

Beyond Barriers: Supporting formerly incarcerated students in American higher education

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Abstract: *The United States prison industry is the largest in the world. With the reintroduction of Second Chance Pell in 2015, more people are starting their education while incarcerated, and some attempt to finish after release. However, they are faced with numerous barriers that may prevent graduation. Drawing on Astin's theory of student involvement, this mixed-methods study examines the challenges that formerly incarcerated people face while pursuing college degrees. Rather than focusing on access, this research focuses on the supports that institutions of higher education can establish to help formerly incarcerated students persist and successfully complete their undergraduate degrees. The findings highlight several supports that formerly incarcerated students find helpful, including counseling, academic advising, and financial aid. There are differences between what men and women find most helpful. The findings could be used to create and adapt policies to produce a more welcoming and supportive campus environment.*

Keywords: *higher education, formerly incarcerated students, retention, reentry support*

Introduction

Over 600,000 people are released from America's jails and prisons each year, and many are likely to recidivate (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2022; Halkovic, 2014; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Although research shows lowered recidivism rates, or the likelihood of reoffending, for people with an education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Escobar et al., 2013), few higher education institutions offer targeted support for formerly incarcerated students. Despite the lack of support and research on this population, formerly incarcerated students should be given the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education, and institutions should dedicate more resources to support them. As Strayhorn et al. (2013) argue:

this population demands our collective attention, as education is the most direct pathway to economic and social mobility in America. Indeed, there is a moral and social justice imperative to better understand their challenges, dismantling policies and practices that systematically relegate them to the lower echelons of society (p. 94).

Based on best practice and an attempt to humanize all research participants, this study uses the terms formerly incarcerated people (FIP) or formerly incarcerated students (FIS) and incarcerated people or incarcerated students (Cerdeira et al., 2019).



It is also important to note that there is no single example of what a FIS looks like or what their needs are. In addition to their age and past educational backgrounds, some students may have started their post-secondary education while incarcerated, and some did not start until years after their release. The process of reentry also varies; it can be “traumatic” and is “an ongoing process” (Halkovic et al., 2013, p. 12).

The purpose of this research is to determine what supportive measures higher education institutions need to put in place to help FIS successfully complete an undergraduate degree. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the barriers, if any, that prevent formerly incarcerated students from successfully completing an undergraduate degree?
2. What institutional support should institutions of higher education provide formerly incarcerated students to help them successfully complete an undergraduate degree?

Literature Review

The American prison industry is the largest in the world (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Halkovic, 2014; Halkovic et al., 2013; Harding & Harris, 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Additionally, as Harding and Harris (2020) assert, the criminal justice system in America is “intimately connected with race, both in its causes and in its consequences” (p. 13). Castro and Zamani (2018) agree and emphasize that “incarceration disproportionately and negatively impacts communities of color, LGBTQ individuals, people with histories of mental illness or substance abuse, and communities denied access to quality education” (p. 9). Statistics from 2019 show that “Black people are incarcerated at five times the rate of White people” even though “White people make a much larger portion of the general US population than Black people” (Lampe-Martin & Beasley, 2019, p. 37). Even sentencing is disproportionate as “Black males convicted of federal crimes receive sentences that are approximately 19% longer than White males convicted of identical crimes, even after controlling for criminal history, age, and education” (Ott & McTier, 2019, p. 297). This, in turn, impacts who is receiving a post-secondary education in America.

In the past, Pell grants, federal grants for students attending an institution of higher education, provided incarcerated people with more access to higher education (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2022). However, in 1994, Pell Grants for incarcerated people were removed as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, essentially eliminating educational access to thousands of people (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Couloute, 2018; Quach et al., 2022; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). While some institutions continued to run programs funded by philanthropic donations (Quach et al., 2022), “the number of prison-based college programs [was reduced] by 90%” (Halkovic et al., 2013, p. 1). However, public sentiment has shifted in recent years as research shows the many societal benefits of offering education to incarcerated people. One of President Obama’s goals was to have “the world’s largest share of college graduates by 2020” (Strayhorn et al., 2013, p. 75). To achieve that goal, Strayhorn et al. (2013) argue that higher education institutions would “need to develop and employ more effective recruitment and retention strategies that support historically underrepresented and underserved students” (p. 75), such as incarcerated people and FIP. From July 1993 to June 2023, the Higher Education Act (HEA) “restricted the eligibility of incarcerated students to receive Pell grant” (Congressional Research Service, 2024), except under Second Chance Pell. Second Chance Pell was started by President Obama in 2015 and piloted Pell grants to some prison education programs (Delaney et al., 2019). Based on the results (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2022), Second Chance Pell expanded multiple times, and now more incarcerated people are eligible for the grants under the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Simplification Act of 2020 (Quach et al., 2022) and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which took effect on July 1, 2023 (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2022).

