education, versus “long term warehousing” of inmates (p. 316). Esperian pulled numbers from peer reviewed studies, as well as U.S. Congressional data to demonstrate the benefit of education and its effects in lowering recidivism rates. Qualitative data was reviewed across the United States from many workers within carceral institutions to better understand how individuals feel about educating incarcerated individuals as well as what they know about prison education. The majority of comments quoted in the article were in favor of prison education, granted, comments from those who were interviewed and perhaps do not support these educational opportunities may not have been included in the study’s final findings.

Another meta-analysis published in 2018, led by Bozick, studied whether engaging in education while in prison reduced incarcerated persons chances of recidivating. After looking through 37 years of research (1980-2017), the team identified 57 studies on correctional education that focused on recidivism as the outcome. The effect size from each study was abstracted using a random-effects regression. The findings were clear: “inmates participating in correctional education programs were 28% less likely to recidivate when compared with inmates who did not participate in correctional education” (p. 389).

Costs of Incarceration Versus Costs of Education

Education for incarcerated people is presented in the literature two-fold: (a) as a benefit to society given it costs less to educate versus (re)incarcerate; (b) education can cultivate social transformation (Novek, 2019).

Annually, incarceration can cost upwards of \$132,860 per person in California, whereas a private, California university’s annual tuition can hover around \$66,640 (Hwang & Duara,

2024). Costs of incarceration include overhead fees to maintain facilities, officer and staff salaries and retirement contributions, inmate medical care, along with rehabilitation programming and activities (Hwang & Duara, 2024). As educational opportunities become more prevalent in prisons, incarcerated people have avenues in which to develop work-related skills to strengthen their employability upon release, supporting reduced recidivism rates, which in turn could save the state money regarding incarceration costs. Post-release outcomes such as securing employment are a boon to society at large, as well as to the individual who did the work to build their skillset and obtain employment. “If programs in prison can provide inmates with skills that improve their post-release outcomes, they can reduce the indirect costs of incarceration and reduce the future costs of incarceration through reduced recidivism” (Stickle & Schuster, 2023, p. 1264). Similarly, the Ministry of Justice in the United Kingdom aims to offer prison education programs that support post-release employment opportunities (Slater, 2023). A 2023 meta-analysis of papers written between 1980 to 2023 was published in the American Journal of Criminal Justice reviewed the impacts of various forms of prison education in the United States, to include: adult basic education (ABE), secondary, vocational, and college opportunities (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). The researchers found that vocational and college education programs resulted in the largest decreases of recidivism as well as the largest increase in post-release employment and wages (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). This specific meta-analysis broke down the various returns across the different education types, forming the conclusion that each form of education is more financially prudent as opposed to the higher costs of reincarceration. Additionally, another study found that “the return on investment for prison education is between 2.5 and 5 to 1. This means that for every dollar invested in prison education, taxpayers save between \$2.50 and \$5.00 in reincarceration costs” (Bozick, 2018 as cited in Workforce

Professionals, n.d., p. 3). Fewer incarcerated people in prison, lowers costs to the state of California.

The consistent and pervasive argument of taxpayers funding prison education when no one paid for said taxpayers' children to attend college often vilifies this avenue of rehabilitation—the belief that punitive consequences are warranted rather than restorative programming. The idea of 'rewarding' prisoners is viewed as supremely "unfair to crime victims and their families" (Page, 2004, as cited in Wade, 2021, p. 18). However, many educators and prison staff will attest to the right of education for all, including incarcerated individuals. "We cannot bar the most vulnerable people from the very thing that has the greatest potential to change their lives" (Esperian, 2010, p. 331). The facilitation of prison education allows incarcerated individuals to grow their knowledge and awareness of the world around them, as well as increase their literacy, which aids in maintaining a sense of calm (Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019). Additionally, the change in behavior among incarcerated people who participate in college courses illustrates the transformational power of education and demonstrates their ability to exercise positive behavior traits once reintegrated into society (Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019).

In Courtney's (2019) article the argument is made that solely measuring the success of prison education via recidivism rates creates a gap in the research regarding immediate impacts of education (p. 44). Courtney goes on to determine whether or not education reduces strains in prison, situated in the framework of General Strain Theory (GST). The strains Courtney (2019) considers are: loss of something valued; treatment in a negative manner; and inability to obtain goals and how these strains contribute to misconduct in a prison environment. Courtney's causal-comparative study provided a pre-test and post-test to include a control to determine if there was a difference in misconduct rates by inmates who participated in prison education as opposed to

those who did not. The control group was those study participants who did not engage in educational opportunities—if this group’s data resembled the results of those in academic programs, then the reduction, or lack thereof, in misconduct could be attributed to a different institutional or societal factor. Using a Mann-Whitney U test analysis Courtney (2019) determined that there was a “significantly greater reduction in infractions in the participation condition (those who engaged in education programming) ($M = 0.52$, $SD = 2.26$) than in the nonparticipation control condition ($M = -0.09$, $SD = 1.90$)” (p. 54). Reducing misconduct in prisons may hold a foreshadowing effect for when incarcerated individuals reintegrate into society.

Dean of Special Programs at Solano College in California (to include prison education partnerships), Dr. Peter “Tony” Zitko (2021), alludes to the emotional and societal benefit, not just financial, as it pertains to offering college courses in prison when he writes, “Higher education is a proven rehabilitation model that helps make society, both inside and outside the prison walls, a safer and more humane environment” (p. 167). Zitko’s point is echoed by other researchers who assert that education supports personal skill building to include: social awareness, problem-solving skills, coping strategies, mental health benefits, as well as confidence (Slater, 2023; Evans et al., 2018).

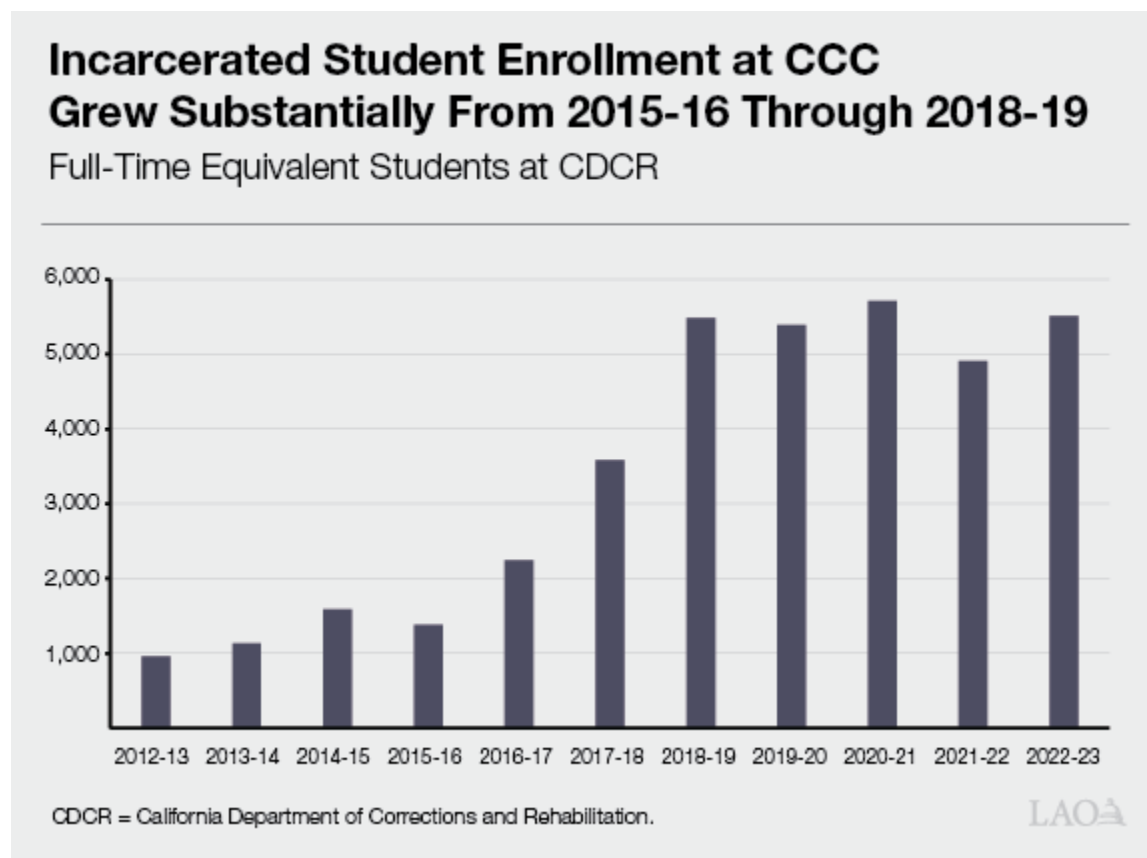
Prison Education Programs in California

Prison education programs in the United States, and specifically in the state of California, have endured multiple peaks and valleys in the offerings provided to incarcerated students. After numerous opportunities and subsequent withdrawals of Federal Pell grants to incarcerated students over the years, the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program funded by the U.S. Department of

Education was established in 2015. This program offered Pell Grants to qualified incarcerated individuals so they could participate in post-secondary education (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2022). Pell Grant opportunities are no longer awarded via a pilot program; as of July 1, 2023, Pell Grants have been made available to all incarcerated students who meet eligibility criteria (CDCR Press Office, 2023). With the increase of financial means to participate in higher education, an increase in interest has followed, driving colleges and universities to partner with carceral institutions across the country. Figure 3 below from California's Legislative Analyst's Office shows the continued annual increase of incarcerated students enrolled full-time in community college coursework (Petek, 2024). (The chart does not include students enrolled in less than twelve units per term which would likely add hundreds more.)

Figure 3

Incarcerated Student Enrollment at CCC Grew Substantially From 2015-16 Through 2018-19



Note. The figure above shows full-time incarcerated student enrollment in California from Assessing community college programs at state prisons by Petek, G. (2024, July 1). California Legislative Analyst Office.

<https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Detail/4913>

Senate Bill 416, approved in 2021, requires all of CDCR managed prisons offer some sort of college coursework from an accredited higher education institution in California (California State Assembly, 2021). Per Petek’s 2024 report, the majority of California’s 34 state prisons provide in-person instruction for associate degree applicable courses through one or more of California’s 116 community colleges (p. 7). The Rising Scholars Network is vast throughout the state of California, supporting in-person, virtual, and/or correspondence community college courses in carceral facilities (Rising Scholars Network, 2021). Additionally, some four-year

public universities within California offer programs and classes, granted, these are not as numerous and students must meet additional requirements to take classes via four-year institutions, incarcerated or not.

Specific academic-carceral partnerships are increasing accessibility for currently incarcerated students to provide more opportunities to work toward a college degree. For example, Mount Tamalpais College, an accredited, private community college is located within San Quentin State Prison (Smith, 2023). This community college is partnering with the California State University system (CSU) to create pathways for (formerly) incarcerated students to continue on to a four-year university post-release (Weissman, 2023). Project Rebound, a California State University initiative, aims to support formerly incarcerated individuals as they finish their four-year degree (Project Rebound). Additionally, UC campuses offer support and advocacy to formerly incarcerated individuals through the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI, Berkeley). Lastly, UC Riverside and UC Irvine, in southern California, offer in-prison opportunities to complete bachelor's degrees through LIFTED (Lifted, 2023).

California community colleges offer transferable coursework in addition to associate degrees and industry-approved certifications. With 116 campuses across the state of California, the California Community College system is supremely situated to work in partnership with CDCR to provide incarcerated individuals access to college courses to best position students to finish associate's degrees and/or pursue bachelor's degrees upon release.

Motivations

Motivating factors that may influence incarcerated individuals to pursue a formal education are many. This section will be divided by first looking at literature revolving around

formerly incarcerated, both at the individual level, then, at the systemic level. Next, a review of the literature that has insight and data on currently incarcerated student motivations will be covered.

Individual Motivations of Formerly Incarcerated Students

When formerly incarcerated individuals reflected on their educational pursuits in prison education programs, they shared both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, resulting in tangible and/or intangible gains. The researchers who wrote “Doing Time Wisely: The Social and Personal Benefits of Higher Education in Prison” conducted semi-structured interviews with four formerly incarcerated students who took courses via Boston University’s (BU) Prison Education Program in addition to administering a 12-item questionnaire (Baranger, 2018). The study’s aim was to better understand the lived experiences of students who participated in the prison education program. The students interviewed were all women who participated in one semester or more of courses through BU while incarcerated; in addition, three former faculty members, all men, who taught in the program were also interviewed. Results of the study were overall positive of BU’s prison education program. “All students reported that the interaction with faculty played a role in improving their reentry into the community” (p. 500). In addition, participation in BU’s prison education program “helped to motivate” the former students as they worked toward other goals in their lives and the faculty interviews validated this claim (pp. 500-501). Students also liked participating in the program because it gave them something to do and a break from the realities of prison life. Furthermore, students learned valuable skills that would benefit them upon release, such as bettering their communication through public speaking-related courses as they watched faculty model strong and positive personal interactions (p. 503). Another powerful outcome for these students was the opportunity to build strong connections with other students in

the program. Establishing and maintaining relationships seemed to be the popular, abstract motivating factor for students to participate in prison education. The literature highlights how education supports relationship building, it also provides the opportunity for incarcerated students to redefine their self-worth and defy entrenched stigmas.

Another prevalent, abstract benefit of education noted in the literature is incarcerated individuals ridding themselves of negative stigmas by increasing their sense of self-empowerment and motivation (Evans et al., 2018). Douglas Evans, in his article “Education in Prison and Self-Stigma: Empowerment Continuum,” wrote that “educational experience contributed to a reduction in the shame they [inmates] were conditioned to feel while serving their sentences in prison” (p. 268). Education can offer new and different perspectives, encouraging students to challenge what they think they know and to potentially reframe experiences, situations, and circumstances.

Exercising purposeful sampling, Evans and his team interviewed 18 formerly incarcerated individuals in New York state to explore how self-stigma manifested when they reentered society and how education impacted said stigma. Grounded theory was used to identify themes and concepts in the data. Of the negative emotions shared by participants, shame and hopelessness were prevalent during imprisonment as well as during reintegration to society. The shift in thinking of oneself as a student as opposed to an inmate changed the individuals’ own self-concepts helping to purge the negative perceptions and stigmas of self. In addition, “Respondents by and large spoke about how participation in the education program was a positive experience that helped them develop a stronger work ethic, study routines, and critical thinking skills” (Evans et al., 2018, p. 269). This shift in self-perception, coupled with the development of critical skills, lays the foundation for both intangible benefits, such as improved

confidence and communication, and tangible achievements, like earning degrees and certificates that symbolize progress and open doors to future opportunities.

Included in intangible gains is confidence to better communicate with others as well as a sense that education offered them some sort of promotion in society—that they could engage in social circles that they perhaps did not before (Evans et al., 2018). The academic record, transcript, and/or diploma(s) are physical manifestations of a student’s education. When considering tangible benefits of education, many formerly incarcerated students participated in higher education prison programs to earn credits/units that would ultimately lead to an advanced degree that would then, hopefully, improve their job skills, prospects, and aid in their reintegration into society (Evans et al., 2018). While intangible gains like improved mental health, better communication skills, and the like are to be celebrated, formerly incarcerated individuals felt that the physical academic record, the “completion of a college degree would be a clear sign to their families and significant others of their progress and accomplishments” (Evans et al., 2018, p. 270). These reflections highlight how participation in prison education programs extends beyond personal growth, cultivating a sense of community, mentorship, and civic responsibility that enriches the educational environment for all involved.

Systemic Motivations From Formerly Incarcerated Students

While motivations stemming from a carceral setting seem to be limited, the majority of respondents from Binda’s (2020) study commented on the importance of the educator-student relationship. Faculty who recognized students’ independence, communicated high expectations, and provided valuable feedback supported students to engage with the course content in meaningful ways (Binda, 2020). Tangential to faculty interactions and their perceptions of

students, is the rigor of individual courses. One respondent mentioned he was impacted by the teachers who “never taught me what to think; they just taught me the ability to think” alluding to professors recognizing students’ abilities to consider the course content and exercise their intelligence in conversations with one another and the class assignments (Binda, 2020, p. 257). These findings offer a deeper understanding of the various institutional systems that impact incarcerated individuals to engage in educational programs, highlighting the complex interplay between personal growth, social connection, and the pursuit of knowledge.

Individual Motivations of Currently Incarcerated Students

A quantitative study published in 1993 by Parson and Langenback sought to better understand why incarcerated individuals participate in GED programs offering valuable insights into the factors that drive educational engagement in correctional settings. Using factor analysis, they found that survey items loaded into four main factors (cognitive control; goal orientation; activity orientation; and avoidance posture). Two hundred five incarcerated students completed a 40-item Prison Educational Participation Scale (PEPS) adapted from Roger Boshier’ five factor instrument from 1983. The intrinsic motivational items with loadings of .70 or greater were: “To seek knowledge for its own sake” (.74) (competence); “To learn just for the joy of learning” (.70) (competence); “To increase my status” (.70) (autonomy); “To make new friends” (.71) (relatedness); “To fulfill a need for friendship” (.72) (relatedness) (p. 40). A more recent study further validates the findings of Parson and Langenback, emphasizing the central role of intrinsic motivation, such as the desire to learn and achieve educational goals, in driving participation in prison education programs.

In 2017, a study was published that took place in Flanders, Belgium exploring factors that motivated pre-trial incarcerated people to participate in prison education programs (Halimi,

2017). A standardized questionnaire, translated into 12 languages, was provided to 486 participants with a response rate of 73.97% (Halimi, 2017). Of those 486 responses, 133 of those individuals had actually participated in prison education programs before or during the research study (Halimi, 2017). After creating seven motivation orientations, the researchers then divided those into micro and meso-level categories assigning a 0 score to “not having this motivation” and a 1 score to “having this motivation” (Halimi, 2017, p. 12). Using multiple regression analyses (descriptive, bivariate, and logistic) the most common motivator was “the desire to learn” at 63.2% among the participants, along with the goal to earn a degree at 54.7% (Halimi, 2017, p. 3). The study notes that there was a difference in motivations based on age, education prior to incarceration, and/or length of sentence; the average age of participants who were involved in the research project was 33.56 years (Halimi, 2017). The researchers concluded that “Learning because of intrinsic motivation is the most frequently indicated motive and is part of the learning orientation” (Halimi, 2017, p. 22). This study’s results align with Novek’s (2019) reflective article when they wrote that volunteer teachers “encountered incarcerated students hungry for learning, dedicated to self-improvement, and grateful for teachers who take their aspirations seriously” (p. 58).

