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Academic Pathways for Formerly Incarcerated Students: “If I could do 12 years in prison, why can’t I do 12 years in college.”

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This qualitative study examined the experiences of formerly incarcerated students in community colleges. In this study, participants described how they made meaning of their postsecondary education experience through their decision to start college, the college preparation, and faculty interactions that collectively influenced their academic pathways. The students of this study were formerly incarcerated Latino men enrolled in California community colleges located in northern, central, and southern regions. This study specifically sought to challenge the stigma that revolves around the experiences of the carceral system leading to a deficit perspective on this student population. The findings from this study aligns with the academic support services for this student population in higher education.

Although the Latino/a/x community are the largest and fastest-growing population they have the lowest education attainment rates compared to their Black and white peers (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Núñez, 2014). At each point in the educational pipeline Latinos (and Latinas) are underrepresented, which underscores existing educational inequities (Sólorzano et al., 2005). As previously noted, while Latinas/os represents the largest U.S. ethnic group, they have the lowest educational transition rates (Sólorzano et al., 2005). A lack of college degree attainment in Latino/a/x communities contributes to intergenerational poverty, inadequate education, poor nutrition, and access to healthcare. Sáenz and Ponjuan (2009) discuss critical economic and social consequences for the lack of Latino males in postsecondary education. Economically, Latino males are the most underutilized labor source, however this population is the fastest growing employment source (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). For the U.S. to sustain

economic and social mobility as a nation, it is critical for the Latino/a/x population to achieve postsecondary degree attainment (Núñez, 2014).

While the Latin/o/a/x community can rely on Latino men for economic and social mobility, there is a lack of Latino men progressing through the educational pipeline. One of the most pressing challenges for this population is the high incarceration rates for Latino men. Researching the experiences of formerly incarcerated Latino male students allows practitioners and researchers to address the needs of this student population. Latinos make up 22% of the 2.3 million males in state or federal custody (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). In California, Latino males are 41% of the prison population, but only 38% of the state population, therefore Latino men are overrepresented in prison (Sakala, 2014). Mass incarceration has disproportionately impacted Latino men, which results in negative consequences for the Latino/a/x community (Abeyta, 2020). These negative consequences have lasting social and economic inequities; the psychological effect, generational and community impact, and economic instability.

College education can break the recidivism cycle, improve employment opportunities, and provide economic incentives for formerly incarcerated Californians (Renewing Communities Initiative, 2015). Recidivism is the return to incarceration rate for an individual within three years of release. Through higher education achievement, recidivism is lowered (Sturm et al., 2010). As previously noted, Latino men make up 41% of the California prison system, but only 38% of the total state population (Sakala, 2014). To reduce recidivism among Latino men, they would need rehabilitation services, educational programming, and employment services. The purpose of this study is to challenge the stigma that revolves around the experiences of the carceral system and

leads to a deficit perspective in formerly incarcerated Latino students. This study examined the following research question: How do formerly incarcerated Latino males make meaning of their experiences in postsecondary education?

As Latino/a/x students enter postsecondary education, they experience a shift in identities from two worlds. Gonzalez and Morrison (2016) discussed a double consciousness, which requires this student population to shift between cultures pertaining to language, socioeconomic status, and country of origin. Similarly, a study by Kouyoumdjian et al. (2017) utilized the community cultural wealth model as a framework to study the support and challenges among Latino/a/x first- and second-generation Latino/a/x college students. Participants suggested their academic persistence was because their sources of support from family and communities, *familial capital* (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). Additionally, the participants discussed their self-determination and motivation to navigate college, aligning with aspirational capital (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). Similarly, Rodriguez et al. (2016) suggested that Latino men rely on their support systems to cope with academic and personal challenges during college.

There are multiple layers that impact the life experiences of a formerly incarcerated Latino male students as they transition from the carceral system to the educational system. Abeyta (2020) explored disparities that formerly incarcerated Latino men in California community college students experienced in postsecondary education. Moreso, Abeyta (2020) proposed carceral capital, a form of cultural wealth to describe the strength in their experience as formerly incarcerated students. In particular, as

formerly incarcerated students are continuously codeswitching between their communities at home and their campus community.

Methodology

The qualitative design conducted for this study is phenomenology with a transformative epistemology to understand how these students make meaning of their experiences in postsecondary education. A phenomenological study is a narrative report of lived experiences from several individuals who described a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology allows researchers to gather information from the perspective of participants by observation or interviews to obtain insight to the participants experience. According to Creswell (2013) the transformative worldview ascended when researchers believed constructivist worldview did not advocate for action. Whereas a constructivist worldview seeks to understand the multiple participant meanings through social and historical cultural norms, the transformative paradigm provides a framework for researchers seeking to further social justice (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2012).