Expanding access to higher education is important for society. As Harding and Harris (2020) argue, “college is an important gateway (or barrier) to a successful transition to adulthood and to both inter- and intergenerational social mobility” (p. 74). American society can no longer overlook incarcerated or FIP.

However, some people do not believe tax dollars should be spent on education for incarcerated or FIP.

They argue that it is unfair to provide a free education to incarcerated people when some people who have never been convicted of a crime struggle to access or pay for an education, which was also the argument used when Pell Grants were eliminated in the 1990s. For example, after New York State Governor Cuomo proposed free education for incarcerated people, Assemblyman Butler stated that “it is outrageous that the Governor has made free college degrees for convicts a priority. . . Free college tuition for prisoners is an insult to everyone that plays by the rules and has no relief in sight” (Zoukis, 2014). What opponents like Butler fail to acknowledge is that there are many benefits to education and that education ultimately results in fewer tax dollars being spent on incarceration (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Delaney et al., 2019; Escobar et al., 2013; Halkovic et al., 2013; Ott & McTier, 2019).

The benefits of education for incarcerated or FIP tend to be discussed in terms of recidivism rates. A 2013 study found that people “who participated in correctional education programs (at any level) had 43% lower odds of recidivating than those...who did not” (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017, p. 98). A similar study in 2018 found that 48% were less likely to recidivate (Bozick et al., 2018). For people who have been incarcerated, recidivism rates are lower when a higher degree is completed (Runell, 2015). This may be because having a college degree is more helpful in the job market than vocational training (Runell, 2015).

While recidivism is an important metric, there are many other benefits of education. For FIP, some of these benefits include lower unemployment (Quach et al., 2022; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017) and more civic engagement (Halkovic et al., 2013; Quach et al., 2022). Educational experiences, specifically in prisons, also “increased knowledge and critical thinking, [a] greater ability to think through and solve problems, and [led to] heightened curiosity and desire for more education” (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018, p. 14). Education may also help “counteract the stigma many have internalized due to their incarceration” (Quach et al., 2022, p. 84). Indeed, the benefits are many and “the effects of going to college post-prison mirror those experienced by first-generation college students” (Halkovic, 2014, p. 496). The benefits for FIP are numerous and also extend to families and communities.

Benefits for families include improved relationships, especially between parents and children (Halkovic, 2014) and “increased life chances” (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017, p. 96). It may also “strengthen...intergenerational mobility” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 39). Additionally, by keeping people out of prison, families can stay together, resulting in fewer children in foster care and less welfare dependency (Halkovic, 2014).

Benefits for communities include fewer tax dollars spent on incarceration (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Delaney et al., 2019; Escobar et al., 2013; Halkovic et al., 2013; Ott & McTier, 2019). The economy would grow if more people were in the labor market. According to Castro and Zamani-Gallaher (2018), “in 2014, the nation lost the equivalent of 1.7 to 1.9 million workers because of imprisonment” (p. 10). Additionally, college graduates tend to have higher salaries, pay higher taxes, own a home, own a business, and participate and engage with their local communities (Murillo, 2021). Reports also show better public safety (Delaney et al., 2019), which strengthens communities and reduces the cost of law enforcement.

Despite the numerous benefits of higher education, many FIP struggle to access and complete a degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While prison education programs are increasing due to Second Chance Pell and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, many people are still released without having access to any type of education. In fact, “only five percent of incarcerated individuals have access to postsecondary education, and an even smaller percentage complete a degree” (Escobar et al., 2013, p. 34). Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine (2017) argue that “these staggering numbers alone suggest this population warrants critical consideration” (p. 96) and demonstrate a clear need for additional resources for FIP (Donaldson & Viera, 2021).

Approximately 29 percent of the U.S. population earns a college degree; while only four percent of FIP earn a college degree (Donaldson & Viera, 2021). This is partly because “supporting college enrollment immediately after release from prison is more complex than making it available in prison” (Delaney et al., 2019, p. 38). This group faces more barriers than traditional adult learners, so institutions need to be better prepared to support them (Custer, 2018; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017).

Even after they are released, the lives of FIP are not easy, because they face a myriad of barriers that are often called “collateral consequences” (Custer, 2018; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017; U.S. Depart-

ment of Education, 2016). One consequence is limited educational access and, therefore, limited employment opportunities. Additional barriers prevent FIP from enrolling in college, including admission policies that prevent people with convictions from enrolling, mandatory disclosure or background checks during the application process, or denying financial aid for people with certain convictions (Couloute, 2018; Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Custer, 2018; Halkovic, 2014; Harding & Harris, 2020; Lampe-Martin & Beasley, 2019; Ott & McTier, 2019; Quach et al., 2022). Since these barriers and their impact have been well-researched and documented as part of the Ban the Box initiative (Donaldson & Viera, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), this research does not focus on the issue of access.

