Rising Scholars: A Case Study of Two Community Colleges Serving Formerly Incarcerated and System-Impacted Students

Melissa Abeyta
San Diego State University

Joe Louis Hernandez
Claremont Graduate University

Anacany Torres
California State University, Long Beach

Oscar Duran
California State University, Long Beach

The California Community Colleges system has launched the Rising Scholars Network designed to house programs for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students attending community colleges in California. This study compared the structure, programmatic, functionalities, and services for this student population at two institutions. A comparative case study qualitative approach was used to compare two programmatic services. The findings of the study could be used to inform administrators and professional staff as they develop programs for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. Educators should consider an anti-deficit approach when developing student programming and institutional language when supporting this student population. Institutional sponsorship of professional development for their college administrators, faculty, and staff on issues surrounding formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students should also be considered.

Keywords: formerly incarcerated; system-impacted; community colleges

Introduction

The United States is only 5% of the world population; however, it has 25% of the world's incarcerated population as it houses 2.3 million incarcerated individuals (Hawkins, 2010; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). The second-largest incarcerated population in the country is in California with over a half-million incarcerated individuals (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). In California, six out

of every ten individuals who are released are re-incarcerated within three years of being released (Mukamal et al., 2015). A report by the Center for Institutional and Social Change identified higher education as an essential impact to reduce recidivism and positively impact the immediate social network of formerly incarcerated individuals (Sturm et al., 2010). Ninety-one percent of state and all federal prisons offer educational opportunities to their inmates in an effort to help them successfully reintegrate into society after being released (Cho & Tyler, 2013; Harlow, 2003).

In early 2019, the California Community Colleges (CCC) system launched the Rising Scholars Network. The Rising Scholars Network is designed to officially house programs specifically for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students attending community colleges in California. Formerly incarcerated students are those who have been imprisoned either in prison or jail. System-impacted students are those who have been affected by the courts through arrests or convictions but not incarceration. The term also includes the family and community that have been directly impacted by a loved one being incarcerated (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019). Currently, only 33 of the 116 California community colleges have on-campus program initiatives to help formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students navigate those institutions. For example, two programs under the Rising Scholars Network include the R.I.S.E. (Reaching Institutionalized Students Through Education) Scholars program at Rio

Hondo College, and the Transitions Program at Santa Barbara City College. Both of these are successful programs that help formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students transition to community college.

Literature Review

Although formerly incarcerated individuals are the topic of several outlets of research and modern media, this student group is seldom examined to any critical extent. The media generally neglects the rehabilitative efforts performed by formerly incarcerated people. According to a recent report released by Smith and Digard (2020), a project that collects data on currently and formerly incarcerated college students in California, higher education participation among justice system-involved students in California has grown exponentially over the past five years.

Outside of California, a recent article published in the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* explored the educational pathways of students in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated individuals at a large state university in the northeastern United States. This university program played a key role in propelling the desistance process for research participants (Runell, 2017). Additionally, this research specifically investigated the extent to which their post-incarceration educational experiences served as a "hook for change" for financial constraints, stigma, academics,

and social development (Runell, 2017, p. 894).

Formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students can be provided a consistent amount of support to help them succeed, as a deficiency of external resources can lead to failure and depression. However, because this population is rarely studied in-depth, faculty and staff are not well-equipped to support these students. "By not knowing about these students' past, the students, faculty, and university staff are unable to help these individuals adapt, succeed and deal with the pressures of their past and their own rehabilitative efforts" (Copenhaver et al., 2007, p. 269). Abeyta (2020) found that students who were formerly incarcerated and system-impacted faced intergenerational trauma from their educational pipeline experiences. It is critical for educators to have an anti-deficit lens and empathize with students from this population as they can utilize their lived experiences to be seen as holders of knowledge as they are merging their streetwise identity with their emerging scholar identity to become streetwise scholars (Hernandez, 2019).

Guiding Frameworks

The guiding frameworks for this study were Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory and Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg (1992) and Moll's et al. (1992) Funds of Knowledge (FOK). In pairing these frameworks, the authors sought to both identify how students can be supported by affirming the information students already possess and addressing how the students can reapply it in post-secondary education.