Another European study published in 2012 (Manger) explored how prisoner motives to pursue education might have differed from those of the general population. The researchers created a 15-question survey to better understand if participant motivation included any of the three main categories: ‘future planning,’ ‘social reasons and escapism,’ and ‘competence building’ when considering educational pursuits in prison (Manger, 2012). In addition, the survey requested demographic and former educational information. The survey was distributed to all incarcerated individuals in Norwegian prisons over the age of 18, which, at the time of the

study, was 3,359. More than half responded to include survey results from 2,065 people. A principal axis was used to factor analyze and then factor loadings and their correlations were identified. Factor 1, 'future planning,' accounted for the majority of the variance at 48.6%, while the other two landed at 12.7% and 7.3%, respectively. The research team also conducted a logistic regression analysis to include demographic information to determine if age, gender, former education, etc., influenced prison education participation or not. Findings from the logistic regressions showed that the "the chance of participating in education decrease slightly with increasing age" (p. 252). Additionally, a longer sentence length was associated with a greater likelihood of prison education participation, while gender and educational level did not show any association. Together, these studies highlight the profound impact of intrinsic motivators on incarcerated individuals' engagement in education, emphasizing the importance of fostering a supportive and meaningful learning environment in prison settings.

Systemic Motivations of Currently Incarcerated Students

Roberson (2022) wanted to detail, through an autoethnography, his own experiences as a prison educator and the importance of the student-teacher relationship as it relates to championing perseverance in academic attainment, specifically in a carceral setting. Roberson studied his experiences, having taught in prison education programs, to reflect on the connections made with incarcerated students and the impact said connections had on the students' experiences. Roberson (2022) spoke with students whom he worked with, one in particular who was about to be released and told Roberson that they were "the key reason he [incarcerated student] would leave [prison] with an Associates of Arts degree" (p. 2503). Roberson (2022) goes on to write that the human connection he made with the student helped aid the student in his success in the program. Ultimately, Roberson's (2022) reflection emphasizes

the impact meaningful, supportive relationships between educators and incarcerated students can have on academic success and personal transformation.

Building on the importance of educator-student relationships, Reese's (2019) study further emphasizes the positive influence of external instructors on incarcerated students' academic experiences and their outlook on post-release success. Providing a self-assessment to incarcerated students, Reese (2019) and his team wanted to “gauge the impact” of the Prison Education Project (PEP) that served, at the time of the article’s publication, 12 of California’s correctional facilities. Self-assessments were provided to students using a Likert scale to better understand if students thought different courses they completed would benefit them when paroled. Data was gathered from the program’s orientation and from participants in three of the non-credit bearing courses the PEP offered in 2016. Comments from incarcerated students overwhelmingly mentioned PEP volunteers as helpful and encouraging, positively impacting their education experience (Reese, 2019). Reese’s (2019) main takeaway echoes that of Roberson’s (2022) experiences: the student/outsider-teacher relationship is crucial to incarcerated student success in academic programs. The transformative power of supportive educator-student relationships in prison education underscores their critical role in promoting academic success and preparing incarcerated individuals for reintegration into society.

Expanding on the role of interpersonal connections in prison education, an ethnographic study further explored how interactions between incarcerated and non-incarcerated students within a prison-university partnership created meaningful academic dialogue and challenged societal perceptions of social groups. A small-scale ethnographic study published in 2019 observed a prison-university education partnership program, one in which traditional university students took a class in a carceral setting alongside incarcerated students (O’Grady, 2019). In

addition to observations, interviews were conducted with 19 participants. During interviews with incarcerated and non-incarcerated students, both groups shared the value of academic conversation with one another, proving to “influence the ways in which different societally constructed social group[s] can be reimagined” (O’Grady, 2019, p. 83). In addition, the incarcerated students “articulate a thirst for a culture of ‘normality’—to be able to talk and interact with others” (O’Grady, 2019, p. 84). The researchers also noticed that the value each individual placed on their education impacted their attendance as well as engagement in the class. This study illustrates the power of collaborative learning environments in reshaping perceptions and promoting a sense of normalcy and belonging for incarcerated individuals, enhancing their engagement and educational experience.

Author, educator, researcher, and political leader Dr. Meghan Kallman (2019) published a study further exploring how the prison context influences the learning environment, highlighting the impact of individual reflection, community interactions, and mutual respect in fostering academic success. Kallman (2019) engaged in inductive analysis as they reflected on their own experience teaching community college courses in state prison in conjunction with observations they kept. Kallman (2019) also held 10 interviews with currently incarcerated students as well as with two students post-release. Using grounded coding, Kallman (2019) highlighted three themes in which “prison context shapes student learning” (p. 325). The themes were: individual learning; communal interactions in learning; and teacher-student dynamics (Kallman, 2019). Despite the prison environment, one in which the structure may not seem conducive to achieving one’s academic goals, the solitary experience of incarceration, for some, helped individuals carve out time to focus on their studies (Kallman, 2019). Rather than engage in distractions as they did before incarceration, perspectives seemed to have shifted as well as the

value they placed on learning. Additionally, when incarcerated students found others with similar goals and values, positive interactions increased and learning became “a community effort” (Kallman, 2019, p. 327). Students learned with one another, taught each other, and cheered for each other’s success(es). Students also brought up the notion that other people in the classroom self-selected to be there, so there tended to be less tension as the class, in and of itself ‘creates a neutral environment’ (Kallman, 2019, p. 327). Lastly, in line with the classroom being more so neutral territory is the idea of promoting respect between the teacher and students. Being spoken “with,” instead of “to,” impacted the students as they felt as though they were listened to and their perspectives were valued which in turn, helped students to engage with the course material (Kallman, 2019, p. 328). This study highlights that respectful, community-oriented learning environments in prison can encourage positive peer interactions and supportive teacher relationships to enhance incarcerated students' educational experiences.

Challenges

Challenges and/or barriers that may inhibit an individual from pursuing a formal education are many. This section will be divided by first looking at literature revolving around formerly incarcerated, both at the individual level, then, at the systemic level. Next, a review of the literature that has insight and data on currently incarcerated student challenges will be reviewed.

Individual Challenges of Formerly Incarcerated Students

Overcoming the self-stigma of incarceration was a motivator to persist in prison education programs for many students, it was also a challenge for incarcerated people to find the wherewithal to start moving on in spite of said perceptions as “prison life and the transition to

becoming an inmate damaged self-esteem and self-confidence” (Evans, et al., 2018, p. 271). Runell (2016) conducted a qualitative study, having interviewed 34 formerly incarcerated individuals in 2012 to better understand prison environment strains that impacted student learning. Of the 34 interviewed, 30 were men, three were women, and one was a transgender person with an average age of 28 years old. While the study was able to identify reasons as to why students pursued higher education experiences while incarcerated, much of what was shared was reflective of the challenges students encountered as they work toward furthering their education. Many of the participants mentioned the lack of commitment by other students impacting the classroom dynamics “because not all students seemed to take education seriously” which then contributed to disruptions (Runell, 2016, p. 97). Additionally, students had to be mindful of gang compositions in a classroom and potential conflict (Runell, 2016). Another challenge pulled from the literature is from BU’s prison education program noting the need for students in carceral settings to be taught study skills so they did not feel unprepared to take college courses (Baranger, 2018). In that same study, students mentioned difficulties in finding spaces in which to study without interruption (Baranger, 2018, p. 504). Despite the challenges and environmental strains faced by incarcerated students, such as self-stigma and classroom disruptions, the persistence to continue their education highlights their resilience and the transformative potential of prison education programs.

Returning to the aforementioned Boston University (BU) Prison Education Program, the current Program Director conducted a phenomenological study to better understand formerly incarcerated student perceptions of the challenges they encountered while participating in BU’s courses (Conway, 2024). Using a college student thriving framework, the researcher’s aim was to explore the biggest barriers inhibiting positive student experiences in the program, framing

questions around students' perceptions of themselves; engagement with their learning; effort and self-regulation execute while enrolled in the program; and acceptance of social engagement and diversity (with students, staff, and faculty participating and/or supporting the program. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 formerly incarcerated students, identifying as male or female with a median age of 43 years old (Conway, 2024, p. 85).

Via a phenomenological approach, using a multi-step analysis to include coding and theming, Conway reported three student thriving themes that encountered challenges. The lack of space within the prison impacted students from excelling and/or participating in their courses as they desired. While they would use the resources available to them, they were often outdated, such as research materials available in the small library. Additionally, quiet space in which to study was difficult to come by due to the absence of privacy and the tumultuous prison environment. Former students in BU's program also mentioned the inability to choose a more multi-faceted curriculum that was personally interesting or helped them with their future job skills. BU's program is primarily liberal studies focused, and while students were grateful for the education opportunities they did have while incarcerated, they wanted coursework that connected better to their post-release occupational goals. Lastly, and both an individual and systemic challenge, students were concerned for different reasons about their stability at a specific institution. The constant concern that an individual could be transferred to a different institution, thus, impacting their academic progress seemed to be a persistent stressor. Whether due to good behavior, and being transferred to a lower-security facility, or disciplinary action, which could also result in a transfer, incarcerated students felt they were often at the mercy of the carceral institution which could negatively impact their time to degree.

Formerly incarcerated students faced numerous individual challenges that hindered their educational progress, their resilience in overcoming these obstacles highlights their determination to succeed. The studies by Evans et al. (2018), Runell (2016), Baranger (2018), and Conway (2024) shed light on personal barriers such as self-stigma, low self-esteem, the struggle to stay focused in disruptive environments, and limited access to study space and resources. These personal struggles are compounded by the difficulty of navigating a prison culture that may undermine students' educational aspirations.

Systemic Challenges of Formerly Incarcerated Students

Of the challenges mentioned in the literature by formerly incarcerated individuals, systemic and/or institutional barriers seemed to be more prevalent than individual constraints. As Runell (2016) and their team analyzed individual challenges to participating in educational programs, they were also able to parse out systemic challenges. Finding a place to study given the ongoing noise and frequent activity in a carceral setting was difficult (Kulman & Ruddell, 2005, as cited in Runell, 2016). Participants also commented about other students' focus in the class. While some took their academics seriously, other students were there to get out of other responsibilities and goofed off, causing distractions (Runell, 2016). Broader difficulties of teaching in a carceral setting impacted student perceptions of prison education, where external factors, such as administrative policies and facility management, can directly affect both the educator's ability to teach and the students' ability to learn.

As a volunteer prison educator for many years, Novek (2019) wrote an essay reflecting on prison education as a whole, and various pedagogies exercised within carceral institutions. Novek (2019) listed a myriad of institutional challenges that impacted a student's opportunity to

engage in learning within a prison to include “racial segregation; hostile corrections officers; routine lockdowns and intrusive scheduling routines; administrators’ concerns about inmate mobilization; and sustainability” (p. 58). While prison life has some semblance of structure, due to the hundreds of individuals living in one facility, day to day events come with a sense of unpredictability including lockdowns which can result in classes being interrupted, changed, and/or canceled (Reese, 2019). These systemic concerns for educational opportunities within a carceral facility not only disrupted students’ academic progress but also reinforced negative attitudes and feelings of marginalization.

Correctional officers’ perceptions and attitudes toward prison education seemed to manifest in their actions and language with incarcerated students that potentially obstructed the students’ ability to fully participate in courses (Runell, 2016, p. 100). Given the power dynamics between correctional officers and incarcerated people, oftentimes officers would behave in a way unbecoming of their post, interrupting in some form or fashion a student’s ability to attend class without any explanation. In “Doing Time and College: An Examination of Carceral Influences on Experiences in Post-secondary Correctional Education,” the interview respondents noted that not all correctional officers acted in such a way, but by and large, the apathy, or complete disregard officers had toward prison education, manifested in unnecessary obstacles for the students (Runell, 2016). Evans (2018) also wrote that prison correctional officers and administrators spoke to, and treated incarcerated people negatively, reinforcing their “frustration, isolation, and sense of hopelessness” (p. 270). The challenges faced by formerly incarcerated students within prison education programs were multifaceted, extending beyond individual barriers to encompass systemic issues within the carceral environment. Obstacles, such as institutional apathy, interruptions caused by lockdowns, and the negative attitudes of prison staff

and correctional officers can significantly hinder students' academic progress and personal growth.

Individual Challenges of Currently Incarcerated Students

Building on challenges faced by formerly incarcerated students, a qualitative analysis set in the United Kingdom (UK), specifically England and Wales, examined perceptions and lived experiences of incarcerated individuals who did not participate in prison education (Slater et al., 2023). The goal of this research study was to better understand why incarcerated individuals did not participate in prison education. With an average age of 39 years old, 24 participants were interviewed via face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Two major themes were identified as to why these individuals did not pursue education while incarcerated: “poor quality education” as well as the stigma associated with being a sex offender and the perceived hopelessness of finding employment after release (Slater et al., 2023, pp. 396, 404). Many of those interviewed felt the courses offered in prison were limited and taught at a low-level, too low in fact, that students did not feel as though they could engage with the content (Slater et al., 2023). Additionally, the wait time to take more advanced, distance education courses as well as the application process involved was frustrating and seemingly not worth the wait (Slater et al., 2023). Some individuals felt there was no point in pursuing education while incarcerated because of the stigma and discrimination surrounding their offense which they believed lessened their job prospects even more upon release (Slater et al., 2023). Those who were found guilty of a sexual crime perceived the offense to override any other identity they may have and/or develop (Slater et al., 2023). The findings of Slater et al. (2023) highlight how systemic barriers, such as low-quality educational offerings and the stigma associated with certain offenses, can significantly deter incarcerated

individuals from pursuing education, ultimately hampering their avenues for rehabilitation and post-release opportunities.

Similarly, Brosens (2015) conducted a study in Flanders, Belgium, that explored additional barriers to education in a carceral setting, focusing specifically on the differences between participants and non-participants in vocational programs within a remand prison (awaiting trial). Qualitative analyses took place with data acquired through a survey provided to 486 individuals, both vocational education participants and non-participants. The survey was translated into multiple languages which is important to note because one of the top institutional barriers to participating or not in vocational education was a “poor understanding of the Dutch language” (Brosens, 2015, p. 14). Additionally, first-time offenders and individuals with shorter sentences (as they awaited trial) tended to encounter more informational and/or institutional barriers, inferring that the longer someone was institutionalized, the more familiar they were with the opportunities available to them and how to access said opportunities (Brosens, 2015). Overall, Brosens’ (2015) article highlights how situational, dispositional, institutional, and informational barriers play significant roles in shaping incarcerated individuals' access to, and participation in, vocational education programs.

Systemic Challenges of Currently Incarcerated Students

Considering individual challenges reported by currently incarcerated students, Kaiser et al. (2024) noted that over 60% of inmates reported prison conditions as a substantial barrier to participating in prison programming opportunities while incarcerated (Kaiser et al., 2021, as cited in Kaiser et al., 2024). The programs in which these students participated was not specified in the study and data was not disaggregated based on program-specific attendance. This

particular study lumped various forms of prison programming together to include treatment, education, gardening, and literacy programs along with a few others. In this study researchers administered a paper-pencil survey to 212 incarcerated individuals. The survey measured seven various institutional and programmatic barriers to better understand “inmates’ motivations to participate in prison programming,” inmates’ interest to participate in programming, and lastly, “inmates’ level of self-esteem” (Kaiser et al., 2024, pp. 878-879). Bivariate correlations, regression models, and multivariate analysis of variance were performed to develop and organize results. Results of this study showed “a mixture of prison-specific and individual-specific factors related to inmates’ perceptions of barriers to program participation” (Kaiser et al., 2024, p. 887). Statistically significant prison conditions that negatively impacted incarcerated peoples’ perception of program participation were “lack of space in the program” and “the program not being offered often enough” (Kaiser et al., 2024, p. 880). While these factors negatively impacted perceptions, they did not necessarily prevent individuals from participating in the various programming provided (Kaiser, et al., 2024).

Considering the challenges faced by incarcerated students in accessing educational resources, Zitko (2021) highlights the ongoing technological barriers that hinder both students and educators in correctional education programs. Zitko (2021) interviewed correctional education faculty and noted there is limited access to computers, various technological programs, academic databases/libraries, along with other basic instructional tools like calculators, quality textbooks, and sometimes even, writing materials. While there has been an increase in technology in prison for education purposes since Zitko’s 2021 article, the resources still do not compare to the access mainstream college students receive. Additionally, Zitko (2021) notes the lack of resources may impede students from being able to fully explore concepts and lessons,

insufficient tools also limits teachers. Zitko (2021) points out that allowing incarcerated individuals some access to work with 21st century technologies is critical so they have exposure and awareness to tools that are considered essential in mainstream society for employment, education, along with daily tasks for many citizens. Technology, while a massive benefit for those taking courses, can also encounter glitches that make coursework difficult to access, complete, and/or submit (Petek, 2024). Security is the main rationale as to why technology is limited in carceral institutions and efforts are being made to find ways to bring in more technological tools to support incarcerated students. These logistical challenges are compounded by limited faculty availability and lack of consistent support for teaching within carceral settings, further reducing the opportunities for incarcerated individuals to access quality education.