Instead, this research focuses on the barriers that may prevent FIP from persisting and successfully completing their undergraduate degrees. A study conducted by Harding and Harris (2020) followed 338 men in Michigan who enrolled in a postsecondary institution after incarceration and found that “only twenty (or about six percent) earned a degree or certificate” (p. 102). Additionally, another study looked at the time since release and determined that “even four or more years after release, the educational attainment of formerly incarcerated people still lags well behind that of the general public” (Couloute, 2018, p. 8). However, these studies did not determine why the students did not graduate.

The barriers that may prevent degree completion may include parole; finances; family responsibilities; and access to housing, food, transportation, and clothing (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Delaney et al., 2019; Halkovic et al., 2014; Lampe-Martin & Beasley, 2019; Miller et al., 2014; Ott & McTier, 2019; Quach et al., 2022; Strayhorn et al. 2013). One study found that parole requirements can “substantially hamper college attendance and engagement” (Quach et al., 2022, p. 80). For example, there may be curfews or meetings with parole officers that interfere with coursework, or FIS may not be allowed to fraternize with other FIP, which eliminates the ability to join a cohort with other FIS (Delaney et al., 2019; Quach et al., 2022). Parole might also require “secure housing” (Quach et al., 2022, p. 88). Not being able to live in on-campus housing or near campus adds “to the strain of learning how to simultaneously balance academic, social, and familial responsibilities” (Runell, 2015, p. 14). Each of these many barriers could prevent degree completion.

Additionally, many students, including FIS, need to work to pay for the cost of their post-secondary education. Employment might also be a condition of parole (Delaney et al., 2019; Quach et al., 2022). On-campus work, often called work-study, is a way for students to make money and gain experience without having to leave campus. However, some campuses prevent FIS from working on campus as student employees are subject to background checks (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Custer, 2018).

The stigma and discrimination associated with disclosing their status as a FIS may also impact a student’s ability to persist (Ott & McTier, 2019; Runell, 2015). Students may have to disclose numerous times, and “it is the continual unveiling of a student’s criminal history at different points in the college journey that harms these students, making them feel exposed and vulnerable” (Custer, 2018, p. 60). Their convictions mean they might “be unable to enroll in certain majors, have limited campus employment opportunities, and be barred from participating in co- or extracurricular activities” (Ott & McTier, 2019, p. 298). Stigma may also prevent FIS from finding a sense of belonging on campus, which may impact their persistence.

Lack of specialized on-campus support is another barrier that may impact persistence. As Strayhorn et al. (2013) argue, “the kind of help they [FIS] needed was far from general and included unique forms of advice, information, or guidance” (p. 87). The barriers outlined above suggest that this population needs “specific types of support based on the unique challenges they confront” (Donaldson & Viera, 2021, p. 18). FIS are similar to other populations such as veterans but have different needs.

Importantly, as noted earlier, people of color are disproportionately incarcerated, so many FIS are people of color; however, FIS aren’t usually included in the diversity statements of post-secondary institutions. Including this population puts “institutions of higher education on the front lines of an important social justice issue of our time” (Halkovic, 2014, p. 494). Institutions have the opportunity to address the racial disparities in our educational system.

Some institutions offer specific support to help overcome the barriers, but they often “seem haphazard” (MacKillop, 2017, p. 171). A new, emerging model is called the hybrid model that offers college education “in prison *and* upon reentry” (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017, p. 100). However, only a few institutions offer this type of “direct link to community-based education for those leaving prison” (p. 100). Additionally, since there are not as many hybrid programs, “it is questionable how the structure and resources of these programs

grams meet the standards of available research on successful transition programs” (Lampe-Martin & Beasley, 2019, p. 38). Hybrid programs would help alleviate “the stress of the reentry process on the individual by outlining a clear path to accessing resources” (p. 39), but more research is needed to see how effective they are.

Despite the large number of FIS, very little research documents their experiences (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018; Donaldson & Viera, 2021; Halkovic, 2014; Halkovic et al., 2013; McTier et al., 2020; Runell, 2015; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Castro & Zamani-Gallaher (2018) argue that part of the problem is that

there are no systematic data collection mechanisms, and collecting student-level data is potentially unethical. Thus, there are barriers to fully understanding both the experiences of currently and formerly incarcerated college students and the factors that influence their access to and completion of higher education (p. 10).

The unethical aspect that the authors describe is the possible discrimination that comes from mandatory disclosure of criminal backgrounds throughout a FIP’s enrollment.

Even though formerly incarcerated women are believed to need additional support after release, typically due to their increased family and child responsibilities, they tend to be less researched than men (Donaldson & Viera, 2021; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Sokoloff and Schenck (2017) argue that “there is a clear imperative to pay special attention to particular needs of women in and coming out of prison” (p. 104). Castro and Zamani-Gallaher (2018) agree because “formerly incarcerated women and women of color can face complicated and unfair stigmatization related to gender, sex, and parenting” (p. 20). In almost all the literature and research reviewed, women were either not included, or the sample was very small.

