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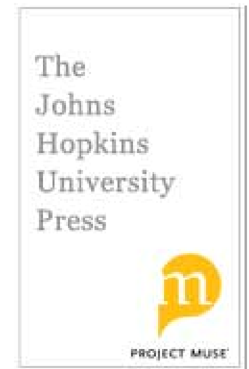

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Beyond Recidivism: Exploring Formerly Incarcerated Student Perspectives on the Value of Higher Education in Prison

Patrick Filipe Conway

Abstract: A primary focus within the field of higher education in prison is to ensure that federal, state, and institution-level polices helping to develop and sustain programs remain durable. Current justifications for policies in support of programs often rely on a predominantly recidivist lens, advocating for programs on the grounds of their likelihood to lower rates of reincarceration and save taxpayers money. However, many advocates argue that such an instrumental approach does not fully capture—and, in fact, might obscure—more foundational civic principles in support of access to higher education in prison. The present article seeks to address the question of how best to justify and defend programs by investigating the perspectives of students themselves, exploring how they articulate the value of their own experiences within a higher education in prison program. Employing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study explores the experiences of 21 formerly incarcerated students who participated in the Boston University Prison Education Program (BUPEP), one of the longest running higher education in prison programs in the country. Participants noted that the program offered a much-needed

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space to participate in a community of mutual respect and mentorship, develop skills and explore personal interests, and regularly engage in noncoercive, nonprescriptive practices of self-reflection and inquiry. The program provided a space unique within prison contexts, helping to break cycles of both literal and figurative imprisonment. Such findings have important implications for both policy and curricula development within higher education in prison.

Keywords: college in prison, second chance Pell, correctional education, interpretative phenomenological analysis, prison education

Introduction

After more than two decades without federal support for college-level prison education, the 2016 Second Chance Pell Program has been instrumental in assisting colleges and universities in the development and expansion of higher education opportunities in prison. Initially, 63 colleges and universities were selected to participate in the program, but that number is now more than tripling, as the initiative is currently expanding to include up to 200 colleges and universities throughout the country (US Department of Education, 2021). The program has been so well received that it has led to the full restoration of Pell Grant availability in prisons, set to take effect in July of 2023, with funding for the proposal included in the 2021 Covid-19 Economic Relief Bill (Burke, 2021; US Department of Education, 2021).

Given the legacy of tenuous federal support for higher education in prison (Gould & SpearIt, 2014; Ubah, 2004), the current focus among many advocates is to ensure that support for such initiatives is made durable. A schism has developed, however, between those who primarily seek to highlight program effects on recidivism and taxpayer savings, and those who are wary of narratives overly reliant on reduced recidivism, instead aiming to promote justifications that are student-centered and speak to the moral and/or civic principles underlying programs (see, generally, Castro, 2018; Harnish, 2019; McCorkel & DeFina, 2019). One particular fear among advocates seeking more humanized justifications for programming is that heightened focus on recidivism may threaten to restrict and diminish the types of educational opportunities made available to incarcerated students, as programs may become prone to taking a strictly vocational and/or virtual learning approach (Conway, 2022a). This concern is particularly relevant considering the wide range of institutions included within the Second Chance Pell experimental sites, among which are four-year public and private universities, as well as two-year community, technical, and junior colleges (US Department of Education, 2020).

Despite increased attention on the particular ways in which prison education initiatives are justified, the perspectives of students who have been

the beneficiaries of such programs have largely remained underexamined (Binda et al., 2020; Evans, 2018). A consequence of the scarcity of research into student experience is that understanding the impact of programs beyond more easily quantifiable measurements—such as recidivism and post-release employment—are not often based on empirical knowledge, but instead primarily rely on the reflections of educators and administrators (Harnish, 2019; Utheim, 2016). The purpose of this study is to specifically explore the experiences of formerly incarcerated students who participated in the Boston University Prison Education Program (BUPEP), one of the longest running programs in the country, in order to identify student-centered justifications for programming opportunities.

Exploring student-centered justifications can help identify and deepen understandings of the value and need for such programs. The research question guiding this study is: *in what ways do formerly incarcerated students articulate the value of their experiences within a higher education in prison program that extend beyond a purely recidivist lens?* My analysis employs interpretative phenomenological methods that highlight the experiences of formerly incarcerated students themselves. I argue that higher education in prison helps break cycles of both literal and figurative imprisonment, offering students a space unlike anything found elsewhere inside prisons. Insights into the particular ways participants make meaning of their experiences, as well as how such dynamics are realized, are especially relevant to a rapidly expanding field.

Background

The History of Higher Education in Prison

The distribution of benefits and burdens relating to target populations within federal education policymaking often depends on two key factors: the level of political power which the target population maintains, and whether that population is portrayed and/or perceived either positively or negatively (Ingram et al., 2007; Lejano et al., 2018). Incarcerated populations are often either ignored or harmed at the level of public policy, as Gándara and Jones (2020) have observed: "numerous studies have linked the negative construction and low political power of those constructed as criminals to their receipt of burdens through policy" (p. 126). Within US contexts, incarcerated people are at an even greater disadvantage, as the country has a long history of taking a particularly punitive stance toward crime (Enns, 2016; McLennan, 2008). Carl (2016) has noted that "America views prison not only as the punishment, but also as the place *for* punishment, deliberately making prison more difficult" for those convicted of crimes.

Given both the low political power of incarcerated populations, and the long history of punitiveness within the US, it is unsurprising that higher education in prison has suffered from inconsistent institutional support. An understanding of this history is useful in contextualizing college-in-prison at a policy level. In 1972, the Federal Pell Grant Program extended to incarcerated students the subsidization of college education costs for the first time (McCarty, 2006). The effect of the legislation was transformative. Littlefield and Wolford's (1982) national survey of post-secondary prison education programs found that Pell Grants were by far the most frequently cited source of funding for programs (p. 17). They not only helped sustain existing programs, but also provided the necessary financial support for the development of new programs: 237 prisons across the country had degree-granting programs in 1976 compared to 772 by 1990, a 325 percent increase in just fourteen years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

By the early 1990s, however, a "tough on crime" mindset had become entrenched within the political sphere, with the push to ban Pell Grants in prisons supported by a majority of both Republican and Democrat legislators (Gould & SpearIt, 2014). The movement culminated with the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act and the 1994 Higher Education Reauthorization Act, both signed into law by President Clinton (Wright, 2001). The two pieces of legislation combined to eliminate access to Pell Grant funding inside prisons. The impact was immediate. A 1997 survey conducted by the Corrections Compendium found that "66% of the reporting correctional systems indicated that the elimination of Pell Grants eliminated most if not all of their college course opportunities" (p. 5). Within the first year alone, the number of prison systems offering a baccalaureate degree dropped by 31 percent (Tewksbury & Taylor, 1996).

