

Conquering barriers: How formerly incarcerated Black men define and achieve success in higher
education

by

Heather Dawn Moore

B.S., Kansas State University, 1999
M.A., Kansas State University, 2016

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

Abstract

This grounded theory study applies both critical race theory and anti-deficit frameworks to recognize the systemic barriers that are in place to limit the success of formerly incarcerated Black students and challenges anti-deficit perspectives that fault those affected by oppressive systems rather than the systems themselves. This qualitative study used open-ended semi-structured interviews to learn how formerly incarcerated Black men defined and achieved postsecondary academic success. Participants described success in relation to goal achievement and discussed that internal motivation to reach their goals was one of two essential criteria for being academically successful. The other criterion for their success is having support to overcome unique challenges related to being formerly incarcerated. This study adds to the literature to build the knowledge and insight of this underserved student group and urges campuses to consider the educational human right in providing access and support for these students as both a societal obligation to open opportunities for formerly incarcerated people and to welcome diverse populations to their campuses by providing intentional support and access to academic success.

Keywords: qualitative, formerly incarcerated, higher education, success, grounded theory

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Christy Craft

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Dedication

I extend my deepest gratitude to all those mentioned and many more who have supported and guided me on this journey.

To my mom - you will no longer have to ask how my paper is coming because it is now complete, and I dedicate this dissertation to you. Your unwavering support, patience, and encouragement have sustained me throughout this and every other long journey I have gone on.

To my boys - You have grown up in a world where your mom was always in school and always had homework to do. My homework is finally done, and this dissertation is dedicated to you and the sacrifices you made so that I could earn my degrees. It is a testament to the importance of determination and a passion for learning that I hope will motivate you.

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To my husband –This dissertation will earn me the right to use the title of Dr., but “Mrs.” will always be my preference. It also marks the end of one chapter and the start of the next, and I can’t wait to write every page of the next chapter With you.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Overview of the Topic

The collateral damage of mass incarceration in the United States ignores education as a human right by preventing those incarcerated from the same access and opportunity for gaining knowledge and economic security. Because of the disparity in the United States justice system, the population affected most severely by these limitations are Black men, who are disadvantaged throughout their educational experiences, limiting their opportunity for access and success in postsecondary education.

Mass Incarceration

The United States' embrace of mass incarceration has led to approximately 2.3 million people imprisoned in jails and prisons (Bronson & Carson, 2019; Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). It is important to note how this number is estimated. Juveniles and adults sentenced to incarceration may serve time in detention centers, public or private state or federal prisons, local jails, or a combination of these options; therefore, it is common to find data grouped together or commonly referenced (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Incarceration statistics vary and may or may not include community supervision, such as probation or parole (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Of the 2.3 million people in United States jails and prisons, over 95% of them will be released (compared to life or extreme sentences, which will not lead to release). About 600,000 people will be released annually (Carson, 2020). After release, correctional control affects almost 4.5 million people on probation or parole (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Nearly half of those released in the United States

return to incarceration within three years (Davis et al., 2013), indicating a distinct need to evaluate this high recidivism rate. High recidivism rates disproportionately affect Black people, resulting in representation at a much higher rate than White people across the judicial system and corrections. Though the disparity has narrowed more recently, Black men have been consistently overrepresented in the system; they are incarcerated at about six times more than White men (Bronson & Carson, 2019). In addition to race, the pattern of over-incarceration includes more significant numbers of teenaged Black youths versus White teenagers of typical transitional college age. Strikingly, Black men aged 18 to 19 “are about 12 times more likely to be imprisoned” than their White counterparts (Bronson & Carson, 2019; Carson, 2020). The incarceration rate for those aged 18-24 is 12% for young Black men compared to 7% for White men in the same age group (Bronson & Carson, 2019).

The challenges of a criminal record remain for these young men post-incarceration (Custer, 2018a; Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). A permanent criminal record affects approximately 70 million people (Johnson et al., 2020; Wagner & Rabuy, 2017), including 20 million people with a felony record, which may never be removed from background check data (Jacobs, 2015). Having a criminal record creates ongoing burdens on successful reintegration into society and significantly limits opportunities for post-release success, including limiting experiences to earn an advanced degree.

Education as a Human Right

Regarding social justice and humanitarian approaches, throughout history, education has been reaffirmed as a human right (Gilchrist, 2018; Kinney, 2007; Kunz, 1949; Lee, 2013). Higher education as a human right was initially declared in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “...higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, based on merit” (United Nations, 1948, p. 4). However, though established as a human right, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals do not have equitable access to or adequate support for obtaining an education (Kim, 2016). In addition to the challenges of access to education, little research is available for this specific group in the area of students’ college success after incarceration (Brower, 2015; Custer, 2018a; McTier et al., 2017), despite the known benefits of earning a degree in higher education, which include reducing recidivism (Magee, 2021), improved socioeconomic status, access to social opportunities and social acceptance (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013; Tyler & Brockmann, 2017), all of which increase post-release success (McTier et al., 2017; Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). A challenge for researchers to address this gap is a lack of centralized data, such as the statistical information reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Within NCES, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDs) gathers institutional and performance data for higher education, including demographic and persistence data. Though this database is the official and central hub for reporting demographic data and indicators of performance for the United States educational

system, this data does not include student or school performance information for those formerly incarcerated (McTier et al., 2017).

Despite a lack of information on this topic, the positive impact of higher education on long-term social and employment success for incarcerated people is well-established (Ott & McTier Jr, 2019; Pryor & Thompkins, 2013; Strayhorn et al., 2013). The value of supporting formerly incarcerated Black male college students includes supporting their success, recognizing their intersectional identities, and welcoming their knowledge and experiences within the classroom and across the campus community. Additionally, incorporating formerly incarcerated students adds to the variety of perspectives and diverse insights required to maximize classroom learning and discussion (Ross, 2019), which further supports the importance of gathering individual and campus data on these students' successes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to learn about the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black male students and their post-admission success in higher education and to develop a working theory about their success.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis to develop an emerging theory of how these learners are successful despite their barriers:

1. How do formerly incarcerated Black male college students define success in higher education?

2. How do formerly incarcerated Black male college students achieve success in higher education?

Significance of the Study

As a result of this study, I encourage higher education stakeholders to provide for and welcome this population of students, foster their success, and recognize and embrace the value of their experiences and knowledge as an asset to the campus community. This study will add to the small body of existing qualitative research on formerly incarcerated students' experiences and destigmatize their experiences by focusing on their successes. While this study recognizes all formerly incarcerated people who forge through the challenges of higher education, it acknowledges the additional barriers of racism experienced by Black men, who are both overrepresented in the mass incarceration system in the United States (Brower, 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Tyler & Brockmann, 2017) and underrepresented in higher education (Brower, 2015; McTier Jr et al., 2020; Naylor et al., 2015). Formerly incarcerated Black students face additional hurdles to achieving upward social mobility and equal educational opportunities. This research will add data to a recognized gap in the literature on how formerly incarcerated students are successful in higher education (Brower, 2015; Custer, 2018a; Ehnou, 2018; McTier et al., 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

This research is significant for social justice and student development interests across higher education. From a social justice perspective, earning an advanced degree centers higher education as a pathway to upward social mobility, including increased job opportunities and

earning potential for those incarcerated, particularly for Black men (Brower, 2015; Ott & McTier Jr, 2019). From an educational perspective, research on this population of students often comes from either a deficit perspective, which associates adverse outcomes with cultural stereotypes (Bensimon, 2005), or a focus on criminal history (Strayhorn et al., 2013). This research is significant for student affairs professionals across education to learn how formerly incarcerated Black men define and achieve postsecondary success. With this research, campus stakeholders may gain new insight into how to best support formerly incarcerated students' success, welcome the diverse perspectives of formerly incarcerated students into classrooms, and increase opportunities for success across college campuses.

Overview of the Methodology

In this study, I used qualitative, grounded theory methodology to learn about formerly incarcerated Black male students' challenges and successes in higher education. Participants were identified through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, which were held in person or by video, as indicated by participant preference. Based on applying the constant comparative method of ongoing data analysis, participants were invited for a second interview to help guide theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006). To meet the criteria of purposeful sampling for this study, interested participants must have self-identified that they are at least 18 years old, Black/African American, formerly incarcerated, male, and enrolled in higher education within the last three years. As is characteristic of the grounded theory methodology, I analyzed data throughout the data

collection process to identify themes and to develop a working theory of success for this group of students. Details about the methodology of this study will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Subjectivity Statement

Researchers must always be aware of their influence on the study, the impact on the trustworthiness of the research, and most importantly, the ethical considerations and care for working with participants. An important aspect of qualitative research is for the researcher to be aware of their positionality, social and cultural awareness, and its impact on the study (Bhattacharya, 2015). A key component of grounded theory research is the consideration of the researcher's influence on the study, especially the ongoing data collection and analysis process, which leads to developing a theory. Milner cautions that it is essential to guard against a color-blind approach to positionality in the research process, which "can potentially lead to the dangers of exploitation and misrepresentations of individuals and communities of color" (2007, p. 392). Therefore, one of the most crucial considerations for this research was ensuring that I am continuously aware of and acknowledge my positionality, privileges, and how my subjectivities affect the participants and the overall study.

My identity as a middle-class, cisgender, White woman with multiple advanced degrees, who has never been incarcerated or faced the systemic barriers that the study participants have experienced, could have challenged my ability to connect with participants, earn their trust for interviews, and accurately collect and analyze the data. Additionally, my academic and career activities center around higher education. Academia is comfortable for me. As a student,

program director, and instructor, I have spent over fifteen years immersed in higher education across many student roles and employment in various academic and student services departments. Academically, I have earned an undergraduate degree in Social Sciences, a master's degree in Sociology, a graduate certificate in Social Justice, and a Ph.D. in Education. As a higher education employee, almost every position I have worked in focused on supporting students in overcoming the structural barriers to their success. These positions include working as an academic counselor for conditionally admitted students, director for high-achieving income-eligible, underrepresented, and first-generation students seeking graduate-level degrees, and instructor for sociology and courses focused on developing academic skills or post-graduation readiness. All these positions I have worked in have put me in a position of power in relationships with students. Charmaz (2006) cautioned that researchers should be aware of the dynamics of power and status, including gender and race, and use the flexibility encouraged by the grounded theory methodology to increase interview success by reflecting on the interview interactions for each participant. Considering this guidance and my positionality, I did not interview students I taught or advised to avoid an unfair power dynamic that may skew my ability to ensure trustworthiness in my study.

This study aims to amplify the voices of Black men who are disadvantaged across our society, specifically in higher education, and to inform higher education about how participants define and achieve success to narrow the gap between opportunity and success for formerly incarcerated participants. I have intentionally chosen to learn from people directly and indirectly affected by incarceration within my academic history, including research on topics such as

prison-affiliated stigma and children's experiences with incarcerated parents. I am also very involved in prison reform and prisoner advocacy, including holding leadership roles in non-profit advocacy organizations and multiple prison reform volunteer engagements. At the policy level, I personally and professionally engage in activities at the state and national levels to advocate prison reform and eliminate policies that encourage structural racism and limit opportunities within our society. As an instructor, I regularly seek opportunities to educate college students, administrators, faculty, staff, and community members on topics related to race and incarceration. I use my privilege to advocate for and stand with people affected by incarceration, but it is never with me at the forefront. My knowledge and goals for advocacy and support are driven by the voices of people directly affected by an (in)justice system that intentionally limits the effectiveness of those most affected and, by design, limits the opportunities for self-advocacy.

When people talk about personal experiences of emotional intensity, there is an expectation that their recipients show not only their understanding of the content of the talk but also their understanding of the teller's stance toward that talk by displaying affiliation and empathic alignment with the teller (Prior, 2018, p. 20). I am genuinely and empathetically interested in participants' stories and experiences and motivated to learn from their experiences to help others be successful based on the working theory of success that I expect to be able to develop. My educational and personal passions for equality and an intentional awareness of my privileges mean that I give additional effort to ensure respectful interactions whenever learning about and discussing sensitive topics related to experiences that I will never know firsthand. That

is why it was important to me to ensure that this research was written from a combination of two primary conceptual frameworks: critical race theory (CRT), which assumes as fact the systemic racism that permeates our culture, and anti-deficit perspectives, which acknowledge the triumph that is Black people clearing the hurdles intentionally placed, rather than blaming Black people for the lacking opportunities for success. These frameworks will be discussed more thoroughly later in this paper.

Despite my increased self-awareness, the result of being genuinely passionate about demanding and creating change to increase equitable opportunities within higher education, my subjectivities will always hinder me. My positionality could have challenged building rapport with formerly incarcerated Black male students. Prior (2018) summarized rapport as empathetic affiliation. As an active advocate in prisoner advocacy and prison reform, I have a positive reputation across many organizations as a person who supports people affiliated with or affected by prison. Over the years, I have become a part of this network of people with similar interests, some of whom also work in higher education. This network may serve as key informants and gatekeepers who can attest to my integrity, sincerity, and respectful approach based on other opportunities to work together on reform and advocacy goals.

Lastly, throughout the study, I consulted with a peer debriefer who is Black, familiar with higher education, and has been incarcerated to ensure that I had an insight that I cannot provide from my own experiences throughout the study and specifically with the steps of data collection and analysis when my subjectivities could cloud accurate results.

The experiences and effects of incarceration, including academics, advocacy, and teaching, are topics of interest to me in many ways. Beginning with my academic interest in studying society, particularly inequitable opportunities in society, I have been focused on learning more about and increasing my understanding of the causes of our nation's obsession with the punitive position of mass incarceration to improve this approach to both healing harm caused by crime and improve the inequitable situations that society has allowed and created, which often leave people with limited options in avoiding criminal behavior, prison, and a fair chance at reentry upon release from prison. I am involved in several prisoner advocacy efforts, including legislative action, prisoner advocacy, and speaking events. Having worked in higher education for many years, I have worked closely with students who face many barriers to academic success because of their incarceration, the incarceration of family members, and the ongoing financial, legal, and social ramifications of these situations that often limit their success. As an educator, I believe that learning firsthand from those who are experiencing these challenges and sharing their stories to create a dialogue to teach others about the value of removing the barriers they face can lead to positive change that improves opportunity and success for those affected by incarceration and for local communities and across society. Upon starting this study, I knew there were many barriers to success for these learners, including difficulties with admission based on incarceration, challenges with technology, depending on the length of imprisonment, and choosing a career despite the limitations of having a felony history. Still, I am interested in learning more about how these students overcame these barriers and defined and achieved success. My positionality is that I have not been in prison; I am White and

a cisgender female. To address my positionality, I invited a peer debriefer to provide insight and perspective to ensure I managed my limitations to maintain trustworthiness in my research. I realize the limits of my knowledge and experiences related to this topic and the importance of trustworthiness in my study. The limitations of data interpretation are discussed in Chapter 5 and are reflected throughout specific reflective efforts for trustworthiness in this study.

Discussion of Terms

When speaking about a group stigmatized by society, it is essential to use humanizing language and offer additional definitions that may not align with general assumptions or stereotypes (Johnson et al., 2020). I consider this respectful approach to learning from and writing about participant experiences throughout this research by purposefully using respectful language throughout this research. This approach supports inviting participants to define success individually and offer examples of how they were successful given the support they needed or experienced. This intentionally supportive and respectful approach to learning about these students' experiences assumes that there are unlimited options for individuals to define, show, and measure their success, including satisfaction, academic achievement, and career success (York et al., 2015), as shown in Figure 1.

Student Success

In this study, I invited participants to discuss their experiences and how they defined and achieved collegiate success. Because I knew that this approach may result in a unique variety of definitions and examples of student success, including factors related to academic performance

indicators or meeting personal goals, discussed below are a few examples of success often used in working with students in higher education. “Student success is also linked with a plethora of desired student and personal development outcomes that confer benefits on individuals and society” (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 5). “Student success is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance” (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7). A more specific definition of student success includes quantitative data, such as coursework or semester grades earned, Grade point average (GPA), persistence, and graduation (Kuh et al., 2006; York et al., 2015). This study’s key components of student success, including academic and personal success, are further described below.

Academic Success

Two examples of existing research that define academic success are studies by Strayhorn (2014) and Scott (2016). Strayhorn’s (2014) study included Black male students at predominantly white institutions (PWI). Strayhorn defined academic success in this study by considering participant results on Duckworth’s Grit Scale (Duckworth et al., 2007) and participants’ self-reported GPA. Another study by Scott (2016) considered post-release academic success related to educational opportunities during incarceration. This study defined formerly incarcerated Black men as “currently attending a postsecondary institution, less than a year from graduation or has graduated in the past 24 months” (Scott, 2016, p. 152). Scott suggested that successful educational opportunities may affect post-release academic success before and during incarceration. This study indicated that academic success could be improved by acknowledging

previous mistakes or poor choices leading to a prison sentence and a desire to make intentional and positive choices to avoid returning to prison and ensure successful community reintegration.

Personal Success

Some examples of personal success are goal attainment, increasing knowledge, and preparation for employment, in addition to (for this population of learners) possibly being a way of clearly marking a change in direction from previous criminal activity and incarceration toward acceptance as productive and contributing members of society (Leyva & Bickel, 2010). A similar study that researched formerly incarcerated women who were recently released showed that they defined success for themselves as having their place to live, participating in helping others, or living without the control of the legal system (Heidemann et al., 2015).

Summary

Mass incarceration has affected all aspects of our society by limiting equitable opportunities for all affected by its continuous effects, even after release. Higher education's role as a pathway to upward mobility, a provider of credentials for increased employment opportunities, and a center for knowledge is poised to support Black men disproportionately affected more than other populations within the carceral system. The critical thinking foundation of higher education is ideal for learning about how participants define and achieve success and applying new knowledge to help students overcome ongoing structural barriers based on race and former incarceration. This research focused on learning about the achievements of this

student group to develop a working theory of success to add to the limited body of literature on the collegiate experiences of these students.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This study focused on the successful experiences of formerly incarcerated Black male students. Black men are underrepresented in higher education even though, since the mid-1980s, there has been an overall increase in enrollment in higher education (Abrams & Franke, 2013); therefore, it is essential to be critically aware of the challenges these students face because of race and former incarceration, which they must overcome to be successful. Critical race theory (CRT) supports that Black men face structural racism, disproportionately higher incarceration rates, and lower high school completion rates due in part to the school-to-prison pipeline, are often viewed through a lens of Whiteness and deficit-based research and face additional policy and practical hurdles to postsecondary success. As discussed in this chapter, quantitative data shows consistent historical data recognizing the diminished educational opportunities for Black men. Qualitative research on this topic is limited and is increasingly becoming more researched. Custer (2018b) believes that what may be the first qualitative study on formerly incarcerated college students was published in 2007 (Copenhaver et al., 2007). Noting this short timeline for qualitative research and acknowledging a recent focus to revise policies to provide more equitable opportunities for these learners, many gaps in the literature remain (McTier et al., 2017).

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I gathered participants' experiences and analyzed their experiences through a critical lens. I applied critical race theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework to view the barriers

for formerly incarcerated Black male students as structural. I also used an anti-deficit framework to focus on the successes of these learners. This way, this study acknowledges the racism that creates challenges for these students but then shifts the focus toward their success despite their structural challenges. CRT and anti-deficit theories inform the context of this study but do not have direct input into the theory that developed but connect the study to existing literature and provide background context for this research.

Critical Race Theory

This study is framed by critical race theory (CRT), which holds racism accountable for the additional challenges in higher education faced by Black people and other people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Additionally, it is essential to consider an anti-deficit perspective, which will be discussed later in this section, along with the critical framework of CRT in studies that amplify the voices of and experiences of Black people within education (Allen, 2015; Anumba, 2015; Harper, 2010; K. L. Williams et al., 2019). CRT was initially credited to Bell and Freeman in the 1970s (Hirald, 2010) as an extension of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which failed to recognize race and racism as factors in the legal system (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). However, the application of CRT is specifically relevant to the field of education, which has historically and structurally disadvantaged minoritized students and continues to do so (Hirald, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano et al., 2000). In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate connected CRT to the education field to “theorize race and use it as an analytic tool for understanding school inequity” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48).

