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Rising Scholars: Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated/System-Impacted Community College Students in an On-Campus Support Program

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A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

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Doctor of Education

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This study is dedicated to Natalie, George, Dre, Janet, Martha, and Penelope, and all the Rising Scholars, Project Rebound scholars and Underground Scholars who had have the courage to return to college after surviving incarceration. Thank you for your openness and generosity in sharing your stories.

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In memory of Bruce Gilmer, whose determination to leave a legacy for his family made this work possible.

In kinship with Jeffory, who is still incarcerated. May the Lord one day bring you home.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB: Assembly Bill (California legislature)

ARISE: A pseudonym for the Rising Scholars support program at an urban community college in Los Angeles County, California

CCC: California Community Colleges

CCCCO: California Community Colleges Chancellors Office

CDCR: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

CRT: Critical Race Theory

CSU: California State University

EOPS/CARE: Extended Opportunity Programs & Services/ Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education

FIS: Formerly Incarcerated/System-impacted students

GMC: Gordon Manor College, a pseudonym for an urban community college in Los Angeles County, California

PSCE: Post-secondary correctional education

RS: Rising Scholars

SB: Senate Bill (California legislature)

UC: University of California

USI: Underground Scholars Initiative

ABSTRACT

Rising Scholars: Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated/System-Impacted

Community College Students in an On-Campus Support Program

by

Jason Durrell Bostick

This study uplifted the stories of formerly incarcerated and/or system-impacted students attending a California community college (i.e., "Rising Scholars") to provide qualitative context to a growing literature following the state's promotion of support programs at the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC) systems. This study interviewed six formerly incarcerated/system impacted Rising Scholars using a narrative inquiry methodology with a theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Desistance theory to inquire about their educational experiences before and during their enrollment at an urban California community college with reentry support. Key themes in the interviews include trauma in early educational experiences, dropping out of college, the gendered experiences of formerly incarcerated women, the role of pregnancy and parenthood as a turning point, and authentic care expressed by the support staff. The narratives of the participants are offered as a counter-narrative to the quantitative neoliberal practice of justifying reentry programs based solely on reductions in recidivism rates.

Recommendations include increasing trauma-informed pedagogy in TK-12 and Postsecondary education, recruiting and educating more allies for Rising Scholars on campus, ensuring that campus reentry support programs fully meet the needs of female Rising Scholars,

and uplifting successes and scholarship by Rising Scholars to build lasting structural support for the Rising Scholars Network.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

After 40 years of historic rates of mass incarceration in the United States, federal and state governments have adopted reforms to reduce the prison population, including increasing reentry opportunities for incarcerated persons. In California as well as across the country, education has been proven to be an effective pathway to reentering the community and reducing the risk of recidivism (see Glossary of Key Terms for an explanation of recidivism). The California Community Colleges (CCC), the largest higher education system in the United States, has played a key role in helping formerly incarcerated/system-impacted students (FIS) become "Rising Scholars" (RS) with a new identity and ties to the community. Support for FIS has mushroomed across California community colleges, starting with the passage of California Senate Bill (S.B.) No. 1391 (Cal. 2014) to restore correctional higher education in the state, and culminating in the establishment of a Rising Scholars Network with the passage of California Assembly Bill (A.B.) No. 417 (Cal. 2021). And while there is a consensus among stakeholders in higher education that FIS need support programs, little scholarly work has been done to study these support programs or their impact on Rising Scholars. Instead, the bulk of the literature has justified investing in college reentry support by focusing on the positive effect of college education on recidivism rates of formerly incarcerated students (Mukamal et al., 2015). This narrative study lifted up the voices of post-release Rising Scholars who attended a California community college with a reentry support program.

Before this paper commences, it is necessary to clarify the use of language about incarcerated and system-impacted persons. Criminology scholarship has historically used

dehumanizing terms such as ex-convict, ex-offender, and parolee that have misconstrued the identities of justice-involved people with their position within the criminal legal system (e.g. Brower, 2015: Maruna, 2001; Potts & Bierlien Palmer, 2014). This study emphasized the humanity of formerly incarcerated students by employing language suggested in the Underground Scholars Language Guide (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019). In keeping with the spirit of Cerda-Jara et al.'s project to use accurate language to humanize people within the criminal legal system, this study referred to college students after conviction, parole, probation, or release from incarceration as "formerly incarcerated/system-impacted students" (FIS) or better still, just "students." See the Glossary of Key Terms for more explanation of the language choices in this study.

Background: Rising Scholars and The Debt of Mass Incarceration

While the recent trend of reforms increasing access to higher education for formerly incarcerated and system impacted people has been admirable, we cannot lose sight of the fact that these reforms were responses to a system that has incarcerated the largest population in the history of the world. And just as it took decades to grow California's carceral population to record levels, it will take time to undo this shameful bounty. The drive to expand higher education for Rising Scholars between 2014 and 2021is just one part of a lengthy process of dismantling the legacy of mass incarceration in California, and by example, the rest of the United States.

Historically, incarceration policy in the United States has always fluctuated between the opposing poles of rehabilitation and retribution. However, the period of policy changes that led to rising incarceration rates from the early 1970s to the 2010s stands out as an egregious outlier.

Michelle Alexander (2012) attributed this policy shift to the transformation of the White supremacist "law and order" rhetoric that opposed integration and civil rights gains in the 1960s into the "War on Drugs" in the 1980s and 1990s that disproportionately impacted the same populations with ostensibly colorblind policies. Writing for the National Academies, Travis et al. (2014) noted that incarceration rates quintupled between 1973 and 2012. The research confirmed Alexander's (2012) analysis that harsh policy changes driven by lawmakers, not crime rates, were the leading cause of historic numbers of Black and Latinx citizens being incarcerated and placed under correctional control (Travis et al., 2014), though they demurred speculating about the motives of the lawmakers responsible.

Support for punitive drug enforcement policies crossed party lines as both Republicans and Democrats attempted to outdo each other with increasingly harsh punishments for drug offenses. President Ronald Reagan signed the *Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986* (1986), establishing mandatory minimum sentences for drug violations, including the infamous enhanced penalties for possession of "crack" cocaine that resulted in racial disparities in sentencing (Alexander, 2012). President William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton doubled down on harsh anti-drug legislation, signing a "three strikes and you're out" provision into the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994* (1994), aka "*The 1994 Crime Bill*." Clinton also extended collateral "civil death" penalties for people convicted of drug offenses, making them ineligible for government supports like federal housing, even while he cut budgets for welfare and other social services (Alexander, 2012). Advocates for punitive crime legislation received a scholarly boost from John DiIulio, Jr., a social scientist who transformed public sentiment in the 1990s with his racially inflammatory report, "The Coming of the Super-Predator" (1995) that suggested the

nation would face a crime wave propelled by a new generation of ruthless young criminals. Though actual crime rates in the ensuing years refuted DiIulio's thesis (a fact he acknowledged too late), the damage was done. The public imagination was besotted with visions of ruthless young Black "super predators" (Haberman, 2014), and incarceration rates continued to rise through the 1990s (Travis et al., 2014).