Only recently have the damaging effects of the 1994 ban begun to mend. The 2016 Second Chance Pell Pilot Program has helped enroll roughly 22,000 incarcerated students in more than 100 federal and state prisons in college-level educational programming (US Department of Education, 2021). The success of the federal initiative has now led to the full restoration of Pell Grant availability in prisons. With funding for the proposal included as part of the recent 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (better known as the Covid-19 Economic Relief Bill), prison education advocates are hopeful that the return of federal support in the form of funding will continue to allow the expansion of educational opportunities inside prisons.

Common Justifications for Higher Education in Prison

Institutions of higher education are increasingly called upon to undertake a more central role in addressing current cultural and systemic crises, complexities, and uncertainties (Cobo, 2013; Stein, 2017). Increased attention in recent years has been paid to the role colleges and universities can play in

responding to the problem of mass incarceration (Castro & Gould, 2018). The majority of research within the field centers around analyzing program effects on recidivism rates and wages earned post release (see, generally, Davis et al., 2013; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Pompoco et al., 2017). The most influential of these studies is the 2013 meta-analysis conducted by the RAND Corporation. The study found that participants in prison education had 43 percent lower odds of recidivating. It concluded that for every dollar spent on education, taxpayers save $5 on what would be spent on reincarcerating repeat offenders (Davis et al., 2013).

Additionally, the way news media covers the debate over higher education in prison almost exclusively favors instrumental arguments, such as reduced recidivism, in terms of articulating support for programs and policies (Conway, 2022b). Given these data, it is perhaps unsurprising that both Second Chance Pell, as well as the congressional measure to renew Pell Grant availability in prisons, rely almost exclusively on positioning prison education as a tool for the market needs of the state: reduced recidivism equating to taxpayer savings. In press releases, the US Department of Education (2016, 2020) has repeatedly claimed that programs will save taxpayers money, directly citing the findings of reduced recidivism and program cost-effectiveness reported in the 2013 RAND Corporation study.

Reducing recidivism is important for a whole host of reasons, among which include allowing individuals to continue to pursue personal and professional goals, as well as not forcing people to repeatedly endure the types of traumas that incarceration often causes. Impacts of incarceration also extend beyond the individual level, of course, frequently causing economic and emotional harm to spouses, children, and extended family members (Correa et al., 2021; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001). And, yet, despite how celebrated the findings are within the RAND report, many within the prison education community have cautioned against justifications overly reliant on narratives of recidivism (Castro, 2018; Lewen, 2014).

The most common line of critique contends that positioning programs merely as a cost-savings measure sidesteps the issue of whether or not the provision of such opportunities is morally and civically defensible (Conway, 2020). It leaves policies vulnerable to criticisms, like those expressed by Rep. Chris Collins (R-NY), who argued against programs, claiming they “reward lawbreakers” by offering free education to incarcerated students at a time when “law-abiding” students are burdened by exorbitant debts (McCarthy, 2016). Reliance on reduced recidivism may seem politically expedient, but without more foundational justifications, the risk of repeating history remains. Similar shortsightedness is what led to the 1994 ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students, with “tough-on-crime” political pressure prompting a bipartisan push to cut funding for programs irrespective of effects on recidivism (Gould & SpearIt, 2014).

Beyond the survival of programs, many advocates worry that the language of reduced recidivism may negatively impact the types of educational experiences programs offer, inadvertently reinforcing the damaging interpersonal dynamics already latent within carceral settings (Castro & Gould, 2018). As Davis and Michaels (2015) have noted, the goal of lowering recidivism can unintentionally "[elicit] from students the compulsory narratives of redemption and gratitude that they know to be a requisite for people moving through the criminal justice system" (p. 147). A hyper-focus on recidivism fails to confront the widely documented, systemic inequities within the criminal justice system that unduly affect communities of color and the financially poor. In short, many advocates contend, as Lewen (2014) has argued, that rather than depend on recidivism to justify programs, the aim should be to help build more just communities and counteract "the harm that is perpetuated by our prison system" (p. 354). Building on this exact point, Karpowitz (2017) has suggested higher education in prison "should be conceived less about how people in prison might change and more about how we, as a society increasingly defined by the scope and quality of our prisons, might change ourselves" (pp. 161–162).

Despite inherent tensions regarding how best to justify and defend programs, research is scarce investigating the issue by taking into account the perspectives of incarcerated students themselves. Stemming from personal experience, as well as interviews with five incarcerated students, Evans (2018) identified a host of benefits for participants, including the broadening of perspectives and viewpoints, the development of self-worth, and the strengthening of critical thinking skills. Providing a collection of short essays penned by five incarcerated students, Castro et al. (2015) emphasized the liberatory qualities of programs, describing how such opportunities have the capacity to lead to critical consciousness and personal transformation. Similarly, Binda et al. (2020) explored the transformational quality of programs by highlighting how they can help students build self-confidence and strengthen interpersonal relationships.

While these contributions from educators and advocates are valuable and provide key insights into college-level prison education, they are often only tangentially involved in aiming to explore justifications for programming. While it is clear that an acute focus on recidivism may potentially dehumanize and pathologize students, diminishing their overall sense of worth (Castro & Gould, 2018), it remains unclear at an empirical level the types of program dynamics and specific experiences that students identify as being personally relevant and meaningful within their involvement in higher education in prison.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework

Following Karpowitz (2017) and Lewen (2014), this study is conceptually grounded within the belief that it is important to conceive of programs as something other than merely a means for reducing recidivism and/or rehabilitating "offenders." By interviewing and seeking to better understand the experiences of those directly impacted by such educational opportunities, this study aims to better understand formerly incarcerated student perspectives on the humanized aspects of higher education in prison that extend beyond a purely recidivist lens. Such insights not only can help better defend programs and initiatives, but can also inform faculty and program administrators of the types of experiences students find most relevant and meaningful.

This study relies on an interpretative phenomenological approach. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a contemporary qualitative approach "committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1). As its "main currency," it prioritizes the particular meanings research participants assign to their own experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003), and is particularly useful in exploring how people experience major events within their own lives, such as important transitions, decisions, and/or other events of major significance at an individual level (Smith et al., 2022). Rooted in psychology, and often employed within the fields of human and health services, IPA has grown in popularity in recent years within the field of education (Chen, 2022; Noon, 2018).

There is serious disagreement over the term IPA, and whether the philosophical orientation underpinning its methodological approach is truly *phenomenological* in nature, or if instead it would be better described as *psychological* (for insights into this debate, see: Smith, 2018; van Manen, 2017; 2018). While I followed the methodological approach of Smith et al. (2022), I remained attentive to van Manen's (2017; 2018) characterization of the desired outcomes of phenomenological research. Seeking "insider perspectives" on lived experience, the outcomes of phenomenological inquiry, according to van Manen (2017), are reflective texts that "induce the reader into a wondering engagement with certain questions that may be explored through the identification, critical examination, and eloquent elaboration of themes that help [readers] recognize the meaningfulness of certain human experiences" (p. 777).

