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BUILDING AFFIRMING SPACES ON UNEVEN TERRAIN: COUNTER NARRATIVES BY FORMERLY INCARCERATED COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Building Affirming Spaces on Uneven Terrain: Counter Narratives by Formerly Incarcerated College Students

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A college education after incarceration is an important means of social and economic mobility, but when formerly incarcerated individuals attempt to enroll in college courses or earn a college degree, they often face institutional roadblocks (e.g. required disclosure on applications), academic obstacles (e.g. readjusting to formal education or using academic technology), and interpersonal challenges (e.g. microaggressions or stigmatization). Utilizing a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework whereby all meaning is socially constructed through language with others, I bring together master narrative, counter narrative, and counterspace frameworks to explore how four formerly incarcerated college students narrate their navigation into and through college spaces. I conducted iterative interviews with four focal participants and interviews with other students and campus leaders on the two campuses in which the focal participants were enrolled, and I conducted a narrative analysis of each focal student to build three key themes.

Findings reveal that first, students grappled with master narratives related to the "socially coveted" college experience (the master narrative a university, a college student, a college degree, and self-sufficiency), and the denigrated master narrative of incarceration. Critical to this theme is that formerly incarcerated students are simultaneously navigating exclusionary narratives of college students and deficit

narratives of formerly incarcerated people. Second, students resisted these master narratives by accessing the counter narratives of students who better represented them, building their own counter narratives, utilizing support from a significant advocate in their academic journey, and by borrowing language from others to build a new narrative of self. Third, students built new imaginaries of what *could be* on college campuses by constructing spaces for other formerly incarcerated students, leveraging student staff positions, and critiquing problematic academic spaces. The switch to remote instruction due to COVID-19 challenged students to build academic spaces in unconventional spaces (e.g. bedrooms, living rooms, and backyards) and led to a deeper appreciation for previously taken-for-granted campus spaces like the library.

This project amplifies the voices of a population that is stigmatized on college campuses and in communities more generally and rejects one-dimensional and deficit views of formerly incarcerated people. This project also complicates the cultural narratives that college acceptance and graduation lead to greater economic or societal benefits, because, as these students indicate, formerly incarcerated students have to do *more* to be "accepted back into the community." Formerly incarcerated people face significant barriers and collateral consequences post-incarceration, and my work highlights the ways formerly incarcerated students contend with deficit narratives to build affirming narratives and spaces to benefit future students like them. I conclude with recommendations for research and higher education stakeholders, and for community members to continue building towards much needed social change.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

New policies and initiatives to support educational opportunities for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals have gained momentum over the last decade (e.g. Chaney & Schwartz, 2017; Corrections to College California, 2018; Public Policy Institute of California, 2020; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). For example, in December, 2020 Pell Grants for incarcerated students were reinstated after being unavailable for over two decades (Cantora et al., 2020; Green, 2020), and in California, where this study takes place, there are growing calls to extend CAL Grants to formerly incarcerated students (S.B. 575). However, formerly incarcerated individuals face a number of significant barriers or "collateral consequences" to civic reintegration such as housing insecurity, employment discrimination, psychological impacts from incarceration and continued surveillance, and social stigma (e.g. Custer, 2018; Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Love, Roberts, & Klingele, 2013).

And while many have argued that a college education after incarceration is an important means of social and economic mobility (e.g. Baum & Payea, 2005; Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009; Livingston & Miller, 2014), formerly incarcerated individuals interested in pursuing a college education face a number of institutional and social barriers that make enrollment, retention, and graduation more difficult (Livingston & Miller, 2014; Solokoff & Fontain, 2013; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2014). For example, students may be asked to disclose their disciplinary history on college applications (Rosenthal, NaPier, Warth & Weissman, 2015), may struggle to (re)integrate to formal educational settings and adapt to new educational

technologies (Dreger, 2017), or may encounter explicit or coded discriminatory language about incarcerated individuals from classmates, instructors, or broader campus literature (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Maruna, 2011; Strayhorn et al., 2014).

Despite these challenges, formerly incarcerated college students persist in order to meet a range of academic, vocational, social, economic, and personal ambitions. And—like other student populations, particularly those that have been historically underrepresented and underserved and are therefore at high risk of dropping out—formerly incarcerated college students benefit from campus supports that enable them to move towards their goals and feel valued and encouraged by their institutions of higher education (e.g. Brazzell et al., 2009; Hope, 2018; Strayhorn et al., 2013). While prison reforms and academic policy changes are a step in the right direction, it is also important to consider the sociocultural context in which these polices are enacted and within which students must navigate.

Drawing from education, social psychology, and sociology, this study will illuminate the narratives of formerly incarcerated college students in order to contribute to scholarship on how to improve educational and personal experiences as well as confront and transform deficit views of this student population.

Rerouting the Nexus: The School to Prison Nexus and Building Linkages from Prisons to Colleges

The *school-to-prison pipeline* (STPP) has been a popular metaphor to highlight the ways in which discriminatory disciplinary practices, particularly "zero tolerance" policies enacted in America in the 1990's, push particular students out of primary and

secondary schools, resulting in a higher likelihood that they will have contact with the criminal justice system (e.g. Wald & Losen, 2003; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). These school disciplinary patterns are much more likely to impact students—particularly boys and young men—of color (e.g. Alexander, 2012; Fabelo et al., 2011). And while this metaphor is helpful to illustrate the relationship between carceral and academic systems, there are important critiques that address the myopic nature of the metaphor and instead ask researchers (and more broadly, *all individuals*) to see the critical role of carceral logics, capitalism, and white supremacy operating in these systems.

McGrew (2016), a scholar of the prison industrial complex, critiques the school-to-prison pipeline metaphor as reductive, often undertheorized, and lacking attention to capitalism and the impact of individual agency and collective action. McGrew (2016) argues that the pipeline metaphor limits imagination and the reach of social justice work because when "school failure, the criminalization of youth, and incarceration are conceived of as a 'pipeline problem,' *pipeline solutions* are proposed"—in other words, solutions are limited to educational reforms and not larger social and political shifts (emphasis in the original; p. 357). His critique is helpful to highlight the need to attend to the complexities of the relationship between the education and carceral systems[1]. Also helpful are reminders regarding the

[1] I use the term "carceral system" instead of "criminal justice system" based on the recommendation from the Underground Scholars Language Guide (Cerda-Jara, Czifra, Galindo, Mason, Ricks, & Zohrabi, 2019) in which they argue "Carceral System is far more accurate than the ubiquitous term 'Criminal Justice System.' Not all who violate the law (commit a crime) are exposed to this system and justice is a

relationship that educational spaces and student populations have to capitalism, neoliberalism, cultural narratives of personal success, and the replication of white supremacy through the education and carceral systems.

It is also important to emphasize that incarceration is just one of the myriad ways that the carceral system can impact individuals, their families, and their communities, and that these impacts are disproportionately experienced by people of color (e.g. Sawyer, 2020) and low-income people (e.g. Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). Sawyer and Wagner (2020) report that while 2.3 million individuals are incarcerated in correctional facilities, the U.S. Justice System[2] "controls" nearly 7 million individuals in facilities, on parole, and on probation. They also emphasize that the impact of contact with the carceral system reaches far beyond an individual who has a criminal record: in addition to the 2.3 million Americans currently incarcerated, 4.9 million Americans are formerly incarcerated, 19 million Americans have been convicted of a felony, 77 million Americans have a criminal record, and 113 million adult Americans have an immediate family member who has gone to prison or jail (which is also called "system impacted") (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). Importantly, their statistic for system impacted people does not include individuals under 18. And while studies

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relative term that most people in this country do not positively associate with our current model. In this context, Carceral System is best understood as a comprehensive network of systems that rely, at least in part, on the exercise of state sanctioned physical, emotional, spatial, economic and political violence to preserve the interests of the state" (p. 2).

[2] While I find them problematic, I sometimes use familiar terms like "correctional facilities" and "Justice System" because they identify existing governmental and institutional entities.

show that a college education after incarceration can improve one's economic standing (Fine et al., 2001; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Wallace, Eden, & Flores, 2020), the movement from one system to another is complex and challenging.

More broadly, incarcerated individuals face a number of challenges in prison or jail that make opportunities to reintegrate into their communities and families, let alone pursue or continue education, particularly challenging. And while there is ample evidence that "corrections education" improves individuals' sense of self, facilitates smoother transitions back into communities, and reduces recidivism (e.g. Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, & Martinez, 2001; Foley & Gao, 2004; Vacca, 2004), the small number of incarcerated individuals who can access educational opportunities in jails or prisons—what Davis et al. (2013) and Gorgol and Sponsler (2011) report is only six or seven percent—often face a disconnect post-release when they try to enroll in further coursework (Brazzell et al., 2009; Enck & McDaniel, 2015).

As an example of how the education and criminal justice systems impact one another, in their study on the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men attending Predominantly White Institutions of higher education (PWI), Strayhorn, Johnson, and Barrett (2013) argue that "In terms of education, incarceration may limit, if not eliminate, the ability of African American men to enjoy the socioeconomic and psychosocial benefits that a college degree affords (National Urban League, 2007)" (qtd. in Strayhorn et al., 2013, pp. 76-7). They argue that barriers to college success for this population "flies in the face of liberal ideas of

freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness" (Strayhorn et al., 2013, p. 77). Research on how best to support formerly incarcerated college students illuminates opportunities to support those who may have been the most underserved and disenfranchised in K-12 educational contexts and may be most vulnerable of dropping out of college, if they make it there in the first place.

So while the pipeline metaphor can obscure other important factors, there are meaningful efforts to build linkages between prisons and colleges, sometimes called the *prison-to-school* or *prison-to-college* pipeline, that (re)imagine ways to support currently and formerly incarcerated individuals into and through higher education. As discussed earlier, it is important to recognize that both pipelines are metaphors: the school-to-prison pipeline is useful to illuminate a pattern informed by carceral logics in America, and the prison-to-school pipeline offers an optimistic metaphor to reimagine ways to redirect individuals through institutions in ways that better serve them. However, the metaphors are only a starting point to help uncover a complex phenomenon in need of greater empirical study, and one challenge of the prison-to-school metaphor is that it builds a mental picture of a linear movement from one system into the other, when in reality that progression is multidimensional, potentially nonsequential, and fraught with barriers.

The pipeline critique aside, the support for individuals leaving prisons and going to colleges has grown in the last decade, particularly in California. Between 2014 and 2017, the number of programs for formerly incarcerated students at public four-year and community colleges in California jumped from 10 to 37 (Mukamal &

Silbert, 2018), and, at the time of writing, at least 5 more programs have started in public four-year colleges in the state in the last few months ("Project Rebound," n.d.). The passage of Assembly Bill 1809 in April, 2019 allocated five million dollars to the Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Students Reentry Program grant (A.B. 1809), and there is growing momentum to extend CAL Grants to formerly incarcerated students (S.B. 575) and extend institutionally recognized support programming to more public four-year and community colleges in the state[3]. And while this development is encouraging, there are still a number of challenges that formerly incarcerated students must overcome to meet their academic, professional, and personal goals.

It is also worth pausing to acknowledge that carceral logics extend beyond K-12 schools and colleges, but I have selected college sites as a place to start to disrupt larger systems and cultural assumptions rooted in white supremacy of who deserves or should have access to a college education.

Institutional and Interpersonal Challenges Facing Formerly Incarcerated Students

As mentioned earlier, formerly incarcerated individuals who decide to pursue college education face both institutional and interpersonal challenges. Sokoloff and Fontaine (2013) argue that discriminatory admissions practices are one of the most challenging barriers facing individuals impacted by incarceration in their state of Maryland and creates a precarious landscape for students who must make decisions

[3] I will return to these points when I introduce the focal sites and students.

about how and when to disclose their disciplinary history. Halkovic and Greene (2015) write that, "using criminal records in the application process evaluates applicants not on their academic credentials or potential, but on past history and stigmatized identities" (p. 762). And while an initiative to move "beyond the box" (an extension of the call to "ban the box" on employment applications) *recommends* that institutions refrain from asking about an applicant's legal history on enrollment forms, many American colleges still require that information. A number of studies found that students who "checked the box" on a college application indicating a history of incarceration did not finish the full application, a phenomenon called felony application attrition (e.g. Custer, 2013; Rosenthal, NaPier, Warth, and Weissman, 2015). It is likely that this barrier discourages individuals from even applying for college and, if they do apply, continues to impact them.

In addition to institutional barriers upon applying or enrolling, research indicates that formerly incarcerated students often face social stigma when they enter a college environment. Goffman (1963) argues that stigma occurs when one is perceived as far from social norms and therefore is placed by others in a subordinate position. Some researchers have used Goffman's framework to trace how formerly incarcerated college students grapple with, avoid, or distance themselves from stigma (e.g. Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Ott & McTier, 2019; Phillips, 2020).

Strayhorn et al. (2013) highlight one participant's view that the general campus climate was far from inclusive saying, "[individuals on campus] labeled me as an ex-offender and they left me be... as if that's all I could ever be [there]" (p. 87).

Phillips (2020), who focuses specifically on the experiences of justice involved community college students of color writes, "[justice involved individuals] often internalize the social blemishes associated with their identity, which is further reinforced through societal and institutional cultural values (Brower, 2015; Copenhaver et al., 2007; Custer, 2013a; Evans et al., 2019; Winnick & Bodkin, 2009)" (p. 8). He goes on to argue that students may try to conceal that aspect of their identity and "[feel] isolated and unsupported, which could negatively impact their academic success" (p. 9).

In order to best mitigate stigma, encourage self-efficacy, and champion success for formerly incarcerated college students, academic institutions are encouraged to offer greater supports both off and on campus (e.g. McTier, Santa-Ramirez, & McGuire, 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013), educate faculty and staff about this student population and their unique needs (Hope, 2018; Ott and McTier, 2019), amend discriminatory policies and institutional language (Custer, 2013, 2018; Johnson & Abreu, 2020), and, while discriminatory policies still exist, offer support to help students navigate those structures (McTier, Santa-Ramirez, & McGuire, 2017).

Institutional Opportunities

As the small body of literature on the experiences of formerly incarcerated or justice impacted college students makes abundantly clear, there are a number of opportunities for institutions to better support this important student population. For example, Baston and Miller (2017) highlight the unique and critical role that community colleges play in supporting students into higher education, and, as noted

earlier, new funding for California community colleges may represent a sea change in prioritizing this student population.

The literature also points to the impact of other campus actors on students' sense of inclusion. And while some campus actors may add to a students' sense of stigmatization, a supportive peer, sympathetic instructor, or knowledgeable staff member can make an important positive contribution (e.g. Morton, 2020; Torres, 2020). In general, it is important for faculty and staff to know about potential accommodations for this student population. For example, Hope's report (2018) points out that if instructors are made aware of particular accommodations formerly incarcerated students might need or want (e.g. a seat with a view of the other students and the door), they are more likely to avoid making the student uncomfortable or re-traumatized. Similarly, Ott and McTier (2019) note that faculty might be unaware of the challenges that formerly incarcerated students may have faced and need guidance offering appropriate supports.

Torres (2020), in her study of formerly incarcerated community college students and administrators at the same community college, found that "administrators and managers are not adequately equipped to understand the challenges formerly incarcerated students face when adjusting and transitioning to community college" (p. 118). And Johnson and Abreu (2019) write "Access to higher education without requisite supports and services to ensure the success of justice-involved students is negligent and irresponsible on the part of the institution" (p. 281).

As these examples illustrate, there are promising opportunities for colleges to better support formerly incarcerated students.

Recognizing, Valuing, and Leveraging Students' Gifts

There are also promising ways to amplify the rich perspectives that individuals impacted by the carceral system bring with them to college. Halkovic and Greene (2015) conducted a participatory action research project to explore ways that formerly incarcerated students "enhance their academic and civic environment of their institution of higher education" (p. 761). They argue that formerly incarcerated college students should be framed as having *gifts* that have great potential to improve college landscapes. In particular they note that formerly incarcerated college students are eager to deconstruct stigma, give back to their communities, leverage their knowledge of how systems work, and create a bridge between the academy and underserved communities (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). While the students have valuable gifts and insights to offer, it is important that the campus community is ready to receive them. In other words, it is critical that the campus climate and policies are set up to value this group of students.

Beyond providing accommodations for formerly incarcerated college students, there are opportunities to destigmatize this group. One opportunity to challenge deficit orientations of formerly incarcerated college students (or any denigrated identity group) is to center the individual narratives of those individuals, particularly as they are constructed in concert with or opposition to larger, sometimes deficit-laden cultural narratives. Narratives are particularly important for individuals who

have been marginalized or stigmatized by cultural "master" narratives (sometimes also defined as "cultural scripts," "majoritarian stories," or "dominant discourses") that devalue them and their experiences. As it relates to the present study, it is important to note that the narrative one tells (or chooses not to tell) about their experiences with incarceration may conflict with narratives of being a college student, and both of these narratives are complicated by culturally constructed values about what it means to be either or both of these identities.

In this dissertation, I interviewed four formerly incarcerated focal participants to better understand the narratives they constructed about their experiences coming into and through college spaces, and I conducted a narrative analysis to build three themes based on what they shared with me. This research contributes to a growing body of research on how to best support formerly incarcerated students into and through college settings but is unique in that I adopt counter narrative and counterspace frameworks to do so. As cited above, research has explored the navigational acumen of formerly incarcerated people as they navigate college (e.g. Copenhaver et al., 2007; Dreger, 2017; Johnson & Abreu, 2019; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013; Strayhorn, Johnson, Barrett, 2013; Torres, 2020), and there has been a wealth of insightful research on how minoritized college students utilize counterspaces (e.g. Grier-Reed, 2010; Keels, 2020; Nuñez, 2011; Schwartz, 2014; Case, 2014; Yosso & Lopez, 2010) and counter narratives or counter stories (e.g. Harper, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso 2006/2013). As it relates specifically to the experiences of formerly incarcerated students, Case and Hunter

(2012, 2014), Miller, Mondesesir, Stater, and Schwartz (2017), and MacKillop (2017) have applied the counterspace framework to understand students' experiences. While helpful research also has been conducted on how formerly incarcerated people more generally utilize counter narratives (e.g. Enck & McDaniels, 2015; Opsal, 2011), this project brings both frameworks together to specifically look at how four formerly incarcerated college students navigate college spaces. Finally, by also incorporating the master narrative framework, this project explores how individual narratives of matriculation and incarceration might challenge, problematize, and shift larger cultural narratives.

Theoretical Frameworks

I have adopted a constructivist epistemological stance for this project, in which all meaning is socially and historically situated and co-constructed through language. Bakhtin's (1979, 1994; Holquist, 2002) theories of *dialogism*, whereby all things are perceived in contrast to something else, and *authorship*, by which individuals construct themselves through language, have been invaluable to the development of this project. In order to explore the ways in which individuals make meanings dialogically (i.e., in dialogue with some other), Bakhtin privileges a study of space and time to situate how an individual comes to understand one's self and the others to whom they are responding. From Bakhtin's perspective, "there is no figure without a ground [and] the mind is structured so that the world is always perceived according to this contrast" (Holquist, 2002, p. 22).

Within the umbrella of dialogism, Bakhtin argues that an individual *authors* one's self in relation to others. In other words, individuals use language in the context of others to decide who they are and how they want to present themselves. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001) adopt Bakhtin's concept of authorship in their development of figured worlds, spaces in which individuals "figure" their identities in contrast to the individuals around them with whom they have constructed a shared understanding. They acknowledge the constraints that individuals face within a figured world, but also acknowledge the opportunities one has for authorship: "[Voice] positions persons as it provides them with the tools to re-create their positions… in Bakhtin's handling, [these are] spaces of authoring" (Holland et al., 2001, p. 45). Authorship affords individuals opportunities to construct themselves in response to some otherness, and, therefore, a critical aspect of both dialogism and authorship is the triparte connection between an utterance, a response, and the interaction between the two. Holquist (2002) points out that the interaction between the two is most important because, from Bakhtin's view, things cannot be isolated and "nothing is anything in itself" (p. 38). From Bakhtin's epistemological stance, there is a tension between one's immediate reality and any pre-existing systems "which is intertwined with everyone and everything else" (Holquist, 2002, p. 28). In an exploration of the relationship between how an individual thinks of themself and the messaging they receive from their larger community, Bakhtin's focus on the dialogic between self and other is critical.

This also means that what someone is or can be and the ways in which one makes meaning of the world is invariably impacted by others. Bakhtin (1979) writes that "at any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life" (p. 373; qtd. in Holquist, 2002). This illustration of the ongoing power of a dialogue is helpful, but it also points to great limits in agency if particular ideas or ways of being are not accessible within a particular historical or cultural context. Nevertheless, the ongoing and dialogic nature of the construction of self is a powerful construct for critical analyses of narratives and which helps set the foundation for work on master, personal, and counter narratives, which I explore in greater detail later.

Goffman's (1959, 1961, 1963) work, particularly as it is concerned with the construction of self, the role of language, and the impact of stigma, is also pivotal to understanding how individuals carrying cultural impacted identities (e.g. college students and formerly incarcerated individuals) construct narratives of self. Goffman is fixed on understanding "a sociological version of the structure of the self" by focusing his analysis on the people and institutions that surround the "self" under study. First, Goffman (1959) theorizes that individuals—whether consciously or not—are constantly presenting versions of themselves based on the individuals with whom they interact. While this self-presentation may be framed as benign in most cases and misleading in others, Goffman introduces a new layer to his analysis when he argues that self-presentation is also a strategy to avoid stigma. Goffman defines stigma as "an

undesired differentness from what [some group[4]] had anticipated" and argues that while stigmatization is made to seem benign, it is discriminatory and leads to a sense that the stigmatized individual is "not quite human" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). The notion of stigma becomes particularly useful in the analysis that will follow because it guides the researcher to examine the larger social narratives that might stigmatize certain ways of being.

Both Bakhtin and Goffman are looking beyond the perceptions, experiences, or performances of a single individual and instead study the ways in which the contours around the individual have impacted one's perceptions, experiences, or performances. Both theorists are interested in exploring the impacts—to different degrees—of space and time and larger constructs on an individual's experience of the world and construction of self. Sensitivity to these issues will become particularly relevant when I discuss the relationships between master, personal, and counter narratives.

Symbolic interactionism

Focusing on how we use language to make sense of our ways of being in relation to the world, symbolic interactionism is a helpful way to elucidate the ways in which humans use stories to help ascribe meaning to their experiences, whether those stories are borne of their own experiences or are circulating more broadly in their culture. It is therefore a useful framework with which to explore the experiences of formerly incarcerated students and the narratives they construct in particular

[4] He also calls this group *the normals*.

sociohistorical contexts. Born out of work by Mead and Dewey, the symbolic interactionism framework highlights the ways in which identities are socially constructed through language. Blumer (1986) articulates three main premises: 1) people respond to things in their environment based on the meaning that they have infused into those things; 2) the meaning that people prescribe to things comes from social interaction; and 3) the meaning is molded through an interpretive process (p. 3). Therefore, individuals understanding of the things around them—and their understandings of themselves—are socially constructed (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1997/2007). I argue that a helpful way to illuminate this construction is to explore both the spaces in which individuals interact to continually define themselves and the words that individuals use to define themselves. Critical to this framework is the role that language plays in constructing knowledge of groups of people or particular individuals and how this knowledge is molded through multifaceted and ongoing interactions with others. For the purposes of this study, it becomes critical to see that one's understanding of matriculation and incarceration is molded by interpretations and interactions unfolding throughout one's lifetime.

Particularly important to the present study is that stigma develops from the meaning we assign to things based on our interactions with others (e.g. Goffman, 1963). For example, Opsal (2011) explores the stigma that mothers with histories of incarceration carry, and she writes "rooted within the symbolic interaction tradition, stigma is a constructed reality that develops out of and finds meaning through interaction and social context" (p. 161). And Phillip (2020), in his work on students

who he labels "justice involved" community college students, writes that "… JIIs [justice involved individuals] internalize the stigma associated with their labeled identity … [and] may intentionally conceal their identities for fear of being discovered or ostracized… The hidden identity JIIs struggle to manage reflects a societal reality intimately understood by those directly affected by stigmatizing behavior" (p. 8). In other words, stigma about a particular group continues to exist because people use language to continually reinforce and reinscribe it, and, as Phillip (2020) highlights, can be particularly challenging to navigate for students who carry—and often conceal—that stigmatized identity.

Less prevalent in symbolic interactionism, however, is explicit attention to how power and inequity impact these meaning-making processes. I am particularly sensitive to how the transfer and modification of stories about different groups saturates one's understanding of the world and how the world works. In the case of the phenomena explored in this study, the social production of meaning through language can denigrate one group (formerly incarcerated people) while valuing another (college students). When these two group identities are situated in a singular body, this tension becomes difficult to untangle but provides great opportunities to challenge cultural understandings of what each means individually. Two intersecting constructs, which I turn to next, illuminate issues of identity, power, language, learning, and interactions in particular contexts as well as highlight resistance from dominant structures and discourse: *counter spaces* and *counternarratives*.

Spaces and Counterspaces

Often in educational research and practice, despite considerable theory and research to the contrary, attention to individual students, particularly those framed by institutions as "at risk," de-emphasizes inequitable educational and societal structures that have a detrimental impact on students. One particularly illuminating way to shift attention from individual students to larger school structures is to focus on the institutional spaces instead of the individuals inside of them. The study of space illuminates ways that students are included or excluded from equitable educational opportunities. A closer examination of the ways in which students identify themselves within educational spaces—whether positively, negatively, enthusiastically, or avoidantly—offers researchers and practitioners occasions to understand how particular spaces stifle or support individuals and to shepherd students into spaces where they have felt or physically been previously excluded.

What is critical about studying educational spaces in the context of this study is that space is not just a container where things happen or a backdrop for what *really* happens in schools or colleges; on the contrary, space profoundly impacts what happens and how it happens. Focusing on space allows researchers to unpack power negotiations in social exchanges, physical (dis)placement of bodies within educational settings, and opportunities to disrupt inequities.

Critical Race Theory has been an important lens with which to view spaces and, as I will discuss soon, *counterspaces.* Critical Race Theory (CRT) was originally developed by legal scholars and has been utilized by educational scholars. For example, Solórzano (1997), in his work on racial stereotyping in teacher education,

identifies five components of CRT: the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; the challenge to dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and the interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano, 1997). CRT also disrupts the centering of whiteness and emphasizes the ways in which racism and white supremacy operate in educational contexts (e.g. Cabrera, 2014; Gillborn, 2005), the legal sphere (e.g. Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and the nexus between them (e.g. Fasching-Varner, Mitchell, Martin, Bennett-Haron, 2014). CRT directs researchers to interrogate (in my recasting in the language of spatiality) hegemonic centers and resistant margins in order to understand how race and racism are embedded in "structural and cultural aspects of education" (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002, p. 219). This framework is particularly appealing because it is often applied to educational settings to understand ways that students navigate inhospitable spaces.

The notion of a counterspace first began to emerge when Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) brought work by hooks (1990) and Collins (1992) on centrality and marginality together with their explicit goal to use CRT to study the experiences of marginalized college students. In particular, Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) highlight hooks' (1990) work on marginality and argue that marginalized students are forced to navigate university settings that are steeped in deficit discourses (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). However, they argue that attending to spaces that are created or utilized during that navigation shines light on students' resistance and persistence.

Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) first formally introduced the counterspace framework as an analytic tool to uncover the ways in which African American

students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) create spaces of resistance. Since then, it has been adopted by a range of researchers investigating different institutional spaces and groups (e.g. Grier-Reed, 2010; Keels, 2020), some of which I describe below.

From CRT and social and community psychology, the literature on counterspaces explores how spaces of resistance within larger structures can support otherwise underserved, marginalized, and, often, discriminated individuals (e.g. Case, 2014; Grier-Reed, 2010; Keels, 2020; Nuñez, 2011). Drawing from Solórzano's work on CRT and counterspaces, Case and Hunter (2012) write that counterspaces challenge "deficit-oriented societal narratives concerning marginalized individuals' identities" (p. 257). They argue that this process occurs because counterspaces allow individuals to tell stories about themselves that affirm or resist larger cultural narratives, to critique dominant discourses, or to connect with others who have shared experiences. In considering the roles that student support programs or other campus spaces can have, it becomes helpful to grapple with how those spaces do (or do not) offer students opportunities to construct new, affirming identities as college students. The framework allows researchers to explore the ways in which deficit ideologies are challenged, how engagement in particular settings can build individual or collective identities, and underscores the notion that spaces are not neutral and necessarily impact the stories that people tell about themselves and others.

An exploration of educational counterspaces creates room to see how inequities play out on a daily basis and to consider new opportunities for students to

resist and persist. For example, Nuñez (2011) uses the counterspaces framework to examine the experiences of first generation Latino college students in Chicano Studies classes, and Case (2014) argues that a Black Cultural Center (BCC) on a predominantly white institution (PWI) was an important space for African American students to counter the "marginalizing dynamics" (p. ii) in other campus spaces. Similarly, Solórzano et al. (2000) find that African American college students, especially those on PWIs, benefit from student-constructed counterspaces that afford opportunities to resist microaggressions from classmates and instructors.

Keels (2020) explores the important role that racial-ethnic counterspaces play for Black and Latinx students enrolled in historically white institutions, but she writes that "many [Black and Latinx students'] college-going identity challenges result from structural racism—an intergenerational system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work to perpetuate racial-ethnic inequity" and links factors like income and academic preparation (which she argues are often inaccurately framed as non-racial, non-ethnic factors) to "historical oppression and continued discrimination" (Keels, 2020, pp. 4-5).

Yosso and Lopez (2011) analyze cultural centers as spaces of resistance on historically white college campuses. They focus particularly on one historically white institution that had recently been designated as an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and argue that "traditional discourse" about diversity maintains negative racial climates on college campuses and that "well-intentioned theories, policies, and practices of diversity tend to uncritically view the experiences of White middle-class

students as the standard" (Yosso & Lopez, 2011, p. 84). In contrast, they define culture centers as "social, epistemological, and physical counterspaces fostering social justice efforts in and around the university" (p. 92). Students on the focal campus used the cultural centers as spaces to celebrate their identities, build a feeling of a "home away from home," overcome the culture shock of a predominantly white institution, and resist assimilation. In these cases, counterspaces serve as an affirming space for students who may feel marginalized in the larger campus community, a means to illuminate academic exclusion and campus discrimination, and a tool to emphasize the resistance and persistence of the students within those spaces.

MacKillop (2017) has used the counterspace framework to examine the experiences of formerly incarcerated community college students, and Schwartz (Miller, Mondesir, Stater, & Schwartz, 2017; Schwartz, 2015) has used the framework to analyze spaces that serve formerly incarcerated students (but who are not the only student population) in GED courses. MacKillop (2017) loosely adopts the counterspace framework to examine the supports for formerly incarcerated students at LaGuardia Community College in New York and illustrates that it is difficult to support—and sometimes even find—formerly incarcerated students and system-impacted students (i.e. a student who has a family member in the criminal justice system). She writes that community-based organizations, religious groups, justice department representatives, and LaGuardia stakeholders to whom she spoke agreed that continued collaboration across sites and working with potential students early (potentially prior to release) were critical. However, she writes that the student focus

groups illuminated "complicated" requests for better supports. For example, while students identified having particular needs, they did not want to be "singled out." One student explained, "I would rather (the space) be a gathering. Instead of people feeling like they need help, more just like let's reach out and go somewhere…" (MacKillop 2017, p. 175). Like many student populations, formerly incarcerated and system impacted students have particular needs, but, unlike some student populations, they often carry stigma that makes acknowledging their needs and reaching out for support more challenging.

MacKillop (2017) utilizes a larger grain size than the current study because she is looking more broadly at an entire community college and its mission to support diverse students instead of smaller spaces within it. She also often frames these spaces as "safe spaces," which is problematic because, as has been well argued, calling a space "safe" does not necessarily make it so and may actually continue to privilege white students (who can deflect discomfort) while still imploring students of color or low-income students (or in this case students impacted by incarceration) to speak about their experiences (e.g. Arao & Clemens, 2013; Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998). Overall, though, her work highlights the important tensions that formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students feel as they navigate wanting or needing support and not wanting to be stigmatized.