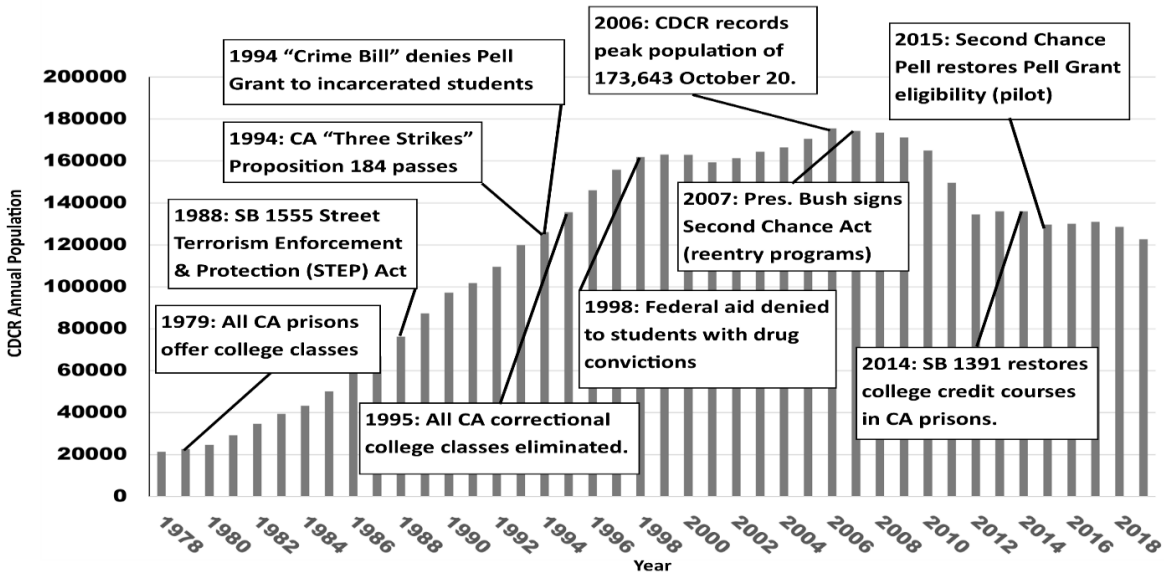
Locking the Schoolhouse Door

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as both California and the United States enacted increasingly punitive crime legislation, access to rehabilitation and education programs that would offer incarcerated people a means of reentry after their sentence was served were simultaneously stripped from the statutes. Figure 1 illustrates a selection of the federal and California laws that increased mass incarceration while denying access to education to incarcerated persons. The California legislature kept pace with the United States Congress in its embrace of punitive legislation and eventual return to rehabilitation. In 1979, California had offered college classes at every prison, but that prison population started to climb. The *California Street Terrorism Enforcement & Protection Act* (S. B. 1555) increased the length of sentences for dozens of crimes if they were deemed to be "gang-related" (Cal. 1988). In 1994, voters passed *California Proposition 184* (Cal. 1994) and President Clinton signed parallel "three strikes" legislation the same year in *The 1994 Crime Bill* (1994), college classes closed across the prisons and were not reinstated until 2014. Furthermore, *The 1994 Crime Bill* (1994) barred incarcerated students from eligibility for federal Pell Grant funding. In 1998, students who were convicted of a drug offense lost their federal student aid eligibility altogether when congress

amended the *Higher Education Act of 1965* (1965; *Higher Education Amendments of 1998*, 1998; Mukamal et al., 2015).

Figure 1

Educational Access for Incarcerated Californians—1978 to 2019



Note: This figure shows the year-end total carceral population of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) from 1978 to 2019, cross-referenced with key federal and state laws increasing incarceration and reducing educational access for incarcerated persons to illustrate the effects of increasingly punitive legislation during this period. Adapted from "Corrections Statistical Analysis Tool (SCAT)—Prisoners," Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d., in the public domain (https://csat.bjs.ojp.gov/advanced-query); "Offender Data Points: Offender Demographics for the Two-Year Period ending June 2019," by A. Gabbard, K. Christian, S. Buttler, J. Yesses, M. Keeling, and Y. Lawrence, 2019, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Office of Research, in the public domain, (https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2020/10/201906-DataPoints.pdf); "The Possibility Report: From Prison to College Degrees in California," D. Murillo, A. Dow, V. Reddy, and A. Huerta, 2021, copyright 2021 by The Campaign for College Opportunity (https://collegecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Possibility-Report.pdf); "Degrees of Freedom: Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians," D. Mukamal, R. Silbert, and R. M. Taylor, 2019, copyright 2019 by Renewing Communities Initiative, ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED574151, (https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574151.pdf).

Stuck With the Check: Paying the Price of the War on Drugs

By the 2000s, America's incarcerated population had become the largest in the world. The incarceration rate had grown from 161 per 100,000 in 1972 to 767 per 100,000 in 2007. In

2012, the rate dropped to 707 per 100,000, but the prison population was still a sky-high 2.23 million, with another 4 million people under correctional supervision (Travis et al., 2014).

California experienced its own boom cycle of mass incarceration during this period. Between 1984 and 2004, the state of California built 23 prison facilities priced at $250 million to $300 million each. The state had built only 12 prisons in the 108 years after the opening of San Quentin, California's first prison (Gilmore, 2007). Twenty years of the War on Drugs doubled that number, not counting smaller facilities such as work camps and local corrections facilities (Gilmore, 2007, p. 7). During this period, California's carceral population soared, reaching a peak of 173,643 incarcerated persons in 2006 (Gabbard et al., 2019). The most apt illustration of the shift in policy priorities during this time can be shown by comparing the money California spent on higher education compared to the amount it spent on corrections. Murillo et al. (2021) explained the change in priorities succinctly:

> In 1976, the state corrections budget accounted for 3.2 percent of the state's general fund revenue, while the UC and the CSU budgets combined made up nearly 12.4 percent. By 1995, the share of state revenues going to the state corrections budget increased to 8.7 percent of the state's general fund, while the UC and CSU budgets had been reduced to 8.7 percent of the state's general fund revenue. California was essentially valuing and investing in incarceration and higher education equally. (p. 26)

Money talks.

However, the actual price of mass incarceration is not measured in state budget allocations. Before this discussion can continue, it is essential that we acknowledge the true costs of incarceration: the effects of incarceration that are borne on the backs of the millions of people who have been separated from their families and forced out of their community due to increasingly harsh laws over the last 40 years. For starters, incarceration itself is a traumatic event with lingering effects on its survivors. The National Academy of Sciences found that surveys of US prisons revealed up to 21% of incarcerated men and up to 48% of incarcerated women have demonstrated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a rate that is up to 10 times higher than found in the non-incarcerated community (Travis et al., 2014). And unlike conventional experiences of trauma which are a single event, incarceration is a chronic trauma that lasts years.

The price is not just limited to the psychological effects of incarceration. Punishment follows incarcerated and convicted people long after their release in the form of "collateral consequences" and *civiliter mortuus* ("civil death") statutes that bar them from participating in many normal functions of civic life, such as access to employment, housing, public benefits, voting, and even victim services. Fines and fees set by the court hound formerly incarcerated and formerly convicted persons, making the task of reentering the community even more difficult (Karamagi et al., 2018). And these add-on penalties are often not properly disclosed to accused individuals who have spent weeks or months in pre-trial detention, all the while losing their jobs or housing under the threat of a harsher penalty if they persist in requesting a jury trial (Alexander, 2012; Chin, 2012; Roberts, 2009).

The price of mass incarceration is not paid solely by the individuals incarcerated and/or convicted by the criminal legal system. Families, spouses, and children are forced to pay the price, too. Housing and employment instability directly impacts family members, and court-ordered fees are extracted from family budgets, putting a greater strain on reentry (Karamagi et al., 2018). Convicted and formerly incarcerated parents risk losing their children to foster care, often against their will (Hirsch et al., 2002; Karamagi et al., 2018). Children of incarcerated parents risk numerous negative outcomes, though most of the research only focused on the effects of incarcerated fathers on their children (excluding the effects of incarcerated mothers), and some evidence suggested that child well-being improved when abusive fathers were incarcerated (Travis et al., 2014). As these studies showed, individuals convicted of a crime, their families, their children, and their community continue to bear the true price of forty years of mass incarceration policies. Sadly, since people convicted of a crime have been judged by society to have a "broken character" (Alexander, 2012; Chin, 2012), their voices are silenced in policy discussions, which almost always revolve around the fiscal costs of the criminal legal system.