Logistics as to how programs are offered and who is chosen, or not chosen, oftentimes does not have a strong rationale. “Some programs use a first-come, first-served approach rather than prioritizing those individuals without a first degree who are close to release” (Petek, 2024, p. 3). Additionally, the demand to take community college courses exceeds availability and the wait time to take courses can range from months to years based on an individual’s instructional preference (correspondence vs. in-person) (Petek, 2024). Case in point, Mount Tamalpais housed inside San Quentin Prison enrolled 255 students in the fall semester of 2023 with another 233 people on the waitlist (Weissman, 2023). Space is a limitation to in-person instruction along with teaching tools within prison (especially for STEM courses) and a current, comprehensive overview of classroom space by prison does not exist, “which could be inhibiting colleges’ ability to further expand their in-person course offerings” (Petek, 2024, p. 4). Furthermore, there are not enough faculty willing to teach inside state prisons which prevents more courses from being offered (Petek, 2024). Ultimately, these systemic barriers highlight the need for more

strategic planning and resource allocation to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): Specific to Prison Education

Many studies on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as it applies to, and/or impacts, the K-12 classroom have been conducted to better understand settings and instruction that can encourage feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. A handful of studies have been conducted that look at the application of SDT within prison education—classrooms of adult learners in carceral settings.

Some rehabilitative programs incarcerated individuals engage in may be mandated upon admission to the correctional facility, while other programs may be selected based on interest to the individual. In “Using Self-Determination Theory in Correctional Education Program Development,” McKinney and Cotronea (2011) assess mastery of material presented in a nutrition course via pre and post-test measures in addition to course evaluations to then determine ways in which the programming can provide value to students in the areas of autonomy, relatedness, and competency. Considering competency and autonomy, the researchers wanted to examine how encouraging these two components as a course is developed, may impact the students’ feelings toward the course (McKinney & Cotronea, 2011).

The nutrition course under review was offered once to students who elected to take the course (they were not mandated). The instructors did their best to impress upon the students the importance of the content that would be taught in said class. After data was collected from both the pre- and post-tests as well as the course evaluations, the course was re-designed to meet the requests of the students. Again, students volunteered to participate in the course. After the

second offering to include pre and post-tests again, students were then asked for specific feedback via course evaluations. Ratings for the course were generally high as students would recommend it to others. Based on course suggestions, the course was adjusted and offered a third and final time. Again, the content of the course was positively received and students showed significant mastery from a pre-test average score of 74% to an average post-test score of 96%. After multiple iterations of the course, this particular offering's evaluation received very little feedback requesting changes. These findings suggest that incorporating elements of SDT into correctional education programs can encourage student engagement and motivation, fostering a more supportive learning environment. The researchers note in their conclusion section that given the modifications to the course from students who had already taken it, added more value to future students (McKinney & Cotronea, 2011). Viewing their own pre and post-tests, students were able to visually see a level of mastery of the course content. Additionally, being able to provide suggestions to help make the course more practical and realistic, perhaps offered the students a level of ownership over the outcome of the course content.

Another study conducted in 2019 examined SDT in a correctional rehabilitation setting. Framed by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and complemented with SDT, this qualitative study interviewed formerly incarcerated individuals to better understand how they viewed their ability to desist from crime after release and what made it difficult (Petrich, 2020). Using purposeful sampling, six men who were on parole, and five men who had completed parole were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews focused on broad events in the participants' lives; for purposes of this literature review, the data provided when the respondents were asked about correctional programs will be shared. Using a multi-layered coding process through inductive analysis, the research team summarized a variety of self-reflective themes the

participants shared. One of the important perspective changes the participants expressed when reflecting on their educational pursuits in prison was changing their own goals and/or habits; rather than immediate gratification, respondents wanted to make lifestyle changes (Petrich, 2020). Interviewees also mentioned wanting to overcome any self-identified deficits (develop competence) and looked to education to do so (Petrich, 2020). Participants also noted courses could easily be disrupted if someone was there who did not want to be and as such, it was important for people to understand why they should be participating in prison education versus requiring them to (Petrich, 2020). The lack of autonomy for one's choices impacted the class environment developing strains for, and among, incarcerated students.

Lastly, a Norwegian study was published in 2020 (Manger) that used an academic motivation scale and self-regulation questionnaire, both instruments modified for the prison population to better understand the intrinsic and varying forms of extrinsic motivations (identified regulation; introjected regulation, and external regulation) to pursue prison education as outlined by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. This study did not look at one type of education endeavor the incarcerated individuals were engaged with, rather, it involved all forms, to include, high school, college, and vocational. Demographic information and education levels were also requested from the participants and included via descriptive statistics. After analyzing responses from 500 male and 29 female participants who were participating in education while incarcerated, using a structured path model that estimated the weight of age and/or educational level on participants' motivational responses, the researchers' results indicated age correlated with extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, specifically noting that younger prisoners were more likely to pursue educational pursuits while incarcerated than older individuals. Additionally, like Manger's 2013 work previously reviewed in the *Motivations*

section of this literature review, this 2020 publication echoes that a primary extrinsic motivation of pursuing education while incarcerated is to obtain a job upon release, or earning a degree. A finding that was not hypothesized by Manger and their team was that “low-skilled” learners were more “motivated by extrinsic incentives than other learners” (p. 567). The research team anticipated those prisoners with a higher-level of education would be more motivated to pursue prison education. This study’s findings touched on age, prior educational attainment, and motivational factors among incarcerated learners, noting that extrinsic incentives remain central to Norway’s prisoners’ education participation.

Perna’s Model of College Choice

Perna’s Model of College Choice (2006) illustrates multiple factors that can impact a student’s decision whether or not to enroll in college and if so, where, and why. Perna’s dynamic model also outlines how factors can intersect, also impacting a student’s choice on college enrollment. While not created with such a bound system in mind, Perna’s model can be applied to carceral educational settings. Using this broad model of what influences college choice from an individual (micro) and systemic level (macro), educators can evaluate what layers inhibit (challenge) and/or support (motivate) incarcerated student enrollment in prison education programs, specifically those offered by higher education institutions. The Habitus layer’s components to consider when researching a student’s experience participating in prison education programs could consist of support with the college process; value of college attainment; academic preparation; availability of resources; and benefits of education. Additionally, layer 3 considers location and institutional characteristics, of which, the review of the literature has noted several that impact incarcerated students’ experience(s).

A meta-analysis entitled, “College Choice Decisions: An Evaluation of Perna’s Conceptual Model Across Populations and Cultural Contexts” focused on Perna’s model as it related to STEM education, specifically students from underrepresented populations. This study wanted to “highlight the ways in which contextual factors and identity, such as minority status and cultural context can impact college choice decisions” (Padilla, 2024, p. 4). After reviewing peer-reviewed conference presentations from 2017-2023, 11 sources were identified for this study, specific to minorities or underrepresented student populations. Of the factors reviewed in the literature, economic and sociological considerations seemed to impact student’s college choice most (Padilla, 2024). Community and familial support, along with financial relief (such as dual enrollment; financial aid; etc.) were also strong influencing factors of student college enrollment (Padilla, 2024).

Research on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in both K-12 and correctional educational settings highlights the importance of developing autonomy, competence, and relatedness to enhance student engagement and motivation. The studies reviewed, such as McKinney and Cotronea's (2011) work on nutrition courses in prisons, demonstrate how providing opportunities for choice, feedback, and mastery can improve both learning outcomes and student satisfaction. Similarly, Petrich’s (2020) study with formerly incarcerated individuals underscores how a lack of autonomy in educational settings can hinder personal growth and rehabilitation. By integrating SDT principles into correctional education programs, educators can create more effective, motivating environments that promote long-term growth and development. Additionally, Perna's Model of College Choice offers valuable insight into the complex factors influencing incarcerated students’ decisions to engage in educational programs. Considering both individual and systemic factors—such as personal goals, institutional support, and available resources—can

lead to more equitable and supportive educational opportunities for incarcerated populations.

Ultimately, incorporating SDT into correctional education not only empowers learners but also aligns with broader efforts to reduce recidivism and support successful reintegration into society.

Chapter 4: Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study sought to explore the motivations and challenges of adult, male incarcerated students as they participated in associate degree granting programs. This study focused on incarcerated students' experiences in prison education programs, specifically those offered by California community colleges. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) wrote that qualitative research aims to better understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). I wanted to better understand individual experiences revolving around what motivates these students to pursue education while incarcerated as well as what they perceive to be challenges and/or barriers to participating in prison education. Interviewing this population was imperative to better understanding their motivations as they pursued higher education and the barriers they encountered as I could not observe—their behaviors or choices—I needed to ask questions and engage in conversation (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

The following research questions grounded this study:

1. What motivates adult incarcerated students to participate in associate degree granting programs?
2. What challenges do adult incarcerated students encounter when participating in associate degree granting programs?

Positionality Statement

I am a college-educated white female, and I conducted interviews in which I asked for some level of vulnerability from men who were taking community college courses while

incarcerated. I interacted with these participants as someone who can walk freely in society, while these individuals cannot. I have not personally been directly system-impacted, although I have been indirectly. I have had limited interactions with students who have been formerly incarcerated.

My partner of many years, however, has been system-impacted. He also works as a peace officer in one of California's state prisons. During CDCR's peace officer training academy, new recruits are encouraged to keep work at work and not discuss much with family. As such, while my partner has worked for CDCR for over a decade, our conversations revolving around his position and varying responsibilities have been few and far between. Additionally, my partner and I were intentional about not discussing my dissertation work in detail so I did not arrive to interviews with preconceived notions and/or thoughts about the participants, their experiences, and/or responses.

Throughout this study, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, consciously examining my thoughts, assumptions, and emotional responses in an effort to minimize implicit bias in the interpretation of data. I journaled as I collected data, allowing me an outlet to reflect on, and review, my initial thoughts and feelings. Entering the research site, I carried varied facets of privilege; I am a white woman working toward a doctoral degree, and I was stepping into a space where many of the incarcerated men I interacted with had lived lives prior to incarceration shaped by systemic inequities—particularly those tied to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Many had limited access to essential resources and opportunities due to structural barriers; now, within the prison setting, they faced the additional loss of fundamental autonomy. The intersecting identities I held could have very well influenced their participants' interactions with me.

Lastly, my entire career in higher education has been student-centered, specific to the undergraduate's academic experience/journey. Working as an instructor and counselor at a California community college as well as an undergraduate advisor at a four-year institution, supporting students as they progress toward their academic, career, and personal goals is what I do in my everyday work. I strongly believe that the connections I built as I planned this study to allow me access to a prison, as well as my professional skill set—having worked with undergraduates in an academic advising/counseling capacity—uniquely situated me to do this work.

Setting & Participants

I conducted interviews at one California state male correctional facility managed and operated by the CDCR. In August 2025, 2,000+ incarcerated individuals resided in this specific facility (CDCR, Population reports). During the fall 2025 semester in which data for this study was collected, 320 students (6.5% of the entire site's population) were enrolled in college, de-aggregated by the following modalities and pursuits:

- 17 students attended a community college a few hours away via correspondence only;
- 302 students attended a nearby local community college via correspondence and/or face to face;
- one master's degree student attended a CSU via correspondence.

I used purposeful sampling to ensure I recruited participants who have prison education experience to reflect on and speak from, i.e. at least two semesters of attempted part-time status, versus being a brand-new student. Criteria for participants interested in volunteering for an interview were:

- identify as male;

- 18+ years old;
- have attended at least 2 semesters/quarters/terms of attempted part-time enrollment or more (6+ units) as a community college student (current semester—fall 2025—could count as their second qualifying term).

I pitched my study and solicited interested students in-person in six classes offered by a nearby California community college held at the research site in August 2025.

While I took a sign-up sheet to aid in recruiting participants, the education coordinators requested I ask interested students to submit a GA-22 and either give the form to me before I left, or place one in the “college box” rather than use the sign-up sheet I had created and brought with me. A GA-22 is an *Inmate Request for Interview* form.

The first afternoon I recruited for my study in two classes and received GA-22s from 12 interested students. The second afternoon I recruited for my study in four classes and received 34 GA-22s from students expressing interest in an interview. Forms collected in-person, after recruiting in six classes, totaled 46. I asked that any other students interested in an interview drop a GA-22 in the “college box” by the end of the week and the education coordinators would relay the information to me. I received four more GA-22s via the “college box” by the study’s recruitment deadline. The total number of unique participants who expressed interest was 50 (15.67% of the potential 320 associate degree seeking students and 36.7% of 136 unique students pitched to amongst the six classes).

Using the information on the GA-22s, I filled in each person’s CDCR number and last name on the (Excel) sign-up sheet I had created. I was able to provide the list of students interested in an interview to the education coordinators to fill in the information I was missing:

race; age; two or more terms of six or more units; remaining years on sentence; and sex identification.

Due to the high number of interested students, as well as time restrictions and resource constraints on the education coordinators, after consultation with my advisor, I decided that the two terms of attendance would be specific to the primary community college that partners with this carceral facility. The list of interested participants was passed along to said community college to confirm which students had attempted two semesters or more of part-time attendance. Three of the 50 students could not be located in the community college's information systems and nine of the 50 interested did not meet the two-term study criteria. After the community college's review and screening out the 12 students who either could not be found or did not meet the college enrollment requirement, total eligible students interested in participating in the study dropped to 38 (28% of the 136 unique students of which this study was pitched to). The list of eligible students was again provided to staff in the carceral facility to determine remaining years of prison sentence, along with entering demographic data. Three students of the 38 submitted to staff at the prison had sentence lengths that were unknown because they recently had a parole board hearing and their release date had not yet been updated. The list of eligible participants dropped to 35.

Table 1*Interested Research Study Volunteers (n=35)*

Remaining sentence length	Number of interested incarcerated student volunteers
1-5 years	6
6-11 years	7
13-17 years	8
30+ years	5
Life without parole or condemned	9

Demographic and specific-study criteria data were added and verified by an administrator in the prison's education department. I grouped the 35 interested participants together who had remaining sentence lengths spanning roughly five years for the first three groups until sentence lengths became too varied to clump together (see Table 1) resulting in five groups of students (of the students who expressed interest, 12 years remaining on sentence, as well as 18-29 years remaining were not represented). The groupings were created to be large enough to randomly sample four individuals from each. For each grouping, I randomly selected four participants using an online randomizer (<https://www.random.org/lists/>) to achieve a finalized 20-person participant list. I initially planned to interview no more than 15 participants, however, given the nature of the prison environment and recognizing there may be conflicts with the individual's schedules I proactively scheduled more. Even though 20 interview requests were sent, 16 students attended. In the larger project, interviews were conducted with 16 people. The goal of this dissertation study was to capture the perspectives of individuals of different backgrounds and sentence lengths. To conduct a more in-depth analysis of those individuals, in consultation

with my dissertation committee, it was decided to focus on a subset of five individuals from the 16. When determining which individuals to highlight, I intentionally selected varying ages and races of those interviewed, to provide demographically diverse perspectives. Five participants, one from each group of sentence lengths (see Table 1) will be highlighted using pseudonyms.

The participants whose data was included in this research study were:

1. Bill, 36 years old, racially identified as Black non-Hispanic, and had one year remaining on his sentence. Bill graduated from a high school in the Central Valley, earning his high school diploma prior to incarceration.
2. John, 40 years old, racially identified as Hispanic, and had six remaining years on his sentence. When John entered incarceration, he had little to no primary education. John completed Adult Basic Education (ABE) and his GED while incarcerated before moving on to college courses to pursue his associate's degree.
3. Junior, 51 years old, racially identified as White non-Hispanic, was condemned/sentenced to death.¹ Junior began his time incarcerated at 19 years old. Junior dropped out of high school a few months prior to graduation due to life circumstances; he completed his GED and associate's degree while incarcerated.
4. Chevalier identified as Hispanic and was 56 years old with 50 years remaining on his sentence. Chevalier earned his GED during basic training for the Army in 1987. He attended a few college courses during his active years of service. Chevalier engaged with the veteran population at this facility, worked in the education department, and held other leadership positions among incarcerated individuals in the facility.

¹ The death penalty has been suspended in California since 2019 by Governor Gavin Newsom (Office of the State Public Defender, n.d.).

5. Maximus was a 41-year-old Black non-Hispanic man and had 14 years remaining on his sentence. Maximus was seven credits shy of completing his high school diploma prior to incarceration; he earned his GED while incarcerated. Maximus earned his Alcohol and Drug Counselor certification prior to being transferred to this most recent carceral institution, where he later earned an associate's degree.

Walking through the prison, from the control gate to the education department, incarcerated individuals could be seen sporting transparent backpacks with the primary community college's logo on them, along with lanyards. Additionally, as I sat in the education department's ABE 1 classroom to conduct interviews, I noticed a plethora of motivating signs and concepts posted on the walls. For example, posters on the wall read, *You have not failed until you have quit trying; Today is another chance to be better; Strive for progress, not perfection; Your attitude determines your direction.* I also saw an image of The Altitude of Genius by Patrick Lencioni in addition to what a fixed mindset can look like compared to a growth mindset. In the hallways of the research site's education department were images of the Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) members, along with other pictures showcasing both college and high school graduation ceremonies. Student successes and positive accolades, such as PTK Honor's Society, were highlighted on the walls for all to see, to include students, staff, officers, and administration.

Data Collection: Interviews

Data collection, for purposes of this dissertation, was in the form of five in-person, one-on-one, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with male incarcerated students who spanned different remaining sentence lengths. The audio-recorded interviews lasted roughly 45-60 minutes in length each and were held early October 2025 in classrooms within the prison's education department. Using the approved interview protocol by both CDCR and UCD (see

Appendix B), the goal of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the students' lived experiences, with a focus on individual motivations and challenges while participating in higher education prison programs, specifically associate degree course offerings.

In preparation for these interviews, a practice interview was held via video chat a year and a half prior with a bachelor's degree seeking student who was formerly incarcerated. This opportunity helped identify questions that needed to be worded differently, provided perspective about systemic considerations, as well as practiced my interviewing skills. In addition to the practice interview, I wrote observations and notes of my experiences in the research site's facility.