In addition, to a transformative worldview, I am guided by an anti-deficit achievement perspective. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework provided researchers with anti-deficit questions to understand the persistence Students of Color in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The anti-deficit approach to research focuses on the success and assets of students historically underrepresented and underserved. Therefore, research on the experiences of formerly incarcerated Latino men would allow us not only to learn from their success stories, but to humanize them and to support their academic endeavors.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The participants of the study were ten formerly incarcerated Latino men enrolled in eight California community colleges located in the northern, central and southern regions. To be eligible, participants had to be 18 years or older, identifies as a Latino man, a current California community college student, and previously incarcerated in a jail and/or state or federal prison in and/or out of California for a minimum of six months. To recruit participants, purposeful and snowball sampling were used.

There were 60-to-90-minute semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face or via video conference using Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire with questions about their personal background, heritage identity, and college enrollment. The data analysis included the following phases: epoche, bracketing, and a cluster of meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche is a process for researchers to set aside their own bias (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Then I used the phenomenological reductions process, known as bracketing, to examine each transcript line-by-line (Dezin, 1989). Additionally, I used the horizontalization, a step-in data analysis to ensure each statement has equal value to understand the participant experiences (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The final phase included the cluster of meanings, a unification of interpretations into themes (Creswell, 2013).

The average age of participants was 34.5 years old. The participants self-identified as Chicano, Mexican-American, Central American, and Mexican. The length of college enrollment at their community college varied from their first semester to four years. Half of the participants were incarcerated for more than 12 years, the most being

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Latino Heritage	Length of College Enrollment	Length of Time Incarcerated	Correctional Institutional Type	Major	Educational Aspiration	G.P.A.
Luke	46	Chicano/Xicano	2 years	28.6 years	State	Social Work	Master's Degree	3.8
Alex	30	Mexican-American	1 st semester	12 years	State	Undecided	Bachelor Degree	N/A
Pablo	30	Mexican-American	2 years	12 years	State & Federal	Civil Engineering	Doctorate Degree	3.83
Marcos	35	Chicano/Xicano	2 nd semester	2 years	County Jail	Peace Studies	Doctorate Degree	3.79
Roman	26	Chicano/Xicano	2 nd semester	5 years	County Jail & State	Sociology	Doctorate Degree	2.0
Jacob	25	Mexican	1 st semester	6 years	State	Fire Science	Doctorate Degree	N/A
Val	32	Mexican-American	1 st semester	12.9 years	State	Business Admin	Master's Degree	N/A
David	32	Central American	2 years	6 months	State	Psychology	Doctorate Degree	3.4
Beaver	45	Mexican-American	1 st year	15 years	Federal	Psychology	Master's Degree	3.6
Rick	43	Mexican	4.5 years	1 year	County Jail	Behavioral Science	Bachelor's Degree	3.73

28.5 years. The remaining lengths of incarceration varied from six months to six years. The participants were mostly incarcerated at state institutions. All the participants had a desire to at least obtain a bachelor and the majority aspired to attend graduate school. Their average GPA was a 3.5 and their majors varied from civil engineering to fire science, business administration, and psychology. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Findings

Participants reflected on their postsecondary education experiences. These findings represent a foundation for how participants reflected on their postsecondary education experiences. Although the participants of the study were immersed in their newly formed student identity, they were fully aware of their experience of being formerly incarcerated and why they chose an academic pathway. The students noted the various factors that influenced their decision to start college including their experience being incarcerated, and their motivation for the chance of a better quality of life. The major themes emerged were the decision to start college, college preparation, and faculty interactions.

Decision to Start College

The decision for the participants to enroll in community college varied. Some students started college after being influenced by their incarceration experiences, other students enrolled for a chance at better life opportunities, and the remaining students reflected on their familial support as the reason for beginning college. One student reflects on his decision to start college while he was incarcerated. Luke said,

I just felt like being in prison for so long. I just wasted so much time. I would just sit in prison, and it would eat me up. Just knowing that if I was to do all these

years in college or continue my education, I would be somebody, I would be somewhere in my life. I'll be somebody successful and it used to eat me up. I always told myself that as soon as I get out, I was just going straight to college and just start my education because if I could do 12 years in prison, why can't I do 12 years in college.

In his reflection, the decision to start college for this student was after he was incarcerated for 12 years. He felt if he was able to be incarcerated for 12 years then he could devote his time to education.

Another student shared their familial support and affirmations from their family that encouraged them to enroll in college. Their family provided not only positive encouragement but also provided them a place to live, which allowed them to solely focus on school. This student shared, "My family really saw that I was doing everything in my power to do right this time, to stay in school and they opened their homes to me, and it really helped me to get on my feet." Familial support and the stability of housing was critical for this student as he was beginning his educational endeavors. This suggests how important basic needs such as housing and food are for formerly incarcerated students.