IPA is informed by three key areas relating to the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022). IPA research is phenomenological because it is concerned with exploring participants' experiences in relation to a common phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). It also involves a double hermeneutic, a dual process of interpretation: the researcher attempts to make sense of the experiences of a particular participant, who aims to make sense of a particular phenomenon (Smith

et al., 2022). The recognition of the interpretative aspect is important, as it encourages researchers to be reflexive in terms of considering how their own experientially-informed lens might impact various aspects of the research process (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2020). Finally, IPA is idiographic in that it aims to make sense of a common phenomenon within both a specific context and among a small sample of participants, allowing for deep analysis of each individual case (Smith et al., 2022). This study aligns well with IPA, as it is interested in deeply investigating and interpreting the meanings that a relatively small, purposive sample of participants ascribe to their own "major life experiences" of enrollment and participation within a higher education in prison program.

METHODS

Context of the Boston University Prison Education Program (BUPEP)

The BUPEP is one of the longest-running higher education in prison programs in the country. The program began offering college credits to incarcerated students at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk (MCI-Norfolk), a men's prison 45-minutes southwest of Boston, in 1972. In 1991, the program expanded and began offering courses at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Framingham (MCI-Framingham), the only women's prison in the state, a site 30 minutes west of Boston (Boston University Prison Education Program, n.d.).

During the 1980s and early 90s, Boston University was one of several universities in Massachusetts to offer college-level courses inside prisons. However, after the 1994 ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students, it was the only program in the state to survive. Because its funding was backed by the university itself (rather than relying on federal support), the ban on Pell Grants did not fundamentally alter its funding structure. At the time, students could apply credits toward earning a BA, and even potentially pursue an MA (this option has since ended). Students released from prison prior to graduating were also allowed to continue their studies on campus at Boston University.

Current students in the program can earn a BA in Liberal Studies and/or an undergraduate certificate in Interdisciplinary Studies. Since the program's inception, a total of 353 students have graduated from the program with a Bachelor of Arts, and 28 of those went on to also receive a master's degrees within the program (Boston University Prison Education Program, n.d.). The BUPEP comprises a strong case selection for inquiry, both because of its longstanding liberal arts tradition—liberal arts continue to serve nationally as the primary educational focus of most credit-bearing programs (Craft et al., 2019)—but also because its programming has remained uninterrupted

since 1972, a rarity for higher education in prison programs given the impact of the 1994 ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students.

Recruitment and Sample

The snowballed sample for this study includes 21 formerly incarcerated students, each of whom participated in the BUPEP. Initial recruitment of participants was achieved through a process of referral by both the current director of the BUPEP and a former director. This sampling strategy of referral from “gatekeepers” and snowballing (essentially, referral by participants) is consistent with IPA’s orientation toward purposively selected samples (Smith et al., 2022, p. 43). The underlying goal was to identify a fairly homogenous group—in this case, those enrolled in the same higher education in prison program—for whom the research question would be meaningful (Smith, 2017). While 21 participants are at the larger end of recommended sample sizes for phenomenological studies (three to five participants is typical), the greater number of cases was prioritized in order to help push theoretical analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The decision to include a larger sample produced further methodological considerations, described in more detail within the “analysis” section.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Interviews were conducted between January and May 2021. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 72, with a median age of 43. The earliest enrollment in the program among participants was 1974, and the most recent enrollment was in 2019. The average date for initial enrollment was in 2006. Among those included in the study, 13 had received their BA (12 of whom earned the degree while incarcerated, while one participant finished on campus at Boston University). Eight participants had not yet completed the degree, although five were either currently enrolled on campus at Boston University or planned to enroll within the coming academic year. One participant also earned an MA from the BUPEP while incarcerated.

The average self-reported GPA among participants was 3.70, with a range of 3.00 to 4.00. The sample included 11 White participants, five Black participants, four Latino/a/x or Hispanic participants, and one who self-identified as multiracial Native American. The sample broadly maps onto the racial demographics inside Massachusetts prisons (43% White, 27% Black, 26%, Latino/a/x or Hispanic, 1% Native American [Vera Institute of Justice, 2019]). All participants were born in the United States. The sample included 11 men and 10 women. Appendix A provides a fuller demographic breakdown of participants included in the sample.

Data Sources

Data sources include hour-long, in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant (Smith et al., 2022). One-to-one, semi-structured interviews

tend to be the preferred means for data collection within IPA studies because they allow for rapport building, offering participants ample opportunity to think, speak, and be heard (Reid et al., 2005). Due to social distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted via Zoom (Coulson, 2015). Questions were designed to elicit responses from participants in which they reflected on and provided insight into where they found meaning, purpose, and value in their educational experiences in the BUPEP. Sample questions included: "What did it mean for you to be enrolled in college while in prison?"; and "Describe an experience from your time within the BUPEP that stands out to you. What makes that experience memorable?"

A set of questions early in interviews focused on important moments—both good and bad—within a participant's educational history before, during, and after their incarceration. For example, one question asked participants about their educational experiences prior to their enrollment: "Prior to your enrollment in the BUPEP, could you describe what your educational experiences had been like up until that point?" These questions helped contextualize participants' experiences in the program within their overall educational histories (Kolar et al., 2015). To enhance policy relevance, a set of questions were also designed to elicit responses regarding aspects participants believed important for policymakers to highlight in the defense of higher education in prison initiatives (Ion et al., 2019). By doing so, the study aims to put policymakers in conversation with those most impacted by their efforts.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then analyzed using a qualitative software analysis program (NVivo). Following an interpretative phenomenological approach, I followed the seven-step sequential process recommended by Smith et al. (2022): 1.) reading and re-reading each transcript; 2.) taking exploratory notes on each transcript; 3.) constructing "experiential statements" based on relevant portions of the transcripts and analysis of exploratory notes; 4.) searching for connections across experiential statements within each transcript; 5.) systematically identifying these connections as "Personal Experiential Themes" (PETs); 6.) repeating the aforementioned steps for each case; 7.) searching for patterns across PETs to develop a set of "Group Experiential Themes" (GETs) that capture the shared characteristics of meaning-making across participants. As a clarifying note, the construction of "experiential statements" relates directly either to a participant's own experiences, or to the experience of making sense of the things that have happened to them (Smith et al., 2022, p. 87). For example, for participants who described "feeling free in the classroom" or attaining "a sense of personal independence" as part of their involvement in the BUPEP, an experiential statement might describe: "Participation in higher education in prison is marked by its potential for a type of cognitive liberation."