For this study's interviews, I worked with the facility's education department's administration to plan logistics. They were kind enough to reserve interview rooms for me, as well as sent ducats to selected participants to reserve their time to meet with me to control movement within the facility. Given my security level access, I also required a CDCR staff or custody escort in and out of the prison.

At the beginning of each interview I shook each participant's hand, thanking them for their interest in sharing their college experience(s) with me. Each interviewee signed a consent form (see Appendix A) prior to the interview and verbally consented to having their voice recorded (per CDCR research policy). After each interview I wrote a brief memo of any outstanding perspectives and/or thoughts provided by the participants in addition to whether or not they graduated high school prior to incarceration, along with any other educational history details. I transcribed all interviews using Microsoft Word, by uploading the recordings so Word could provide a transcript.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and edited as needed while reading each transcript as I listened to the corresponding recorded interview in tandem to ensure accuracy, context, and continuity. I deleted any identifying information from the transcripts prior to saving the documents. I labeled each transcript with a number (order of interview), date of recording, as well as the participant's pseudonym.

Data analysis was broken down into two phases that I found myself cycling through repeatedly as I immersed myself in the students' interview transcripts. During phase one of coding, I highlighted data that conveyed incarcerated students' direct thoughts, feelings, and motivations, through inductive analysis using In Vivo and holistic coding while considering SDT and Perna's Model of College Choice frameworks. I used In Vivo coding so the participants provided the language, imagery, and tone conveyed in the coding (Saldaña, 2021). Holistic coding paired with In Vivo coding, seemed to be an intuitive way to review an individual's life experiences as they discussed their academic journeys while incarcerated, given the intent of review was from a macro view. Holistic coding allowed me to review the data with a wide lens to code without a maximum length restriction for the data (Saldaña, 2021). Since the participants shared—unprompted—various life experiences with me prior to incarceration, along with their goals after release and how education will benefit and/or support said goals, holistic coding allowed me to highlight the data in broad strokes, to include short and long excerpts from the transcripts.

After multiple read-throughs of each transcript and having done a few rounds of phase one's preliminary coding in the transcripts, I then built an Excel spreadsheet that included initial coding terms. I copy and pasted direct quotes from the transcripts into the spreadsheet. Phase two

consisted of analytical coding and theme development. I continued to adjust the codes in the spreadsheet through analytical coding as patterns among participants began to emerge and solidify. Saldaña (2021) notes that patterns can be a somewhat stable way to identify “humans’ ways of living and working” (p. 8). Since a prison institution is a micro-environment, incarcerated people’s ways of living and working may look different than mainstream society, including engaging in educational opportunities. Reviewing the various patterns, I was able to better determine themes, and the variations that existed within the themes given individuals’ life experiences and perspectives. I moved data in my spreadsheet to more appropriate columns and/or adjusted themes to be inclusive of the participants’ experiences. With the themes in mind, I read through the transcripts again to determine if there was any data I may have missed that lined up with the themes created from the various patterns previously identified by the participants.

Data analysis allowed me to reflect on the experiences of the participants which then assisted in coding, categorizing, and theming the data. Additionally, I kept a codebook (see Table 2) to better articulate and keep consistent content descriptions as well as provide a reference for myself as I continued to code, analyze, theme, and then, eventually, wrote my findings.

Table 2

Codebook: Themes and descriptions

<i>Extrinsic Motivations</i>		
Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Community Building and Peer Support		Other students' encouragement; make friends; build community.

Familial Impact		Emotional connection; caretaking through skill development/future employment.
Encouraging Interactions	College Instructors	Positive reinforcement; offer encouraging sentiments verbally and/or in writing.
	Prison Edu. Dept. Staff/Admin.	Support college enrollment; offer advocacy; connect with outside entities for documentation; create a positive atmosphere.
Escapism		Avoidance of mundane prison life and/or returning to cell.
Early Release	Parole Hearing	Participating in school, tutoring, etc. may help support a picture of rehabilitation to determine if individual is eligible for release.
	Milestone Credit	Time taken off sentence length given classes completed and/or degree(s) obtained.
<i>Intrinsic Motivations</i>		
Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Self-empowerment		Leads to autonomy; desire and drive to make better choices for a better future.
Exert a Positive Influence		Influence their community and environment once released in positive and proactive ways. "Give back."

Goal Attainment: Personal and/or Academic		"Goals." "Direction." Understanding predicates change.
Desire to Learn		Perspective shifts; larger world view; learning for interest and curiosity.
Change Societal Perception(s)		Prove to others they are not who they said they were. Demonstrate the desire and ability to "change."
<i>Challenges: Community College Specific</i>		
Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Access to Resources	Faculty	Lack of access to counseling faculty; limited in-person access to teaching faculty. Limited communication options outside of class time.
	Course Materials	Observed: Wrong book was approved. Now instructor needs to pivot while correct book is going through approval process. May impact syllabus, class lectures, assignments, etc. Troubleshooting.
Lack of Preparation		Lacking confidence to complete college work; years have passed since attending formal schooling.
<i>Challenges: Prison Specific</i>		
Themes	Sub-themes	Description

Insufficient Resources	Space	Lack of study/quiet space. Compete w/other individuals for tables in public spaces. Public areas may be loud.
	Technology	Primarily with regard to online resources: Wi-Fi only available in certain spaces. Ability to research is limited.
Peer Distractions		Students who, rather than take classes with a desire to learn, want to look good to parole board and may not engage like the other students who are wanting to build their academic competence. Talking; off topic; behaviors cause classes to get cancelled, etc.
Custody Staff Interactions	Prejudices	Negative and biased attitudes, primarily from COs aimed at incarcerated individuals.
	Microaggressions & Hostile Treatment	Demeaning and demoralizing actions that demonstrate a level of control that minimizes incarcerated individuals' autonomy.
Physical Location Limitations	Lockdowns	No movement in a section of, or in entire, prison. Classes often cancelled.
	Carceral Institution Transfers	May occur at any point in time, even after a course has started. If college does not operate in individual's new facility, all work completed is null and void.

Limitations

There were a few limitations that impacted this study. Firstly, participants self-selected to participate. The research questions focused on motivations and challenges, and one could reason that adult incarcerated students who are motivated to pursue higher education in prison, may be more motivated to participate in a study such as this.

Secondly, the staff at both the primary community college offering courses in the facility and the prison participating in the study verbally shared their support of, and enthusiasm for, prison education. The incarcerated student experiences conveyed in the data may not be shared among all adult male incarcerated students as not all California community colleges and/or carceral institutions may provide adequate access to, and/or substantial support of, higher education opportunities. Similarly, these research findings include five individual perspectives from students who engaged in higher education while incarcerated. A larger number of participants is needed to contribute to findings and illustrate variability among data to substantiate generalizations.

Due to the education coordinators' workload, a slight adjustment to the minimum terms required to participate in this study had to be made. Rather than reviewing students' academic records from multiple institutions to determine if they met the minimum two-term enrollment participant eligibility, it was decided to confirm with the primary college offering courses at the carceral facility. I recruited in-person during classes offered by this college, and staff from the Rising Scholars Program were able to confirm enrollment. However, there were students who were interviewed who had completed college courses at other community colleges while

incarcerated and had more than two terms of enrollment in addition to two or more terms at this specific community college.

I conducted interviews in-person, in a secured carceral facility. Most interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. I worked with the education staff and administration to schedule days and times for students to meet with me. With these interviews taking place in a prison, security also needed to be maintained, in addition to privacy for myself and the participants. Three out of the five interviews were interrupted multiple times. This contributed to cutting off the participants' train of thought and responses as we navigated disruptions. While the disruptions did not seem to be deterrents to continue the interview, I do not know if specific people's temporary presence impacted participants' responses.

Additionally, students, per the request of the site's education coordinators I was working with, were asked to submit a GA-22 rather than use the sign-up sheet I had created. A GA-22 is an *Inmate Request for Interview* form. Some students, during my first classroom recruitment pitch, did not have a form on hand. Forms are readily available throughout the institution and are part of the communication culture between incarcerated individuals and prison staff. When going to the next classroom to pitch my study, I was able to secure blank GA-22 forms I could then hand out to interested students. Ideally, I collected forms before leaving individual classrooms so as not to chance students forgetting to express interest by the deadline.

Similarly, working in a secure facility, there are different ways of communicating and requesting time with an incarcerated individual. I learned that there are slips provided called ducats: yellow are priority, white are non-priority. For education department related matters, priority should only be issued for assessments and testing. For my study, non-priority ducats

were sent out, and the reason as to the meeting request was not noted. Given it had taken two months from recruitment to sitting down and conducting interviews, I had a significant number of no-shows the first day of interviews. Without a reason for the meeting on the ducat and it not being a priority, for the few who did not attend, while it could have been because they had conflicting appointments or commitments, it may have also been because they did anticipate a request to be sent from the education department, and did not feel the need to come.

In terms of my positionality, my life partner has been directly system-impacted and our family indirectly impacted. Additionally, my partner is a correctional officer at a California state prison (not at the one in which this study was conducted). While he and I do not discuss his role at the institution much, we were also intentional about not discussing my study outside of access logistics (who I should contact, gate passes, etc.). Once I made connections with various prison and higher education staff and administrators, they were able to assist me in navigating the various systems to set up and execute this study and I rarely needed to run logistical questions by my partner.

Chapter 5: Findings

Key Findings for Research Question 1

Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations were discussed by participants as to why they initially pursued higher education while incarcerated, and/or continued to persist in their academics. The research question that influenced motivation-related questions in the interview protocol was: What motivates adult incarcerated students to participate in associate degree granting programs?

Extrinsic motivators, while not as prevalent as intrinsic motivators, seemed to provide both a collective benefit to pursue community college courses while incarcerated, along with individual advantages.

Extrinsic Motivations

All participants spoke about encouragement received from other students that contributed to increased confidence to continue in their courses, and/or a sense of community that seemed to be prevalent among college-going incarcerated individuals. Students also noted the impact the content in the courses had on their relationships with their family members, showcasing that what students were learning was not just applicable to them, and the time they serve in the institution, but also transferred to the life outside the prison walls.

External support also showed up in the form of teaching faculty from the primary community college as well as the prison's education department staff. Students appreciated help as they navigated the confines of functioning in a secure living facility as people provided information to aid in their academic endeavors. Additionally, being seen as a good steward among their classmates helped define and illuminate some students' sense of purpose.

Lastly, a few of the participants described the possibility of early release as having influenced their academic pursuits, either having initiated their college career, or serving as an incentive that continued to propel their studies forward. In the pages that follow, quotes from the participants will be shared that elaborate in more detail the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation themes that were pulled from the data along with corresponding context (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Extrinsic Motivations

Extrinsic Motivations	Community Building and Peer Support (5)	
	Familial Impact (4)	
	Encouraging Interactions	College Instructors (2)
		Prison Education Dept. Staff (3)
	Escapism (2)	
	Hope of Early Release	Parole Board (2)
		California's Proposition 57 (4)

Note. This figure outlines the themes derived from the participants' interview data that highlighted extrinsic motivations. The numbers in parentheses indicates how many participants out of the five, brought up the respective themes.

Community Building and Peer Support. Every single participant shared positive feedback regarding the community of college-going individuals at this specific carceral facility. Junior provided an example of a time he was nervous to give a speech for a class and how other students helped increase his confidence:

So I gave my speech, and one of the guys came up to me and said, “You did really good.” And I told him, “But I’m nervous for my next one.” And he told me some things that I did during my speech. He was like, “You got this.” So having other students there is kind of motivating and helpful because if they believe in you or they see something in you...that same spark motivates me even more. It validates what I feel or think about myself—I can achieve my own goals because other people see it in me already.

John, while being mindful of his surrounding environment and the interpersonal dynamics that come with living in a carceral facility, also commented on the sense of camaraderie among college students in prison:

I also remember that I’m in prison, so that kind of blocks certain communities from happening, but it’s more community than anywhere else. When you’re talking about how to do a certain, you know, equation, how to...what is...a problem about something. You’re creating a community through that and that gives you a sense of comfort like, okay, I’m all right. Safety, you know?

Bill continued the narrative of positive interpersonal interactions and community building with other students when he said:

So just yesterday I seen one of the guys [from a business class] and said, “Man, how’s your business looking? How’s it panning out?” So we got to talk a little bit about that, but it opens the door for that. Like people are willing to help, they’re willing to come together

and help you figure it out. It's a very encouraging environment for school—for college—specifically like this institution.

Chevalier, who is heavily involved in various communities in the facility, noted the power the group dynamic from those engaged in education has meant to him:

And in class, you know, we work together as a group and you're kind of working with the other guys and you're helping them out. And...or they're helping me out or whatever.

And it just gives a sense of purpose where there's nothing here but basically to sit and wait and die.

Similarly, Maximus who has been in a few different carceral institutions expressed the uniqueness of the college-going community at the research site's facility:

Like people get together that's in classes, ask each other questions like, well, "What did you get?" Well, you know, if I missed class, "Well, what did she or he say?" So it's just like a network of communication that goes on here. It's not like no other, honestly. I haven't been to too many places in college, like I said, but the community of college people here, I hadn't experienced it.

These positive peer relationships not only enhanced social well-being but also contributed to a more collaborative and supportive academic environment within the carceral facility.

Familial Impact. For a couple of the participants, positive interactions did not end with other students in the facility. Bill spoke specifically to improved relationships with his family through both college education coupled with CDCR group programming:

I've been able to strengthen relationships with my family. A lot of the stuff we learn in groups [Department of Rehabilitation programming/self-improvement groups/etc.] and

psychology classes, sociology. I realized that what I was learning in the college class, I'm learning about it and applying it and they validate each other, right? Relationships, because even just with people in general, because understanding like the way we think, the way the different crises that we go through in our lives and what we're dealing with. For Chevalier, his academic achievements had given him and his parents something to bond over:

And every single day when I get back from work or school, I get to call my mom and let her know how's it going, this and that. And they're so excited. I send them the report cards. They're so happy. And of course, my dad, "You ain't no 4.0." "Here, here's the paperwork, you know, do the math." It makes them happy, which makes me happy. And it makes this all so much easier to deal with and stuff. I've got purpose now. Education is my purpose.

The improvement in family relationships highlights the transferability of interpersonal skills gained in the prison's academic setting to reach and impact the participants' loved ones. A few of the participants noted that their academic achievements would help them as they care for their family either financially or emotionally in the here and now, as well as in the future.

John, who had an eleven-year-old daughter mentioned:

So as a father, I feel a responsibility to take care of my daughter, because she's with her grandma and that's not their responsibility, it's mine. I feel a big responsibility for my community, myself, everything that I never thought I could be. I need to do it [education], you know, and I have this big motivation inside of me that I have to do it.

For Chevalier, the tangible proof of academic attainment provided a sense of accomplishment and was something he could show to his family, demonstrating his positive life

choices. Chevalier shared, “I should have done this a long time ago. And like I said, I've got kids and I've got family and I've upset them so much. I got to do something to make it up. You know what I'm saying?”

Similarly, Maximus wanted to pursue academics to share what he learned with his family, along with providing physical evidence that he was doing something with his time while incarcerated. Maximus told me, “And then even with the learning, being able to share that with my daughter and my family members so they could know like, he ain't in there wasting his time.”

Participation in postsecondary education serves as concrete evidence of participants' commitment to making practical, future-oriented decisions that may influence family dynamics during and after incarceration.

Encouraging Interactions: College Instructors. Teaching faculty's words can carry weight, especially when they are the content experts and the ones evaluating a student's homework submissions for a course that is being graded. Many of the instructors who had taught at the research site via the primary community college helped instill confidence in the students. For example, Chevalier, who is also a tutor in the education department shared:

That professor just gave me a wonderful little message [in Canvas], “Hey, Chevalier, you know, I see you and T, you know, you guys are like teachers with your students. You help them out and try to understand, you know, I notice these things.” He didn't have to write that. ...but out of the kindness of his heart, he said, “Hey, I notice what you guys are doing. Keep it up, man.” And that encourages me to assist more and help out with others and stuff.

Maximus shared some of his primary school experiences during the interview that led to some apprehension he had about starting college courses while incarcerated:

I can go back to elementary to talk about a teacher who made education very unpleasant.

I don't like that feeling. I'm having the whole class laugh at me because of what the teacher said about me. What I don't want to go to school for, that? I'm cool. That influenced me to start skipping school in the fifth grade.

However, Maximus' engagement with, and support from, teaching faculty impacted his college experience, changing his perspective revolving around education:

I like that they demand more of us. You don't get to use the excuse that you're incarcerated to do less than. "We're not bringing a watered-down education to you. We want you to get the full experience of what it's like to be college educated." So like, my experiences have been pleasant.

Positive reinforcement and sincere acknowledgement from teaching faculty seemed to not only promote academic persistence but also contributed to a broader shift in students' attitudes toward learning.

Encouraging Interactions: Prison Education Staff. Despite day-to-day logistics of supporting over 300 college-going students, the education coordinators and administrators in the education department at the research site have helped encourage students to start and persist in their academics.

Further down, in *Key Findings for Research Question 2*, institution transfers will be highlighted. Junior transferred carceral facilities and explained when he arrived he, "Had to transfer all my credits to start college over here again, which the education coordinators made it very easy coordinating and doing that." Inability to transfer credits could have stifled Junior's academic progress; having support in the carceral facility allowed him to maintain momentum toward his academic goals.

Chevalier also needed support hunting down academic records so he could begin his college journey and shared, “I was terrified. But the people here—the education coordinators specifically—helped me get into college because there was an issue with records as far as GED records.” Chevalier also reflected on the prison’s education department’s encouraging culture when he said, “This whole environment, because it’s so progressive. It’s so much, it’s so much positivity.” When referring to an impactful former principal who left the institution during Chevalier’s time there, he told me what he shared with her prior to her departure:

Thanks for everything. You don’t know the effect you had on so many people, on my kids—my daughter and my son. You just...I wish you knew how big of a change you made. The day I get to walk out, I get to walk out of here as a college graduate. If it weren’t for that, I’d be the same, same guy.