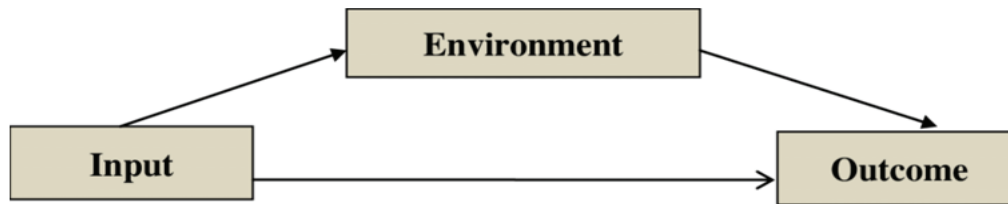
The literature covers the many barriers that FIS face and provides some recommendations for how to support this population. However, the research was lacking in that most studies were qualitative with very few participants, or only included men, or failed to include the voices of the FIS themselves.

Theoretical Framework

No single variable can predict what makes a student persist and graduate, and other research done with FIS tends to focus on student attributes rather than the environmental structures that post-secondary institutions can create. For example, theories in the literature ranged from desistance from crime (Runell, 2015), transition theory (Strayhorn et al., 2013), stigma (Ott & McTier, 2019), and sense of belonging (McTier et al., 2020). Perhaps this focus on the student attributes is because it can be difficult to determine exactly what makes a difference in retention. Astin (2001) argues that “environmental assessment is not only the most difficult and complex challenge in the field of higher education research, but is also the most neglected topic in the assessment literature” (p. 33). However, environmental variables are what institutions can control, so they should not be ignored.

Despite the complexity associated with assessing environmental variables, that is what this research attempts to study. This research uses Astin’s theory of Student Involvement, which is based on Astin’s Input-Environment-Outcome (IEO) model (see Figure 1). I chose IEO as the theoretical framework for this study because its “principal purpose is to enhance our understanding of how undergraduate students are affected by their college experiences” (p. xix) and to “assess the impact of various environmental experiences by determining whether students grow or change differently under varying environmental conditions” (p. 7). This study looks for growth or change in retention and graduation.

Astin developed this theory in 1962, and it has “undergone a number of refinements over the years” (p. 7). The theory and model consider the “inputs” of a student, i.e., the “characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution” (p.7). In this study, the main input considered is incarceration. The theory and model also consider environmental factors, which Astin groups into six categories: institutional characteristics, curriculum, faculty, peer group, residence, major and financial aid, and student involvement.

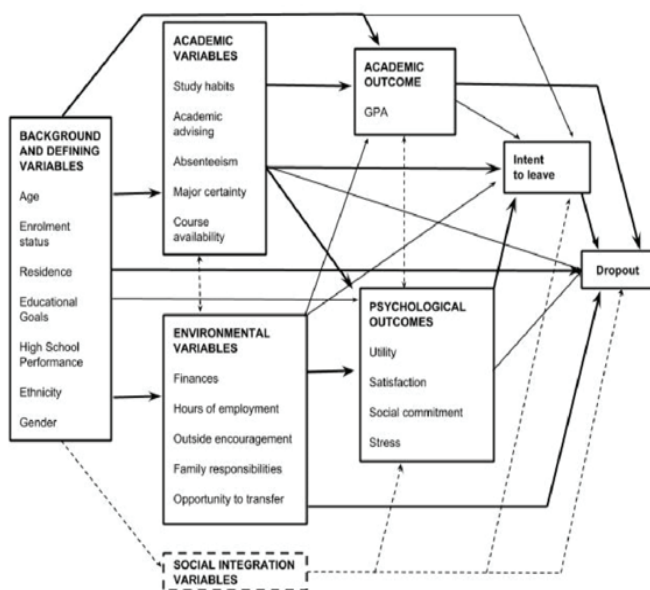
Figure 1*The IEO Model (Astin, 1991)*

Note. Adapted from Astin, A. (1991). *Assessment for excellence: The philosophy and practice of assessment and evaluation in higher education*. Oryx Press.

This complexity also means that not many researchers focus on environmental variables as Astin does, but his work has informed many other studies. Even the most prominent researchers in student retention, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005, 2016), look to Astin's work. How College Affects Students "is based on Astin's (1984) framework for understanding how college affects students" (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 2). Pascarella and Terenzini believe Astin's framework and its categories "work together to explain college and its effects on students" (p. 2). Understanding how college affects students allows institutions to direct resources to the most effective student supports.

Van Horne et al. (2018) used this theory and model to study international students, another nontraditional student population. They point out that the "theory would suggest that success is largely a matter of effort made by and on behalf of the student" (p. 353). The effort made on behalf of the student is what is most important to my research.

One limitation of Astin's model is that he did not test it on nontraditional students. However, his model is closely aligned with Bean and Metzner's model (1985), which argues that environmental variables are "more important for nontraditional students than academic variables" (p. 491). Bean and Metzner's environmental variables include finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer (see Figure 2).