Additionally, Schwartz has framed GED classrooms (Schwartz, 2014) and community college campuses more generally (Miller, Mondesir, Stater, & Schwartz, 2017; Schwartz, 2015) as counterspaces for formerly incarcerated students. For

example, Schwartz (2014) finds that the young male students enrolled in a particular General Education Development (GED) course were able to figure new identities in the space, which she frames as an example of "spatial justice." In other words, students were able to revise earlier negative associations with schooling as dangerous, exclusionary, and demeaning by entering and participating in a space that was instead safe, welcoming, and affirming.

Master, Personal, and Counter Narratives

Because I have adopted the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (whereby individuals create meaning through language), *narratives* provide an important means of unpacking how individuals think about themselves, others around them, and their experiences within an evolving cultural narrative. Narratives have been studied from a broad array of disciplinary lineages (e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, rhetoric, education) to understand the ways in which individuals use language to construct stories about themselves, their lives, and their communities.

In social psychology, a focus on narrative identity work (e.g. Case & Hunter, 2014; Hammack, 2014) has become an important lens with which to consider how individuals construct narratives about themselves based on the affordances or barriers that certain spaces offer; this framework illustrates ways in which identity—embedded within the narratives we tell about ourselves and others—is continually being revised (e.g. Case & Hunter, 2014; Hammack, 2015). And an important construct that has emerged from this body of research is that of the "master" narrative (also sometimes

called a "cultural script," "majoritarian story," or "dominant discourse"), which individuals grapple with as they negotiate their own identity in relation to society. A master narrative is a sort of compulsory narrative about the way things should be. Opsal (2011) argues that the formerly incarcerated mothers in her study distanced themselves from stories of incarceration and situated themselves closely to the "culturally coveted social identity" of motherhood (p. 153). In this example, the mothers were able to accentuate the aspects of themselves that are framed more positively in the larger cultural narrative and therefore feel more positively about themselves. In connection to the proposed study, it is helpful to think about how adopting and nourishing the identity of a college student can have profound impacts on an individual who might otherwise feel they are portrayed negatively or dangerously by the master narrative of incarceration.

The trouble with a master narrative is that it dictates how a person should be and values or denigrates a person based on the master narrative to which they are attached. As an example, the master narrative of the "American Dream," which often garners critique but still guides some cultural ideas about success and hard work, implies that homeless people are lazy. If the larger master narrative illustrates that hard work leads to monetary and personal success, then adopting that narrative implies that a person who is homeless must not be hard working. The flaws of this façade are immediately visible: there are people who work hard and are also homeless because of circumstances outside of their control (e.g. any number of natural disasters or market fluctuations that lead to layoffs), and there are people who may not work

hard but have monetary or personal success regardless. This study illuminates the same tension by using individual stories to complicate and challenge the assumptions beneath the broadly circulated narratives of "incarceration" and "matriculation."

To highlight the tension between individual and cultural narratives, I draw on Hammack (2008), who argues that the relationship between master narratives and personal narratives "provides direct access to the process of social reproduction and change" (p. 224). I also draw upon Snow and Anderson (1987), who argue that larger narratives that are embedded in particular cultures (i.e. "master narratives"; e.g. Bamberg, 2004; Thorne, 2004; Thorne & McLean, 2003; Hammack, 2008), that individuals resist, embrace, or alter in order to construct affirming narratives of self.

One way to agitate larger, master narratives using smaller, individual narratives is through the production of a *counter narrative*. Like counterspaces, counter narratives have a lineage from Critical Race Theory, and counter narratives identify ways that individuals to intentionally position themselves in contrast to larger, potentially degrading master narratives. Seale-Ruiz (2013) writes that counter narratives "reject stories that are accepted as normalized… [and challenge] racist ideologies [that] help maintain the status quo" (p. 6). Counter narratives illuminate the myriad ways in which systems and individuals construct and adopt hegemonic, neoliberal, and racist narratives that circulate uncritically within cultures and also the ways in which these stories can be remade to empower those who have been denigrated or disenfranchised. Yosso (2006) uses the framework of *counterstories*—in

contrast to majoritarian stories—to elevate the experiences of Chicana/o students. Yosso (2006) writes:

> A majoritarian story implicitly begins from the assumption that all students enjoy access to the same educational opportunities and conditions from elementary through postsecondary school. From this premise, and utilizing seemingly neutral and objective standard formulae, the majoritarian story faults Chicana/o students and community cultural traditions for unequal schooling outcomes. A counterstory, on the other hand, begins with an understanding that inadequate educational conditions limit equal access and opportunities in Chicana/o schooling. Pointing out the biased and subjective formulae of the majoritarian story, the counterstory reveals that Chicanas/os usually at- tend overcrowded, run-down, and racially segregated schools (p. 4)

These counterstories or counter narratives illuminate the myriad ways in which systems and individuals construct and reproduce hegemonic, neoliberal, and racist narratives as well as lift up opportunities to resist those master narratives.

Insights from traditions other than CRT have contributed too. Coming from psychology, Haney (2008) highlights the challenge that is particular to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. He writes, "The crime master narrative portrays their lawbreaking as the product of their entirely free choices, ones exercised by persons unencumbered by background and circumstance… As a result, criminal behavior is seen as a reflection of the inherent 'badness' of those who engage in it" (p. 914). I argue that related to the crime master narrative is a narrative that disqualifies individuals who have committed crimes from enjoying the benefits of education. In the proposed study, the ability of individuals implicated by larger cultural scripts to acknowledge but resist racist, classist, sexist, and other discriminatory "master narratives" of what it means to be a successful college student becomes extremely important. A unique complexity for the focal participants in the proposed study is the

additional challenge to navigate an insidious cultural narrative around what it means to be incarcerated in America. In this case, the power disparities embedded in educational and carceral institutions are called to the forefront and individuals are encouraged and empowered to resist stories that impact their sense of self and ability to succeed.

By utilizing a narrative lens in this study, multiple aspects of individuals' experiences can be brought into focus, particularly the larger cultural narratives that circulate and influence individual stories of self and the opportunities to tell stories in contrast to earlier (potentially disparaging or discriminatory) stories told by others. Put another way, narratives allow individuals to situate themselves in contrast to or association with larger stories and, through their (re)construction, highlight opportunities for agency and change.

Chapter 2: Documenting and Interpreting Student Narratives: Research Design and Methodology

In order to explore the experiences of four formerly incarcerated college students entering and navigating their college campuses, I designed a qualitative research study to capture the complexity of students' narratives and used narrative analysis to answer three interrelated research questions:

1. How do formerly incarcerated college students narrate their navigation into and through college?
2. How do formerly incarcerated college students position themselves in the context of larger master narratives?
3. How do formerly incarcerated college students perceive the impact of campus spaces?

Research Design

Grounded in notions of symbolic interactionism and narrative analysis described earlier, I designed this study to illuminate the particular experiences of four focal students, one attending a community college and three attending a four-year institution, as they navigate college carrying culturally impacted identities as both college students and formerly incarcerated individuals. To do this, I interviewed each of the focal participants four times. I also interviewed one administrator at the four year institution and one administrator and one instructor at the community college and conducted two student focus groups at the four year institution. I also relied on my informal observations before the switch to remote instruction. I focused

particularly on students' experiences in programs specifically designed for formerly incarcerated students. By illuminating these experiences, I provide researchers, practitioners, and, more broadly, individuals who have or who have not had interactions with the carceral system a better understanding of how the four focal participants used language to represent and make sense of their experiences navigating college.

2020 Context: COVID-19 and Racial Reckoning

It is critical to note that this dissertation and the focal participants' narratives were constructed in the midst of a number of exceptional social and public health crises in the United States. In addition to the typical academic and personal challenges that formerly incarcerated college students may face, the focal students grappled with a number of other national challenges. First, the global outbreak of COVID-19 infections, which, at the time of writing, continued to disproportionately impact people of color and low-income people, was first reported in the United States in January, 2020, and the region in which this research took place received a shelter-in-place ordinance in March. In May, the very public murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter Movement, forced a national discussion about racism and police violence, and spurred protests across the country. The local region also saw a record number of wildfires that forced individuals to evacuate their homes, destroyed thousands of buildings, and ravaged tens of thousands of acres. And the year was also an election year that was fueled by political chaos from a presidential administration that had

already denigrated vulnerable populations and illustrated indifference towards and occasionally support of white supremacist groups.

These local, national, and world events necessarily seeped into all facets of this dissertation project, yet my research participants remained resilient and committed in light of these colossal tests of strength and fortitude. It is also worth noting that the exploration of *academic spaces* was fundamentally changed. In a matter of weeks, college courses were transformed into remote classes accessed by videoconferencing platforms like Zoom. Quiet library spaces were replaced with crowded kitchen tables, and bustling campus communities were reduced to email communication and isolation. And the support spaces that students utilized were also drastically changed when in-person meetings and events either paused in preparation to be moved online or were never successfully moved to the online space. While I could have never imagined a data collection year like this, the complex tapestry offered unique opportunities to unpack notions of safety, justice, fear, and, ultimately, hope for the future. Beyond traditional challenges, the focal year forced us all to live, work, and learn differently, and presented a unique landscape for these four formerly incarcerated college students to traverse.

Sites and Focal Student Selection

California offers a diverse range of college campuses and types of programs for formerly incarcerated students and, therefore, unique opportunities to explore the relationship between the larger campus structures, the programs, and the students. Funding structures, staffing allocations, and visibility on campus all impact how

programs are positioned on campus by administrators and how they are viewed by students. While some programs might be better known to administrators, faculty, staff, and students, other programs might be more obscure or less institutionally supported; these variations become significant when analyzing how students respond to varying levels of inclusion and exclusion within and outside of the program. Therefore, I began by selecting two colleges that represented different kinds of post-secondary institutions and offered different kinds of supports for formerly incarcerated students.

The first site, Cedar College, is a community college that enrolled 13,000 students, about 9,000 of whom were part time students, in the 2019-2020 academic year.[5] Cedar had no formal programming for formerly incarcerated students; instead, a student run club called Forward Scholars served as a supportive space for formerly incarcerated and system impacted students. The second, Seaside University, is a public four year university that enrolled 15,000 undergraduates and almost 2,000 graduate students in the 2019-2020 academic year. Prior to 2020, Seaside had a program called Radical Scholars that served a range of student populations, including formerly incarcerated and system impacted students, and during summer 2020, Seaside was able to secure institutional funding to create an Underground Scholars

[5] With the exception of the name Underground Scholars, which I was given permission by leaders at Seaside and Emerald Universities to name explicitly, and the network overviews on pages 48-49, all names of colleges, programs, and individuals included in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

chapter on their campus. I discuss both colleges and their programs in greater detail in Chapter 3.

I recruited students differently at the two sites because of the shift to remote learning one month into data collection. At Cedar College I informed students of the study, including the goals, the unlikely potential risks, the interview process, and the small incentive to participate, in person during one of my bimonthly informal visits to the site before the shelter-in-place order. I distributed student demographic and interest surveys to gather demographic information about program-affiliated students and to ask students to indicate their interest in participating in the study. Four students agreed to participate, and one ultimately participated in the study. In contrast, recruitment at Seaside University was impacted from the outset by COVID-19. While I had informally visited the Radical Scholars space before the shelter-in-place order, I had not yet presented information about the study verbally to program-affiliated students. Therefore, I used snowball sampling with my first participant to contact other program-affiliated students via email. I emailed demographic and interest surveys and informed consent forms and also explained the project (including the goals, the unlikely potential risks, the interview process, and the small incentive to participate) via email. Four agreed to participate, and three ended up participating.

Participants comprised a range of ages (from early 20s to mid 40s), ethnic identities (e.g. identifying as Hispanic/White, Chicano, and African American), and number of years on their current campus (ranging from less than one full year at the start of data collection to five years). The participants also represented a range of

experiences within their programs (e.g. at the start of data collection, two had worked in student staff positions for their institutionally recognized program, one founded his student-run club, and one was very new to her campus and program).

I describe each focal participant in greater detail in Chapter 3, but here I offer a brief overview of Val, Chad, Ashley, and Jay to provide some preliminary context of their experiences.

Val self-identified as a Hispanic/White woman who, at the time of our interviews, was in her forties and was in her first year as a transfer student at Seaside University. Val is a parent, former special education practitioner, and former foster youth. Val had always loved learning and, after attending a number of community colleges, was excited to transfer to Seaside University and looked forward to the economic and professional boost a college degree would offer. Upon enrollment at Seaside, Val became affiliated with Radical Scholars and also later Underground Scholars.

Chad self-identified as a Latino male who, at the time of our interviews, was in his forties and had been studying at Cedar College for five years. Prior to enrolling at Cedar, Chad was experiencing homelessness and battling drug addiction; he learned about a cohort program at Cedar while in rehab and reported having a "lightbulb moment" and thinking: "Oh, maybe that's an option? Let's try that." Chad started Forward Scholars, the club for formerly incarcerated and system impacted students, after vising Underground Scholars at Emerald University because he wanted a space

for formerly incarcerated students "to be able to be themselves. And [have] a place where they can have hope."

Ashley self-identified as an African American woman who, at the time of our interviews, was in her twenties and her fourth year at Seaside University, where she had particularly enjoyed taking a service learning course and appreciated other opportunities to help students and community members because, as she told me, "I really like helping people." Ashley had always been encouraged to go to college, and, while she was enrolled at Seaside, she was affiliated with an Ethnic Resource Center and with Radical Scholars.

Jay self-identified as a Chicano/Latino male who, at the time of our interviews, was in his thirties and his second year at Seaside University. Jay did not attend a traditional high school and earned his GED in prison; he attended community college for two years before transferring to Seaside University, where he was integral in starting an Underground Scholars chapter at Seaside.

Data Collection

I collected a number of qualitative data through multiple sources to understand how participants navigated college spaces, including iterative interviews with the focal participants, interviews with staff and faculty who were knowledgeable about the experiences of formerly incarcerated students, and focus groups with other program-affiliated students (see Table 1). I also constructed analytic memos to document my own sensemaking as I collected the data.

Table 1: Participants

Stakeholder type	Participant name(s)	Number of interviews
Focal participant	Chad	4
	Val	4
	Jay	4
	Ashley	4
Campus administrator	Lana (Seaside)	1
	Allyson (Cedar)	1
Instructor	Renee (Cedar)	1
Student focus group participant	Rico and Rex (Seaside)	1
	Val and Selina (Seaside)	1

Data Sources and Data Collection

Iterative interviews with focal participants. I conducted three iterative, semi-structured interviews with each of the four focal participants during the focal term, being mindful to schedule interviews as students were developing their stories of their courses, their relationship with the programs that term, and as they were finishing their coursework (i.e. one interview towards the beginning, middle, and end of the term; see Appendix A for the data collection timeline and Appendix B for all individual student interview protocols). An unintended consequence of the focal term was that I also had an opportunity to hear how students were adjusting to remote learning and how the programs were or were not faring in the switch to remote instruction. Individual student interviews lasted approximately one hour, and only one interview was conducted face-to-face; the other fifteen were conducted over Zoom.

Conducting interviews remotely (which I did for 20 of my 21 interviews) added a layer of complexity to the interview space. There were sometimes distractions from partners, children, and pets, and some interviewees were in non-private spaces

like a friend's kitchen, an empty campus hallway, or an outdoor area. These contextual features—both the remote nature of the discussion and the setting in which participants selected or to which they were relegated—likely impacted the nature of our discussions. For example, my third interview with Chad was done in his friend's kitchen: he was using her computer, which did not have a working camera so I could not see him. It seemed like his friend was cooking in the kitchen while he spoke with me. At one point he responded to a question she asked about their upcoming meal, and she helped him with names (e.g. Gabriel Fernandez) that he was integrating into the conversation. While he seemed comfortable speaking to me in front of her, it added a unique layer to the interview that complexified the dialogic interview construction typically built between an interviewer and interviewee.

Throughout the interviews, I asked students to tell me stories about their experiences navigating particular campus spaces so I could better understand their experiences; for example, I asked the focal students to "please tell me the story of how you first came to your college" and "please tell me a story about an important class that you've taken and why that class was important to you". I also wanted to use "story" questions to get as close to the experience as possible. For example, Josselson and Hammack (2021) explain that interview questions like these ("little q's") are "experience near," easily accessible to the participant, and "[invite] the participants to describe in detail—tell the story of—either particular events, a significant aspect or time of life (e.g., a turning point), or to narrate an entire life story" (p. 8).

In the first interview, in addition to learning more about how they came to their campus and found (or, in the case of Chad, built) their support program, I provided students with a campus map to discuss relevant campus spaces. I used a campus map to direct them to think concretely about the range of academic spaces and those which were most salient to them. This became particularly relevant when interviewing participants on Zoom because it allowed us both (participant and interviewer) to *return* to the campus through the use of this visual, in contrast to the varied spaces (e.g. bedrooms, backyards) we found ourselves as we engaged in the interview.

Second and third interview questions were developed based on earlier interviews, emergent themes, and world events impacting students and their personal and academic experiences, such as COVID-19, social distancing and school closures, George Floyd's murder and the subsequent resurgence of the BLM movement, and political and social unrest. Additionally, in the third interview I discussed two salient, emergent themes (stigma and space) with students. And while students made some explicit recommendations for the campuses and/or programs in the interviews, during the third interview, I also asked specifically about what recommendations they had for greater, more effective supports on campus.

Interviews with program-affiliated faculty and staff. I interviewed one faculty member and two staff members in order to learn about the institutional contexts that students were navigating, including background information abouts the programs and the master narratives of incarceration and matriculation at play on the

two campuses (see Appendix C for staff/faculty interview protocol). I wanted to be able to compare and contrast how students were positioning themselves and the perspectives of other campus members as they relate to the formerly incarcerated student population, the program history, and the larger campus context.

At Cedar, I interviewed the faculty mentor of Forward Scholars and an administrator who is familiar with Forward Scholars. At Seaside, I interviewed the director of the transfer success program in which Radical Scholars is housed and who oversaw the new funding allocation that led to the Underground Scholars Program at Seaside University. While I could not interview the coordinator of Radical Scholars because she was on sick leave, I was able to gather information about the program from speaking with the director of the transfer success program. I also used my last interview with Jay, who took on a leadership role for the Underground Scholars Program to learn about those developments as they were unfolding.

Focus groups. I also conducted two focus groups with formerly incarcerated students at Seaside University to gather more context about how other students were conceptualizing the programs in their college navigation and more about the master narratives that they evoked as they reflected on the larger campus climate (see Appendix D for focus group interview protocol). Each focus group interview included two students and lasted about an hour. Interestingly and unintentionally, each focus group included one returning Seaside University student who had been formerly affiliated with Radical Scholars and one student who had just transferred from Cedar College, who was formerly affiliated or familiar with Forward Scholars and who,

while potentially also affiliated with Radical Scholars was more integrated into Underground Scholars from the time of their arrival to Seaside University.

Despite interest in participation from Forward Scholars-affiliated students, COVID-19 caused deep disruptions to students' lives (which I discuss later), and I lost contact with three students who originally expressed interest in participating. I was only able to retain one focal participant from Cedar College and was unable to facilitate a focus group interview.

Informal observations. I planned to do systematic observations over the focal term, but due to the pandemic instead had to rely on my informal observations during my visits to the two programs between August 2019 and February 2020 (before the shelter-in-place order). While this limited the scope of my data, being physically prohibited from the campuses aligned with students' new experiences of formal academic spaces, namely that they were almost entirely remote. I was still interested to learn how students were reflecting on prior spaces and how they were managing their new college contexts (e.g. classes on Zoom, resources online, etc.). I was also given a unique glimpse into students' *new* academic spaces—namely, their bedrooms, their kitchens, their backyards—and to learn how those spaces were or were not serving their academic development. During the focal term, I was hoping for future systematic observations, but that was not possible due to the continued remote instruction and shelter-in-place ordinance.

"Member validation" interviews. I conducted interviews in the term subsequent to my main data collection in order to learn how students were adjusting

to the new quarter and, in the case of two of the four participants, adjusting to life post-graduation. Seale (1999) frames the member check interview as a "member validation" interview and many scholars highlight the rich opportunities member checks can offer because they encourage reflexivity, balance power, and offer opportunities for transformation (e.g. Cho & Trent, 2006; Koelsch, 2013; Seale, 1999; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). I shaped the interviews to strike a balance between what Cho and Trent (2006) identify as *transactional* and *transformative* validity tools; in other words, I used the interview to ensure that my participant summary (which I include in Chapter 3) matched their perception of reality, and I also used the interview to discuss ways to use the project to extend opportunities for change.

In these final interviews, I asked participant-specific follow up questions and shared preliminary insights to hear their reactions, questions, and additions. I also checked that I included accurate information about their experiences (e.g. the correct major and number of years at their college), and that they were comfortable with the information I intended to use in the dissertation. I also provided a definition of counterspaces (Case & Hunter, 2012) and engaged in a discussion around whether their program fit that definition.

Finally, I asked if they had questions for *me* about myself, the project, or future work to support this student population, which led to interesting final thoughts from the participants. Chad, after being very generous in sharing his own personal obstacles, asked me about "demons" and barriers I had faced. Ashley, who was preparing for her future graduate work, asked about my progress in the doctoral

program. Jay, perhaps due to his new role as the program coordinator of Underground Scholars asked if *his* description of the program and his experience was clear. And Val said the project was "exciting," asked for a copy of the final dissertation, and told me not to forget her when I become "famous." These closing interviews were powerful ways to discuss the data but also to hear what this project means for the participants and future formerly incarcerated college students. While these interviews added a new layer of data, they also ensured I was remaining authentic to my research goals, which are to elevate the narratives of students who have been historically muted and to ensure that their representation is indicative of their actual experiences.

Transcribing and Data Analysis

Next, I describe how I moved from interview audio recordings to narrative analysis.

Transcription and Preliminary Analysis

I used an online, voice recognition transcription service called Temi to produce a first pass transcript of each interview[6]. After the Temi program produced a first pass, I verified the accuracy of each transcription by listening to the audio recordings, correcting minor errors, scrubbing identifiable information, and capturing important features of the conversation such as long pauses, false starts, emphasis, laughter, and, in some cases, yelling (e.g. "It's not fair! It's not fair!"), or emotional

[6] After each interview I deleted the video recording that Zoom provides when a user records a meeting and deleted the audio files immediately after transcribing each interview.

segments of the interview (e.g. "she was able to recognize [voice starts to shake] that I was bigger than my circumstances. [starts to cry]") as these were important to understand as part of the co-constructed story participants were sharing with me in the interview setting. I created a key for names and places and their matching pseudonyms in my hand-written journal.

Along with the transcript verification, this first round afforded me an opportunity to begin to make meaning of the data. As I listened to participants' voices and read their words, I stopped frequently to write notes in my journal to capture emergent themes, potential codes, and, a particular affordance of my data collection strategy, to prepare follow up questions to integrate into later interviews. Some large, somewhat-amorphous themes that were already emerging during the transcription verification stage were that all participants had a helping mindset (e.g. shepherding other students through the college landscape, wanting something better for future students) and that there existed a tension of intersectional identities for some participants (i.e. emphasizing that different students' backgrounds predicate different supports, and that it can be challenging to identify with a nondominant identity).

Analytic memos. I composed analytic memos to track lines of inquiry throughout the interview, transcription, and analysis phases. These memos were helpful in tracing participants' development over time, capturing helpful contextual features of a turbulent period in our nation's history, and helping to make sense of the data by lifting up particular themes across participants' interviews and across participants.

I used a paper journal throughout the interview and transcription verification processes to track the relationship between what participants said and how they said it, to draw connections across participants, and to trace my own processing of information (e.g. what I found most salient during my first engagement with the data). I used a Google document to capture long-form ideas or reflections either as they related to the whole project, across participants, or specific comments that participants made. I also used this document to reflect on my own positionality at each stage of the analysis. Both forms were helpful as I developed subsequent interview questions, traced themes, and analyzed data, and I continued to develop these memos as I moved into the narrative analysis that I describe below.

Once I had verified all transcripts, I printed each participants' transcripts as a set (i.e. interviews one, two, three, and four) and, drawing heavily from Josselson and Hammack (2021), completed a narrative analysis of each focal participant through five unique readings of their full transcript set.

Narrative Analysis

Josselson and Hammack (2021) provide guidance on narrative analysis that heavily informed my analysis. They raise important ethical and methodological components of narrative research, including the importance of transparency and reflexivity in the analytic process and sensitivity to the co-construction of narratives that occur in the interview space, "both between interviewer and interviewee in a narrative interview (e.g., Mishler, 1986) and between the individual and the possibilities afforded by culture (e.g., Hammack & Toolis, 2019)" (p. 17). In addition

to the iterative reading process that they recommend for narrative analysis (which I outline below), their emphasis on transparency and reflexivity to reach "methodological integrity" was an vital piece of this project.

Josselson and Hammack's (2021) iterative reading process includes five readings of the data with discrete goals for each, which enable the researcher to: build familiarity with the data, identify salient voices, build coherence across themes and voices, identify theoretical connections, and locate cross-case connections. I have replicated this order of analysis, and made two adjustments, including attending to voices *and* spaces that participants evoke and constructing individual analytic "chapters" of each participant. Table 2 illustrates these readings, and I describe them in greater detail next.

Table 2: Iterative readings in the narrative analysis process
(Adapted from Josselson & Hammack, 2021)

Reading	**Goal**	**Process**
1	Become better acquainted with the data; track emergent themes	Read; annotate themes, initial thoughts, and lines of inquiry; memo
2	Identify voices (people, groups, master narratives) and spaces evoked by the narrator	Read; annotate each identification of voices (of people and/or spaces) evoked in the narratives; memo
3	Bring together themes and voices to identify larger stories and coherence across the interviews	Read; annotate salient patterns across interviews that connect voices to larger elements of the narrative
4	Identify connections between participants' narrative and theory	Read with particular attention to earlier analysis; annotate connections to theory
5	Identify cross-cutting themes and connections to theory	Read with larger themes and theories in mind; trace ways in which participants connect or diverge with one another

Reading 1: Initial Engagement and Emergent Themes. While I was already familiar with the data from the interview and transcription verification processes, this is where I began my deep reading of the interview data. During this first reading, I was most interested in getting a sense of the gestalt of the narrative and identifying salient themes (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). I made marginal annotations in pencil to capture important details and my own questions and reactions, and I underlined salient quotes[7].

Simultaneously, in a red pen I underlined every instance of a person (e.g. "my mom," "those people," George Floyd, "a young kid that's caught teeter tottering") or space (e.g. statistics class, the club, "a Zoom room") that the participant discussed. This process diverges slightly from the process outlined in Josselson and Hammack (2021), but it allowed me to attend more closely to the details of characters and spaces in the narrative. As the examples illustrate, I was liberal in my identification of people and spaces; in some instances they were very abstract ("a young kid that's caught teeter tottering"), in others they were virtual ("a Zoom room"), and in still others captured broad categories ("those people").

This process also allowed me to attend to unique features of their stories. For example, I noticed that Chad invoked "you" in four different ways in our discussions. First, to mean *me*, the interviewer (e.g. "What barriers did you face? As- being a female?"); second, as the linguistic space holder "you know?"; third, when he would

[7] I offer a very detailed report of my analysis to meet Josselson & Hammack's (2021) call for transparency in the analysis process.

move into a longer explanation of something upsetting to him (e.g. "Then the more you watch the media, the more you want to turn it off, but you can't turn it off because you want to know what's going on. And so the more you try to avoid it, then your mind is racing"); and fourth, to indicate an academic experience that was his own but framing it in a way that he might say it to another student faced with a similar barrier to whom he was sharing an academic strategy, like when he described how he learned to overcome confusion in class

> Because you're in the classroom and you've seen everybody else nodding their head, nodding their head. And you're thinking, "Oh shit, they must know what's going on." But they're probably in the same thing just nodding their head because they don't want to ask because they don't want to look stupid and they're probably thinking the same thing. Like you're like, "what is this teacher talking about?" So I learned to ask questions.

After reading each transcript in the set, I paused and created a bulleted list of initial thoughts and emergent themes. For example, after reading Chad's fourth interview, I realized there was a theme emerging related to collective struggle. I recorded the following in my notes:

> *The role that collective struggle has inspire action:* on a large scale, Chad talks about how inspiring it was to see undergraduates and graduate students at Underground Scholars at Emerald University that "looked like [him]" to motivate his own college trajectory but on a small scale he also invokes that same mindset. For example, in interview 4 he talks about how knowing that other people struggle with depression makes it easier for him to struggle with his depression.

I also took brief notes as they related to my own positionality as I read the transcripts individually and then developed those notes after completing the full set. For example, after reading Chad's first interview, I wrote:

> At one point during interview 1, Chad mentions the grassroots origin of USI and how now "it's an actual office" and "part of the school" and ends by saying "so it would be nice if we could get something like that part of the school for, for us" and I respond by offering an anecdote… that Project Rebound "started in a mop closet"—and I find it interesting that I shared this anecdote to give him another model/roadmap/program that has come before and become recognized by the campus community. I believe that stems from working with the Forward Scholars students so closely over the last year or so and wanting to make sure they have hope as they continue to fight for legitimacy on campus.

After reading all four transcripts in the set, I drafted a holistic overview of the participant's story of coming into and through college using the information dispersed throughout all four interviews. Later in writing up my analysis, I integrated salient quotes from the interview to flesh out the student's academic trajectory.

Reading 2: Multivoicedness of People and Spaces. The goal of the second reading was to illuminate the different voices being evoked by the narratives and to identify the people, contexts, or ideologies that participants incorporated, adopted, or rejected to construct their own story. In this reading, I was also interested in the dialectic between themes that emerge from individuals' narratives *as they are connected to* larger cultural narratives. For example, Opsal (2011) notes themes of "felon" and "good mother" as constructs in which the women in her study position themselves towards or away from and Toolis and Hammack (2015) highlight the ways in which homeless youth push against the "American Dream" construct by explicitly positioning their experiences in contrast to that narrative. In these examples and others, individuals use narratives to disrupt the dominant discourse that do not serve, and in fact may denigrate, them. These samples are helpful because they illustrate not

only how a single narrative is constructed, but also how it is situated within a larger cultural narrative.

I started again from the beginning of the set and, with a blue pen, annotated where various voices, ideologies, or master narratives were being evoked by the speaker. Some were very clear, like when Chad discussed a particularly significant instructor: "Dr. Bautista is the one who really, really kept telling me and bushing me like, 'good job, Chad, good. You, you can do this.'" Others evoked a way of thinking that, in my analysis, developed and was revised as I went. For example, Chad often espoused the importance of asking for help, and, in interview four, he shed light on why that advice is so important to him:

> we're taught at a young age to do it on your own, you know? Go and- "go over there and go do it, just go do it," you know? And, um, "don't bother nobody and you go do it," you know? That's been ingrained in us for so long, but not to ask for help.

So the "voice" was revised from a general theme (from reading one) of "help seeking" to an evoked ideology of "independence v. asking for help" because it was a message beyond just the role that asking for help can have, but encouragement to fight the habit of thinking individuals have to do things themselves. And sometimes participants also identified a larger master narrative, which Josselson and Hammack (2021) argue can be significant: "Thinking about voice beyond *individuals*, though, they may be the voices of *ideologies* or *master* narratives—systems of belief or discourses which the individual must navigate as they develop their own language of the self (Hammack, 2008, 2011)" (p. 49). As another example, throughout our discussions,

Chad evoked a master narrative of an ideal college student to whom he compared himself.

In this reading, I also extended the concept of voice to capture salient *spaces* that participants identified as they built their narrative. Here it is important to note again that for almost all of the interviews (fifteen out of sixteen interviews with the focal participants), we were never *physically* in the same space, let alone a campus space. What seemed like an unfortunate adjustment that had to be made due to COVID-19 actually resulted in more meaningful, albeit abstract, conversations about campus spaces. Participants, rather than speaking about a space that they could ostensibly occupy *during* or *directly after* the interview, were forced to speak about spaces in the ways in which those spaces existed in their memories. It became clear in my analysis that framing a *space as a kind of voice* was critical to illuminate the ways in which participants used an abstraction of campus spaces to make meaning of their experiences and themselves.