The inclusion of 21 research participants—a large sample for a phenomenological study—required a high level of attention during the process of searching for patterns across PETs. Emphasis within the presentation of findings shifted toward the shared elements within GETs rather than predominantly focusing on idiographic detail. As Smith et al. (2022) note for larger studies, "even where the presented analysis is primarily at the group level, what makes the analysis *IPA* is the fact that the group-level themes are still illustrated with particular examples taken from individuals" (p. 105). The goal was to identify unifying GETs while also retaining the uniqueness and variety of experiences contained within individual cases. Following the recommendations of Smith et al. (2022), each articulated theme had to be inhabitable by at least half the participants in the study in order to comprise a GET (Smith et al., 2022).

Positionality and Credibility of Findings

I approached this study from the perspective of an advocate for higher education in prison. I have several years' experience teaching and working within the BUPEP, as well as within the Boston College Prison Education Program, for which I recently assumed the role of Program Director. Prior to my involvement with higher education in prison, I also worked as a criminal defense investigator for the public defender office in Washington, DC, investigating level one felonies on behalf of defendants who could not afford their own legal representation. As a result of these various experiences, I have my own beliefs and convictions when it comes to issues of criminal justice reform and providing higher education opportunities in prison.

In addition to my own personal work experiences, it is likely that my educational background and identity as a White, middle-class male mediate my perspectives on issues relating to crime and justice, as well as higher education writ large. Given data on the racial and economic disparities in terms of incarceration, this was especially important to keep in mind, both during interviews with participants but also during data analysis. For this reason, I employed Vagle's (2018) practice of *bridling* (in essence, a process of journaling in order to explicate and clarify my own thoughts and assumptions), a practice consonant with the reflexivity encouraged within IPA. As Vagle notes, bridling "does not mean that we can totally set aside our own presuppositions, but it does mean that we try to own them, so to speak, and interrogate how they might influence the analysis" (p. 110). Bridling is a self-reflective and iterative process, one which aims to ensure that the voices and perspectives of participants are prioritized over the potential preconceptions and/or biases of researchers.

Additionally, "member checks" were employed as a means of evaluating and authenticating findings (Birt et al., 2016). While IPA relies on researcher interpretations, the goal is to prioritize the perspectives of participants, and so member checks were used as a measure to better ensure that my own

interpretations were faithful to participants' reflections, insights, and lived experiences. As such, I confirmed reported sociodemographic information and shared with participants the results of data analysis, describing both their individual PETs and the broader GETs in detail. I asked for feedback from participants, particularly if they had questions, concerns, or disagreements with the findings, indicating that if there was no response within two weeks, it would be assumed that they agreed with the information as shared. Only five participants responded, all confirming the described findings.

FINDINGS

The reduction of the risk of recidivism was, unsurprisingly, found to be important to participants. In fact, as Abby (all names pseudonyms)—a White woman in her mid-40s—described, the opportunity to lower the likelihood of returning to prison was one of the biggest draws in the application and initial enrollment process. Citing her reasons for enrolling in the BUPEP, Abby stated simply: "There is data that for every year of education someone gets, that's a year between themself and an act of recidivism. It keeps people from getting in trouble again." The importance placed on the reduction of recidivism was not merely experienced at the outset of the program. For Felipe, a Hispanic man in his early 40s, the reduction of this risk remained vital for him long after his graduation and release from prison. When asked how he would defend programs, Felipe was direct: "Recidivism, man. I haven't been back yet."

If helping to break cycles of literal imprisonment was found among participants to be important (which it certainly was), no less important or real were the ways in which involvement in the program offered students a liminal space that helped disrupt a figurative sense of imprisonment. This was a sentiment shared by almost every participant in the study (only one participant did not express this sentiment). Jeremy, a Black man in his mid-30s who is now enrolled in graduate school outside of prison, commented on the distinct difference between the environment of the classroom and the prison itself: "Yeah, you're locked up. You know, you're an inmate . . . you're behind bars, you're a criminal. But when [the correctional officer] is gone, it's like we're in a free space." Similarly, Pamela, a woman in her early 50s who self-described as multiracial Native American, highlighted how the program enabled her to find a measure of freedom: "I took advantage of every opportunity to kind of open doors for me; not necessarily open the doors to get out, but open doors for my own personal freedom."

This sentiment was not restricted to any one type of identity in prison. It was shared almost unanimously across participants. Hugh, a White man in his early 50s, became emotional when commenting on the liberatory quality of his experiences:

> It was freeing me from a life I once had, and it was setting me up. It was liberating. Every moment of it, I savored; every f[——] page I read, typing papers on a typewriter with a dictionary in hand. . . . I mean, it was the focus of my entire existence in Norfolk. It meant everything. It was priority number one. It really just liberated me, and made me feel like a f[——] human being in the darkest moments of my life.

These types of perspectives are crucial in terms of locating justifications for higher education in prison that extend beyond a purely recidivist lens. I argue that three specific dynamics within participants' experiences of the BUPEP help explain the types of liberatory experiences many found so important: 1.) it helps create a community of mutual respect and mentorship hard to find anywhere else in prison; 2.) it offers opportunities to develop skills and explore personal interests; and 3.) it enables students to engage in noncoercive, nonprescriptive practices of self-reflection and inquiry that are particularly needed in carceral settings. These three Group Experiential Themes (GETs) are vital in considering the ways in which incarcerated students articulate the value of their experiences within higher education in prison, and can lead to deeper understandings of why such programs are so essential.

Creating a Community of Mutual Respect and Mentorship

The first theme emerging from the data was the great value placed by participants on the communal aspect of the program, centered around learning, mutual respect, and mentorship. Such a finding aligns with scholarship demonstrating the importance of programs in helping to strengthen interpersonal relationships in prison (Binda et al., 2020). For many participants (15 of the 21 included in the study), this facet even outweighed certain instrumental benefits, such as earning a bachelor of arts. As Jennifer, a White woman in her early 60s who graduated from the program nearly three decades ago, recalled, "the idea that I would get my college degree was actually, I mean, I didn't have that kind of objective . . . it was just to study and learn, and to be among people who learned and taught."

For Regina, a White woman now in her mid-50s, participation in the program signified an opportunity for a healthier social environment. She lamented the lack of meaningful social experiences available in prison, describing how prison could often be depressing simply because, "you don't want to hang out at the table shooting cards or talking crap." Developing relationships was often limited to what Regina described as involvement in petty conversations, "talking and reminiscing about, 'oh my God, we did this to that one, or that to this one.'" Regina described the relationships formed within the BUPEP as entirely different: "the class was just transformative, because it brought people that were in the class closer. Because in an environment like that, you don't like everybody in your classroom. You may not trust everybody in your classroom, but you have mutual respect." She con-

tinued to describe how important it was for her to have access to "intelligent conversations where you're picking at each other's brains." She mentioned one of her most meaningful personal transformations within the program was not just in the recognition that others cared about her, but also in how she became invested in the success of her peers: "I cared about the people that were in my classes."