Figure 2*A conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 491)*

Note. Adapted from Bean, J. & Metzner, B. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 485-540.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1170245>

Astin's IEO theory "is more concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development (the how of student development)" (Astin, 1999, p. 522). By using this theory, post-secondary institutions can consider the "processes that facilitate student development" (p.522). Institutions can reevaluate how to respond to the students' needs rather than putting the onus on the students.

IEO theory informs the survey questions this research uses. The survey focuses on the environmental variables that the institution can offer, such as housing, counseling, advising, transportation, and campus-work opportunities. During data analysis, I looked to see which environmental variables might affect student retention.

Methods

Research Design

This mixed-methods study was designed to better understand the environmental variables that influence the persistence of FIS in higher education. The study utilized an anonymous online survey that included optional open-ended questions for participants to share their stories in more detail. The design is a simultaneous approach in that both the qualitative and quantitative data are collected at the same time. Additionally, the qualitative portion gives a voice to this population. As Creswell and Creswell (2023) note, a mixed methods study is "suitable for studying the complex problems of today that require gathering numbers and hearing the voices of individuals" (p. 23).

The study uses an explanatory design, which is "most appropriate to research that analyzes relationships or trends using a quantitative approach, but also wants to be able to address underlying mechanisms or reasons" (Patten & Newhart, 2018, p.178). Explanatory design is the best approach for this study because the quantitative portion attempts to understand "the best predictors of outcomes" (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 20), such as what environmental variables best predict successfully completing an undergraduate degree.

Setting

Because not all higher education institutions ask applicants about their conviction history, there is no way to know how many students were formerly incarcerated. Therefore, I conducted a nationwide survey to find as many participants as possible. Based on my research, I selected institutions that educate FIS and reached out to all institutions that were listed on the National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs (National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs, n.d.). In total, I contacted nearly 450 higher education institutions and organizations that work with currently and formerly incarcerated people; 16 agreed to distribute the survey. Finally, I reached out to six social media groups for FIP and posted the survey in their public groups.

Participants

Respondents were eligible to participate if they were over 18 and had served at least 24 hours in jail. Participation was open to all genders and to those on parole. Respondents were excluded from participating if still incarcerated; under 18; on work release, house arrest, in hospitals, or in alcohol/drug treatment facilities under court order.

I received 47 responses. Participant data can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1*Demographic Information of Survey Participants*

	n	%
Gender:		
Female	12	25.5
Male	35	74.5
Non-binary	0	0
Did not answer	0	0
Race:		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0
Asian	0	0
Black or African American	11	23.4
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0
White	19	40.4
Did not answer	13	27.7

Instruments

Program directors or research coordinators at these institutions and organizations sent a survey on my behalf via Microsoft Forms. The survey included demographic and background questions and then asked participants to reflect on the time enrolled in a post-secondary institution after their incarceration (see Appendix A).

Data Collection Procedures

Participation in this research was completely voluntary. The survey was conducted using Microsoft Forms. A human consent form was provided at the start of the survey and participants could end the survey at any time if they chose not to participate for any reason.

Names and email addresses of participants were not collected, but participants had the opportunity to share their contact information if they were interested in a gift card lottery.

Because this population was hard to reach and may have hesitations about participating and disclosing their involvement in the criminal justice system, I offered a lottery for participants. Those who wished to join the lottery provided their email at the end of the survey. I provided 10 \$20 Visa gift cards, which were sent via email to the selected participants. Each participant was assigned a number when they completed the survey, so I used the random-number generator function in Microsoft Excel to choose winners, which ensured the winners were selected fairly and without bias.

I used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze the quantitative data, and I used QDA Miner Lite, a data analysis software, to complete the thematic analysis and open coding with the qualitative data. I saved and maintained all data in a password-protected OneDrive folder.

Data analysis

The data analysis techniques are based on the theoretical framework and IEO model. Specifically, the survey attempts to understand what environmental factors impacted the retention and graduation of these participants. Once the data was collected and the survey was closed, quantitative data was loaded into SPSS software, and qualitative data was uploaded into the QDA Miner Lite software.

First, for the quantitative analysis, I used descriptive statistics to describe the sample and to calculate the means and standard deviations for the variables. Next, I looked at the rankings of support variables and ran t-tests to analyze differences across groups (such as men and women, finished and still in progress). Of the participants, 21 had completed a degree (44.65%), 24 were still in progress (51.06%), and two did not finish (4.26%).

Then, I took the highest-ranked variables and ran a regression analysis to measure the impact of the variables on graduation, but none was significant. Finally, for the qualitative analysis, I read the open-ended answers multiple times, and coded themes. I looked specifically for information about the environmental conditions that the institutions created to encourage student involvement and persistence.