For example, Val evoked the Disability Resource Center (DRC) space throughout her narrative. While the physical office is in a particular building at a precise place on a campus map and with particular furniture, wall paint, and humans within it, the voice of the DRC as an institution but also as a character in her story was evident. Val often highlighted the embodied inaccessibility of spaces like the DRC, but, for Val, the DRC office was also, at times, a hostile and malicious entity to which she had to battle and felt obliged to help others to grapple with. Therefore, in

my analysis, this space, and others like it, were elevated to voices that helped participants make meaning of their experiences into and through college.

After reading each interview, I typed a list of all of the voices evoked in the interview, and once I had read all four interviews, I distilled the voices evoked across the four interviews into a new list that combined all of the voices from all four interviews, removing duplicates. After my second readings I had identified 87 unique voices and spaces evoked in Chad's narratives, 56 in Val's, 128 in Jay's, and 92 in Ashley's.

I then took these distinct voices and categorized them in a few different ways to make sense of how the participant was utilizing the voices to make sense of their experience. I started with a uniform categorization structure, but I found that unique organizational structures based on how the participant evoked the voices and spaces were helpful. Chad's organizational categories privileged types of inner speech and the revoicing of others; Val's voices and spaces were organized by categories of sensemaking about her ideologies and expectations, her assessment of physical geography, and her relationships to other people; Jay's voices and spaces are organized temporally by past, present, and future; and Ashley's voices and spaces included connections to giving or receiving help. More that offering a way to organize the voices and spaces, this reading became particularly helpful when I began to engage in the next reading to make sense of patterns within the narratives.

Reading 3: Patterns Across Themes, Voices, and Spaces. The goal of this reading was to bring together voices and spaces evoked in the narratives with the

themes identified during reading one and that were continuing to emerge on each subsequent reading. In this stage, I mobilized thematic analysis and attention to voice to uncover patterns in the narrative. The goal of this stage was to recast the individuals' narrative in an analytic way. Josselson and Hammack (2021) identify the guiding question of this reading to be: "*How do all of these voices and the thematic content they produce create coherent patterns within the narrative?*" (p. 57; emphasis in the original).

I started again from the beginning of the set and, with a green pen, annotated patterns that emerged. After reading each transcript, I again paused to document the patterns of that interview and my own reflexivity.

For example, after my third reading of Val's transcripts, an important pattern I identified was the disconnect between her expectations of college and her lived experience. In the first reading I had identified salient quotes directly from Val ("I was really excited [about going to college] and I LOVE learning") and my own preliminary themes ("prior academic experiences"), and in the second reading I identified important voices that informed her earlier academic experiences and expectations of college (e.g. Julia, "professors," a large lecture hall). However, it was not until the third reading that I was able to see a larger pattern that connected the voices to her earlier college expectations and her feelings of disappointment in the actual college experience. So while Val experienced a range of supports from earlier community colleges and interacted with larger messages about "world renowned" universities like Seaside University that informed what she imagined actually being a

student at Seaside *might* be like, these expectations were, as Val said, "busted" when she actually got there. This reading helped bring the earlier elements together.

Reading 4: Engagement with Theory. Again following Josselson and Hammack (2021), the goal of the fourth reading was to bring the different voices, spaces, and themes in conversation with salient theories. At this point in the process, I had also created an analysis document for each of the four focal participants in which I provided an overview of their educational journey, the salient voices and spaces in their narratives and their unique organizational structure, and the salient themes emerging from their individual narratives (see Appendix E for Val's analysis chapter as a sample and Table 2 for an overview of all individual themes). At this point I also drew on theory to make those thematic sections more robust. And this document aided in moving to the final reading, in which I moved from reading participants individually to reading them as a larger set.

Table 3: Individual narrative analyses themes

Participant	**Individual themes**
Chad	Chad is invited to try on new, positive voices that help craft a new story of self: "…maybe I am smart, maybe- you know? Maybe I'm not that dumb after all": Telling one's story offers a constellation of opportunities for self and for others: "You can do this, even though you have… negative life experience. Other people want to hear your story" Representation creates opportunities for alternative futures: "I saw Brown people like me… they're getting their doctorate, you know, and uh, they showed me that there is a path if you're willing to do the work."
Val	Val's love of learning and expectations of college are challenged : "My dream has been busted. It's not what I thought it was"

	The campus geography hinders accessibility, which disproportionately impacts vulnerable students: "… you would think [a vulnerable population] would be like in the CENTER of campus" COVID disrupts Val's academic and psychological well being[8]: "I was like, 'do I finish school? Like we're all going to die… Like what's the point?'"
Jay	Jay embraces his FIS identity "unapologetically" to create more visibility and create a "positive stigma" "…especially if you're at a UC, I think you're in a, in a space where you're able to, uh, bring visibility to where there once wasn't before" Affordances and challenges of a campus ecology: "They've been kinda like in this box for their whole lives… as much as they're tripping out on me, I'm kinda like tripping out on them" Office space and professional roles open doors and support cross-campus linkages: "…to be in a space… where they can catch that vibe, gain that experience… [and] pave the way for what comes next for them"
Ashley	Complex identity features complicate support opportunity and program membership: "I wouldn't want to take up that space that someone else could use" Finding one advocate can guide the way: "…if you could just find-even if it's just one person that will just help you and support you and guide you, like you'll be good" Challenging a negative perception of help seeking: "sometimes you also have to be a little bit vulnerable and let people know like this is what you need"

Reading 5: Cross-case Comparison. The goal of the fifth reading was to read through all of the transcripts once more as a full set (all sixteen transcripts) to amplify the cross-cutting themes (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). At this point I already

[8] Note: all four participants had psychological and academic impacts from COVID-19 and remote instruction (which I explore in their original participant overview documents)

had the individual narrative analysis documents and therefore a sense of how the individual themes intersected into larger thematic clusters, but this reading offered a new view of the data in which I could focus on how participants' narratives connected to a selection of cross cutting themes. For example, interviews with Ashley very rarely connected with the larger master narrative of incarceration and college going (likely because she does not identify closely with the identity of formerly incarcerated *and* because she very closely matches the college student master narrative to the point that it is likely naturalized to her), but her interviews tied closely to the master narrative of self-sufficiency and counternarrative of help seeking. On the other hand, Jay's interviews were rich with examples of his navigation of the master narratives of a formerly incarcerated person and a college student, with only a few references to the help seeking narrative. This final reading heavily informed the themes that I will explore in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Researcher Positionality

An important component of the epistemological stance I have adopted for this study is continuous attendance to my own positionality. I am a white, middle class, heterosexual, cisgender woman who has been fortunate to have had predominantly positive educational experiences and to have worked and been educated within both a public California State University and a public research University of California. As a young person, I was impacted by the incarceration of my only cousin, and my view of the carceral and educational systems were forever impacted by what I saw him endure. And while his experiences with incarceration left an important impression on

me, I have never been incarcerated. Additionally, my connection to the carceral system by way of my cousin's incarceration sits in stark contrast to those who have incarcerated parents, partners, or children.

My identity and experiences have an indelible impact on each stage of this process: choosing this line of inquiry, designing this project, analyzing this data, and presenting this work. Additionally, my identity and experiences (or lack of experiences, as it relates to incarceration) impact the spaces to which I am granted access, and my presence impacts the data that is available to me. For example, before beginning this project, formerly incarcerated students and colleagues "vouched" for me to others. As students, faculty, and staff learned more about me, they grew less suspicious of my intentions and began to see me as an accomplice[9] in this work; I understand and appreciate their hesitancy, and I am grateful for their openness and generosity.

Another important component of my positionality is my racial identity as a white individual. All four focal participants were students of color, and, more generally, incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and systems-impacted individuals are more likely to be people of color (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). I believe this reality, coupled with the fact that I have not personally been incarcerated, had an impact on what students told me and the way that they phrased particular responses, particularly

[9] There have been recent discussions to replace the term *ally* and with *accomplice* to highlight critical investment to support marginalized groups instead of allyship which can be more symbolic than actionable (e.g. Indigenous Action Media, 2014; Powell & Kelly, 2017).

as when the response was related to race. For example, when describing experiences with other students on campus who had never met formerly incarcerated people, Jay characterized them as "students from the suburbs" whereas if he had been speaking to a person of color he might have said "white students." Students sometimes talked about their racial identities as they juxtaposed "other" (presumably white) students, and I expect my own positionality shaped the way they framed some of these ideas. These racial markers were still present, but I believe that students may have omitted important comments because they were speaking to a white person, or, put another way, may have shared more about their racial identities and how those identities impacted their narratives and relationships with campus spaces with a person of color.

I also consider myself closely connected to the groups and people at the center of this study. I knew three of the four focal participants prior to the project. At the time of writing this dissertation, I continued to work closely with two of them. I have also supported the focal programs in formal and informal ways over the last three years, including offering guidance informally to students in Forward Scholars and working as a member of Underground Scholars.

I am also sensitive to the fact that I am an interpretive and analytic tool in this project, and that my experiences and identity impact the process. Because symbolic interactionism directs researchers to explore co-constructed meaning-making and narrative analysis relies so heavily on reflexivity, it is impossible to remove myself from the analysis. In order to attend to my own positionality, biases, and vantage point, I have paid thoughtful and honest attention to my own positionality in the

analytic process and ensuring that in each step, I am pausing to be reflexive about my own sensemaking of the data.

Chapter 3: Two Colleges, Two Worlds: State Context, Sites, and Focal Students

California is home to 116 community colleges serving over two million students, 23 public state colleges serving about a half million students, and 10 public universities serving about 275,000 students. However, with over 125,000 incarcerated people in the state, an estimated 95% of whom will be released (Bureau of Justice Statistics), and even more in contact with the carceral system in other ways (as discussed in Chapter 2), each of the three public California college systems have unique networks to support formerly incarcerated college students enrolling in each system.

First, Project Rebound, which was started at San Francisco State University in 1967 by Sociology Professor John Irwin (*Project Rebound,* 2020), supports formerly incarcerated college students in the CSU system and, at the time of writing, is represented on 14 of the 23 campuses. The program offers mentorship, academic advising, psychological counseling, and other services to ensure that CSU students who have had experiences in the carceral system are set up to do well at their CSU campus.

The Underground Scholars network started at University of California, Berkeley as a student organization in 2013 by formerly incarcerated and system impacted students. After receiving funding from Berkeley, a group of formerly incarcerated students were able to acquire an office space and hire a small number of staff and students to continue building the program ("Berkeley Underground

Scholars," N.D.). They later secured funding from the state for an academic support program. At the time of writing, eight of the nine undergraduate-serving Universities in the UC system have started chapters on their campus, and the program also has a strong network of community college ambassadors, like Chad, who are tasked with recruiting students, sharing resources, and encouraging transfer.

Finally, the Rising Scholars network was recently established at the California community college level. While some community colleges already had support programming particularly tailored for formerly incarcerated college students, the hope is that the new, more unform network will help gain more policy traction (Kellie Nadler, personal communication) and encourage programming on campuses that do not already have a program to support formerly incarcerated college students. Research indicates that community colleges are critical points of entry for formerly incarcerated individuals interested in pursuing higher education, and yet there are often gaps in supports (e.g. Baston & Miller, 2017; Torres, 2020).

I will discuss two other programs in this dissertation that do not fit neatly into the categories above: Radical Scholars at Seaside University and Forward Scholars at Cedar College. The first, Radical Scholars, is a program for college students with a range of backgrounds including being formerly incarcerated, former foster youth, or, for a number of reasons, independent from their family. Forward Scholars is a student club that came out of Chad's ambassadorship with Underground Scholars. After he visited Emerald University and saw Underground Scholars, he was motivated to build a club at Cedar College.

In this section I present an overview of the two different campuses at which students in this study were enrolled, the different programmatic offerings, and one significant shift that took place at one of the colleges during the focal year. Then, I offer more detailed vignettes of each of the four focal participants. As a reminder, with the exception of the name Underground Scholars, which I was given permission by leaders at Seaside and Emerald Universities to name explicitly, all names of colleges, programs, and individuals included in this dissertation are pseudonyms. Student participants' names were self-selected.

Cedar College and Forward Scholars

Cedar College is a community college that serves about 13,000 students, about 9,000 of whom are part time students. During the focal academic year (2019-2020), about half of the students identified as white, a little over one third identified as Hispanic, 5% identified as two or more races, 2% as Asian, 1% as Black and 1% as American Indian/Alaskan. The college has two campuses: one is located in a more affluent area where the population is majority white and Latinx, and one is located in a predominantly Latinx community that has a lower median household income. The two campuses offer similar supports for students but on a different scale, with the more affluent campus housing a full library, the admissions office, and different academic buildings, and the smaller campus houses fewer on-site supports.

Cedar College sits near the coast of Central California. Over the years, the main campus has built innovative centers to prepare students for Allied Health careers. The secondary campus is relegated to two buildings in the downtown region

of a nearby agricultural town; while the hallways are unremarkable, the foyer often bustles with students coming and going. Both campuses sit on indigenous lands. Cedar became an official community college in the late 1950s.

Forward Scholars is a student-run club at Cedar that had between six and ten regular members who met weekly with a faculty mentor before the shelter-in-place directive in March, 2020. The group was founded by Chad and a few other students in 2017 after visiting Emerald University and watching a presentation by Underground Scholars that gave Chad "hope of just making this a club where it's a safe spot where people don't get judged for being who they are." The group included a mix of traditional aged college students and older students, male and female identifying students, and those who were formerly incarcerated, system impacted, and supportive allies and accomplices. The group met once a week during the lunch hour in a classroom they reserved ahead of time to discuss their upcoming events and check in on personal topics. Once a month they held their meeting at the secondary campus, which was closer to where many of the members lived. Chad explained that the meetings "gave us a space to just be ourselves and not be afraid. We, we talked about all kinds of crazy stuff… sometimes not even stuff that was on the agenda, just, just about our day. [pause] And creating that bond." As a student club, Forward Scholars had to meet requirements from the college, like attending administrative meetings, filing paperwork for classroom registration and event planning, hosting events, and finding a faculty sponsor. Renee, who was also formerly incarcerated, was the faculty mentor of the club. She attended the meetings and informally advised

students. Chad and other students in Forward Scholars organized events on and off campus to recruit new students but also to destigmatize and educate their campus community on issues of incarceration.

For example, the students invited a representative from a community organization to bring a "prison trailer" to the campus quad. The trailer simulated the experience of being in a prison cell, and Chad recalled one faculty member having to leave and "cry in her office" because the experience was so upsetting. Renee emphasized how important the group was to the campus community; she told me "[the events are] at their core anti-prison." Chad organized two events in late March and April of 2020 to bring visibility to the queer community, but the shelter in place orders forced him to cancel his plans.

Unlike Radical Scholars, discussed below, Forward Scholars had no designated space on campus and very little institutional support. Instead, they occupied different empty classrooms on the two different campuses, set up tables in the quad for events, enjoyed no designated support staff, raised their own funding for events, and were relatively transient on the physical campus. Chad, who was preparing to transfer, was committed to creating a space that would exist beyond his time at Cedar College. He shared his vision with me:

> I just want there to be a space once I'm gone for somebody else to be able to be themselves. And a place where they can have hope and know that they can not only just go their community college but there's help for higher education and don't think- don't ever think that you're not good enough.

Chad envisioned a number of resources in that space like "free printing or book vouchers or meal cards or even counseling that way students don't take these classes

where the counselor knows. 'Um, okay, so you have this record, so maybe you can't get into this.'" Renee explained that her vision for Forward Scholars "would include an office with a staff, paid internships with formerly incarcerated students doing the work." Chad, Renee, and a Cedar College administrator, Allison, identified gaps in supports for formerly incarcerated students at Cedar College that Forward Scholars struggled to fill, and all three hoped for something more permanent and institutionally recognized to support this student population.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 severely impacted the group, and by the end of data collection, the club had, as Chad explained, "gone silent." Balancing layered responsibilities with work, childcare, school, and general psychological wellbeing, the club was no longer a priority, and the requirements from Cedar College to maintain a club loomed too great for the group. Chad was optimistic that the club would start again soon and told me he would go back to Cedar College informally after transferring to help that effort.

Seaside University, Radical Scholars, and Underground Scholars

Seaside University is a historically white[10] public four year university and Hispanic Serving Institution serving over 15,000 undergraduates and almost 2,000 graduate students. During the focal year, about one quarter of the undergraduates identified as European American, Asian, and Chicano/Latino each; almost 5%

[10] I choose to use the term *historically* white institution instead of *predominantly* white institutions (PWI) to emphasize the racist and settler colonial roots of most institutions of higher education in America and to disrupt what Collins (2004) describes as "unquestioned ideologies" that become "natural and inevitable" (also see Keels, 2020; Wilder, 2013).

identified as African American, and less than 1% identified as either American Indian or Pacific Islander. Nearly 10% identified as International students.

Seaside University is also located near the coast of California. There is a quad area with a café, bookstore, and some student programming offices, but the campus is decentralized with smaller hubs in different pockets of the overall campus. Like Cedar, Seaside also sits on indigenous lands. Seaside became an official university in the late 1960's.

Radical Scholars is an institutionally funded student support program that was created to serve students with a range of experiences, including those who are former foster youth, survivors of abusive homes, formerly incarcerated, or system impacted. Lana, the director of the transfer center where Radical Scholars is located, estimated there were 150 students affiliated with Radical Scholars during the 2019-2020 academic year and she told me that she estimated about 25% of students were formerly incarcerated or system impacted because "that's what the statistics in California say." Lana pointed out, though, that she didn't know for sure because that data had not previously been collected. In Fall 2020 Seaside added a question to their application about students' status as formerly incarcerated or system impacted so that those students would be connected with resources.

Before the shelter in place order in March, students and staff met for weekly meetings in a designated office space on campus, which was also open for students to use for studying, socializing, and accessing resources (e.g. computers, books) during normal business hours. All three Radical Scholars-affiliated focal participants reported

that Melissa, the program coordinator, worked very hard to provide students with resources for academic purposes (e.g. scholarship applications and internship opportunities within the program) and personal purposes (e.g. housing resources and individual guidance). The program historically did outreach during a fall orientation event and had a designated website to recruit students. Jay noted that the exact needs of formerly incarcerated students were sometimes obscured because "they're doing so much already," but he was able to infuse more conversations about supports for formerly incarcerated students into the space through an internship he had with Radical Scholars during the focal year.

While Val and Jay shared small critiques of the physical layout of the Radical Scholars space, which I discuss in Chapter 6, all three Radical Scholars reported feeling positively about having the space to either study, print documents, or gather with friends.

And even though students were not able to access the space during the data collection term because of COVID-19, students were attuned to and grateful for the institutional support they received, even remotely. For example, Selina, who transferred from Cedar College, where she was one of the early members of Forward Scholars, to Seaside University, where she was affiliated with Radical Scholars and Underground Scholars, paraphrased what she had heard (and saw to be true) about the financial contexts of the two different institutions: "[people told me] community college is horrible, but once you get to a [college in the Seaside University system], they have money for this, they have money for this." Selina told me this at the end of

her first term at Seaside University: she was already seeing the stark contrasts in institutional support for formerly incarcerated students at Cedar and Seaside.

During the 2019-2020 academic year, there were a number of efforts and initiatives to build beyond Radical Scholars to better meet the unique needs of formerly incarcerated students at Seaside University. In the 2019-2020 academic year, Jay's internship allowed him to work closely with Radical Scholars to develop ways to build supports specifically for formerly incarcerated students. He had already been in contact with students from Underground Scholars at Emerald University and was learning how to establish a similar program at his university.

In concert with those efforts, in the 2019-2020 academic year Jay started a student club for formerly incarcerated students which looked similar to Forward Scholars at Cedar College: there were a small number of students who spearheaded the club, there were a number of requirements for students to meet in order to receive and retain student club status, and it had no designated space on campus. However, it served to indicate to the larger community that there were formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students on the Seaside University campus.

During Summer, 2020, Seaside University was allocated funding to support students in the wake of COVID-19, and Lana submitted a funding proposal for federal CARES Act funding that would assist Radical Scholars and its parent program, and after engaging in ongoing conversations with Melissa and Jay about the needs of formerly incarcerated and system impacted students at Seaside, she requested a portion of the funding to develop an Underground Scholars program at

Seaside University. Jay became the program coordinator and had funding to hire a number of student staff. And while COVID-19 forced everything online, at the time of writing it was likely that Seaside University's Underground Scholars would have a space on campus when it was safe to return. In other words: the transformation from the student club to formal program on campus mirrored the transformation Chad, Renee, and Allison had hoped for the Forward Scholars group.

And unlike Forward Scholars which went "silent" in the switch to remote learning, the support for formerly incarcerated students at Seaside flourished in the wake of COVID-19 due to the preexisting collaborations and Lana's grant application which made the funding of Underground Scholars possible. In fact, Radical Scholars-affiliated students who identified as formerly incarcerated and system impacted were able to branch out to Underground Scholars. Selina, the transfer student from Cedar, juxtaposed the student-led efforts of Forward Scholars with the institutional support of Underground Scholars and explained:

> it is hard to have a volunteer only version of this in- ANYWHERE. Like people's life is hard, like to only be volunteering to do it? Like I would feel bad when I was late or I couldn't make it [to Forward Scholars' meetings].

Selina and other transfer students I spoke with identified the privilege of having an institutionally recognized program, not only for what it symbolized, but also for the relief it gave to students who were already balancing family, work, and academic responsibilities.

Focal Participants

Turning to the students themselves, I will offer a short vignette of each that I developed by drawing salient details about their backgrounds and their academic experiences that I gleaned over my first three interviews with each of them.

Val

Val self-identified as a Hispanic/White woman and, at the time of our interviews, was a first-year transfer student at Seaside University. Val had earlier experiences in the foster care and juvenile justice systems and uses those experiences to motivate her own work and her academic pursuits. At Seaside, Val became affiliated with Radical Scholars and later Underground Scholars.

I first met Val when she attended a panel over the summer of 2019 for incoming transfer students where I was speaking from my experience as an instructor at Seaside. Val struck me as very outgoing and chatted with me before the panel began. During the panel, she asked me and the other instructors specific questions about the writing expectations at Seaside and the available supports, and I would later learn that an earlier "traumatic" writing class in community college had made her particularly concerned about college level writing expectations. I saw Val two more times in person during the Fall 2019 and Winter 2020, and she was very enthusiastic about supporting this project, despite her busy schedule. One striking example was when we had an interview while she sat in her car in a parking lot before going to a doctor's appointment.

Prior to transferring to Seaside, Val worked at an elementary school as a special education practitioner for a decade and decided to go back to school because

"I reached a point where … I wasn't being valued for what I was doing and because I don't have a degree- you can't really barter, like these hourly positions are capped and you can't really go above it." She attended a number of community colleges before transferring to Seaside University, and she found Radical Scholars during a summer bridge program for transfer students and explained: "I just kinda like, I just latched on to them. Like from day one… I know that's not like the norm cause a lot of people are like, 'I didn't even know they existed,' but it's almost like day one, I knew they existed and I just like glue- stuck on them." Val's affiliation with the transfer center more generally and Radical Scholars and later Underground Scholars particularly were important to her academic journey, and at one point she even referred to the space as "home."

Due to her background in Special Education, Val is very sensitive to the needs, and often the lack of support, for students who need accommodations and additional support from educational institutions. In our first interview, Val compared the support she received at her community college with the lack of support she received at Seaside University:

> So coming here they don't advocate for you. It's like, 'Oh yeah, we can't get you a note taker' or 'Oh yeah, sorry. The teacher said no' and I was like, 'wait, what do you mean?' Like I'm coming from special education. That's what I was doing for work. You cannot tell me that the teacher is deciding that they don't want to give me this accommodation. It is NOT a choice. It is by law accommodation that needs to be met.

Val was in the foster system as a youth, and, despite her early desires to earn a BA in sociology and an MA in social work, after having daughters she realized "[child protective services], that heavy abuse? I can't- I cannot NOT see my daughters. So I

knew that I was not going to pursue like that type of work," but expressed still being interested in earning her master's degree in social work. Like the other three participants, Val was committed to helping others, especially those who have been silenced or ignored.

Like many students across the country, Val struggled with the abrupt switch to online learning but was grateful for social support from Radical Scholars and later Underground Scholars. As I completed this project at the end of the in the 2020-2021 academic year, Val was a sociology major planning to finish her degree that Spring and was in the process of deciding if she wants to go to graduate school. Val took a leave of absence starting in January, 2021, because of the impact of COVID on her academic development and psychological health.

Chad

Chad self-identified as a Latino male and had been studying at Cedar College for five years. After learning that he was HIV positive in a drug rehabilitation center, he remembers thinking to himself: "man, I know how to fuck up my life really bad, but I don't know how to love myself or take time to take care of me. I think it's time that I take care of me." Learning that he was HIV positive was an important catalyst for Chad, who decided to use it as a chance to make important changes, one of which included enrolling in community college. He learned about a cohort program at Cedar while in rehab and decided to enroll.

I first met Chad when he invited me to visit a Forward Scholars meeting in 2019. He welcomed me warmly into the classroom space: one student was already

there chatting with him while he wrote an agenda on the board and his emotional support animal, Daisy, ran over to greet guests as they arrived to the room. Chad was soft-spoken and gentle in his interactions with others: in the exchanges I saw between him and other Forward Scholars students, he actively listened, offered encouragement and suggestions, and embodied a calm, supportive presence in the space. During our first interview, Chad moved my recording device closer to himself and said "I kind of speak softly" before generously sharing his experiences with drug addiction, homelessness, HIV, and college.

During our first interview, Chad explained how transformative his first visit to Emerald University and Underground Scholars was:

> … me and, um, Selina went up cause it was just free lunch and a trip to Emerald University. So we did it. [laughs] And when I went up there, I saw Brown people like me. I saw people that did worse things than I did or just as bad, but they got caught, you know? Um, people that did 12 years in the SHU, I've never been to prison and there's people that are doing and they're getting their doctorate, you know, and uh, they showed me that there is a path if you're willing to do the work.

Chad became an ambassador for Underground Scholars, working to build the link between community college students and the UC system, and he also decided to start Forward Scholars. Chad had success recruiting other students—both formerly incarcerated, system impacted, and allies—and got support from Renee as a faculty mentor to make the club official. The club put on events each month, and, before the pandemic hit, had weekly meetings at one of two Cedar College campuses.

Chad was a helper. After overcoming experiences with homelessness and addiction and continuing to manage his HIV diagnosis to where his viral load is

undetectable, he was committed to not only shepherding other Cedar College students (formerly incarcerated, system impacted, *and* students with no contact with the carceral system), and also building bridges from the local jail, into his community college, into four-year college, and beyond. Previously he endured "years and years of just being told that 'you're stupid' or 'you're dumb' or you're just, it's- 'you're gonna be a drug addict,' or 'look what you get now,' or 'Oh, you fucked up'" and explained that the cohort program he enrolled in his first semester at Cedar College was challenging because "it was really, really hard to hear compliments from, from the administration." He explained that he was "really grateful" to take those courses because they helped boost his confidence and prepare him for success in college. Chad also had an Emotional Support Animal who gave him "something to take care of" and "so much therapy."

Chad's academic goals evolved over the course of his enrollment at Cedar: he started with a desire to earn a Health Services certificate and shifted to preparing to transfer with a "...degree in sociology, human services, liberal arts, and a certificate in Latino Studies" and, by the end of the study, he planned to transfer to Seaside University or Emerald University and explained: "now I want to get my master's and who knows, maybe one day I'll get a PhD!"

Ashley

Ashley self-identified as an African American woman finishing her last year at Seaside University. During her time at Seaside, Ashley enrolled in a service-learning

course over many quarters which, she explained, “was very significant to me because I was able to help… I really like helping people.”

Ashley was motivated to help people, including classmates and friends, and particularly young people. She described enjoying her service learning class because “there was a lot of likeminded people… that could relate. And shared the same passion that I did about helping and children.” At some point during each of our interviews, she talked about how much she loved helping people, and she shared a particular moving story about a young boy at her volunteer placement who came to school without a jacket on a rainy day. After alerting the teacher to the situation, Ashley learned that the boy was experiencing challenges at home:

> I was like, "we have to do something, you know, because he doesn't have a jacket on and it's like raining”… we were able to get the kid a jacket. And then like the next day I had some money and I went and bought him a jacket… I asked if that was okay if I gave it to him and [the principal and teacher] said, “yeah.” That was one of my stories that I really remember just cause he was just so grateful and it like, I just like helping people. So it was just, it just felt good that I was able to do something.

Ashley had always been encouraged to go to college as a child and watched her cousins successfully earn their degrees. And when she came to Seaside she benefited from the support of a staff person who helped her access resources and get jobs. While she was enrolled at Seaside she was affiliated with an Ethnic Resource Center for four years and with Radical Scholars for two years, and she also worked at both spaces at different times to help with event coordination.

Ashley explained that she was "used to always being the only black person or… the few… the minority," so the lack of diversity at Seaside was "nothing new" to her. Despite not being "new," she explained:

> … there's times I do wish, like a LOT of times I wish I had chosen to go to like an HBCU or, you know, just a school with more diversity… that's part of the reason or one of the main reasons I do like going to the [Ethnic Resource Center] or like to events that are held for like people of color just so I, you know, I can be among like people that are like me.

While this project focuses on how contact with the carceral system impacts students' experiences of campus spaces, this comment from Ashley helped illuminate how she felt more positively being among "people that are like [her]," which included Black students—a small minority (less than 5%) of the student population at Seaside. Beyond participating in this project, for which I recruited students affiliated with Radical Scholars who were formerly incarcerated, Ashley did not identify as a formerly incarcerated person. When I asked her about her thoughts on the new Underground Scholars program that developed after she had graduated, Ashley told me that she would not have "use[d] the space" of Underground Scholars if it had been there while she was a student because she wouldn't have wanted to take resources that would be better used by another student. Her comment is an important reminder of the multifaceted and complex identity constructions that students carry.

When George Floyd was murdered in May, 2020, I had a hard time reaching Ashley, but when we next spoke, she proudly told me how much she had been protesting, but that it made finishing her last quarter of college even more difficult. Ashley had a complicated relationship with police. She saw campus police as helpful

and kind, and she told me that she knew most of the campus police personally; however, she did not "understand what's going through their minds" when it comes to police who murder citizens. In our last conversation, Ashley told me that she was studying for the LSAT and wanted to be a lawyer.

I have never met Ashley in person. I imagined our first Zoom call would be awkward because of that, but Ashley was warm and generous in sharing her experiences with me, even during our first few minutes of speaking. During our last interview, while COVID-19 still ravaged the country, we said that someday it would be nice to meet in person.

Jay

Jay self-identified as a Chicano/Latino male and was in his second year at Seaside University. As mentioned earlier, Jay did not attend traditional high school and earned his GED in prison. After transferring from community college to Seaside, he was integral in starting the Underground Scholars chapter at Seaside.

I first met Jay in Spring 2018 after reaching out to Lana, the director of the transfer center which houses Radical Scholars and now Underground Scholars, about wanting to host an event to promote supports for formerly incarcerated students. In our first interaction, Jay was reserved, and I felt that he was—rightfully so—checking to gauge me and my intentions. Since then, Jay and I have become close collaborators and colleagues.

Unbeknownst to him at the time of our interviews, the 2019-2020 academic year would be his last year as an undergraduate. While he had originally planned to

stay an additional year to utilize some of the resources at Seaside University before going into either a MA or PhD program, in a sudden shift, he decided to file for graduation after receiving a job with the newly formulated Underground Scholars program at Seaside University. He was a sociology major who transferred to Seaside University from community college. While at community college—with the educational goal of earning his AA and moving into the workforce—Jay met an Underground Scholars student ambassador who would visit his community college and who encouraged Jay to go to Emerald University and learn more about the program. He remembered that his first visit "blew [his] mind" and he was amazed to see "30 or 40" students who were all formerly incarcerated and working on their bachelor or graduate degrees.

When he came to Seaside University, he was initially resistant to becoming affiliated with Radical Scholars because he felt the program was tailored to support former foster youth and, while he was briefly in the foster system, he did not identify with that student population. However, he met another formerly incarcerated student during his first week at Seaside University who encouraged him to connect with Melissa and Radical Scholars. Jay spent the 2019-2020 academic year working for Radical Scholars and has also worked on different research projects on campus. He explained during our first interview: "I want to say, even if I was the ONLY person here that was formerly incarcerated, I want to say that [laughs] I would still believe in bringing visibility to formerly incarcerated students here at Seaside University,

[laughs] you know?" and his networking has led to significant changes in supports for formerly incarcerated students at Seaside University.