Lastly, Maximus expressed his sincere appreciation for the people who supported him as he began his college-going career at the facility in which this research took place:

Man, I could attest to specifically here with the two college coordinators, how proactive they are. And arms open, just being ushered in. And then when they usher you in, you see everybody else. So being able to build upon that...

Supportive relationships with the education department staff and administration appeared to be a cornerstone for some students, fostering increased commitment and a reinforced emotional investment in their own academic success.

Escapism. A couple of the participants initially gravitated toward college courses as something to do—to help alleviate some of the monotonous day-to-day existence of living in a carceral facility. Chevalier expressed his drive to pursue college when he shared:

Like I said, out of boredom. And even on the three-yard, they offered nothing. I couldn't get... I was there for four years, couldn't get a job washing dishes. I tried over and over. “Hey, you guys got a job? Whatever it takes, I'll mop the floors, shine boots, whatever. Give me something to do.” Nope, got nothing for you. Nothing. A buddy of mine told me about it [college].

For Maximus, his interest in starting college was a need for stimulation after the Department of Rehabilitative Programming (DRP) he was engaged in during the day was over as opposed to going back to his cell. Maximus shared why he initially pursued college:

Something to do after hours, because over there, colleges only ran after 3:00 p.m. And usually the programming was from 7:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. And after that, if you don't got no job, you're basically in a cell. So that was one way to get out of the cell. And then like I said, just taking an interest in it. It's like, oh, I'm doing this because I'm learning.

Whether or not the individuals pursued college as something to do or as an avoidance tactic, each individual highlighted in this dissertation eventually discovered a thirst for knowledge that further propelled them to persist in their academic pursuits.

Hope of Early Release: Parole Hearing. Some college-going incarcerated individuals pursued and completed courses, certificates, and degrees to provide evidence to the parole board that they were taking advantage of positive opportunities provided inside the carceral facility to demonstrate a change in behavior to then be released on parole. For example, Junior shared:

There's guys that take college because they just want to sit in the class to look good, even though they're not succeeding in the class, just by them sitting in the class, it looks good for the parole board.

John, when he described the outward appearance positive life choices can signal to the parole board, also shared opportunities students have that are tangential to coursework and degree programs:

A lot of those guys are not really tutoring. They just go and they just sit down and converse about nothing, honestly. But that parole motivator is...you having a bunch of like tags on your chest that says, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. Because look, I've been going to college. Look, I have a PTK [Phi Theta Kappa]—Honor Society. Look, I've been tutoring and helping people, which says that now I'm changed because I help people. I'm not saying everybody, but the ones that are using the system...they're just doing it for that reason, to get out.

Rehabilitation can be cultivated and supported in a myriad of ways to then be shared with the parole board as evidence that thinking patterns have shifted and behaviors have changed. From Department of Rehabilitative Programs' groups like restorative justice, guiding rage into power (GRIP), or cognitive behavioral interventions, to GED completion, volunteering within the prison, working a job, vocational training, personal therapy, college courses, and more, these opportunities can aid individuals as they process their trauma, learn about the world around them

as they increase awareness, build skill sets and work skills, and/or take on leadership roles (CDCR, 2025).

Hope of Early Release: Proposition 57, Credit-Earning Opportunity. Educational attainment for an earlier release date per the parole board was not the only option to support a shorter sentence. Junior, the student interviewed who was on death row with little hope of release unless resentencing bills get passed by the California Senate, referenced Proposition 57 credits when he commented, “Some guys come just to sit in the class because it gives time off their sentence.”

Individually, John, Maximus, and Bill, who had the opportunity for release, discussed Proposition 57’s milestone credit as being an incentive to pursue college courses while incarcerated. John shared:

For every class that I take, I get a week off of my sentence. For every degree that I get, I get six months off. So yeah, it's definitely a motivator. I'm trying to get out as soon as possible.

Maximus, while eager to escape the confines of his cell as noted above, was told by another incarcerated individual that college coursework could trigger an earlier release date:

And I had a friend and he was like, well, you might as well do college. They've given us some time off. You get your [parole] board day closer. And I really wasn't paying attention to being a lifer, that it actually makes the board come closer...so I was curious.

Bill, who was looking at release sooner than the other students who were interviewed, mentioned:

It [milestone credit] was a good incentive and a good reward afterwards, but there's nothing that you can compare to the stuff that you would learn through the classroom. By

actually putting the work in and finding what you want to do in life and what you can learn in the classroom that you can take home and help people in your dorm, people on the yard, people, you know, your family at home and friends.

While Bill was encouraged to pursue higher education while incarcerated given the benefits of receiving time off his sentence for course and degree completion, his intrinsic motivations began to outweigh the extrinsic. This pattern seemed to be echoed by multiple participants: an earlier parole date or release date was incentive to start college given Proposition 57's milestone credit, and their motivation eventually shifted—learning and achievement outweighed the promise of time off their sentence.

Intrinsic Motivations

Incentives like the milestone credit, leaving the confines of one's cell, and encouraging a more positive community were opportunities individuals took advantage of early in their academic careers. During their college-going process, many incarcerated students discovered they enjoyed being challenged intellectually. They also began to recognize additional benefits in their lives that came from engaging in education. From a deeper understanding of the world around them, to recognizing healthy or toxic family dynamics, to increased confidence and a deep sense of accomplishment—education, for the sake of learning, for many students, rooted itself in their evolving identity (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Intrinsic Motivations

Intrinsic Motivations	Self-empowerment (3)
	Exert a Positive Influence (4)
	Goal Attainment: Personal and/or Academic (5)
	Desire to Learn (4)
	Living for Myself (5)
	Change Societal Perception(s) (4)

Note. This figure outlines the themes derived from the participants' interview data that highlighted intrinsic motivations. The numbers in parentheses indicates how many participants out of the five, brought up the respective themes.

Self-empowerment. Bill alluded to in his aforementioned quote, to an overarching theme among all participants was a strong and developing sense of autonomy through self-empowerment. A few of the participants discussed being presented with academic opportunities and the psychological, mental, and cognitive benefits they gained that then impacted them to continue making future decisions for themselves. To this point, Junior stated, “I had a hard time learning at first—what was required of me to fulfill each class or each assignment. But once I found out how to fulfill these assignments, it felt kind of empowering, like I can do this on my own.”

Junior also had an overwhelming sense of conviction for the impact education had on one's decision-making skills and abilities when he shared:

I think it's [education] a blessing. And I think if more people were motivated and saw that they were capable of doing it, even when they don't think that they would, that they'd shock themselves like I did. And they have better self-motivation, self-esteem, and a better outlook on life. I think a lot of us come from environments or neighborhoods or negative people that make us feel little and make us feel like we can't achieve. And we live with that. And I think that if the system somehow started motivating guys to be better, that college would be something every inmate in here can do and would probably want to do.

Like Junior, John also discussed his changed outlook on life that fueled his confidence as he made more intentional decisions, enabling his own “self-growth”:

So beginning college and then immersing myself little by little in college, like opened my eyes to a better future, to learning about things that I never thought I could learn about, to understanding...to my own self-growth. My perspective is different because I see, yeah, I see life as an educated person. I don't see life anymore as a person, as just trying to survive...I see life now with the eyes of knowing what I could accomplish. It's in the form of my mind now that I could accomplish things, as opposed to before, it was never accomplishable.

Lastly, Bill, when asked what he wanted prison administrators to know about prison education, commented that education allowed incarcerated individuals to develop a sense of purpose:

That it is very beneficial and something they already know: a person that is going to college and getting degrees, they lower their chances of ever coming back...very, very low. And I think it's because of the purpose. Like we feel good about ourselves. We know

that we're able to accomplish things and we were given a chance and put in a position where we can make something of ourselves—only just need that opportunity.

These students' desire to learn not only led to academic achievement but also encouraged a positive feedback loop—where success reinforced motivation, furthered intention, and inspired a sustained commitment to learning. Academic achievement served as a catalyst for many as they formed a future identity and purpose for themselves, developing students' belief in their ability to influence their own trajectories through effort and dedication.

Exert Positive Influence. Developing and harnessing a sense of agency to positively influence the world around them was a strong motivator for four out of the five students. They discussed the opportunity to “give back” once released, to better their communities as they planned to provide support that they did not have prior to incarceration.

Junior, who was sentenced to death, worked to influence and encourage his peers in the carceral facility:

I was motivating other guys to do their schoolwork instead of participating in the stabbings or the gang stuff. And now that I'm out here, I enjoy that because I can use my story to maybe influence or motivate other people. I just wanted to motivate other people and use myself as an example. Like if this guy's doing it [college], we can all do it.

Junior's desire to support others did not stop with those in the carceral facility. Should resentencing bills get passed in the state of California, Junior was already considering what he wanted to do should he have the opportunity to reintegrate into society:

Like I said, I want to go out there and help teenagers. So this is partly my motivation.

Hopefully I can influence and help other teens not follow in my footsteps. I want to go out there and do symposiums at colleges and with other people...to learn and help make

new laws or make the system better. I can do it without education because I've been in the system so long and I've seen the flaws. But I think having a degree is going to make someone listen to you that much more. So I think the influence of the degree has an influence over how much people will listen to you, how much attention you get given.

Junior believed his college degree would help him assert a level of expertise and credibility he may not have possessed prior to completing his program. Similarly, John wanted to use various frameworks he learned in his courses and apply them to life outside of the institution as he worked to be an agent of change:

I feel a big responsibility for my community, myself, everything that I never thought I could be. I need to do it, you know, and I have this big motivation inside of me that I have to do it. I want to answer them [life's questions] and then give back and create frameworks for a system instead of, you know, frameworks coming from the outside. I want to help. You know, all those little kids that were put in the back of the class, I want to be able to put them in the front of the class. You know, for sure. That's a big motivation.

Bill articulated his vision to work in an academic environment after release, given his self-professed love of learning, to share his own experiences to influence and inspire others:

But now once I learn it and apply it to myself, now I can share that. So I want to work in, hopefully in the college environment and in a role to where I can help other guys that are coming out of prison or that are still in and maybe help them with making it easier for them and motivating them and encouraging them by, my story, as well as a bunch of a lot of other guys that have done it. But even social work, working with troubled youth and helping them, change the direction they're heading.

Lastly, Maximus also shared that he would like to support youth through creating a non-profit when he said, “Because even right now, part of unity, understanding, nurturing, and inspiring the youth, to be able to share my story, and not just that personal experience, but the education side of it also.”

Engaging in higher education stands as a impetus of personal agency, signaling a cognitive and behavioral shift toward purpose-driven growth. Considering personal aspirations helped many of these students visualize what life as an educated individual could look like upon release, and how they could use what they learned to better their communities through proactive and preventative approaches.

Goal Attainment: Personal and/or Academic. Earning a college degree can be a sign of personal achievement. A degree is a tangible manifestation of dedication that can propel individuals forward in careers and/or future academics. Junior mentioned, “My thing is, I want to get the ones [classes] for my degree done because I want to achieve and show that I have achieved what I wanted.” Junior’s former quote is double coded with living for myself as he shared his desire to earn a degree was not just to achieve something or check a figurative requirements box, but to accomplish something for himself.

John notes the importance of education as it provided a greater worldview to include possibilities and avenues to achieve said possibilities:

There's no change without you understanding where you're at, you know, where you're going, what you're doing. You know, like, what do you need to do for this, to go over there, to get an education and to help your kids or to create a business or to have a good job and then do good in that job and be able to, you know, there's none of that without prison education. Prison education is monumental, you know? For sure.

Similarly, Bill reviews some of the intangible benefits education has instilled in him that support his future pursuits:

So for me, having set these goals and accomplishing them, and to almost...where it becomes routine.... So I'm going to keep going and know that I will make it there.

Because I think one of the huge benefits of college, and that I have gotten, was like a confidence that I can do anything that I want to set my mind to. That there's nothing that I can't accomplish because education has helped me and I learned critical thinking skills.

Looking long range, like where I want to be and knowing I have to work to get there.

Ambitions to obtain higher degrees were repeated by other students who were interviewed, including Chevalier. He wanted to pursue degrees of higher learning and earn academic accolades in addition to an associate's degree, and he shared:

Yeah, no, absolutely...bachelor's degree and beyond and stuff. I'm going to go as far as I can, but I'm not going to stop there. Because I know they also have a master's program with Dominguez Hills. I'll get the bachelor's and then I'll go for the master's and whatever else I can get after that. That's my goal. Just for a sense of self-accomplishment. But hey, there's a degree sitting right there on the wall...I'm in prison. This is a way of saying, "Hey, listen here, I made a mistake, but I'm going to make a better me." It's good for yourself. It's good for us.

Lastly, Maximus concurred that engaging in education not only signaled to himself his incontestable efforts to make positive life choices, it also indicated to others that he has done something worth doing as opposed to living the life he lived prior to incarceration:

Continue to do something positive. I feel like education is positive. I've never seen nobody go to jail for going to school...or go to the hole for going to school. I just feel

like it's something positive in being a role model right here—now, because I've left landmines out there that people step on for doing the wrong thing. And it makes me feel...it makes me feel good for people to come in like, “Man, I'm doing it because I seen you.” I want to be a positive role model now instead of a bad influence.

As far as Maximus’ specific academic goals were concerned, he hoped to complete his bachelor’s degree:

To get a BA [bachelor’s]. I would prefer to get one before I get out. So that time can be spent [after release] like possibly making money. So definitely one aspect is to give back and ultimately open up my own nonprofit, right? So that's great. That's the main thing.

Academic achievement reflected these participants’ commitment to personal growth and reinforced that internal transformation is possible, even in the face of incarceration. Education served as a vehicle to support personal, educational, and career goals, as these individuals looked toward hopeful futures.

Desire to Learn. Four of the participants found developing academic competence and making sense of the world around them stimulating. Their feelings of accomplishment, along with broadening their perspectives encouraged them to continue in their academics.

When he shared his process of meaning making in college courses, Junior said, “Being in class and getting to hear the teacher explain this stuff as I'm reading, or I read the chapter before class, it starts clicking better for me. And it’s just, it's more exciting.” Similarly, John noted his favorite field of study was psychology because he wanted to deepen his understanding and better learn how people think and how they behave:

Because I'm trying to know what's in there, what's in my mind. Why am I thinking this?

Why was I thinking that? Why was my mom thinking this when she left me? Why was

my dad...? You know what I mean? Since I never met him, why was...why did you do that? Why? Who am I? Where am I going? Like, why are those kids in the neighborhood doing all that?

Bill also felt an affinity for psychology, along with sociology, primarily because he saw the benefits of understanding core concepts from those fields play out in his life:

Because those [psychology and sociology] are instrumental in change and rehabilitation. Like they go hand in hand with the [CDCR's DRP] groups and a lot of the stuff is reinforced through each class. And so it like really sticks. It really sticks. And it takes a lot of willpower and that desire to want something better—to take those classes.

Continued increased awareness of the world around them seemed to foster curiosity and drive to keep learning. Chevalier shared:

And being in education and stuff, it just...I get to learn. I feel so much better, more informed, better informed. And it's helped me out in so many ways. Yeah, just this education, I love it.

These students' desire to learn not only drove academic success but also cultivated critical thinking skills and broadened their perspectives, which in turn inspired continued intellectual growth.

Living for Myself. Wanting something better for oneself than what they experienced before and during incarceration was a strong theme running through each participant's interview. For example, when asked to discuss his experience taking college courses while incarcerated, Junior mentioned, "Now it's time to live for yourself, whatever life you have left. And you should do the best you can now and enjoy yourself." Despite Junior's death sentence, he was overcome with a desire to make the most out of the time he had left. John, Bill, and Maximus

discuss how education was a choice they made for themselves while in facility and also impacted the life they planned to lead upon release. John stated:

There's no ifs and buts about it, I have to go out there and get rich, you know? And I mean get rich in education, get rich in friendships and good things that are going to be a fulfilling life. I feel like I've never really been happy. I need that happiness. I need that righteous happiness that you go out there and you want to work and you pay your bills—responsibility. And even though it's a little hard, it's okay because you have people around you and you're doing something good and you're filling up those voids, those old voids with positive things...

Similarly, desiring a different lifestyle than how he grew up led to Bill's continual pursuit of a college degree:

And I just thought that [college] was another step towards the direction where I wanted to go in rehabilitation. And initially I took a paralegal course on my own. And from there, I'm like, I completed it. And I'm like, college is probably going to be a lot harder. But I know learning and just continuing to grow was something that I wanted to do. But that change is where I'm at now, as far as not in the gang stuff, not in the drugs, not in the alcohol, no trouble, and having a goal and a career where I can have a successful life outside of prison.

Maximus illustrated the positive feedback loop education attainment can develop in individuals that impacts one's desire to keep achieving when he said, "A lot of times you just start stuff and give up or it's taking too long, but to see it all the way through, right? Okay, that self-worth get built up, self-efficacy, like, man, I can do this. All right, I want more."

Chevalier, who was in his mid-fifties with 50 years remaining on his sentence, had little hope of release. When asked why he was taking college courses, Chevalier responded:

Why? Here's the deal. For me, as I stand right now, I am scheduled to die here, right? I got enough time where I'll be 103 when I get out, in theory. It's not about, you know, "Hey, I'm gonna get out and get a great job." It's for me. I need it for me because I'm at the lowest point in my life right now. It don't get no worse than prison, you know what I'm saying? And at least I can sit here with a smile every day and say, "Hey, you know what? I did it for me." I'm a better person. Whether anybody else realizes it, I know, I'm a better person now.

Should resentencing bills in the future be passed that would allow Chevalier a sooner chance at release, he reinforced his academic pursuits being his own personal goal when he said:

There is no benefit to me. I can't move my parole date any faster. Even if they said, "Hey, we're knocking off 20 years." So what? I'll be 100 years old when I get out. There's no incentive for me to have to worry about getting a job when I get out. I got 100% disability compensation from the military. So I don't need to go to college to get a degree because I have to go find a good job. That's not what it's about. This is for me. I'm doing it for me. That's all.