Quantitative Analysis

Of the 47 participants, 12 identified as women (25.5%), and 35 identified as men (74.5%). The majority of the participants identified as White ($n=19$, 40.4%); 13 preferred not to answer (27.7%); 11 identified as Black or African American (23.4%) (see Table 1). The average age was 44, and ages ranged from 27-62. The average age when participants first enrolled in higher education after incarceration was 22-58 with a mean of 38.62 ($SD=10.72$), which means almost all were older than the traditional aged college student (ages 17-22). This average is in line with data on incarcerated individuals as “the vast majority...in federal prisons are older than 25” (Donaldson & Viera, 2021).

The majority of participants had no college education before they were incarcerated ($n=34$, 72.34%). There were 12 (25.5%) who had some high school but no degree; nine (19.1%) had a GED and 13 (27.7%) had a high school diploma. Nine (19.1%) had some college but no degree. Only four (8.4%) had some type of college degree.

After incarceration, all participants went on to attend college. At the time of the survey, 15 (31.9%) had an Associate’s degree, six (12.8%) had a Bachelor’s degree, and six (12.8%) had a graduate degree. An additional 15 (31.9%) had some college but had not yet earned a degree.

Some participants had access to education during incarceration. 12 (25.5%) received no education; 13 (27.7%) attended classes but did not receive a degree; five (10.6%) received a certificate; nine (19.1%) received an Associate’s degree; one (2.1%) received a Bachelor’s degree; three (6.4%) received vocational training; and four (8.5%) had other classes such as substance abuse treatment, anger management, and other rehabilitative classes.

Of the institutions attended, most participants attended a public two-year college ($n=20$, 42.55%) or a public four-year college or university ($n=20$, 42.55%). Some may have also attended a public two-year institution before attending a four-year institution. Two (4.26%) attended a private four-year institution, one (2.17%) attended a for-profit two-year, one (2.17%) attended a for-profit four-year, and three (6.38%) attended other types of institutions.

To better understand which institutional supports were most important to FIS, participants were asked to rate 16 variables on a scale of one to five, with five being the most important and one being the least important. I selected variables based on environmental factors identified from the literature review and theoretical framework. Participants who did not receive assistance or were not given access to this type of support were instructed to select N/A. For each variable, I looked at the average ranking and how many participants responded (See Table 2).

Table 2

Ranking of Variables

Supports	Number who responded	Mean Ranking
Counseling (mental health)	44	4.20
Academic Adviser	44	4.09
Tutoring	41	3.95
Admission support/advising	42	3.83
Books	38	3.76
Employment support	38	3.74
Mentorship	35	3.69
Referrals to local organizations for other supports and/or resources	40	3.63

Food	32	3.25
Technology training	35	3.23
Childcare	15	3.20
Career Planning	34	3.18
Assistance with parole	22	3.14
Transportation	28	3.07
Clothing	23	2.87
Housing (on-campus)	15	2.47

From table 2 it is seen that the highest ranked variables (in order) are mental health counseling, academic adviser, tutoring, admission support, books, employment support, mentorship, and referrals.

There were additional survey questions about mentors, with 55.32% (26 out of 47) indicating that their post-secondary institution provided them with a mentor; and 73.08% (19 out of 26) indicating that the mentor had experience with incarceration. Of those mentors, 89.47% (17 out of 19) were also formerly incarcerated. One participant said, “mentorship opportunities to help the student stay successful and on the right path.” Most participants had a peer mentor, and it was a high-ranking variable, which highlights its importance.

I ran a *t*-test to determine if there were significant group differences between the rankings of men and women. Four variables indicated a significant difference: childcare, career planning, technology training, and transportation (see Table 3). Though there were fewer women participating in the study, they ranked these four variables much higher than the men. Out of the twelve women participants, the five women who ranked childcare ($M=4.60$, $SD=0.89$) compared to the 10 men ($M=2.50$, $SD=1.72$) ranked the support significantly higher, $t(13)=2.54$, $p=0.03$. The nine women who ranked career planning ($M=4.33$, $SD=1.32$) compared to the 25 men ($M=2.76$, $SD=1.66$) ranked the support significantly higher, $t(32)=2.55$, $p=0.03$. The 10 women who ranked technology training ($M=3.10$, $SD=1.29$) compared to the 25 men ($M=3.28$, $SD=1.84$) ranked the support significantly higher, $t(33)=-0.28$, $p=0.08$. The seven women who ranked transportation ($M=4.00$, $SD=1.15$) compared to the 21 men ($M=2.76$, $SD=1.76$) ranked the support significantly higher, $t(26)=1.73$, $p=0.02$.

When comparing the women’s highest ranked variables to the overall highest ranked variables, the women’s that rank higher are firstly childcare ($M=4.60$, $SD=0.89$), then career planning ($M=4.33$, $SD=1.32$), and then counseling ($M=4.20$).