The recognition of each other's humanity was something Jeremy found particularly important as well, citing the way in which the prison environment typically divided people by "ethnicities or different crimes." Overcoming preconceptions could sometimes be challenging, but it was part of what created trust and human connection within the program:

> There were probably some guys that you looked at as tough guys, and maybe some guys you took as though they wouldn't have an intelligent bone in their body, and you go there and you hear them talk and reason . . . and you hear [them] and see like, wow, not only can you see that they have those abilities, but you also see that they're more like you, and you're also more relatable to them. . . .You see that you have this thing in common, which is like a brain and, you know, the human aspects, like how [you have] the capacity for compassion for these people.

The fostering of communal bonds, however, was not solely restricted to occur among peers. As McCorkel and Defina (2019) have noted, the mentorship received from faculty in programs can also encourage a sense of community. Nelson, a Black man in his late 60s who graduated the program in the early 2000s, noted that what stood out most for him upon entering the program was the way in which faculty "teach you and treat you as a student, rather than merely as a prisoner." This stood in direct contrast to how Nelson felt treated by prison staff, who "assigned [him] little worth or value." Inside the classroom, faculty not only treated students with "dignity," but regularly emboldened students, as Nelson expressed, "to display some of the humanity that existed inside of you."

With mentorship from faculty, participants regularly cited the dual nature of camaraderie and accountability. Jeffrey—a White man in his mid-50s currently finishing his last credits on campus at Boston University—reflected on his relationships with faculty by contrasting them with the majority of other relationships inside prison, where "people f[—] with you" all day. He cited several faculty members in demonstrating the difference between the prison and classroom environment:

> When you sit in a BUPEP classroom, I'm with my friend Patrick. I'm with my buddy, Dev. Oh, there's Jenifer, how's it going? You know, and it was all business. You know, nobody was getting over, nobody was . . . nobody gives a s[—] about why you're in prison. They care about you and, 'are you getting

> your education?' 'Do you need help?' 'Anything we can do for you?' And that gave me a sense of humanness. Like, you're not judging me, you're treating me as an equal, and I will never forget that.

For Jeffrey, it wasn't just friendship and human connection that made relationships with faculty meaningful. It was also, simultaneously, the offering of a nonpatronizing form of accountability: "They didn't show us, in my opinion, any favoritism . . . like, 'Oh, we're gonna give these guys good grades because they're inmates.' No. You had to earn that grade." Such insights reflect what Hall and Killacky (2008) identify as the importance of developing academic rigor and accountability within higher education in prison programs.

Participants described how the sense of community fostered within the program extended beyond it, and even beyond the prison itself. During various semesters, the program offered students opportunities to take courses alongside "on-campus" students enrolled at MIT and Harvard, as well to participate in mentorship programs that brought experienced tutors into the prison. One faculty member teaching a Shakespeare course even brought professional actors into class to perform for and alongside students. Zachary, a White man in his early 30s, remarked that these experiences connected students to the outside world, particularly because these were "outsiders" who treated students with respect and open-mindedness: "They weren't biased, they weren't prejudiced. And I didn't feel judged when I walked into a classroom. I didn't feel that feeling [of someone implying] 'I think I'm better than you.'" Zachary said that no matter who came into the prison, the purpose was always "to challenge your intellect" to expand beyond the confines of the prison itself.

For participants, the bonds developed within the program were so personally meaningful that many continued to strengthen them even after release. For example, Darren—a Black man in his early 40s—described: "Those of us who are free now, we're all still a part of a brotherhood. It never goes away, and that's the beauty of something like that." Many participants (16 out of the 21 participants included) expressed how relationships developed within the program among peers and with faculty members created a network of support upon release. Sophia, a White woman in her mid-20s who was released from prison within the last year, remarked: "There were a lot of girls I met through being in class that I still am in contact with. And that is a big outlet for me because I'm needing help on the outside now." For Hernán, a Hispanic man in his early 40s, the friendships have become more than just a system of support. They are "real genuine" friendships built on mutual respect and fellowship: "There were four of us, we went to Miami about two years ago. I'm in contact with them to this day. Sometimes they come by the house, have some laughs. It built a strong bond between us individuals. Just behind the wall, and then it came to the outside." Despite the often oppressive

and stratified environment inside prison (Rodríguez, 2010; Utheim, 2016), participants in the BUPEP were able to establish and develop meaningful, long-lasting relationships between peers, with faculty, and even with program "outsiders," that often extended beyond the mere terms of a prison sentence.

The Development of Tangible Skills and the Exploration of Personal Interests

The development of tangible skills and the deepening of personal interests experienced within the program were often perceived by participants in direct relation both to their lives prior to incarceration, as well as to their experiences within the confines of the prison itself. A common lament, conveyed by 17 of the 21 participants, was either having underperformed or having had bad experiences within their own educational history prior to incarceration. In line with recent scholarship on the topic, participants often attributed these negative experiences to their own immaturity or lack of preparation at a younger age, and/or to insufficient opportunity, structural support, and academic encouragement (Kallman, 2020; Thomas, 2012). Participants variously described themselves at earlier ages as being "not yet ready for education," "[not having] the tools needed," "not open to classwork," "easily sidetracked," "directionless," "unsupported," and "not mature enough" to be successful in school.

Often, these negative experiences were the result of a confluence of factors, among them: inadequate or improper conduct by teachers or other school officials, challenging family dynamics, complex and interrelated layers of oppression, as well as potential behavioral issues and/or poor decision making at a young age. The case of Adrián, a Hispanic man in his mid-30s, provides an example of the types of challenges that many participants faced as children and young adults. Adrián described himself as a smart kid, precocious, and eager to learn. He faced several adversities, however, that made his school experiences difficult, and at times, even traumatic. He was diagnosed at a young age with ADHD, and also had "lots of issues with anger," including "authority issues" and a "general distrust of adults." He lived in a low-income, predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhood in Boston with a grade school that was overcrowded and under-resourced. Additionally, Adrián described that his "biological father wasn't there for [him]," and he was also "treated horribly by [his] stepfather." His mother loved him greatly, but struggled with alcoholism and drug use.