CRT has roots in the legal system that borrows from and applies across disciplines and contexts, including topics in sociology, education, and women's studies (Jones et al., 2014; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Solorzano et al., 2000). As a conceptual framework supported by the tenets described below, CRT centers on the stories of minoritized students. CRT acknowledges participants' counternarratives as true and racism as usual in our society. These counternarratives reflect the limited opportunities for minoritized students within our education system, where there is a lack of educational opportunities for success for Black students (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McGee & Stovall, 2015). The tenets of CRT assume that systems of power disadvantage minorities and that racism is structurally interwoven into our society, including our education system (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Patton, 2016; Rollock & Dixon, 2016). The foundational tenets of CRT can vary; therefore, it is important to specify which tenets will be considered for this research (Garcia et al., 2018):

- **Racism is normal and an everyday experience for those within a racial minority group.** Racism is normal in American society and, over time, becomes natural to those living it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998).
- **Race is a social construct.** Racism exists to support and perpetuate White privilege. Therefore, change will only come with interest convergence when favorable for the majority (Bell Jr, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).
- **CRT brings a critical approach to policy examination to ignite social justice-informed changes.** The purpose of this approach is to create pathways away from

structural racism by insisting on intentional efforts to bring about equity (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Solorzano et al., 2000)

- **Counterstories of the oppressed are valid and important** (Jones et al., 2014).
Experiences and narratives of oppression are legitimate. Storytelling and collective narratives convey these everyday experiences (Jones et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998).
- **CRT is an intersectional theory.** Each person's identity, even when considered within a common group, includes a variety of experiences across interdisciplinary and societal contexts. As Crenshaw (2015) states, "Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power." This intersectional approach applies to the primary CRT tenet, which explains that racism is normal and exists to serve the majority (Crenshaw, 1989; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011). An intersectional lens is necessary to understand the racial and identity experiences of formerly incarcerated Black students to consider their academic success as a component of their post-release success (Lea III et al., 2020). This research centers on the voices of formerly incarcerated Black male students who overcome added challenges based on these intersecting identities.

Critical race theory also brings an important perspective when applied to education and the role of education in creating and perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline. The United States' education system combines an unfair curriculum with a deficit perspective, limiting Black men's academic success (Allen & White-Smith, 2014). CRT can be both a conceptual

framework and methodology, specifically in educational research, as it “offers an explanatory structure that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. society (Yosso et al., 2004, p. 2).

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

In this study, I also applied an anti-deficit framework by inviting formerly incarcerated Black male students to define and discuss their success despite structural racism and post-incarceration challenges. Ladson-Billings (2006) brought together critical race theory in education and the problematic approach of an educational deficit perspective in discussing “the achievement gap.” Ladson-Billings explains that by approaching this gap as a deficit of minority students, it fails to hold accountable the structural ways that education disadvantages these students from the same learning opportunities as White students. Harper (2010) customized the anti-deficit framework he originally developed to study how Black male students persist through college-level STEM courses. Other studies have followed, including research on the success of formerly incarcerated Latino men in community college (Abeyta, 2020). An anti-deficit-centered study determined that formerly incarcerated students enrolled in community college identified that a strong transition from incarceration helped their postsecondary success, including family support, employment opportunities, and access to physical and mental health services (Torres, 2020). Anti-deficit research works with a CRT framework in other studies, as well. Williams’ (2019) mixed methods study used the anti-deficit framework and the counterstories of Black men attending community college. Williams focused on the “achievements, perseverance, and excellence of Black” men Field (2019, p. 103) in that study. These studies used an anti-deficit

framework to inform educational stakeholders about supporting minoritized student populations to encourage their success across campus. It is essential to consider an anti-deficit perspective because so much of the literature focuses on students' challenges rather than considering their accomplishments. Many challenges and lack of opportunities, including the school-to-prison pipeline, have limited options for success and increased the likelihood of incarceration.

Incarceration

While the focus of this research was on learning how formerly incarcerated Black male students define and achieve success in higher education despite the barriers they face, it is crucial to understand the disadvantages experienced by these students because of being Black and formerly incarcerated. Structural oppression affects all Black people in the United States. Still, it is particularly damaging to the success and access to opportunities of Black men, who are significantly more likely to be incarcerated when compared to their White peers (Brooks et al., 2013). The likelihood of imprisonment remains much higher for Black men than White men. Black men have about a 30% chance of incarceration during their lifetime, about six times that of White men (Bronson & Carson, 2019). While the current rate of overall incarceration has decreased and the gap in racial disparity has begun to close, Black men are still overrepresented in the carceral system, as shown in Figure 2.

Imprisonment rates of sentenced prisoners under the jurisdiction of state or federal correctional authorities, per 100,000 U.S. residents age 18 or older, by race and Hispanic origin, 2007–2017

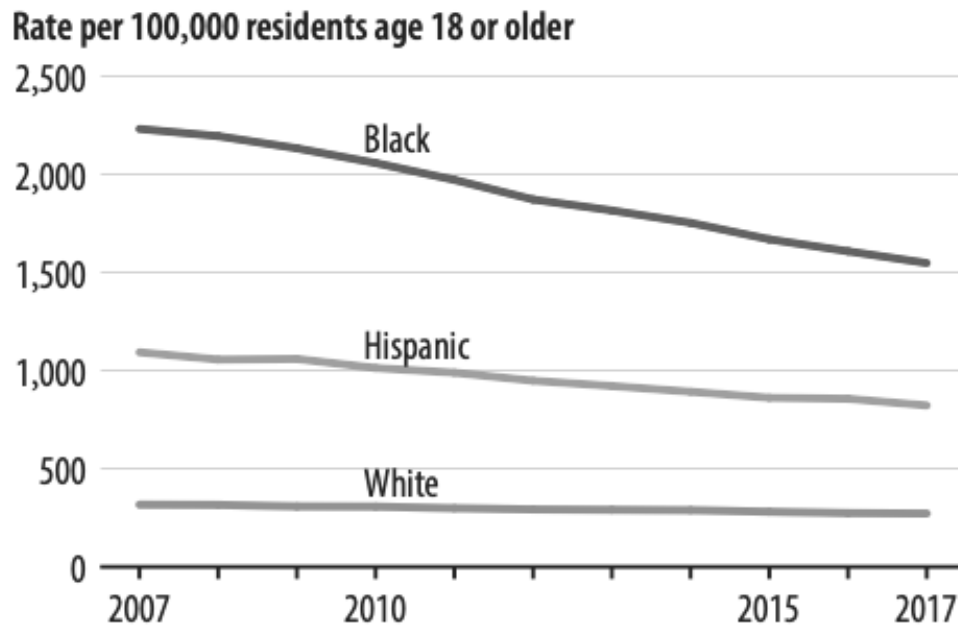


Figure 2.1 Rate of incarceration by race (Bronson & Carson, 2019)

The incarceration rate for 19-22-year-old Black men shows that those who did not graduate from high school are four times more likely to be incarcerated than those who graduated high school (Merlo & Wolpin, 2008). Considering the typical age for college transition, Black men, ages 18-19, are 12 times more likely to be incarcerated than same-age White men (Bronson & Carson, 2019). Having an increased chance of incarceration and lack of earning a high school diploma results in 60% of incarcerated Black people who have not earned a high school diploma or graduate equivalency degree (GED) (Pettit & Gutierrez, 2018), which

significantly limits their post-incarceration success (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013). The over-incarceration of Black men means they are more likely to be incarcerated than to earn a postsecondary degree (Cramer et al., 2014; Marable, 2008). The burden of a criminal background adds to the barriers placed across many aspects of education for Black men, including limiting opportunities for successful college admission and degree completion (Cramer et al., 2014; Giraldo, 2016; Grace & Nelson, 2019). One of the reasons Black male students experience incarceration at a much higher rate is the effects of challenges they face in the United States educational system.

Educational Challenges

Challenges to a successful academic performance begin early in the school experience of Black male students, including lacking opportunities for educational preparedness by attending underfunded schools or being thrust into the school-to-prison pipeline, leading to interaction with the juvenile or adult court system. If students graduate high school and consider attending college, they face restrictive legal and policy-driven barriers limiting admission or financial aid eligibility due to criminal history. This research acknowledges these challenges and looks to disrupt the deficit narrative by learning how formerly incarcerated Black male students succeed despite these barriers. While incarceration challenges admission and success in postsecondary education, structural racism affects educational experiences for Black men. There is no shortage of research supporting that Black students face barriers throughout their educational experiences (Brooks et al., 2013; Donnor, 2005; Love, 2009; Potrafke, 2006; Rubin, 2016; Tuitt, 2012; Von

Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Structural and economic oppression and racism across our society create additional challenges that dissuade Black male students from pursuing higher education, including being academically underprepared for admission to postsecondary educational options (Carey, 2019; McGee & Stovall, 2015). This study recognizes three critical components of primary and secondary academic challenges: the school-to-prison pipeline, teacher bias, and unequal educational opportunities.

Primary and secondary educational challenges

The barriers faced by formerly incarcerated Black male students often begin with primary and secondary educational challenges, such as the school-to-prison pipeline and limited educational and academic opportunities at underfunded schools, creating disadvantages for them early on.

School-to-prison pipeline

The United States public education system has a White-centered perspective that contextualizes Black students' academic weaknesses as deficits, behavioral issues, or defiance rather than acknowledging student challenges as opportunities to provide additional support to encourage success (Persell, 1981). This White-centered perspective is supported by "Eurocentric practices that support White supremacy and justify inequities" (Hamer & Johnson, 2019, p. 77) combined with a predominantly White, middle-class, female population of teachers (Hamer & Johnson, 2019) and teacher education programs which have only recently started to acknowledge implicit bias in their educational models (Beachum & Gullo, 2020; Coggs et al., 2013).

While teacher education programs aim to give more attention to the workforce and student diversity, the United States' educational system continues to reflect a majority of White teachers in the workforce, even though minoritized students make up almost half the student population (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015; United States Department of Education, 2016). Students report higher learning outcomes and better teacher/student relationships when provided diverse teaching staff that more closely matches student racial representations (Banerjee, 2018); however, despite this awareness, 2011 public school data reflected that about 40% of students were from a minoritized racial group, compared to about 20% of teachers (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). Research shows that the White-centered focus on teacher education and school curriculum perpetuates the assumption of negative stereotypes about Black students' behavior and performance in the classroom (Bryan, 2017). Results of these assumptions lead to disproportionate discipline referrals and punishments, with in-school and out-of-school ramifications, which create more barriers to a successful educational experience and perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline may begin in the classroom when school staff, backed by the school and law enforcement policies and procedures and alongside implicit bias rooted in White culture, decide that student behavior fails to meet expectations. However, the standards for conduct are often set on White-centered expectations for what is appropriate and ignore those behaviors that counter White cultural norms, leading to a determination that they are problematic (Dutil, 2020). What may be missed in the assumption that a Black student is exhibiting negative behaviors is further consideration of Black student experience in a predominately White teaching

workforce, but also that the United States' curriculum is White-centered and not entirely reflective of authentic or complete Black historical experiences or relevant cultural curriculum, which may contribute to Black students' lack of engagement in the classroom that is viewed as poor behavior (Grace & Nelson, 2019).

Bryan (2017) described a White third-grade teacher who discussed a Black student who transferred from a "low-performing" school with him. As explained by Bryan, the teacher further described the student's situation and related circumstances from a deficit perspective. This approach reflects typical teacher education programs that do not supply culturally responsive teacher education and lack information about Black culture and history. The teacher explained to Bryan that because of his mother's drug use, the student needed to move to live with another family member and that the student was "failing miserably" and had a "behavioral problem" (Bryan, 2017, p. 328). Later observations by the researcher described watching a teacher's aide reprimand this same Black student more harshly than a White student for the same reason (not lining up correctly with the rest of the class). While not all White teachers are responsible for unfair discipline or racial bias, Bryan's (2017) research offers several examples of how young Black students are disadvantaged by deficit thinking by educators and unfair disciplinary interactions (Cramer et al., 2014). Bryan suggested that keeping Black students in the classroom, supporting them proactively instead of reactively, and intentionally teaching culturally relevant preparation as part of teacher education programs will help disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Additional data support Bryan's above observation by quantitatively showing the disproportionate discipline rate for Black male students. For example, as Figure 2 shows, Black

male students receive out-of-school suspension at a much higher rate than other students of color and almost four times higher than White male students.

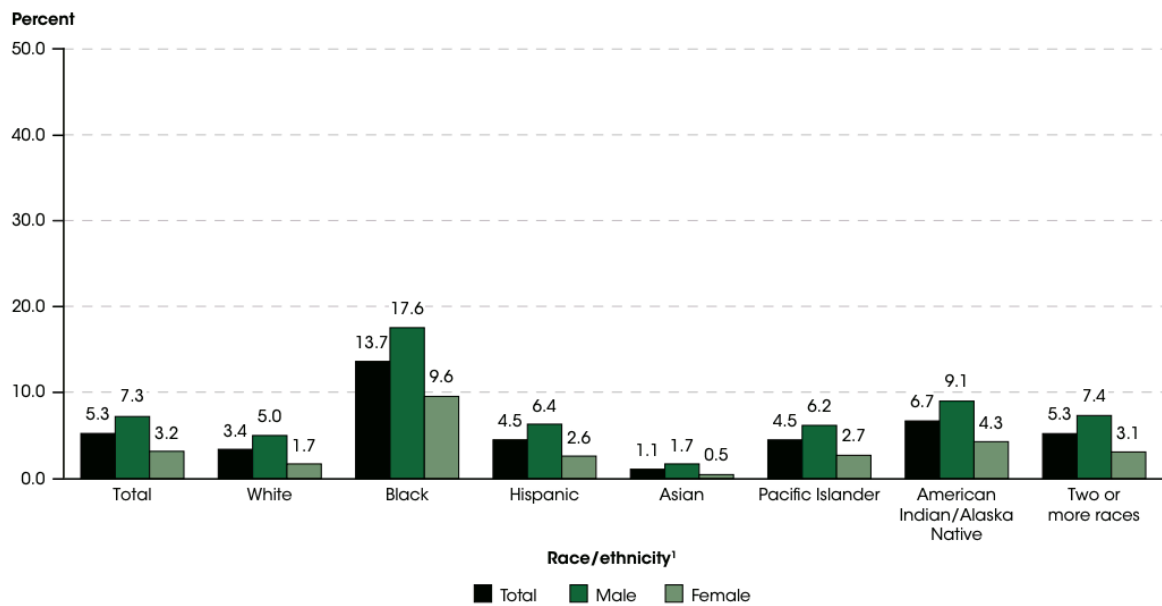


Figure 2.2 Public school student suspension rates, 2013-2014 (de Brey et al., 2019)

Instances of suspension and poor academic performance directly affect dropout rates and the likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system (Darensbourg et al., 2010). When controlling for demographics, the dropout rate was 32% after a student received one suspension in the ninth grade, compared to a 16% dropout rate without any suspensions (Balfanz et al., 2015). Balfanz (2015) also found that each additional suspension led to a 20% decreased likelihood of high school graduation with each subsequent suspension occurrence. These statistics remain consistent for Black male students, as roughly half of those suspended during their education will not earn a high school diploma (Shollenberger, 2015). Black male students'

overall high school graduation rate is less than 50% compared to White male students, whose graduation rate is about 80% (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). The school-to-prison pipeline results from the implementation of unfairly applied disciplinary issues and exists in contrast to the assumption of a supportive school environment that provides structure and learning opportunities. As experienced by Black male students, a disproportionate number of school discipline encounters leads to a lower high school graduation rate, a higher incarceration rate, and a lower rate of educational success, in addition to the unequal educational opportunities created by structural racism.

The school-to-prison pipeline begins with discretionary (not required by local law enforcement) referrals for disciplinary action by the school (Fabelo et al., 2011). One reason for discretionary referrals is the assumption of a deficit perspective, which assumes a position of student deficiency. The premise of a lack of ability inherently disadvantages Black students' potential for academic achievement and long-term success (Cramer et al., 2014; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014), especially in consideration of missed class time for suspensions and other disciplinary action. When students are given out of class for disciplinary punishments, time away from the learning environment creates gaps in instruction and missed learning opportunities, which leads to academic challenges (H. Morgan, 2021). Beyond the school-related results of disproportionate discipline, there are significant out-of-school ramifications. For example, leaving students unsupervised during out-of-school suspensions leaves time and opportunity for criminal activity, almost doubling the likelihood of arrest (Guckenburg et al., 2016).

The school-to-prison pipeline affects both primary and secondary school experiences. It refers to the result of educational assumptions and policies that systematically and disproportionately affect students of color, often Black male students and those with disabilities (Gage et al., 2019; P. L. Morgan et al., 2019). The result of these negative experiences is that students are pushed away from academic success by way of zero-tolerance discipline policies, alternative educational settings, and increased grade retention policies, which ultimately steer students into the juvenile and adult carceral system (Cramer et al., 2014; Darensbourg et al., 2010; McTier et al., 2017; H. Morgan, 2021).

Inequitable Educational Opportunities

Educational challenges faced by Black students also include unequal educational opportunities, such as limited academic and extracurricular programs at underfunded schools. As a result of years of structural racism in the United States, schools in lower socioeconomic areas, which enroll a high number of Black and other minoritized groups, receive limited state and local funding, leaving these students disadvantaged (Heitzeg, 2009). Additionally, there is a significant difference in public school funding in areas with lower local area tax income because of differences in local area tax revenue. This discrepancy in public school funding leaves a large gap between schools in higher socioeconomic areas and high-poverty areas (Smith, 2009). Lacking adequate educational funding limits extracurricular opportunities, such as athletics, student clubs, and fine arts offerings, and leaves fewer ways for students to be supported for success to meet a variety of learning styles and engage in extracurricular events which are shown to help classroom learning (Akos, 2006; Broh, 2002). These educational disadvantages limit

Black students' academic potential based on eligibility for access to funding rather than as assessed for eligibility based on merit. They perpetuate the opportunities for negative behaviors when these learners do not feel engaged in their environment. Additionally, limited additional extracurricular and academic support options, such as standardized test preparation opportunities, leave students from underfunded schools without adequate preparation for postsecondary admission and postsecondary success. If Black students continue to college, there are many more barriers that these students overcome to be successful.

Postsecondary educational challenges

The experiences of Black men based on race and previous incarceration lead to low college attendance and completion. Only about 40% of Black men graduate college in six years (Kena et al., 2015). The overall 4-year graduation rate for Black students, about 19%, is half the rate of White students, about 43% (Griffin et al., 2022). The 6-year graduation rate at HBCUs is about 30% (Gordon et al., 2021). Some reasons for a lower college graduation rate for Black men include barriers to college admission, such as affordability, academic readiness, and other effects of the school-to-prison pipeline (Preston, 2017). Additionally, though there has been a progression in increasing equitable access to admissions for formerly incarcerated people, many structural barriers remain if formerly incarcerated students gain college admission. Some of these barriers are policy restrictions that limit access to college on admission and financial aid (Custer, 2018b; Ross, 2019), limitations on opportunities to engage in student activities (Abrams & Franke, 2013; Johnson et al., 2020), stigma-related barriers (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Evans et

al., 2019; Halkovic & Greene, 2015) and as has been discussed, having limited access to pre-college opportunities which provide skills for academic readiness (Strayhorn, 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Policy Barriers

Stemming from the origination of the recent efforts to “ban the box” by attempting to eliminate discrimination due to questions that lead to disclosing a criminal past (Custer, 2018a; Jung, 2016), gaps for denying admission to this group of applicants have been left. One of these gaps is that admission policies vary greatly. While some schools may only ask about felony or incarceration histories, for example, there has also actually been an increase in questions that ask about criminal records, including questions about juvenile and misdemeanor arrests, charges, or convictions (Brown & Hilbig, 2019; Stewart & Uggen, 2020). Moreover, beyond asking about a criminal past, one study noted at least one institution that does not place a time limitation on how far back a criminal history can affect an application (Custer, 2013).

Federal laws block access to financial assistance from students without a criminal history. Laws such as The Anti-Drug Abuse Act (1988) and the Drug-Free Student Loan Provision (1998) amendment to the Higher Education Act (1965) block access to government funding options to help pay for college (Britton, 2019; Custer, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017). Subsequent laws, such as the Deficit Reduction Act (2005), loosened some restrictive access to federal dollars for those convicted of a drug crime while receiving federal financial aid; however, state and merit awards often still include related limitations based on conviction, as well (Custer, 2018a; Kelly & Schneider, 2012).

For example, the ability of formerly incarcerated students to pay for school with financial aid is one challenge, but student-friendly options for self-support, such as not being eligible for on-campus employment and work-study eligibility, exist (Harris & Keller, 2005; Jacobs, 2015). In addition, extracurricular opportunities such as athletic attendance and event participation (Potrafke, 2006), especially if they require out-of-state or overnight travel, may prevent athletic scholarship and peer engagement opportunities for students who have been incarcerated. Pathways to college success are also limited by housing restrictions (Schudde, 2011), participation in class activities, and volunteer requirements. It is essential not to ignore how the intersecting experiences and policy barriers related to race and being incarcerated affect a student's ability to succeed. Policy barriers create additional procedural challenges and can also affect how students perceive their educational experience regarding feelings of stigmatization or a sense of belonging.