Table 3

t-test comparing women and men

Support	Gender	N	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>
Childcare	Women	5	4.60	.894	0.03
	Men	10	2.50	1.72	
Career Planning	Women	9	4.33	1.32	0.03
	Men	25	2.76	1.66	
Technology Training	Women	10	3.10	1.29	0.08
	Men	25	3.28	1.84	
Transportation	Women	7	4.00	1.15	0.02
	Men	21	2.76	1.76	

Since grade point average (GPA) is a strong predictor of persistence (Astin, 2001, p. 241), I ran a bivariate correlation test, which revealed a significance between GPA ($M=3.52$, $SD=0.362$) and if an institution was in contact with a student before their release ($M=1.66$, $SD=0.48$), $p=0.00$. This aligns with the findings in Table 2, which show that admission support was highly ranked. I also ran a chi-square test to look for an association between each of the highest ranked variables and GPA, but none was significant. I also checked for a correlation between GPA and having a peer mentor, GPA and working full-time, part-time, or not at all, and GPA and type of institution attended, but found no significant correlation.

I also ran a *t*-test comparing the rankings of those who finished and those who were still working on their degree, and found no significant differences.

Qualitative Analysis

As noted earlier, giving a voice to the students was important as many of the studies with this population were very small. Some of the major themes from the open-ended survey questions were work ethic, finances, and student services such as mentoring, counseling, and academic advising, which aligns with the quantitative data.

Many participants noted their work ethic. One participant said “we belong in every space. We are resilient, smart, and determined. We have a work ethic second to none, and we have academic integrity.” Another participant said, “We are smart, dedicated, and hardworking. We don't take this chance for granted, and if allowed to succeed, we will shine in ways that will surprise you.” Such testimonials demonstrate that the participants are highly motivated, which is an important factor beyond the scope of this research, which focuses on the institutional supports that will help the students graduate.

Yet, many voiced their frustration with the higher education institutions they dealt with after incarceration. One said that institutions do not recognize “how hard it is to deal with the barriers of having a record.” Another said that “the system didn't do its job, so I had to do it myself.” They asked for institutions to be patient and understanding:

“being treated like an animal for years of your life chips a piece of your humanity, and you constantly think others are judging you or will not help you. Offer the help, and don't be surprised when the person says, “Why would you help me?”

Finances were also mentioned numerous times. One participant said they needed “more financial assistance. Rebuilding our lives post-incarceration is financially very difficult, especially when starting from nothing.” Helping with finances can even include the seemingly simple financial transactions. As one participant remarked, “Most of us do not have a bank account and only have cash. That was a problem because the [school] cafeterias only take credit cards.”

Student services such as mentoring, counseling, and academic advising were another important theme in the open-ended answers. Participants said they needed “mentors and others to help with resources” and “more counseling for us.” Counseling can help support students' mental health as they navigate their reentry and the stigma of their conviction. Some participants mentioned that they did not disclose their conviction status or disclosed on a need-to-know basis, while others said the disclosure was not a struggle. One participant noted that disclosure would have been easier if they saw “others like me.”

The scheduling of classes and student services was also frequently noted. One participant noted that “this schedule is impossible to meld with a regular job. The classes and work hours do not merge.” Another said that one of the biggest barriers to their success was the “lack of accessible tutors.” Accessibility might mean available times because, as one participant stated, “the biggest barrier for me is that most classes that I need to complete are only offered during the day. I work 40 hours a week, and more online and night classes would help me out the most.” At no point in the survey did participants ask for services that were not already offered—their biggest issue was not always being able to access existing services.

Discussion

Needs vary greatly across this population, and as one student noted, they “can't speak for all formerly incarcerated.” However, by hearing directly from FIS, something that was often limited in past research, we can learn more about their needs and how institutions can better support them. Specifically, by using Astin's IEO theoretical framework, we can evaluate the environmental factors that institutions should put in place to better support these students.

To begin, institutions must also make sure policies and procedures are in place to make sure these students can access support. As one participant stated, policies should “welcome and support us. Policy sets the tone.” As more institutions focus on creating diverse and inclusive campuses, they should make sure to include this population in their efforts. As Mayhew et al. (2016) point out, “quality engagement with peers of diverse...backgrounds...inspires positive attitudes in ways that few other educational interventions have the power to do” (p. 598). Inclusion of this population benefits the entire campus.

The results of the survey also show the importance of supports that many institutions already offer, such as counseling and academic advising. Additionally, as Eisenberg et al. (2016) highlight, “given the connection between mental health, retention, and resilience, it is necessary to have a counseling center offering the broad range of prevention and intervention services” (p. 93). Institutions should consider the demands of FIS and make sure tutoring, counseling, and academic advising are available at hours that are convenient for them. Many institutions already have nontraditional students on their campuses, and research has shown that “nontraditional students pursuing higher education often face a lack of time due to competing priorities such as work and parenting” (Donaldson & Viera, 2021, p. 16). Improving scheduling could help all nontraditional student populations, including FIS.