Buyer's Remorse and Educational Reform

Policymakers who had made common cause getting "tough on crime" in the 1990s were facing ballooning prison costs in the 2000s during an economic downturn (Rizer & Trautman, 2018). California faced the same problem as the bill for massive growth in prison infrastructure came due (Gilmore, 2007; Murillo, 2021). President George W. Bush reintroduced the theme of rehabilitation into carceral policy with his call for a "Second Chance" for incarcerated citizens during the 2004 State of the Union Address (Bush, 2004). The *Second Chance Act of 2007*

(2008) marked the beginning of a shift in policy away from punishment. Although this legislation reflected a key turning point in policies affecting incarcerated citizens, it should be remembered that both Republicans and Democrats embraced the punitive qualities of the War on Drugs as politically useful in the moment. Stolberg & Herndon (2019) observed that Senator Joe Biden, for example, was a leading sponsor of both *The 1994 Crime Bill* (1994) and the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008). The redemption narrative implicit in the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008) was likewise politically useful as an illustration of President Bush's signature "Compassionate Conservatism," but its true appeal was as a mechanism to reduce recidivism, and thus prison costs. The proof is in the text: while President Bush mentioned the word "compassion" six times (and recidivism costs only once) in his public comments at the bill's signing ceremony (Bush, 2008), the word "compassion" appeared zero times in the final published text of the law. Meanwhile, "recidivism" appeared 25 times and "reentry" 117 times (*Second Chance Act of 2007*, 2008; word count analysis conducted by the author). President Bush was not alone in acknowledging the need to reform America's incarceration binge. As America entered the second decade of the twenty-first century, a consensus quickly built around the need to reduce its carceral population. Michelle Alexander published her groundbreaking *The New Jim Crow* arguing that the "War on Drugs" systematically stripped minoritized populations of their rights through incarceration on a scale comparable to the institution of slavery itself (2012). The College Board issued a contemporaneous report arguing that mass incarceration's disparate impacts on Black and Latinx youth were so significant that they threatened America's educational standing on the world stage (Spycher et al., 2012).

This consensus appealed to budget-conscious Republicans as well as triangulating so-called moderate Democrats. Having spent two decades successfully campaigning on harsher and harsher penalties for people convicted of a drug offense, these policy makers again found bipartisanship in looking for ways to avoid paying for the consequences of their own policies that got them re-elected. Seeking a way to reduce recidivism, lawmakers turned to higher education as a reentry tool to address the needs of hundreds of thousands of convicted people caught in the wake of the "War on Drugs."

The data on recidivism (i.e., system-impacted people returning to incarceration, either by reoffending or as administrative punishment for failing to meet a condition of parole) was not encouraging. Early attempts to study the effect of education in the prisons on recidivism concluded with the gloomy pronouncement that "nothing works" (Bozick et al., 2018). Later, more statistically rigorous studies found correctional education to be more effective than previously thought, starting with an Urban Institute study (Winterfield et al., 2009) validating the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008), and similar findings have been verified by multiple meta-studies showing correctional education reduces the risk of recidivism and increases employment opportunity (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013; Davis et al., 2014; Davis & Tolbert, 2019). In 2015, a limited number of pilot programs offered "Second Chance" Pell Grants to incarcerated students, with the hope that one of the most egregious effects of the War on Drugs would soon be removed (Davis & Tolbert, 2019; Pettit, 2019). And in early 2021, the Pell Grant was finally fully restored for incarcerated students (Burke, 2021).

In California, correctional education and higher education post-release returned as a rehabilitative tool after S. B. No. 1391 (Cal. 2014) passed, establishing pay parity for college

faculty teaching correctional education students. California allowed community colleges to count incarcerated students as Full-Time Equivalent Students (FTES), which meant that post-secondary correctional education (PSCE) was credited the same as college courses taught on campus, and college faculty were paid equally as well. But access to educational opportunities in California prisons was limited and not equally accessible across all facilities in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). Renewing Communities (a collaboration between the public interest nonprofit Opportunity Institute, Stanford Law School, and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center) commissioned a series of reports advocating for increasing access to PSCE as well as increased support for formerly incarcerated students in community colleges post-release to reduce recidivism (Mukamal et al., 2015; Mukamal & Silbert, 2018; Silbert & Mukamal., 2020).[1] The advocacy paid off. Face-to-face PSCE programs increased from one prison in 2014 to 34 in 2017; in the same period, on-campus reentry support programs grew from 10 across the CCC, University of California and California State University systems to 37 (Mukamal & Silbert, 2018). A 2020 survey by the Campaign for College Opportunity identified 76 reentry support programs and/or student-run clubs for formerly incarcerated students spread across California's colleges (Murillo et al., 2021).

Rising Scholars: The Challenge and Promise of a College Education

Formerly incarcerated students have been a challenging student population to serve, in part because they were only visible to be counted in equity outcomes when they chose to identify themselves. This is especially true in California, which prohibited inquiries about a student's

[1] None of the studies on education as a rehabilitation tool have successfully disaggregated on-campus college education from correctional higher education (PSCE). Nor have they successfully distinguished remedial and secondary correctional education from post-secondary correctional education.

correctional history in its admissions to public colleges. Nevertheless, California's community colleges have served as a gateway for FIS to reenter higher education. In 2021, the California Community College Chancellors Office (CCCCO) announced the formation of a "Rising Scholars Network" to coordinate and promote support services for FIS, or Rising Scholars (RS), to use the CCCCOs term. On one hand, studies have suggested FIS have found community college to be a positive and meaningful experience that can help them find purpose in their life (Brower, 2015; Halkovic et al., 2013; Potts & Bierlein Palmer, 2014). At the same time, FIS have experienced stigma and ignorance in their interactions with the community college system (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Giraldo, 2016; Halkovic et al., 2013), suggesting a need for professional development and cultural competency training for faculty and staff.[2] Livingston and Miller (2014) also found inequities in FIS experiences of higher education that reflected the socioeconomic inequalities that existed among the students before they were incarcerated, pointing to a need to address not just academic readiness but a larger range of social needs affecting RS during reentry. Davis and Tolbert (2019) found FIS college experiences were affected by multiple environmental factors, including proximity to family, economic status, and the quality of support on campus. Throughout the literature, advocates have been calling for the development of FIS support programs at the community college, often in coordination with local corrections officials and off-campus allied support networks, to help RS navigate the pathway from incarceration to higher education (Brazzell et al., 2009; Davis & Tolbert, 2019; Garcia, 2017; Halkovic et al., 2013; Spycher et al., 2012). Despite this array of challenges, though, a

[2] The Breaking Bars Community Network ally training by Brittany Morton (2020) is an excellent example of the appropriate training which is being adopted by multiple support programs in the California colleges.

2020 analysis of quantitative academic data from RS support program participants at six California community colleges found promising evidence that the Rising Scholars in the study persisted in college, often with a full-time load, and with a higher average GPA than the average of the student bodies of their colleges (Silbert & Mukamal, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Despite repeated calls for the development of FIS support programs on community college campuses in the literature, there is still a dearth of qualitative studies that tell the stories of formerly incarcerated students and their experience of support programs, particularly in the California Community Colleges. Most research on FIS in higher education has fallen into two categories: (a) quantitative studies that measured the effect of reentry programs on recidivism rates (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2014), and (b) qualitative studies that amplified the voices of formerly incarcerated students as they experience a college education (Davis & Tolbert, 2019; Halkovic et al., 2013; Potts & Bierlein Palmer, 2014).

The Problem with Quantitative Studies

In criminology literature, nearly every study of the effectiveness of reentry programming has used recidivism rates as the standard metric of assessment (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013; Davis et al., 2014; Esperian, 2010; Mukamal et al., 2015). Unfortunately, convicted persons can be returned to prison for a variety of reasons that have little to do with the effects of any one support program; some are within their locus of control and others are beyond their control (as I will explain more fully in Chapter 2). This data offers little useful information to teachers and program leaders about how to help Rising Scholars succeed in college. Nevertheless, recidivism rates have been incredibly popular as a statistical validation for reentry

support programs among institutional stakeholders. And the literature advocating for FIS support in the California colleges has been no stranger to this phenomenon.