On top of these challenges, Adrián's first memory of school was traumatic. In kindergarten, Adrián would occasionally "raise hell" (he was quick to note, however, that he does not remember "doing anything particularly heinous" for a six- or seven-year-old). His teacher, however, responded reprehensively:

> [He] put me in a diaper, and paraded me around the school from classroom to classroom, introducing me as AJ the baby. I want to act like a baby, so I was being treated like one. And that was one of my first experiences. I just remember the trauma at the smirks, the laughing. . . . That was probably one of the most defining moments for me [in school].

Adrián's relationship to school remained relatively consistent throughout most of his childhood and young adulthood. He "always genuinely enjoyed learning," but his view of "teachers and people of authority" was so negative that he ended up dropping out of high school in the ninth grade. As an act of defiance, he earned his GED "without studying" and "without paying attention" to his teachers, just to show that it wasn't any "lack of intelligence" that caused him not to succeed in school.

Many of these challenges, adversities, and traumas that participants experienced prior to incarceration had lasting effects that were then only exacerbated by their experiences inside prison walls. Participants (20 of the 21 included in the study) described surviving prison as a harrowing experience, and as in no way conducive to personal growth. The prison was routinely described as "a depressing place," one in which the majority of people were either "languishing" or frequently involved in "pettiness," "drama," and/or "infighting." The environment of the prison was at turns either "isolating" and "lonely" for participants, or else "wild" and "noisy." Many participants felt as though they faced a near "constant stigma" (both "internal and external") regarding their own status as an incarcerated person. As Abby remarked, "some of the guards felt that we were garbage." Participants perceived that the most common result of experiencing incarceration was to either become "institutionalized" and "numb" to the environment, or else "angry" and "resent[ful]."

The ability to learn, develop hard and soft skills, and work toward a college degree while incarcerated often helps combat such feelings (Binda et al., 2020; Evans, 2018). As Nelson remarked, "when you're incarcerated, they strip you of your dignity and let you know that . . . you're at the end of the totem pole. And this is where you are, and they keep you there. . . . They kind of keep the foot on your head for a while and say, 'Hey, this is where you belong.'" Conversely, the BUPEP was not interested in stifling or subjugating participants, but instead was primarily concerned with helping students "reach [their] full potential." This effort to help students personally develop occurred in a number of ways. First, and perhaps foremost, for many participants, was through sheer exposure to college-level curricula. The supportive environment created by faculty and program administrators encouraged either a new or renewed connection to learning. As Abby noted:

> There were a lot of things I had never heard of and didn't know about, so that was cool [she pauses]. Astronomy. That one, the Astronomy class blew my mind, like there were so many things, it was so—it was incredible. My greatest takeaway from all of the whole experience was there were so many things I didn't know. [Faculty] knew their stuff and were super passionate about it as well, and so it was impossible not to be moved by some of the things that were covered.

These types of learning experiences not only were described to be inaccessible elsewhere in prison, but for many participants (15 of the 21 included in the study), these were experiences with which that they had limited prior opportunities to engage, even before incarceration. As Felipe remarked: "I was never given the opportunity to take part in stuff like that, so me having the opportunity to take part in something bigger than the stuff back home was a great feeling."

The exposure to learning and encouragement to pursue personal interests often led to an enthusiasm for expanding one's own knowledge-base and world view. When asked to describe certain moments or experiences that were impactful, Pamela commented:

> Oh, my goodness, there was so many different moments and different professors that had such an impact on my spiritual and mental transformation. It was . . . incredible. It was like they were nurturing when they came in. They wanted to teach you and they wanted you to learn, and they saw that we were eager. But it was like nourishment, because my mind was craving something, and they were so happy to give it to me.

Pamela described that her renewed commitment to learning led her toward developing "hard skills" (like expertise in given subject areas), "soft skills" (like "social skills" and an ability to "network" with different types of people), and fostered within her a "sense of empowerment," "confidence," and "pride." She remarked:

> I started to care more about the way I talked, and I started to care more about the way I carried myself. So, I was learning [different] things and I was learning more about me. And so, by me investing in myself, it was me loving myself. . . . I'm not gonna react the same way to somebody telling me, 'Oh you're no good, you're worthless,' because I know I'm worth more, because I worked really hard at being more and doing more.

For many participants (19 of the 21 in the study), the opportunity to learn, develop, and succeed within higher education was perceived as validating, an opportunity that enabled Adrián, for example, to escape from a type of personal imprisonment grounded in a negative self-conception.

> More than anything [in prison], there was this tension that was unresolved. I'm not one to take failure lightly or to shy away from a challenge. I couldn't get the chip off my shoulder, feeling like I was bested by . . . this thing called education or classroom testing. I just felt like I was bested. I felt like I had lost that fight. And I wanted to come back for round 2. . . . [The ability to do that] was challenging, but also liberating and a lot of fun.

Taking part in college-level coursework not only represented a path toward educational attainment and learning unavailable elsewhere inside the prison, but also helped participants reconceptualize their own identities as scholars and recognize capabilities that often previously had remained unexplored.

Noncoercive, Nonprescriptive Practices of Self-Reflection and Inquiry

A final striking theme emerging within the data was the way in which participants described how the program fostered a deepened capacity for self-reflection and inquiry. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the most popular course experiences for participants were within sociology classes. These findings are in alignment with prior scholarship relating to adult learners and incarcerated students, in which discussions on practical lived issues and experiences were found to be acutely impactful and relevant (Kallman, 2020; Knowles et al., 2020). Beyond sociology courses, participants described how a broad slate of college courses encouraged serious study of various subject matters—history, math and sciences, literature, and music, among others—which in combination led to deeper understandings of both the human condition and individual participants' self-conception, particularly in relation to their own social locations. As Jennifer remarked, "To make a human life in prison, that is the task."

Participants described that one of the most meaningful aspects of involvement in the program was the measure of autonomy and self-direction it offered. The prison was uniformly discussed as a highly "constrained" and "punitive" place, where participants were "looked down on" by prison staff and constantly made to "walk on egg shells." Even getting to class could be an ordeal, as Christine—a White woman in her early 30s—described. Christine was held at a minimum-security prison, and bussed to MCI-Framingham in order to take classes. Every time she entered the prison, she was put through a "degrading process" in which she was forced to "to take everything off in front of two people and bend over and cough." Participants confirmed what researchers—such as Rodríguez (2010)—have suggested, that the primary emphasis inside prison is often on ensuring that "every prisoner [is] made to follow orders," exposing participants to an often "demeaning" and "dehumanizing" process of treatment.

Because of the restrictive environment of the prison, many participants (14 of the 21 included in the study) described that one of the most meaningful

aspects of the program was the way in which faculty and program administrators empowered students with an important degree of self-direction. As Nelson expressed:

> [The program] allowed you to expand yourself past . . . where you'd ever been before [prison] or while inside of the prison. . . . It also made you feel as if you were being treated just like college students on the outside by being asked to [take part in learning], not just being dictated to, but actually included in the process of the education. So, it's not just somebody coming into a classroom saying, 'this is this, this is that.' They made sure that our input was also [treated as] worthy and valued.