Stigma

In addition to the positive outcomes of pursuing higher education, including lowering criminal engagement and recidivism rates (Chappell, 2004) and increasing social mobility (Ma et al., 2019), educational engagement also disrupts negative stereotypes and stigmatization related to being formerly incarcerated. Goffman (1963, p. 3) defined the term stigma as “refer[ing] to an attribute that is deeply discrediting” and “an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor [and] can confirm the usualness of another.” The explanation of stigma theory is that those whom a group stigmatizes are seen as less than and as a “tainted, discounted [person]” rather than as a “whole and usual” one, affecting their social identity and how they present themselves in

different situations in society. The stigma is applied by those termed as the “normals”—those not deviating from typical societal expectations and viewing themselves as without tainted character, thus rationalizing the unfavorable judgment and assumptions of undesired characteristics of others. Goffman identified three types of stigmas: abominations of the body, blemishes of character, and tribal stigma related to race, nation, and religion, with those who have been incarcerated being stigmatized by society and seen as having blemished character by those who have not been incarcerated (the “normals”). This stigmatization leads formerly incarcerated people to limit involvement in opportunities based on how others perceive them or the increased likelihood of disclosing their formerly incarcerated status (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Owens Jr, 2009).

This stigmatization that formerly incarcerated students feel extends to how they feel judged in society, including on campus. Students with a criminal history often face stigmatization directly from those on campus by whom they feel judged or separated when, due to their criminal record, they are unable to participate in the same opportunities as students who do not have a criminal history (Johnson & Abreu, 2019; Ott & McTier Jr, 2019). Challenges brought on by stigmatization for formerly incarcerated students can happen at several points across their experiences in higher education, including at the point of application for admission, which may require disclosure of criminal history, post-admission when applying for financial aid, or during in-class activities (Strayhorn et al., 2013). In addition, course requirements, such as projects in the community or partnerships with local schools that may require background checks, may limit opportunities for formerly incarcerated students. Acknowledging the barriers

experienced by this population of learners, it is typical for this group of students who have been incarcerated to feel stigmatized by society and higher education (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2019; Halkovic & Greene, 2015). Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualized stigma into four components: the determination and label of being different, the connection of negative stereotypes to those who are labeled by those in positions of power, and the resulting separation of those who are labeled from others who are not, and then lastly, the significant disadvantages and discrimination which leads to inequality as a result of being stigmatized. Existing data consistently recognizes stigma as a factor limiting learning from this population and as a significant barrier to their success as students (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2019; Halkovic & Greene, 2015). The criteria required to categorize a felony conviction increases the likelihood that this conviction is listed on background check applications required for federal financial or employment support or for which may be required for courses or academic major selection (Custer, 2016). Not being able to participate in everyday experiences with peers, such as on-campus employment, or enrolling in required courses because of criminal history, in addition to feeling excluded in a predominantly White campus environment, can not only cause a formerly incarcerated student to feel stigmatized, but it may also affect their sense of belonging in the campus environment.

Sense of Belonging

In addition to stigma theory, I considered a sense of belonging as crucial for evaluating the educational success of Black men, as both theories are related to student development and success. Regarding postsecondary experiences, a sense of belonging can be described as comfort,

welcome, and support. Strayhorn (2018) described a student's sense of belonging as feeling connected to others on campus and as particularly important for those stigmatized, including those formerly incarcerated (Strayhorn et al., 2013). As discussed below, a lack of a positive sense of belonging for Black students is an identified barrier to persistence in higher education (Strayhorn, 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013). One way that Black students may feel a sense of belonging relates to if they feel they are a welcome part of the campus community, particularly if they are an underrepresented race at a predominantly White campus. Another factor considered in Black student experience is how they feel they belong within the classroom and in situations with predominantly White faculty and staff (Cabrera et al., 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2007), who dominate the pool of instructors in higher education (Guiffida & Douthit, 2010; Love, 2009; Tuitt, 2012).

Some examples of other barriers to a positive sense of belonging are a lack of community on- and off-campus, a lack of satisfaction with campus racial climate, and a feeling of a lack of institutional commitment to their success (Guiffida & Douthit, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Karkouti, 2016; Rankin & Reason, 2005). As discussed with previous examples of postsecondary challenges such as policy barriers and stigma, a sense of belonging can negatively impact a student's college experience and persistence toward successful completion.

Summary

Current research recognizes that critical race theory has an integral and vital role across all aspects of education. It is essential to take this critical lens in the examination of Black men

and their experiences in education before and after incarceration to recognize the systemic and policy-related barriers they overcome, including White-centered educational experiences in primary and secondary school, structural challenges from the school-to-prison pipeline and unequal educational opportunities before they have even graduated from high school. Given the increased likelihood of incarceration, Black men who have been ensnared in the carceral system then face reintegration challenges and systemic barriers as they try to enter and complete postsecondary education due to being Black and formerly incarcerated. In this study, I focused on the success that these students experienced to intentionally shift from the deficit perspective of evaluating Black student experience toward how they overcame the systemic racism and structural challenges they faced throughout their educational pursuits.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative methodology for this grounded theory study, framed by critical race theory and anti-deficit perspective. For this study, data was gathered to answer the following research questions: How do formerly incarcerated Black men define success in higher education? How do formerly incarcerated Black men achieve success in higher education? Participants were interviewed to learn how they defined and achieved post-admission success in higher education.

Research Design

This study was designed based on the conceptual perspectives of CRT and anti-deficit frameworks. Conceptual frameworks are used to situate qualitative research studies and emerging theories (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). Using CRT as a lens is necessary as it assumes as fact the structural challenges experienced by Black men, who are culturally and intergenerationally affected by incarceration both as an overrepresentation in prison and underrepresentation in higher education, including inequitable educational opportunities. The tenets of CRT were discussed in Chapter 2, including applying CRT as a framework for understanding the additional obstacles and unequal access to education faced by Black people, who disproportionately experience other limitations due to incarceration. The CRT framework is common for research on race and education (Hylton, 2012; Lynn et al., 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In addition to CRT, this study was framed by an anti-deficit perspective. This perspective focuses on resiliency and success despite adversity (Hernandez et al., 2022) and

“empathize[s] with students from this population as they . . . utilize their lived experiences to be seen as holders of knowledge. . .” (Clark & Brooms, 2021, p. 101).

In considering the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men who are successful in postsecondary education, the grounded theory (GT) methodology allows the researcher to construct a theory directly from knowledge gained from data for a particular phenomenon or participant experience. Unlike most other theories, it develops as research is gathered and analyzed (Salvini, 2019). Grounded theory originated from an objectivist perspective, which assumes a collective everyday reality, versus the more recent constructivist perspective, which assumes individual realities based on subjective experiences (Glesne, 2016; Morse, 2016). The constructivist approach to GT assumes that the researcher has knowledge of the topic and will apply it along with social/cultural context with ongoing data analysis to focus on participants' meaning-making of their experiences (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

The GT methodological approach allows for multiple perspectives, including those of the researcher, to understand the realities and the meaning-making of participants to develop a theory related to the topic of study (Lal et al., 2012). Literature shows that qualitative research successfully applies grounded theory in research design across many disciplines, including sociology, education, and psychology, but also reflects doubt about the merits of this methodology. Common concerns are that grounded theory lacks rigor (Chun Tie et al., 2019) and consistent specificity about the methods used, including guidance for the role of the researcher (Salvini, 2019). To address these concerns, this study's methods were developed intentionally

with more formalized guidance of constructivist grounded theory as defined by Charmaz (2006), which gives structure and researcher guidance for this research design.

Participants

Qualitative interviews, which involve participants' narrative involvement, require an additional layer of trust, respect, and empathy (Lavery, 2003). As such, added care and effort are necessary to identify and invite participants and protect their data. In discussing the merits of grounded theory in research and because of the nature of qualitative research as representative of the social reality of participants, there must be careful attention to ensuring that the data collection and analysis is portrayed as giving credibility to the study with respectful regard to participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

A fundamental aspect of grounded theory that guides participant identification and selection is theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is an ongoing sampling process that allows the researcher flexibility to seek new participants or new forms of data based on emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987) and to encourage the opportunity for a variety of participant experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Theoretical sampling helps gather additional participants or seek further information based on themes and categories as they develop. Theoretical sampling differs from initial sampling, the first step in data collection. Theoretical sampling comes during and after data collection to work toward saturation of developing categories and themes (Charmaz, 2006).

Starks and Trinidad (2007) suggested that the typical sample size for grounded theory research can range from 10 to 60. While these guidelines are considered, given the nature of theoretical sampling, grounded theory methodology does not prescribe a required number of participants (Creswell et al., 2007). As previously discussed, potential participants for this research may have considered themselves part of a stigmatized group, limiting the researcher's ability to identify willing participants and leading to a smaller sample size. Similar studies include a small number of participants. One qualitative study interviewed four formerly incarcerated students (Copenhaver et al., 2007). Other research shows similar participation numbers, including a study about the success of formerly incarcerated women (Cramer et al., 2014) and ethnographic research about the experiences of formerly incarcerated students (Ehnow, 2018).

To qualify for the study, a screening questionnaire was used. Eligible participants self-identified as Black/African American and male. They also provided documentation to meet other eligibility criteria, as discussed below. Participants were accepted into the study based on the following criteria:

- Self-identification of age: 18-70 (initially age 65).
- Self-identification of gender (male) and race (Black)
- Documentation of incarceration (i.e., official prison identification documents, online government website verification, or other official representation of incarceration).

- Documentation of current or recent within the last five years (initially three years) enrollment at or graduation from a higher education institution, including public or private, 2-year or 4-year college, university, or community college.

This study did not limit the type of higher education institutions that participants were attending because the nature of the study sought to understand how formerly incarcerated Black men are successful, and this can occur in any institution type, such as public, private, community college, or traditional four-year degree-awarding higher education institutions. Additionally, allowing various school types allows for possible theoretical development regarding participants' success within different schools, locations, campus sizes, and demographics, allowing for other patterns to emerge. Also, participants were not asked about their crime, sentence, or any related details; however, they all chose to share some related information. There were not any identifiable patterns to the information that they shared, and no further information was requested as the focus of this study was explicitly on their successes despite challenges related to incarceration.

Though initially, I intended to ensure participant anonymity, the first participant asked to have his name included. Upon receiving permission from IRB for this modification, each participant was given a choice to be represented by a pseudonym or to have their actual name used. All participants chose to be referenced by their real names: Daniel, Demetrius, Earl, Eric, and Machli.

IRB revisions were sought and approved to allow the choice of participants to use their actual names or a pseudonym, to increase the age from 65 to 70, and to widen the period for

educational participation from three to five years. The revision for a wider age group was based on the opportunity to interview a participant outside of the initial age range. It was essential to consider his insight about his experiences of success as an older-aged student, which is a unique experience across all types of students. The period for participation was increased to include data that spanned the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which limited educational opportunities for students who did not enroll or stay enrolled during this time. This increase in the participation period also allowed for conversations with participants who may have had in-person and unintended online experiences, as required during the pandemic. Increasing these time spans ensured maximum data could be gathered and considered varying experiences and success, which may have been affected by the pandemic's unique limitations that may have affected success.

Five people participated, and three completed two rounds of interviews. Two participants did not respond to a follow-up request for a second interview; however, data saturation was achieved through extensive interviews with participants, including follow-up emails. Follow-up emails included asking for additional clarifying details and member checking to ensure trustworthiness during the ongoing data collection and analysis process.

I used purposeful and snowball sampling methods and gate-keeper and key informant access. My position as a prisoner advocate and volunteer who works with prison reform organizations, combined with my previous research on people affected by prison, provided me with connections to this population of students. Those who helped me to network directly with this group of potential participants are gatekeepers and key informants. Gatekeepers and key

informants "hold some kind of formal or informal authority" that helps access unique or stigmatized groups (Jones et al., 2014, p. 118). Jones (2014) explained that key informants are seen as insiders who can assist with access to a gatekeeper with direct access to participants. Key informants and gatekeepers who work in prisoner advocacy groups shared the research opportunity via social media advertising or direct connections with potential participants. Additionally, as a member of several social media groups for formerly incarcerated students and their families, including some for formerly incarcerated students and others who work in higher education, I could directly share information about my study. Gatekeepers helped me to connect with four of the five participants I interviewed.

Purposeful sampling was necessary to ensure that participants aligned with the research criteria. Once I connected with participants in this sample group, I used snowball sampling to invite other participants. Snowball sampling uses a referral system of gathering participants who meet specific criteria and know others who meet the same criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). To increase my access, once I interviewed a participant, I applied a snowball sampling technique to ask participants to connect me with others interested in being interviewed about their related success and experiences. This snowball sampling technique was also applied to ask participants who inquired about the study but were not eligible if they could refer others for the study.

Out of respect for and appreciation of participants' time, participants were electronically sent a \$25 Amazon gift card. All participants were given a gift card, including those who only participated in one of the two interviews. I paid for gift cards. Additional incentives for participation, as confirmed in responses by study participants, included intrinsic motivation for

helping others based on sharing information about their struggles and how they overcame these challenges to help others.

Data Collection

My primary data collection method was that of semi-structured, open-ended intensive interviews designed to learn about formerly incarcerated Black men's experiences in higher education, focused on how they defined and achieved success in higher education. The qualitative research design and open-ended interview style invited various responses that may or may not reflect challenges related to gender or race. The semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher the flexibility of the intensive interview style. This style guarded against "...[forcing] interview data into preconceived categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 32) by developing a set of questions that gives consistency across participant interviews and allows for coding to identify themes based on the data, not assumed by the researcher. To further protect against preconceived categories, as previously discussed, the critical framework of CRT, which assumes the systemic limitations of participants' educational and post-release success, works together with an anti-deficit perspective to specifically consider participant achievements as told from their reflections. I used an intensive interview approach to encourage these personal and in-depth conversations. This approach can be conversational and is fundamentally premised on the researcher's respectful desire to learn more about a topic and probe for deeper answers (Charmaz, 2006). This interview approach allowed me to gather additional details, earn participant trust, and apply the snowball method for learning from other potential participants. Most importantly,

this interview style allowed me to ask clarifying questions and to seek additional details to ensure I accurately and comprehensively understood the participants' responses and perspectives.

Given the timing of the research during the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person interviews occurred when it was safe and allowable as determined by state and national guidelines and participants' preferences. Four of five participants chose video interviews, which took place via Zoom. One participant chose an initial in-person interview at his office. Initial interviews lasted about 90 minutes. If agreed upon by the participant, a second interview occurred, which took 60-90 minutes. I requested two interviews with each participant to ensure I accurately collected and analyzed their experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell et al., 2007). Having two interviews set about a week apart increased trustworthiness. The time between interviews allowed participants and the researcher time to reflect on their interviews and review their transcripts. This opportunity allowed me to inquire about any perceived inconsistencies in answers or note the consistent responses across the interview questions.

With participant consent, I recorded the interviews by audio (in-person) or video (online). Then, I transcribed all interviews to ensure accurate coding and analysis. Transcripts were obtained via an online transcription service, Temi.com, which uses encrypted servers to transcribe and protect uploaded audio files. Reviewing printed transcripts ensured that the same information could be reviewed multiple times with consistency and in the context of the full interview. Upon reviewing the transcript, I followed up with participants for member-checking

and verification, such as ensuring my understanding and interpretation of a participant's response or to get clarity or further details as other interviews took place.

While some participants chose to share information about criminal history, length of prison sentence, or prison location during their interviews, this information was not specifically gathered. Data collected during the screening process included electronic forms of researcher notes, screening survey information, and eligibility documentation, which were stored in password-protected online storage for the required five-year period. Hard copy participant data, including researcher notes and memos, were protected in a locked filing cabinet, accessible only by the researcher. All collected data will be deleted or shredded per IRB guidelines.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was based on constructivist grounded theory. A key aspect of data analysis for grounded theory is to consider the fit and relevance of the collected data (Charmaz, 2006) on an ongoing basis using the constant comparative analysis method to develop a theory that answers the research questions. Data analysis incorporated critical race theory and anti-deficit frameworks, as previously explained. In this way, data analysis included consideration of race and related systemic challenges based on incarceration in the context of their experiences in each response. The anti-deficit framework centered analysis on how participants reflected success, positive experiences, and outcomes despite the limitations assumed by CRT. These perspectives were considered throughout the data analysis process, beginning with initial coding, as described below.

Charmaz (2006) suggested three steps for coding data in a grounded theory study: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding to compare, conceptualize, and categorize the data. My process and the data analysis steps are described in more detail later in this section and shown below in Figure .

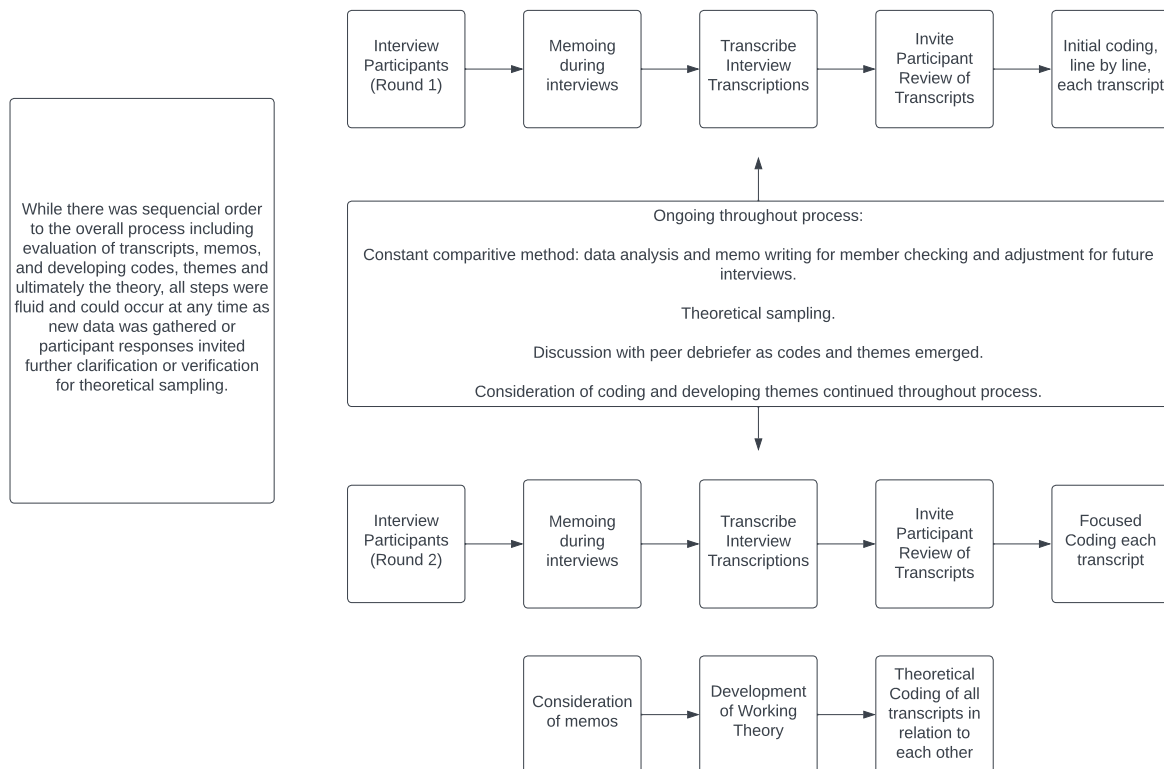


Figure 3.1 Data Analysis Process

I analyzed transcripts as soon as they were transcribed, then again several days later, and finally, as a group when all first and second interviews were complete. Each time that I noticed a potential new concept for a theme emerging, I reviewed all transcripts within the context of this

new theme, as described by Charmaz as a reexamination of earlier data as an ongoing process throughout data collection.

Along with the data analysis process discussed, memo writing is a crucial component of data analysis for grounded theory research. Memo writing was completed during data collection and during data analysis. As shown in Figure 4, memo writing "provides a space to become actively engaged in the materials, to develop [researcher] ideas, and to fine-tune your subsequent data gathering" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). Charmaz (2006) suggested beginning with freewriting thoughts and topics and writing about how the data develop into themes. However, Charmaz explains that no single correct way to apply memo writing to research exists. Still, they should be analytic and show the process of intentionally wrestling with the data to develop codes. Also, as shown in Figure 4, comparing existing memos and integrating new memos as data can repeat after initial memos are written. In this way, the constant comparative method is applied throughout the data collection and analysis process. The writing and reflection of memos ensured that I actively engaged with the data and was consistent throughout the data collection process. The memos helped me process my thoughts and reflections as they occurred during the coding and analysis of the interviews. As was previously discussed, critical race theory served as a theoretical framework for this research; therefore, memo writing included consideration of this critical lens applied to the data collected and analyzed as codes and themes develop. The memos were especially helpful in developing questions I needed to ask to probe for a deeper understanding of responses related to race and experiences of incarceration, for which my positionality had to be considered. I also used memoing to reflect on the emerging theory in the

context of if/then statements. Charmaz suggests using memos to diagram concepts. Using this suggestion, I drew out relationships from participant responses. Using the format of if/then statements to identify how participants were able to achieve success despite the challenges that they faced, I created connections between their efforts, the support they received, and the way that they were successful.

Analysis Organization

The research questions for my study were: How do formerly incarcerated Black male college students define success in higher education? And, how do formerly incarcerated Black male college students achieve success in higher education. In coding, developing themes, and organizing the data collected, I centered the research questions as I moved through all the steps of coding the data. “Grounded theory research uses a search for themes and patterns to build theory” (Glesne, 2016, p. 187). To begin the analysis process, I started with initial coding. I intended to use coding software, such as Dedoose; however, I found it much easier to interact with the data by using different colors to highlight participant responses and to make written comments on the data immediately as I reviewed the transcripts, as discussed below. I took margin notes during interviews and wrote memos after each interview to summarize general thoughts and identify specific responses to consider further as I analyzed future data.