Transition Theory

Schlossberg (1984) defined a transition as any event or non-event that results in changed routines, roles, relationships, and assumptions. Upon entering a new transition, Schlossberg's (1984) theory encourages an understanding of the process involved as an individual moves through three stages: approaching transitions, or "moving in;" taking stock of coping resources, or "moving through;" and taking charge, or "moving out" (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In addition to the three stages, Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory describes an individual's transition process as involving sub-experiences and events that shape the journey of the transition. Examples of sub-experiences and events during an individual's transition process into a new system include locating physical spaces within the system, interacting positively or negatively with individuals within the system, and needing help within the system. For example, a formerly incarcerated individual returning to college will have interactions with several individuals prior to arriving to the college space, at the college space, and might or might not possess adequate knowledge to successfully enter or navigate the college space.

Funds of Knowledge

Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992) emerged as a concept in the early 1990s to counter deficit research surrounding low-income, working-class Latinx families. According to Moll et al. (1992), the knowledge that is found in these households can range from agriculture, household management, repair work, folk medicine, and material and scientific knowledge. Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg (1992), analyzed familial resources and how the families exchanged knowledge as currency within their networks connecting the trading of information through the family's interactions with others to reframing a pupil-teacher interaction as a network interaction. More recently, two studies have emerged which apply this theory to the under-researched student population of gang-involved youth (Huerta & Rios-Aguilar, 2018) and formerly incarcerated students (Hernandez, 2019). In both studies the researchers highlighted subjects' knowledge, skills, the acquisition of knowledge, and how this knowledge is utilized to successfully navigate higher education.

Methods and Data Sources

This study specifically examined two California community colleges with established programming for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. The study was guided by the following research question: How do campus resources support formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students in community colleges?

For this study, a comparative case study qualitative approach was used (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005). Case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context; Creswell, 2013). Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes (Creswell, 2013). For example, several programs (a multi-site study) or a single program (a within-site study) may be selected for study. In this research, the study was bounded by two individual colleges with participants from only those two colleges. The case study approach was utilized to compare the structure, programmatic functionalities, and services of two programs to service formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students from two distinct community colleges.

This study utilized two different community college sites where formerly incarcerated and system-impacted programs are administered. Both community colleges are located within Southern California, but in different counties. The California Community Colleges system currently has 16

post-release programs in Southern California designated by the Corrections to College California project. The two California community colleges were selected because of their established post-release programing for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. The data collection procedures used to conduct this study were 60-90-minute, semi-structured interviews with current program counselors.

A four-step process for data analysis was used for this study. Specifically, preparing the data, exploring and coding the data, refining the data, and validating the findings (Clark & Creswell, 2015). First, the researchers transcribed the data through an external transcription service. Meanwhile the researchers analyzed their interview notes in preparation to code the data. The preliminary exploratory analysis is when the researchers begin their general understanding of the data (Clark & Creswell, 2015). Secondly, the researchers began coding by an in vivo method examining the group of information from the participants in ways that correlate (Clark & Creswell, 2015). Next, we used codes to search for overarching themes. Finally, we used two methods to ensure validity of our findings: bracketing and member checking (Clark & Creswell, 2015). To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers adhered to following journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking. A field journal was used to document a written list of procedures and decision made throughout the study (Ortiz, 2003). Finally, the

researchers utilized peer debriefing and member checking to analyze findings and confirm results.

Findings

The first community college, College X, serves more than 16,275 students with 51.4% Latino, 28.9% White, 10.8% Asian, and 2.1% African American. The student-to-faculty ratio at the first community college is 36:1. The second community college, College Y, serves more than 16,263 students with 77% Latino, 11% Asian, 8% White, and less than 3% African American. The student-to-faculty ratio at the second community college is 54:1. Each of the two community colleges offers associate degrees, associate degrees for transfer, and certificate program options for students while offering a variety of service programs to students while serving a diverse student population, reflecting their service areas. Both community colleges have previously obtained distinct grants to serve formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students on their campuses.