Jay faced many setbacks from COVID 19, including having two internships in the summer and 2020-2021 academic year cancelled, but Jay explained "I think at that point I had overcome so many other things that there's no way in hell like, I shouldn't be able to overcome this, you know?" Jay's thesis explores the ways in which "educational policies… Produce and reproduce exploitable laborers," and he planned to go to graduate school for Higher Education Leadership.

Chapter Conclusion

The statewide networks and campus overviews shared in this chapter offer a picture of the contexts that formerly incarcerated college students in the state of California navigate, and the vignettes offer insight into how participants' experiences might be aligned with the experiences of other formerly incarcerated students across the state. While there is no precise data on the number of formerly incarcerated college students in California, as a group, the academic and racial-ethnic backgrounds of the focal participants align with what we do know about formerly incarcerated students and can extrapolate about formerly incarcerated people more generally. Three out of the four were first enrolled in community colleges, which aligns with literature on the community colleges as an entry point for formerly incarcerated students (Baston & Miller, 2017; Phillips, 2020). The carceral system also disproportionately incarcerates Black and Brown bodies (Murillo, 2021; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020) as represented by these students. On the other hand, while Black men

are incarcerated disproportionately to all other groups, they were not represented in my study because the tiny Black student population at Seaside and Cedar (five and one percent, respectively) made it impossible for me to recruit Black males for this study.

In the following chapters I present three themes that emerged from speaking with Val, Chad, Ashley, and Jay between March and December of 2020. To build these themes I drew from three theoretical frameworks: *master narratives*, socially situated stories that identify what a particular society values (e.g. Bamberg, 2004; Hammack, 2008); *counter narratives*, opportunities for individuals to challenge those deficit, sometimes discriminatory, master narratives (e.g. Harper, 2009; Seale-Ruiz, 2013); and *counterspaces*, affirming spaces in which marginalized individuals can support one another (e.g. Case & Hunter, 2012; Keels, 2020). First, I will present the master narratives that animated the college contexts in which these four navigated their college journeys. Then, I will examine how students used a range of strategies to disrupt the master narratives, including having access to and creating counter narratives, finding supportive advocates, and trying on new voices to fashion a more affirmative story of self. Lastly, I will explore ways that students valued, challenged, and created campus spaces in order to build greater possibilities for future formerly incarcerated college students.

Chapter 4: Entering the College Landscape: Five Master Narratives

A driving influence for this project was my interest in the power of personal narratives to resist larger, hegemonic cultural narratives, which often reproduce inequities. I sought to explore how students employed counternarratives in their college navigation, so it is important to first illuminate the collegiate master narratives and the master narrative of incarcerated people that operate in the cultural imagination and impacted the focal participants' academic journeys.

While individuals' narratives of self are continually being revised (Case & Hunter, 2014; Hammack, 2015), there are other, culturally circulating master narratives with which individuals must grapple as they construct their own narrative of self. As noted earlier, *master narratives* are the broadly circulated and historically and socially situated stories that identify what a particular society values. The literature illustrates how these master narratives impact, for example, the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers (Opsal, 2011), people experiencing homelessness (Snow & Anderson, 1987), cultural and scientific framings of homosexuality (Hammack, 2011), and women who deemed promiscuous (Romero & Stewart, 1999). To my knowledge the master narrative framework has not been applied specifically to college nor explicitly to incarceration (although, as noted earlier, there is literature on the counter narratives that incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people construct; e.g. Enck & McDaniels, 2015; Opsal, 2011)

In this chapter I illuminate how aspects of master narrative of *college* are engrained in the American cultural consciousness and create challenges for students

who do not neatly align with that narrative. As I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, students are empowered when they have access to more representative images of college students and opportunities to resist master narratives that do not serve them or in fact denigrate them. This chapter lays the foundation for the contexts in which students build their own (counter)narratives. It should be made clear at the outset that the narratives that Val, Chad, Ashley, and Jay shared over four hours of interviews only represent a slice of their complex lived experiences. However, elements of their stories help to problematize the cultural narratives related to matriculation and incarceration, which I intend to unpack and argue here.

The Master Narrative of a University

The master narrative literature highlights ways in which individuals grapple with sociohistorically situated narratives about what a culture values as they negotiate their own identity in relation to society (e.g. Hammack, 2008). Symbolic interactionism helps to illuminate how cultural master narratives, including one's understanding of matriculation and incarceration, are molded by interpretations and interactions that unfold throughout one's lifetime (e.g. Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1986; Bogdan & Bicklen, 1998). As an example of how master narrative permeate people's understandings of themselves, Opsal (2011) found that the women in her study positioned themselves towards the master narrative of motherhood and away of that of a formerly incarcerated person. However, it is important to problematize these dominant master narratives and identify what they uncover about our cultural values and how they can denigrate the experiences of some individuals. These collegiate

master narratives have positive cultural connotations but can illuminate inequities. I begin with the master narrative of a university where I will describe aspects of the master narrative that each individual illuminated so as to continue to develop an illustration of the four focal participants. I will describe the subsequent master narratives of a college student, a college degree, self-sufficiency, and a formerly incarcerated person in a more integrated way.

"My dream has been busted": Challenging Val's Expectations of a "World-Renowned University"

Because Val positioned herself away from having "a regular high school experience being in the foster care [system]," she told me "when I FIRST started [college], I don't think I had expectations … I was really excited and I LOVE learning." And while she did not remember having expectations for college when she first enrolled in community college, over the years she had experience with six different community college campuses and was able to assess different levels of support at each:

> I loved Northwest Community College. I loved the teachers, I loved the staff. And then when I came back [here]… I have like my expectations that staff help you? And that like the counselors actually are guiding you and … I had a horrible experience at Bay Community College.

These experiences emphasized the range of supports across campus sites, but, as noted earlier, Val persisted through her community colleges and wanted to earn her B.A. in order to surpass the salary cap at her former job.

Before learning that she could apply to Seaside University, Val was set to attend Hilltop College, a less prestigious, less expensive four-year college that was

closer to her home, but she had been attracted to the prestige of the Seaside, and when she learned she could apply she thought:

> I was like, wait, what? Me? Like, I didn't like, you know, I didn't think I was the greatest student. I didn't think it was possible, like it wasn't- I was just going to go to Hilltop and you know, finish my BA. But when I heard that I was eligible to apply, I was like, 'I'm going to Seaside University!'

This more prestigious route, coupled with earning an impressive scholarship, fueled Val's enthusiasm for her college experience. As she was making her college choice, Val told me that other people tried to convince her that "the commute and just like the difference in tuition" should have dissuaded her choosing Seaside. They encouraged her to take her acceptance letter as a victory but not *actually* attend Seaside University, but she decided to persist and told me "I never even like thought it was possible."

In contrast to the optimism she exuded in our first interview when she told me about being accepted to Seaside University, during our third interview she emphasized how disappointed she was by her lived experiences as a Seaside student. She told me plainly that "looking back… what I know now… I wouldn't come to Seaside University cause it's, it's been one hell of a ride that I have not benefited ANYTHING from." When I asked if her expectations about Seaside went unmet because of remote instruction, she responded emphatically that she had felt this way

> PRE COVID! From last summer, last summer here… I just thought the classes were going to be different. I thought like we're at a BA level that we would be more hands on that we're not getting- we're literally in a huge ass room being lectured at- like LITERALLY lectured at like we're in a UNIVERSITY, we're in a world renowned UNIVERSITY and our teacher is lecturing. He's literally lecturing. It's not an ENGAGING conversation. It's

> LECTURING. Like I- I'm, I'm appalled at that- that's the type of education, even at this high, I just assumed that it would be different.

On three instances, Val explicitly highlighted the disconnect between the institutional face of Seaside University and what it actually offered to students. She said, "they talk a good game. They sell you on a really good game, but it's like- it's like looking in that mirror, it's like 'look at my BEAUTY' And then really you're like a wretched old witch [laughs]."

Val also came to Seaside with high expectations of her instructors and looked forward to learning from their wealth of knowledge but told me that was not what she experienced. She said, "unfortunately we have a lot of faculty that are here for research… they're here to earn their sabbatical, to go do their research and they don't really give a shit about teaching." Val was looking forward to interacting with faculty who would fuel her love of learning. Unlike the attractive college experience she felt she was "sold" and expected, Val was disappointed by her experience at Seaside that did not live up to her vision of a "world renowned University."

"I never had the mentality that I was smart enough": Chad Grapples with Who Belongs at a University

While Chad was able to openly challenge other narratives, such as his positive HIV status as "the end of the world" or formerly incarcerated people as scary, he indicated ways that a pervasive cultural narrative of a typical college experience had become embedded into his assessment of his own college experience. Instead of identifying a need to adjust or adapt the cultural narrative, though, he used the disconnect between his expectations of college and his own experiences to illuminate a

helpful representation for others. I will address his efforts to use his experience to support others briefly here and in greater detail in Chapter 5.

In our last interview Chad demonstrated that his beliefs about college were present from a young age. On one hand, when I asked him about his perceptions of or goals for college as a child, he responded by asking "What's COLLEGE? You know what I mean?" but he also indicated that he had already established a strong cultural value system around *types* of colleges. He explained that his mom completed a vocational training program and during two different interviews told me that she encouraged him to go to "vocational training" or "a trade school."

But he explained:

> in my mind I was like, that's not school. That's not- I don't want to- if I, 'if I ever go to college, it's going to be a real college,' I told her. But then, um, I went on another path, you know, with my drug addiction and everything.

Later in his life, Chad also assigns meaning to the Seaside and Emerald-system and says "I never had the mentality that I was smart enough to go to a [research university]- that's for quote, unquote, 'those people,' other people, not me."

While Chad had a few false starts on his postsecondary journey, he held on to a perception of "real college" and expectations of what a college experience should be like when he enrolled in Cedar College in 2015. In our second interview, he reflected on his original ideas of what—and how long—one's community college experience should be.

> I remember back in 2015 when I started Cedar College, I heard people say they'd been at Cedar College like six years, seven years. I just thought, "how in the hell? Where are you? That's so long." Here it is 2020, 21 and I started

> in 2015. I'm that person now. [laughs] … [but] it can be done, you know? I just want other students to know it can be done.

In this excerpt, Chad reflected back on his original ideas of college and what his actual journey looked like, and how the mismatch between the two can be useful for other students who might need motivation or their own form of representation. The repetition of the phrase "it can be done" is powerful: Chad leverages his own self-doubt and fears of inadequacy to repeat a message to other struggling students that "it can be done."

In two different interviews, Chad evoked a travel metaphor for his journey through Cedar College and both times emphasized that his journey has been long, categorizing it as "the scenic route" and "the long way around," perhaps in part because he had internalized and subscribed to the idea that community college should take a short amount of time. It is instances like this when one's individual narrative is shown to be disconnected from the master narrative that can create tension. While Chad utilized that disconnect to motivate him to share his story with others, it is also possible that students who struggle to complete college in a particular timeline become discouraged and drop out.

"I knew I had to go to college": Ashley Meets Childhood Expectations

Unlike the other three participants, Ashley knew people who had completed their bachelor's degrees and explained that she had been encouraged to go to college from a young age. She explained:

> my mom always drilled it in my head that I needed to go to college. It was something that it needed to be done… [she] stressed on all of us… the importance of education. So I knew I had to go to college, especially cause

> like, she finished college and… she just told us like, education is really important. So from the time we were little, we always knew that we were going to go to college- all my brothers and I.

Ashley's experience illuminates that, while incarceration may create barriers to higher education, having a road map in the form of a family member who has attended and completed college can be invaluable to building one's college trajectory. It also sheds a note of optimism for how college completion by a formerly incarcerated or system impacted person can create an important ripple effect on families and communities.

And while Ashley often shared how positively she felt in smaller spaces on campus (e.g. the Radical Scholars space or the Ethnic Resource Center), she identified discrimination in the STEM field which is worth highlighting as an important consideration when we consider the experiences of students coming into a university.

During our third interview, Ashley mentioned that some of her friends had felt stigma at Seaside but that they were not affiliated with Radical Scholars. In our follow up interview, I asked her to elaborate on the root of that stigma and she said:

> [the stigma] was based off like the color of their skin, they kind of felt like there's a huge stigma… especially, um, with certain majors, I guess they were both STEM… [and] being one of the only, or very few people of color in that- in that field, they kind of felt like… professors or people weren't really, um, being accommodating towards them or helping them, giving them the help that they really needed… from what they were saying, it was just like, um [pause] they just felt like they were put up to fail pretty much?

She went on to explain that her friend:

> didn't understand something that the professor was teaching. So they went to the professor and talked to them and the professor still wasn't being helpful. And what the professor [said was]… "if this course is too hard, maybe you

> should change your ma- major." Yeah. And I was like, "wow, like- for a professor to tell you that that's really, really mean."

I include this example to problematize the institutional calls for and celebration of greater diversity in contrast to the reality for students of color at Seaside. While Ashley was always prepared to enter college and reported feeling positively and doing well in her classes, she also identified ways in which discrimination operated.

"Bring visibility to where there once wasn't before": Jay Identifies the Rich Opportunities at the University

While Jay acknowledged some of the same problems that Val identified about institutions of higher education, he also highlighted how important college can be for a student and their family and community and for challenging deficit views of students.

As I will discuss in greater detail later, Jay embraced his formerly incarcerated identity "unapologetically" because, from his perspective, "we're in an environment, an academic setting where, uh, we're kind of proving to a lot of different people that didn't think that these types of achievements or … accomplishments were possible." He also identified that at colleges like Seaside, formerly incarcerated students are able to "bring visibility to where there once wasn't before … you're helping people understand what they don't understand." This visibility on campus had an outward ripple into students' families and communities. He explained:

> [when a formerly incarcerated student is accepted to college] you're bringing your kids, you're bringing everybody… you're accepting everybody. … Like how can we support the student, their family, uh, and meet their needs? So they're more successful and, and go on to do great things… you think about… how we're, we're working as an institution to kind of create this change for, for

> these folks that are coming in, right? So that's what I think about when, uh, I think about like, um, kind of like this resistance, I guess you could say, or, or kinda like fighting back, but in a way that's like a little bit more strategic.

Jay presents a cultural narrative that formerly incarcerated students are rare on college campuses and that the majority of students (and likely staff, faculty, and administrators, too) "don't understand." However, as Jay points out, growing the formerly incarcerated student population on campuses can be a powerful tool to challenge people's perspective as well as serve students who have historically been excluded.

For these four students, the master narrative of a university was a prestigious, highly selective institution, with a definitive timeline for completion and which is, for the most part, occupied by individuals who have not had contact with the carceral system, have not thought carefully about the carceral system, nor tried to understand the experiences of individuals who have had contact with the carceral system.

The Master Narrative of a College Student

There has been growing interest in providing supports for formerly incarcerated college students (e.g. Corrections to College California, 2018; S.B. 575). And more generally, there been growing calls to complicate and disrupt the tendency to view whiteness as the norm in higher education (Keels, 2019; Yosso & Lopez, 2019) and to increase the ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity on college campuses. However, three of the four participants explicitly referenced images of *typical* college students, to which they juxtaposed their own selves as college students.

Ashley was the only participant who did not signal this cultural narrative, likely because in many ways her age, as a student in her early twenties who went almost directly from high school to college, matched that of the cultural narrative. The others, however, signaled that things like being younger, having no visible tattoos, being from a privileged background, and in some cases having limited previous life experiences (including never have met a formerly incarcerated person) were more archetypal of a "typical college student."

Val is a relatively older student and a student parent, and she positioned herself much differently than her other college friends who are younger and, from her estimation, have fewer responsibilities. She explained that when her friends would invite her to spend time with them on campus she would think:

> I'm flattered. Like thank you. It feels good. But it's like, yo, 'I'm 41 years old. You guys are like 20, 30?' like I'm not like- I got kids! Like, I'm not like a free 'oh yeah! I'm like free and fun spirited, let's have fun.' I appreciate the offers and stuff, but yeah, like 'I'm, I'm a grown woman! I have responsibilities!' [laughs]

Val shared a sharper critique when she turned her attention to the general student population at Seaside University. She explained that students who come from privilege, and are typically "coming straight out of high school," are able to live in a "bubble" on campus. She found the ways that students were able to shield themselves from challenges while simultaneously donning a label of "liberal" problematic:

> on the university campus that like the problems of the world aren't necessarily the problems of the world, you know what I mean? Like you're in a bubble on campus and the problems of the world look very vastly different than like real life world.

She draws important distinctions between the students who she sees at Seaside ("people who are like fresh out of high school") and her own experiences. When she was explaining a particular support in which she was grateful to have someone "essentially like kind of holding your hand through it" she said:

> I think it's essential to success. Especially for people who are system impacted that aren't like, you know, we didn't go to the best high schools or even for returning students… I'm not fresh out of high school… my writing skills are not up to par and like, yeah, I'm here, but it's not as easy and it's not as fresh. Like I have life experience. And so it's, it's very different from a student that's just fresh out of high school that has been like in school for the last four years versus somebody that's had to go into life and like live life and experience life and be damaged by life and then making the decision to come back. And like, I feel like we have a bit of a deficit. And so having, having other people, um, accessible, I think is very, um, essential to being successful.

Val did cite support from her friends at Seaside, many of whom she met through Radical Scholars, but her comments about the distance between her own experiences and those of "the general student population" are important for institutions to consider.

Of particular note was that Val faced a lot of writing struggles that she felt could have been avoided if she had access to a "refresher course." Her last writing class was "20 years ago" and she wondered "What are we doing now? Like what, what are the formats? … I asked if I should take a writing class and I was told no." The cultural narrative that college students come directly (or almost directly) from high school disadvantages those students who do not share that experience.

Chad is also a relatively older student who evoked the narrative of a typical college student throughout our interviews as a way to juxtapose his own positionality and lived experiences from that of other students who he encounters and to offer a

new narrative for individuals who are interested in higher education and who share some of his experiences.

Chad was very explicit about his message to other college students during our first interview. As we wrapped up our conversation, I asked if Chad had anything to add and he said:

> I just want there to be a… place where [formerly incarcerated students] can have hope and know that they can not only just go [to] their community college but there's help for higher education and don't think- don't ever think that you're not good enough. I mean I'm 46 and when I first got here, um, I was like, what? 41 40? And that self doubt that you have in your head like, "look at these 18 year olds or 20 year olds, what are you doing?" You know, but I'm exactly where I should be and I'm just on my journey, and I'm not done yet.

Chad helps illustrate that while we can challenge widely held cultural narratives, we can also absorb others. While Chad sees how his narrative diverges from what he imagines a college experience should look like, he also wants to embrace his unique path and, as I will discuss in Chapter 5, use that to motivate others.

And while Jay is closer in age to a "traditional" college student, he illuminated a particularly relevant piece of the master narrative of a college student: the assumptions that faculty and staff make about a student's prior learning. For Jay and Val, these expectations created challenges because the master narrative was so vastly different than their individual experiences. Jay was in juvenile hall during much of his youth and never attended high school. During two different interviews, Jay brought up examples of how he had to speak with instructors because their assumptions about his prior learning were incorrect.

During our first interview I asked Jay to describe a particularly impactful class and he described a course with a global perspective, a large number of international students, and an instructor who built and fostered a strong classroom community. But when I asked him if he had any challenges in the course he said:

> OH YES, definitely. … So keep in mind, I, I've never been to like high school, right? I ended up getting my GED while I was incarcerated. Um, and so a lot of the things that the professor was talking about had to do with like the demographics in Europe. … she would like, say … "this place is next to this place and because of this you have this ocean." And I'm just like, "what the fff?" Like, you know, like I had no idea what she was talking about. And so it threw me off! … eventually I went to office hours and I explained to her [laughs] and, uh, and … eventually she started creating like slides that showed images of like certain countries and things like that [laughs].

He went on to describe that if she started the class with something he did not understand he would think "'fuck, this is, it's a wrap. I don't know what the hell she's talking about.' And it was just like over my head and it just, it wasn't a good feeling." And when I asked him later if he planned what he would say to her he said "I planned that one. I was nervous as fuck. Like, how am I going to say this in a way that doesn't like, come off wrong." But to this instructor's credit, she adjusted her curriculum to better match his academic background and made the course more inclusive.

In another instance, a professor at Seaside made assumptions about students' high school experiences. Jay described the classroom interaction:

> she was like 'yeah. You know, like everything that you learned in high school.' And I'm like, 'yo, like I never been high school. Like, what was I supposed to learn?'… she went out of her way to correct herself in front of the entire class. And it was just like a, I dunno, it was like, for me… it was a moment where she had respected like the situation and was like, yo, she went out of her way to correct it.

Again, the professor took the opportunity to adjust what she said, and likely also presented a larger learning opportunity for the entire class. Hope (2018), Ott and McTier (2019), and Torres (2020) identify gaps in instructors' and administrators' knowledge about the experiences of formerly incarcerated students, and Jay's experiences underscore that assumptions about what students have and have not experienced could be inaccurate. Fortunately, Jay was able to speak up for himself and likely made an important impact on his instructors and their pedagogy, and it helps to again emphasize that the master narrative of a typical college student can be detrimental to students' sense of self and academic development.

As Val, Chad, and Jay help to illuminate, the master narrative of a college student is one who is younger, likely coming directly from high school where they acquired the tools to be successful in college, and likely bring fewer lived experiences with them to college.

The Master Narrative of Self-sufficiency

A specific facet of a successful college student master narrative that the focal participants evoked in their narratives is that of a student who succeeds seemingly on their own. There are reverberations of rugged individualism and the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" adage that permeate the dimension of a successful student who is imagined to be self-sufficient and independent. And while the literature shows that finding and utilize supports on college campuses increases retention and sense of belonging, particularly for formerly incarcerated students (e.g. Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Torres, 2020), the master narrative of self-sufficiency still

looms large in how the focal students assessed their ability to be successful independent of others. In fact, in MacKillop's (2017) study on formerly incarcerated community college students, she found that students they did not want to be "singled out" for having any particular need. And as I will discuss later, the emphasis on independence is complicated by interactions with dehumanizing systems like the carceral or juvenile "justice" systems, in which individuals are often blocked from asking for or receiving adequate support.

The relationship between self-sufficiency and college success was underscored by Ashley, who explained that some individuals have a negative connotation with asking for help, which she positioned in contrast to her own view that asking for help is an important skill. During our third interview, Ashley said she thought it was important to create spaces where "students feel comfortable like reaching out and asking for help when they need it. And knowing they don't feel judged or… they'll get the help that they need." As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6, Ashley utilized supports on campus, but her comment is striking because it implies that she is familiar with instances in which students do feel judged asking for help.

She described a situation where "my friend will be like, 'yo, I really need this.' But it's like, 'did you ask?'" When I asked her to say more about why she thought people did not ask for help she replied, "I've always wondered that too. I'm not really sure. I don't know if it's a sense of pride or just not wanting people to think that, you know- I don't know." And even for a student who has successfully utilized a number of supports and advises her friends to "be a little bit vulnerable and let people know…

this is what you need," she also explained that she has fought discomfort in asking for support:

> I have no problem asking when I need something, you know? But I also understand like sometimes too, like I feel sometimes if I ask for something else, I kind of don't want to ask again cause I feel like, 'Oh, I've asked too many times' or 'I don't want them to think that I'm not trying myself.'

Ashley's comment is striking because it illuminates a struggle that might be more particular to historically minoritized students on campus who don't want to be perceived as asking for assistance "too many times" and therefore "not trying" themselves. As noted earlier, Ashley has also heard from friends who *do* ask for help and receive what is framed as discriminatory responses from faculty. Even while Ashley knows how positive asking for support can be, she sees the gap between *asking* for help and getting help that makes her less inclined to reach out for support.

The master narrative of a self-sufficient, successful student is compounded by concerns of being perceived as not trying or being too needy, and, as Ashley points out, even students who *do* utilize supports might monitor their help-seeking; this is particularly worrisome when considering the many students who may choose not to ask for help at all for fear of not living up to the college student master narrative. As an example of someone who struggled to ask for help throughout his life, Chad was deeply impacted by messaging from his childhood to be independent and self-sufficient. Sometimes he explicitly connected this to his academic experiences, like when he said "we're so we're so taught to do everything on our own, but really you can't get through college without asking for help and being willing to ask for help. But sometimes we're just… programmed to just do everything on your own." But other

times he connected this master narrative to the experiences of incarcerated individuals. For example, while he was describing his hopes for outreach to the local jail he said:

> we need people to go in there and tell them, "Hey, talk to somebody and, you know, and ask for help." Like I told you, we're so taught not to ask for help, you know? Um, and I wish I did cause maybe I could have been a nurse, but, but um, but here we are.

For Chad, the master narrative of self-sufficiency surfaced early in his childhood but bled into his interactions with academic and carceral systems. And his avoidance of help-seeking ultimately blocked him from learning if he could pursue a career in nursing, which he had assumed he could not pursue because of his drug charge but told me "I never looked into it, honestly." However, in both cases he had evidence of how not asking for help created greater challenges for him and therefore hoped to encourage others to ask for help.

Finally, Val's narrative illuminates an embedded component of this narrative that can be invisible to individuals who have never had contact with the carceral system: unlike the ways in which asking for help in college may expose weakness, asking for help in carceral settings can be difficult (if not impossible) and may lead to discipline or additional challenges. Val cited a number of challenges that she felt put her in an unfair position of having to advocate for herself. I will discuss her deep call to advocate for others in greater detail later, but moments of self-advocacy illuminate aspects of her perception of college support and her earlier experiences with institutional authority. While responding to a question about challenges navigating different programs at Seaside, Val incorporated her experiences in juvenile hall with

her perception of academic institutional authority figures, particularly those who are not successfully serving the students who it is their role to support. She explained:

> I was a foster youth, but because I was on probation, I was in juvenile hall, so I didn't get to go to the shelter to get placements. I had to go to juvenile hall. I was like locked up with criminals. Even though I didn't commit a crime, I was locked up with criminals. … [so] I'm very sensitive to authority, especially authority who like aren't hearing you? And like when I feel like my pow- like there's a power difference, I get flustered? And especially if the person is not hearing me or if injustice is happening. And so like I get really… almost shell-shell shock? But like in those moments I like, it's hard to remember like "they're not out to get you," the- like you have to find that communication and sometimes like getting flustered and… I'm already having a problem.

For Val, the voice of authority—particularly an authority who "is not hearing [her] or if injustice is happening"—can trigger negative experiences as a child in juvenile hall in which she sought supports but instead felt surrounded "by criminals" and a "power difference." It is important to note that for another student having an interaction with a student services staff member having what Val framed as a "bad day" would not be perceived through the same lens. Val, on the other hand, has to intentionally remind herself that an ineffectual staff person is not "out to get [her]." Not only does Val experience disappointment at the lack of support she receives at Seaside, but her negative interactions with authority figures remind her of deeply troubling memories of institutions and institutional actors who withheld support or made getting support more difficult.

The focal participants illustrate the master narrative of self-sufficiency is inextricably tied to one's success in college. In contrast, asking for help indicates weakness or an inability to succeed. Literature on the experiences of first generation college students, an intersectional identity that Chad, Jay, and Val also hold, helps

uncover how the emphasis on independence in American higher education creates a cultural mismatch for first generation students (e.g. Stephens et al., 2012). Beyond this, though, the carceral logics of prisons, jails, and even juvenile detention centers operate in such a way that self-sufficiency is not valued, but rather is the only option for the individuals inside.

The Master Narrative of a College Degree: An Unequal Benefit

Exploring the experiences of *formerly incarcerated* college students illuminates a crack in the façade of what a college student looks like and what a degree can *do* for the recipient. Another aspect of the college master narrative implies that a college education will lead to economic mobility and comfort, and indeed there are significant bodies of literature that show how a college education can increase one's economic standing generally (Johnson, Cuellar Mejia, Bohn, 2018) and for formerly incarcerated people in particular (e.g. Fine et al., 2001; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Wallace, Eden, & Flores, 2020). However, when we utilize the master narrative framework, we see how these trends are not uniform and that, in fact, formerly incarcerated people have to do *more* to see the same benefits or reap the same societal benefits.

Val and Jay pointed out that a bachelor's degree does not carry as much currency for a formerly incarcerated person as a person who has not had interactions with the carceral system. Val evoked a message about college completion and excellence that is particular to formerly incarcerated students. As mentioned earlier, one of Val's motivations to transfer and earn her bachelor's degree was to have more

earning power, but Val also absorbed a message about the role of college completion and excellence from formerly incarcerated students that troubled the notion that a degree leads to an improved life. While explaining some of the institutional barriers that formerly incarcerated students face (e.g. that internships can be off-limits to students with felonies), Val told me that formerly incarcerated students

> …have to like do so much MORE because they have a record… some [formerly incarcerated students] realized they have a record and a BA is not going to do shit for them, so they have to go all the way to get a doctorate, to be able to be accepted back into the community, DESPITE doing their time, getting off parole and moving forward with their lives.

A multitude of studies show ways in which a college degree can impact formerly incarcerated students' financial wellbeing (Fine et al., 2001; Wallace, Eden, Flores, 2020), but this comment highlights ways in which earning a bachelor's degree with a criminal record is not enough to ensure that an individual will be "accepted back into the community." Students like Val can identify deep disappointments and challenges with institutions of higher education but are obligated to persist in inhospitable conditions to prove their worth and rehabilitation to their communities. Given this, it is imperative that institutions ensure support for a population whose college-going success has even greater stakes than what Val called "the general student population."

Jay also identified the disconnect between earning a degree and experiencing success post-graduation. More generally he pointed to degree inflation across the country (Collins, 2002) and said, "I feel like especially these days… you're not as competitive as a person that has a masters or PhD." But beyond this concern, Jay has

to balance his record with his academic achievements. As one example, he told me about a graduate program he was interested in that included a position working for the local county afterwards. He explained "with a record, you can't work for the County. So which means that with the record, you don't qualify for this program." Even after earning a bachelor's degree and ostensibly being admitted into a graduate program, Jay would be ineligible for the program because his record would cast a longer shadow than his impressive academic achievements.

As Jay and Val's comments suggest, formerly incarcerated students who succeed at the baccalaureate level may choose—or indeed feel forced because of low employment opportunities or societal stigma—to earn higher postsecondary degrees. From a more positive outlook, Chad revised his academic goals ("I thought I would quit at just getting my BA, but now I want to get my master's and who knows, maybe one day I'll get a PhD") in part because he was able to see other formerly incarcerated students succeeding, which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. However, it is critical to highlight Jay and Val's view that a college degree is not worth as much for a formerly incarcerated person because they are *still* fighting the cultural perception of their label as a formerly incarcerated person.

There is a cultural perception and empirical evidence that a college degree creates greater cultural capital (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986), which is particularly critical for a formerly incarcerated person who would benefit from this cultural bump. But the master narrative does not ring true when individuals with degrees and a record are still forced to prove that their degree or they themselves are as legitimate as

someone without a record. While Ashley and Chad talked about earning advanced degrees, they did not explicitly link those goals to economic or societal advancements. According to Jay and Val, though, there are inequitable benefits of a college degree depending on the student to which it is granted. They highlight that, for formerly incarcerated students, the master narrative of a college degree leading to improved financial or societal standing is distorted.

The Master Narrative of a Formerly Incarcerated Person

The final master narrative to explore is that of a formerly incarcerated person. While I argue that the circulation of more diverse narratives of college and college students will help weaken hegemonic narratives of what college should look like and who should be enrolled, I also argue that the master narrative of a formerly incarcerated person must be interrogated and exploded. Haney (2008) helped to illuminate the crime master narrative in America as operating on a belief that behavior deemed "criminal" is "seen as a reflection of the inherent 'badness' of those who engage in it" (p. 914). Relatedly, Maruna (2011) argued that formerly incarcerated individuals wear "invisible stripes" throughout their lifetime by virtue of their contact with the carceral system. Chad, Val, and Jay highlight ways in which these cultural perceptions create additional challenges for formerly incarcerated students, but Jay and Chad also indicate the opportunities to challenge deficit views.

First, Chad evoked the master narrative of a formerly incarcerated person as one of his motivations for starting Forward Scholars. He explained that he was motivated to make

> …this a club where it's a safe spot where people don't get judged for being who they are. Um, a lot of times they think we're ex cons or we're criminals or you know, I mean, as you see, some of our members have tattoos on their faces, tattoos on their heads and um, some, some people are scared of that, they- But we're people, ordinary people with families.