For the participants, each academic accomplishment contributed to a deeper sense of empowerment, illustrating the transformative impact of achievement on identity and self-worth.

Change Societal Perception(s). The comments shared by some of the participants demonstrated a strong desire from those in prison education programs pursuing associate degrees to change the narrative that had been built about them by society at large. Whether through deep, personal reflection, CDCR programming, college coursework, or a combination thereof, all

participants spoke about not being a bad person despite having made a bad choice or being offered only bad choices to begin with, and not wanting those choices to define who they were.

Junior described an underlying drive to achieve in college when he said:

But also, part of me doing this stuff was to prove people wrong...I just always felt a motivation to prove people wrong...We weren't born bad. We were just presented bad life circumstances. And if we have a chance to do better, if they present us with a chance, a lot of us will take it.

Similarly, John noted:

Like everybody else that said that you couldn't, are wrong, and you did do it. So that's...I want to prove to everybody—and to myself—that I wasn't what they said I was, you know? We're trying our best, you know. Not everybody's bad, you know, not everybody. There's people that are actually trying to change, that it was just a mistake that we made, you know, it is not who we are defined as. One mistake is not who I am.

When asked what he wanted people on the outside to know about prison education, John remarked:

Taxpayer dollars are going towards a good cause, you know? That it's not just giving money or education to people that don't deserve it; that these people are going back into your community and they're going to be your neighbors, and they're going to be part of your community and part of your society, and that you want them to come out educated. Because in that education, nobody's inherently bad. In that education, you make people understand why they did what they did and what they need to do for that not to happen again, and those good things to happen, and for them to just contribute to your community.

Chevalier commented on the practicality at both macro (community) and micro (personal) levels that supports incarcerated individuals completing college coursework and earning a degree, along with the individual and societal benefits:

You come out much smarter. You have a job, because here's the deal: All of us that are in here are...they're going to be out there, in theory. And I have family out there, and I want smart, educated people out there. I don't want thugs, gangsters who spent, you know, 10 years in prison getting tattooed, blasted back, and, you know, and still with that same mentality and stuff, you know? Wouldn't it be better to have these guys educated? Able to get a good paying job, able to buy a house, provide for their family, that they don't need to go out and rob or hurt anybody and stuff. That's the ideal situation.

Chevalier continued his explanation about the importance of education in prison and the support needed from society, in addition to the community colleges:

Notice us. Because all you see on TV, all we see, and trust me, we sit here watching TV all the time, right? And every time we see a guy or people doing like these mass robberies at the stores, we sit there and we cringe like, "Oh my God, man. This is why people want to lock us up forever. That they think we're all like this." They don't understand that we're in here working, we're doing the work, we're spending the time, you know. They don't see that. All they see is the negative and nobody here is the positive. They don't see that the big community colleges are out there assisting us. They're in here with us physically, they're in here with us coming into the prison. Nobody else is doing it, but they are.

Finally, Maximus echoed the research-supported trend of declined recidivism rates due to an increase in education when he said:

If you look at the recidivism rates of people with AAs to BAs, all it does is go lower and lower and lower right. If they encourage it, they can actually feel safer. They don't have to worry about their communities being robbed and shot up. If they encourage it, if they can show some more humanity, it'll be better for them.

For these students, earning a degree served as a powerful statement to society that they were more than the labels thrust upon them as they challenged stereotypes, defied expectations, and proved that they are capable of transformative change.

While extrinsic factors may have motivated individuals to consider, pursue, and/or persist in their college coursework in a carceral facility, developing increased understanding and autonomy over their own choices seemed to actuate students to continue learning. An academic record and/or diploma, while concrete evidence of these students' accomplishments seemed to substantiate the hard work and dedication they employed, the social, intellectual, and mental stimulation became the overwhelmingly desired reward.

Key Findings for Research Question 2

The second research question that grounded this study was: What challenges do adult incarcerated students encounter when participating in associate degree granting programs? Navigation within a secure carceral facility can prove challenging for those who have been stripped of their privileges. Not only can living in prison prove difficult for those who are incarcerated, people from outside organizations who are working with these individuals are also impacted by the need to create a secure environment. Challenges that come with maneuvering in a high-security facility can include security checks, alarms, and lockdowns, as well as a lack of appropriate college resources, requiring both the students and community college partners to be resourceful when engaging in academics inside an environment that was not originally built to support higher education. Additionally, attitudes and actions directed at incarcerated individuals who were attending college required immeasurable tenacity, as these students persevered through an already tense environment.

In response to the second research question, first community college challenges will be reviewed (see Figure 6) and then findings regarding prison specific challenges will be highlighted (see Figure 7).

Community College Challenges

Figure 6

Challenges: Community College Specific

Challenges: Community College Specific	Access to Resources	Faculty (4)
		Course Materials (observed)
	Lack of Preparation (2)	

Note. This figure outlines the themes derived from the participants' interview data that highlighted community college specific challenges. The numbers in parentheses indicates how many participants out of the five, brought up the respective themes.

Access to Resources: Faculty. Given the many demands on higher education staff and faculty, to include the myriad of courses different instructors teach each term, it may come as no surprise that communicating with instructors and support staff at the community college of attendance is difficult outside of class time. Should questions need immediate answers, or remaining degree requirements need to be identified, incarcerated students may look to the experts at the college, or their peers. With limited access to telephones and Wi-Fi as well as internet restrictions, navigating streams of communication can prove challenging.

Junior recounted a request he made to speak to the community college counselor, “Well, you can talk to him (counselor) once a year and I already talked to him. So I haven't been able to talk to him again.”²

It is worth recognizing, if community colleges have counselors who work with currently incarcerated individuals, usually only one counselor at that campus holds said responsibility, and oftentimes, it is a percentage of their counselor position, as opposed to a full-time equivalent.

Counselors at the community college are masters-level faculty who engage in rigorous academic training to support students as they complete associate’s degrees, certificates, university transfer requirements, and more. Additionally, counselors at the community college work with students in a variety of life stages, from recent high school graduates to many in their retirement years and anywhere in between, as they explore areas of interest, learn basic skills, build knowledge in fields of study out of interest, or pursue experiential learning opportunities. Given the scarcity of counselor resources at this carceral facility via the main college of attendance for the majority of students, the education coordinators in the prison have had to learn by doing, how associate’s degrees are completed to include major requirements as well as general education per the state’s Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC, soon to be Cal-GETC with adjusted general education requirements) to supplement the guidance and expertise provided by the community college counselor.

² After hearing this comment from Junior, I reached out to the Dean I had been collaborating with at the community college that offers the majority of courses at this carceral facility to ask if there was in fact a restriction regarding how many times a student can meet with a counselor each year. His response noted, there is not a restriction, rather, it is a consideration of their limited resources.

Difficulty connecting with faculty from the community college extended to instructors in addition to counselors. Junior explained what kind of access students have to the instructors after classes end for the day when he shared, “We have a thing on our app, on our Canvas, that we can send the teacher messages, but that's kind of the only interaction. And sometimes it might take weeks to get a response.” John also noted the limited, and often competing time to reach out to faculty:

Because we don't have as much time with them. We have one hour a week and then they're gone, or two hours a week, you know? You get a Canvas and in Canvas, you're supposed to be able to communicate, but it's probably like, “Hey, is there work today?” “Is there class today?” And that's it. Yeah, nothing beyond that.

And while a lack of options to communicate was a source of frustration, sometimes the strain in connecting with faculty was due to the incarcerated individual's schedule in the carceral facility. Junior noted that when he had to get from point A to point B before or after class, the time constraints impacted his opportunities to speak with instructors:

You can talk to them, I guess, maybe before class or after class. I've done that a very minimal amount because I don't want to take up class time or keep them after class too long. Plus I have to get to places I got to go. So it's not like I have enough time to talk to someone after class and then go make dinner.

In-person classes provide an opportunity to speak with faculty, albeit often brief, coupled with multiple individuals navigating for a few minutes with one individual. Correspondence courses are also offered to those residing in a carceral facility and are completed via mail. The entire course: syllabus, readings, homework, and tests are sent to the student in the carceral facility and they then mail completed assignments back as dictated in the course contents. There

is a communication form associated with each course that students can submit their questions to the instructors and wait for a reply. Maximus shared his overall feelings regarding correspondence when he mentioned, “So like the timeframe of sending in and receiving corrected material gets a little frustrating.” Chevalier shared his previous experience taking a class via correspondence:

I mean, correspondence, the only issue I have with that is you may get a teacher, especially in the summertime because it's so short, they won't respond. And I just recently came across an issue where the guy wouldn't respond...we have that *Teacher-Student Interaction Form*. Every time you send something in, there's a form you fill out. Any questions you can ask there, and then they respond.

While difficulty connecting with student support and teaching faculty created frustration, students continued to persist as they exercised their resilience and resourcefulness to continue their academic journeys despite institutional barriers preventing ease of communication.

Access to Resources: Course Materials. The first evening I recruited for my study was also the first day of the term's courses. I witnessed the education coordinators distribute textbooks, as well as hand out school supplies (funded by grants secured by the primary community college). As textbooks were being signed out, the instructor of a particular course commented that the book was not the correct one. The education coordinators shifted quickly to problem solve alongside the instructor. Students could proceed with the course content with the current textbook, however, the education coordinators would work on writing a memo to have the correct textbook approved to then be allowed inside the carceral facility.

The education coordinators worked to triage and solve problems for both teaching faculty and students in the carceral facility. While I was there a student's laptop was stuck on a screen

and he could not clear it. He brought this to the attention of the education coordinators, and they instructed him to place a GA-22 in the “college box” and they would send him a ducat so he could bring his device to them. One coordinator in passing, mentioned, “We are IT too.” Both education coordinators I met and shadowed during my recruitment days commented on how much they like their jobs. They are also the only two staff members that college-going students seek support from for most questions and concerns, regardless of their training or scope.

Having an incorrect textbook or not being able to log on to the college’s online learning system (OLS) can usher in delays in covering course content. Instructors must pivot on demand to adjust required readings and corresponding assignments, not knowing exactly when students will receive the correct book for the course. Since a student does not have access to traditional student services in prison as they would on a college campus, accessing individuals who can help with their technology needs may take a couple days from a GA-22 submission, to sending a ducat to reserve the incarcerated individual’s time, to finally holding the meeting to troubleshoot their technology. Again, these unintentional time delays can impact a student’s progress in a class, causing them to fall behind and/or not meet assignment deadlines which could then lead to discouragement, followed by a decline in motivation.

Lack of Preparation. Like Maximus mentioned in *Key Findings for Research Question 1*, prior K-12 education experiences can impact an individual’s perception of a college education. In addition to someone’s general hesitation and/or trauma as it relates to their past education experiences, students may not feel prepared to engage in college content. For example, Chevalier shared, “And I can’t tell you how nervous I was. Panicking. Can I do this? I’ve forgotten everything. I don’t remember anything from school.” Chevalier, and many others who participated in courses and certificates offered by the education department at this particular prison, took the computer related technologies (CRT) class which helped bridge the technology learning gap. Chevalier explained, regarding CRT:

I highly suggest to all these guys, everybody I see here, especially the guys that are struggling, “Guys, get into CRT, get into this class right here. They will teach you how to use that laptop so you know what you're doing.” So that way when you hit English 1, and they're trying to tell you how to do this and do, footnotes and stuff, you know what to do already and stuff. So you're not sitting there like for the first time pecking at the keyboard, where's the exclamation mark? They don't know. “Hey, SHIFT 1.” They just don't know these things. Why would they?

The time from high school or GED completion to college enrollment can span days, months, or years, also contributing to a lack of confidence in potential academic achievement.

Maximus shared:

And it was challenging just being out of school from when I got my GED at Pelican Bay in 2006 all the way to 2014. I hadn't participated in nothing—education as far as school. So it was challenging for the fact of the narrative I was telling myself, like, you've been out of school a long time, this is college, you barely got your GED.

A lack of preparation for college-level coursework can make the transition into higher education daunting, as students must (re)learn foundational study skills while simultaneously adjusting to academic expectations, all while in a carceral facility.

Prison System Challenges

Figure 7

Challenges: Prison Specific

Challenges: Prison Specific	Insufficient Resources: Space and Technology (5)	
	Peer Distractions (3)	
	Custody Staff Interactions	Prejudices (3) Microaggressions & Hostile Treatment (3)
	Physical Location Limitations	Lockdowns (4) Carceral Institution Transfers (4)

Note. This figure outlines the themes derived from the participants' interview data that highlighted prison specific challenges.

The numbers in parentheses indicates how many participants out of the five, brought up the respective themes.

Insufficient Resources: Space and Technology. There is not true freedom of movement inside a carceral facility. Correctional officers are aware which tiers or wings go to chow, have time on the yard, etc. Additionally, ducats are slips provided to incarcerated individuals that notify them of an appointment whether that be medical, visitation, or any other requirement or request of their time. To this point, there is always movement in a carceral facility, but it is strategically timed and documented. Living in a secure facility can make it difficult to find a quiet spot to study that is not also occupied by others during their recreational or down time. Junior, for example, discussed studying in one of the few libraries in the prison, however, he

found it difficult to focus given the other individuals in the space who also needed to access resources there:

In the law library...they'll schedule [tutoring], let's say, statistics from eight in the morning till ten in the morning. And then from ten in the morning till noon will be psychology class. And then from noon to three will be statistics, math, or some other class. So you have set time to go down there to get tutors. But even in that environment, now you have the guys in there trying to get schooling tutors, but you also have the interactions of the law library guys in there. So it's chaotic, all these environments are chaotic environments to get studies done.

Considering the difficulty in finding a space to study, John noted that, "Most of the time studying is in the cell." However, incarcerated individuals tend to bunk with another person, whom they call a cellie or bunkie. Even their own curated space may not be conducive to completing homework, reading, or studying as Bill astutely shared:

So what makes it difficult is being in a dorm where it's kind of loud, not many people going to school. So being the only person kind of going to school in a dorm...trying to work through distractions that are also in the cell as well. Like if you have a cellie that...he kind of got a lot of energy or he likes to have the music on. So it's like, I'm in a little box and I got to be able to read this textbook and focus. And so I would say that the distractions and then no access to Wi-Fi probably would be another thing.

Access to Wi-Fi is fairly new for incarcerated individuals and is only available to those who have prison-issued devices like laptops for school. Even with Wi-Fi available, there is a significant limit on which websites and software can be accessed and many of the devices come with preloaded and/or bookmarked websites. Individuals do not have access to the internet from

their cells. Junior explained, “But now they put Wi-Fi in the day rooms (i.e. common areas). So you have to go to the day room where there's a lot of guys watching TV, playing cards. So it's very distracting to do work in there.” For Junior, having a quiet space was paramount to his ability to focus as he shared, “I have ADD, ADHD, and I best absorb stuff and study on my own in a quiet space. So being able to study in my cell would be very good for me.” Chevalier reiterated Junior’s Wi-Fi sentiments when he said:

Some of the units do have internet where they could do it [study], and they just finally put internet this year into the day rooms. So now all the units have internet, so I don't have to wait to come down to the school area, because you can't hang out in here, and I need to upload my homework. You can't do that. They schedule it so you can go to the library on Sunday or you can go to the gym on Monday to use the internet. But you know, sometimes you can't wait till Sunday, but you know, “Hey, it's Tuesday. What was on that thing?” I got to search up, you know, what the work is again. You can't wait that long.

Students covet effective and convenient study spaces with access to Wi-Fi, the same spaces other incarcerated individuals, who are not students seek out. Maximus shared a typical experience in a day room:

It's a lot of people around. So it's like you are jockeying for space...empty table. You can be like, okay, it's an empty table. I'm about to go back to the bunk, grab my books, and then come back. And it's four people at the table already like, oh man, I'd have missed my chance.

In line with a lack of Wi-Fi in the facility, John also touched on the need for access to an internet browser like Google. In addition, John also shared other supports that would be helpful

to students such as “...tutoring, more actual like hands-on training or help on how to navigate the tool, a computer or navigate or anything that has to do with like me researching anything history or anything, there's really, it's very limited...”

Limited access to space and technology can lead to frustration and impact students' focus, productivity, and academic potential.

Peer Distractions. It may be obvious that there would be a plethora of distractions in a shared living facility like a prison, however, three of the participants spoke about distractions in the classroom as well. Junior shared:

So when there's guys like that, they're just, I call them distractors. They distract you from being able to get the full attention that you desire. Like these guys' attention is not in the class because they're just there to get credits and leave, to get a lesser sentence or something, where I'm there to learn.

John also commented that sometimes his peers in class could behave in such a manner that took away everyone's opportunity to attend class:

It's a little ugly in a sense where there's people always with their own agendas, and their own, using the system for their own. It impacts me in a way that sometimes there's no, they don't run the class because somebody did something dumb.

Lastly, Bill referred to peer distraction outside of the classroom and framed it more as peer pressure:

It's the discipline. You got to be disciplined. Like when everybody wants to go to the yard and play sports or something, you have to like, I want to, but I got to get this done. Or sacrifice, sacrifice and discipline for some.

Without a quiet, conducive study space or reliable access to technology, completing college coursework becomes significantly more challenging, yet many students demonstrate remarkable tenacity, finding creative ways to learn and succeed despite these persistent barriers.