Klingele (2019) argued that recidivism rates were a high-stakes measure that failed to capture the transformative process of change from a convicted person's role as a correctional inmate to an integrated member of the community. Furthermore, the institutional imperative of validating programs through recidivism rates in federal and state legislation has even led to some institutional stakeholders "gaming" their outcomes to manufacture lower recidivism rates, regardless of any progress made by the individuals in the treatment program (Klingele, 2019). Creating a space where the voices of Rising Scholars are empowered to tell their story would not only function as a counter-story to the neo-liberal metrics of recidivism rates, but these stories could also help to identify alternative measures of reentry success.

The Problem With Qualitative Studies

Most qualitative studies of formerly incarcerated students in college, dating back to the original Urban Institute assessment (Winterfield, 2009), have discussed higher education as if the act of attending college itself *was* the reentry support program (Winterfield et al., 2009). And hardly any studies have directly addressed support programs in the CCC. There are a few exceptions: Davis and Tolbert (2019) incorporated community college FIS support programs in their study of a hybrid "pathways to college" program in North Carolina; Silbert and Mukamal (2020) analyzed quantitative grade and enrollment data from Rising Scholars in 6 California community colleges with support programs; and Smith and Digard (2020) evaluated FIS support programs across multiple California colleges, but the study included only two community colleges in the sample pool. By comparison, Murillo et al. (2021) identified at least thirty

California community colleges offering RS support programs, though there are currently 116 colleges in the CCC. Despite these initial forays into qualitative studies of FIS support programs in California community colleges, Silbert and Mukamal have acknowledged that more stories of Rising Scholars need to be heard (2020, p. 16).

My Positionality in the Problem

My own introduction to formerly incarcerated students illustrates why it is so important to make sure the stories of Rising Scholars are made accessible to the broader college community. My own college education had been buttressed by the privilege of growing up with parents who were advocates for gifted education. My first job was working for my mother's private summer school for gifted and talented students. Though I never attended private school, interacting with the staff year-round and teaching college success classes for the summer program gave me the cultural capital to successfully navigate college (it took me many years to recognize these privileges for what they were). After I earned my master's degree in English, I worked as a community college instructor where I participated in years' worth of annual professional development sessions, "flex days," and meetings of the campus equity committee. I had been teaching English composition at two community college districts in the Los Angeles Metro area since 2005. The turning point in my story was meeting J. Luke Wood and Frank Harris who had just published a book with Khalid White based on their study of men of color in the community college (2015). Wood et al. argued that teachers need to build relationships with Black and Latinx students, and particularly with the men of color in their classes (2015). One anecdote from their research is telling: survey participants reported that they were more likely to have a relationship with the college maintenance staff than with their own college instructors

(Wood et al., 2015, p. 25). This anecdote haunted me, and I resolved to make sure that my students would never feel that way in my class.

But as I opened myself up to my students, they started opening to me, and several disclosed their status as formerly incarcerated students. One student stands out in my memory. A young man disclosed his incarcerated status on the first day of class. His engaging presence was a gift to our classroom community. Unfortunately, he disappeared from class for multiple weeks and then returned just as suddenly, but by then he was so far behind he could not pass the class. In the aftermath of this semester, I realized I knew next to nothing about the needs of this formerly incarcerated student; I had no idea how to help him succeed, and I didn't know anyone on campus who was a resource about students with a conviction. I failed this promising student by not knowing how to support his success.

I also recognize now that my lack of knowledge was a systemic failure. Both colleges I worked at offered ongoing annual professional development (PD) for faculty on a wide range of topics, but not once in fifteen years had they addressed the needs of FIS.[3] I began my research for this study so that I would never find myself in that helpless situation again. I want to use what small measure of privilege I have (as a White, male, middle-aged adjunct teaching in an urban college in the California Community Colleges) to make sure the voices of formerly incarcerated students are heard not only by the faculty and staff at my own colleges, but that their voices carry to the Boards of Trustees, and to the colleges that have yet to acknowledge the needs of their own formerly incarcerated students. It is my hope that by lifting up the narratives of these Rising

[3] After I started my research for this dissertation, one of the college districts where I work opened a FIS support program in the last year, and the other started a FIS support working group, where I serve as a member. But this is a very recent development, and professional development for FIS allyship is still an emergent field (Morton, 2020).

Scholars, they become visible to all in California's community colleges and will be formally recognized by inclusion in the campus equity plans in each college district.

Purpose

This narrative inquiry study aimed to create a platform where formerly incarcerated Rising Scholars could tell their stories of attending a community college in Los Angeles with an on-campus support program. By sharing their stories, this study invited community colleges to add Rising Scholars to their ongoing equity and anti-racism conversations already engaged across the CCC. The stories of Rising Scholars seeking transformation through higher education also provided a counter-narrative to the neo-liberal metric of recidivism rates. Rather than reducing the stories of Rising Scholars' educational journeys to a statistical probability, this study identified descriptions of desistance and persistence in the stories of FIS that served as alternative measures of reentry success.

Research Questions

This study asked three research questions:

1. What are the experiences of Rising Scholars attending a California community college?
2. How do Rising Scholars use the services of a reentry support program at a California community college?
3. How do Rising Scholars perceive themselves as they participate in a reentry support program at a California community college?

Significance: Social Justice

There are multiple social justice implications to this study. First, the growth of formerly incarcerated students on college campuses has been a testament to the ongoing legacy of California's and the federal government's commitment to mass incarceration policies over the last forty years. California voters passed *Proposition* 184 (Cal. 1994), and they supported Democratic and Republican politicians who proved they were "tough on crime" by incarcerating hundreds of thousands of Black and Brown people (Travis et al., 2014). This is a generational debt that can never truly be paid off, and we owe it to those are trying to reenter society through higher education to make their success our mission.

Second, Rising Scholars are a vulnerable and often invisible population on college campuses. To its credit, California public colleges do not ask about criminal history in admissions. On the other hand, this privacy makes tracking Rising Scholars difficult, and they are usually left out of the larger equity conversation comprised of student populations that are promoted by legislation such as the federal *Higher Education Act of 1965* (1965; Hegji, 2018). As a result, institutional professional development for faculty and staff at the institutional level is rare. Allyship training programs like the Breaking Bars Community Network Ally Training (Morton, 2020) are now being offered in colleges across the state, but Murillo et al. (2021) had reported only six allyship trainings at the time of publication (out of a total of 116 colleges across the CCC).

Although each campus support program may only serve a few dozen Rising Scholars at a time in each college district, community colleges in California are well placed to reach the growing number of Rising Scholars seeking college degrees. In 2015, California's 116

community colleges served 1.8 million students, almost 25% of the total national enrollment of college students (Mukamal et al., 2015). As a result, the CCC is uniquely positioned in this country to make a significant impact against the effects of mass incarceration. Conversely, if California decided to withdraw its support of campus reentry programs, perhaps due to the financial strain of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, or as the result of a shift in political leadership, the loss would be felt more greatly in the CCC than in any other college system in the country. For this reason, it is vital to find ways to move past the conventional measurement of recidivism reduction which has justified reentry programs since 2007, and in some cases has even hampered them (Klingele, 2019). This study, by bringing the stories of Rising Scholars to greater attention, will add to the emerging qualitative studies of FIS and add to the identification of alternative measures of reentry success.