Chad also described a traumatic incident when one of their members was "chased around by the, the sheriffs and I guess they put him in handcuffs in front of [their] son, um, when he was on campus." On his community college campus, Chad could see the stigma and deficit views that formerly incarcerated students like himself face, and he sought to disrupt those views.

Jay, who commented that "there's a lot of people that may not want to hang out with someone that's formerly incarcerated or has tattoos," also suspected that his tattoos led to a discriminatory comment from a student staff member at the campus gym. Jay described that on the first day that he visited the campus gym (and therefore did not know the protocol for checking in and using a locker) he was wearing a tank top and his tattoos were visible. The employee asked Jay "'are you a student here?' And I was like, what would make him think that I'm not if I'm like here [at the school gym], right? …that kind of threw me off." Much of the literature on the experiences of formerly incarcerated college students notes the role that visible tattoos can play on stigma or discrimination (e.g. Copenhaver et al., 2007; Wallace et al., 2020), and Jay's experience and Chad's reference to the treatment of some of the Forward Scholars members provides further evidence of the discrimination that students face.

Val, during an honest moment, shared with me that she sometimes wonders about the crimes that individuals have committed and wonders what the "general

student population" thinks about formerly incarcerated students because she assumes they "go to the worst [case scenario]." She wondered

> if you find out someone was formerly incarcerated, like, does that change your views on them? Does it change- like, do you want to hang out with them anymore? Do you want to be alone with them? And then like, what are you, what are your parents say when they find out you're with a former criminal?

And as we continued to talk about the tension around the "general student population's" views on formerly incarcerated people, I asked Val what she thought might improve this perception and she responded that the key was fostering a more nuanced understanding of the carceral system: "the more that society accepts the fact that everybody in jail isn't a bad person?" She went on to explain the contradictions of how society treats and simultaneously judges people who have interactions with the carceral system:

> We don't give them the mercy that like, "dude, your life was fricking horrible. How, how do we expect you to come out any better than what you did?" Um, and we don't, we don't acknowledge that. "I DID MY TIME. I did my time. I did my probation. I did my counseling. I got off probation. … I'm done!" But yet society still says, "NO, you're a criminal."

Val's adamant revoicing of society is telling of the larger cultural narrative of incarceration, which continues to loom over individuals far beyond their prison sentence.

Jay reflected on ways in which the cultural representation of an incarcerated person or a gang member is often held by individuals who have never actually met an incarcerated person:

> They're kind of, more than likely, bombarded with like social media and movies and, you know, all different things that they might have this idea of what a gang member looks like or what someone who's been incarcerated

> looks like. Um, but I don't think they really had, um, ever- so- having the opportunity to conversate with somebody, having like a meaningful discussion? Uh, that kinda changes their perspective on what they THOUGHT they knew? Uh, you know, I always find that pretty fun.

Interestingly, Jay pointed out that as strange as it is for students who are unfamiliar with the criminal justice system to meet him and learn about his experiences, he "trips out" meeting students who have never met a formerly incarcerated person. He described a time when he became closer with classmates who came from a "semi-privileged background" and how:

> I learned genuinely, there are people that do not know or have never seen any, or met anybody that's been locked up before. And I'm like, "Oh fuck. Like, this is real. Like they're, they've been kinda like in this box for their whole lives." So, uh, to actually see it firsthand, I think that's a trip. So as much as they're tripping out on me, I'm kinda like tripping out on them.

Given the incarceration rates in the state and country, Jay's comment makes sense: it is strange to meet people who have never (knowingly) met a formerly incarcerated person. But again, Jay is able to illuminate how discriminatory policing and sentencing practices often divide segments of the population along racial, ethnic, and class lines.

According to the focal participants, the master narrative of incarceration derives from the media, not from actually meeting, knowing, or speaking to formerly incarcerated and system impacted people. And those who have had interactions with the carceral system are often assumed to have engaged in the "worst possible" crime, which, as Haney (2008) helps to illuminate, also implies something about the "badness" of the individual. Another important component that Jay helps to emphasize is that many individuals—particularly those attending historically white

colleges like his—may be completely cut off from individuals who have incarceration experience. Coupled with problematic media representations, the lack of first-person accounts further strengthens the mythology of incarceration and formerly incarcerated people.

Chapter Conclusion

The symbolic interactionism framework highlights the ways in which identities are socially constructed through language (Blumer, 1986) and individuals use language to make sense of their world. In this chapter, I highlighted five master narratives that animated the contexts in which Val, Chad, Ashley, and Jay navigated coming into and through college and to which they are continually responding as they build their narratives of self. And while this chapter helps to set up the ways in which students *responded* to these master narratives in a number of ways, it is also important to pause and reflect on how the master narrative of a college student, for example, is exclusionary to so many students who have different sociohistorical, racial-ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Even this socially valued experience (going to college, being independent from family, earning a degree) raises many concerns when we examine it through the master narrative framework because, as I explained in Chapter 1, it operates as a compulsory narrative about the way things should be.

Similarly, the master narrative of incarceration that the focal students illuminate is one-dimensional and informed by media representations. Chad explained that people see formerly incarcerated people as "ex cons or criminals," and Jay explained that "there are people that do not know or have never seen any, or met

anybody that's been locked up before." Closely examining the master narratives that operate around individuals as they experience some phenomenon sets us up to see both the issues embedded in the larger structures and the opportunities for and urgency of resistance.

Chapter 5: Disrupting the Master Narratives

In the previous chapter I explored salient master narratives that animated the landscape on which the four focal students navigated their college entry, enrollment, and, for two of them, completion. In this chapter, I explore ways that students disrupted four of those master narratives by accessing counter narratives of college and college students, constructing their own counter narratives, and utilizing support from a single, critical advocate. I conclude the chapter with a particularly striking example of how the co-construction of narratives can offer students a new voice with which to see themselves and fashion a revised narrative of themselves.

As discussed in Chapter 1, counter narratives are ways in which individuals use personal narratives to speak back or resist some aspect of the larger cultural narrative, and the framework has often been utilized to investigate ways that college students counter dominant racist narratives (e.g. Harper, 2009; Seale-Ruiz, 2013; Yosso, 2006/2013). Counter narratives are also used to decenter white, middle class perspectives and make students feel as though they are not "the only one" (Nuñez, 2011, p. 645). In this chapter, I illustrate how the focal participants accessed representative counter narratives, built their own counter narratives, and were motivated and supported by particular advocates.

"I saw Brown people like me… getting their doctorates": New Visions of College and College Students

As I discussed in Chapter 4, a dominant master narrative that operated as students made sense of their journeys into and through college spaces was that

universities are prestigious, highly selective, and occupied by people who, largely (if not exclusively), had not had contact with the carceral system, had not thought carefully about the carceral system, nor tried to understand the experiences of individuals who have had contact with the carceral system. There were unique ways, however, that Val, Chad, Ashley and Jay's perceptions of universities (and their ability to occupy university spaces) were challenged. The first was through non-traditional outreach and the second was by being invited to see a new vision of what a university *could* look like.

Whereas Ashley had it "drilled it in [her] head" that college was "something that had to happen," Chad, Val, and Jay described not knowing about college as young people and learning about options for college in nontraditional ways. In response to my question about their images of college as children, Chad sarcastically replied "what's COLLEGE? You know what I mean?" However, when Chad was in rehab, he saw a presentation for the cohort program at Cedar and decided to apply. Chad's nontraditional onramp to community college made a big impact in his life was another step in his process to "love myself and… take care of me." As will become a pattern in this chapter, Chad also wanted to leverage his unique way of learning about school to benefit others and had goals of going into the local jail to "plant the seed" about options for college in that population.

Val told me that she did not have access to information about college when she was growing up and that visions of success in her childhood were from seeing individuals overcome their substance abuse. However, while completing community

college classes, Val was advised to take a course to prepare her transfer application. In that course she learned that beyond applying to the local college, she could apply to Seaside, and she explained:

> I was like, wait, what? Me? Like, I didn't like, you know, I didn't think I was the greatest student. I didn't think it was possible… But when I heard that I was eligible to apply, I was like, 'I'm going to Seaside!'

And Jay told me "I don't think I knew what it [college] was… Nobody in my family had went to college, so- and it wasn't like something that anybody ever talked about," and he first learned about college when he was in juvenile hall when he was "12 or 13":

> at that time I still didn't know what college was… [a visiting speaker] was saying that he had got his PhD and I was like, "what's that?" Right? But he came to juvenile hall, he gave a speech, uh, and it was crazy 'cause he … came in, dressed up in like a Pendleton, some Dickies and some Nike Cortez, right? And as he's talking, he starts stripping off these clothes and like underneath is like a business suit.

This performative presentation introduced Jay to the concept of college, and he later earned his GED while incarcerated. A few years later he described another experience when a visitor from Project Rebound, the CSU-based program for formerly incarcerated students, gave him a pamphlet through his cell bars that had "chains or something that were like breaking apart or I can't remember what, but I was like, yo. And it said that everybody was like formerly incarcerated." Jay's early experience with Project Rebound helped him envision himself on a pathway to college, and after his release he enrolled at his local community college.

Again, Ashley is an outlier in this case because she was told from a young age that college was in her future but, as I describe in greater detail in Chapter 6, a

summer outreach initiative to reach out to Black students who were accepted to Seaside was how she learned that she was accepted in the first place. She described getting the call and thinking it was "news to me cause I didn't even know I got in. So I said, 'yeah.'" I begin with these snapshots of students' first entry point either to community college or university to highlight how beneficial nontraditional dissemination of narratives of college can be for students and how getting these messages, even in unexpected places can have a profound impact.

And even when students learn that the university is a place where they might go, they still contend with the master narrative of the typical college student, which, for the focal students, was one who is younger, likely coming directly from high school where they acquired the tools to be successful in college, and likely bring fewer lived experiences with them to college. However, the focal participants indicated ways that access to new narratives of college students that more closely matched their own experiences motivated them.

Earlier in their academic journeys, both Jay and Chad planned to earn an associate's degree, but they both visited Emerald University as community college students and explained that seeing other formerly incarcerated students there was the catalyst to extend their educational goals and imagine new opportunities for themselves. Chad described this original plan to get his "little human services certificate and that's it!" but then visited Emerald with Selina, another Cedar student and explained:

> I didn't think there was more for me, but when I saw that there's other people like me? When I seen there's other Brown people like me, you know? There's

> other- people that look JUST like me and they're, they're doing it, you know? So it makes a big difference.

Similarly, Jay described an Underground Scholars ambassador coming to his community college and Jay telling him "I'm just trying to get my AA. I'm just trying to get out of here," but eventually visited the Underground Scholars space:

> it blew my mind to see a bunch of, uh, people that were formerly incarcerated that were at Emerald that were either in master's programs or, uh, undergraduate programs. And so when I seen that, it kind of inspired me to like just APPLY?

For both men, seeing a new vision of what a college program and college students could look like and specifically that formerly incarcerated students could succeed at the university was a powerful motivator that encouraged them to envision themselves finding that same success.

Val described a similar phenomenon as she saw counter narratives of successful Seaside students affiliated with Radical Scholars. She told me:

> it's through the Radical Scholars program that I actually even started considering like going forward to graduate school… THEY'RE going towards a doctorate program and it's like, "wow, wait if you're doing it, why can't I do it?" Um, and so just opening my eyes to the possibilities of, um, pursuing a higher degree than just settling for my BA.

Like Val, Ashley highlighted the value for students in the Radical Scholars space who can interact with people of similar backgrounds. She said, "it's a lot easier for people to go in there cause… everyone there is like them, like Radical Scholars students," but when I pushed her to define what a kind of student a Radical Scholars student was she said: "it's kind of a big umbrella, like, cause you have people that are, were formerly incarcerated- that are also considered Radical Scholars students,

people that were in the foster youth that are considered Radical Scholars, transfer students." As noted earlier, Radical Scholars served a larger demographic of students, but Ashley was still able to identify that being in a space with people who were different than what Val called "the typical student population" made it "easier" for students to feel comfortable and utilize supports.

Access to counter narratives of successful college students who more closely match how students identify was critical to their motivation and the further development of their academic plans. Case and Hunter (2012) write that the "offender labeled African American youth" in their study construct reimagined personal narratives that "define themselves in an affirming manner despite the pejorative views society holds concerning them. While this narrative is an individual-level narrative, it is contoured by the collective narratives within a counterspace" (p. 909). I discuss how the Underground Scholars and Radical Scholars spaces operate as counterspaces in Chapter 6, but I include this attention to collective and reimagined personal narratives here because Chad, Jay, and Val identify ways in which being around students "like them" creates opportunities to build their own counter narratives.

"Paving the way for whoever comes next": Constructing Counter Narratives

Another master narrative that certainly impacted how the focal students navigated campus spaces and made sense of their own place in college was the narrative of a formerly incarcerated person. According to the focal students, the

master narrative of incarceration derives almost exclusively from predominantly negative media representations and detracts from the other rich aspects of individuals' lives.

Chad and Jay present counter narratives that resist the master narrative of formerly incarcerated people and, importantly, did so *specifically* to improve the landscape for future formerly incarcerated students. Their narratives emphasized the wealth of knowledge that formerly incarcerated students can bring to formerly incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated students, and people (students or community members) who have not had contact with the carceral system. They both expressed that embracing and—in some cases recasting—the formerly incarcerated narrative was imperative given the experiences they had had and the challenges they had overcome.

Chad, consistent with his comments explored in Chapter 4, was invested in destigmatizing incarceration for other individuals on his campus. He explained "I really feel like I'm an asset. Like I have negative experience that other people don't have, and… [exhales] I want to tell people things that they've never experienced." Chad had survived homelessness, drug addiction, and a positive HIV diagnosis before his college journey began, and he expressed wanting to use his life experiences to benefit others. He told me that his experiences and the experiences of other formerly incarcerated people might be the "key" for others:

> People want to know, "how did you end up like that? How can I get my son back into being my son again? How, how did I lose my daughter in that?" You know, "how can you help me?" I want to help the next person. And because

> you have that story, you have the key to unlock these doors that are shut to them, you know? But they don't realize that they have that power.

Here Chad is explicitly flipping deficit narratives and emphasizing the power and knowledge that comes with overcoming a number of obstacles. His goal is to be able to leverage his earlier challenging experiences to benefit others and offer a representative example to other students who might not fit the "typical college student" mold. At the end of our second interview I asked if Chad wanted to add anything and he said, "I just want other students to know that it can be done."

Similarly, Jay "unapologetically" embraced his identity as a formerly incarcerated student and emphasized using his platform to motivate discussions about formerly incarcerated students. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Jay emphasized using his student staff position to flip how people think about formerly incarcerated individuals and shared that one way to do that was to "have a positive stigma attached to it. So knowing that people who are part of this program [Underground Scholars] that are formally incarcerated are scholars, they're professionals, they're parents, um, they're goal orientated, um, and things like that." Jay recognizes that he and other formerly incarcerated students like him are on a larger campus space where they are "proving" things to others on campus and went on to say:

> [it's] a process of people getting to know you, getting to know the people that you're associated with, uh, the things that you've done to help your community. Uh, I think *when they see this other side*… you're helping people understand what they don't understand. (emphasis added)

By simultaneously embracing his formerly incarcerated identity and experiences *and* highlighting the multifaceted and rich experiences that formerly incarcerated people

also have, Jay is able to strategize about different ways to shift the narrative about formerly incarcerated students.

Jay also sees his work at Seaside as "kind of paving the way for whoever comes next" but acknowledges that these changes are "a process":

> it's funny when you see it, like a freshman student coming straight out of like the suburbs somewhere… it's like [laughs]. You know, and they like, see [a formerly incarcerated student] like, "does he go here or do they go here?" It is like, "yeah." [laughs]… So it's always refreshing, but I think that's, that's for me, at least it's always like the perfect opportunity to, uh, kind of display what it is that we're really about. And then what it is that we're capable of.

Chad and Jay want to leverage the rich lived experiences of people who have gone through the system and how much they have to offer to those who have similar or divergent experiences and as a way to chip away at the deficit master narrative of an incarcerated person.

While Val did not connect her experiences with the carceral system explicitly, she drew inspiration to construct and embody a college student counter narrative for the benefit of her own children and the children that she taught. When I asked her who had helped her on her college journey, she highlighted the role that the young people in her life had played to encourage her to persist:

> I think my- [exhales] knowing [voice shakes] that like my students know that I'm in school is a big push cause it's like, we tell them every day that they can succeed, that they can overcome the barriers. [starts crying] And so like my students and my children, like I know are watching me. And so it's like, it's that push to keep going? …we're telling these young kids that they can overcome any barriers that it doesn't matter what color you are. It doesn't matter about your economic status, it's your grit and your will… if you put your mind to it, you can achieve it.

She went on to explain that even given the immense challenges of the 2019-2020 school year, the children in her life kept her going:

> Cause even at times, like I do want to give up and I'm just like, "ah, I don't know why I'm trying this," it's like, look- I start- I went to school and the apocalypse happened. [laughs]. Um, so that is something like, I definitely, um, I definitely use that to push me. Like my kids are watching me, like I can't give up.

In this powerful excerpt, Val positions herself as a potential mentor or example for others but also uses that role to nourish her own persistence in her challenging academic landscape.

While Ashley shared many stories of helping others, and particularly a few instances of "being the voice" of students who needed supports, Chad, Jay, and Val were intentional about leveraging their experiences to inform counter narratives for themselves and for those who look to them for guidance and support. Lana described this pattern as the "lift as we climb" motto that she so often saw formerly incarcerated students employ.

Students receive messaging from others—whether intentional or accidental—that impacts their experiences in their communities and in school. Worse yet, the narratives of incarcerated individuals are often tarnished, vilified, or snuffed out. The focal students illustrate ways to build reimagined personal narratives (Case & Hunter, 2014) to not only resist deficit or discriminatory structures but also reinforce the road to and through college for future students like them. Uncovering ways to support narrative construction for previously incarcerated students *despite* or *in contrast to* larger cultural narratives about what it means to be a "college student" or a "previously

incarcerated individual" illuminates opportunities for individuals, their families, and their communities.

"If you could just find…one person… you'll be good": An Advocate's Guidance

Much of the literature illustrates how supportive individuals on campus are critical to the success of historically underrepresented students and, specifically, formerly incarcerated students (e.g. Johnson & Abreu, 2019; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Torres, 2020). Val, Chad, Ashley, and Jay share experiences that align with that finding, and they also are each able to identify a *single advocate* who changed their trajectory. For Val, this individual provided a critical push to pursue college, and for Chad, Ashley, and Jay, the individual gave them critical tools to succeed once they were enrolled. While not directly related to the master narrative of self-sufficiency (which students identify as inextricably tied to one's success in college), it is helpful to see how these other individuals provided important tools for the focal students' academic journeys.

When Val was younger, she met a woman named Julia who made a profound impact on Val's personal and academic trajectory. Julia was a case-manager for a Christian charity that offered young people housing and grocery stipends if they returned to school to earn their diploma and learn a trade. During our last interview, Val explained the role that Julia played in her academic and personal trajectory:

> …she is the first one that really started encouraging me and having the conversation about college. Um, I've always been a smart student, like I always had A's and B's, I was a good student. It's just, I think, life events just kind of squashed any hopes I had. And, um, yeah, so she just, she was able to

> recognize [voice starts to shake] that I was bigger than my circumstances. [starts to cry] And she like really showed that she believed in me? And I guess like, just her believing in me empowered me to be like, "no, I can do this. That I'm better than this."

Prior to meeting Julia, Val painted her childhood as void of "successful people" and as a dark chapter as she grappled with her mother's death which left her "reality… shattered at a very early age." However, despite the challenges she fought to overcome, it was not until this individual illustrated belief in Val's ability that she began to imagine a different story for herself and, as she said, started to believe "I can do this… I'm better than this."

Ashley, Jay, and Chad found advocates in their first year of either four-year or community college. During our third interview, Ashley and I discussed different institutional barriers that I had been hearing about from other students, and she contrasted those experiences and said:

> My experience is definitely a lot different than most people I talked to that have like difficulties and I'm not really sure why… I guess I had a really good advocate that really just- made sure I knew the right people and talked to the right people. Um, my advocate really, really helped me from the time I started to like the time I graduated. She's always, um, been there and helped me a lot.

Early in Ashley's college journey she met Hannah, a now-retired staff person who worked in a student support program at Seaside University and who played an important role in supporting Ashley throughout her first two years of college. She explained a fortuitous meeting and how "we sat down and we just like instantly clicked." And when Ashley mentioned she needed a job, Hannah offered to ask if colleagues on campus were hiring.

Ashley explained that Hannah eventually retired but that her replacement, Lucy, has also played a big role in her life. Ashley estimated that she knew Lucy for two years and that Lucy "knows [her] situation pretty well," that the two formed a bond, and that Lucy helped Ashley "navigate anything I need help with… we meet like once a week and… I like talk to her about everything that's going on and if like any new problem has occurred… she plays like a big role."

Ashley perceives herself as lucky, and therefore her experience "different," to have found an advocate on campus, and it's also important to note that Ashley not only found this individual early in her time at Seaside University, but even when Hannah was retiring she made sure that Ashley was in good hands with Lucy. Ashley explained:

> I feel like- for a lot of people, like if you could just find, even if it's just one person that will just help you and support you and guide you, like you'll be good. But like a lot of the times it's really hard to find that one person that you connect with and that you can open up with and just feel comfortable with.

Ashley's example illustrates how critical it is for a student to find a genuine connection to someone on campus *early* and in a *sustained* capacity. Her experience is particularly important for formerly incarcerated students and students with complex lived experiences because, as Ashley said, having a person who "knows my situation pretty well" and to whom she "bonded" is critical.

Jay identified critical support from a staff person named Adela at his community college. As I will discuss later, Adela "took a chance" on Jay and hired him to work as an ambassador for a transfer program on campus—which, as he later reflected, brought him full circle to his position at Seaview. In addition to Adela

taking a chance on Jay, she also provided him with important navigational strategies that he still utilizes. He explained a day when they went to an event together and Adela "got real serious" and told Jay "if there's anything that you take away from all of this… just remember like the power of networking." After that conversation, Jay paid close attention to the ways in which Adela could make connections with a range of stakeholders at his community college, which was a skill he continued to develop after he transferred to Seaside and still utilizes.

Finally, Chad credited Dr. Bautista, one of his instructors in the cohort program during his first semester at Cedar, for providing him with critical skills to be successful in college. He explained that Dr. Bautista "laid down the foundation," and he indicated that she taught him and his classmates strategies like sitting in the front of the class, exchanging numbers with classmates "in case you have to miss a lecture or whatever," and asking for help. Chad explained that even though "we're so taught to do everything on our own… really you can't get through college without asking for help and being willing to ask for help."

And in direct opposition to the master narrative of self-sufficiency, Chad added that the resistance to asking for help in college runs counter to the endeavor of learning new things in a college setting:

> I don't have a problem now asking for help anymore… But in the beginning, when you first start school, I don't know what it is. I don't know what the stigma is with why you feel like you should know everything when you don't know everything?

It's likely that Chad's experience in the cohort program made these successful college student strategies more explicit, but it's also important to note that of any of the other

instructors he had during that time or after, Dr. Bautista was the one he credited for providing such valuable lessons.

Julia, Hannah, Lucy, Adela, and Dr. Bautista all played important roles in supporting the four focal participants into and on their college journey. And the importance of these supportive networks is echoed in the literature. For example, Strayhorn et al. (2013) found that formerly incarcerated black male college students in their study used supportive networks with faculty, staff, and peers to aid in their transition to and persistence in college. Even beyond tangible supports (e.g. jobs) or advice to be successful (e.g. network, sit in the front of class), these individuals emphasized that they believed the focal students could be successful, which gave them an important boost of encouragement to begin or continue their college journey.

"Maybe I am smart?… maybe I'm not that dumb after all": Crafting a New Story of Self

An important component of Bakhtin's (1979, 1994; Holquist, 2002) work is the dialectical nature of identity construction: one constructs themselves *in relation* to others. Dialogism is an important component of narrative construction, and it is also a useful framework to see how individuals build ideas with language in the company (physical or imagined) of others. This becomes particularly critical to highlight when exploring how to best support students who, at some point in their lives, either by their family, community, or interactions with denigrating systems like the carceral system, were told any number of negative things: they are dumb, inferior, incapable, or in some way bad. In the co-constructed reality that we build through language with

others (Blumer, 1986; Bogdan & Bicklen, 1997/2007), it becomes critical to uncover ways to offer students new, affirming language with which to construct their narrative of self.

I discussed how important Dr. Bautista was for Chad above, but beyond sharing important strategies for academic success, Dr. Bautista gave Chad a *new language* with which to construct his narrative. And while this was happening in smaller ways for the other three, Chad's experience is so powerful that I want to explore it in greater detail. Chad shared that he was often the subject of verbal abuse and that, for years of his life, he was told: "you're stupid," "you're dumb," or "Oh, you fucked up." Chad talked about how important Dr. Bautista was to him during our first interview, but his emphasis on inner dialogue, particularly *negative* or *degrading* inner dialogue from his youth or adolescence, became more clear as our interviews went on. More than the other three participants, Chad directly revoiced the comments—both positive and negative—of others throughout his interviews, offering insight into how others' voces impacted his self-perception. The negative voices in his narrative were used not only to cite earlier comments from those around him but had become integrated into his own self-talk.

However, when he enrolled in the cohort program at Cedar College, Chad was introduced to new, more positive voices by Dr. Bautista that were at first difficult to believe and even more difficult to integrate into his own self-perception. Chad described Dr. Bautista:

> She's the one that really pushed me … and [told] me like what a good job I did. And I'm so used to being the black sheep and the F up in the family, you

> know, I'm so used to being, you know, "Oh, Chad did it again." Or "Look at what Chad did," you know, from being- using drugs and it just being [a] totally different lifestyle, you know? So, so to get praised and told "good job." It was hard to hear. I'm I- I'm used to it now, but it was really hard for me to adjust, uh, from- to get complimented.

When he first heard compliments and supportive words from his instructors, Chad thought they were "blowing smoke up [his] butt" and explained it was "really weird to hear positive reinforcement because I'm so used to hearing how bad I am and how negative I am." When he began hearing "positive reinforcements" he wondered "what is this stuff?" and told me these moments of support made him realize that "I didn't allow myself to love myself in the beginning, you know, and Dr. Bautista got me to open up and just say, 'Hey, you know, you can, you can do more than this.'"

Chad reported how profound it was to hear, and eventually adopt, positive language about himself. However, Chad's experience helps illuminate how uncomfortable that encouragement can be for students who have been inundated with hurtful, sometimes abusive, comments from others and who have integrated those voices into their own perception of self. And while Dr. Bautista began moving the dial on Chad's self-perception, he also told me that an EOPS counselor started complimenting him and showing him support around the same time. As Chad grappled with the discomfort of positive feedback from instructors, hearing more support from other sources helped to bolster his change in perspective. He explained that after a while he began to think:

> …well maybe, maybe, I do know- maybe I do got this… maybe I am smart, maybe, you know? Maybe I'm not that dumb after all. You know? Because after years and years of just being told that "you're stupid" or "you're dumb" or you're just, it's- "you're gonna be a drug addict," or "look what you get

> now," or "Oh, you fucked up" after years of- and self sabotage, you know, it was really, really hard to hear compliments from, from the administration.

Here, Chad illustrated the stalls and starts in his new thinking. As he was hearing words of encouragement from Dr. Bautista and a counselor, he was trying on a new voice while battling persistent and intrusive voices from earlier in his life. This quote also helps to illuminate that, for Chad, hearing these comments from "the administration" (e.g. his instructors and other people associated with Cedar College) was particularly meaningful.

Chad also brought this important piece to his goals for the future. He told me about efforts to integrate the cohort program courses into the local jail and emphasized how these courses would not only offer academic enrichment, but also an opportunity to revise the stories one tells about oneself:

> …Allison and I are working on getting classes into [the local jail]… hopefully sparking and planting the seed in, um, in that population, the same population and um, giving them a little hope, you know, that, you know, "maybe, maybe I smart enough," cause a lot of times we're told we're dumb and… you're just told you're just a loser… you're just not worth it. But if we invest in people, um, the outcome is gonna be great.

For Chad, experiences in classroom settings and with supportive faculty and staff can bolster students above and beyond academic development. Hearing new, supportive voices and having opportunities to try on those voices can open opportunities to build a new story of self.

This change in thinking was slow and uncomfortable, but it was the process of trying on new voices from those around him (e.g. "you can do it, Chad") and integrating them into his own self-talk (e.g. "maybe I am smart") that allowed Chad to find more

power in his experience and a more positive vision of himself. During our last interview, Chad reported that hearing positive things "doesn't bother [him]… now."

Because narratives of self are constantly being negotiated and co-constructed, it is important that students have access to positive, agentive voices as they build a story of self in college. In Chad's case, before coming to Cedar, he had access to very few positive voices, which negatively impacted his own self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). However, Dr. Bautista lent Chad a new voice that eventually helped his confidence grow. And if we zoom out we can imagine that the larger deficit master narrative of formerly incarcerated students that Chad expressed navigating might have occluded these positive voices. Therefore, it is integral to simultaneously chip away at deficit master narratives while also bolstering the construction of affirming individual narratives.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted ways that students challenged deficit master narratives, including by accessing counter narratives that more closely matched their own experiences, building their own counter narratives to inspire future students, and benefiting from a helpful advocate. This chapter helps to illuminate ways that students resist larger hegemonic master narratives that do not serve them and by troubling academic narratives that center the experiences of white, middle class students. What is particularly striking about the findings in this chapter is that students' motivations for constructing affirming counter narratives rest in the hopes that they will inspire others. These reimagined personal narratives (Case & Hunter,

2014) take on additional weight as they not only affirm the individual who constructs the narrative but also serve as inspiration for others.

This chapter also points to ways to leverage the dissemination of counter narratives to impact a greater population. For example, Jay and Chad were both intentionally invited into the Underground Scholars space to be able to gain access to new visions of college students, and, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Chad was invited to share his story with faculty during a professional development workshop. Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) found that a "difference-education intervention," in which college seniors shared how their diverse backgrounds impacted their experiences of college, helped incoming students, and opportunities to more broadly share the counter narratives and strategies that students have developed may be an important strategy to keep challenging the master narratives presented in the previous chapter. Another opportunity for the sharing of counter narratives is within counter spaces, which I take up in the next chapter.

But before I move on to explore counter spaces, I'd like to close by reflecting on the one master narrative from the previous chapter that remains unchallenged: the master narrative of the benefit of a college degree. In some ways, seeing representative role models successfully completing their undergraduate and graduate degrees can offer assurance that the process is feasible and that formerly incarcerated students can in fact be successful, despite the looming institutional challenges. However, at least among the four focal students in this study, the master narrative of the college degree persisted unchallenged. Even while formerly incarcerated students build their

academic repertoire, it is unclear if those accomplishments will yield results that are equal to, for example, a person who has not had contact with the carceral system. This is deeply problematic.

While other master narratives can be challenged, the material benefits that many formerly incarcerated people are still barred from—*despite participating and succeeding in the academic sphere*—underscores another facet of the ongoing racist and classist structures that not only make it more likely that low income people and people of color will interact with the carceral system, but that they will also be less likely to ever reap the same societal and educational benefits because of that interaction. I return to this point in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6: Formerly Incarcerated College Students as Thoughtful Architects of Campus Spaces

The third theme that emerged from the narrative analysis is that students' experiences on campus spaces (or not being able to find or access spaces) inspired new imaginaries of what *could* exist. Chad and Jay, in particular, shared their goals for future spaces, and all of the focal students identified affirming existing campus spaces and ways to improve or build spaces that would elevate the experiences of future formerly incarcerated college students. I conclude with ways in which the four focal students were making sense of campus spaces in the age of COVID-19 and the shift to remote instruction.

Early in the development of this project I was convinced of the important role of campus spaces on students' wellbeing *and* their ability to resist and challenge larger deficit views by rich research on counterspaces (e.g. Case & Hunter, 2012; Grier-Reed, 2010, Nuñez, 2011; Patton, 2006; Solórzano and Villalpando, 1998; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Counterspaces are spaces in which individuals tell stories about themselves that affirm or resist larger cultural narratives, critique dominant discourses, or connect with others who have shared experiences (Case & Hunter, 2012). The counterspace framework is often employed in higher education research to explore ways in which historically underserved and minoritized students utilize or, in some cases, informally build, affirming spaces to resist otherwise inhospitable or unwelcoming campus cultures.