Custody Staff Interactions: Prejudices. Four out of the five participants shared their experiences navigating negative attitudes and prejudices from prison staff as they worked on their educational goals while incarcerated. Junior, at 51 years old, having been incarcerated since 19 on death row, ended up dropping out of high school his senior year, and when he became incarcerated requested to complete his GED. Junior stated it was an uphill battle to complete his GED as he shared there was a resistance and unwillingness to invest in his education given he had no hope of release. Junior was able, after years of asking, to complete his GED and begin college courses. He provided his perspective of what he believed many people, including staff, feel about incarcerated individuals and their right to an education:

So I think some staff have this thing like, “You're in prison, you shouldn't be getting a free education.” “You're just scum of the earth, you're just manipulating the system to get out of—You're manipulating to get something that you're not, you don't deserve.” And a lot of us understand what we did and we're trying to correct that and be a better person

and make amends. But staff doesn't see that. They just see punishment... And I think that's a mistake because, like I said, if I had help before I got to prison, I wouldn't be here. Junior went on to explain that he is often stigmatized due to the actions of others who may not be taking the various opportunities seriously:

I would say that some of the changes can't be made because you have guys in the class that are just flunking by. And that's going to make staff not want to help the guys like me because they see, "Oh, this guy's high in class or this guy's just using the system. So therefore, we have to watch all these guys." And that's what makes it hard is because you do have the outliers that make the guys like me look bad because these other guys aren't doing the right thing and following the rules.

John echoed Junior's opinions, that navigating opportunities in a carceral facility can be difficult, when he mentioned, "There are officers that are not...that don't love the idea of us getting an education." Chevalier spoke about his experience specifically at the research site when he shared:

The COs here, the correctional officers, they know that we're in college and they're, for the most part, supportive, you know? You may get one or two that haven't been to college and kind of got like a chip on their shoulder, like, "Oh, you guys think you're all that. I get it. I understand. I'm just going to be in prison and here you are getting free education. Now they're giving you guys, what, a bachelor?" I've heard that before. "I got to screw up and go get free college? You know, maybe I'll come to prison for four years and get a free education." You know, and that's just some of the negative things that you'll hear here from certain COs. It's not all...For the most part, they're...90% of these guys, ladies, they're wonderful people.

Lastly, Maximus shared comments he had heard as he tried to navigate prison education:

We had two particular COs that just didn't believe in nothing to improve your education, your self-help, your health. Like they was just like, "You're here, you deserve to be here, and you should die here." And they'll voice it: "It doesn't mean nothing." "You're not going to be able to use it." "You're still stupid." "It don't matter." Stuff like that. I've never seen anybody get hands, get physical as a deterrent from going, but I've seen a lot of verbal altercations for sure. You got staff—custody—that discourages people from being better.

Facing prejudices can wear down a person's confidence and create additional emotional and psychological hurdles. However, many incarcerated students persist in their academic goals, driven by their commitment to redefine narratives and change the trajectories of their lives through education.

Custody Staff Interactions: Microaggressions and Hostile Treatment. While verbal sentiments may usher in feelings of inferiority, three of the interviewees also discussed some of the more overt ways in which the power dynamic between incarcerated individuals and correctional officers could manifest, impacting one's academic pursuits.

Junior, who again, had been incarcerated for over 30 years at the time of this interview said he had seen many ways officers could sabotage an individual when he explained:

Let's say you have a test to take every Friday, and they [correctional officers] know this, some staff will hit their alarm to make an alarm to make it where you're late for your appointment to mess with your test, or they'll shut the program down. "Oh, there's something going on. We got to search the unit today." And when you tell it's purposeful, then you know, it gets frustrating because now you're like, they just fucked off my whole

semester. So these little things can lead guys to different places of deterrence. Either fight over the obstacles and go through them, or they give up, or they start flunking and doing bad. So I think that custody staff is the largest obstacle.

John noted similar behaviors by custody staff that made getting to places, including class, difficult:

Officers again, that are not in line with our change and they wanted to be repressive instead of rehabilitative. So they do whatever they can to not let you out of your cell, to not let you study at the right times or come out or do whatever.

Delays in cells being unlocked added stress to an already tension-filled environment. Chevalier echoed the frustrations shared by the other participants when he commented:

They just got to let us out in time, because we're locked down. "Hey, your class starts at this time. Don't be sweating." Like, you know, "Where are you going?" Come on, you see the backpack. You don't, you know I got school and stuff like that. Don't harass me, you know. Because you go from getting harassed up in there for silly things

Microaggressions, though sometimes subtle, can accumulate stress over time to undermine students' academic confidence and create an unwelcoming educational environment; yet despite these subversive actions, many students remain committed to succeed.

Physical Location Limitations: Lockdowns. Requiring no movement in a section or the entirety of a prison, lockdowns can greatly hamper a student's class progress. Lockdowns can last a few hours, to a couple of months. Incarcerated individuals impacted by a lockdown cannot leave their residences: cells or dorms, and only prison staff can enter the facility. Junior graciously shared the details of what a lockdown is and how it impacts college-going incarcerated individuals:

A lockdown is where you either have no inmate movement at all, where the program is totally shut down, where the teachers don't even show up. You can't even get out of your cell, you're cell-fed, you don't even get out to take a shower until you're off lockdown. But if there's a minimal lockdown, like let's say there's a lockdown in one part of prison, not the other part of prison...I'm in Unit 2, which is down here, and Unit 4 inmates are all the way down on the other side of the prison, and they were being searched. I was able to make the class, but the teachers didn't show up because the whole class wasn't there.

Due to the inability to attend class due to a lockdown, John shared the ramifications on courses and how students persist given institutional operations that impede their academic participation:

So lockdown will be like simply, that's it. Last time there was a lockdown like a month ago or two months ago, and we're on lockdown for a month. So there was no school for the whole month. The instructor tries to catch you up, you know, and when you go back to class, look, this is what we're missing. Let's try to do as much as possible. And if by the end of the class, then you get whatever grade that, I feel the overall work.

Chevalier also noted the cease of all movement in the facility, to include college attendance:

But yeah, when there's a lockdown, they lock it down and that's it, regardless of the school or not. Oh, well, no school. The professors can't get in. We can't go to school. And

if it lasts a while, you know, a couple weeks, they last a couple weeks and stuff, you know?

In addition to a lack of movement in the facility, Maximus shared how lockdowns impact his reasoned momentum in a course:

So the way that a lot of institutions are set up, it might be a modified lockdown, which is parts of the prison. And you might live in that part of the prison. So you missing out. Everybody else is going to school but you. So you falling behind and you don't get a chance to ask those questions and stuff like that. And then if it's a bigger lockdown, like just everything stops. It kind of gets in your way of just the motivation that you have, right? Because the external stuff starts taking effect.

Being unable to attend class presented a significant barrier to learning, cutting students off from essential instruction and academic community, however, many persisted despite the disruptions.

Physical Location Limitations: Institution Transfers. Transferring prisons may come with some notice, or none at all, and even then, plans are subject to change. For individuals who must transfer carceral facilities, depending on the timing of the academic term, this could prove rather discouraging and even delay degree completion. Junior shared one of his experiences when transferring prisons in the middle of a term:

I knew I was transferring. And so my semester was about to start and I signed up for classes. I didn't know when I would get transferred and I had just got my classes. But it's still a hindrance because like I said, I dropped classes. Now I had to wait for the new semester to get into classes and get used to the new school or the new functions of the school. ...it's bad in the sense that I had to drop classes in the middle of a semester.

John echoed Junior's concerns about academic progress being impacted by prison transfers, noting how such moves abruptly halted coursework and had the potential to negate academic progress. "Transfers, when you transfer, if they got another college in that prison, then you're good. You transfer all your credits and you transfer all your stuff. And...but if you left the class midway, then that class is done. You lost everything." Maximus shared his own experience of having transferred carceral facilities:

I was in an argument and debate class next door and I was coming over here and I was writing everybody like, "Hey, I'm at this juncture. I heard they got it over here." And, you know, because of space, you just don't get in. When you get transferred, nine times out of ten, you're not going to get back in that spot. If you get transferred, you might not even have the same college at that institution. So it just kind of sets you back. You one class away, you need Psych 40, this particular institution don't offer it. What you gonna do? So you mean...I gotta change the subject of what I wanna go in? I wanna do sociology. I don't wanna do psychology, but we gotta switch it.

Bill's circumstances ushered in a slightly different, albeit hopefully positive problem. Bill completed his associate's degree and signed up for a bachelor's program that partnered with the carceral facility he was in at the time of interview. However, Bill had a parole board hearing in November 2025 and with roughly a year remaining on his sentence, was hopeful he would get released. With the potential of release, Bill did not know what his plans looked like to obtain a bachelor's degree. He might have started some classes, only to have to withdraw, or, he may have waited to pursue a higher degree till he was out. Bill explained:

I was trying to get to places where they had a bachelor's degree program, but it's kind of difficult to go where you want to. But I ended up here and they offer multiple degrees. So

I did sign up for it. However, I go to board in November [2025] and God willing, I get granted [release]. And I want to continue to go outside and get my bachelor's degree, which I know I can do and continue to get even more education after that.

Transferring carceral institutions, and oftentimes simultaneously, academic institutions, can disrupt students' progress and challenge their persistence, in addition to often facing delays in transferring units, making it harder to complete degrees.

A carceral institution in the state of California can imbue mental and physical strains on the occupants. These stressors may have a magnified impact on students who need access to specific resources to attend class as well as adequately study and complete course content. Despite the multitude of barriers consisting of: a lack of preparation for college coursework; hostile interactions with custody staff; inability to attend class due to lockdowns and/or peer disruptive behavior; and an overwhelming need for broader internet access to further engage with faculty and the curriculum, students persisted.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Discussion

This study explored how the different components of Perna's model, overlaid on a carceral institution, impacted incarcerated students' autonomy, relatedness, and competence when reflecting on their prison education experience(s) through varying forms of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. It is important to note that these results highlight five individual perspectives at a single California state prison, and as such, more research needs to be done to substantiate these conclusions.

Study's Findings Considering Self-Determination Theory

Considering the psychological needs outlined by SDT, *Key Findings for Research Question 1* identified both the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations shared during the data collection phase that highlighted students developing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Extrinsic motivations included positive and supportive relationships with fellow students, family members, instructors, and the carceral facility's education department's staff and administration. The varying interactions ushered in feelings of relatedness, oftentimes motivating students to make others proud via their academic accomplishments, as well as a desire to support their classmates. Baranger's 2018 study with formerly incarcerated individuals noted faculty motivated the students at BU to continue in their coursework, along with Binda's 2020 study emphasizing the importance of the educator-student relationship. Literature investigating currently incarcerated students' perseverance in their academics also emphasized the positive influence educators had on incarcerated students (Roberson, 2022; Reese, 2019). The four aforementioned studies validate the comments made by currently incarcerated students in this

study: those (including teaching faculty) who showed an emotional investment in the incarcerated students' pursuits seemed to unintentionally encourage a sense of accountability, emboldening students to persevere in their college careers. The affirming relationships highlighted the psychological need of relatedness as it applied to and influenced a student's motivation to persist; a sense of autonomy was also a positive consequence of such interactions. Students' eagerness to show a change in their decision-making as they pursued positive life choices, continued to encourage them to find and select academic opportunities that exemplified a change in their life trajectories. These findings are similar to those from Petrich's (2020) study that found when individuals on parole reflected on their academic choices when incarcerated, they desired to bolster long-term evolution rather than seek immediate self-gratification. Having a sense of control or autonomy over their lives through academic endeavors served a dual purpose: the power to make their own educational decisions as well as the opportunity to lessen their sentence lengths. Engaging in higher education while incarcerated was often incentivized with the promise or hope of early release. The extrinsic motivators of California's Proposition 57's milestone credits to shorten an incarcerated individual's sentence length, or the contribution to one's rehabilitation through academics, which may be viewed in their favor by a parole board, initially drew many students to the college classrooms in the carceral facility. Whether individually or collectively motivated, the chance for enhanced communication with others, or the guarantee of benefits academic attainment could furnish, launched students toward their collegiate goals, whether through individual courses or degree programs.

While extrinsic motivators may have heralded many students to begin college while incarcerated, often the drive to continue turned inward, bolstering varying intrinsic motivations to persist. SDT supports the internal journey many of the participants shared when reviewing the

Self-Determination Continuum (see Figure 1) from externally regulated motivations that, for some of the students came in the form of early-release credit per Proposition 57, to personally valuing the benefits of education (identified regulation), to eventually enjoying education and finding satisfaction in the learning process (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). Cultivating a broader worldview and considering alternative perspectives allowed students to recognize the broad array of life choices they had available in the immediacy, as well as looking forward to release. Discovering opportunities, having the power to make their own academic decisions, and achieving educational goals, inspired students to continue to learn, amplifying their ability to exercise autonomy over their college careers.

Developing a greater level of competence in concepts and fields of study they did not know about or understand prior to college courses and CDCR programming, allowed students to feel more confident as they navigated relationships, various situations, and planned for their futures. An increase in confidence through a deeper understanding of the world around them was a catalyst for their own self-empowerment, frequently illustrated as a positive feedback loop. As courses or degrees were completed and more knowledge honed, the sense of achievement, and developing identity as a student, emphasized their choice to keep learning, fueling their engagement in the blossoming college-going culture.

Empowering oneself through an appreciation of awareness and education called attention to life choices these students did not feel they had before incarceration. The participants felt they had more control over their lives and began to build visions for their futures. Some of the students interviewed sought to open non-profits or work in educational organizations to provide proactive and preventative assistance to youth in their former communities, advocating for others as agents of change. For those who may not have had such specific images of their future, the

resounding concept of having a purpose was pervasive throughout the interviews. Career goals were not the only driver to pursue a college education, learning for the sake of one's interests and curiosities was also a heartfelt theme amongst the participants leading to the idea of living for oneself—of achieving solely for the purpose of personal satisfaction.

Lastly, and perhaps the most profound consideration in the data that spurred students to begin and/or continue in college coursework was the ambition and effort to demonstrate to broader society that they too cared about the community impact of their choices. While ridding oneself of internalized stigmas was found in the literature review (Evans, et. al., 2018), student data from this study conveyed the desire to be seen for more than their mistake(s) by society at large, while they themselves also acknowledged the harm they had caused. They wanted the opportunity to emphasize their propensity for positive change, and their desire and capability to be strong, contributing members of society. The participants interviewed for this study reinforced evidence from correctional education research that academic engagement supports cognitive and behavioral transformation (Courtney, 2019), goal attainment (Kallman, 2019), increased stewardship, and reduced recidivism (Bozick, et al., 2018; Davis & Linton, 2021; Esperian, 2010; Stickle & Schuster, 2023; Taliaferro & Pham, 2017; Zitko, 2021).

Study's Findings Considering Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice

Perna's Model of College Choice (2006) provides a systems perspective when considering higher education access, or lack thereof, in a carceral setting. In Padilla's 2024 study, when reviewing Perna's Model of College Choice, the findings showed economic and sociological considerations seemed to impact student's college choice most. Community and familial support, along with financial relief were also strong influencing factors of student college enrollment (Padilla, 2024). And while community, peer, and familial support

extrinsically motivated students in this carceral facility to consider, and then pursue college opportunities, for incarcerated individuals, systemic factors such as institutional restrictions, academic preparation, resources and course availability, along with overarching attitudes pertaining to prison education, also influenced students' desires for, and willingness to pursue and/or persist in higher education.

The capacity and desire to achieve their goals, as well as the ability to be a positive influence moving forward, was paramount to incarcerated students' educational persistence. Reviewing Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice in tandem with the students' interview responses, it became clear that layers 2 and 3 underline the most prominent institutional challenges to prison education. Layer 2, school and community context, considers: availability of resources, types of resources, structural support and barriers; while layer 3, higher education context, considers: marketing and recruitment, location, and institutional characteristics (see Figure 2). Given carceral facilities were not built with college enrollment at the forefront, using Perna's model is helpful in visualizing where unintentional barriers to education may be dismantled to support a more robust college-going culture in carceral facilities.

Keeping in mind Perna's layer 2 (school and community context), which includes resources, and layer 3's (higher education context) location and institutional characteristics, having access to teaching and support services faculty, along with course resources proved to be a challenge for students, in addition to the faculty supporting them. From textbook mix-ups, requiring a quick pivot on the teaching faculty's end, to sparse communications with instructors and counselors, navigating each semester came with its own challenges to persist. Access to the means to support academic success extended into everyday prison life for these students as well. Data from this study echoed previous researchers' findings, that securing a space that was

conducive to a student's ability to concentrate and focus without interruption or discomfort proved difficult inside the carceral facility (Conway, 2014; Baranger, 2018; Runell, 2016). Additionally, stable Wi-Fi was limited to common areas, often full of noise, and places to sit were a rare commodity to come by. While students continued to overcome the daily challenges of navigating and living in a prison environment, they also needed to be resourceful and resilient, in their academics as well.

Harkening back to Perna's layer 2: structural barriers within the school and community context and layer 3: location and institutional characteristics as they pertain to higher education, lockdowns and institution transfers impacted students' ability to maintain momentum in their coursework. From an inability to attend classes due to cancellations, to a lack of Wi-Fi in cells and dorms to allow students to work on and submit assignments, lockdowns were a systemic barrier to accessing college coursework and instruction. Similarly, undergoing an institutional transfer may have rendered all participation and graded assignments null and void for classes in progress at the time of relocation—this was also noted as a persistent stressor by formerly incarcerated students interviewed by Conway (2024) and their team. Transfers could also postpone future college enrollment depending on the time of the year, classes offered, and enrollment availability at the new institution. The powerlessness that came from having course progress halted required an immense amount of fortitude to carry on, especially after an institutional transfer.

Layer 2, structural supports and barriers, considers the community context and the impact it may have on a student's decision to pursue a college education. Peer distractions and custody interactions in the form of prejudices, microaggressions, and hostile treatment were challenges many of the students noticed, or personally experienced as they pursued their academic goals.

While a more peripheral impact, other students who may not have been taking their academic opportunities as seriously may have been issued a disciplinary action that then affected the entire class in a negative way, i.e. cancellation of class—similar findings were discussed in Runell’s 2016 study. In addition, comments and hostile treatment from custody staff also impacted students’ motivation to persist (Novek, 2019; Evans, 2018; Runell, 2016). From negative attitudes about incarcerated individuals having higher education opportunities, to behaviors unbecoming of an officer, students found themselves internally battling the negative prejudices slung their way, and/or strategizing ways to ensure they would make it to class on time.