As noted in the findings, participants believed it would be easier to disclose their conviction history if they saw others like themselves. Additionally, one participant recommended “a student-led RSO [registered student organization] for formerly incarcerated individuals.” Peer mentors, professional mentors, or cohorts of FIS, such as a student club, could be helpful. Eisenberg et al. (2016) argue that “peer support groups can offer an important complement to the services provided by campus professionals. Student affairs leaders should foster the growth and development of these groups” (p. 92-93). No matter how the services are configured, representation among this population matters. Institutions should create opportunities for this population to create community among themselves.

One procedure that institutions should update is the recruitment of FIP. Admission support was highly ranked in the survey results, and an institution reaching out before a student was released was positively correlated with a higher GPA. As Mayhew et al. (2016) explain, “college GPA appears to explain or mediate the relationship between academic integration (or involvement) and subsequent retention” (p. 415). Therefore, institutions should attempt to recruit FIS while they are incarcerated so the options are understood before release. Eliminating questions about criminal records in the application process could also help attract FIS since evidence “suggests that the requirement to disclose their conviction history may discourage people from even applying” (Donaldson & Viera, 2021, p. 9). Finding and eliminating unnecessary barriers is important for this population.

Most of these recommendations would not require substantial financial investments. Most already have the services being requested—counseling, academic advising, employment support, and mentors. Higher education is experiencing significant disruption with declining demographics of college-aged students (Schwartz, 2023). Some institutions are closing or consolidating (Higher Ed Dive Team, 2023), but many have yet to tap into the potential of FIS.

Additionally, as noted during the literature review, formerly incarcerated women have different needs and ranked supports differently from men who took the survey. There was a significant difference in the ranking of childcare as a necessary support. Institutions that recruit formerly incarcerated women should offer or help secure childcare.

FIS are a large population that would greatly benefit from a post-secondary education and institutions should do more to recruit and retain them. Additionally, many institutions purport to support social justice initiatives, and supporting this population, which is largely made up of people of color, can help address the injustices of our criminal justice system. As Halkovic et al. (2013) note, “there is a growing consensus that institutions benefit from diversity, and that diversity is maximally productive when the organization seeks out the unique talents that each participant contributes to the college community” (p. 18). FIS, their peers, and the institutions that admit and support them all benefit from their enrollment and persistence.

Limitations

One limitation of the survey was the sample size. While this was one of the larger studies done with this population, it would have been helpful to compare this group to a larger group of FIS who started but did not successfully complete their degree.

As the literature review suggested, more focus needs to be paid to formerly incarcerated women, and as evidenced in the results of the independent samples *t*-test, they have different needs.

Finally, this population had a smaller percentage of African American and Black participants compared to the population and the percentage of the population that is incarcerated. A study with a sample size of the formerly incarcerated population would represent the challenges of this group better.

Conclusion

This research examined what institutional supports FIS need to successfully complete an undergraduate degree. Given that over 600,000 people are released from America's jails and prisons every year, the country cannot afford to deny them a post-secondary education. The costs of investing in this population are outweighed by the numerous benefits for individuals, their families, and communities. The findings highlight the fact that the supports needed, such as counseling, academic advising, and mentorship, are typically already offered on campuses. Therefore, institutions should make sure that the supports are easily accessible to this population and that the FIS are communicated with regarding what is available to them. Since this study had limited participation of women and FIS who dropped out, additional research should look at those sub-populations more closely. Supporting FIS is beneficial for both the students and institutions and is especially important as many institutions face a disruption in demographics and resources.

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Appendix A

Survey Background Questions

Age:

Gender (please select one): Woman Man Non-binary Prefer not to answer

Race:

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Prefer not to answer

How long were you incarcerated for?

Level of education before incarceration (please select one):

Some high school, no degree

GED

High school diploma

Some college, no degree

Associate's degree

Bachelor's degree

Certificate

Graduate degree

Level of education after incarceration (If you are a current student, select the last level of education you completed):

Some high school, no degree

GED

High school diploma

Some college, no degree

Associate's degree

Bachelor's degree

Certificate

Graduate degree

Did you receive any education while incarcerated?

None

Courses but no degree

Certificate

Associate's Degree

Bachelor's degree

Vocational training

Other:

Your age when you enrolled in college/university after incarceration:

Type of college/university attended after incarceration (check all that apply):

Private, 4 year

Public, 4 year

Public, 2 year

For profit, 4 year

For profit, 2 year

Religious

Other:

Was your degree online?

Completely online partially online all in-person

Name of institution that you attended after incarceration (please list all that you attended):

If you are a current student, select your current classification:

Freshmen Sophomore Junior Senior N/A

GPA (your cumulative GPA when you graduated or your current cumulative GPA):

Did a college/university reach out to you before you were released? (ie: did you know about your options for education before being released)?

Yes No

How many years did it take you to complete your undergraduate degree?

3 4 5 6 7 8 did not finish still in progress

Did you take a leave of absence at any point during your enrollment?

Yes No

If yes, for how long?