Finally, as a middle-aged, White, male English adjunct professor who has taught for nearly 20 years in an urban setting, I feel a duty to use whatever privilege and social capital I have at my disposal to help my students reach their goals. As a composition instructor, I stand at one of the classic gateways in the college system: passing my class unlocks eligibility for higher-level classes, while failure could sideline my students progress into increasingly futile attempts to pass transfer-level classes until they drop out. The stakes are high for any of my students, but they are even higher for Rising Scholars. This study will promote their success by bringing their narratives to the attention of faculty, staff, and college leadership so that institutional stigma and ignorance can be replaced by understanding and compassion.

The Ethics of Care and Radical Compassion

As an underlying foundation to this study, and consistent with my context as a classroom teacher as well as a social justice leader, I have aligned myself with Nel Noddings' "Ethic of Care" (2013) and the ethics of "radical compassion" as expressed by Gregory Boyle, SJ (2010). Noddings argued that empathetic "inclusion," i.e., seeing the cared-for "as he is and as he might be—as he envisions his best self" is essential for the caring teacher to confirm their student (2013, p. 67). Noddings' ethics of accepting and embracing the student resonates with Boyle's description of his calling to "stand with" the gang members in his parish and at Homeboy Industries:

> Soon we imagine, with God, this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. (Boyle, 2010, p. 190).

These descriptions of compassion aligned with Brueggemann's (2018) definition of compassion as an act of social criticism: "Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness" (p. 88). From the position of Noddings, Boyle, and Brueggemann, then, the caring act of empathetically standing with one's students is not just a "best practice," but in fact it is a socially critical action seeking to dismantle

systemic injustices. And as an act of Brueggemann's "radical criticism" (2018), caring and compassion become a component of critical race theory, which forms part of the theoretical framework for this study

Theoretical Framework

This study intersected three disciplines, and by necessity drew from three frameworks to inform its work. The overarching framework is Critical Race Theory (CRT), as the current challenge of Rising Scholars is a direct consequence of this country's embrace of the so-called War on Drugs and the decades of mass incarceration policies that ensued, to the detriment of millions of Black and Latinx people. Yet since this study stands at the intersection of education and criminology, it also makes sense to draw from critical approaches in each field as well. As a result, this study will also employ elements of Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge, drawn from Yosso's CRT-informed critique of deficit frameworks in education (2005), and Desistance and Identity Transformation, drawn from phenomenological criminology. Although these frameworks at first glance do not seem to fit neatly together, they were united in this study through their reliance on narratives to inform their scholarship.

Critical Race Theory

This study was guided primarily by a Critical Race Theory framework, since the story of Rising Scholars seeking a college degree is situated right at the intersection of two systems that have historically discriminated against Black and Latinx people, namely, higher education and the criminal legal system. CRT itself was rooted in Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and the critique of civil rights efforts within the legal system (Khalifa et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), so employing a CRT approach to examining the use of higher education to remediate the

legacy of mass incarceration was particularly appropriate. The following discussion will summarize the elements of CRT that applied directly to this study.

Acknowledging the Systemic Nature of Racism

This study was built on the premise that systemic racism exists and informs many of the challenges facing formerly incarcerated students. Alexander (2012) has ably demonstrated the systemic racism in the criminal legal system, and her argument is buttressed by the National Academy of Science's study of the causes mass incarceration in the United States (Travis et al., 2014). The higher education system itself is no less infused with systemic racism in its treatment of FIS, as I will discuss in Chapter 2.

Interest Convergence

The "convergence of interests" was a term introduced by Derrick Bell (1980) in his critique of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), but it could just as easily be applied to the unusual show of political bipartisanship supporting the passage of the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008). Furthermore, interest convergence has been driving the ongoing fixation on reporting high reductions in recidivism rates from higher education reentry programs, and the correctional budget savings those statistics imply.

The Sociocultural Context of Laws and Policies

Although higher education was touted to help formerly incarcerated persons reenter the community, it is important to remember that only a few generations ago, most of the Rising Scholars attending college in the 2020s would have been denied equal access to education by statute. California had been one of several Western states that sorted students with any Latinx heritage into substandard "Mexican Schools," until four immigrant families sued their children's

schools, resulting in the *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) decision which ended explicit discrimination by race in California's schools (Strum, 2014). The United States Supreme Court affirmed an end to race discrimination in schools a few years later in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), but Black and Latinx students have still been struggling with the impacts of an educational system that was designed to exclude them rather than to educate them (Wood et al., 2015).

Rejecting "Colorblindness"

Khalifa et al. (2013) described "colorblindness" as the key insight from a CRT critical framework: when discriminatory systems are dressed in the apparel of objectivity, any resulting discrimination can be blamed on the individual experiencing it rather than the system enabling it. Alexander discussed colorblindness in mass incarceration at length (2012), while Klingele called out recidivism rates for rendering the complex process of reentry into a colorblind metric as potentially damaging as high-stakes testing is in educational systems (2019).

The Importance of Storytelling, and Counter-Storytelling

Of all the features of CRT that informed this study, "storytelling" was the most important, as it related directly to the purpose of this study: to gather and to promote the narratives of Rising Scholars in a California community college. Delgado argued that narrative, particularly "counter-storytelling" that makes the experiences of people in outgroups visible, can "shatter complacency and challenge the status quo" by destroying the mindsets that justify oppressive systems, (1989, p. 2414). Solórzano and Yosso also have cast narrative in an activist light, advocating the use of counter-storytelling as an act of resistance against majoritarian stories that frame Black and brown people in a cultural deficit perspective (2002).

Interdisciplinary Analysis

This study followed the transdisciplinary tradition of prior CRT scholarship, drawing together perspectives from criminology, education, psychology, and ethnic studies.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso (2005) applied CRT to educational scholarship to identify a framework for discussing how Black and Latinx students navigate educational systems that were designed to exclude them. These six sources of "Community Cultural Wealth" sustain Black and Latinx students without their being subjected to the deficit lens implicit in Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Aspirational Capital draws on the resilience formed by maintaining hopes and dreams in the face of social barriers. Linguistic Capital reflects the social skills gained by living with multiple languages. Familial Capital describes the cultural knowledge drawn from the student's *familia.* Social capital refers to the social networks and community resources available to the student. Navigational Capital refers to the ability to move between systems and institutions that often were not designed for students of color. Resistant Capital is formed by living in opposition to systemic oppression in society. Giraldo et al. (2017) built on this framework, arguing that formerly incarcerated students can tap into "dark funds of knowledge" from their prior carceral or gang-related experiences as an additional form of Cultural Wealth.

Desistance

Klingele defined desistance as "the process by which individuals move from a life that is crime-involved to one that is not" (2019, p. 769). This superficially simple operational definition belies a paradigmatic struggle in criminology circles, though. As I will explain further in Chapter

2, most criminology research on reentry relied on quantitative measures like recidivism rates, which claimed to measure the statistical likeliness of a convicted person's return to incarceration over a given period. However, desistance theory challenged this majoritarian discourse, describing the move away from criminal activity as a lifelong process of identity transformation (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Notably, Laub and Sampson noted that this process "is not an irreversible transition" (2001, p. 12). This notion of a dynamic lifelong process of change was a key distinction of desistance. Another significant element was the concept of identity restructuring through changes in one's self-narrative. Both Maruna (2001) and Stevens (2012) pointed to changes in justice-impacted persons' internal self-narratives as significant factors towards maintaining desistance. Until recently, though, most desistance literature has presented its findings in a colorblind format, representing the experiences of White prisoners as representative of all incarcerated persons. As one of the few desistance scholars to embrace CRT, Glynn (2016) argued for using counter-storytelling and an intersectionality framework to bring attention to the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black men in Birmingham, UK, as they navigated the multiple social and systemic forces affecting their desistance process. The key features of desistance that informed this study are identity transformation, the dynamic process of change, and the importance of self-narrative. These features are not usually found in discussions of CRT, and they complemented both the theoretical framework and the methodological framework of this study.