Literature on educational counterspaces intends to not only identify ways in which students build new or embrace pre-existing spaces within larger educational institutions, but also to shed critical light on systemic inequities and covert or overt racism or sexism on the larger campus that students must resist to succeed and to thrive in school. And we can extend this to capture deficit thinking about formerly incarcerated students. Ultimately, this theme highlights implications for the ways in which colleges create, allocate, and geographically place spaces that impact students' experiences.

One of the unintended consequences of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and sheltering-in-place as I began my data collection was that students were no longer physically inhabiting the spaces that I was asking them to reflect upon. Therefore, the impact of physical spaces and the impact of the people who usually also occupy those spaces became more difficult to untangle. However, this phenomenon underscores the role of people and narratives in students' experience of a space. The fracture that COVID-19 created in students' experience of and sense making about spaces is coupled with opportunities for institutions to radically rethink ways to use college spaces moving forward.

"It blew my mind to see a bunch of people that were formerly incarcerated": Existing Blueprints Inspire Future Plans

As mentioned in Chapter 5, Jay and Chad both visited Emerald University as community college students. After seeing such a thriving program, they were more attuned to the absence of spaces for formerly incarcerated college students at Seaside

and Cedar, respectively, and they actively worked to build those spaces. Jay recalled that the experience "blew [his] mind" and encouraged him to transfer, but when he arrived at Seaside he "noticed that there wasn't really anything, any programs really geared towards assisting formerly incarcerated students the WAY that there was at Emerald or the way, the way I had seen at Emerald, you know, it was entirely different." After the catalyzing experience of seeing formerly incarcerated students enrolled at a prestigious university and in a thriving space, Jay was surprised to see a gap in supports for formerly incarcerated college students at Seaside University. He became involved in Radical Scholars, but he found himself continuing to compare his experiences with Radical Scholars to his visit to Emerald University and Underground Scholars comparing "walking into a space and [seeing] about 30 or 40 other individuals that are ALL formally incarcerated, [and] it's a big difference when you walk into a different space and there's only like maybe one or two."

Jay also indicated that shared goals and learning from other students was a critical component to an effective space for formerly incarcerated students. He likened his experience at Underground Scholars to how he imagined students felt living in a dorm specifically for Black students at Seaside:

> You feel comfortable, uh, celebrating in these types of spaces… you feel comfortable, uh, letting your voice be heard. Um, you don't feel … any like stigma associated with WHATEVER it is, whatever kind of background you come from. Like, you know that everybody's coming from a similar background. Um, and so when it comes to things like that, I think all those create like this, this environment where people, um, especially when you're sharing information, I feel like they're just a little bit more successful in, uh, in whatever it is that they're pursuing.

Jay finds power in gathering students with "a similar background," (and, importantly, he broadens the demographic possibilities but emphasizes that similarity of some sort is important) and his emphasis on "sharing information" illuminates both the wealth of knowledge that students can share with one another and the lack of support that would be specifically helpful for formerly incarcerated students. Fortunately, Jay was able to use his connections to Underground Scholars at Emerald University and now the statewide network to build a new chapter at Seaside University.

As noted earlier, Chad *also* visited Underground Scholars at Emerald University during an event to support community college students' transfer process which inspired him to create Forward Scholars on his campus. Like Jay, Chad saw a gap in supports—academic and psychosocial—for formerly incarcerated students at Cedar. However, Chad's battle for space was hampered by a lack of institutional support. Instead, he was tasked with creating the space through a student group that did not afford him or the other Forward Scholars-affiliated students with the resources that Jay and the Radical Scholars had. Chad envisioned a future when formerly incarcerated Forward Scholars would "have office space… to use computers and book vouchers and, you know, just have different resources that they need." He also identified having a director and building linkages to the local jail:

> get in there [the local jail] and, and get your hands dirty with, with other students that are in there. Um, basically show them that there's hope… spark up the hope that, you know, "okay, yeah, you're right here right now, you know, at least get some college credits while you're in here"… create a pathway for them when they get out of there… have a counselor that knows about people that have been incarcerated. Um, maybe somebody wants to

> spend all their time doing this, but because of their quote unquote "background," they can't do that… don't waste their time doing that, have them look at other career paths.

While Chad had a helpful list of supports for students at Cedar College, he also saw his plan extending into the local jail to begin planting the idea of transferring to community college in the minds of currently incarcerated individuals. Miller, Mondesesir, Stater, and Schwartz (2017) use the counterspaces framework to examine the experiences of formerly incarcerated students and write "exiting prison is as scary as going in" and argue that a GED or community college classroom can be a critical space to support students who have experienced incarceration. Chad's vision and Miller et al.'s (2017) insight have important implications for the construction or strengthening of future networks, particularly at community colleges.

And, like Jay, Chad emphasized the importance of specialized supports (e.g. a counselor who understands the limits of employment for individuals with a record or students with similar backgrounds "sharing information"). In Keels' (2020) work on counterspaces for Black and Latinx students, she found counterspaces provided "compensatory supports [Black and Latinx students] needed to counterbalance the low-quality guidance that many reported receiving from White academic advisers and professors" (p. 163). While her work is focused on the racial-ethnic components that Black and Latinx students grapple with on historically white campuses, although the focal students' intersectional identities overlap with those in Keels' work, there are certainly parallels in considering the gaps in knowledge that counselors or professors

may have if they have not been informed of the unique contexts with which formerly incarcerated students grapple as they move through college.

Jay and Chad spoke highly of their visit to Emerald University, but also expressed disappointment at the absence of support programming at their respective colleges. However, they were both able to use their experience at Underground Scholars at Emerald University to inform a dream for their own colleges and then make that dream a reality. In the words of hooks (1989), they were able to use their marginalized position on their own campus "from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (p. 20).

"Just knowing people care about my success is a really good feeling": Affirming Spaces on Campus Improve Sense of Belonging

All four participants highlighted affirming campus spaces they encountered during their college experience and often indicated that those spaces offered them a place "to seek refuge" (Lawrence, 2002, p. xvii) from the larger campus. And again, it is important to remember that students were not able to access any of the physical spaces they discussed, and yet the importance of those spaces permeated the stories that they shared.

The work to create and promote supportive spaces was recognized by Val and Ashley. Val explained, "having utilized those spaces and being able to connect with other people that it is, uh, it is like a calming, encouraging space of knowing like there's other people like me that have overcome those situations and we are succeeding and we- we are not only succeeding, but we're flourishing." Val's

experience with Radical Scholars and Underground Scholars not only offered her a sense that there were "people like [her]," but offered her a vision of what was possible and an affirmation that she could flourish. While this also connects nicely with the counter narrative explored in Chapter 5, Val placed great value on the physical space of Radical Scholars. During our first interview she explained that even coming into the space she thinks "'Oh, I'm home.'... And it's very like sad when like they're not open," and during our second interview she reiterated "I just kind of clung on to them. That was my home." Val felt very isolated when she could not access the space, and that feeling was amplified by the campus closure, which I discuss more later.

Ashley also discussed benefiting from the affirming spaces that she found in Radical Scholars, an Ethnic Resource Center, and her service learning course. When I asked her to describe her experience in those spaces, she explained:

> I felt good. … it was always, I always just felt good… I went in there and left feeling happy and positive and just a sigh of relief. Just knowing that people care and want me to- and really like care about my success is a really good feeling. And I always got that and received that every time I would go into all three of these spaces.

Ashley's description of having a "sigh of relief" after visiting these spaces underscores what an important role they had on her college experience. As noted earlier, Ashley appreciated the Ethnic Resource Center because it allowed her to "be among like people that are like me." Ashley and Val underscore how valuable it can be to find a place like "home" or that makes a student feel "happy and positive."

And even when students could not physically be together, Radical Scholars was able to make a fast shift to remote spaces to host things like a BINGO event

where, as Jay reported, the goal was to emphasize "community building and seeing everybody there" and one student who joined the Zoom call said "I don't even want to play. I'm just here to like, chill and hang out."

After the event, Val explained that there was a "theme" of talking about "self care." She explained, "A lot of people were just saying what they do for self care. And then when it came to me, I was like, 'no, I'm a mess. Like I ain't got no self care.' It's something that I've been battling with myself." Even with the isolation that students were facing, Radical Scholars was able to maintain the program space and offer opportunities to build or maintain community and talk about ways to sustain themselves during that difficult period.

"[Being] in that type of setting [will help] pave the way for what … comes next for them": Student Staff Positions as Essential Building Blocks

An important component of students being able to build something affirming for themselves and students like them was having opportunities to work in student staff positions. By the time I finished data collection, all four students had had at least one experience working as a student staff member for at least one campus program. Val was hired as a student staff member with the early Underground Scholars funding allocation, Ashley worked for an Ethnic Resource Center and Radical Scholars, both in event planning capacities but where she would often find herself "voice of like certain students that would come in and have questions or concerns," and Chad had a staff position in the Equity division at Cedar College. Finally, Jay held a number of

student staff positions at his community college, including the position which led him to meet an ambassador of Underground Scholars, and had an internship with Radical Scholars that eventually developed into his role as the program coordinator for the newly-created Underground Scholars program. All of these positions validated students' expertise in formal ways, ensure that other students see formerly incarcerated students succeeding, and, critically, support formerly incarcerated students financially.

Chad also discussed material benefits of working on campus: his employers were sensitive to his school schedule and encourage him to develop campus events. He explained his supervisor "always pushes me to push the Forward Scholars. … she invited me to a [campus] meeting… and she also invited me to be part of a FLEX [week]… So at one me, [and two other Forward Scholars] told our story [to instructors]." Chad and two other Forward Scholars had also been invited to attend a conference for formerly incarcerated college students in Sacramento with Cedar administrators, which was unfortunately cancelled because of COVID-19. These opportunities help create links between campus spaces which might be lacking in understanding formerly incarcerated students' experiences (e.g. faculty professional development during FLEX week), students' own experiences, and students' professional development.

An important piece of Chad's student staff narrative, though, is that he experienced a delay in being hired that he links to his incarceration experience. In two interviews while he talked about his job on campus he also included his

experience going through the background check. When he first told me about his job and his supportive supervisor he began explaining that other students who had applied at the same time were hearing back about their positions and he thought "MAN I'm not going to get it because of my record or this or that. And… my supervisor, told me, 'you know, maybe it, maybe it is your record, Maybe? I don't know'" but that eventually he got the position.

And again during our third interview, Chad revisited his fear about his background check and emphasized the stress he continues to feel when he applies for jobs:

> …for example, when I applied for my position… we had to get a background check… they fingerprint you and I was kinda worried about that… you worry, you get the stigma, you know, *you worry, that was so long ago, you know, I did my time, I did what I had to do*. And, um, the lady told me that, you know, there was something wrong with my fingerprint… [but] I got the job. I passed the background check and, um, [exhale] you always have that following you, you always have your past following you no matter what.

Chad's experience not only highlights how much positive impact student staff can have on their campus community if given a chance, but also ties back to the master narrative of an incarcerated person who is forced to wear their stigma (and potentially be banned from employment opportunities) for things that happened "*so long ago.*"

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, Jay also shared an experience of finding a promising graduate program that included a temporary job with the county after graduating. But Jay learned that there was a catch: "with a record, you can't work for the County. Which means that with the record, you don't qualify for this program… I can't work for the county, like where am I going to go?" What would have been a

promising graduate program is not an option for Jay, who is still facing "collateral consequences" of incarceration (Love et al., 2013).

Ashley also highlighted how important student staff positions were, particularly for formerly incarcerated students. While her record has since been expunged, she emphasized that for students like her friend Jay, getting a job can create additional stress. Because formerly incarcerated students can be blocked from internships or particular employment opportunities, it is important to create student staff positions on college campuses to ensure their wealth of knowledge is leveraged to create more meaningful employment opportunities *and* to benefit other students, whether formerly incarcerated or not.

Ashley was an enthusiastic supporter of other students and, as has already been mentioned, she successfully networked to get a number of student staff positions that positioned her well to help others. One job brought her full circle from her original acceptance from Seaside and allowed her to play an important role for future Seaside students.

In the months leading up to Ashley attending college, her communication from the outside world was blocked. On one very fortuitous day, Cheynne, a staff member at an Ethnic Resource Center at Seaside, called Ashley to see if she would be enrolling there. Later as a student staff with that same center, Ashley learned this was an annual outreach procedure, and she even helped with it one year. She explained:

> Cheyenne gave us like a list of people who had not yet- and they were all like people of color. And I think they had… not yet decided… So it was like five of us working with [Cheyenne] and she gave us a list of names and numbers and we would just call them and let them- and ask them if they were still coming.

In Ashley's case, this friendly reminder to accept or decline one's college admission also alerted her to the fact that she had been accepted to the college. She told me "I received a call from her asking if I was still going to attend and it was like news to me cause I didn't even know I got in. So I said, 'yeah.'" Years later she was able to reach out to other students in the same way, helping to extend the reach of her helpfulness to other students on campus.

In addition to receiving academic and personal support from Radical Scholars and Underground Scholars, Val's position as a student employee with Underground Scholars gave her access to important conversations that she might not have had elsewhere. She pointed out that "not everybody wants to be associated with the Underground Scholars because there's a negative connotuity [sic] of being incarcerated and their stigmas," but Val also identified the Underground Scholars meetings as spaces where she could engage in conversations about how to "push back on the stereotype." She went on to describe that "in our last [Underground Scholars student staff] session [I talked about how] people who are incarcerated aren't proud to be incarcerated and they don't talk about it." In contrast, though, she was able to brainstorm how to break that stereotype with her Underground Scholars coworkers and explained that they had not had those conversations "openly" with individuals outside of the student staff group.

It was also in this student staff space that Val was able to have a difficult conversation with Jay about asking for information about people's convictions. She explained:

> Like I don't ASK, but it is a thought in the back of my head, like, and I, and I brought this up to Jay and like… Cause it's not like you can have part of the [student staff] interview be "WHAT WAS YOUR CRIME?" Um, and so he just said like, you know, "we don't really talk about our crimes committed. It was just like, we, you know, we were institutionalized and you keep it moving."

Val's experience with the student staff group (as unique from the larger group of affiliated students) illustrates a "community of resistance" (hooks, 1990, p. 47) and, borrowing from hooks' notion of homeplace, what Lawrence (2002) described as a place "to seek refuge and dress wounds of battle and places for hard conversations, where differences can be aired and strategy mapped" (xvii). Her conversation with Jay about convictions illustrates the tension that Morales (2017) highlights individuals in counterspaces must contend with. She writes, "embracing the tension of contradiction was another component of counterspaces, and a particularly difficult one given that many people stray from confrontation… this contradiction and tension is a necessary part of our process of growing, learning, and transforming" (Morales, 2017, p. 3). While I do not have enough data on the smaller counterspace of the Underground Scholars student staff group as they were just coming into those roles as data collection came to a close, it is helpful to think about how the smaller space, which included students heavily invested in the continued support for formerly incarcerated students at Seaside, might foster more opportunities for students to "[learn] from and [engage] with one another in critical discourse" (Morales, 2017, p. 2).

In addition to collaborating on strategies of resistance, Jay was the most vocal about the role of student staff positions in general, and particularly for formerly incarcerated students. He had benefited greatly from working in an office at his

community college, and his position enabled him to make contact with the Emerald University Underground Scholars ambassador who eventually convinced Jay to visit Emerald University, which eventually led Jay to apply to transfer. Upon reflecting on that fortuitous meeting, Jay told me "had it not been for me being in that position and him not being in that position, I don't think we've ever would have had a conversation. So [I'm] very fortunate." Jay also benefited from the mentorship of Adela, who he met through his community college position. He described that time as "a trip" because "certain people took a chance" on him and were "super supportive" even though at that time he still had to wear a surveillance bracelet, a very visual representation of his interaction with the carceral system.

These early community college experiences led Jay to see how important student staff positions can be for formerly incarcerated students. He told me that his community college job

> set the tone for everything else… and just being in the space with other professionals, I was like, "Oh shit."… I actually worked at like a whole bunch of other jobs. And like that first ambassador job was like one job that I was like eager to go to… [everybody was] on a vibe… I think for formerly incarcerated students to be in a space like that, where they can catch that vibe, gain that experience, uh, and just be in that type of setting throughout the course of their academic career, I think it'll help, uh, uh, pave the way for what- like what comes next for them.

Jay emphasized how having formerly incarcerated college students like himself in an office setting with other professionals would expand their opportunities and, importantly, also become a job that, as Jay explained, a student might be "eager to go to."

Later, as a student at Seaside University, Jay applied for an internship to work for Radical Scholars and its parent program. He reflected that "that [position] gave me the platform that I needed to kind of, um, build on those conversations [with campus stakeholders]… I was in the office every day and like, there was nothing they could do to get rid of me, even if they wanted to. So they had to hear what I w- what I had to say." Beyond being in an office space and having a meaningful job, Jay leveraged his student staff position to amplify his concerns about the lack of supports for formerly incarcerated students and his ideas to build better supports.

Jay's experience exemplifies how important student staff positions can be for a number of reasons. Not only do they offer formerly incarcerated students opportunities to highlight their rich experiences and lived knowledge, but they also offer opportunities to work with other professionals on meaningful work. Finally, they offer ways for students to be a part of important projects that might further extend the reach of supports for formerly incarcerated college students in a way that compensates students for their important intellectual contributions.

"… you would think [a vulnerable population] would be like in the CENTER of campus": Critiques of Campus Spaces and Geography

Another component that students highlighted was that some student support offices were inaccessible, which has major implications for historically underserved student populations like formerly incarcerated students. Val was the most sensitive to and vocal about her critiques of different campus spaces and shared that Seaside University lacked geographically accessible resources, particularly for vulnerable

students. She discussed inefficient and insufficient campus transportation and continued by reflecting on the campus geography more generally. She said

> …what I notice about our campus is that a lot of the offices that serve minority students and our vulnerable population students are not easily accessible, right? Like [a resource center], like the [campus] shuttle doesn't even GO there. The shuttle drops you off down the way. And then it's a little walk… I've heard [that] a lot of students … don't even access [a resource center] because it's too far out of the way. Um, like you have your… DRC students who will access the DRC cause they NEED to, but a lot of the other things are just not easily accessible.

As noted earlier, the geography of Seaside University is unique in that it sits on a 2,000 acre plot of land; however, Val provides an important critique of the challenges navigating such a large campus, both in physically moving from class to class and accessing student supports at sometimes inaccessible locations. Val discussed the lack of accessibility at Seaside University during each of the four interviews. And it should be noted that at no time during our four interviews were Val and I physically *on campus* and yet the inequitable geography of the campus still weighed heavily on Val's mind.

Val and Jay also shared a small critique about the physical Radical Scholars space. When I asked Val to describe the first time she visited the space she (in the company of Jay and Ashley) talked about how friendly everyone was (and even referring to the space as "home"), but she identified a concern about a metal security gate that was open during business hours but, even open, still had an troubling aesthetic feature that was also symbolic for Val. She explained there's a "little cubby area where when you first walk up the stairs" that she "hated" because "it looks like a

jail. I just hate that part. I'm like, 'oh my god, that looks like a jail, like time-out center.'"

And, as mentioned earlier, Jay compared the size of the Radical Scholars space—which served a number of student demographics in a relatively smaller area—to the size of the Underground Scholars space at Emerald University that was much larger and served only formerly incarcerated students. He later described an instance when Melissa was going out of the office for a few days and mentioned that Jay could adjust things in the space if he wanted to. He decided to rearrange the furniture to make the space more inviting and recalled:

> When [Melissa] came back, that whole place was rearranged, yo. But it was crazy because, uh, there was a lot of more people coming in now… or people that were coming in like, "Oh, this space looks bigger. Like, it looks like you could actually come in here now." And so I think for me, just like envisioning a space that, uh, would allow that would allow more people? I think that's kind of like, without really knowing, I think that's, that's what I was going for.

The examples of moving furniture or critiquing the security gate illuminate how small design decisions can impact how or if students engage with particular campuses spaces. On a macro-level, the geographic placement of supports on a campus also send messages to students about what is valued. Critiques of the spacial aesthetics and spacial layout of the campus mirror comments that Patton (2006) heard from Black students' critiques of a Black Cultural Center (BCC) counterspace on their campus. Students in her sample highlighted how critical the BCC was for their sense of belonging, but also noted that the physical space of the BCC (a small, repurposed home in need of repairs) and its geographic location (on the periphery of campus) made the space feel less inclusive.

"I miss it all. I never thought I would miss school or say it. I miss school": Campus Closures Underscore the Importance of Campus Spaces

COVID-19 had a dramatic impact on all facets of students' lives, and forced Chad, Val, Jay, and Ashley to build academic spaces in their bedrooms, living rooms, and back yards. At the time of writing, there is budding research that illustrates the extent of trauma facing college students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Kecojevic, 2020), but the switch a remote also took a drastic toll on how students were able to organize their day, continue to access support, and create some semblance of the academic spaces that suddenly disappeared.

First, the pandemic and sheltering-in-place also had dramatic impacts on Forward Scholars. Radical Scholars benefited from institutional support and a program coordinator, and were therefore able to host online events (e.g. a BINGO event and a virtual graduation) shortly after the switch to remote instruction to foster "community building and seeing everybody [on Zoom]." Forward Scholars, on the other hand, relied on student labor and, pre-COVID, had to cobble together meeting places. Without access to campus spaces, nor the support of dedicated program coordinator, *and* with the immense pressure of academic, family, and work demands in conjunction with a turbulent historical moment and a global pandemic, Forward Scholars went "silent."

Even beyond their affiliations with Forward Scholars and Underground Scholars, Val, Chad, and Jay discussed how they had to get into new routines and

mindsets working from home to be able to continue to do their academic work. Val in particular struggled to balance helping her children with their schoolwork while trying to complete her own. She told me during our first interview, "I'm in here trying to do work? The kids keep asking me [questions]" which added stress to an already incredibly traumatic and unstable experience.

Chad described his struggle to stay motivated working at home and contrasted being at Starbucks or the library and "for some odd reason you get more done somewhere else than at home. So being home you don't really feel motivated, especially when you're wearing your pajamas all the time. [Laughs.]" During our last interview, Chad titled his computer to show me a stack of books in his window sill that he called his "office." And Jay also discussed the challenge to find a routine at home because "working in the house. Um, it just, it's not for me at all, like, like straight up." Without access to the quiet campus spaces and academic routines, students had to develop new strategies and ways to meet their goals.

Ashley, who was fortunately already connected with a number of campus supports, also emphasized that getting help became more challenging

> it was a lot easier [pre-COVID] cause you can just walk in and then, you know, either talk to someone right away or if even if you can't talk to someone right away, there was someone else always there to help you. Now you have to send emails and hope people like get reply really fast.

Her comment stresses the challenges of communication in the switch to remote environments. Whereas previously Ashley could have talked to staff person in their office and received information or confirmation that they were working to address her needs, she now had to send emails and hope that people read them and responded in

a timely manner. For other students who were not previously connected to campus supports, this task was likely more challenging.

COVID-19 and the switch to remote learning also illuminated how much students valued academic spaces that they had previously taken for granted. Three of the four participants highlighted the role that the library played in their academic experiences, and Jay and Chad were particularly vocal about how no longer having access to the library impacted their academic development.

Val recalled how, early in her time at Seaside, the library was where she first tested her feelings of belonging. She explained to me that she knew some of the library resources (e.g. an area for tutoring in the very back) but had never checked out a book ("I'm not even sure how that process works"). However, in a very powerful moment she described using a table near the front of the library and feeling "the intimidation of the other students and it's just like, 'no, I belong here.' Like reminding myself that I belong here just like anybody else." Val's experience in the library acted as a site to test herself and her sense of belonging on the campus. Later when I asked Val what spaces on campus she was missing she replied "number one is the accessibility of being able to go to the library and have a quiet place to work… [that's] Not happening at the house with the kids." What was previously a metaphorical battlefield between herself and her feeling of intimidation from other students was a space she deeply missed.

Chad emphasized the role that the library played for him, and it is very likely that without the switch to remote instruction, he would not have realized how much

he appreciated that campus space. During our second interview (shortly after the shelter-in-place order), I asked Chad if there were any spaces that he was particularly missing now that he was completing his coursework at home. He said, "I miss it all. I never thought I would miss school or say it. I miss school… and just even the quiet time in the library. I took the library for granted." In hindsight, Val and Chad identified the critical role of a quiet study space which may not have been viewed as critically had it not been for its sudden absence.

Jay also explained how important the campus library was to him and his academic success, and later explained that because of his incarceration experiences, in which he utilized a very precise ability to track "energy" in spaces for survival, he felt an affinity for the energy in the library. He explained:

> Part of surviving in [prison] was reading people's body language and so, um, if their body language or your energy wasn't right, I just felt like it's like I want to stay away from it. And so, um, the energy that I did like and I did appreciate was, uh, the energy in the library. I felt like I would see the same faces every single day. Like every single day nonstop. People would sit at the same chairs… We would probably nod… [and] acknowledging each other like, 'Oh, shit, you're handling your business too.' And I felt like it was that energy that kinda like propelled me, like pushed me forward like, okay, this is the energy that I needed.

Here Jay's keen sense of different spaces and their energy adds another layer to how to think about the role of campus spaces. Jay appreciated the library far beyond the academic affordances that it provided, but the space itself gave him the motivation to continue on his academic pursuits. His visceral response to the energy in the library is also very insightful as we consider how adept the focal students were at critiquing and building effective and affirming spaces.

During our second interview, Jay highlighted a lot of academic and personal challenges but then paused and said, "if I had to say there was a challenge [this term], it was trying to figure out, uh, how to [pause] live without the library [laughs] straight up." COVID-19 changed the way we experienced the world, and it also helped illuminate a lot about students' relationships to campus spaces.

Chapter Conclusion

As the critical geographers and counterspace theorists who inform my work make clear, space is not just a container where things happen or a backdrop for what *really* happens in schools or colleges. On the contrary, space profoundly impacts what happens and how it happens on college campuses.

More generally, the critical geographer Lefebvre (1976, 1991) argues that a *space* is a social and political product and, therefore, a study of space can be a tool to highlight marginalization and power. Lefebvre argues that as we walk down a street, for example, we are simultaneously experiencing the space through our senses, through some idea that we have created about that space, and some additional "residue" of creativity or artistic expression. As it relates to this project, as students experience academic spaces, they are experiencing the physical, embodied, and symbolic manifestations of institutional decisions about academic spaces: what spaces exist, who is invited into them, and who is made to feel comfortable or uncomfortable. And, particularly Jay's comment about the library energy and the keen eye to campus spaces that all four shared helps to illuminate, there are important implications for how to adjust or develop spaces to be more inclusive and welcoming.

Mitchell (2018) points to the way that spaces are embedded with meaning and writes "ideology and hegemony matter in these constructions… those who feel comfortable and dominant in the space are able to 'take' the space and further naturalize assumptions about who belongs and who does not, and how people ought to look and behave in it" (p. 141). While we can imagine this negotiation unfolding in everyday life, it becomes particularly relevant as researchers and practitioners think about historically marginalized groups, and it is important to cast light on ways in which institutions of higher education reify and privilege the master narratives of college and college students by way of space production or modification or erasure.

Given calls for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses, careful work on campus *spaces* offers powerful opportunities to disrupt naturalized assumptions about "who belongs." Keels (2020), again in her analysis of racial-ethnic counterspaces, writes, "in crafting a plan for diversity that is central to their educational and intellectual mission, universities should take stock of their efforts to avoid the trap of making statements about diversity instead of taking action" (p. 155). One important component of this is to attend to campus spaces, and I explore this and other opportunities to take actions next.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how formerly incarcerated college students narrated their navigation into and through college, how they positioned themselves in the context of larger master narratives, and how they perceived of campus spaces. While representing a range of academic backgrounds, three of the four participants had nonlinear paths to college and all four had nontraditional onramps to college. They grappled with a number of salient master narratives, which are the broadly circulated and historically and socially situated stories that identify what a culture values, including the "socially coveted" (Opsal, 2011) master narratives of the college experience (a university, a college student, a college degree, and self-sufficiency), and the denigrated master narrative of incarceration. Borrowing inspiration from more representative counter narratives of college and college students as well as utilizing support from and trying on affirming language of others, students were motivated and empowered to construct their own counter spaces and counter narratives in order to build or reinforce narrative construction and college pathways for future students.

In returning to the foundational scholars who guide this work, Bakhtin (1979) illustrates that what someone is or can be and the ways in which one makes meaning of the world is inextricably impacted by others. The focal students constructed their own narratives in relation to the larger master narratives of college and incarceration as well as the voices of others and the experience of salient campus spaces (or, in some cases, a lack of space). And while much research has been conducted on the stigma

(Goffman, 1963) that formerly incarcerated students experience (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Ott & McTier, 2019; Phillips, 2020), this research shines a light on the stigmatizing structures and narratives that students must resist and how, most often, they use the contradictions or inequities as a catalyst to create something (a narrative or a space) better for "the next person" (Chad), "whoever comes next" (Jay), "these young kids" (Val), or "people that are like me" (Ashley).

Whereas previous work on the challenges formerly incarcerated students face in college has focused on institutional and interpersonal challenges that make enrollment, retention, and graduation more difficult (Dreger, 2017; Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Rosenthal, NaPier, Warth & Weissman, 2015; Solokoff & Fontain, 2013; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2014), this project contributes a greater understanding of the ways in which master narratives of matriculation and incarceration impact formerly incarcerated college students' experiences, and how the motivation to support future students is a critical driver in their narrative and space construction.

Before moving to implications for a number of stakeholders, I revisit my research questions and summarize and discuss my findings.

Review of the Research Questions

Turning to my first research question, how do formerly incarcerated college students narrate their navigation into and through college, I found that the focal students traveled nontraditional paths to college, and even Ashley, who was a more typical college-aged student learned of her admission to Seaside University through a

unique outreach format. Jay first learned about college while incarcerated and applied to community college after his release, and Chad learned about a community college cohort program while in drug rehabilitation. Both Jay and Chad were later motivated to transfer to four-year institutions after seeing, as Jay said, "a bunch of people that were formerly incarcerated" at Underground Scholars at Emerald University. Finally, Val took a class at her community college to help with her transfer application to the only four-year college she thought she could attend, but, while attending that class, explained being thrilled to learn she could also apply to Seaside University.

These origin stories further highlight the need for robust and diverse outreach strategies into community groups and organizations, carceral institutions (including juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons), and community colleges, all of which are important links in supporting formerly incarcerated students' college entry.

Another important piece of navigation *through* college was finding individuals or spaces that made the focal students feel as though they belonged. As discussed in Chapter 5, students found other students who, as Chad said, "looked like me" or, as Val said, were "other people like me that have overcome those situations [with the carceral system]." Ashley discussed the value of being with other Black students on campus and how she enjoyed events for "people of color so… I can be among people that are like me." And as much as students benefited from finding other students and spaces that made them feel as though they belonged, Jay also emphasized how important it was to *build* those relationships and spaces for future students. These components of students' academic journeys amplify important recommendations,

which I discuss in more detail below, to ensure that colleges *retain* formerly incarcerated students.

Finally, all four students shared with me their plans to pursue graduate degrees. While their college journeys included a number of obstacles, many of which I have described to illustrate the many ways institutions of higher education could better serve formerly incarcerated students, it is important to highlight the persistence and exciting plans that Val, Chad, Ashley, and Jay have. And Val, Chad, and Jay specifically indicated that seeing students with whom they identified succeeding academically pushed them to revise their plans. Chad transitioned from wanting to earn a Heath Services certificate to wanting to transfer to earn his bachelors, masters, and "maybe one day… a PhD!" And Chad and Jay pointed to, once again, ways that seeing formerly incarcerated students moving up the academic ladder motivated them. As just mentioned, Chad is now interested in pursuing a doctorate, and credited seeing "Brown people like [him]… getting their doctorate" and showing him "there is a path if you're willing to do the work."

Val, Chad, Ashley, and Jay shared powerful and complex narratives about their entries into and through college, and their experiences help illuminate ways that colleges can better recruit and retain formerly incarcerated students as well as empower them for exciting graduate programs and fulfilling and happy futures.