Initial coding

In the first step of data analysis, initial coding, the researcher asks a broad question about what the data indicates, which aims to seek out the "common factor" (Creswell et al., 2007, p.

251). Initial coding begins with a big-picture question that considers the participant's point of view and asks about what is holistically conveyed by the data (Charmaz, 2006). "Speed and spontaneity help in initial coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48), in which the researcher begins early data analysis. Initial coding can occur word-by-word, line-by-line (a common approach), or incident-to-incident to look for statements' significance in generating initial codes.

The first step of initial coding that I took was line-by-line coding. I examined each line of text for participant responses that specifically included the words or variations of the word success. As suggested, I identified words and phrases that described or represented success, such as "progress" or, for example. During this initial line-by-line coding, I realized that many responses described success, such as earning good grades, and again reviewed each transcript for a group of words that defined or described success achievement. I wrote guiding questions from thoughts I developed in my memos, including, "Does this define success?" or "Does this describe or represent achieving success?" As I completed initial line-by-line coding, I continuously compared the newly reviewed data with previously reviewed data and memos. I adjusted interview questions slightly as the analysis progressed and as I gathered more data. Examples of this were that I noted that participants often described being successful because they were the first generation to attend college, so I began collecting information about first-generation status to examine the prevalence of this response further. For those whose first interviews had passed, I added this question to my memos for the second interview to include this question. I also identified that participants felt successful if they experienced improved academic performance from a previous educational experience, such as not giving importance to

previous educational experiences and genuinely enjoying current educational experiences, by comparison.

I highlighted each option in different colors during coding to begin seeing the emerging patterns. I initially reviewed every transcript twice, with several days in between reviews, so that I could step back from the research and allow myself time to identify other patterns without anticipating what I expected and was familiar with from recently reading the transcripts. From initial coding, I was able to gather a variety of ways that participants defined success. In reflecting on the memos I wrote during this process, I noticed that having goals related to earning a degree was significantly linked with defining success, but goals were described in various ways. I created a memo to examine these potential categories in the next step, focused coding.

Focused Coding

The second step, focused coding, reevaluates initial coding while moving through data analysis at a concept level, including consideration of data with other data to develop focused codes. While initial coding may have a routine, focused coding may not. Charmaz (2006) suggested that consideration of the data at this step includes point of view, elements of power, and control over social processes experienced. The meaning the participants make of these situations and their experiences start developing themes within the data. This stage may return to initial coding for data not considered until focused codes appear (Charmaz, 2006).

For focused coding, I reviewed the highlighted passages and started synthesizing the categories, creating subcategories, and developing thematic codes for further analysis. My

memos for this stage reflect the beginning of an outline, for which each code started to either become a theme or support for a pattern I noticed. My guiding questions for this step included: “What do these responses have in common?” “What do they all convey about success?” After completing two complete reviews of the coding for every transcript, I developed an outline that became the structure for organizing future interview responses and follow-up questions.

In addition to the coding process, it is essential to consider the constant comparative approach to grounded theory. I continued memoing, noting that some responses overlapped across several categories. I continued reviewing responses and developing or recategorizing codes until all relevant responses were categorized meaningfully and consistently.

Throughout this focused coding process, I noticed that two themes became consistent. Both goals and direct and indirect references to feeling stigmatized remained prevalent across participant responses. For example, participants would note success as being out of prison and successful by attending college classes. Then, several participants also reflected that being out of prison and successful meant not feeling judged for their incarceration within their classes, reflecting signs of educational success and recognition of countering feelings of stigmatization, both as post-release goals. This included not only how several participants defined success but also how they identified when they had been successful. As was expected, one of the motivations for this college attendance was to be hired into a position that reflected their education, or even as a student, when participants felt increased social acceptance because they earned a college degree and could have better employment opportunities. These examples of combining overlapping codes and categories led me to the final step of theoretical coding.

Theoretical Coding

Charmaz (2006) suggested that theoretical coding is the third step of data analysis in grounded theory research. This step involves combining all the data to contextualize them within a theory. This coding step may reveal conditions or predict the consequences of understanding participant involvement in a phenomenon. Theoretical coding combines relationships between codes to conceptualize the data as a whole (Charmaz, 2006). I envisioned a flow to the data in my memos, much like a story. I brought all the individual codes together and identified to answer the question, "What does it mean?" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 251) examines participant responses to identify and support the themes developed in focused coding. This step moves from previously identified codes toward defining and evaluating relationships within the data to develop a theory (Walker & Myrick, 2006).

From the developing story, the cumulative reflections of the five participants in my study, and their experiences, I could identify the critical points of success for students and start to develop a theory of their success. As part of memoing and reflecting on my tendencies and insights as the researcher, I drew several versions of a diagram representing possible if/then statements. If this happened, then this student population identified feeling successful. If this did not occur, students provided examples of challenges to their success. The final grounded theory, based on analysis, will be presented in the next chapter.

Trustworthiness

When using qualitative research methodologies, the researcher needs to ensure the trustworthiness of the research data, which can be shown by increased transparency in the research process (Lal et al., 2012). Bhattacharya (2015, p. 36) suggested a high level of researcher engagement to ensure quality data collection and analysis, ". . . qualitative research calls for the researcher to become increasingly vigilant to reflect and address the role of subjectivities in research with academic rigor and trustworthiness."

This methodology of this grounded theory study allowed me to apply a constant comparative method to evaluate the data as I collected it. This process and open-ended, semi-structured interview questions allowed me to continually reflect on and analyze the data as it was being collected, including my subjectivities and positionality. For this research, additional steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness, including a peer debriefer, member checking, and researcher memo writing, as part of an ongoing data analysis process.

To stay aware of my subjectivities, I sought a review of my anonymized data and codes from a peer debriefer. Peer debriefers challenge the research process to ensure trustworthiness. They are familiar with the topic and research method and will act as external reviewers to examine the research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For this study, I invited a peer debriefer who is a formerly incarcerated Black man who, before losing faculty rank because of his incarceration, was a tenured professor at an Ivy League school.

In addition to a peer debriefer who reviewed the data, participants were asked to participate in member checking. This method invites participants to review their interview transcript to clarify or correct their responses or to add additional context that they may notice is missing from the interview. As part of constant comparison, I took notes during interviews and would compare previous statements on an ongoing basis. If a participant shared a significantly different response from what others had said, or if I noticed an unexpected pattern in the responses, I would ask, “Others have said this....do you agree or have different thoughts about this?” The member-checking process increases trustworthiness and considers researcher positionality to break down a hierarchal relationship (Malagon et al., 2009). In this method, the researcher verifies information with participants or others familiar with the topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Lastly, as previously discussed, memo writing is essential for grounded theory, given this theory’s variation in structured guidance for data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 2016). Memo-writing helps the researcher keep track of developing thoughts during the research process and serves as an audit trail to support the trustworthiness of the project. By employing each of these methods, the trustworthiness of the data collected can be verified and ensured. Examples of memos I wrote were discussed in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Limitations of the Study Design

There were several challenges with this study design, some of which have been discussed previously. One primary limitation is the identification of participants. As members of a

stigmatized and oppressed group, potential participants may not have wanted to disclose their eligibility for this study (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). As previously discussed, utilizing gatekeepers and key informants are two common strategies for connecting with participants, particularly in research from a critical perspective (Berg, 2009; Jones et al., 2014; Widding, 2012). This method helped me overcome this limitation. In addition to the help of gatekeepers and key informants, the snowball sampling technique also helped me invite new participants outside my networks.

An additional challenge was the limitation of personal interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. This limited my ability to attend in-person events and to directly connect with potential participants. To address this limitation, I increased my interaction within the prisoner advocacy and prison reform network to connect with potential participants, as previously explained. Given the pandemic limitations, networking with gatekeepers and key informants was vital for this study.

Another limitation of the study addressed with gatekeepers and key informants was my position as a White woman who has never been incarcerated. Given that I could not directly interact with potential participants, I relied heavily on gatekeepers to validate my research interest and convey my respectful approach to interested participants.

Summary

This qualitative study used semi-structured individual interviews to learn how participants defined and achieved success in higher education and the challenges they overcame

as formerly incarcerated Black men. I gathered and analyzed data using the methods associated with grounded theory methodology, including my use of initial, focused, and theoretical coding. Additionally, memos, the constant comparative approach, and awareness of research subjectivities ensured trustworthiness throughout the data collection and analysis process. In the next chapter, I review the results and findings of the data.

Chapter 4 - Results and Findings

In this qualitative study, I aimed to learn about the postsecondary success of formerly incarcerated Black men. In gathering the data for this study, I interviewed participants to answer the research questions: How do formerly incarcerated Black male college students define success in higher education? And, how do formerly incarcerated Black male college students achieve success in higher education? Five participants—Daniel, Demetrius, Earl, Eric, and Machli—are introduced in the next section of this chapter with their answers to this initial question.

As expected, how participants defined success was individually meaningful; however, collectively, their responses consistently reflected descriptions of success that centered around goal achievement. Next, participants responded to questions about how they achieved success. In these responses, emerging themes included having and being motivated by goals, discussing the unique challenges of being formerly incarcerated, and receiving personal and campus support to overcome these challenges to succeed in higher education. In the next section, I introduce the participants' responses about defining success. At the end of this chapter, I propose an emerging theory grounded in the data.

Defining Success

To begin, it was essential to learn about participants and understand how each person defined success for the context of the rest of their interview responses. I asked participants open-ended questions that invited them to define success in whatever way they chose. Participants did not offer succinct definitions of success. Still, rather than defining success specifically, they

described success in the context of goal setting and achievement, indicating that they described success as making progress toward or accomplishing a goal.

Overarching themes within participants' definitions of success included goal achievement, such as post-release success, educational success, and feeling validated. Examples within these themes included positive social interaction in classes, earning a degree, which enhanced employment opportunities, and feeling that higher educational opportunities helped to feel validated as a formerly incarcerated person reentering society. Also included were examples of successfully overcoming challenges, such as learning and practicing technology use and interacting with non-incarcerated people at a job. These helped prepare participants for successful engagement and interaction in the classroom.

Next, I introduce each participant, including individual summaries on how they defined success, which serves as the introduction of this chapter. Interview analysis then discusses how they succeeded, including their motivation and goals, and the types of support identified as helpful for overcoming challenges, such as systemic barriers, technology skills, competing priorities, and stigma, which will follow later in this chapter.

Machli



Figure 4.1 Machli

Machli worked in education before being incarcerated, and he had a goal of working in a leadership role in higher education. He was nearing completion of his coursework for an online doctoral program when he began his incarceration. As of this writing, he has successfully reached his goal and completed his doctoral degree.

Machli described success as goal achievement and discussed his motivation to achieve both personal and academic success:

Personal success, for me, is achieving your goals that you set out for yourself. You know, your internal drive, what drives you every day to become who you are destined. So, I set goals personally to achieve, to get my bachelor's and master's [degrees]. I think academic

success is the end goal. I just continued to press through, and I completed all my courses.

I probably had like two more courses left when I [began incarceration]. After those two courses, then I started my dissertation phase.

Machli also described success as not returning to prison. He viewed a lack of education and opportunity as related to high recidivism rates. He reflected on his circumstances as he described the importance of distancing himself from the stigma of being in prison and focusing on completing his degree. He discusses overcoming the challenges of prison to stay on track with his educational goals and having further opportunities because of earning his degree:

When you find the data on guys, on recidivism, on guys coming back and doing a second and a third bid, it's really connected to their lack of education, lack of opportunities.

Getting the degree was gonna be so fulfilling, so I wasn't gonna do anything to jeopardize me overcoming what I was going through to get to this place. When you come out of there with a piece of paper that's going to elevate you and open some doors, there's still going to be some resistance, but three or four years from now, and there'll be less resistance than five years from now, and so on.

One of the aspects that provided support for his success was that his program was online. This option for asynchronous coursework and classroom involvement, combined with family support, which will be discussed later in this chapter, meant that he could continue coursework during and after incarceration to continue progressing toward his goal of earning his doctoral degree.

Demetrius



Figure 4.2 Demetrius

Demetrius had the longest sentence of all participants, having originally been sentenced to multiple life terms. Demetrius was motivated to be released from prison and knew that educating himself to complete important legal documents was essential. He described success as reaching his goal of being released, including writing a commutation that the Governor approved and allowing him his release after serving 18 years. As others discussed, Demetrius credits the support he had, which helped him to accomplish his goals and be successful at overcoming challenges to complete his degree and to help others:

I was confronted with the reality of that time that I would die in prison, that I would never be in a place where I'm able to hug my kids. You know, I'm able to, you know, sit at a dinner table with my family. So, these things mean so much more to an individual

like myself. You know, and I don't take 'em for granted. While I was there, I didn't give up hope. I knew that one way for me to get out was my relationship with God, as well as continuously furthering my education. From that point, I always was intending to go back to school. I wanted to acquire the knowledge of law necessary to help those who can't speak up for themselves. I really, really wanted it. I love learning. I loved having this opportunity to learn more and more. I desire to be an instrument of education, you know, from the basis of my personal experience and from what I've seen throughout the years of incarceration and what I'm still learning. How I measure success is, what I am as a person am able to invest in someone else because someone did it for me, you know, and what am I able to help someone else achieve?

He also discussed receiving support from his wife as he overcame challenges in continuing his education after incarceration. And, like Daniel, who is discussed next, Demetrius was motivated by being a positive role model for his children.

Daniel

Daniel, who also has a family and works full-time to support them while completing his college courses, described how much he loved learning and teaching. He wanted to make a difference as a college professor. He begins by discussing his skills and then his motivation that helped him to achieve success, which he described as getting his education and achieving his goal to become a professor:

I wanted to teach learning to help others. So, to be able to articulate what I've learned, that is something that I love to do. I think that is, in essence, the epitome of success, you know, standing in front of a classroom. You know, I learned, I took the time to educate myself, I did that. You, students, do the same; you know if you want to be here, take it from me. But while you're here, you're gonna learn what I have to offer first. And you know that arrogance that exists with those snobby professors, the things that they know, and they see that no one else has. That is the epitome for me that having the ability to exude that arrogance to be the master at that field, to be the head of that department, etc., is the ultimate goal; I think that that will be success to me.

Daniel described success as accomplishing his goal of becoming a college professor. Specifically, he talks about the respect of leading a classroom and the confidence that comes with this level of knowledge and authority in the classroom. This goal motivates him to do well in courses and overcome many challenges, such as competing priorities, such as providing financial support for his family and being a role model for his daughter, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Eric



Figure 4.3 Eric

Eric is a social worker and the only participant currently working in a field that requires licensure, which is often challenging for people with past criminal charges. He described success as making positive personal changes and living a life not driven by addiction, which also enabled him to feel successful:

So, me spending time, reading, exercising, meditation, regularly being around positive or like-minded people, staying out of trouble as far as not trying to be slick with the drugs and breaking the rules and smuggling and stuff, getting a job and being responsible on that job, those sorts of things kind of helped me get used to the right mindset and feel successful. So, when I get out, if I get a job where I got to go to school, it's not a big deal.

I know how to get up early. I know how to go to bed on time. I know how to keep my clothes clean and take care of myself and all that. I know I should be watching what I eat.

Throughout the interviews, Eric described goals centered on healthy living and appreciating the intentionality and successes of his education, working, and intentionally avoiding active addiction. He credits the support of his family, which allowed him to go to school without worries about housing and increased financial costs. He shared several examples of on-campus mentoring and support that helped him overcome challenges in earning his degree. Later in this chapter, Eric discusses how these goals led him to accomplish another goal of working in a job that allows him to help others.

Earl

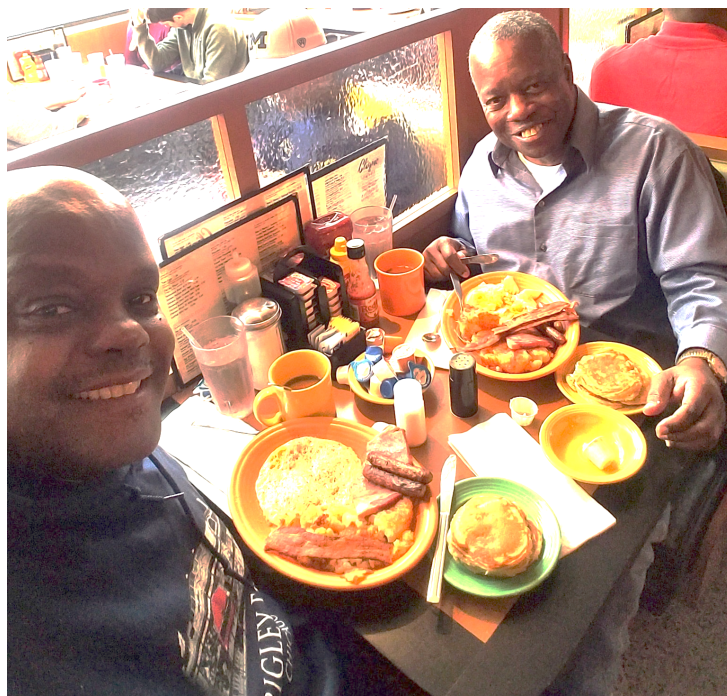


Figure 4.4 Ronald and Earl

Earl, the most senior-aged participant at 70, described overcoming specific challenges with technology due to nearly 30 years of incarceration. He missed many opportunities to experience the introduction of technology devices—such as touch screens, laptop computers, and smartphones—commonly known and used by most students. Earl described success as reaching educational milestones—initially earning his associate degree—and being able to become a legal writer and be released from prison. As will be discussed, he speaks about one of the themes, educational success, as a motivation for him to do well and reach his goal:

It started off because I wanted to be better educated about the law to work on my case. And then I could see the difference from when I was in school when I was younger. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work, but I was a poor student because I just wasn't interested, but I had never been to college.

Earl also described success as keeping a commitment he made to himself to reach a goal of earning his degree and of always staying true to his word:

I'm the type like if I start, something I want to see it through, so you know, for me, it's important to see this through, you know, go on and get my degree. My goal was to, you know, get a degree, and to me, that will be success.

Earl later discussed that his strong commitment to his word carries over into his work. He passed away a short time after our interviews and was not able to complete his degree.

As will be discussed throughout the rest of this chapter, all participants felt motivated to reach goals as part of their definitions of success. They all identified various challenges uniquely tied to being formerly incarcerated and how they overcame those challenges with support to be

successful at reaching their goals. A more detailed discussion of how participants achieved their goals follows next.

Achieving Success

To achieve success, participants had goals they were working toward and the motivation to overcome challenges to be successful. These two components, motivation and goals, had to occur together; therefore, these criteria for success are included in this section. However, motivation and goals also appear and will be pointed out in the context of other participant responses discussed throughout this chapter. Participants also emphasized the importance of feeling validated after incarceration. Examples of validations were described as feeling less stigmatized by incarceration in attempts to get a job or compared to other students who had not been incarcerated in the same classroom. Participants also felt that educational success mitigated some of the societal judgments they felt.

The other key component of achieving success is having the support to overcome challenges faced along the way. While working toward their goals, participants encountered difficulties for which they needed support to help them overcome and remain focused to succeed. Examples of challenges that participants overcame are systemic barriers, technology skills, competing priorities, and stigma. Personal support discussed includes family and mentoring relationships that helped with housing or guidance, such as networking with offices that provided financial aid resources or scholarship opportunities for assistance in paying for course tuition and fees.

Motivation and Goals

Participants described success as having a goal and making progress toward that goal. The data collected and analyzed from these interviews showed that participants could only achieve academic success by setting goals and being motivated to achieve those goals to progress in their education. While it is conceivable that a person could have a goal and not be motivated to accomplish it, it would not be easy to imagine being motivated if one did not have a goal to be motivated to be successful in attaining. This relationship is supported by participant responses, which link motivation with goals that lead to educational success. Participants also spoke of having goals in many responses using the word hope or luck or descriptions related to these concepts. In this example of overlapping data, hope was also a motivation to reach goals. Hope encouraged resilience in overcoming challenges faced in pursuit of educational goals. References to hope are also discussed across several sections in this chapter. In this study, participants were motivated to be successful in their education by goals of being successful upon release post-release success and feeling validated after incarceration. In this example, which introduces this section, Machli discussed hope as a motivation in the context of the goal of being successful as a result of post-release opportunities accessible because of furthering his education:

It was more about hope. When you see in prison college programs going, when you offer it in those facilities, what you're doing is you're giving hope. You're not guaranteeing it. You're just saying, Hey, there's a possibility. You can go here to here because of this. And that's what they need. They need hope. They need opportunity. They need vision and

inspiration. Those that had never got educated or didn't believe in education and going after a degree, they were all the naysayers. They didn't have the same goals to help motivate them. So, for academics, you know, whether it's graduating, getting a certain GPA, or achieving on an assignment. I think it's about pushing through. To be successful, you have to embrace opportunities. I'm hoping that it becomes a great story for me to tell, and hopefully, the whole process is very, you know, fruitful in the end because I learned much in the process.