This study bridged multiple critical fields that do not appear to fit well together. Nevertheless, under the larger umbrella of a Critical Race Theory framework, there is room to incorporate the valuable insights of Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (2005), as well as to

acknowledge the contributions desistance scholarship can offer to understanding the process of identity transformation formerly incarcerated students experience on campus. The thread running through all these perspectives and fields of study is the importance of narrative, both to the students themselves and to counter the majoritarian narratives these students are working to overcome.

Methodology

Consistent with my social justice orientation of "standing with" Rising Scholars in their efforts to earn a college degree and reenter community, and in keeping with its critical race theory framework, this study proposed to amplify the narratives of formerly incarcerated (and system-impacted) community college students attending college with a reentry support program. Accordingly, I used narrative inquiry as a research methodology. Narrative qualitative research required researchers to collaborate with their subjects with respect and equality of voice to construct a narrative that illustrates the experience under study (Mills & Gay, 2019). CRT promoted narratives of people who have experiences of systemic racism as oppositional counter-stories (Delgado, 1989; Glynn, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). By uplifting the stories of Rising Scholars pursuing a college degree after incarceration, my research presented new opportunities for increased understanding and allyship across the community college system.

Research Design

This study took place in an urban community college in Los Angeles County, California, which had launched a new on-campus support program for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students the year before. Working with the support program director and staff, I sent invitations to all current and former members in the program to participate in this study. Since

community college populations differ significantly from the demographics of the state CDCR population, I used a purposeful sampling approach to identify 8-10 participants representative of the students attending the support program on campus (see Chapter 3). The criteria I used to select participants was: Students who had been incarcerated and/or were "system-impacted" (meaning that they were immediately affected by the incarceration of a family member or loved one); students who had submitted an intake form to the on-campus support program; students who were currently or formerly enrolled at least part-time for one semester at the community college. Selected participants had to be 18 or older. There were no limitations on gender or age (other than being above the age of majority). I conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant, about 60-90 minutes in length using questions drawn from the theoretical and methodological frameworks. The transcripts were coded for thematic and structural significance, and shared with the participants, who were invited to review and discuss the significance of the interview. The member check and re-storying took place via email.

Limitations

Narrative inquiry studies human experience, and stories are the primary vehicle for investigating those experiences (Lal et al., 2015). As a result, the "data" presented in a narrative inquiry has limited generalizability. Furthermore, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted, the investigator is a co-constructor of these narratives with the research participants, which means that my positionality impacted the interpretation and construction of these narratives. I am a 51-year-old White, male, adjunct community college professor whose daily contacts with Rising Scholars are most likely to be in the classroom. Like many people, I have relatives who are/were incarcerated: my uncle moved in with my mother after his release from prison, and my wife and I

maintain regular contact with a cousin who has been serving "life without parole" since the 1990s. Nevertheless, I have not had any immediate experiences with the carceral system. I relied on my interactions with the on-campus support program and my status as an instructor ally to build rapport with the participants.

Another limitation was the site of the study. I drew my sample pool from one college where I taught and already enjoyed a familiar relationship with the coordinator and staff of our Rising Scholar support program. This was convenient for the purposes of the study, but the location of the college within Los Angeles County and the specific demographics of this L.A. neighborhood impacted my sample pool. Also, as I noted earlier, the difference between the demographics of the community college and the demographics of the incarcerated population at CDCR is significant, and it should be factored into the analysis of larger themes or significance in the participants' stories.

Finally, this study was limited by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on college campuses in California. California community colleges were closed to on-campus instruction during the data gathering phase of this study and did not start to reopen until January 2021.[4] Traditional elements of a qualitative study, such as visits to the program site or face-to-face meetings with participants, was proscribed by county- and college-mandated COVID-19 protocols, and participant interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online video conferencing service (www.zoom.us). Seidman warned about the impact of interviews conducted by long

[4] As of Summer 2022, many students still opting for greater online options for their classes than were offered before the COVID-19 pandemic.

distance (2013), so I was mindful to this concern and worked harder to demonstrate engagement during the interviews.

Delimitations

This study was limited to the experiences of Rising Scholars using a reentry support program at a California community college. Other California college system supports, such as Project Rebound in the California State University or Underground Scholars at the University of California were not included. Furthermore, this study did not aim to address the experiences of incarcerated students attending post-secondary correctional education, only those of students attending college courses offered outside a correctional setting. As I will discuss further in chapters 4 and 5, one participant attended courses remotely from a transitional housing unit, but the courses were not offered as PSCE. Rather, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this student was able to attend traditional college courses remotely prior to her release. Another participant earned college credit through PSCE, but he volunteered to discuss his experiences during the course of the interview; I did not solicit information about his carceral experiences, as per the interview protocol (see Appendix B).

Although the Rising Scholars in the study were no longer incarcerated (and therefore not technically a "vulnerable population" in the strict sense of the term), I did not wish to needlessly invite my participants to relive any trauma related to their experiences with the carceral system. I focused my interview questions on their experiences in school, in college and with the Rising Scholar support program on campus (see Appendix B). I did not purposely seek to question participants about details of their incarceration, though some chose to relate carceral experiences as they pertained to the story of their educational journey. In keeping with the terms of the

Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D), I reminded all participants of their right to choose not to discuss this or any part of their history.

Assumptions

This study employed a constructivist, phenomenological paradigm in which meaning was constructed through interactions, and the experience of human consciousness informed social reality. It also employed a critical race framework that resisted institutional and cultural inequality (Leavy, 2017, pp. 129–131).

Regarding the Rising Scholars I proposed to interview, I assumed that we would be able to build enough trust that they would be willing and able to share their stories, at least as they understood them.[5] Furthermore, even though the research suggested that most FIS experience forms of systemic and direct racialized oppression, I could not assume the students in this study would discuss their experiences in a way that aligned to a CRT framework. Rather, I focused on listening to their narratives in their own words.

Glossary of Key Terms

Since this study crossed multiple disciplines, some frequently used terms required explanation for the lay reader. Many of these terms reflected the guidance of the *Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved in the Carceral System* published by the Berkeley Underground Scholars Initiative (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019). Others were terms used by

[5] Maruna (2001), for example, valued the participant's self-perception of a narrative more than an "objective" external account of the story.

the California Community College Chancellors Office (CCCCO), criminology scholarship, or Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Criminology

Carceral/Carceral System, an alternative for the more commonly used term "Criminal Justice System," indicates the systems "that rely, at least in part, on the exercise of state sanctioned physical, emotional, spatial, economic, and political violence to preserve the interests of the state" (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019).

Correctional control indicates that a person is subjected to the power of the criminal legal system through incarceration, parole, or probation (Jones, 2018).

Criminal Legal System (CLS) is another alternate term for "Criminal Justice System" which acknowledges that justice is not always served in the processing of convicted persons through the carceral system (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017).

Desistance in its simplest terms describes refraining from criminalized activity or returning to incarceration. Criminologists and psychologists use the term to describe the process of changing one's identity from a person defined by their incarcerated status to a person who identifies aa a member of the community (Klingele, 2019; Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Formerly incarcerated person refers to a person no longer in custody of the state, county, or federal correctional system. A formerly incarcerated person may, however, be subject to correctional control, i.e., supervision during parole or probation (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019).

Incarcerated person refers to an individual currently in custody of the state, county, or federal correctional system. This term offers no judgement on an individual's guilt or innocence or their moral character (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019).

Justice-impacted is used by some stakeholders to refer to persons who were directly affected by the carceral system, either through incarceration, parole, or probation (Silbert & Mukamal, 2020).

Reentry is the process of reintegrating into one's community after release from incarceration. After decades of "tough on crime" policies, the federal government found formerly incarcerated people were returning to their communities in need of jobs and other support or they risked being returned to incarceration. Congress passed the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008) which provided pilot grant funding for reentry support programs to lower the risk (and expense) of recidivism (O'Hear, 2007).