This sense of not being strictly "dictated to," but instead encouraged to take active part in the learning process frequently fostered for participants a desire for self-reflection and personal inquiry. Many other types of programs at the prison would simply "tell you what to do" or stipulate "what conclusions to reach," but because the education received as part of the BUPEP was not perceived as being prescriptive or coercive in nature, participants felt liberated to draw their own conclusions and freely explore the details of their own lives.

This process of self-reflection and inquiry took shape in many different forms, often interrelating with participants' individual identities and life experiences. Adrián, for instance, was able to better understand that while growing up, he had been living inside what he described as an "identity trap": "I looked at myself as unlovable and unteachable, unchangeable in many ways." The exposure to educational opportunity, however, allowed him to break free from this trap, as he referenced his prior negative educational experiences described as part of theme two:

> As a result of applying myself to education and writing papers, and doing the research that was required for any given subject, I just gained confidence. I realized I am much more than what I thought, and I indeed was an *adult*. I was a man, I was, I was a lot more than I had, than I, you know—I definitely wasn't AJ the baby, like I had felt before.

Adrián went on to explain that it was the experience of the program that allowed him to gain that hard won insight. He explained, "the system [of the prison] is meant to break you down . . . you're meant to feel like you're in trouble constantly, you're meant to fear." The BUPEP, however, allowed him to gain the tools necessary to take back a measure of control, to redirect his life:

> I'm rewriting the narrative right now, in the here and now. I can critically think through problems. Therefore, like when I find myself ready to act, say violently, and revert back to old behavior or to an addiction, or whatever it might be, I can problem-solve myself and critically think myself out of that

> space, and, in a sense, like rewrite my future—or at least my present, and consequently my future.

For some participants, like Hugh, the program had the effect of affirming the value of their individual identity. Hugh grew up gay in Somerville, Massachusetts in the 1980s, which he described as a town that was "very working class": "Most of the dads were drinking and selling drugs, you know, and all of that just kind of trickled down to all the kids." School never seemed a good fit for him, because Hugh felt a disconnect between his inner life and the life he was forced to present outwardly in school, at home, and in his neighborhood:

> I wasn't able to grasp [the importance of school] because I was so distracted by coming to terms with my sexuality. In the late 80s, you know, people were dying of AIDS, I was at a Catholic school, and I was petrified of my friends finding out. Add in that I ran away from home, and now I'm like, searching for love from my father who was like a mess of an alcoholic, and I was just lost. I was lost.

Hugh's experience in the BUPEP was wholly different. Faculty accepted Hugh on his own terms. This allowed Hugh to integrate his prior life experiences into his own self-conception: "It was, 'I am overcoming. I am moving beyond that life I found so hard to escape from.' It was like, I f[——] figured it out. Finally." The development and integration of healthier self-conceptions might help explain the types of "transformational" educational experiences often described within higher education in prison programs (Castro et al., 2015; Keen & Woods, 2016). For Hugh, a renewed sense of self—found, in part, because of the educational opportunities afforded within the program—had a liberating effect: "[It was an] awakening of untapped potential, an awakening of opportunity, . . . of possibility, of intellectual and academic development. It was an awakening of belonging in this community of higher education, and the acknowledgement that *I*, in fact, belonged there."

For Felipe, the experience of the program helped him come to terms with his own family environment growing up. Felipe described that his home life when younger had been "chaotic," in large part due to his father's drug addiction. He harbored what he labeled as an "unhealthy" resentment against his father into his adulthood. The BUPEP allowed him insight into his own upbringing in some surprising ways, as a science course (one only tangentially related to addiction) allowed him to process some of his father's experiences:

> I didn't know much about addiction as far as the science of addiction and what's going on and why people get addicted to drugs and what's happening in the brain and things like that. I didn't know. My father was a heroine user, a drug abuser who was never around, and I always blamed him. Like, 'he chose drugs over me' and you know, in [the BUPEP], like I educated myself on certain

> things and I came to terms, like even with my dad's stuff. I always held some resentment toward him and towards my family and it wasn't necessarily his decision. He was an addict and he did things to feed his addiction.

Felipe felt that the program did not prescriptively dictate how he should contextualize his life experiences, but rather it encouraged him to draw his "own insights" on "things I wasn't originally familiar with, stuff I didn't understand growing up, stuff that I struggled with myself." These insights were so important for Felipe that they have led him to work within the same community where he grew up as an addiction counselor post-release.

Similar to others, Pamela described how the cumulative effect of coursework within the program was that it better enabled her to think critically about dynamics within her own life, her family's life, and within her broader communities. She felt encouraged to ask and seek answers to her own questions:

> What were the patterns in my family's life? Why did my father go to prison? Why was my mother an addict? Why was all this abandonment happening in our family? And how was this cycle gonna stop? Did I want my children to experience these same patterns?

What Pamela valued most was not "being told" the answers to these questions, but instead being offered guidance "to gain the tools and space needed to try and answer questions for [her]self." Pamela's experiences mirrored those of other participants, who found their involvement in the BUPEP particularly meaningful not only because of the relationships they developed and the opportunities they had to learn, but also because it helped unlock a capacity for independent self-reflection and inquiry that previously had been challenging to achieve.

Discussion

One of the primary current focuses within the field of higher education in prison is to ensure that polices helping to sustain programs—whether at the federal, state, or institution level—remain in place. Legislative history reveals the dramatic consequences when such policies are abandoned (SpearIt, 2016; Ubah, 2004). As prior policy research related to higher education in prison suggests, politicians may occasionally have to rely on some form of instrumental, recidivist arguments to ensure that policies take root, but it is important that such framings do not undermine or diminish more foundational civic arguments (Conway, 2020; Harnish, 2019). The present study contributes to the end of identifying rich, student-centered justifications for college-level prison education that extend beyond such a purely recidivist lens.

While depth of insight was preferred for this study, breadth of experience is also important, and so future research following similar epistemic assumptions should be undertaken both in different parts of the country, but also within different types of college-level programs. Second Chance Pell supports community college programs, as well as online higher education (US Department of Education, 2021), and so additional studies within these particular programs types would make for useful contributions to the field. As with most qualitative research, the purpose of this study is not to produce findings generalizable to large populations within varied settings, but instead to yield nuanced understandings relevant to and illustrative of a specific sample (Chen, 2022). This is especially true of IPA studies, wherein participants are purposively selected to provide rich, in-depth perspectives on the specific phenomenon under study, rather than represent a more generalizable population (Smith et al., 2022).