The Hope Initiative

The program at College X, the Hope Initiative, is designed to assist formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students who have been impacted by incarceration either through having been incarcerated or through the incarceration of a family member or close friend. The Hope Initiative was founded by three College X staff members

beginning in the fall of 2018 and officially established by winter 2019, after receiving a grant to formalize and fund the initiative.

Grant funds only support the expenditures of two staff members who are coordinators of the program. Although the program staff members are responsible for developing and organizing programming and services for students, the grant does not provide funds to support other programming, additional staff, or supplies for students. The two staff members are responsible for recruitment, onboarding, case management, retention, and engagement of student participants. Students who participate in the Hope Initiative benefit from having a contact person to assist them with enrollment and with questions they have regarding their needs at the college. Staff members assist students with onboarding, with college and financial aid applications, and follow-up items leading to course registration. Staff members also engage in retention efforts of active students to ensure academic needs are being addressed and met. The retention is achieved through case management, which is the consistent contact and follow-up of individual student participants to optimize their well-being through messaging, and support via phone calls, e-mails, and counseling appointments. Since the formalization of the program, staff has seen an increase in referrals and new student inquiries by at least 50%. For example, in the first month the program grew from 15 to 30 students. The program has served 100 unique students who identified as formerly incarcerated or system-impacted and currently serves approximately 40 active students.

Hope Initiative staff also developed and facilitated an annual professional development training for the college's faculty and staff to provide awareness and information on the experiences and needs of formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. Hope Initiative staff also hosted an annual preview day for incoming and current students who are formerly incarcerated or system-impacted. Activities of the Hope Initiative which require additional funding are often additionally funded by the college's Student Equity office. This office has supported several activities of the Hope Initiative by providing meals and other materials for the program's events.

Beyond the college, the Hope Initiative engages in outreach activities to promote its services to the local community and has a formal partnership with their local sheriff's department, local parole department, and local community agencies. The Hope Initiative is also a member of their county's collective "Reentry Partnership" program. The staff of the Hope Initiative intentionally developed these relationships and promoted services of the Hope Initiative to address the reentry needs of potential students and enhance the value of education in reentry to outside organizations. These partnerships were developed for the purpose of referral of students, resource-sharing between community partners, and to continue discussions around reentry issues, reentry needs, the importance of education,

and overall community health. The Hope Initiative also works directly with local state universities to advocate for formalized programs for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students, emphasizing the importance of creating pathways for opportunities for this student population.

Project Hope

At College Y, Project Hope was founded to serve students who have experienced incarceration or have been system-impacted either through probation or the incarceration of a loved one. Project Hope was founded in Spring 2017 through the collaboration of various constituency groups at College Y; a graduate student employed in the Office of Student Equity spearheaded the project. Initially, Project Hope was presented as a way to provide services to a consistently underserved and under acknowledged portion of the student population at College Y.

The first year of the program was staffed by one part-time employee at the college who was overseen by the Director of Student Equity, which began with 20 students and provided assistance with applying to the college, a book loan program, and assistance with learning about campus resources. In the program's second-year, another graduate student was added to the team, and services expanded from those previously mentioned to include outreach and recruitment to parole meetings, assistance with English courses, and helping students to learn computer programs

such as PowerPoint. During the second year, the program grew to serve 60 students in total.

Currently, Project Hope is funded by a grant through the county reentry office, which has partnered with the probation department with continued assistance from the student equity office. Through the grant, the program seeks to serve students who are currently on adult felony probation. However, the student equity office support continues to allow for broader recruitment that can include those persons on parole or having some form of carceral system involvement. The program has expanded recruitment efforts to work with drug and alcohol treatment centers, the probation department, half-way houses or sober livings, and the parole department. In addition, Project Hope serves a women's program where the women complete the last portion of their prison sentence while they attend school and/or work. One of Project Hope's most sought-out services by the students and the community alike includes the record-clearing clinics. The student equity office at College Y partners with the county's public defender's office to provide expungement services to students and community members at no cost to them. These clinics are held at least once per semester and have been conducted for the past three years. Over 150 students and community members have been served through these events. Moreover, the program's staffing has expanded from employing only two graduate students to having a program manager, three part-time academic counselors, one graduate student, and

a classified staff member. The growth in staffing has also helped to serve an increasing number of active students. For example, the program grew to 60 students in eight months.