Recidivism is the return of a formerly incarcerated person to custody. The term implies an individual's return to law-breaking, however there are multiple ways a person can be re-incarcerated that are driven by policy or administrative decisions in the carceral system rather than a person's return to crime (Klingele, 2019). Recidivism is terribly costly to state and federal carceral systems, so any reentry support program that reduces the risk of recidivism, even by a small percentage, pays for itself by saving the government money (Mukamal et al., 2015)

System-impacted indicates a person who has experience with incarceration, arrest/conviction without incarceration, or the incarceration of a family member or loved one (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019).

Higher Education

Extended Opportunity Programs & Services (EOPS) The mission of EOPS is "to encourage the enrollment, retention and transfer of students handicapped by language, social, economic and educational disadvantages, and to facilitate the successful completion of their

goals and objectives in college" (California Community Colleges Extended Opportunity Programs & Services Association, n.d.). Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) provides financial support for students in EOPS.

Formerly Incarcerated/System-impacted student (FIS) indicates a person who has been incarcerated and is attending college after release (Silbert & Mukamal, 2020), though in practice many people are convicted and subjected to correctional control without incarceration. Furthermore, many people are directly impacted by immediate partners or family members who are incarcerated and/or convicted of an offense. Consequently, it is more accurate to refer to Rising Scholars as formerly incarcerated/system-impacted (the same acronym still applies).

Rising Scholars is the term used by the California Community Colleges to refer to students seeking a college education, either while incarcerated and/or after release. The Rising Scholars Network refers to all the community colleges serving Rising Scholars with an organized support program, coordinated through the CCCCO, though individual colleges may use program names other than Rising Scholars (California Community Colleges, n.d.).

Special Resource Center (SRC) is the name of the support center at Gordon Manor College serving the needs of students with disabilities.

Critical Race Theory

Counter-storytelling presents narratives and stories of minoritized groups to strengthen "traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" while disrupting **majoritarian** cultural narratives that render status quo power inequities invisible (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

Interest Convergence is the term used by Derrick Bell, Jr. to describe the premise that the rights of a minoritized group will progress only when they align with the interests of the majority group (Bell, 1980).

Majoritarian stories derive from a "legacy of racial privilege," reinforcing a cultural mindset that views the status quo position of the dominant ingroup as natural and normal (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Overview

Chapter 1 introduced the topic of formerly incarcerated students in community college and discusses the overall study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the study and the conceptual frameworks of critical race theory, desistance, and narrative inquiry. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the narrative inquiry of Rising Scholars in a California community college. Chapter 5 discusses the significance of the findings and areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to share the narrative experiences of Rising Scholars to answer three questions:

1. What are the experiences of Rising Scholars attending a California community college?
2. How do Rising Scholars use the services of a reentry support program at a California community college?
3. How do Rising Scholars perceive themselves as they participate in a reentry support program at a California community college?

These questions were a first step in filling a gap in the research on education for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted college students. The bulk of the current research had focused on the effect of post-secondary correctional education (PSCE) on incarcerated students, which was measured in terms of recidivism rates and the probability of finding employment post-release. Research on higher education for students after incarceration has been more qualitative, describing a mixture of barriers and benefits. However, little research was available on the impact of on-campus support programs for formerly incarcerated students (FIS), despite the dramatic expansion of programs across California college campuses since 2014.

This literature review will discuss the advocacy of higher education as a reentry tool for formerly incarcerated students, followed by a review of the qualitative research on formerly incarcerated college students. By necessity, this review will start with a discussion of higher education for incarcerated students. Since many FIS began their studies while incarcerated

before attending college in person after their release, the research validating the effect of higher education on current and formerly incarcerated students has been unable to disaggregate the impact of PSCE from the effects of attending on-campus college classes. In fact, Davis et al. (2013) admitted they were even unable to disaggregate the impact of remedial secondary correctional education for the General Educational Development test (GED) from that of correctional college courses (PSCE).

California Prisons and Higher Education

Higher education classes within prison settings have been a fixture of California corrections since California prisons offered college classes in the 1970s (Mukamal et al., 2015). Access to this form of "correctional education" (CE) was restricted in the late 1970s, disappeared in the 1980s, and slowly reappeared in the 1990s in the form of correctional correspondence courses. In 2014, following the passage of S.B. No. 1391 (Cal. 2014), CDCR formed a partnership with CCCCO to once again offer in-person college courses in carceral settings, and to pay college instructors the same rate for in-prison teaching as they were paid for teaching on campus (Mukamal et al., 2015, p. 40). By 2018, the number of incarcerated students attending face-to-face PSCE classes had grown to just under 4,000 (Arambula & LeBlanc, 2019). As of June 2020, the enrollment in face-to-face PSCE grew to 11,472 students (Murillo et al., 2021). Although the growth of correctional college classes clearly has been a success story, remember that as of June 2019, the total incarcerated population in California's prisons was 125,472 (Gabbard et al., 2019), so even after a period of spectacular growth in PSCE, still only about 10% of California's prisoners have had access to a college education.

The Story of a Statistic That Wouldn't Die

Although this study did not specifically focus on PSCE, it is necessary to examine the research on correctional education because these studies formed the basis for the expansion of college opportunities for current and formerly incarcerated students in California. To borrow a phrase from Clandinin and Connelly (2000), this foundational research established the "grand narrative" of higher education reducing recidivism and saving states money that has continued to be used as a rationale for ongoing research and legislation supporting FIS.

After the passage of the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008), multiple criminology studies promoted PSCE as a means of reentry for incarcerated students. A RAND meta-study of correctional education (including secondary and post-secondary education) famously reported that incarcerated students who participated in correctional education had 43% lower odds of recidivating and 13% higher odds of finding employment after release (Davis et al., 2013).[6] This 43% finding quickly became a shibboleth in research promoting higher education as the new reentry program for formerly incarcerated people, even in contexts beyond the scope of the study, such as reports promoting on-campus FIS programs in the California Community Colleges (Mukamal et al., 2015; Mukamal & Silbert, 2018). Even the United States Department of Justice cited this 43% statistic in its report recommending expanding PSCE in a slate of prison reforms at the national level (2016). The general reception of this statistic within the reentry discourse was best demonstrated by Runell (2016) whose summary strips out any statistical nuances, leaving the reader with a politically attractive soundbite devoid of context or qualifiers: "There is

[6] "Recidivating" means being returned to incarceration. Recidivism "rates" are an expression of the statistical likelihood of the persons within a given sample returning to prison.

a proven link between receiving a postsecondary education in prison, reduced likelihood of recidivism, and successful reentry through gainful employment and social connections" (p. 92).

The only problem with such optimistic reporting is that the original finding, while encouraging, promised little, and only in a limited context. In 2013, the RAND Corporation released a meta-analysis of studies between 1980 and 2011 that found correctional education was associated with 43% lower odds of recidivism and 13% higher odds of finding employment (Davis et al., 2013, Davis et al., 2014). In plain English, the 43% rate describes the difference in the recidivism rate of formerly incarcerated persons with correctional education compared to the rate of those without correctional education. Yet both subject groups had members return to incarceration within the period of the study. However, the small numbers of formerly incarcerated people avoiding recidivism with a correctional education was offset by the fact that correctional education was so extremely cost-effective that the program needed only a 1.9% to 2.6% reduction in recidivism to "break even" compared to the cost of reincarceration (Davis et al., 2013), so that even just a few correctional education students successfully desisting justified funding the program.

Soon after Davis et al.'s RAND study (2013) was published, Bozick et al. (2018) conducted a more statistically rigorous meta-study that revised the recidivism rate after correctional education to only 28% less likely to recidivate, and they found no statistically significant difference on employment chances between incarcerated persons with correctional education and those without. Even though Bozick et al.'s more rigorous 2018 study undercut the 43% statistic, the original soundbite from Davis et al.'s 2013 finding has persisted in discussions of reentry programming for current and formerly incarcerated students (e.g., Oakford et al.,

2019; Silbert & Mukamal, 2020; Smith & Digard, 2020). In a testament to the staying power of a good soundbite, that same quote from the original RAND study was cited as a legislative finding in the text of A.B. No. 417 (Cal. 2021), the legislation establishing the Rising Scholars Network in California's Community Colleges: "1. (b). Research shows that postsecondary education reduces recidivism and increases the odds of finding employment for justice-involved students" (McCarty, 2021).