Lastly, while most challenges in the research surfaced in layers 2 and 3, considerations were articulated that fell into Perna’s habitus layer 1, specifically, academic preparation; similar concerns were mentioned in Baranger’s 2018 study. When considering a college education, many students initially lacked the confidence to inquire about the details. Through their peers’ encouragement and the carceral facility’s education staff’s support, students garnered the wherewithal to enroll in college. Given the span of time since many of these individuals had last sat in a formal education class, they sought guidance and know-how from more seasoned students. The gap in academic support services seemed to be a deterrent to many incarcerated individuals when first presented with college course options.

Conclusion

This study revealed how incarcerated students' educational journeys were shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors as they navigated the difficulties of living in a carceral institution. Extrinsic motivators, such as supportive relationships, institutional incentives like Proposition 57, and access to educational programs, often sparked initial engagement in college, however, it was the growth of intrinsic motivation that sustained long-term persistence.

As students' psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were cultivated and developed, they not only began to envision positive futures for themselves but also gained a deeper sense of purpose, identity, and agency. However, systemic barriers, ranging from institutional transfers and lockdowns to limited resources, a lack of college preparation, and custody staff prejudices, were shared as significant obstacles that threatened progress and persistence. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination to learn and grow, with the hope of meaningfully contributing to society. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the transformative potential of higher education in prison settings and highlights the importance of dismantling institutional barriers to foster encouraging, supportive, and accessible educational opportunities.

Implications for Policy

Policies are meant to usher in change, ideally positive change. John shared some sincere thoughts on prison education when he said:

Walking around...everywhere, knowing that I'm like I'm in charge of my destiny. I'm trying my best to change. And if you help me change, then we could change the community to be better. You have better neighbors, you have a better understanding of people, and then you won't just judge...It's [education] monumental. Without it, there's no, like, there's no change. You know, without prison education, there's no change.

Increased Funding

An opportunity to support incarcerated students can come in the form of increased (state and/or federal) funding for additional staff to serve this population. Incarcerated students have lower persistence rates than their traditional California community college counterparts (Petek,

2024). Permanent funding for prison education in the state of California is rather new, information gathered from this study supports opportunities for prison education programs to grow and develop, requiring staff to support expansion. Given the decreased rates of recidivism for formerly incarcerated individuals with a college education, policy makers could explore ways to increase funding for this avenue of rehabilitation. Not only is educating incarcerated individuals less costly than housing them, as John mentioned above, their change will usher in shifts in their communities, making them more positive, safer, and productive places to live. Staff positions focused on the incarcerated individuals' rehabilitation through education at the prison-level could look like retention specialists, career coaches, and additional education coordinators. Staff positions at the community college would mainly be in the form of faculty, from an increase in counseling and student support services, to instructors. As prison education programs grow, so too, will the need for colleges to provide more access to student support and content experts.

Correctional Officer Disciplinary Policy Review

CDCR administration at the state level may find it judicious to review disciplinary policy as it pertains to correctional officers behaving in ways that are unbecoming of their post. Whether the behaviors are verbal or physical, intentional or not, actions should be investigated and dealt with accordingly. Creating barriers whether they are emotional or physical can add stress and tension and to an already strained environment in which rehabilitation has been made a primary goal of CDCR's mission, specifically through education and as such, it should be encouraged, not discouraged.

State Legislation

Proposition 57 is specific to the state of California. If other states do not have a similar policy, incentivizing incarcerated individuals to complete college courses and degrees, it would behoove politicians and communities to consider the benefits of such a program. As the students shared in the interviews and the literature review supported, many incarcerated individuals will reintegrate back into the general public; having an expanded worldview, robust soft skills, and job skills will help these individuals be more productive and peaceful members of society.

Professional Program Curriculum

Lastly, I recommend that teaching and administrative credentialing programs include, as part of the curriculum, coursework on the school to prison pipeline. Credentialed teachers and administrators can gain a deeper awareness of the systemic issues that may contribute negatively to a students' experiences and work to counter the situational dynamics through strategic programming and support.

Implications for Practice

While staff and space resources are limited, there may be strategic ways to implement opportunities to improve the college experience for both students and teaching faculty in the prison environment.

Increased Varieties and Opportunities of College Programs

Incarcerated students interviewed were eager for real-world, applicable courses and degree programs (artificial intelligence came up a few times, along with engineering, and other hands-on or computer-related course options). Utilizing their time while incarcerated to better

prepare them for the job market upon release had students reflecting on skills and degree programs they would like to see offered. The students often reiterated how thankful they were for the programs and classes available to them, and they desired more. The students also recognized there were logistical and financial considerations that the colleges had to consider when offering courses inside a carceral facility, to include securing faculty to teach classes. Outside-the-box thinking and innovative solutions are needed to meet student interest and continue to work to gradually offer more course and degree options. Surveying students and holding interest groups for both the college and prison's education department to determine the options that will provide the best return on investment—and perhaps, not necessarily financially, but in terms of workforce preparation for those currently incarcerated.

Solutions For Course Completion Despite Transferring Carceral Facilities

Community colleges and their partners in the prisons' education departments need to find innovative ways to help students complete classes in which they are transferred out of due to moving carceral institutions. Some level of continuity and perhaps statewide support needs to be injected into prison education via California community colleges. Building out systems that allow students to complete coursework recognizes the value and hard work of these students' time, energy, and dedication to their academics.

Cultivate a Positive Environment

Create a space that is welcoming, encouraging, and inclusive. While limitations may exist as to what can be displayed and how, the education department's environment within a carceral facility can encourage student engagement, positive thinking, an increase in morale, and a sense of belonging supporting students' psychological need for relatedness. Additionally, donning the

identity of “student” rather than “inmate” within the affirming spaces contributes to a cognitive shift, where incarcerated individuals begin to see themselves as more than their mistakes, harnessing a more positive label.

Promote Academic Community

The opportunity to further a sense of community in educational cohorts, specifically the up-and-coming bachelor’s degree soon to be offered by a nearby university, had many students noting the benefit of an “honors student dorm.” Additionally, the myriad of disruptions and barriers that must be overcome to complete homework and readings, study for tests, etc.—the majority of students interviewed mentioned there was talk of a dorm years ago, specific for college-going incarcerated individuals. Many of them have held on to that specific vision and would like to see it come to fruition—this continues to be a topic of conversation at this carceral facility amongst the college-going students. There are practical and security implications that I am not expert on that seem to be preventing this vision from becoming a reality. While logistically such a feat may be difficult, the downstream effects could prove extremely beneficial.

Stronger and Consistent Wi-Fi Access

Providing Wi-Fi access in cells and dorms would allow students to work on online coursework and turn in assignments through Canvas without delay or added stress should there be a lockdown or medical reasons as to why a student cannot attend class. Wi-Fi access in cells and dorms can also allow students a more conducive location in which to do their coursework without having to worry about noise, space constraints, and other distractions.

College Preparatory Programs

A few students noted their lack of confidence when they initially signed up for college courses. For quite a few, they had been out of high school for 20+ years. Many years had passed since they had seen an algebraic formula or touched a computer keyboard. Offering a college success or college orientation course every semester that infuses computer basics may be worthwhile to explore. Not all students will have had the opportunity to engage in the computer related technologies (CRT) course. Additionally, learning various study strategies, ways of taking notes, what structured paragraphs are, etc. would all be helpful skills for new-to-college and/or returning students. This type of course offering would also benefit teaching faculty as well. They would have more confident students, more uniformed assignment submissions, and potentially more engaged students because they will have been provided, not just technical tools, but practical study skills as well.

Increased Academic Support

In this same vein, incarcerated individuals who earned their high school diploma or GED prior to incarceration are not eligible to take the Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses, regardless of how long it has been since they did algebra, wrote an essay, etc. Given the gap some individuals had between when they completed school and have then enrolled in college, many wished they had some sort of preparation or content refresh, especially for math. Again, teaching faculty would benefit from students taking preparatory courses in fields like English and math (algebra, trigonometry, etc.). Less time would be needed to re-review content or catch students up on curriculum that is needed to continue on in more rigorous coursework.

Faculty Office Hours

Similarly, in-person or video office hours, if time and space logistics permit, would allow more opportunity for students to get their immediate questions answered as opposed to sending a message on Canvas and possibly receiving a response before the next class meeting. Office hours would also encourage student engagement, providing a space for one-on-one discourse as students work to deepen their understanding of the course material.

Professional Development

Lastly, professional development, if it does not already exist, can be created for those planning to, or who already work with incarcerated students to develop awareness as well as a variety of best practices. Traditional and/or mainstream teaching methods may not be the best to use in a carceral setting and educators need to adjust their typical approaches and strategies considering the new micro-environment of a carceral facility they find themselves in, along with reflecting on the power dynamics and assumptions they themselves may consciously and/or unconsciously employ (Novek, 2019). Trauma-informed teaching strategies trainings and opportunities for professional development would be worth exploring and/or enhancing, as well as self-reflexive exercises to allow educators to consider their own positionality and privilege (Novak, 2019).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study aimed to explore currently incarcerated adult male experiences as they pursued associate degrees through prison education programs. With little qualitative research generated in the United States with currently incarcerated students, this study provides a foundation for future research. The data in these pages will allow other researchers, educators,

and administrators to better understand how to support incarcerated students who are interested in pursuing higher education prior to release.

This study's results incorporated five individual perspectives. More research needs to be done to substantiate policy and practice changes for large academic and/or carceral institutions. Continued research at both male and female facilities could assist in ushering in statewide revisions for higher education access and opportunities offered in California state prisons.

Soliciting data from education staff both in the carceral facility as well as educators and administrators at community colleges can substantiate, as well as triangulate data provided by student participants. There seems to be a plethora of challenges that impact the successful execution of education programs that students may not be aware of, however, the staff who organize and run the programs would be equipped to speak on suspected challenges.

A multi-site study would be prudent. Different facilities have different cultures and those incarcerated, different attitudes and perceptions revolving around education. Challenges to pursuing and completing college courses may be different from facility to facility depending on administration and leadership, security levels, prison-college partnerships, course and degree offerings, technology and supplies available, and more.

Lastly, considering Perna's Model of College Choice, it would be advantageous to prison education programs throughout the country to see the model adapted for carceral facilities as they operate differently. A visual representation of systemic considerations could help educators, policy makers, and prison staff, administration, and officers prioritize finances, programming, and support systems for incarcerated students.

Final Reflections

While my population of interest changed during my time in the doctoral program, my initial curiosities did not. I have consistently wondered how and when individuals are exposed to, and educated about, careers along with post-high school educational options and opportunities. After focusing on students in rural communities early in my Ed.D. journey, I came across some information during summer break between years one and two that had me wanting to understand prison education programs. From there, I was able to tour an education department at a California state prison to confirm my interest in conducting research with incarcerated students. The short and extremely meaningful conversations I had during this visit cemented my desire to shine a light on this vulnerable and stigmatized population of students.

This research focused on a population that carries a lot of bias as well as negative associations in people's minds; a population that is often discriminated against as they work to reintegrate into society; a population that is viewed with a myriad of assumptions and prejudices. I wanted to approach the semi-structured interviews with an open mind, not knowing much about college courses offered in carceral facilities; I also wanted to phrase my questions to encourage students to share what they wanted without judgment and without feeling led to answer a specific way. I wanted explore the students' overall experiences of taking associate degree applicable courses while incarcerated. I wanted to stray as far away from "damaged-centered research" as I possibly could and engage in "desire-centered research" (Tuck, 2009, pp. 411-416). Humans are complex, and systems built by us are also complex. I wanted to better understand, and then illustrate, the complex nature of taking college courses while incarcerated, to paint a picture of contradiction, self-determination, and complexity (Tuck, 2009).

The journey from conception of study to execution was full of ups and downs as I navigated what felt like a never-ending approval process. Often my road to research was dubbed, “a moving goal post.” As I continued to pursue this research, wanting to better understand higher education prison programs for students participating in the here and now, the importance of this work propelled me forward. The deeper I dove, the more I realized how little qualitative research with currently incarcerated students existed, and I began to understand why, and the value of this study became more profound. The time commitment, unbeknownst to me, was lengthy, taking one year and three days from first research application submission to research participant recruitment. The approval process required multiple partners at UC Davis, CDCR’s statewide Office of Research, research site administration and staff, along with the community college administration and staff. The timing of this study, to include supporters who helped provide information, access, and advocacy should be underscored.

The individuals who spoke with me were proud of their academic accomplishments—and their ensuing transformations—and looked toward a brighter future once released. The resourcefulness and resilience the students employed was admirable and a testament to their drive to better their own life circumstances not just in facility, but as they prepared for release and reintegration back into society. I left each day of interviews with a strong conviction that we, as a society, have failed. John told me, “I learned my own ABCs in a prison cell.” In the next breath John noted, “I see life as an educated person. I don't see life anymore as a person...as just trying to survive, trying to like...I see life now with the eyes of knowing what I could accomplish.” Proactive prevention and strategic intervention need to be at the cornerstone of outreach and community support. Many of the individuals and their families should have received some sort of intercession, either through community support and/or tangible resources

prior to incarceration. Should intentional, quality, and timely resources have been provided, these men and their families could have had opportunities to: work through their childhood trauma(s); garner appropriate academic accommodations for primary and/or secondary school; receive mental health support; better understand and cope with addiction; be provided with applicable and/or in-demand skills for the current job market; obtain sponsorships to finish their high school diplomas or GEDs, or go to college; find safe and reliable housing opportunities; and so much more. All the participants spoke about their enhanced and wider worldview that came with education, to see the world as larger than their current circumstances, and that is what we as a society need to do.

We, as a collective, have to do better.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview participant informed consent form (in addition to verbal consent, per CDCR)

UC Davis Consent to Participate in Research

_____, 2025

Title of Study: Motivations & Challenges of Adult Incarcerated Students in Associate Degree Programs

Investigator: Joyce Fernandez

Introduction and Purpose

You are invited to join a research study. This study wants to learn about people in prison who are taking classes through California community colleges.

If you agree to take part, I will meet with you one-on-one to talk about your experiences as a college student in prison. The interview will take about 1 to 1.5 hours.

I will record our talk and write it down, but I won't use your name in any notes.

There are no benefits for you from being in this study. Taking part will not change your housing or programs, and it won't affect your chances of parole or release. We hope this study will help teachers understand how to better help students in prison.

Some questions might make you feel uncomfortable, but you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to.

Confidentiality

Your information will be used for this study and may be used for future research. We will not share any personal information that can identify you. Our goal is to support more research, which might involve other researchers. Your data may go into scientific databases; we won't ask you if we can share any de-identified information.

We will do our best to keep your information private, but there is a small risk. Some answers might include details about you and we will handle your information carefully. Staff from UC Davis may access the research.

To keep your information safe, we will store all recordings and notes on a secure server that needs a password. The recordings will be deleted after we write them down.

Rights

Joining this study is completely up to you. You can choose not to participate, skip any questions, or stop at any time. There will be no penalties if you decide not to take part or to stop.

If you want to stop at any time, please let me know, and I will delete any recordings or notes about our talk.

Questions

If you have questions about this study or feel you have been harmed, please contact Joyce Fernandez at (530) 752-0410 or jfernandez@ucdavis.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the UC Davis Institutional Review Board at (916) 703-9158 or HS-IRBEducation@ucdavis.edu.

If you agree to participate in the research, please write your name, sign, and date below:

Name (please print)

Signature

Date

Appendix B

Interview protocol

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. As I mentioned when I introduced my study, I'm hoping to better understand your college experience while you've been incarcerated. I will be asking multiple questions and recording our interaction. Please answer what you are comfortable with and if you want to skip a question, just let me know. I'd also like to take some notes, if it becomes distracting, please tell me and I can stop. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Lastly, before we begin, I need you to provide verbal consent to this interview if you would like to continue.

Basic information:

1. To keep participants in this study anonymous, I won't be using your real name. Is there a name that would not be associated with you, that you would like me to use?
2. Please describe your experience taking college courses while incarcerated.

Probes:

- a. What did you consider when signing up for college courses?
- b. How long have you been taking community college courses while incarcerated?
- c. Did you earn your high school diploma or GED prior to incarceration?
- d. Did you attend college prior to incarceration? If so, how was that experience?
- e. How did you hear about educational opportunities available to you while here?
- f. Tell me about your experience with your instructors.
 - i. Supportive;
 - ii. Challenging;

- g. Prefer in-person, online, a hybrid (online/in-person) and/or correspondence courses? Can you tell me about your experiences in any of those formats?

Motivations:

- 3. What are some of your goals and expectations you hope to achieve by taking college courses here?

Probes:

- a. Early release via milestone credit a factor?
- b. Future impact/goals/expectations post-release.
- c. What kind of community have you been able to build for yourself since enrolling in classes?
 - i. Study groups? Campus-sponsored clubs?
- d. Which course(s) interest you most? Why?

Logistics (potential challenges):

- 4. Can you walk me through how you decide which classes to take each semester or term?

Probes:

- a. Who helps you determine which classes to take each semester? Is it an easy or difficult process? Can you tell me more.
- b. How do the different modalities impact your choices (online, in-person, correspondence, etc.)?
- c. What kind of guides, course catalogs; instructions; etc. exist to help you understand your degree reqs. and courses needed and/or available?

Challenges:

- 5. What makes it difficult to be a student while incarcerated?

Probes:

- a. When do you find time to dedicate to class, studying, and homework?
- b. What kind of study skills support do you have, if any?
- c. Are you able to connect with the instructors easily outside of class time?
- d. How do lockdowns impact your progress in a class?
- e. How do institution transfers impact your progress as a student?
- f. How might other students (or non-students) impact your own experience taking classes?
- g. What motivates you to continue enrolling in classes given the challenges you just described?

Ending Questions/Final thoughts:

6. What would you like community college administrators of prison education programs to know?
7. What would you like prison staff and administrators to know with regard to prison education?
8. What would you like people on the outside to know about your experience taking classes while in prison?