Another student received encouragement and validation to pursue college from his sister while he was helping her with math homework. His initial plans after being released from corrections was to work with a union. Pablo shared,

One day, my sister who's also in college, was working on some math homework and it was kind of complicated stuff and so I was able to keep up with her as she was explaining it to me. And she made the comment of like, 'well you should go to school, this isn't just easy math and you're understanding it so clear; you should go to school.'

He is now thriving at his community college as a civil engineering major, he is involved in the science and engineering club and is a math tutor. His career aspirations include

beginning his own civil engineering firm and encouraging STEM locations in poverty-stricken neighborhoods for children in the k-12 system. The decision to start college for these formerly incarcerated students varied from their incarceration experiences, a chance at better life opportunities, or from familial influences.

College Preparation

Participants of this study described a lack of preparation that stems from being incarcerated during traditional high school years. They were in juvenile hall instead of high school and they missed the socialization that traditional students have, such as knowing how to write an essay or turning in an assignment on virtual platforms such as Blackboard. One participant shared an interaction he had with his English professor. First, he said, it took some time to ask for help. He remembers the first interaction with his English professor by sharing,

Yeah, she gave me an attitude. She hit it just like that too saying, ‘this is stuff you learned in high school, you should know how to write an essay... you should know this already’... Then I told her, I was in juvenile hall and then at 18 years old I went to prison. I didn’t go to regular high school. I didn’t have that type of help.

In this example, the professor assumes each student has received traditional k-12 socialization; however, that is not the case. When the formerly incarcerated student population arrives on campus, they are in an unfamiliar environment with hidden social norms of being a college student. The student has to self-identify as a formerly incarcerated individual to the professor in order to receive additional instructional support.

Other participants describe the assumption that all students attended community college with having a high school experience and the socialization that comes with attending high school. One student said, “I just fell behind with a lot of things. When I

come in touch with other people, they are like, man that's easy, man for you it is. I didn't grow up writing essays." Another student described learning to advocate for himself when he needed additional help in class and how helpful it was having a professor who had empathy for him. The participant suggested for students to identify what exactly help them be successful and then communicate their situation with the professor.

Although some participants expressed challenges with feeling less academically prepared for college than their peers, they discussed how some faculty interactions were supportive. The next section describes those positive faculty interactions.

Faculty Interactions

Several students described feeling a sense of belonging from their faculty interactions. When I asked the participants about their support from faculty on campus, Beaver said,

Have you seen the movie *Stand and Deliver*? It's just like that. My teachers are like him, they will teach you calculus. If you pay attention, you will learn calculus. The school is capable of teaching somebody like me calculus.

This student is describing how the faculty at his college were committed to teaching and made him feel a sense of belonging in class.

The stories participants of this study shared were about faculty who assisted them through an assignment and how faculty helped them process their lived experiences of being formerly incarcerated through their homework assignments. For example, David shared,

I think communication is key. I think if you really want to help people succeed, especially people who were not prepared for this, this level of education, commitment, focus, and understanding and everything they've been through. And I would hope that they would have a bit of more understanding towards how exactly this person is teaching themselves or learning.

David's experiences with his faculty interactions indicate that communication and empathy with formerly incarcerated students are crucial to their success in postsecondary education.

Many of the participants of this study described how they used writing assignments to discuss their experiences or opinions on mass incarceration. Some students were open with their experiences with the professors, although not all of them shared their stories at class level. One student shared how he received feedback from a faculty in an assignment where he shared his life experiences. He stated,

He was there encouraging me and teaching me how to write. I knew that this person knew how to deal with me. He would read my papers I would write, like all my trauma, and he would help me rewrite...it was like, he knew what my baggage was, and he was willing to work with that. It's just a matter of being patient with these students that are carrying bags that aren't even there.

In this student's experience, the professor's empathy and encouragement helped the student to feel he had a sense of belonging on his campus institution. Positive faculty interactions through open communication and empathy can create a sense of belonging in the classroom for formerly incarcerated students.

Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest practical implications for supporting formerly incarcerated students. The study revealed that various factors influenced their decision to start college and students were influenced to begin college for a chance of a better quality of life. These recommendations center on connecting formerly incarcerated Latino student to campus resources to help them stay enrolled through completion. These must be a priority for community college administrators, faculty, and practitioners. First, this student population needs specific information, resources, and support for

basic needs. As their basic needs of housing and food are met, these students can focus their attention on their studies. Secondly, institutions should offer wrap-around services for formerly incarcerated students. These services could include follow-up, case management, tutoring, and counseling. Next, tailored workshops, programming, and events geared specifically for formerly incarcerated students are recommended for practitioners to provide a sense of belonging on campus for this student population. Finally, professional development and ally training is suggested for administrators, faculty, and practitioners. These trainings must be inclusive of the experiences of formerly incarcerated students, such as the Breaking Bars Community Network, Project Rebound, and Underground Scholars in California. Collectively these practices assist formerly incarcerated students feeling a sense of belonging in their campus community.

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