Having goals of post-release success, such as job opportunities or helping others with legal knowledge gained from education, were common examples for participants and are discussed in detail in the next section.

Post-Release Success

Though each person described post-release success differently, some examples included not returning to prison, avoiding active addiction, and being positive role models for their children. Eric had a goal of earning his degree as part of his goal to be successful upon release. This motivated him to do well in his classes and to hold himself accountable for his academic success. He was also motivated by those around him, who modeled what he determined to be a “normal” life. Eric used the term “normal” to describe those different from him, given his incarceration history and drug addiction. Stigma is an instance of an overlapping theme within overcoming challenges, which appears throughout participants’ narratives and is discussed more fully later in this section. Eric was motivated by his goal of future success, for which earning a degree was necessary, and this helped him to perform well in his classes:

I looked at the end goal. Trying to move forward in life rather than stay where I'm at or going backwards would be motivation. I was motivated by comparing my work in other classes. If I am struggling with one particular class, I look at the bigger picture. If I'm doing pretty well in my other classes, I can do well in this one. It came to my mind that going to college is not just about the subject matters of each class. It's also about how to interact with professionals, my professors, and other students who were living their normal lives, and being around these people who were living lives without drugs and alcohol. Being around professionals was interesting and helped me to learn.

Eric referenced his goal to have a job that allowed him to help others. This goal kept him focused on the opportunities for post-release success and motivated him to avoid active addiction, earn his degree, and eventually become a social worker:

What kind of pointed me toward higher education was wanting to be a peer mentor in some substance abuse place. That's what got me into college. I was thinking I was going to get an associate degree, find an entry-level job at some rehab place, and then work there and figure it out from there. I saw the people who would come into work in the prison, and they were getting paid to run these programs that were about overcoming addiction. So, I figured maybe I could do something like that, but outside of a prison, and get paid for it. You know, to use my experience of addiction and being successful at not falling back into trouble right after getting out because I have seen that happen.

Eric also responded that while some career opportunities may be limited because of incarceration, there are increased post-release opportunities that come with earning a degree:

There are people who come out of incarceration and complete the degrees, but they get so wrapped up in this idea that nobody will accept me, there's going to be too many obstacles, and they just wallow in that, and I guess it's understandable. The way I see it, there are going to be some limitations depending on the person's crime, you know, what they've done, where they can go. Maybe somebody who has a drug history is not going to become a pharmacist or something that there are going to be limitations. But, with an education, there are other opportunities to create a better life for oneself other than just scraping by.

Like Eric, Machli also identified his goal of not going back to prison. He discussed the lack of educational achievement among Black men, particularly those in prison. He explained that this inequitable access to education meant that many Black men did not have the motivator of educational success to help them reach the goal of not returning to prison. He also mentioned hope as related to having opportunities because of education and as a motivation for his success:

Well, going through the process [of incarceration], it made me realize it was a big indicator of separation because so many of us Black men was not educated. I had a master's at that time. So, I was very, you know, I was an anomaly there, but I saw the importance of [being educated]. For a lot of brothers there, it didn't seem like there was any hope. So, being educated and going through the process of being more educated, I left there knowing that there was more; there was hope and opportunity. Those that are there and that wasn't doing that was setting themselves up for coming back. And that's why I feel like in this case when I get that title, and I'm working and all that, I know I'll

get opportunities. Because of where I am, that I've gotten two degrees, I have opportunities. I get a chance I might not otherwise get if I am only judged by my past.

Daniel had a daughter in high school, and he was motivated to do well in his education to be a role model for her. Daniel was also one of two participants who wanted to work in higher education, which requires earning a graduate-level degree. He was motivated both by being a role model and accomplishing his career goals:

I didn't want my daughter to see me give up. I wanted and still would like to have the ability to teach in front of a class. I told my daughter, "You need to go to school. You know there's no way around it. You gotta go to school, and you gotta listen," and her challenge back was, "Why do I need to finish school, have you?" in essence. And you know, it's the line that stands out because how do I preach something that I'm not practicing? So, I felt that leading by example meant I had to go ahead and get my degree. So that also was something that I used as motivation because she didn't see that I didn't sleep, you know, a night or two trying to make sure I got a paper done and be up at 530 to go to work.

Like Daniel, Machli's employment goal was to continue his career in higher education and work in an educational leadership position, which requires a terminal degree. He talked about having hope as a motivator that moved him forward in his academic pursuits and post-release success goals:

If you're educated, and you have a degree, and you look like you're moving forward in that opportunity, and you network, then you some doors are open, you know? And so,

going through working on my doctorate while I was there, um, pushing through, man, it just gave me hope. I would see the athletic director and administrators at work, how they work with the students, and what their goals were, and I was inspired about being in that capacity. It was either doing that, or I thought about being a special education teacher. At that time, special education was starting to be like this buzzword that was coming out in education. There was a need for Black males in that sector, and I was going to do it because there was a need, but I wasn't doing it because I loved it or had a passion for it. [Before being incarcerated], I was a basketball coach and an athletic administrator. I had been working in student affairs for maybe 14 years. I had a solid higher education experience working on a campus. Being someone that was educated was not foreign to me. I knew the impact of higher education, and I had a purpose. Before my charge, I had already decided that I wanted to get my doctorate.

Like Daniel and Machli, Demetrius also had children. Demetrius wanted to ensure that after his release, he could positively impact the world for his children as motivation and the post-release success that comes from education, "I have a daughter and a son. And so, what I do is I want to make this world a little bit better for them." Demetrius spoke about how intergenerational incarceration had affected the men in his family. He discussed having a goal to stop the "trauma" cycle, as he described it. He said, "I want to stop this trauma [of incarceration] with myself, and I do not want it to pass on to my son." Demetrius was motivated to be successful in each of these goals by pursuing his education. He said, "I was like, I wanna get my

life back on track. Education is the best way to do so, but there's still a lot of adjusting that has to be done in life first.”

Earl’s original goal was to be educated in the legal field to apply that knowledge to efforts to earn his release from prison, which he was successful in doing. His response incorporated validation with motivation and goal setting. He described that even after incarceration, and despite continuing to earn a non-law related bachelor’s degree, others still recognize his legal knowledge and seek his assistance for legal cases:

My real interest in going to school was because I had a case that I was still fighting. I had just been sentenced to 30 to 60 years. I did get an associate degree in paralegal studies and became a legal writer in there, but then I lost interest. I did a lot of good work, you know, I made a lot of connections, I know a lot of attorneys. As a matter of fact, I had one of my coworkers just a few minutes ago drop off transcripts that she wants me to look over. I feel like I'm able to put what I learned in school to good use and to be able to apply the knowledge that I've gained. I had the respect of my teachers and fellow students and whatnot, but then they took the college option out of prison. I would have had the Bachelor years ago had they not taken away college out of the prisons. But you know, I did decide that I would continue once I got out so meanwhile, I continued being a legal writer and educating myself. Even though, to be honest, I didn't know when I was going to get out, if ever.

As previously described, Demetrius and Earl had a common goal, to be released from prison. They were successful in their goal and their educational pursuits because they were

motivated to learn the skills necessary to complete their legal work to aid their release. Like Earl, Demetrius' was motivated by his goal of release, which would lead him to post release success and being able to further his progress to earn his law degree and has been a common post-release goal, so that he can also help others:

I was sentenced to spend three natural life terms as a first-time drug offender because of the war on drugs initiative that was transpiring in the eighties when they just had these outrageous sentences. So, as I continued to further my education, I continued to familiarize myself with law. I was able to draft up my own commutation and submitted it to the parole board, the governor saw merit, and I was released. And so, I've been home now for about ten years. I definitely want to go pursue law. Law is where my passion is because of the injustice that I've witnessed throughout my life. My plan is to further my education and my understanding of law so that I would be more familiarized with how I can help individuals as they are going back on appeals or, you know, whatever the aspect may be legal-wise. I've always heard, "Well, you're really familiar with quite a bit of the law from your personal experience, and you're studying for yourself." I say, "Yeah, but there's still a lot more that I need to know." And so, my goal is to one day have my law degree and, with my law degree, utilizing this to further what I can do in this line of work to help others.

Beyond being motivated to reach goals of being a positive role model and being in a career that fulfilled a passion, participants were also motivated to be successful based on positive educational experiences, such as previous educational performance or influence from family.

Educational Goals

Students set various educational goals, including goals of earning their college degrees, based on motivation to improve academic performance as compared to earlier educational experiences or continuing from earlier attempts to move forward in and complete their educational progress. Additional examples of educational goals included furthering their education for employment and career opportunities or applying the value of education that they were raised with by their parents to their ongoing efforts to earn their degree. In many examples, this theme includes much crossover between goals and motivation, as often the goal to earn higher grades than in previous educational experiences was also the motivational factor driving the goal. Some participants, such as Daniel and Earl, were motivated to be better students than they were previously. Machli explained that strong educational expectations and career goals, which required advanced education, were expectations that started with his parents, who also cross themes as a support system that helped him to overcome challenges as he worked to be successful in education. Machli explained:

I was at a military junior college for two years; it was just liberal studies. And it was just really to get me going because, as a high school student, you know, I slacked off a lot. I was just really focused on my sport and not really on academics. I went to this college because they recruited me, gave me a scholarship, and my parents wanted me to find a place to be more disciplined. [Education] was modeled for me by my parents. I mean, I didn't do what they wanted me to do; they wanted me to be a physical therapist. They wanted my brother to be a physician. [My parents are Western Indian] and they're known

for nursing. They come here and want to be nurses and doctors. Although they scripted it, we didn't follow that path, but we did go, we did finish up, education was a norm for us. So, I achieved it. I got my associate, my bachelor's, and my master's, and I'm working on my doctorate.

Demetrius had also been enrolled in college before being incarcerated, which motivated him by having an interest in learning and teaching:

Well, I had already been in college before. In 1995, I was already taking classes at what was [Small Liberal Arts College]. So, I did have some college experience when I did go to prison some years afterward. So that kind of put me in a unique position where I was doing a lot of teaching. I was helping a lot of the guys who were incarcerated with tutoring.

Earl, Daniel, and Eric were also first-generation students. Earl's mother instilled the value of education in Earl at an early age:

And I was thinking back then, as a youngster, what do you need with a diploma now? But it was that important to [my mother] because she was the first one in the history of our family to ever graduate high school. That's why it was so important to her, and she stressed to me how important it was to get an education. When I first started college, people were doubtful. I'm the type, like, don't dare me to do anything because not only am I gonna do it, but I'm also going to do this every semester just to show you.

Something that I never knew during my previous education because I was bored to death and then I used to skip school quite a bit, too, you know. I wasn't interested in it back

then, but once I discovered that I had a knack for it and actually enjoyed learning stuff, you know, it came easy to me.

Daniel reflected on his prior educational experiences, which occurred when he was incarcerated:

I am a first-generation student. While incarcerated, I obtained my GED though I found out later I had enough credits to graduate from [Small Urban High School]. Then, I took a number of vocational courses. I was a teacher's assistant in food service technology, so I was already adept at getting a vocational certificate. I attained another vocational certificate in business management and also in custodial maintenance. I was sent to a segregation cell for a year, and behind those doors is where the COs did abhorrent things to guys. That was life-changing, so from 1999 until 2015, when I was released, it was all about obtaining any and all levels of higher education. So over roughly 15 years, I began a process of obtaining any and all certifications. Every single associate degree that was offered I have because, at that point, [while being incarcerated] the highest level of education you can have was an associate degree. I earned an associate in general education, an associate in arts, and my four-year degree is in education studies.

Eric excelled at classes while incarcerated when he was in a program that also trained him to be a firefighter and found himself motivated by earning good grades:

I forget exactly what it is, but I could earn some kind of educational credit. I got into the inmate firefighter program, and we had to take classes while we were working as firefighters for the prison. I was motivated by passing my class and not just passing, but doing well, getting A's and B's. I also kind of enjoyed it.

Participants had a variety of ways that they were motivated by tangible examples of success, such as earning high grades and building on previous educational experiences or expectations that they had grown up within their families. However, another prevailing theme was that students' ongoing efforts and educational successes were motivated by feeling healing and validation as related to being formerly incarcerated.

Healing and Validation

Participants were also motivated by feeling accepted and validated within society as related to being formerly incarcerated. Several participants built on this further by explaining that this validation was also part of healing from the stigmatization of prison. This motivation helped them succeed in higher education and feel more fairly accepted in consideration for employment despite incarceration. Participant responses in this section will be discussed in future sections in this chapter as some examples are shared directly with overcoming stigma.

Machli wanted to work in higher education but was unlikely to be considered for these positions because he was previously incarcerated and may not have had an acceptable background reference. He felt that he would be validated in the eyes of others who might otherwise judge him because he had been in prison by earning his doctorate; therefore, validation was both a goal and the motivation to succeed to be accepted:

I hope that it [doctoral degree] just kind of gives me a level of, I don't wanna say power, but leverage, right? It just helps leverage me in, in spaces where I probably would not be able to be in otherwise. And so, people will know that I was successful. And I can say it with confidence and that, that this education and this process, and this is what happened

to me, this is why I'm better from it. So, to me, it's like there's two-prong reasoning. It's confidence building, and it deals with healing. It's all connected with healing. Look at me now because of this education, look at me now because of what it's done for me, but this is who I am. I was always this person. What happened was I made bad decisions, but I'm not a bad person. I think that it will elevate me into a space in my heart where I will be proud to say that and be readily open to say, "Oh yeah, I'm formerly incarcerated, as well." I know that at some point, when I start to get stronger about it, I can speak with conviction, positivity, and inspiration and say, "Yeah, this is what happened to me."

[Earning my doctorate] changes the landscape of the conversation. To know that my story could be inspiring to someone. Whatever the result of this situation is going to be, it's going to be a setback. And you know, if I can finish [my degree], regardless of how long it takes, it would give me a way to say I can come back from this. Because, in the midst of what I'm going through, I was able to complete my doctorate degree.

Earl explained that he does not like to talk about being incarcerated but feels validated when he feels accepted by classroom peers. He also described feeling validated by both a sense of belonging and redemption in his response:

Other students in the classroom, they are much younger, and none of them have ever experienced prison. You know, they have a thirst for stories about what it was like in prison. They watch movies and whatnot, but they want to hear firsthand. [People] don't know unless I tell them. It's not something I really like to talk about a whole lot. But if they've got a question about it, I'll share it as honestly as possible. You know it's a story

of redemption, you know, how I grew up. It's like, I went, I did that time, and that doesn't mean that it's over for you. You can come up and be successful, you know. I have a good job, a well-paying job, new car, a career, all that stuff, so you know the story is a positive message. I think most of them had never met someone like me, so that's exciting, too.

Most of them come from a good background, they are students from privileged backgrounds, and they've never met anybody like me. So, it's like here's a guy that I met in person that spent 30 years in prison and grew up on the east side of [a large predominantly Black urban city] and that kind of stuff. The fact that I'm in school after that is amazing. They couldn't imagine, they haven't even lived 30 years, so they couldn't imagine doing 30 years of prison.

In another reference to having a sense of belonging, Eric spoke about the healing that he felt by being around people focused on their education and not addiction. He said, “Being in the classroom was very restorative. It was healing to connect with people other than with drugs and alcohol.” Daniel described the judgment he felt. He recognized many types of education, including formal and informal learning, which helped him to feel validated by his education:

I've noticed there's a number of times where we determine someone's level of intellect by how they speak or by their inability to articulate themselves. We make judgments of someone not being educated. But there's a number of modes that individuals show us their intellect without actually saying anything to us. Others teaching me how they learn is important, so I can teach others how to learn and show that there's a number of ways to learn instead of just book learning [and being educated decreases judgment].

As Daniel described, Machli is also motivated to earn his degree to decrease negative assumptions and feel validated in situations where he currently feels stigmatized. In this example, he described a time when he interviewed for a job and went from being a top candidate to not receiving the offer once his incarceration background was revealed:

So, I say, let me get to the final round for consideration, and then let's have a heart-to-heart discussion about [my background]. Like, let's have a conversation. And they say, "Oh, I did a background check." I can say, "Let's talk about it." You know what I'm saying? I think it changes my opportunities a little bit, you know. Right now, if I have to talk about it, I'm gonna always slip in that I'm pursuing a doctorate, and I'm close to finishing it, and that I'm working on my dissertation. That's how I discuss it. Because at the end of the day, what it does is it's a piece of paper that elevates us, and it gives us opportunities to, you know, get promotions, and move into a sector where we want to be. It gets exciting for somebody to call you doctor.

For participants to achieve success, they needed to have goals and motivation to reach those goals. Examples of participants' goals included success upon release, motivation related to prior educational experiences, and feeling validated. Participants were motivated to reach these goals by being positive role models, being able to work in their chosen career or employment position and being accepted by others during employment opportunities or in the classroom, for example. In the process of achieving success, participants also shared details about the challenges they overcame to be successful and the support they needed to do so.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants in this study described many challenges that they overcame to be successful in higher education. Specifically, they felt they could succeed when they had support. This section discusses participants' common challenges, such as systemic barriers, technology skills, competing priorities, and stigma. Understanding these challenges must be further considered with the support needed to overcome them. The next section of this chapter discusses the support participants had to overcome these challenges.

Systemic Barriers

Participants identified various systemic barriers that made their ability to be successful in pursuing their studies far more difficult. Examples discussed below include limited options to access or continue college courses while incarcerated, reentry challenges such as having basic identity documents upon release, and limited options for housing. It was common that acknowledging the barriers that participants overcame was also in the context of the support they received to do so, which is further discussed later in this chapter.

In an example of overcoming a systemic barrier with family support, Machli discussed the systemic limitations of pursuing his education, which he started before he went to prison. The prison system that Machli was a part of during his incarceration did not provide a way for him to officially continue his college courses while he was incarcerated because his classes were online and not a part of the programming offered at that prison. An example of another overlapping theme, this systemic barrier was overcome with personal support from his family, which allowed

him to be successful. Machli overcame this barrier to his academic success because he had family support from his sister:

They didn't have any systems in place for me to continue my classes in prison, so I had to do it on my own. Being able to coordinate that with my sister, who was sending me the work, and I was doing it and sending it back to her, I just kept it moving in a different meaning.

Earl also had to get creative to achieve academic success, despite the rigidity of the prison system:

At first, anybody could go to college, but then they changed it, and they said people that had life sentences couldn't go anymore. So, the guy was asking me, are you still going to college? He said, "When you fill out the form, and they ask your out day, put anything down there. They don't check it, and they can't take the degree back once you got it, you know?" So, I did that, and I kept taking classes. I was connected with an organization that helped me. They sent textbooks and assignments, and stamps into the prison so I could send the work back once I completed it. I had examples, you know, new people, that had came out and had been successful. What really helped me be successful was when I worked in prison legal services.

But, upon release, Earl had a different set of systemic barriers to overcome, and he also mentioned a barrier discussed later in this section, competing priorities:

I couldn't just come right out and go right into college because there are so many challenges. We've advocated against some of these, and some changes were made. But,

for one, you had to get an ID, and that was hard to do. I went to the Secretary of State, and they would say, can you bring us some mail? We need two pieces of mail with your address. Well, nobody's writing to me; I just got out of prison after 30 years. Fortunately, I had a parole agent who wrote me what was called a residency letter, and they accepted that. But then, finding a place to stay, meeting your parole requirements, you know there's a lot to do other than just concentrate on going to school.

For Eric, one of his basic needs upon release was to afford housing. His response combines the reflection of the systemic barrier to housing and simultaneously gives an example of a support system, his family, which helped him succeed. Support from his mother was vital in overcoming this challenge and for him to be able to attend college successfully:

You got \$200 bucks, and somebody is just expecting you to be successful, and if you don't have a place to go, you're stuck. And so having a place to stay when you get out makes a big difference. And it should also be a place that's secure. Many of these halfway houses are just crack houses, and they're shoved in a room side by side; they might shove nine people in it. And half of them are students and, you know, following the right path. So now you're in a situation where you can't, you can barely sleep at night because people were stealing from each other or doing drugs right in front of you. Yep. You can't move anywhere else. Cause they just gave you \$200 bucks, and you had to use \$75 of that to take a bus to get to where you're going. I also had a place to stay, you know, when I came back here to go to school, that helped a lot. My mother lives in the area, and I was able to stay with her.

Because of his incarceration, Daniel experienced systemic challenges related to college admission. He found that it was easier to get admitted into a program if he could avoid the background check that would be required for in-person learning, even though it meant a more challenging online experience for him:

I guess that's another reason probably why I'm doing online. It was the way to go, so I didn't have to go through that rigorous screening and background check. But, at the same time, it's harder than in the classroom. When you're attempting to banter back and forth, it is very difficult. And the irony is they promote that back and forth in the courses. But it's just so difficult not to see a person and be able to go there, so I hated online courses. I mean, If the option is to do them again, I would probably defer.