My second research question investigated how formerly incarcerated students positioned themselves in the context of larger master narratives. As has been established by critical race theorists, the master narratives of college and college

students are exclusionary and need to be opened up to disrupt the tendency to "uncritically view the experiences of White middle-class students as the standard" (Yosso & Lopez, 2011, p. 84). The focal students at the heart of this study show us that we need to destigmatize asking for help and having experiences in or contact with the carceral system.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Val offered an important critique that formerly incarcerated students have to "do so much MORE because they have a record." Similarly, Jay explained that formerly incarcerated college students occupy a space in which they are actively defying the odds and expectations of others and where they are "proving to a lot of different people that didn't think that these types… accomplishments were possible."

Using the master narrative frame to interrogate the culturally valued experience of going to college illuminates the ways in which universities uphold inequities and how the economic and societal rewards linked to a college education vary depending on the background with which one entered. As I noted at the end of Chapter 5, the focal students help to illuminate that the master narrative that a college degree leads to greater economic and societal standing is deeply flawed, as we see when Jay paints a contradictory picture of a promising graduate program to which he could apply based on his academic success but to which he would not be able to attend because one component of the program is a job that he cannot access with a record or in Val's powerful comments about how a college degree "doesn't do shit"

for formerly incarcerated students who may choose to pursue advanced degrees to be "accepted back into the community."

We need to dismantle the socially circulated master narrative that formerly incarcerated people still have a debt or something to *prove* to society after they have served their time in prison or jail. As these four successful and multifaceted students indicate, deep misconceptions about formerly incarcerated people are informed by false media representations and the "crime master narrative" (Haney, 2009).

To disrupt these deficit narratives, the focal students benefited from access to a broader range of student narratives, particularly ones that more closely matched their own experiences, as well as encouragement from others to build their own counter narratives. An important component of this strand is that the focal students illustrated that their counter narratives were utilized just as much to benefit others as they were for the focal students themselves. And while these other audiences were, in the case of Chad and Jay, often future (real or imagined) formerly incarcerated students, they were also younger people more generally, and individuals who did not know formerly incarcerated people or had a warped perception of this population (who "don't know what they don't know").

Chapter 5 also emphasizes that *language matters*. In the dialogic construction of identity (Bakhtin, 1979), the language of others has a profound impact on the ways in which we construct our own sense of self. Chad shares the invaluable impact that Dr. Bautista had on his academic development *and* the recasting of his own narrative (e.g. moving from "you're stupid" to "maybe I am smart") and how much he valued

hearing "compliments from the administration." This development is wonderful and encourages optimism for how to support future students, but also recall that Ashley's friend was also impacted by language when, instead of receiving support on a confusing concept, their professor told them "if this course is too hard, maybe you should change your major."

My third research question explored how formerly incarcerated college students perceived the impact of campus spaces. Considering the deficit viewpoints that may circulate on college campuses, counter spaces offer opportunities to find likeminded people, engage in challenging conversations, and give and receive support. In Chapter 6, it is important to emphasize that institutions signal value systems by the spaces that they create and privilege. For example, the student club structure for a group of formerly incarcerated community college students (whereby they also do not have a designated campus space) is not enough of an indication of institutional support for that student population. The students in Forward Scholars dreamed of something bigger and more concrete and, without institutional supports, crumbled under the pressure of COVID-19.

As we envision a post-pandemic future, institutions might consider ways to repurpose disused office spaces to symbolically *and physically* incorporate vulnerable students into academic epicenters instead of relegating them to the margins. And, in an unexpected finding of this work, Chapter 6 also underscores how important student employment opportunities are to amplify the experience and knowledge of

formerly incarcerated students and, critically, indicate how valuable they are to the university community and compensate them for their intellectual contributions.

Once the master narratives are illuminated, we can see how vital affirming (counter) spaces are "to seek refuge and dress wounds of battle and places for hard conversations, where differences can be aired and strategy mapped" (Lawrence, 2002, xvii) *and* that important tools (like having access to a diverse set of "college student" narratives) are critical for students to be able to build their own affirming narratives and spaces.

These insights offer powerful implications for practitioners, scholars, and citizens interested in greater educational equity. I conclude my dissertation with recommendations for higher education stakeholders, including administrators, staff, and faculty, for researchers, and for community members interested in making critical social change.

Recommendations for Higher Education

This study has a number of recommendations for stakeholders in institutions of higher education. First, it highlights the important role of administrators and staff who choose if, how, and for whom to create student support programing. Torres (2020) found that administrators lacked an understanding of challenges formerly incarcerated students face when transitioning to community college, and it is likely that a lack of knowledge about the experiences of formerly incarcerated students is amplified at four-year institutions. Morton's (2020) graduate thesis reports on a collaboratively constructed ally training program that illuminates ways to value the

experiences and insights of formerly incarcerated students *and* provide institutional stakeholders important tools to understand and support this student population. My dissertation amplifies the need for institutional actors to understand the challenges facing formerly incarcerated college students and to find ways to become allies or accomplices in supporting them.

As illustrated in Chapter 6, institutional support is needed for programs that serve formerly incarcerated students, particularly at the community college level. Students like Chad, who want so deeply to leverage their lived experiences to benefit others, are well positioned to make important contributions to their campus community and beyond. However, without institutional support (e.g. funding to hire student staff, a program coordinator, or a designated campus space), student leaders can only do so much. While I agree that student leaders must drive the development of these programs, they also need to be compensated for their important and invaluable intellectual contribution. College students, *particularly those at community colleges*, have competing responsibilities including work, family obligations, and their academic success, so institutional support is critical.

I draw inspiration from Keels' (2020) recommendation that "universities should take stock of their efforts to avoid the trap of making statements about diversity instead of taking action" (p. 155). One actionable way to effect change to campus climate by valuing and leveraging the deep knowledges of historically underserved populations like formerly incarcerated and systems impacted students is to create more student staff positions that ensure students are in dynamic workplaces and being

compensated for their intellectual contributions. While this was an unexpected finding of this study, it is a very concrete step that institutions can take to support formerly incarcerated students.

Furthermore, support program staff must be mindful that students come into college with multifaced identities that do not always fit neatly into a particular student demographic or support program *type*. Ashley illustrates that, despite being formerly incarcerated, she would not have utilized the Underground Scholars space because she does not identify with that identity structure. It is important for colleges to appreciate the rich backgrounds of students and offer resources with a variety of student groups in mind to capture a range of experiences.

There are also implications for advising. In particular, Chad identifies the need for college advisors who understand the unique circumstances of students with a record. Keels (2020) reports that students in her work used counterspaces to compensate for "low-quality guidance" from white advisors or instructors (p. 163). And while this is an important benefit of counterspaces, hiring or training advisors to understand the particular challenges and affordances of formerly incarcerated students is another opportunity to signal to students that they belong and are valued on that college campus.

Finally, at the close of Chapter 6 I highlighted that this moment (in the preparation to return to campuses after one year of remote instruction) is particularly rich to radically reimagine the allotment of campus spaces for students, particularly those who have been previously relegated to sub-standard or marginal spaces on

campus. As has been discussed, the focal participants were keen observers and critics of campus spaces and designating space on college campuses will symbolically indicate that formerly incarcerated students are welcome and have a *home* on campus.

Moving from larger academic spaces to individual classrooms and faculty members, I offer recommendations for instructors who interact with, instruct, and profoundly impact students with a plethora of lived experiences. Earlier research has highlighted the need for faculty to learn more about the complex challenges formerly incarcerated students may bring with them to the classroom (e.g. Hope, 2018), and my project builds on this recommendation and extends it to also emphasize that instructors must suspend assumptions about students' prior learning. While this is important to consider for all students, incorrect assumptions about students' prior learning can have deleterious effects on students who may already feel marginalized on their campus.

Jay was able to speak to his instructors about his challenges with the content and with their assumptions of his background, and Jay mentioned he was fortunate that, from his estimation, the instructors *heard* him, without judgment, and made adjustments. He explained that their thoughtful responses made an important impact on him: "for me, that was kind of like, it was a moment where [the instructor] had respected like the situation and… went out of her way to correct it." Building healthy classroom communities is good teaching regardless of the particular students in the classroom, but instructors' willingness to be open to learning how to support new

student populations with complex lived experiences was particularly impactful for Jay and should be a spirit fostered by more college instructors.

Meanwhile, writing instructors, particularly at four year institutions, may make assumptions about students' experiences with writing. One component of Val's story that I only briefly discussed earlier was that she reported being in a "traumatic" writing class in community college that made her particularly nervous about the writing expectations at Seaside. After struggling alone, she eventually she reached out to her sociology professor who she emphasized was also "a first-generation college student" and who offered her writing support specific to that discipline. She described that "no one had ever broken it down like that before." Writing and statistics courses were particular pinch points for Chad and Val, so continuing to find ways to support students in those classes is critical.

The focal students' narratives offer interesting possibilities for curriculum in higher education. Nuñez (2011) found that Latinx students enrolled in Chicano studies courses on PWIs began to feel that they were not "the only one" on their college campuses. I am curious about how we can extend this use of curriculum to build more inclusive and welcoming college campuses. In addition to offering courses on dismantling carceral logics to offer the general student population a more nuanced tool kit for how to talk and think about the impact of mass incarceration, these courses may also serve as a symbolic way of affirming the presence of formerly incarcerated college students and valuing the deep knowledge that people who have interacted with the carceral system already have by virtue of their individual funds of

knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). In particular, a unique feature of Seaside is that it has a rich tradition of progressive ideologies and a strong network of abolitionist scholars, and it would behoove institutions to hire and leverage the knowledge of faculty already working on these issues.

Institutional calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion remain hollow when segments of the student population are still stigmatized and when institutional language and messaging focuses on the "micro" (individual) issues instead of the "macro" (system) issues (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). And, as I will take up in the next section, there are exciting opportunities to leverage research to radically shift the ways in which we build knowledge *about* institutions of higher education to better meet the needs of students.

Overall, the aforementioned institutional recommendations must be taken up to ensure students who have likely already been disenfranchised by the K-12 educational systems, and then further disenfranchised by the carceral system, find greater support when they come to postsecondary academic spaces. In order to make changes and ameliorate past injustices, institutions of higher education need to use the right language and to *hear* the stories of their formerly incarcerated students (or community members, or neighbors) and find ways to indicate that formerly incarcerated students are valued on their campuses.

Implications for Research

Tuck (2009) argues that educational research and practice intending to support disenfranchised communities continues to frame individuals from a

"damaged-centered" perspective, in that students are articulated as broken and in need of mending by the institution. She argues that researchers should instead aim to capture the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (p. 416). This call is particularly important when the focus of educational research is on a population that is *already* denigrated by many in the larger culture.

The trend to explore the stigma that formerly incarcerated people navigate (of which there is much already: Johnson & Abreu, 2020; LeBel, 2012; Maruna, 20021; Ott & McTier, 2019; Phillips, 2020) is helpful to an extent, but over time it begins to subsume the cultural imagination of the experiences of formerly incarcerated people. With the replication of studies on stigmatization, formerly incarcerated individuals' complex lived experiences and personal and academic desires are eclipsed by the multitude of challenges on their path. Halkovic and Greene's (2015) recasting of formerly incarcerated students as bearing *gifts* helps illuminate the richness that they bring to their college campuses, and my findings point to the importance of being mindful of the ways in which researchers are framing formerly incarcerated people.

To build towards Tuck's (2009) call to capture *desire* instead of *damage*, future research may consider continuing to explore the successes and resiliency of formerly incarcerated people. One important way to do that is to support the scholarship *by* formerly incarcerated scholars, like Murillo (2021) and Maldonado (Maldonado & Meiners, 2021), and increase Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects and publications co-authored by currently or formerly incarcerated individuals (e.g. Fine et al., 2004).

There is also important research being done on ways to create stronger linkages between "corrections education" and post-secondary institutions, but we see that these linkages are sometimes not strong enough to support students as they transfer from one to the other (e.g. Brazzell et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2013; Enck & McDaniel, 2015). More research is needed on what makes a strong and effective transition from "corrections education" to public colleges and what role support networks like Project Rebound, Underground Scholars, and Rising Scholars have in that transition.

In addition to highlighting the critical role of programs like Project Rebound, Underground Scholars, and Rising Scholars, my dissertation also highlights the value of community colleges as a starting point for most formerly incarcerated students. Dissertation work by Torres (2020) and Phillips (2020) have exciting implications for community colleges and community college students, and I anticipate a growing body of work on this topic to further explore ways that community colleges can leverage their position in California (e.g. Mukamal & Silbert, 2018) and nationally (e.g. MacKillop, 2017) to support this student population.

Further, this project attempts to bring together some familiar and some unfamiliar strands of research. Due in part to their CRT lineage, but also because of their complementary foci, counter narrative and counterspace research is often looked at simultaneously or at least tangentially (e.g. Case & Hunter, 2014). In this project, I incorporate the master narrative framework to empirically explore the cultural, and sometimes deficit or exclusionary, narratives that are being *countered* and the role that

spaces have to either resist or replicate those cultural values. There is more work to be done to build these different theoretical strands together because they offer empirical evidence for the pieces that must be challenged as individuals build counter narratives and counterspaces.

This work also has implications for narrative research and analysis. Building from guidance by Josselson and Hammack (2021), I was also able to incorporate the ways in which *spaces* enter into our dialogic construction of self. While this thread needs greater exploration, it was certainly helpful to illuminate the ways in which students in this study were conceptualizing the role of spaces. It also fits nicely with the work by critical geographers to explore space as a social and political product (e.g. Lefebvre, 1976, 1991), which is a helpful grainsize to look at even more expansive systems that impact a formerly incarcerated students' experience in college.

Looking toward the future, other, complementary bodies of literature are relevant to the topics and questions explored in this dissertation. Scholarship on carceral logics explores the ways in which individuals' experiences have been impacted by incarceration, whether or not they have themselves been incarcerated, because of the (to use to my chosen framework) master narrative that public safety is reliant on social control (e.g. Miller, 2014; Weaver & Lerman, 2010). Annamma (2016) bridges spatial theory and carceral logics to explore how incarcerated young women made sense of their life trajectories, and offers examples of how carceral logics are visible in the U.S. including "Higher Education requiring the disclosure of criminal history on an application form whose purpose is to limit or eliminate one's

chances of being admitted" (p. 1211). Future work must attend to how attention to carceral logics builds complexity in how individuals are navigating social and academic spaces.

The carceral logics framework has also sometimes been merged with critical university studies, which offers a number of angles with which to view the role of universities in our larger society and the impact of capitalism, white supremacy, and racism built into the fabric of institutions of higher education. Maldonado and Meiners (2021), as an example, present a long lineage of academics critiquing the university and illuminate the contradiction that

> Critique, even of the university, is folded into the university's mission of marketing itself, especially to the tuition-paying consumer… Yet invitations to elaborate on theory, or policy, or even joy—for example, carcerality, targeted criminalization, or futurities—are generally reserved for the experts (p. 70-75).

They problematize the claim that "education reduces recidivism" by highlighting the role that larger structures play in positioning "education" and "criminality" in particular ways. And while I have only recently engaged with these bodies of literature, I find them helpful to illuminate ways in which carceral logics are employed by systems such as systems of higher education.

In short, in addition to employing the theoretical frameworks discussed in this project (i.e. master narratives, counter narratives, and counterspaces), research on the higher education of formerly incarcerated students must also examine how carceral logics, capitalism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy play out in higher education as systematic barriers to equitable education for this student population.

Societal Implications and Closing Thoughts

This study underscores that significant cultural change is needed to think in more affirming ways about formerly incarcerated people and their experiences in carceral and educational systems. As college campuses and communities more generally grapple with discussions about police brutality, calls to defund police or remove cops from campus spaces, and abolishing prisons, it is important to consider how these topics are deeply personal to students who have had contact with the carceral system.

As discussed in Chapter 1, people of color and low-income people are more likely to have had interactions with the carceral system (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020), and while no precise data exists on the number of formerly incarcerated students enrolled in California community colleges and four year institutions, it is likely that they are predominately also students of color and low-income students. This intersection of race, class, and inequitable—and sometimes discriminatory—institutions is critical to continue to explore and disrupt.

It is also necessary to problematize the notion that a college degree is the panacea for formerly incarcerated and systems impacted people. Jay reminds us that when a formerly incarcerated person is accepted into college "you're bringing your kids, you're bringing everybody… you're accepting everybody." Attaining a college degree creates a positive ripple effect on communities, and, as Ashley illustrates, makes it a smoother process for second generation college students, but the college landscape is uneven and fraught with challenges for formerly incarcerated people and does not evenly guarantee all that the master narrative of a college degree promises.

As the focal participants highlighted, the challenges that formerly incarcerated students face—*despite participating and succeeding in the academic sphere*—illuminate the racist and classist structures that not only make it more likely that low income people and people of color will interact with the carceral system, but that they might also be less likely to reap the same societal benefits because of that interaction. These systemic inequities need to be remedied in order to offer the full benefits of a college degree for people who have had contact with the carceral system.

It is also important to remember the critique from McGrew (2016) and others that the school-to-prison pipeline metaphor may limit our vision to educational reforms instead of larger social and political shifts. I argue that we see similar outcomes in the prison-to-college pipeline because it may occlude our understanding that colleges may act in some ways as extensions of prisons much in the same way that we see the policing and surveillance in K-12 settings act as an extension of the carceral state. And it is also worth noting that these metaphors keep us focused on reforms instead of abolition.

If the master narrative of incarceration indicates that a further debt or illustration of worthiness is necessary beyond serving one's sentence, then that seems to be strong evidence that the carceral system does not work. Black and Brown individuals are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration and then forced to contend with the collateral consequences and residual master narrative of incarceration that make navigating and successfully completing college more difficult, thereby deepening inequities for people of color in America.

These deep social inequities were further emphasized during the turbulent data collection year with the very public murders of Black people by police and a pandemic that further emphasized the economic and racial disparities that plague the country. While I explored issues of capitalism and white supremacy briefly, there is much more to say about the ways in which these ideologies and anti-Blackness and carceral logics seep into every corner of the issues at play in this dissertation.

Throughout this dissertation I highlighted ways in which the focal students clearly identified distinctions between themselves and their classmates, often as they related to class, contact with the carceral system, and (while usually just implied) race. Jay discussed meeting a "kid from the suburbs" who had never met a formerly incarcerated person and Val identified that "[students are] in a bubble on campus and the problems of the world look very vastly different than like real life world." An important component to disrupt deficit notions of *who a formerly incarcerated person is* lies with those who have not had contact with nor critically interrogated the carceral system. As is evidenced in this dissertation, formerly incarcerated students are already working hard to disrupt deficit master narratives about themselves, their families, and their communities. What is needed is action from those *without* carceral experiences, who, as the statistics show, are more likely to be white and upper- or middle-class individuals. This moment in the history of the United States is ripe for action by white, upper- or middle-class Americans who want to be allies or accomplices to stand with formerly incarcerated people. This work must be taken up in concert with work by activists and scholars—some of whom are currently or formerly incarcerated—to

dismantle what I call the master narrative of incarceration that is so deeply rooted in the United States. This dismantling is critical for greater academic access and achievement for formerly incarcerated students and for racial justice.

APPENDIX A: Data Collection Timeline

Date of data collection	Date of tertiary data collection	Date of world event
Chad #1: 3/5/20		
		3/19/20: COVID-19: statewide lockdown
Ashley #1: 4/16/20		
Val #1: 4/22/20		
Jay #1: 5/1/20		
Val #2: 5/7/20		
Chad #2: 5/7/20		
Jay #2: 5/8/20		
Ashley #2: 5/11/20		
		5/25/20: George Floyd murdered by MPD
	Cedar College instructor: 6/4/20	
Jay #3: 6/5/20		
Val #3: 6/18/20		
Ashley #3: 6/23/20		
Chad #3: 7/21/20		
Chad #4: 10/19/20		
Jay #4: 10/19/20		
Ashley #4: 10/28/20		
	Cedar College administrator: 10/29/20	
		11/3/20: Presidential Election
	Seaside University administrator: 11/23/20	
	Focus groups 1 and 2: 11/25/20	
Val #4: 12/2/20		

APPENDIX B:
Semi-structured Interview Protocol (Individual Student Interviews)

First interview:
Overview: For this initial interview, I'm interested to learn about how you came to [college], how you use [program], how your courses are going so far this semester, and a little bit about how you define yourself in different spaces on campus. Basically, I want to get to know you and your experiences here at [college] and how you feel you have been supported and might be even more supported in your studies. First, I will ask you about your journey to college and then ask you to tell me about important places for you on this college campus. I'll finish by asking you to tell me anything else you'd like me to know about you or your time so far at [college].

1. Please tell me the story of how you came to [college].
    - What important actors (people) influenced that story? How so?
    - What or who presented challenges for you?
    - What or who helped you?

2. Please tell me the story of how you found and entered [program].
    - How did you learn about [program]? (e.g. word of mouth, flyer, advisor)
    - When did you first visit [program]? What was that first experience like?

3. Please tell me a story about a significant class that you've taken so far—the story can be positive or negative, but in some way significant to you.
    - More generally—what was significant about that story?
    - Why do you think you chose that class?
    - How do you feel when you're in that space?
    - What has that experience been like so far?
    - What challenges have you faced?
    - What successes have you enjoyed?

4. [introduce a printed map of the campus]

5. I'd like you to consider three spaces on campus. The first will be [program], the second will be the class you just described, and the third can be any other important—positive or negative—space on campus that you'd like to talk about (another class, the quad, the café, etc.). And I'd like you to describe how you feel in those spaces.

- Describe yourself in that space—what do you do, what do you feel like, how do you present yourself?
- If you feel at all negative or doubtful in any of those spaces, what would make you feel more positive?

6. Is there anything else that I should know about your experiences in college so far, specifically as they relate to [program]?

Second interview:
For this second interview, I'm interested to hear how your [quarter/semester] has progressed and any new stories you think are relevant as I continue to learn about you and your experience at [college].

1. How is the term going for you?
    - Classes?
    - [Program]?
    - Social circle?
    - Life outside of school?

2. Check in about COVID-19 and remote instruction.

3. Please tell me the story of a success that you've experienced so far this term.

4. Please tell me the story of a challenge that you've experienced so far this term.

Third interview:
Overview: In this third interview, I'm hoping to hear more about how your [quarter/semester] is wrapping up, what your plans are moving forward, and hear your perspective about some themes I'm seeing. But I want to start, of course, by checking in on how you're doing and how you are coping with the events of the last few weeks.

1. How are you? (classes, shelter-in-place, etc.)

2. Next, our already chaotic and often sad academic year has gotten worse. I'm wondering how you're coping with the murder of George Floyd and the response from BLM and others.
    - Have you utilized any supports to help cope?
    - Have you heard about initiatives to remand cops off campus? What do you think?

3. Since we last spoke, the CSU system and most community colleges have announced fall will be held online. How are you feeling about that [either the likelihood that you will also be online in the fall or that you have already been told you will be online in the fall]
    - What does this extended shift in your education mean for you?

4. Last time we spoke, I said I'd be asking you to tell me a few more stories, so, as you reflect back on this [semester/quarter], please tell me a story from this [semester/quarter] that exemplifies who you are as a student.

5. Please tell me a story about where you see yourself next year.
    - What or who has helped you define that path?
    - What or who has challenged that path?
    - In what way has [program] impacted that path?
    - In what way has [college] impacted that path?

6. Please tell me a story about where you see yourself in five years.
    - How has [program] impacted that vision?
    - How has [college] impacted that vision?

7. I'm starting to look back at the data and make sense of it. I have two items I want to ask you about. First, some students have discussed [stigma/pressure disclosing their FIS identity]. Have you ever felt that way?
    - Why/why not? Where did you experience this? What about in [program]?
    - Has your affiliation with [program] added to or helped mitigate that feeling?

8. Another theme that has been coming up is the importance of space (or in some cases the lack of space or the displacing of space).
    - Ashley: harder to access resources because we're not on campus; ethnic resource center v. Radical Scholars
    - Jay: comparing the space at Emerald University to Radical Scholars
    - Val: the location of [two important campus resources] far away from other resources
    - Chad: wanting your own space for Forward Scholars

9. Is there anything else I'm missing that's relevant to your experience?

10. How would you suggest to get people together for a focus group?
    - Workshop on college success, college writing, or UC transfer
    - A space to discuss how to improve academic spaces based on students' own expertise

- Sharing what students are working on (or what they'd like to bring in as a sample) that's been meaningful to them during this time (music, poetry, art)

11. Do you want to set up a time for the fall meeting to have on your calendar or can I contact you in August to set something up? (reliable email?)

Fourth interview:
Overview: During this final interview, I'd like to get your feedback on some emergent themes and hear about your progress [in school or post-graduation], and I will share a vignette that I have written about you to ensure I have an accurate representation of you.

1. First, I'd like to ask you a little bit more about your background.
    - What were your goals as a kid? What did you want to be when you grew up?
    - What did you think about college?
    - Who did you know who went college? How did you get your ideas about college?
    - When did you first decide you wanted to go to college?

2. Can you share with me one or two people who have championed or supported your journey into and through college?
    - (Probe for one personal person and one academic person)

3. Next, I'd like to share some preliminary findings with you. Last quarter I shared with you that I was hearing from some students that they experienced stigma or heard from others about stigma, and I also was thinking preliminarily about the role of spaces. At this point in my analysis a few more things have come into focus…
    - **Ambassadorship**: using formal and informal opportunities to guide other students into or through higher ed; *also* benefitting from the ambassadorship/guidance of others
    - **Institutional barriers** (to a job, to financial support, to developing/maintaining a club): barriers put in place that hinder the sense of belonging and/or material resources that would benefit formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students

4. Define counterspaces (Solórzano): does your program fit that definition?

5. Next, I want to share my initial description of you that may appear in my dissertation and make sure that it is a good representation of you (and check about pseudonym, level of detail, things I missed that you want to include, etc.) Is this representation a good one?

6. [Any follow up questions specific to that participant--TBD]
    - Jay:
    - Chad:
    - Val:
    - Ashley:

7. Finally, are there any other stories or things about you that I should know as I continue this work? Are there other things that should be on my radar?

8. Are there any questions that *you have for me*?

APPENDIX C:
Semi-structured Interview Protocol (Program Affiliated Faculty and Staff)

I'm interested to learn about your experience as a [role in program/on campus]. I am particularly interested in the challenges that you see formerly incarcerated college students face and the ways that you think [program] or larger campus community could support this student population. First I'll ask you a bit about your own background, the challenges and opportunities you see for this student population, and I'll conclude by asking you to tell me anything else you think is relevant.

1. How long have you worked at [college] and what is your current role?

2. What originally brought you to your current position?

3. What are the biggest challenges that formerly incarcerated college students face on this campus?
    - What challenges do you imagine formerly incarcerated college students who are *not* part of [program] face?

4. What supports do you offer formerly incarcerated college students to help them mitigate those challenges?
    - What supports do you wish were more robust or available to students? Why?

5. What are the biggest challenges you face as [leader of the program, faculty, or staff] as they relate to supporting this student population? How do you overcome those challenges?

6. What are some of the successes that you've seen over the years, either for particular students or [program] as a whole?

7. Now I'd like to discuss how COVID-19 has impacted the students affiliated with [program]. What has sheltering in place meant for [program]?
    - How has it impacted the programming that you might have, under normal circumstances, provided?
    - How has it impacted the program-affiliated students
    - What are your plans moving forward in light of the continued shelter in place orders?

8. [Overview of dissertation] What else do you think is important for me to know as I continue this project?

APPENDIX D:
Semi-structured Interview Protocol (Student Focus Groups)

Overview: During focus groups, it's very important than we are all respectful of one another's views, that we listen to one another, and that we feel comfortable enough to either agree with what has been said or to offer our own unique perspective. It's particularly important that if you have a view or experience that has not be expressed, that you feel comfortable sharing that information. And you can always come to me later if you think of something to add.

During this focal group interview I'm interested in hearing a bit more about each of you, about the classes you're taking, and about your experiences at [college]. I'm also going to share some preliminary findings and ask you to share your feedback.

1. Introductions: Please tell us your pseudonym and the following:
    - What classes are you taking this quarter/semester?
    - What is your major?
    - What are your academic and/or professional goals?
    - When did you decide to go to college?

2. [caveat about starting by looking at Radical Scholars and now looking at USI] How would you describe [program]?
    - How did you find [program]?
    - What was your first impression of [program]?
    - What has [program] offered you that has been helpful?
    - What could [program] offer you that would be even more helpful?

3. In my earlier individual interviews, I asked students to identify an important space on campus and tell me a bit about navigating that space and the larger campus.
    - Can you each describe one place on campus that is meaningful to you (either because it is positive, negative, or some combination of the two) and explain why it stands out?

4. And clearly we are lacking academic spaces right now. How has the switch to remote learning been for you? In what ways could Radical Scholars or Seaside better support you during this time?

5. I'm also here to share my initial findings with you all and hear what you think of them— Do they match your experiences? Do they need to be modified? Am I missing something? Please be honest; my goal is to accurately capture your experiences so that this project can help improve the educational and personal experiences of formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students here and elsewhere.

Ambassadorship: using formal and informal opportunities to guide other students into or through higher ed; *also* benefitting from the ambassadorship/guidance of others
Institutional barriers (to a job, to financial support, to developing/maintaining a club): barriers put in place that hinder the sense of belonging and/or material resources that would benefit formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students

6. What other recommendations do you have for ways to support formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students here and elsewhere?

7. Is there anything else that I should know about your experiences in college so far, specifically as they relate to [program]?

8. Are there other things that I haven't mentioned that should be on my radar? (note: if you don't want to share them here, we can meet privately, or you can email me)

9. Are there any questions you have for me?

APPENDIX E:
Sample of Preliminary Analysis Document: Val

Val identifies as a Hispanic/White woman who, at the time of our interviews, was 40 years old and had transferred to Seaside University where she had been studying for four quarters.

I met Val briefly in August, 2019, when she attended a panel hosted in part by Radical Scholars and in affiliation with a summer start program for transfer students. I was invited to speak about my experiences teaching writing and college success courses, and Val asked me specifically about college writing expectations and resources, which led to a larger group discussion about communicating with faculty and accessing academic support on campus. I met her again in April, 2020 on Zoom after she volunteered via email to participate in my research study. During our first interview, Val described the timeframe between our two meetings like this: “it's just been a shit show. [laughs] I mean it's like also out of our control right? Over summer. And then you had the rolling blackouts and then campus was closed because the blackouts and then we went on strike and then the strike and then now the COVID.”

Sixteen months prior, in Fall, 2019, Val enrolled in Seaside University as a returning student parent in her forties interested in earning her bachelor’s degree in Sociology and then potentially pursuing a graduate degree in Social Work or Education. Over our four interviews, Val emphasized her ongoing advocacy work to

empower herself and others, particularly when she felt academic institutions were not meeting the needs of vulnerable populations. Val often positioned herself in contrast to her college peers, who she framed as different from people like herself who "experience life and [have been] damaged by life and then [make] the decision to come back" to college. Across all four interviews, Val highlighted a number of academic meta-narratives that have not rung true in her experience and offered a number of recommendations for how best to welcome and support vulnerable student populations. In particular, Val's previous experiences with academic writing became relevant as she navigated new expectations and resisted memories of a particularly traumatic writing course. By the time I met Val she had already overcome enormous barriers to academic success but was motivated to succeed on the "world renowned" campus. However, Val was disillusioned by much of what she experienced and then was profoundly impacted by COVID. At the time of writing, she is on leave to focus on her own mental and physical health and her elementary-school aged daughters' academic development.

In this section, I will start with the story of Val's academic journey into and progressing through Seaside University, the salient voices and spaces in her narratives, and the themes I have identified from my analysis of her narratives. I conclude with a preview of some cross-cutting themes across all four participants.