The program was modeled on the incarceration experience of the employee who spearheaded the project. The employee noticed that he received a better onboarding process during his first jail sentence from others who were incarcerated, than when he started college. Therefore, Project Hope has modeled the onboarding experience for students that introduces a specific student to a specific staff member in student services to assist in a "warm handoff." A similar process has been developed when community college students transfer to a four-year university. The staff at Project Hope has developed relationships with similar formerly incarcerated and system-impacted programs that exist at local state universities and has begun to facilitate a transfer experience for this student population.

Discussion and Implications

This study was conducted to compare the structure, programmatic functionalities, and services for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students from two distinct California community colleges. The findings from this study provide a blueprint for community colleges in the development stages of programs for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. The two colleges in this study had similarities in their onboarding, engagement, and

recruitment of students that increased the numbers of students served through its programmatic efforts. Another similarity is that both of these programs were founded with grants. The authors suggest that specific funding resources for this student population be included in the general fund.

The outcomes of these two programs are to provide knowledge, resources, and individual support to guide this student population on their higher education journey. Students from both programs have received onboarding support, resources, and information to be successful in their community reentry process. By helping students meet their educational goals and successfully matriculate through the colleges, recidivism among student participants has decreased. Institutional agents at both programs have provided and fostered a sense of belonging to student participants on campus and in their community.

Implications for Practice

Students who identify as formerly incarcerated and system-impacted have a social stigma connected with their past lived experiences. At the 2019 NASPA Western Regional Conference there was a *Statement of Solidarity* as a guide for practitioners (Duran et al., 2019). In the carceral system, individuals are labeled as "felons" or "convicts." However, this terminology is not only rooted in deficit thinking, but could also be detrimental to the student's development and self-esteem. Educators are mindful of stigmatizing language, as negative labels

only serve to dehumanize and retraumatize the students seeking advice and support. Instead, more humanizing language such as incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated individuals, and justice-involved persons should be used when addressing those impacted by the carceral system.

Community colleges are encouraged to develop institutional sponsorship of professional development for their college administrators, faculty, and staff on issues surrounding formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. An outside consultant who works directly with this student population or who has been directly impacted by the carceral system could facilitate the professional development training. Achieving professional development strategies that examine incarceration and its effects from a critical lens can be developed. Institutions can also consider specific professional development focused programming to include implicit bias and ally training. Such training could provide resources and tools for faculty and staff to better support this student population.

A final recommendation is for colleges to develop practice centers in higher education institutions that examine hiring practices and policies. Often these students will attend these colleges; however, they may not see themselves reflected in the administration, faculty, or staff. Colleges should consider reevaluating their hiring practices involving a person's conviction history that often disqualifies the person from positions in the college. Human resources offices can identify how a person's duties are affected by a conviction and its impact on a new position. With that caveat in mind, the prior record will not be taken into account. The authors suggest that institutions actively target people with conviction histories for employment to help serve this student population. This would assist in developing new career opportunities for those applicants with criminal records. Additionally, this would allow for formerly incarcerated students to see themselves represented among those who teach, thus assisting them on their educational journeys.

Implications for Future Research

Findings from this study raise critical implications for future research on formerly incarcerated and carceral system-impacted students. As this study utilized two different community college sites where formerly incarcerated and system-impacted programs are administered, a longitudinal study could be made to examine the transitional needs of students from this student population from incarceration, through community college, to universities. Another future comparative case study would be to examine the staff who work with programming for this student population. In particular, the experiences of the staff who are formerly incarcerated or system-impacted, and to discover how they shaped their lens to manage the program. Colleges may analyze the effectiveness of their programs for these students by determining success rates, retention in courses, persistence from

one term to another, graduation rates, and transfer rates.