This particular IPA study allows for deep exploration and interpretation of the meanings that participants attribute to their own experiences within a higher education in prison program. Because of the highly personal nature of IPA studies (Smith et al., 2017; van Manen, 2020), the themes that emerge are important for policymakers, program administrators, and prison education faculty to bear in mind in determining not only how best to justify and defend programs, but also in considering the types of educational opportunities that are made available within carceral settings. They can also help inform larger studies—with representative samples at a more national level—in order to explore the extent to which such findings are generalizable across program types within different settings.

While breaking cycles of recidivism was unquestionably found to be important among participants, achieving a personal, cognitive sense of liberation was found to be equally important, and in many cases, transformative (Castro et al., 2015; Keen & Woods, 2016). While the environment of the prison itself frequently caused division, anger, and fear (Rodríguez, 2010; Utheim, 2016), the capacity to develop meaningful relationships grounded in mutual respect was described as being particularly relevant. Participants not only developed strong bonds with their peers in the program, but also frequently took part in mentor/mentee relationships with faculty and program administrators. The descriptions of these dynamics echo the findings of Binda et al. (2020), who highlighted the importance of developing strong interpersonal relationships for incarcerated students within such programs.

The interpersonal connections built within the BUPEP helped bridge common divides existing within the prison itself, often based on racial, ethnic, criminal history, and/or geographic backgrounds (Bloch & Olivares-Pelayo, 2021). Relationships with faculty and administrators also helped create a much-needed link to the outside world, helping to sustain a connection to

life beyond the confines of prison. Future research should aim to investigate the specific types of teaching practices most conducive to developing strong relationships within such settings, both between students and between students and faculty. It may also prove useful for program administrators to explore offering co-curricular opportunities as part of their broader educational programming, such as the formation of student committees, tutoring programs, and other groups or clubs capable of providing meaningful relationship building opportunities.

As important as the development of interpersonal relationships was to participants, so too was the renewed commitment to learning and personal development that involvement in the program often sparked. Whether rightly or wrongly, participants often perceived themselves as having failed at school prior to incarceration, or conversely, having had school (or their communities) fail them. These dynamics are common within such programs (Kallman, 2020). The prison itself provided very little opportunity to enhance tangible skills, expand knowledge, or develop personally and/or intellectually. Many participants described themselves as eager for these types of opportunities, particularly as many viewed their lack of access to such prospects being a major component contributing to the dynamics that led to their incarceration in the first place. The newfound opportunity to develop hard and soft skills, explore topics of personal interest, and receive guided mentorship was often perceived as a means for cognitively escaping the restrictive environment of the prison, empowering participants to gain some of the tools for intellectual inquiry and personal development that they seldom received prior to incarceration.

Such a finding potentially has major implications for policymakers considering how best to justify and defend higher education in prison initiatives. For participants, it was not an "either/or" scenario in relation to valuing components of the program that were instrumental or more humanistic in nature. Instead, it was the melding together of instrumental aims (for example, the development of skills leading to better career prospects) and more personally enriching aims (such as opportunities for guided intellectual inquiry and personal development) that made involvement in the BUPEP so meaningful. Advocates and policymakers should consider these two purposes in tandem, rather than as wholly separate goals, when justifying programs. Likewise, educators and program administrators should think carefully about how best to serve *both* objectives. It may very well be that the two aims are inseparable, a humanized, student-centered approach being perhaps the most likely path toward achieving the types of desired economic and social outcomes often cited as central to programming opportunities. Careful reflection within both policymaking and curricula development on the types of experiences incarcerated students find particularly meaningful not only can help substantiate a clarity of purpose, but also can have a poten-

tially generative effect, spreading greater consciousness of the humanizing potential such programs can offer.

Finally, the BUPEP helped foster for participants a deeper capacity for self-reflection, both in terms of personal decision making and accountability, but also in relation to better understanding social contexts inside and outside prison that impact individuals and communities. Participants described most experiences in prison as either highly prescriptive or coercive in nature. It was important for participants to be involved in a program where they maintained a crucial measure of self-direction in their learning. Exposure to a broad array of learning opportunities encouraged self-reflection and inquiry, but any conclusions or insights drawn were neither prescribed nor obligatory. The encouragement of critical thinking facilitated reflective practices without mandating them, without coercing yet another form of compliance.

Such insights suggest the need for future research to explore methods for implementing components of self-directed learning into programming opportunities, as participants very much valued the ability to retain an important measure of agency within their academic lives. At a program-level, the capacity to provide opportunities for guided independent studies, either formal or informal, may provide a unique and welcomed learning experience. Faculty should consider dedicating effort within individual courses to help foster a level of independence within the learning process. This can be done by incorporating student experiences and perspectives into discussions and assignments, as well as within peer-led activities and demonstrations, allowing students to share and take in knowledge from each other. Such practices can help connect classroom learning to students' own experiences, using them as a valuable resource for learning while also allowing additional opportunities for mentorship and community building.

CONCLUSION

In considering the totality of interviews, Jennifer's remark stands out as particularly telling: "To make a human life in prison, that is the task." While the work of "feeling" or "becoming" more human is difficult—perhaps even impossible—to quantify, it is nonetheless a felt experience, one that very clearly shines through in many of the interviews with formerly incarcerated students. It is only through the process of listening to students (and former students) themselves that such voices, perspectives, and experiences are given pride of place. While reduced recidivism may indeed be a welcomed byproduct of college-level prison education, it is limited in its capacity as a justification for such programming. A purely instrumental approach does not fully capture—and, in fact, might obscure—more foundational civic principles related to the recognition of human dignity and the provision of educational access and opportunity.

There are certain unambiguous benefits to striking a balance between a vocational and more holistic approach to curricula, as well as in providing online learning opportunities in carceral settings, but policymakers, as well as program administrators and faculty, should be keenly aware of the types of experiences valued by participants in this study. In the face of disheartening personal and interpersonal dynamics in prison, it is vital that higher education programs remain deliberate in providing spaces which foster mutual respect and mentorship, which offer opportunities to develop skills and explore personal interests, and which promote self-reflection and inquiry in a nonprescriptive, noncoercive manner. Doing so can help combat some of the most dynamics inside carceral settings, helping to provide a more humane response to mass incarceration.

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Appendix A. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Sample Characteristics	*n*	*%*	*Median*	*Range*
Gender				
Men	11	52		
Women	10	47		
Race				
Black	5	24		
Latino/a/x or Hispanic	4	19		
*Multiracial Native American	1	5		
White	11	52		
Education				
Graduated with MA	1	5		
Graduated with BA	13	62		
Not Yet Completed BA	7	33		
Current Age			43	26-72
GPA			3.70	3.00-4.00
Year Started Program			2006	1974-2019
Year of Last Class/Graduation			2011	1986-2020

Note. $N = 21$.
**Self-Identified*