Val's academic journey

Val described a number of obstacles as a child that would make college enrollment further out of reach than a more "typical" college student. During our last interview, Val told me more about her childhood, her early thoughts about college, and what she wanted to be when she grew up. Val's mother passed away when she was ten and, Val recalled: "my reality was shattered at a very early age… I don't have any recollection of wanting or desiring to be anything. I think it was just day to day trying to make it." She explained that she "wasn't surrounded by successful people" in her youth and that her opportunity to see people enjoy success was through their continued recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

Because of her "volatile" relationship with her dad, Val was in and out of the foster system, which was also the reason for her incarceration. She described her frustration being "locked up with criminals" because she was a ward of the state, and those experiences had an indelible impact on her view of authority figures, which I will discuss in greater detail below. Her status as a foster youth deeply impacted her academic experiences as well. As she recalled the disruptions she faced, Val explained that despite doing well in school, she "didn't have a regular high school experience being in the foster care, you know, just jumping around?"

It was when she was seventeen and became affiliated with a program for homeless youth that Val met Julia, a volunteer at the program, who encouraged her to consider college. Val had always "LOVED learning" but experienced a number of

challenges as a young person, and, in an emotional point in our last interview, Val explained:

> Julia is the first one that really started encouraging me and having the conversation about college. Um, I've always been a smart student, like I always had A's and B's, I was a good student. It's just, I think, life events just kind of squashed any hopes I had. And, um, yeah, so she just, she was able to recognize [voice starts to shake] that I was bigger than my circumstances [starts to cry]. And she like really showed that she believed in me? And I guess like, just her believing in me empowered me to be like, "no, I can do this." That I'm better than this.

Val attended six community colleges over twenty years and experienced different levels of support and community at each institution. Val, in line with much of the literature, experienced tremendous challenges with statistics. She told me that she took statistics *seven times* and then took a seven-year break from college because she thought she would never pass the course. Each time, she said she could tell by the end of the first week if she should drop the class because it was already over her head. Eventually, she felt pressure to continue pursuing her degree to help her move beyond her wage cap at work, so she tried again. She explained, "I actually, um, because I took it so many times [chuckles] I couldn't take it [at her local community college]. So I had to go to ANOTHER community college to take it. So I went to [another community college], which was the best thing that could happen to me. My teacher was phenomenal. Um, I passed the class over summer with a B."

Another challenge that Val overcame as she progressed through community college was a particularly traumatic experience in a college writing course that had a

lasting impact her self-perception as a writer. She described the memories from this class as "part of the problem" of her low self-esteem as a writer, and explained:

> …the very last class I took [in community college] was an English [class] and the, and I think that's probably part of the reason why I'm so traumatized with my writing? Because the professor was a, um, well the teacher was a editor, so even people who had A papers were completely lit up. So you didn't come out of it- like this whole class- we all thought we were failing… we all thought we were like, not gonna pass this class, but everybody got A's. But that wasn't reflective in our writing or in our feedback. So I think that's part of the problem.

The memory of that particular writing class, the lengthy gap between her earlier writing courses, and the real and perceived expectations of the writing-intensive courses she took at Seaside University made her question her ability to succeed.

> And then before that ["traumatic" writing course], I took English 1A 20 years ago? There's like, I inquired on campus about a refresher course of like, 'okay, this is 20 years ago. What are we doing now? Like what, what are the formats?' Um, and I was asked if I should take a writing class and I was told no, but yet they don't offer, uh, writing workshops.

Even at Seaside University she approached a disciplinary faculty member about her writing and expressed her concerns about her preparation, but he offered to support her and gave her helpful strategies for writing in that discipline. However, she ultimately felt overwhelmed by the writing expectations (which was likely compounded by contradictory advice from a writing tutor and her worries about COVID) and "gave up" on that class. Her writer identity challenges served as an ongoing source of struggle for Val's academic journey.

Finally, as Val prepared to transfer from her community college to a four-year institution, she ran into another obstacle while completing her transfer application. In our first interview she described asking for support with the application and instead being advised to take another course at the community college that would help her with her application (note: the lack of effective supports that she receives from different institutions once again plays a prominent role in her narrative). While this made her frustrated, it was during that class that she learned she could apply to transfer to Seaside University, which is a more prestigious (but also more expensive and more remote) college than the one in which she had originally planned to transfer. She remembers:

> I was like, wait, what? Me? Like, I didn't like, you know, I didn't think I was the greatest student. I didn't think it was possible, like it wasn't- I was just going to go to [College E] and you know, finish my BA. But when I heard that I was eligible to apply, I was like, 'I'm going to Seaside University!'

While she perceived the guidance course as the college's way of "taking [her] money," this more prestigious route, coupled with earning an impressive scholarship reignited Val's enthusiasm for college. And even when people in her life encouraged her to take her acceptance letter as a victory but not *actually* attend Seaside University, she decided to persist and told me "I'm happy that I'm here at Seaside University cause I never even like thought it was possible."

Therefore, when Val began her studies at Seaside University she was motivated to start strong. However, despite her best efforts, she felt that the

academic year presented a huge range of challenges: “I started over summer cause I was like, ‘I want to get my feet wet, I want to know, you know, what is it, what is it going to be?’ Um, so I definitely didn't want to waste time and I definitely, like I proactively tried to like get my best feet set up for success, but I feel like it's just been a shit show.” As noted above, rolling black outs, nearby fires, two campus strikes, and then COVID were all forces outside of her control that made her wonder why she had decided to enroll in college.

However, a critical and sustaining piece of her college enrollment was finding Radical Scholars and two other student support programs on campus, one that focused on supporting transfer students from a broad range of backgrounds (student parents, veterans, former foster youth, and formerly incarcerated students) called [X] and the other primarily focused on supporting foster youth. She recalled being drawn to the [X] transfer summer transition program mentioned earlier and, through that program, learning about Radical Scholars and [X], the parent program, which serves transfer students as a whole and houses Radical Scholars. She told me during our first interview: “I just latched on to them. Like from day one I was in the [X] space, the Radical Scholars space and just, I latched on to them. I latched onto Jason and Jay, like I really like just connected with everybody, with Melissa and just like from day one of my, um, first time on campus.” However, an important quality of the Seaside University geography is that the campus is decentralized, often making *finding* resources more difficult—a point that I will discuss in greater detail

later. Val went on to describe her first connection with Radical Scholars as atypical: “I know that's not like the norm cause a lot of people are like, ‘I didn't even know they existed,’ but it's almost like day one, I knew they existed and I just like glue-stuck on them.”

At the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, Radical Scholars and [X] supported a new program called [USI], which is a statewide network in the Seaside University system to support formerly incarcerated and system impacted students. Val played an important peer mentor role in Fall, 2020 when the program became official, and told me that the space played an important role for some students but also acknowledged that not all students who *might* be affiliated with [USI] would choose to do so. During our last interview I asked specifically if the [USI] space was used to resist some of the stereotypes that Val had mentioned some formerly incarcerated students face, and she said:

> …that's something I had talked about in our last [USI meeting] was that people who are incarcerated, aren't proud to be incarcerated and they don't talk about it. And there's like, I see that not everybody wants to be associated with the [USI] because there's a negative [connotation] of being incarcerated and their stigmas. And it's not something that you're proud of. And so it's not something that you're just putting out there to be like, "Hey, yeah, I was formerly incarcerated." Um, I think that having utilized those spaces and being able to connect with other people that it is, uh, it is like a calming, encouraging space of knowing like there's other people like me that have overcome those situations and we are succeeding and we- we are not only succeeding, but we're flourishing.

Val identifies a simultaneous strength and caution of being affiliated with [USI] and rightfully highlights that while accessing the program can offer great

support and reward, there is still often a barrier to even admitting one's association with the criminal justice system.

In contrast to the very positive things Val shared about Radical Scholars, [X], and [USI] and the affiliated staff and students, Val had harsh critiques for the Seaside University institution. Most prominent (and which will be discussed in greater detail below) was her frustration with student supports, particularly when they disproportionately disadvantaged vulnerable students. And beyond critiques of the institution, Val was also often critical of the "general student population" who, as will be discussed below, have had a more sheltered experience than her and others like her have had. For example, in the exchange above about broad stigma that she sees formerly incarcerated students face, she explained how she imagines the "general student population" responding to news that someone is formerly incarcerated: "I think even too like just with the general student population. Like if you find out someone was formerly incarcerated, like, does that change your views on them? Does it change- like, do you want to hang out with them anymore? Do you want to be alone with them?" In three of our interviews, she pointed out contradictions she saw "younger" students exhibiting (e.g. yelling "fuck the police" but then calling the police to help if someone is hurt at a rally; students asking others to use "they, them pronouns" to respect their gender identity and then "harassing" the Young Republicans group).

Val highlighted a number of ways in which her assumptions about what her educational experience at Seaside University would be like diverged from what she actually experienced, including the quality of teaching, the priorities of faculty, staff, and administrators, and institutional policies that fail to support students and their learning (note: I take up these issues in greater detail below). These unmet expectations and the overwhelming factors of the 2019-2020 school year made Val doubt her place at Seaside University: "even at times, like I do want to give up and I'm just like, 'ah, I don't know why I'm trying this,; it's like, look, I start- I went to school and the apocalypse happened [laughs]." As I will discuss in greater detail, the impact that COVID had on Val's mental health was profound; eventually, with the accumulation of two incomplete courses, her daughters' school schedules, and her unstable physical health (perhaps exacerbated by the stress of the pandemic), and ongoing struggles with mental health compelled Val to take a quarter off of her studies.

Prominent voices and spaces that inform Val's salient themes

I identified 70 distinct voices and spaces that Val evoked over her four interviews (see Appendix for the full list). And while some voices and spaces were very concrete (e.g. her daughters, her "traumatic" English instructor), others represented ideologies or larger master narratives (e.g. her perception of a "regular high school experience," her expectations of Seaside University). While I will not explore the role that *each* voice and space had on Val's experience in detail, the

larger list of voices and spaces played critical roles in how she described her academic journey more broadly and inform the themes explored below.

While the voices and spaces Val evoked can be organized by *type* (e.g. salient individuals from the media, family members, academic spaces, nonacademic spaces, "institutions," and metanarratives), it became more useful in my analysis to organize the voices and spaces that Val evokes in her narratives as thresholds to illuminate three discrete (but sometimes overlapping) *categories of her sense making*: those that inform her ideologies and expectations, those that inform her assessment of physical geography, and those that inform her understanding of the role of and relation to human beings.

These different sensemaking categories also map on to salient themes in her narratives. As you will read below, three salient themes from Val's narrative involve her balancing her own expectations of college in contrast to what she actually experiences, Val's critique of the physical landscape of Seaside University, and Val's reflection on how individuals (like herself) benefit from the advocacy of others and how individuals (also like herself) benefit from their capacity to advocate for others. Finally, because COVID played such a pivotal role in her experience, I conclude with a reflection on how the remote learning context and persistent concerns of mental and physical safety clouded Val's ability to succeed during the focal academic year.

"My dream has been busted. It's not what I thought it was": Val's love of learning and expectations of college are challenged

Because Val positioned herself away from having “a regular high school experience being in the foster care [system],” she told me “when I FIRST started [college], I don't think I had expectations … so I was really excited and I LOVE learning.” And while she didn’t have expectations for college when she first enrolled in community college, over the years she had experience with six different community college campuses and was able to assess different levels of support at each:

> I loved [out of state CC]. I loved the teachers, I loved the staff. And then when I came back to [current location], I went to [local community college] and [another local community college], like by this time I have like my expectations that staff help you? And that like the counselors actually are guiding you and … I had a horrible experience at [local community college]. Um, just like the counselors misguiding you and ending up with a bunch of frivolous classes that you don't need.

However, as noted earlier, she persisted through her community colleges and wanted to earn her B.A. in order to surpass the salary cap at her former job. In contrast to the optimism she exuded in our first interview when she told me about being accepted to Seaside University, during our third interview she emphasized how disappointed she was by her lived experiences as a Seaside University student. She told me plainly that “looking back… what I know know… I wouldn't come to Seaside University 'cause it's, it's been one hell of a ride that I have not benefited ANYTHING from.”

When I asked if her expectations about Seaside University went unmet because of remote learning, she responded in an emphatic tone:

> PRE COVID! From last summer, last summer here, like, um, even like my, um- I just thought the classes were going to be different. I thought like we're at a BA level that we would be more hands on that we're not getting- we're literally in a huge ass room being lectured at- like LITERALLY lectured at like we're in a UNIVERSITY, we're in a world renowned UNIVERSITY and our teacher is lecturing. He's literally lecturing. It's not an ENGAGING conversation. It's LECTURING. Like I- I'm, I'm appalled at that- that's the type of education, even at this high, I just assumed that it would be different.

On three instances, Val explicitly highlighted the disconnect between the institutional face of Seaside University and what it actually offered to students. She said, “they talk a good game. They sell you on a really good game, but it's like- it's like looking in that mirror, it's like ‘look at my BEAUTY’ And then really you're like a wretched old witch [chuckles].”

In addition to drawing on a fairy tale metaphor, Val also evoked a neoliberal narrative in her assessment of Seaside University. Before learning that she could apply to Seaside University, she was set to attend [College E], a less prestigious, less expensive, and more geographically desirable four-year college. As she was making her college choice, Val told me that other people tried to convince her that “the commute and just like the difference in tuition” should persuade her to choose [College E]. In the end, she chose Seaside University, but kept the financial element in the forefront of her mind. For example, while discussing her challenges with DRC, Val explained that the department’s excuse of being understaffed should not have impacted her the way that it did: “my tuition is not understaffed… I'm paying full tuition. I'm not getting a discount because you're understaffed. I'm not getting a

discount because this person's not here. You're charging me for the full experience. I expect to get the full experience." Unlike the shiny college experience she felt she was "sold" and expected, Val faced a number of unmet expectations.

Like her DRC accommodation expectation, Val cited a number of challenges that she felt put her in an unfair position of having to advocate for herself. I will discuss her deep call to advocate for others in greater detail later, but these moments of self-advocacy also illuminate aspects of her perception of college support and earlier experiences with institutional authority. While responding to a question about challenges navigating different programs at Seaside University, Val incorporated her experiences in juvenile hall with her perception of academic institutional authority figures, particularly those who are not successfully serving the students who it is their role to support. She explained:

> I was a foster youth, but because I was on probation, I was in juvenile hall, so I didn't get to go to the shelter to get placements. I had to go to juvenile hall. I was like locked up with criminals. Even though I didn't commit a crime, I was locked up with criminals. And so it's like when you, you get like- for me like I'm very sensitive to authority, especially authority who like aren't hearing you? And like when I feel like my pow- like there's a power difference, I get flustered? And especially if the person is not hearing me or if injustice is happening. And so like I get really, um, it's not even like almost shell- shell shock? But like in those moments I like, it's hard to remember like "they're not out to get you," the- like you have to find that communication and sometimes like getting flustered and just already having a problem, you know what I mean? I'm already having a problem. I'm coming to you and you're just giving me an attitude and I'm like, like, "wait, what? Like you say you don't have an attitude but your face and your body language is saying you have an attitude. Like, I'm not- I'm here asking for help this is your- if I'm wrong and this isn't your job, then let me know? But other- like set the

> attitude aside. I'm sorry for your bad day but help me resolve this cause that's what your job is."

For Val, the voice of authority—particularly an authority who "is not hearing [her] or if injustice is happening"—can trigger very negative experiences from juvenile hall in which she sought supports but instead felt surrounded "by criminals" and a "power difference." It is important to note that for another student having an interaction with a student services staff member having a "bad day" would not be perceived through the same lens. Val, on the other hand, has to intentionally remind herself that an ineffectual staff person is not "out to get [her]." It is also worth noting that instead of these experiences matching her perception of a supportive academic environment, they often mimic deeply troubling memories of institutions and institutional actors who withheld support or made getting support more difficult.

As Val continued to push against the feeling of being unsupported by the intuition, she also evoked a message about college completion and excellence that is particular to formerly incarcerated students. In addition to the message from her employer that college completion leads to greater financial earning power, Val also absorbed a message about the role of college completion and excellence from other formerly incarcerated students. While explaining some of the institutional barriers that formerly incarcerated students face (e.g. that internships are often off-limits to students with felonies), Val told me that formerly incarcerated students:

> …have to like do so much MORE because they have a record… some Radical Scholar- and Underground Scholar-affiliated students realized they have a record and a BA is not going to do shit for them, so they have to go all the way to get a doctorate, to be able to be accepted back into the community, DESPITE doing their time, getting off parole and moving forward with their lives.

A multitude of studies show ways in which a college degree can impact formerly incarcerated students' financial wellbeing (see sources from Chapter 1), but this comment highlights ways in which earning a bachelor's degree with a criminal record is not enough to ensure that an individual will be "accepted back into the community." Students like Val can identify deep disappointments and challenges with institutions of higher education but are obligated to persist in inhospitable conditions to prove their worth and rehabilitation to their communities. In these contexts, the institutions must ensure better care and support for a population whose college-going success has even greater stakes than "the general student population."

Implications:

- this student population has been told that college degree is critical for success (find quote about people getting graduate degrees because with their records they needed MAs or PhDs); therefore, it is critical that the hard work that students put into getting to college is rewarded by a rich academic experience…
- There's also a connection to the neoliberal university here, in that Val talks about her issues with DRC and connects it to money
- Another piece to potentially unpack (perhaps as it relates to space) is her critique of the Seaside University town more broadly as an example of how *other people* should have more accurate expectations of the town and college: "Social realities: "I think people are misled by [town] 'cause they think it's like, "Oh, it's a surfer free love town." No, [town] is embedded in racism. [town]'S foundation IS on racism. They've been white for so long

because of that. And I don't think people understand that and going Seaside University, they think, "Oh yeah, stoner school, yay! Hippie free love!" And it's like, actually, like you got to know the history.

- Note: related to problematic policies and the neoliberal connection: she also flags **institutional policies** that do not necessarily support the wellbeing of students (e.g. in interview 3 when she talks about deciding to "eat the costs" of her summer class because it is five units and she needs six units to be eligible for financial aid)

"… you would think [a vulnerable population] would be like in the CENTER of campus": The campus geography hinders accessibility, which disproportionately impacts vulnerable students

An additional piece of Val's disappointment with the college was her deep concerned about the lack of geographically accessible resources, particularly for vulnerable students. During our first interview, Val pointed to another disconnect between the messaging about campus resources and the lived experiences of students:

> when I came here, they were like, "oh, we have great shuttle. You'd get around. You don't need a car." And my first time [on campus]… we got left by our tour guide and she's like, "okay, find your own way… We're done." And it took us three shuttles to get like on the bus to get back to where we were. And I'm like, how is this even effective? Like, yeah, you guys have these systems in place, but they're not EFFICIENT.

In addition to being inefficient, Val explained she finds the shuttle service to be insufficient. She told me:

> …what I notice about our campus is that a lot of the offices that serve minority students and our vulnerable population students are not easily accessible, right? Like the [resource center], like the shuttle doesn't even GO there. The shuttle drops you off down the way. And then it's a little walk… what I've heard from a lot of students who I spoke with is like, they don't

> even access [resource on campus] because it's too far out of the way. Um, like you have your, you have your, um, your, your DRC students who will access the DRC cause they NEED to, but a lot of the other things are just not easily accessible.

However, as was common across Val's interviews, she highlights a pragmatic issue with providing all student support programming with an accessible and robust space. On the one hand she "was surprised" that two programs for first generation college students were "so far away from everything else" and said "people who you're serving are a vulnerable population and that you would think they would be like in the CENTER of campus, in the center of everything so the accessibility was there." At the same time, she acknowledged:

> …at the end of the day, not everybody CAN be easily accessible and not everybody CAN have their own space because that space doesn't exist. We cry for more space. But then when they try to build, everybody's like, "no, you can't build protective trees protect the land. This is sacred land." … at the end of the day… how do you grant that to everybody? How do you choose what program's more important than the others?

While she raises an important point about the capacity of the campus to support a range of programs, her points about the location and accessibility of supports for vulnerable students are still relevant.

Implications:

- The geography of Seaside University is unique in that it sits on a large plot of land, however, Val provides an important critique of the challenges navigating such a large campus, both in physically moving from class to class and particularly accessing student supports at sometimes inaccessible locations. It should be noted that at no time during our four interviews were Val and I physically *on campus* and yet the inequitable geography of the campus still weighed heavy on Val's mind.
- I don't know much about the world of disability studies, but I imagine they have literature that might be interesting as it relates to this theme (e.g.

accessible buildings for students with mobility challenges); it's not a close match, but it might offer some interesting ideas about campus planning and design?

- Other quote about the unique campus structure: "Our campus is very segregated. And that the, even just the whole college system and the way it's like a perpetuated segregation, that just kind of, it doesn't feel right. And it's like, yeah, there isn't really a central place that would fit everybody."

"…She was able to recognize that I was bigger than my circumstances": Advocacy by others and for others makes the journey possible

An important pivot in Val's academic trajectory was meeting a woman named Julia, a case-manager for a Christian charity that offered young people housing and grocery stipends if they returned to school to earn their diploma and learn a trade. During our last interview, Val explained the role that Julia played in her academic and personal trajectory:

> …she is the first one that really started encouraging me and having the conversation about college. Um, I've always been a smart student, like I always had A's and B's, I was a good student. It's just, I think, life events just kind of squashed any hopes I had. And, um, yeah, so she just, she was able to recognize [voice starts to shake] that I was bigger than my circumstances. [starts to cry] And she like really showed that she believed in me? And I guess like, just her believing in me empowered me to be like, "no, I can do this. That I'm better than this." (interview 4; ~4:37)

Prior to meeting Julia, Val painted her childhood as void of "successful people" and still grappling with the fall out after her mother's death which left her "reality… shattered at a very early age." However, despite the challenges that she fought to overcome, it was not until this individual illustrated belief in Val's ability that she began to imagine a different story for herself.

The other side of the coin, of course, is serving in that role for others. And while Val did not identify a person who she might have had the same kind of impact as Jane had on her, she used her hopes to inspire other people as a huge motivator for her. Right after telling me about Julia, Val continued by explaining how she tries to set an example for her biological children and the children that attend the elementary school where she worked:

> I think my- [exhales] knowing [voice shakes] that like my students know that I'm in school is a big push cause it's like, we tell them every day that they can succeed, that they can overcome the barriers. [starts crying] And so like my students and my children, like I know are watching me. And so it's like, it's that push to keep going? Because like we're telling these people- we're telling these young kids that they can overcome any barriers that it doesn't matter what color you are. It doesn't matter about your economic status, it's your grit and your will. And if you're, if you, if you put your mind to it, you can achieve it. So I feel like that's been like a major push for me. [pause] Cause even at times, like I do want to give up and I'm just like, "ah, I don't know why I'm trying this,' it's like, look, I start- I went to school and the apocalypse happened. [laughs]. Um, so that is something like, I definitely, um, I definitely use that to push me. Like my kids are watching me, like I can't give up.

In this way, Val positions herself as a potential mentor or example for others but also uses that role to nourish her own persistence in her challenging academic landscape.

Outside of her own academic experience, Val shared stories of her work to advocate for children in her life. Val told me about her “history of advocacy” spurred partially by having to advocate for her son. She told me: “I had a rough time with my son in school, so I had to get a lawyer and I had to go against [local] unified school

district because they weren't giving him what he needed with his accommodations."

She also described highlighting the needs of low-performing children at her previous job even when it was an unpopular view:

> [her elementary school] really rely on our data analysis to inform our teaching and … we want our students in green obviously. And… I speak up and I'm like, "if you follow the students in red, like these students have been consistently in red, what are we doing to get these students at red?" Because we focus on the higher tier- and to push them up. And I feel like, I feel like we don't do enough for the ones that are in red. And so I definitely advocate for my students. I definitely push back with administration of like, "Nope, that's not going to work."

As noted earlier, Val's experiences in juvenile hall fortified and necessitated her own self-advocacy. This is important context to understand her story as she has evolved over her lifetime from a necessity to self-advocate from a young age to being a fierce advocate for others. But when she needs support from her college and does not receive it, it hurts even more because she feels like it's an intentional blow to her, and this bleeds into her vision of "younger" students at Seaside University as well as in other educational settings. In a continuation of our discussion about her challenges with the DRC, Val emphasized that she was fortunate to have a background in self-advocacy, whereas the general student population likely did not:

> Um, the majority of students are coming fresh out of high school. So you figure that these students have had their parents like, you know, advocating for them and saying like, "Hey, this ain't cool. Like we need a shuttle. The shuttle should stop in front of the [resource center] it shouldn't stop down the street. Like what's the problem?" And like, students don't really know? [pause] Um. If you don't have the experience of having to advocate for yourself, you don't know how to do it. And so unless like older- another

> student will be like, “Hey, this is how you do it.” It kind of just gets brushed under the rug.

Val went on to describe the IEP process in elementary, middle, and high schools and ways in which students have formal advocates but not explicit instruction on how to translate advocacy skills to their own experience. Therefore when they get to college, they struggle to stand up for themselves and demand their legally-guaranteed accommodations. She went on to say, “I think that the school is aware of that. And I think they kind of take advantage of it because they know that the students aren't going to push back.”

Here we see a convergence of Val’s suspicions and unmet expectations of the institution with her deep drive to support others who might otherwise not have it. In these instances, ideally the institution would be focused on providing support, the student would benefit from the support, and Val would not need to expend energy worrying that students are being taken advantage of and/or feel obligated to support them. However, as Val indicates, that perception of how things *should be* does not match her lived experience.

Implications:

- this is just another reminder of how powerful a single supporter can be for a students’ success; it also connects to Clare’s comment about how students “lift as [they] climb,” which, if we want to connect back to larger cultural narratives is antithetical to American individualism and “the American dream” which focuses on individual success
- Note: maybe include more of Val’s history of advocacy: son, and students at her school

Cross-cutting notes:

- Chad: this theme is also really prevalent (but perhaps a little zoomed out to not focus on *individuals* but imagined *groups*), particularly as it relates to being an example for others that (paraphrased) 'if I can do this, so can you'
- Ashley: very motivated to support children (e.g. the little boy with no jacket)

"I was like, 'do I finish school? Like we're all going to die… Like what's the point?'": COVID disrupts Val's academic and psychological well being

While COVID caused deep disruptions across the world, Val was the most vocal of the four focal participants about how the pandemic had impacted her academic progress and psychological wellbeing.

During our first interview, Val was emphatic about her dislike for remote learning. She told me just minutes into our first conversation: "I HATE online classes. I don't take online classes for a reason. I'm not disciplined. I'm barely disciplined to go to classes in person."

A dominant thread across Val's narrative was the heavy reliance on technology that was amplified by COVID-19 and remote learning. Val gave "kudos" to some of her instructors who made the switch to remote learning both more lenient in terms of deadlines ("…two of my professors are very open and they're just like, 'Hey, just get the work done. If it takes you 'til July, it takes you 'til July.'") and in their organization of their learning management system ("…he had a very structured way of doing it. Everything was on his modules. Like everything was there. There's no reason not to succeed other than like, not being able to be disciplined in when you're doing the work."). However, her personal laptop broke early into the switch

to remote learning which put incredible pressure on her to find channels of communication and catch up on late work. Even after getting support from Radical Scholars and another support service on campus, by the time Val got a working computer she was “legit like two, two and a half weeks behind” of a ten-week course.

As noted earlier, Val grappled with her self-esteem as a writer, but, despite her perseverance with different writing assignments and extensive support from the instructor in one particular writing-intensive course, it was ultimately the stress of COVID that thwarted her success. Early in our conversations Val flagged this writing-intensive course as a potential concern, and eventually she reached out to the instructor because she was considering dropping the course. The instructor responded with targeted, discipline specific writing support and also tried to build her confidence:

> … he himself is a first generation student, uh, he used to be a professor at [a community college] for writing. And he broke it down to me. He said with sociology, when you're reading articles- He broke it down to me. How to, um, how to group the articles. So like you group them on commonalities… what subjects are in common? And then [you’re] just cut pasting. And he's like, you can't write a introduction because you don't know what you're going to write about. You can't write a conclusion because you haven't concluded anything. He's like, so your first step is just to get the quotes that stand out to you and put them together and that's how it's going to like it'll BUILD it. And then you put your introduction. So that was very helpful. Nobody's ever like broke it down for me that way. Um, and that's what I told him, like even the skeleton of a paper, like I don't, I don't know. I don't know like what I'm doing. And he also said that he didn't think I needed to take a writing course. He says that he's willing to help me. So that was like a huge relief.

After that explanation during our second interview, I asked specifically about the class during our second interview. Val explained that the convergence of contradictory feedback from a tutor and her unstable mental health pushed her to stop trying:

> VAL: that's the class that I just gave up on… Yeah. Even [the instructor] extended his help and I just, like, I just gave up on it. I was just like, I'm not. I'm- yeah.
> Kylie: Was it just- there was just too much going on? It just didn't seem-
> Val: Um. Too much going on and I tried to reach out for help with the paper. And it was completely opposite of the advice that I was given [from the instructor]. And I was just like, "you know what? This is too much for me. I'm not."
> Kylie: Yeah.
> Val: I think there was a part too that I was just in a really bad space? And so like mentally, I just did not care. I had to pull my head out of my ass and like, realize like, look, time is going to go by regardless. Now we could either pick away at this or we could just give up and like, you know, you- when all is said and done and all of this is blown over, I don't want to feel stupid that I got so in my head that the world was going to end that I didn't finish school. You know what I mean? We come out out of this and it's like, "Oh dang. I gave up for nothing."

In addition to and inextricably linked with the academic impact of COVID is the deep psychological toll it has taken on individuals. As the quote above begins to illustrate, a few times during our discussions Val dwelled on if and when she and others might literally die from COVID. In some instances, she used it as motivation (or fodder for motivation that never quite came, as in above) to keep moving forward with her studies and in other instances felt it made continuing her education pointless.

In the following quote, Val links the uncertainty of life in the time of COVID with the academic expectations of the university:

> I almost feel like the school should have gave us a chance to deal with this COVID- and just say, you know, we're going to cancel this quarter. Like everybody's going to be pushed back, but… Like nobody's going to have consequences for getting pushed back and then almost like offer the classes that would have been offered this quarter also next quarter with whatever classes and that way we just had a chance to like get our bearings and like actually deal with this pandemic for what it is. Um, cause that was something also I was like, "do I finish school? Like we're all going to die. What's the mat-? Like what's the point?" But then it was like, well I don't want us to not die and then me. "Like Oh, I should've stayed in school." You know what I mean? Not even KNOWING what it is and having to like jump into a quarter. I wish the school itself would have did a better job of either starting later or just giving us time to get a grasp on what's happening in the world.

On the timing of the quarter system, the United States began to respond to COVID just as one quarter was ending and another was beginning, but Seaside University did not offer an extended break to, as Val says, "get a grasp on what's happening in the world," and instead were forced to push forward. It's unclear what long-term impact this institutional decision might have on students, faculty, and staff who, even at time of writing, may still not have fully grappled with the magnitude of the ongoing pandemic.

In light of this, Val was very open with me about how COVID had impacted her mental health and how she feared for her own life and the lives of her loved ones. She told me "when this happened, I wasn't mentally healthy. Like I just, I like, I thought we were all going to die and I'm like, um, it was very scary cause I legit thought we were all going to die. And, um, when you're faced with death like that,

like it's not good. And so to have to like shut that off and get it together to start classes and then as you like- as you go, you like- things are getting worse." She went on to explain that in the second week of the new quarter she packed some things and her children and left town. While Val later started seeing a counselor remotely with her student health insurance, she was forced to deal with her trauma while continuing to perform in her classes.

Implications:

- It's important to acknowledge that the academic stress caused by COVID is widespread and disproportionately impacts vulnerable college students like Val. Val was surprised by the level of support she received from her instructor ("I didn't expect him to offer the help"), but she ultimately "gave up" because of the many forces against her (e.g. her computer, contradictory advice from a tutor, her other family and academic obligations).
- More broadly: instructors must be cognizant of challenges students face (i.e. a student who fails to complete work despite the instructors' best intentions must be reframed in a more humane light to acknowledge their many complexities; and specific to online learning, instructors need to be cognizant of the many things that could go wrong with remote learning)]

Cross-cutting notes:

- Chad talks about psychological impacts: the role that mask-wearing and lack of physical contact is having/will have on individuals (particularly children), being afraid to touch anything, and feeling overwhelmed by the news
- Jay talks about academic disruptions: two academic programs that he was planning to utilize were cancelled, and he reflects on the challenges of getting 'into a rhythm' with working at home instead of utilizing the library and other campus spaces
- Ashley doesn't talk about being as impacted by shelter-in-place or COVID, but it does impact her volunteer placement and she notes that it makes pre-existing inequities worse

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