Daniel also noted that in one instance, he felt his admission rejection was based on race, not incarceration:

I don't think my incarceration played a big role in my first attempt in admission to [Small Private College], but my race did. I spoke with an admissions officer on the phone, and one of the first things they said was, "Oh, so as a minority student, you'll be looking for student aid?" I thought, wait, this is a phone call. I mean, I didn't walk up to her office and speak to her; she just automatically assumed, by the way I speak, that I was a minority. That in and of itself was a slap in the face, so we didn't even get any further. It makes me wonder how assumptions would have affected my admission if I would have gotten any further. I felt pride in attempting to enroll at that university because my mom had been affiliated with it for so long. And for the other person to automatically assume

without knowing me because of my vernacular and reduce me to a race by what she heard was one of the most offensive things I've experienced since I've been free.

Daniel was also motivated by a separate negative experience at another institution denying him admission because of his incarceration. In the last sentence of this response, he discussed the stereotype and stigma that he felt because he was unable to be considered for financial support, which crosses several challenges discussed in this section:

I think that there were several motivating factors. One, I didn't want a bad experience with admissions at [this school] to beat me. The area to which I paroled to had two private Catholic schools, so the tuition in and of itself was out of my league expressly for a gentleman who just came home. So, I found an online program, and [this program] offered ways to obtain my degree that I could afford. No one knew, no questions were asked about a background check when I was admitted. Oh, I mean, it was all about the money, you know, if it is tuition, grant, or loan, whatever, as long as you're paying on it. Since then, I've mentioned that I had been in, and that doesn't stop an individual in education, process, things of that nature, and there's always a little bit of bantering back and forth, of course, because some people still don't think I should have that chance for grants and things like that.

Because Machli was already admitted before being incarcerated, he did not personally experience the barrier of a background check that limited his college admission options, but he discussed the challenge others might encounter and the stigma he felt:

To be successful, you need to find and see which institution you can go to get the best benefits. There's too many options for schools to attend, so the big scarlet letter is the incarceration. I've never had barriers to successfully app a higher education degree. But I think that there are challenges. The research tells you what they are, like the ban the box that we got to use to get rid of that. People that see that box and when they see their question, they just automatically destroy the application and move on.

Earl wanted to enter a university-sponsored program designed to support formerly incarcerated students. He was surprised that he was required to find and produce 30-year-old documents to appease the local police chief to gain admission to this program:

When you apply for this program, you have to supply your academic records, and you have to supply details about your criminal history to the local chief of police; he wanted the transcripts from my trial. I told him my case was 30 years ago it was hard for me to find the information he wanted. I mean, you can look it up online, and it has all that [verification] information you need, but I still had to give them the police report.

Because of his incarceration, Eric faced a barrier when completing an additional admission step and having a special interview:

I had to have an interview to be admitted with a lady who was in charge of maybe social work admissions in that department for students. She did set me aside for an interview. It was just us talking in a room. She asked me some specifics about some of the cases that I had been charged with and done time for. And some things I couldn't remember because it's kind of foggy. And then, at the end, I asked her, "When will I be hearing from you

about me being accepted into the program?" because I was transitioning from the community college to . . . a bachelor program [at another institution]. And she said to me, "Oh, you're in." I said, "Wow, thank you!" And that was it. She was a very nice lady. They could have said, "Sorry, application denied," without any kind of explanation, but you know, I would have probably had an idea why if they would have.

There were other challenges that students had to overcome beyond conquering the systemic barriers of admissions, including learning the technology skills necessary for success in the classroom.

Technology Skills

If people in prison are allowed to use technology, it is limited and highly restricted. It may not have full functionality compared to equipment or internet usage that is commonly used for education or employment. This lack of experience limits post-release readiness and related skills, such as those needed for utilizing computers and cell phones, which are standard for educational success.

Daniel discussed the restricted exposure he had upon reentry:

The first couple of months, I couldn't figure out anything about the computers. I didn't know the programs they were talking about and didn't understand whiteboards or any of that language. The cut and paste was lost on me because none of that was offered in the prison system, none of that. I mean that the college program just brought in computers and laptops for everyone to be able to utilize, but you had no access to the Internet, no outside sources. We had maybe a little Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica at our

fingertips but no interaction with the Web, so I came out totally unprepared for that. It was brutal. I struggled with finding certain things, getting things fine-tuned, clicking on links, and not understanding what I was doing, and when I did, that was an immense struggle for me. I spent more hours trying to figure out how to maneuver through those things than I did actually studying. I struggled so much, just hours and hours and hours of just saying why doesn't this work, why doesn't this work, and not having anyone over my shoulder to say, "Here, you should try this." I didn't have that, and I would have rather had a text and sat in the classroom.

Demetrius talked about the technology gap he experienced, the result of years during his incarceration that he was unable to learn about technology as it quickly advanced:

Just getting back into school was a little difficult because everything is so different. Submitting papers, everything was just completely different from what I did 30, 40 years ago. Everything was just really, really different. When you've been incarcerated for such a long time, and you're coming home, the technology gap is just horrifyingly scary. I mean, we see in one year how technology advances, and so when you have someone who's been incarcerated for, you know, 20 years and they're coming home, the technology gap is huge. And so, for myself, it was a bit easier to overcome that gap because when I began to work back in hospitality as a night auditor, what I would do all night long is sit there and research. You know, I would play around on my computer, play on Outlook, play around in Word, play around in Excel, you know, just to get a feel. Every night at work, I made it a point to learn something new. So that helped bridge the

gap for me. But unfortunately, so many individuals who were coming home they don't have that opportunity.

In an overlapping example of family support, Demetrius gives credit to his wife for helping him to get familiar with technology, whom he discusses later in this chapter as providing key support for him upon reentry. But he recognizes that not everyone has this type of help, so he uses what he has learned to mentor others who are making their way post-release:

You know, because of the work that I do, I work with so many men and women who are coming home, and they're trying to make that transition into school. And it's, it's extremely difficult for them, whereby I think mine was a little bit more unique because I, you know, it took me ten years where I familiarize myself with systems, how the system works you know, had someone you know, who had my back, you know, had a good support system in place. So, it was a lot easier for me to make that transition. And so, you know, just acclimating back to that was a little challenging for me, but my wife, who has her education, has her degree, she, you know, like, okay, well, you want to do your papers like this. You want to do that like that. So, she helped me out a lot.

Because Earl was older, he not only was not familiar with current technology but had largely missed the initial introductions of technology as it took over the processes of daily life, including the expectation of having and using a cell phone as a standard for functioning in society and as a student:

I was technologically challenged. The rest of the students they've all grown up in this stuff, and it is secondhand now. Whereas I had to take a technology empowerment class

to learn how to use a computer, how to use the phone, email, PowerPoint, and all that stuff. I had never seen a cell phone, and I didn't know how to use it. When I first got out, I couldn't answer the phone. My brother bought me a cell phone, and he called the number, and it was ringing. And I'm looking at it, and he was like, "Slide it over, just slide it." So, I took him literally. I put the phone on the floor, and I slid it. I didn't know he was talking about the bar on the bottom of the screen. I mean, there's so many technological differences between me and the people that have been out here the whole time. But I will tell you about young teenagers. They're impatient. They're like, "Dude, give me the phone."

In another instance of addressing the importance of support, which will be addressed later in this chapter, Earl credited in-person learning and a supportive environment as helping him to learn about technology to be successful:

I used to have to watch whatever on the TV because I didn't know how to work remotes and whatnot; they didn't have all that stuff when I left, you know. I think about the fact that I'm learning what the other students already know. We had a class assignment, and we broke up into groups of five, and we were doing an assignment. I had the knowledge about the procedures, the court proceedings, and whatnot, but they had the knowledge or the technological skills we needed to do the assignment. So, you know, we worked together on that, and they were more than willing to be helpful with helping me to figure out the technology.

Besides technology, formerly incarcerated students had additional challenges to overcome. While all students are faced with challenges to overcome and multiple priorities to balance, oftentimes these challenges are more difficult for those who are released from prison who may have to face them all at once, with limited resources, and in conflict with family needs for full-time work, or with limited previous educational and social experiences which are helpful for overcoming these hurdles. Examples of these competing priorities are discussed next.

Competing Priorities

For students who have been incarcerated, there are additional unique challenges to balance competing priorities. Often, they have additional release requirements to be employed, find housing, support a family, and pursue their education. This is unlike most other students who may have each of these priorities build separately and gradually with time to prepare and prioritize these commitments.

Demetrius had to figure out how to make what he called “quality decisions.” The effect of years of a lack of autonomy and agency necessary to manage day-to-day decisions and obligations was more challenging for him:

I always was intending to go back to school. It was just the opportunity never presented itself. As far as when you're coming home, there's a lot of stuff that has to be done. You know, especially after 18 years. One of the biggest challenges that a person who has been incarcerated for an extended period has to face is how to make quality decisions. Because if you think about it in this way, when a person is incarcerated, their everyday life is managed. Every moment of every hour of every day, you know, institutionalized. So,

coming home, just learning to acclimate myself, and learning to make those decisions, was a big jump for me.

He also had a family to take care of and spend time with:

You have a family, you know. I gotta get out here, and I gotta take care of my family.

And I, so you find yourself under all this responsibility. But honestly, and I don't wanna mean to sound selfish, but at the same time, your responsibility right now is to yourself, and part of that is becoming able to better contribute to your family. There are a lot of pressures.

Demetrius balanced his priorities by taking a smaller class load:

So, you don't just come out and say, "Hey, I'm just gonna take 12 credits." Take it slow.

Build yourself up to that pace. It took ten years for me to be successful after I got out, in school or otherwise, but even in that transition, there are still things that I am learning, you know? And so that's why I chose to take only two or three classes at a time until I get to the place where I can take on more. And once I got back into the full swing of things, I would say I'm successful because I've gotten all A's so far.

Daniel also had to find a new way of being successful with competing priorities and without the isolation that made it easier to focus solely on academic performance:

So, on a bigger scale now that I'm free, if I had the opportunity to still be in the cell, I believe a master's program would be simple. Freedom, in that sense that I'm speaking of, is detrimental to someone like myself who had been locked up for so long because now I've been pulled in so many different directions. But when I was in the cell, I had only

one direction, so I could focus on the classes. I definitely noticed the difference. The pull in the many directions is why my coursework was finished at like 4 am, and I turned in assignments at the nick of time by 5 am and things of that nature. I mean this there's a creative, your creative juices get flowing when you have a deadline, and I used that a lot more so than I needed to. But also, at that time, the house is quiet, and my mind was quiet. So yes, ironically, the cell mentality would help my education. I also had to reverse order to be successful with the struggles that existed. Keep in mind that I have a full-time job, and at the same time, I had a new family that was brought into my home, and I had to work to feed all of us and do my educational learning. So, there was a lot, a lot more going on besides my studies.

As was discussed, Daniel was motivated to reach his goal of becoming a professor, but upon release from prison, he felt additional pressure to manage competing priorities that made it more challenging to succeed:

Upon my release, I wanted to teach at some university somewhere. I wanted to have my doctorate degree, and I wanted to teach. I wanted to teach a couple of other anthropological disciplines, but I wanted to educate. I would love to find a master's program in Education or some form of anthropology to move on to my doctorate. I would love to do that and still be able to take care of my family. And I think that I've gotten to this rut of monotony. 12-hour days, 6 am to 6 pm shifts, and not getting to a point where I'm just saying that my family is okay, and my mortgage is being paid because those are priorities.

Like Daniel, Earl recognized the ironic benefit to the isolation and limited obligations of incarceration, having the ability to focus on doing well in classes without time constraints, which is not usually a practical option upon release:

I had to develop study habits, the right study habits, and the discipline to get good grades. I didn't have to worry about that while I was incarcerated. I had all day long to study; it didn't matter how efficient I was. Well, you know the way I see it, you're locked in a cell with the books. Why wouldn't you get all A's was my way of thinking about it, you know. But once you get out, there's other challenges that there's challenges of, you know, day to day living.

Eric gave credit to a program that no longer exists that helped him to balance priorities and get a solid start upon release:

There was the SB 618 program to kind of support us with a smoother transition from being inside to being outside. Supposedly it started off pretty robust, but I think by the time it was my turn to get out, it was dwindled down to: we'll buy you some t-shirts and a bag of groceries or something like that, which was nice, but still. It was better than nothing at all.

Without access to financial grants, Earl would not have been able to attend college:

You know, I never thought I'd get grants with my [felony] history. That was a big deal to be able to pay for college. I wasn't making big bucks coming out of prison, but I wasn't going to get anywhere without getting more education, and I still had to work, so it made a big difference to make progress in both areas and to have the grants.

Machli also had to balance financial obligations and time with his family to continue earning his degree:

Especially when you're like not fresh out of college, it's hard to stay focused when there's so much else you have to keep up with. I'm saying when you're deep into the family world, and you're balancing all that, it takes a lot more dedicated effort, especially if you've been incarcerated and overcoming all of that, too. When I started [the doctorate], it was loans; I took my loans out. I know people that focus on the monetary aspect, and they get diverted from even their purpose and their goal. Whether it's going to school, whether it's going after a business, creating and being an entrepreneur, when they hear the numbers, the cost, you know, they're discouraged from even going through the process.

Machli went on to talk about the judgment that comes with incarceration, which limits financial opportunities:

You know Pell [Grants] are coming back in prisons? And I can see that there's gonna be a lot of folks in those systems that will excel with [that financial opportunity]. Without that kind of discrimination, they're going to get opportunities. You're going to see a lot of people excel and do marvelous work. And then you realize, oh wait a minute, this is what happened to you; you did this much time? You're taking that layer of judgment away by taking these classes and getting a degree.

Judgment, as mentioned by Machli, also often referred to directly as stigma was a challenge that came up throughout the interviews and is discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.

Stigma

Throughout the interviews, participants, directly and indirectly, discussed the stigma of incarceration related to the challenges they overcame to succeed. Referencing both the stigma of incarceration that commonly is a part of college admission applications, Machli referred to “the scarlet letter” when he discussed challenges with college admission:

Oh, I mean, you know that was one of [the reasons I didn't mention anything about being incarcerated] was, I thought, what are the consequences for them? How would they approach it because this could be like, I could be the example here at this institution, right? This could be a new thing that they have never done, so it was like, why? Okay, so how is disclosing this going to benefit me? That was my main question like does this benefit me? Probably not. This type of pain and misery and setback is not, you know, it's not really rewarded, right? I just looked at it as this is probably not a good idea to reveal it. It was about really being an actor. You know, I have to write this thing out and get an Oscar for it.

In this response, the stigma that Machli felt is addressed by the healing and validation that motivated him to be successful in earning his degree:

I was ashamed to even have those conversations [about being incarcerated]. Because at the end of the day, I've never been through anything like this. So, I didn't even know how to approach the conversation. I was still working on my introduction elevator speech. Okay, how do I explain this, you know, and so all that was really difficult? Part of it was shame. It was like when you've never been in a place like this, and you're dealing with stress, and you're dealing with all types of external pressures and internal pressures. Part

of it was depression you're dealing with, you know? Whether it's suicidal thoughts, all of that was compounded, and it just wasn't a place to have those conversations. A lot of what I was feeling was suppressed, and I was just trying to act like, to be an actor, to act like none of this was really happening when it seemed like everything was crumbling around me. And, I knew that ultimately, if I can get to a place where I can get through this and I can get this degree, to get to a place where I can overcome my shame, where now I can talk about it. I'm turning my liabilities into an asset. And if you've ever been, if you have ever gone through any type of trauma or hurt, there's a process of healing, and that takes time. I want to define it. I wanna define and change that narrative for me because I know that throughout the whole system, I never got the speak my narrative.

Like Machli, Eric also saw earning his degree as a way of neutralizing the stigma of being formerly incarcerated. His comments also relate to previous discussion in this chapter about feeling motivated to be a role model for others:

You know, it might not be a shock to hear that you got an associate degree, but if somebody says, "I've got a master's degree, and I'm working in a professional position," then it might kind of throw a person off. That's kind of why I'm doing this [interview] with you, in the hopes that people can kind of let loose with that stereotype that people who've gone to prison cannot excel. If I can do what I've done, then that means anybody can do it.

Daniel realizes the negative judgment as well. He does not like to discuss his incarceration but realizes that it is a part of his experiences that validate his knowledge in the classroom:

I'm never hesitant to mention it, but I also don't wear it as a badge of honor because it's a blight to me. It's very embarrassing to have been through [being incarcerated]. But, you know, it's to us, where we came from, it's kind of a rite of passage. In the classroom, my arguments, in any form, are concrete. So, I always felt that I'm not going to use this as a crutch. But as banter, you know to generate important conversations, it's okay. So yes, I was incarcerated, so what?

Eric indirectly described the stigma he felt being around what he called “normal people”:

I think it's an adjustment to be around people who are trying to do things with their life. I would call them normal people because I was used to running after drugs all the time, being in the streets, not getting up early in the morning, and not really being too responsible. So, adjusting to that, being responsible, being on time, being studious, that was an adjustment. Also, sometimes, thinking, what am I doing here? I can't do this, the self-doubt kind of thing.

Earl realized that his education has helped him to deflect some of the judgment that society has about people in prison and calls out the preconceived notions that would otherwise limit his ability to make his own impression:

Yes, I think I've overcome the challenges that a lot of people still face because of the fact that I did have some education. Because people have a preconceived notion of what an

ex-con is like, we change that narrative when we're in college and earning a degree. As a matter of fact, I give a lot of presentations in front of groups, you know, civic groups and organizations, and I won't even mention until the end that I'm formerly incarcerated or a returning citizen. They're usually shocked, like are you kidding me, because they have a preconceived notion. You know, they just don't think of it beyond, here's a black man who spent 30 years in prison, oh Lord, what is he gonna talk about? No one thinks people coming out of prison after 30 years will go to college. I think they prefer that we just go in a hole, somewhere, and stay out of sight, you know.

In further conversation, Earl directly labeled the stigma of those who have been incarcerated:

Most people coming out of prison, they have bought into the notion that, you know, to the stigma that this is what it is, and this is what it's gonna be. I'm trying to break that stereotype that it doesn't have to be that way. You can do this, and you can do that. But I used to get so disappointed because when they did have the college [courses] in the prisons, I'd be in the classroom and look out the window. It would be six people in the classroom and 6000 people out on the yard. I was just amazed that more people wouldn't take advantage, and even some of those in the classroom, they'd be like, "Oh, can I see your homework?" No, you absolutely cannot. You've been locked in there with books just like I have.

Demetrius said that the feelings of stigma never go away and are present on campus:

When you've been incarcerated and as you deal with the trauma of incarceration, it's something that never leaves you. It's something that is actually a part of you even today. I'll be perfectly honest with you. I just feel that you have to be aware that it's out there, it's, you know, it's, it's, it's no way around it. I just see it more and more especially now. . . where people felt more comfortable with expression, their racism invited openly, they felt more invited to [judge]. I just think that I've been to many campuses, you know, I know it's just different just visiting or going there on a daily basis.

Along with discussing the challenges they overcame to succeed in higher education, participants also identified the types of support that helped them succeed.

Support Systems

Participants identified sources of support, including personal and community support—such as family, friends, and mentorship from individuals and reentry programs—campus support, which included support from various campus offices, and feeling supported by campus options--such as feeling as though they belonged in diverse and inclusive spaces and having their preferred in-person or online learning option, which allowed them to be successful. Much of the support participants discussed was from mentorship received on and off campus and notably usually occurred as happenstance.

Personal and Community Support

Examples of family support have been discussed previously in this chapter with specific challenges that participants overcame. In this section, I present specific examples of family support experiences as related to networking and success on campus. Participants also had

support from non-profit reentry and advocacy organizations within the community, for example, a state employment program that helped with the reentry process, making a smoother path for academic success. Demetrius had support from both his wife and networking through his employment at a prisoner advocacy organization:

I would say a support system is really important, just having the information you need. I was talking to my friend, who was an attorney, and he was giving me all the information [about going to college]. I also had a great support system with my wife. My wife said they had a new program . . .and she said they'll pay for you to go back to school. My wife is my strongest supporter. Of course, you know, it was funny because my wife says, "Okay, this is what you wanna do." And then I went to the counselor, and I had a really good counselor, too. They said, "Okay, this is what you want to do." So, it was helpful to just be able to go to someone on campus who was able to help me lay out what's needed in order for me to reach my goal. I've spoken with a few individuals who say, "Hey, knowing you, that would be a great move for you to pursue law."

Machli had a mentor, another formerly incarcerated Black man who also worked in higher education:

Think about it. Who was a successful person out there who didn't make it to their highest pinnacle of their life without a mentor? Mentoring is probably one of the most important aspects of your professional career. You need someone that can advise you, consult with you, steer you in the right direction. I have a mentor, and he kept going, you know, he kept on going, knowing that there was still more to fulfill, and he didn't let being

formerly incarcerated hold him down. He's a professor [who has earned a Ph.D.] and a formerly incarcerated person who works at [a top-ranking institution].