Conclusion

Specialized programs for formerly incarcerated students in community colleges provide an avenue of support during their transition from post-incarceration to higher education (Abeyta, 2020; Hernandez, 2019; Manyweather, 2018; Torres, 2020). This level of support provides students with the resources and tools needed for their overall well-being, basic needs, and academic success. In addition, empowerment and reframing of students' perceptions of themselves in an academic setting may be of benefit to other formerly and currently incarcerated persons (Torres, 2020). This level of support generates a pipeline not only for college enrollment and success, but also reinforces a continuum of healthy community reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals within communities.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Dr. Melissa E. Abeyta, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Way, EBA Room 210, San Diego, CA 92182. Email: mabeyta@sdsu.edu / (951) 387-5201

References

Abeyta, M. E. (2020). *A phenomenological study of formerly incarcerated Latino men in California community colleges* (Publication No. 28317975) [Doctoral dissertation, San Diego State University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2016). *Correctional populations in the United States, 2016.* https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus16.pdf

Cerda-Jara, M., Czifra, S., Galindo, A., Mason, J., Ricks, C., & Zohrabi, A. (2019). *Underground scholars initiative: Language guide for communicating about those involved in the carceral system*. Underground Scholars Initiative.

Cho, R. M., & Tyler, J. H. (2013). Does prison-based adult basic education improve postrelease outcomes for male prisoners in Florida? *Crime & Delinquency*, *59*(7), 975-1005.

Clark, V. L. P., & Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide.* Pearson Higher Education.

Copenhaver, A., Edwards-Willey, T. L., & Byers, B. D. (2007). Journeys in social stigma: The lives of formerly incarcerated felons in higher education. *Journal of Correctional Education*, *58*(3), 268-283.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Duran, O., Griffiths, H., & Hernandez, J. L. (2019, November 2-5). *RISE scholars: Utilizing education to re-shape and empower formerly incarcerated students' experiences at Rio Hondo College* [Conference session]. NASPA Western Regional Conference, Portland, OR, United States.

Harlow, C. W. (2003). *Education and correctional populations*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

Hawkins, S. (2010). Education vs. incarceration. *The American Prospect, 22*(1), A18-A19.

Hernandez, J. L. (2019). *You are about to witness the strength of street knowledge: How formerly incarcerated Latinx/a/o students transfer their knowledge acquired through their lived experiences to find success in higher education and build resiliency* (Publication No.

13815149) [Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Long Beach]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Huerta, A. H., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2018). Treat a cop like they are God: Exploring the relevance and utility of funds of gang knowledge among Latino male students. *Urban Education*. Online First. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085918794766

Manyweather, L. H. (2018). *Escaping the prison industrial complex: The shared experiences of formerly incarcerated Black male students on a California community college campus* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. California State University, Long Beach.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, *31*(2), 132-141.

Mukamal, D., Silbert, R., & Taylor, R. M. (2015). *Degrees of freedom: Expanding college opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated Californians*. Stanford Criminal Justice Center.

Ortiz, A. M. (2003). *Ethnographic interviews. Diverse research approaches and methods applied to the college environment*. Brunner-Routledge.

Runell, L. L. (2017). Identifying desistance pathways in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated individuals. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *61*(8), 894-918.

Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2020). *Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2020*. Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html

Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition*. Springer.

Schlossberg, N. K., Waters, E. B., & Goodman, J. (1995). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. Springer.

Smith, L., & Digard, L. (2020). *From corrections to college in California: An evaluation of student support during and after incarceration*. Vera Institute of Justice.

Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443-466). Sage Publications.

Sturm, S., Skolnick, K., & Wu, T. (2010). *Building pathways of possibility from criminal justice to college: College initiative as a catalyst linking individual and systemic change*. Center for Institutional and Social Change.

Torres, A. (2020). *Watering the roses that grew from concrete: The support services for formerly incarcerated students on a community college campus* (Publication No. 28001534) [Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Long Beach]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Vélez-Ibáñez, C., & Greenberg, J. (1992). Formation and transformation of funds of knowledge among US-Mexican households. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *23*(4), 313-335.