A friend also motivated Earl, leading to Earl's college success. Ronald, or Ronnie, as Earl referred to him, motivated and encouraged Earl during incarceration and after Ronnie and eventually Earl were both released. As Ronnie made his way back into society, he developed relationships with many advocacy organizations that he later connected Earl with, which created for him a network of support both on and off campus:

A good friend of mine, Ronnie, got involved in advocacy work, and he's heard of on a national level. When I first got out, you know, I saw the success that he was having, and he brought me into the fold. As a matter of fact, he was the one that got me that first speaking engagement. That really helped my confidence and helped me get connected and thinking I could do more. [Ronnie] is one of the first people I contacted [when I was released]. We made arrangements to go eat breakfast (Figure 7) and we talked about a lot of things about me getting going again. One of those things was the connections Ronnie had with an organization and an attorney, who had also been incarcerated, and this and that, and so then it all came together when I was able to use this to know about people who could help me in school, too.”

Networking with this attorney eventually led Earl to get to know a person who happened to be a supportive professor at the school he attended:

I took some criminal justice classes, and this was a guy that worked with at the ACLU who was like, "Oh, I see where you're going to [Regional University of Large State

System], a good friend of mine is a professor there." And so that helped me get connected to knowing someone on campus. I know that I was fortunate to get these opportunities probably because of some of the people that I knew. You know, a lot of people coming out, they won't even have access to these programs. I was fortunate because I was around people that was like, "Hey, have you ever thought about, you know, so on so on such and set, and we're able to connect me to, you know, these different programs or whatnot."

Once participants were connected on campus, they also shared that they randomly found support from staff and faculty.

Campus Support

While interviews revealed some negative interactions that participants had, which were not supportive, it is important to note that every participant partially credited their progress to reaching their goals and being successful in higher education to a campus person or program that they happened upon at their university. However, no two resources were exactly the same, and these experiences were happenstance in how students came across these avenues of support. Earl credited a program created to help formerly incarcerated people succeed on campus. Eric, Daniel, and Demetrius credited an advisor, professor, or other person within the institution who took note of their abilities and was inclined to help them build their skills or point them to offices and guidance, which would increase their success.

Demetrius was motivated by a professor who valued the diversity that Demetrius brought to classroom discussions. He said, "When you have a professor who says, 'I really appreciate the fact that you enrich our conversations.' That's very motivating for me, you know, because this is

what, this is what I desire to do.” This started a relationship of support and mentorship with this professor, who guided Demetrius to resources and encouraged his success on campus.

Eric credited the professors who encouraged and believed in him, and he realized this made it easier for him to be successful:

A few professors encouraged me to get at least a bachelor [degree] and probably a master [degree] to become an independent person who helped work with people with substance abuse concerns. And also, I was getting fairly good grades. Those two things combined kind of encouraged me to aim higher towards a master's degree, but if I wouldn't have, I would have just probably found some job. I know I'm older, and it may have been a little bit harder, but my past experience as a young man is whenever I got hired someplace, I kind of excelled.

For Eric, it was important to have a trustworthy advisor. However, he noted that he found this person after struggling as a first-generation college student who was unsure of where to go or how to ask for help and trying to figure out what help he needed:

The funding and having access to support a person to know what classes to pick and how they could be transferred over or applied to complete your major was helpful. I think that's kind of something that people need guidance with unless they've been to college, or they have family members who went to college. I was first-generation, so I had to feel my way through it. You know, I'd go talk to an advisor, talk to my professors, and share my goals, my hopes, and why I'm here. But I think me being able to ask for help from someone just kind of being mindful of the barriers to let people in because of

incarceration. I think you can't put everybody in the same box. Along the way, I recognized that I could do well in school. Because I was getting A's and B's. Then, I think one or two professors encouraged me to go further, to get at least a bachelor's degree and probably a master's degree. Then I know another professor, she was a social worker and, and one of her classes, she mentioned that a person could get a master's degree in social work in five years instead of six, because if you get a bachelor's in social work, then the master's is only one more year. I went over to [Major Urban Research University] because another professor said to talk to them over there, to talk to an advisor in the social work department, and they will tell you what classes you need. So, I made an appointment, took my transcript over there, and talked with this advisor in the social work department. That was important because I had talked to another general advisor in the university, and she didn't even mention social work. But when I went directly to the social work department, they looked at my transcripts and said, "Okay, you need this, this, and this." And that's what I took, and I was able to transfer over easily. That same woman would pop up every now and then and be a support and encouragement in my life. I contact her every once in a while, nowadays.

Eric also gave credit to coming across the right person in the financial aid office who helped introduce him to financial resource opportunities. A student employee offered him guidance on dealing with his student loans so he could be in good standing and continue through college:

I was kind of worried about getting in when I was applying, but I got through. Also, I had a \$2,000 loan that my father had talked me into after college that I just hid from, and that blocked my way. So, I was thinking it's over, the game's over, and I was about to give up when I went to go talk to somebody about it. But the young lady, a student, most likely, she said, "Well, why don't you just go take care of it, call them, take care of them?" So, I picked up the phone, I had the information on who the loan was by, and I talked to somebody. They said, "Well, just start making payments. And if you start making payments for a few months, we'll just say, 'Oh, he's good to go. He's paying now.' So, you can get your grant or whatever."

Because of the guidance Eric received to help him bring his loans into good standing, he received funding to allow him to attend college without working, a previously discussed common example of a competing priority:

Well, again, lucky for me, they had grants. I don't know if I would have completed school this quickly if there weren't grants available and if I would have gone for it. But I had the grants, so I went full-time. If full-time hadn't been available, I would've dragged my feet, maybe just given up and gone looking for a job instead. So, the grants were very instrumental in me being able to go full-time. The lady who told me which classes I needed to take had told me before the bachelor's program was over to apply for a grant, some kind of grant, a scholarship, or something for the master's program. I applied, and I got it. I don't remember how much it was. I don't even remember how I applied it, but I did it. I won it.

The pattern of crediting supportive people within the colleges continued with Machli, who actually was motivated by a former warden-turned-professor, who originally worked at a facility where Machli was incarcerated:

My professor was actually at one time a warden at an institution that I was at that I knew. And so, talking with him it's really motivating for me, and to hear his encouragement, it's really a great position to be in. And I know a Dean at a University who understands my past, and he's been very supportive and trying to keep me involved in the industry. He's kind of helped me rebrand myself, reinvent myself. He's pulling me into volunteering in different capacities because that's what it's going to take. It's going to take networking, building that brand, building myself back up, and then when people start seeing your work, they start to open those doors.

Earl was the only participant who experienced a college program created within the university to help formerly incarcerated students:

I heard about [an educational transition program at a large state research university] for non-traditional students, such as myself. So, I applied, and I was accepted, and here I am. They make exceptions for you, you know, make sure you have mentors or tutors, and they check on you to make sure you're doing right. They want you to succeed, and they probably figured [these], students meet a new extra help or something. They have a coffee hour for the students twice a week where, if you need anything, you could talk to the administrators at the program. They give you extra tutoring, and they just send you

texts or emails to check to see if everything is okay with you, do you need mentoring, or just to ask what they can do to help you.

Earl also gave credit to supportive faculty for his success, because they offered flexible office hours so that he could meet with them around his work obligations:

My professors have office hours, where you can be on Zoom with them. They have been really flexible, whereas because of my schedule, I can't always meet during office hours, so if I send them an email and ask them to meet, you know they usually make arrangements for me.

Having support on campus often meant getting access to resources and knowing people who could help students network to other opportunities. However, it was also important to have a variety of classroom options and extracurricular activities, which helped students feel comfortable and supported their success.

Classroom and Campus Options

Diversity in the classroom was important to participant success. One consideration for classroom diversity was how the course was offered. Some participants preferred online course options, while others, like Eric, discussed that being around a diverse student population in the classroom was an important consideration for his success because he had always been around diverse populations growing up, and this helped him feel comfortable in class:

My comfort is with diversity. When I first thought about how I have this kind of attraction to [large public universities], I used to say I don't know why I always feel kind of comfortable when I'm here. And then, I came up with the understanding that perhaps it

might be related to me being raised in a military family. My family finally settled down here in [a large, predominantly Black urban city]. Perhaps that aspect of seeing all the various races and cultures in different places is what I got used to, so having diversity on campus as far as a student population helped me feel a degree of comfort. I'm imagining there might be a few less diverse campuses out there that would not make me feel as comfortable.

Demetrius felt that his age and being formerly incarcerated were unique and brought diversity to the classroom. This helped him to learn from younger students and feel valued that he could contribute different perspectives and knowledge for them to learn from, too:

And, you know, it's different being older. Going back to school and with the life experiences, a lot of our discussion boards, and a lot of our discussions in class, people tend to see me a little in a different light. And I think it is because of the fact that I have so much more life experience. And you know, I'm able to explain in conversations how my perspective has developed, especially when it's dealing with criminal law. Most of the people who are in these classes are either studying to be police officers or studying to be attorneys. You know, they're studying to do social work.

Earl also noted his age difference from most of the other students as part of creating a diverse classroom. The differences between race and age were more apparent to him during in-person classes, so he felt more comfortable with online learning options, which blended these differences:

In my first semester, I was really gung-ho about doing the work, and I formed a good relationship with my professors and some of the students. I mean, the online way was kind of different; it was a lot of reading. The in-person classes were kind of different, too, because my youngest grandchild just turned 23, and he's already older than most of the students I was in class with. You know there weren't too many Black students there either. So, between the age difference and all that, I felt kind of a little bit out of place, but they didn't seem to bother me, so I just stayed focused. When we have in-person classes, and I went, I was one of only maybe three Black people in a classroom out of forty, you know. So, you know, it is even less for Black men that have been formerly incarcerated.

Eric felt it was important to have interactions outside the classroom, including participating in campus events and extracurricular activities, which were also crucial to his success:

So, being in college is not necessarily always just about the subject matter. It's also about learning how to communicate with your professors and your fellow students and participate in community events like clubs and things of that sort. And, for me, that was a wonderful part of my experience that meant a lot for me.

Eric also discussed that it was not just the level of interaction with the campus community, but also whether classes were held in-person, which he preferred and felt helped him to connect to resources, as previously discussed:

You know, I don't know. I can't imagine myself reaping that same benefit with what people are going through, with the pandemic and virtual education right now. For me, being in that social setting was very important. And I also think that an in-person setting allowed perhaps not only my fellow students but the administrators and teachers to see who I am and my potential and kind of nudge me toward resources. I was selected as student of the year in the bachelor's program and in the master's program. How would that have happened if it was all virtual? These people wouldn't get to know me and see what my efforts were outside of the classes.

Machli shared that he feels more comfortable and successful with online learning from his perspective as a Black man:

I think when you are going into a doctoral studies program, initially you start to think, do I belong based on the population of students I see? And if there's nobody that looks like you, that talks like you, then you can have some inferiority and being there. And sometimes, as an African American or Black person, when you're speaking in a population that you're the minority, you feel the pressure of I have to make sure I'm on point because I'm speaking for all of us. And so, if I'm not, if I'm failing, then the general consensus is, this is what Black people do. And so, I think early on, I wanted to make sure that I was proper, so I was just on guard. And then, as I started to settle in, I started to be myself and not be worried about what people would think about me being Black, or formerly incarcerated, or any other judgments, but initially, you always have that coming in. The fact is the number one factor is walking into the room and seeing what the

demographics are. I mean, that's just like whether I'm walking in physically or whether I'm doing it virtually. It's just something that stands out because race plays an important factor in America; we just made it that way. When our ancestors have, and it's been embedded in all of us, in policy and legislation, and everything does, that's something you are aware of when you walk in the room. I will never be able to turn that off. I'm saying all those things play a part, and so it's just something like I said: you can't turn off because it's been going on for hundreds of years. In online classes, you know, when there is no physical presentation, I think that it just removes those barriers of judgment, and it just allows you to focus on the important things. So, it allows me to focus on the work and not worry about what anybody thinks, you know, just focus on the work. Especially when you have to submit assignments and you didn't have to comment on other people's assignments. They just see a name, and they may see a picture when you're submitting stuff, but that's all they know.

With it being an online university, you probably don't have the same expectations to be around in person or checking in on people like me who live in one state and attend school in another state. So, they didn't even know about my [incarceration] because, you know, at that level, you don't have relationships. Any type of interactions you have, it's all one-offs, you know what I'm saying? I didn't know a single student in my class. I'm under the radar with them, just a regular student. As long you know you're paying, and you do what you're supposed to do and keep moving forward.

For Machli, the fact that his program was offered completely online afforded him the unique opportunity to continue his coursework unofficially during his incarceration:

I had some flexibility that happened to align with my incarceration. I was so blessed that all the physical class stuff that I had to do happened within that first year, so I could take a break before my dissertation. The delay got approved for like hardship. I didn't really want to kind of explain [my legal situation] because I didn't really want to open that up for anything that would reject me. I just talked to my advisor, took a year's absence from the dissertation phase, and just focused on the course I needed to complete. It was challenging and difficult, but I was able to take a year off. I had to do a verbal presentation, but it was a recorded verbal presentation I sent [from prison]. And then, since my chair gave me a year off, I didn't have to see her, which was good because having to get online would have been challenging. So, when I got home, I jumped online to meet with the Professor, "Oh hey, how's it going? I haven't been doing anything, just been so busy, you know, meeting many new people." It was really about being an actor. I have to write this thing out and get an Oscar for it.

In an instance of both mentorship and the flexibility of online coursework, which supported academic success, Daniel was guided to college by someone who helped him think about taking online courses to fit his work schedule:

And then someone told me to begin the process of looking into online courses. I mean, the convenience of the online course also was a contributing factor to me choosing it. I just looked online for ways to finish my four-year degree, and there's two primary

colleges in my area. The program I chose, their degree will be transferable to a potential master's program, so accepted in any other any other college if I further my education.

So, I did that, and since I didn't have a legitimate support system behind me that would allow me to go to school on campus full-time, it was just easy to make that choice.

Students reflected that they needed support to overcome barriers which they uniquely experienced as a result of being formerly incarcerated. The support they shared was often from faculty, or staff, or may have been a feeling of support in an inclusive classroom environment, either online or in-person, based on their individual needs and preferences. Having this support, along with being motivated to reach individual goals, helped them to be successful in higher education.

Theoretical Development

The interviews of five formerly incarcerated Black men consistently represented that they viewed success as goal-centered. Participants shared many known and common challenges unique to this population of learners and described how they were supported in overcoming them. Participants shared some common motivations and goals; however, the support needed for success is the variable they had no control over, as compared to goals/motivation and barriers, which were internally identified. This meant that if they lacked a key moment of support, they may not have succeeded in higher education. And that the less support they had, the less likely they were to succeed because no matter how motivated they were or how familiar they were with the barriers they had to overcome, without support to overcome how the barriers affected the students' abilities, they were unlikely to succeed. Feeling accepted, and supported, and being able to make the choices between options that met their needs, including online or in-person classes, or being able to attend diverse campuses, or changing majors, helped students to be successful. I will further discuss a few of these examples shared by participants in Chapter 5.

The developing theory that emerged from this research is called the Formerly Incarcerated Student Success Theory and is represented by Figure 8 below. Students must have a goal and the motivation to reach that goal. Then, they need to have the support necessary to overcome the unique challenges of incarceration. When all these aspects are combined, formerly incarcerated students succeed in higher education. Participants in this study felt they could succeed when they had support to overcome challenges and the motivation to reach goals. They

consistently credited connecting with the right person at the right time, often just by luck, in ways that made all the difference in their success.



Figure 4.5 Formerly Incarcerated Student Success Theory

This figure describes a developing theory, the Formerly Incarcerated Student Success Theory. Each participant internally navigates motivation and goals. Having support from personal and community connections may help participants' motivation and goal progress, but this external support is not required. However, to overcome challenges, students must receive

support to conquer these barriers. Therefore, support is key to supporting formerly incarcerated students' success.

Member Checking

The member-checking process was very important for developing this working theory. During the analysis process, I reflected on my own subjectivities in consideration of stigma and the responses and experiences that participants described. Having previously performed research centered on stigma, I readily recognized this concept in responses from participants in which they did not directly label it themselves. I used the member-checking process to ask others about statements or representative language that was used to see if they recognized the discussion of stigma in common responses, such as referring to previous incarceration as a “blemish” or “scarlet letter” as a stigma. I also asked directly after comments that reflected stigma, “Do you feel stigmatized by being incarcerated?” Member checking was also important in reflecting on topics of race. Participants might describe that they felt more comfortable being in online classes where they felt they were not judged by race, but when I asked directly if they felt their race affected their experience or success, some would comment that they did not feel it did. Member checking was very useful for reflecting on my subjectivities and inconsistencies between participant language and direct responses to pointed questions on these topics, for example.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

In this chapter, I strive to interpret the findings of my research considering existing research and theory. Two primary concepts are used to frame and interpret the data, including Critical Race Theory (CRT), which assumes the structural disadvantages that Black people overcome within education (Dutil, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016; Solorzano et al., 2000; Tate IV, 1997; Yosso et al., 2004) and anti-deficit framework, which works against an abundance of deficit literature (Allen, 2015) that fails to blame the structural disadvantages that hinder Black people's success (Allen, 2015; Anumba, 2015).

The Formerly Incarcerated Student Success Theory is the emerging grounded theory developing from this data. This developing theory focuses on support as an essential component of how formerly incarcerated students achieve success. Participants defined success by discussing markers of success, which indicated progression toward, or accomplishment of, a goal. It was apparent from participant interviews that goals and motivation were linked, as success was not attainable without a goal to strive for and the motivation to achieve it. Further development of this theory brought attention to the difference between internal and external factors that affect a student's success. Another key point is that while participants could internally set their goals and identify their motivation for pursuing and accomplishing them, they needed external support to help them conquer the barriers they faced. Interviews confirmed that each student developed internal goals and motivation to be successful. While there may be some

impact from others who were motivational role models or who were supportive of participants seeking to reach their goals, the participant internally defined the primary component of having a goal and the motivation to reach the academic goal. The support needed to help students be successful may have come from similar sources, such as faculty and staff or community reentry groups, but it was always by happenstance. Support offered was random and lucky, and each participant's experience was unique based on the chance of finding the right help at the right time, which helped them succeed academically.

Motivation and Goals-Internal

The Formerly Incarcerated Student Success Theory recognizes the importance of individual motivation and goals that are developed internally and controlled by each student. While the motivating factors, or those who offer motivation, may be external, students' individual motivation and personal goals are internally determined. This internal motivation is considered in contrast to the variety of support necessary to overcome challenges for which students need support and which support must be provided by others. Similar studies have also found that motivation helps to increase self-efficacy, resiliency, and academic success for formerly incarcerated students (Torres, 2020; Turner-Odom, 2016). Eric said, "I looked at the end goal. Trying to move forward in life rather than stay where I'm at or going backwards would be motivation."

The feelings of healing and validation that students described further reflected the presence of ongoing stigma, discussed later in this chapter. Participant goals and motivation

centered around post-release success, positive educational experiences, and feelings of healing and validation related to feeling stigmatized by incarceration and related judgment. Machli stated, “It’s confidence building, and it deals with healing.” Goals such as finding a job related to earning an advanced degree would help them support their families, feel accepted by society, “live like others,” and, according to Eric, live a life not driven by addiction. Students felt normal when they were around other students who were similarly focused. They were motivated when they earned high grades, either because they had not done so previously or because they wanted to continue successful previous academic efforts and results. They described feeling comfortable on campus when they were recognized like other students, without reference to their incarceration. Preference for in-person or online learning varied based on scheduling options, but some participants felt more comfortable with the less personal online environment that allowed them to blend into the classroom atmosphere. Participants felt that they belonged and could separate from the identity of being a formerly incarcerated person within diverse campuses. Like other research, participants in this study confirmed that these examples of validating experiences (Alvarado, 2020) helped mitigate feelings of stigma (Copenhaver et al., 2007).

Participants would discuss feeling different or recognizing other nonincarcerated students in the classroom as normal. Machli discussed being an “actor” and referenced winning an award for his acting by keeping his incarceration private and explaining that he was busy rather than incarcerated. Though he did not explicitly say so, he identified often that this and other examples of choosing when/if to discuss his incarceration were related to whether he thought doing so would bring judgment. I used memoing to note that in future interviews, I would ask specifically

if participants recognized or identified stigma to ensure that I was not overly sensitive to it, given my familiarity with the concept. I validated the existence of the stigma as a consideration of a motivation to heal from feeling stigmatized and a challenge that participants needed support to overcome to be successful using this ongoing comparative and member checking method.

Support to Overcome Challenges-External

Participants were unlikely to succeed without a variety of external support received to overcome unique challenges related to incarceration. They often responded about the intentional isolation and stigma that the carceral system encourages, and they noted challenges with the transition from prison to college. Compared to the internal control that students have related to feeling motivated and setting goals, they also needed external support to overcome the challenges along the way. Students shared some examples of support received, such as that from family, community, and campus programs, which helped them to overcome unique challenges related to incarceration. Challenges that required support included overcoming systemic barriers, learning technology skills, managing competing priorities, and mitigating feelings of stigma.

Some common challenges, such as the transition to college (Van Herpen et al., 2020), financial concerns and challenges of first-generation students (Hanushek et al., 2019), lack of family support, and competing obligations (Mishra, 2020) are commonly known to affect students' development and success in college. What is unique for formerly incarcerated students is that due to incarceration, these challenges happen all at once. Whereas for a typical student

who hasn't been incarcerated, challenges more often come sequentially or as intentional preparation for college, (Ehnow, 2018; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Additionally, the times when non-incarcerated students typically expected learning curves and transition points varied greatly from when a formerly incarcerated student experienced learning curves and transition points but with additional challenges to their success and often with many challenges at a time. Thus, supports commonly in place for others during known transition points, such as preparation for college through high school coursework or beginning a college career with a peer group, were absent or ill-timed. For example, this meant that most formerly incarcerated adult-age students were learning technology that other students had grown used to long before attending college while also adjusting to a vastly changed technological world that had evolved without them during their incarceration. As Earl reflected, he was trying to learn the basic task of answering his smartphone, let alone learn to use an online discussion board on a computer through a learning platform and computer he had never seen or used before. Students reported campus-related challenges with admissions systems when they had to provide decades-old legal work to be admitted or financial aid when they found they had a past-due student loan stopping them from enrolling. They came across information such as scholarship opportunities, which allowed them to continue their education. Still, without this information they happened upon, they could not continue due to the cost of attendance and defaulted loans. Students had an opportunity for financial aid because someone helped them learn how to set up payments for previous student loans or guided them to an advisor to discuss grant and scholarship opportunities within their major. Campus support, such as that provided by

faculty, staff, and campus offices, was inconsistently provided, and often, as reflected by participants, it was luck that landed them in a place where the right person was at the right time with the right information was able to help them overcome a challenge to their success. For some, an advisor suggested a class to help the student choose their major. Other campus support that helped students succeed included being in diverse classrooms with people of varying ages and life experiences, including those not incarcerated, and feeling valued for their contributions and diverse experiences in the classroom. Individual participants each had various reasons for preferring online or in-person learning related to convenience to balance competing priorities, such as family and work obligations (Opsal & Foley, 2013), and decreasing feelings of stigma with anonymity (Anderson et al., 2023) and online coursework. Lastly, within campus support, it was important for participants to have campus mentorship and guidance from various offices, faculty, and staff, who were key for successful educational experiences (Murillo, 2021).

Community and personal support included support from family and friends and reintegration support to bridge the gap between prison and campus for them to be successful. These were external supports such as mentorship from other formerly incarcerated students and help to learn technology or learn of college programs from family members. Participants overcame challenges in learning technology that had evolved while they were incarcerated, but they were dependent on external factors to do so. They may have had a supportive family who helped them learn to write a paper that met college-level expectations, or they had a job with access to commonly used software programs and the opportunity to teach themselves during

downtime. Again, these examples shared, which were most supportive, were not within the student's control and happened to occur.

Stigma was a common thread throughout this research. From my researcher's standpoint, early on I assumed the stigma that this population felt. I thought it would be essential to provide participants with confidentiality to decrease judgment that I assumed and which is supported in the literature (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2019; Halkovic & Greene, 2015), as related to participants speaking about their experiences and the stigmatized topic of incarceration. But when I discussed the anonymity of the interview with Daniel, he responded:

I guess to me, that's as harmful as it is good because, I mean, no one speaks. Or, I guess I can't say no one, but a lot of us don't speak up, but we want our voices to be heard. And I say that because our voices have been silenced in several ways for our incarceration.

From that interview on, after receiving updated IRB approval, I gave each participant a choice to include their actual name with their interview. All participants preferred to use their actual names, and all but one participant provided a picture to personalize their story further.

As has been previously discussed in this chapter, participants often used common terminology associated with stigma theory, including identifying the others who are not blemished by incarceration as the "normal people" (Goffman, 1963). Students directly and indirectly described and identified feeling normal when they were in classrooms and on campuses with others working to attain educational goals. Eric spoke of this in his response, including describing imposter syndrome. Similar statements throughout the interviews by Earl and others revealed the ongoing stigma felt by those who had been incarcerated, which was often

also directly identified and confirmed by participants. For example, Earl saw success upon release due to college attendance as the opportunity to interact with “normal” people, including other students and the professionals on campus. As defined by Goffman, normals are “. . . those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the normals” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the stigma placed on formerly incarcerated people; however, it was often discussed indirectly. In reflecting on how or if he decides to discuss his incarceration, Machli reveals the intentional social identity management (Goffman, 1963). Machli refers to “the scarlet letter” when discussing challenges with college admission. He also discussed deserving an award for the acting he did to hide his incarceration to protect his ability to continue college while incarcerated. Unsurprisingly, a key part of discussing indicators of success came with acknowledging the limitations students faced related to the stigmatization of incarceration.

Participants described feeling validated by talking about their success. They commented that it was important to recall their achievements in the otherwise negative experience of incarceration, and it was important for them to encourage these educational successes for others and to remember how far they had come from being incarcerated by working to reach their academic goals.

Future Research

Throughout the interviews, participants specifically and figuratively discussed that they were motivated by having hope that surrounded progress in reaching their goals. For this

research project and its theoretical development, I considered these references as part of motivation and goal attainment. Future research should consider the experiences of formerly incarcerated students through the positive psychology lens of hope theory (Snyder et al., 2002), which includes goal-oriented thinking, finding pathways to success, and self-motivation to move forward toward goal achievement and success.

Future research should continue to give specific focus to the role of race as it relates to formerly incarcerated Black student success. Literature confirms that in addition to the support offered, a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018; Tuitt, 2012) and racial identity (Cross Jr, 1991; Strayhorn, 2017) are important to student success in higher education (Dutil, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1998). However, it was surprising to find that very few participants reflected on their race during their interviews. This may relate to some of the key tenets of critical race theory, which assume racism to be normal in American society and a normal part of White-centered educational fields. Another related CRT tenet is the centrality of racism experienced by Black students (Bell Jr, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). While the absence of this discussion does not mean that race is not an important consideration for supporting the success of formerly incarcerated minoritized students, it may reflect that being Black is not recognized as a challenge because it is normal to experience unequal treatment and increased disadvantage; therefore, participants may not recognize this as an additional hurdle to their success.

In recognition of my own subjectivities and positionality, I used member checking throughout this process to consider the CRT framework and seek more information by asking

participants specifically about how they felt their race affected their experiences. It was from applying this member checking process and reflecting on Charmaz process for seeking new data for theoretical sampling and ongoing reexamination that allowed me to gain more insight into participant perspectives. By comparison, the challenges participants discussed overcoming were predominantly related to incarceration, for which Black men are disproportionately affected, to begin with, thus normalizing and blurring the educational challenges typically recognized as related to inequitable access to education known to be related to race because of incarceration. As an example of this, one participant, Machli, who spoke often about his race, discussed that the online learning environment allowed his race to be irrelevant. He explained that he preferred the online learning environment because he was assessed based on his efforts unrelated to racial stereotypes. However, he did not see his race as a factor in his education or related challenges. Instead, he spoke of the challenges he overcame as strictly related to incarceration. Daniel responded that his race did not directly affect his academic success but discussed that race affected his admission experience and limited his admission success.

An additional consideration for future research also relates to the race and gender of the researchers. As previously discussed, though CRT literature supports the increased challenges overcome by Black students, these specifically referenced details were largely absent from participant interview data in this study. It is possible that participants may not have focused on their experience as a Black man because I am a White woman, and they may have assumed that I would not understand their perspective and experiences because of my privilege and perspective. Seeking to learn from formerly incarcerated Black men about their experiences allowed the

opportunity to amplify participants' stories. Still, because I am a White woman, my race and gender may also have limited the depth of those conversations (Holmes, 2021).

In further consideration of race, based on participant responses, the key component of the challenges they overcame to earn their post-secondary degrees were predominantly based on being formerly incarcerated, not due to being Black men. However, the racial disparity and over-incarceration of Black men cannot be ignored (Pettit & Gutierrez, 2018; Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). However, future research should continue to investigate this intersectionality as this focus on being Black men may seem absent because this student group already faces increased adversity based on their previous incarceration status; thus, those additional challenges were blurred between race and incarceration.

Implications of the Study

Implications of this study include recommendations for campuses and communities based on this research and emerging theory. Urging campus leaders to give importance to viewing higher education as a human right (Gilchrist, 2018; Lee, 2013), valuing the diversity of all learners as teachers in the classroom (Chapman, 2007; Comeaux, 2008), and actively seek to prepare minoritized students to fill disparities in job placement into careers requiring college-level degrees (Galán et al., 2021). Campuses should see their role in participating in and correcting the systemic hurdles for all underserved and represented students, specifically those who have been formerly incarcerated, and provide intentional support for various unique academic and non-academic needs of these students. Participants were successful because of

their own determination and happenstance of finding support along the way to overcome the barriers they faced. Based on participant recommendations and analysis of the data, providing an office, perhaps staffed with staff and students who have been incarcerated or who are keenly familiar with the experiences of incarceration and who have insight about navigating higher education, which provides transitional support not only for students reentering college but also provides support for navigating similar reentry needs off campus. As supported by Tietjen, et al. (2021) intentional mentorship to support formerly incarcerated students and offer guidance for improving financial literacy, learning technology, and navigating resources would address the common issues participants overcame to succeed, including navigating systemic barriers, learning technology skills, and managing competing priorities and stigma. Eric suggests that increased communication would be helpful to allow formerly incarcerated applicants to have individual evaluations for admission but that it should be a part of a plan for ongoing support from empathetic people. In this discussion, he again references the importance of intentional support, which he discussed as being pertinent to his success.

My situation was pretty easy, but I think maybe they can even have a board or a group that kind of sits with special cases where somebody has gotten out, and they're trying to change your life, and they can sit and talk to these people and listen to them. Ask the necessary questions about what you were in for, what's going on with you now, and about live-in support. You have to find out what's going on in the person's life and support that person as they go through the educational process. Maybe like the same way I was with the program [that I participated in], where they were supposed to be available to check on

you and find out when your release date is, help you with what you need. There should be a team where a person could go to find a resource person. If you have any problems with your classes, finances, food, or transportation, you talk to these people here. The kind of support somebody needs is what I think a person would need to be successful because some bus tickets, a pat on the back, and \$200 bucks are not enough. So that if it doesn't work out, you can't say we didn't try to help you in every way we could, but that's not what I've said that was not, in my experience, upon release. And I had support in getting through classes, but it wasn't a specific program or anything.

Communities should consider the value of education as a method for reducing recidivism and increasing public safety and stability. The more educated a formerly incarcerated person is, the less likely they are to recidivate (Truesdale-Moore & Lewis, 2023), which creates a stronger and safer community. Machli spoke of education as a deterrent for returning to prison.

For a lot of brothers there, it didn't seem like there was any hope. So, being educated and going through the process of being more educated, I left there knowing that there was more; there was hope and opportunity. Those that are there and that wasn't doing that was setting themselves up for coming back.

Formerly incarcerated students who persist and graduate may be able to support others within the local community. Daniel knew that he needed a strong, supportive network to help motivate him. He said, "If I were to keep on with my education, I would need, I think it would be a network, friendships, that would encourage me. I guess, in essence, nurture me."

Understanding that mentorship is a key component of support, formerly incarcerated students

who persist and graduate can, in turn, mentor others toward success (Timor et al., 2023). Eric said, “I think me being able to ask for help from someone just kind of being mindful of the barriers to let people in because of incarceration.”

Supporting all students to be successful in education, in particular, formerly incarcerated students who face additional challenges, offers value across and off campus. Success on campus and in the classroom benefits everyone in the classroom and the community.

Conclusion

Formerly incarcerated Black men were motivated to reach goals and be successful upon release based on previous educational experiences and seeking healing and validation as a result of reaching educational goals. However, because of being formerly incarcerated, they faced additional challenges, such as systemic admission and financial aid barriers, learning technology skills, managing competing priorities, and overcoming stigma. To be successful, this working theory established that participants had to have goals and internal motivation to reach their goals. Setting goals and recognizing the motivation to achieve them was within the participants’ control. However, conquering these additional challenges related to incarceration required external support, which occurred by happenstance. The necessary support came from personal and community support, campus support, including staff and faculty, and supportive classroom and campus options, such as online or in-person learning choices, depending on the student's needs.

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Appendix A - IRB Approval Letter



TO: Christy Craft
Spec Ed, Counsel & Student Aff
Manhattan, KS 66506

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 09/15/2021

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Conquering barriers: How formerly incarcerated Black men define and achieve success in higher education."

Proposal Number IRB-10806

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 09/12/2021

EXPIRATION DATE: 09/11/2024

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Rick Scheidt on 09/15/2021 10:42 AM ET

Appendix B - Informational Email

I am Heather Moore, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Kansas State University. For my Ph.D. dissertation research, I am interested in learning about the collegiate success of Black male students who have been incarcerated. Male participants, aged 18-70, who self-identify as Black, who have been previously incarcerated, and who are currently or recently (within the last three years) enrolled in college are invited to participate.

The focus of this study is to learn about how formerly incarcerated Black men define and achieve success in higher education. Participants will attend voluntary one-on-one interviews and correspond via email for interview transcript review and feedback. A minimum of two in-person or video interviews will take place. A follow-up email conversation may be necessary for clarity or elaboration to ensure the researcher accurately collects and analyzes participant experiences. Interviews will also offer time for questions from participants about the research process.

Interviews are expected to last between 60-90 minutes and will be held by video or in-person, depending on participant convenience and COVID-19 requirements at the time. Participant identities will be protected by using pseudonyms and safeguarding all interview data. Participants may feel uncomfortable with answering personal questions related to their experiences and may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants will earn a \$25 Amazon gift card.

If you would like to take part in this study or know of someone to recommend for participation, please contact me by email to receive an eligibility questionnaire for participation.

Participants will be asked to verify eligibility, including documentation showing current or recent college enrollment within the last three years and documentation of incarceration. At the start of the interview, participants will receive an informed consent form for review and signature. Soon after the interview, I will send the interview transcript for the participant's review and verification.

You can also contact either the Principal Investigator, Dr. Christy Craft at 785-532-5940 or the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 785-532-3224 or irbcomply@k-state.edu.

Thank you for considering participation in this study!

Sincerely,

Heather Moore

Doctoral Candidate, College of Education, Kansas State University

Appendix C - Eligibility Email

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this study. This study focuses on how formerly incarcerated Black male college students define and achieve success despite their challenges because of race or incarceration status. To determine eligibility to be included in the study, please answer the following questions:

1. Please let me know how you heard of this study: _____
2. Are you over 18 years old? Yes No
3. Are you currently or recently (within three years) enrolled in postsecondary education (college or university)? Yes No
4. Have you been incarcerated? Yes No
5. Do you identify as a Black male? Yes No
6. If selected to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide enrollment documentation and previous incarcerations before the interview. Can you provide the following information? Yes No
 - a. Proof of enrollment examples may include an unofficial transcript, date-stamped course schedule, or other similar/official documentation showing enrollment in higher education currently or in the last three years.

- b. Proof of previous incarceration may include state or federal website information, prison identification card, or other official related state or federal document.

You will not have to share any details about the crime, charge, or sentence related to previous incarceration if you do not wish to do so.

You will receive a response within 1-2 business days. If you are eligible, you will be invited to set up a time for a virtual or in-person interview.

I appreciate your consideration for this study.

Thank you!

Heather Moore

Doctoral Candidate, College of Education, Kansas State University

Appendix D - Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: Conquering barriers: How formerly incarcerated Black male students define and achieve success in higher education.

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/EXPIRATION DATE: December 2022

LENGTH OF STUDY: 18-24 months; August 2021-August 2022

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Christy Craft, Professor & Interim Dept. Chair,
College of Education, Kansas State University

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Dr. Christy Craft, 785-532-5940, ccraft@k-state.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: Should you have questions or wish to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB, the contacts include the following:

Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-3224

Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: This research aims to learn about how formerly incarcerated Black men define and achieve their higher education success.

PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED: Participants are invited to participate in a minimum of (2) one-on-one interviews, expected to take approximately 60-90 minutes. Additional interviews may be scheduled to ensure thorough efforts are made for complete and accurate data. Interviews will be in-person, when possible, but may be held via Zoom or other online platforms due to the ongoing changing guidance for safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on the interview format, interviews will be audio and/or video recorded. Recordings will be transcribed to support accuracy and consistency in data analysis. Participants will be invited to review data that may be included in the study to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness in the research process.

BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES COLLECTED: None.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO THE SUBJECT. None.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED

Participants may feel uncomfortable disclosing their experiences related to being formerly incarcerated. The researcher will include intentional efforts, including research disclosure and empathetic regard, to offer reassurance to participants who disclose any discomfort in the process. Participants will be notified that they can pause and/or stop participation at any time during the process.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED

Participants who participate in the research, including one on one interviews, up to one additional interview, as needed, and review of their summary data as sent via email, will receive their choice of a \$25 gift card for Amazon. Participants who do not complete the research process are not eligible for receiving this benefit.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

All participant data will be kept confidential and shared only with the use of pseudonyms. Confidentiality will include electronic forms of researcher notes, files, and documentation, which will be stored in a password-protected file for the required five-year time frame. Any hard copy information will be protected with limited access in a locked file cabinet. After this period has ended, all data collected will be deleted and/or shredded. Personal data may be shared, but unless permission is given by the participant, only in an anonymous format using a pseudonym and without revealing any specifying information. Privacy will be considered in meeting for one-one interviews in public locations to protect the confidentiality of related discussions. Participants will also be able to review information from interviews to ensure the accuracy and confidentiality of information shared which may be used in the study. Deidentified data, completely void of any identifying aspects, may be used without specific permission.

Terms of Participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Participant Name: _____ Date: _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Witness to Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E - Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the process of deciding to attend college. How did you decide to do so?

Why?

- a. How many of your family members and/or friends have attended college? To what extent did you get any guidance or assistance from them about navigating college?
 - b. How did you choose the school at which you are currently enrolled? What was your experience during the application and admission processes?
 - c. What is/was your major, and did it change?
 - d. What process did you go through to choose your major?
 - e. To what extent, if at all, did your former incarceration influence your choice of major?
2. What kinds of extra-curricular activities do you take part in?
- a. How, if at all, have you experienced any restrictions on extra-curricular activities because of your incarceration?
3. Please tell me how you define and measure success.
- a. Can you offer some examples of personal success?
 - b. Can you offer some examples of academic success?
4. Please discuss who or what motivates you to be successful in college.

- a. Are there particular people or campus offices/resources that you count on for supporting your success? If so, who?
 - b. What are examples of how they are supportive and/or motivating to you?
 - c. What else motivates you to be successful in college?
- 5. When, if at all, did you first experience challenges during college related to being Black and/or formerly incarcerated?
- 6. What situations, if any, have you overcome during college despite challenges due to your race or incarceration status?
 - a. How did you overcome those challenges?
- 7. How do you decide whether to disclose or to hide with others on campus that you have been incarcerated?
 - a. How does this choice affect your success?
 - b. How many people on-campus know that you have been incarcerated?
- 8. Have you ever felt stigmatized?
 - a. If so, please tell me how you have navigated those situations.
- 9. To what extent do you feel like you belong on your campus as a college student?
 - a. What makes you feel this way, or what would help to feel this way?
- 10. How does being a Black man who has been incarcerated affect your ability to be successful in college?
- 11. What advice or information would you share with another Black male student who is formerly incarcerated about succeeding in college?

12. After reflecting on your experiences as a formerly incarcerated Black man, is there something else you would like to add that will help me understand how you were successful in college?

13. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Appendix F - Debriefing Statements:

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me today. Your insights are invaluable for learning how formerly incarcerated students are successful in higher education. The next step will be for me to review your responses so that I can assess what further information or clarification needs to be gathered during our next interview.

The information gathered from this study is confidential and will be summarized with other interviewees' responses to be included in my dissertation research. You will not be mentioned by name, nor will any personally identifying information be included in the report. If you have questions about this study, contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Christy Craft, at 785-532-5940 or the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 785-532-3224 or irbcomply@k-state.edu.

Appendix G - Member Checking Email

Dear (Participant Name),

Thank you very much for participating in an interview for my research study. Please find attached the transcript of our interview. Please review the transcript and offer any feedback on areas that you feel need more clarification or add any other details from your reflection of the discussion. I would appreciate it if you could please return your feedback to me within a week.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss the research or your responses, please let me know. I appreciate your time to ensure the accuracy of your interview transcript.

Thank you,

Heather Moore

Doctoral Candidate, College of Education, Kansas State University

heathermoore@k-state.edu