The Uncanny Role of Recidivism in Reentry Literature

Before proceeding to a review of the literature on formerly incarcerated students in college, it is necessary to take a moment to acknowledge the outsized role recidivism has played as a justification for supporting PSCE and post-release higher education programs as a mechanism for reentry. Traditionally, criminology studies have used recidivism rates as the gold standard metric for evaluating the success of a reentry program. Klingele (2019) summarized the status quo view of recidivism simply: "Recidivism rates are one of the primary ways that legislators, policymakers, grant funders, media outlets, and criminal justice system actors determine whether specific criminal justice interventions have succeeded or failed" (p. 772). Higher education for current and formerly incarcerated students as a reentry program has been subjected to the same institutional pressure. Hirsch et al. (2002) cited recidivism rates when bemoaning the loss of correctional education opportunities in the 1990s, while Esperian (2010) lauded correctional education's effects on recidivism rates after the passage of the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008). In fact, this promise of recidivism reduction was the basis for the bill's bipartisan support (Alcoholism & Drug Abuse Weekly, 2007; Second Chance Act of 2007, 2008) Significantly, the most rigorous meta-studies measuring the effectiveness of correctional

education relied on recidivism rates as the quantitative measure of success (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013, Davis et al., 2014), confirming recidivism as the gold standard of reentry program assessment. This institutional norm in criminology explains the lasting power of Davis et al.'s 43% recidivism reduction statistic, even as subsequent studies revised their finding (2013).

Despite their reputation as a blue-chip metric in quantitative criminology studies of reentry programs, recidivism rates have been a poor measure of an individual incarcerated person's progress from "inmate" to reentered "community member." Klingele (2019) argued that recidivism was a binary measure that offers no means of discerning the reason for a person's return to incarceration nor the length of the intervals between incarceration. Furthermore, recidivism rates fluctuated significantly in response to external factors entirely out of a person's control, such as state and local parole policies, and even judicial rulings. Despite Davis et al.'s famous 2013 statistic about recidivism acting as a measure of re-integration, Davis et al. (2014) were forced to acknowledge that their pool of eligible studies used multiple definitions of recidivism which included "reoffending, rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, technical parole violation, and successful completion of parole," and the length of time participants were followed to measure recidivism ranged from six months to ten years (pg. 13). In other words, recidivism rates were just as likely to reflect the effect of policies in the local correctional system as they were to reflect the effectiveness of a correctional treatment program (Klingele, 2019).

Finally, as a statistical measure, recidivism rates do not express the general likelihood of any single person in the treatment group to reoffend or be returned to incarceration. Statistically, recidivism rates express the relative difference in likelihood of re-incarceration between

members of a treatment group and a control group, and that difference is quite small. As an illustration, Bozick et al.'s rigorous analysis of 37 years of studies of correctional education found participants 28% less likely to recidivate (2018). In plain language, "28% less likely" means that if an incarcerated person without correctional education has a 50% chance of recidivating upon release, and a person who attended correctional education has a 36% chance of returning to incarceration, the difference is 28% (or 50-36, divided by 50). In other words, while rigorous studies of correctional education have found statistically significant reductions in recidivism rates, objectively these differences can appear minute.

While it is true that any increase in the chance that an incarcerated person will successfully reenter desist from recidivism is good, the mainstream reliance on recidivism rates as a metric for success revealed an underlying warrant in the discussion of reentry programs for formerly incarcerated persons: all reentry programs are predicated on the expectation that they will result in budget savings for states and counties. The *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008) specifically cited a $50 billion increase in correctional costs in the legislative findings of the bill, and not coincidentally, the first generation of reentry pilot programs funded under its authority were tasked with reducing recidivism by 50% over five years (Klingele, 2019). In other words, the bipartisan shift towards correctional reform, starting with the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008) reveals that the same politicians who got themselves elected by enacting the laws that led to mass incarceration about-faced and embraced reform when they discovered they did not want to bear the cost of maintaining the largest prison population in the history of the world (Green, 2013). Fortunately, using correctional education as a pathway to reentry has been so incredibly cost-effective (Davis et al., 2014) that even small results are worth the investment.

But why should advocates for reentry support in higher education be concerned about the deep history of the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008) and its insistence on reducing recidivism? First, despite its popularity among institutional stakeholders, measuring recidivism is an unreliable means of assessing an incarcerated person's progress towards reentry, and it is easily affected by factors outside the control of the participant, or even subject to administrative "gaming" by changing administrative policy (Klingele, 2019). Second, in times of economic stress (such as a global pandemic that wipes out a state's fiscal reserves), the bipartisan alliances that supported reentry programming may evaporate if programs cannot document their effectiveness in ways besides recidivism rates. Third, recidivism rates reduced a complex overdetermined phenomenon of social reintegration into a soundbite-sized percentage that is devoid of any context, nuance, or appreciation of institutional bias that impacted the result. For system-impacted people, recidivism rates function as a form of qualitative colorblindness that obscures the larger systemic influences on whether a person returns to incarceration or not. In short, although correctional education, PSCE, and post-release higher education have enjoyed evidence of lower recidivism rates among participants, recidivism rates alone were not enough to justify lasting support for FIS support programs. Qualitative measures and other alternatives to recidivism are needed.

Desistance

Desistance has been one promising alternative metric to recidivism rates. Unlike recidivism which was a binary measure (either a person was incarcerated, or they weren't), desistance measured the lifelong process of identity change from incarcerated inmate to a reintegrated member of the community. Klingele defined desistance as "the process by which

individuals move from a life that is crime-involved to one that is not" (2019, p. 769). Unlike recidivism, this process was not linear, nor binary, and it allowed for setbacks and returns to incarceration. Maruna refined the definition of desistance to include not just "long-term abstinence from crime" but "rather on the maintenance of crime-free behavior in the face of life's obstacles and frustrations" (2001, p. 19). This last point by Maruna was significant, as it shifted the focus of reentry away from a general description of the process of desistance to a greater emphasis on the practical matter of maintaining desistance in the face of daily challenges. By asking "how" a formerly incarcerated student persisted, Maruna opened a window to asking questions about resilience, funds of knowledge, and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Community College as a Pathway to Re-Entry

Ultimately, the campaign to expand higher education in California as a form of reentry paid off. As of 2020, at least over 1,000 formerly incarcerated students were attending classes on California college campuses (Murillo et al., 2021). The exact number is difficult to determine since, unlike incarcerated students who are counted by CDCR, formerly incarcerated students in public college can only be counted in California if they self-identify. Students who may have started their higher education in prison face a new set of challenges as they continued their education on campus post-release. This section surveys the research on formerly incarcerated students attending college. Note that most participants in these previous qualitative studies attended college without the formal institutional support that was the subject of this study.

Formerly incarcerated students face a daunting set of challenges after release. This list of requirements for participants in a North Carolina community college reentry program illustrated

how the overlapping requirements of completing parole and attending college could overwhelm anyone:

> [T]he students were expected to enroll in college full-time; secure part-time employment; find suitable housing arrangements; address transportation needs; reunite with family members; and, in some cases, resume parental and financial responsibilities for their families while managing and seeking treatment for any substance abuse, depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues. (Davis & Tolbert, 2019, p. 35)

The fact that these students pursued their dream of a college degree in the teeth of such overwhelming challenges calls to mind Father Boyle's admonition that we should stand in awe of the burden people carry rather than in judgement of the way they carry it (2010).

Literature on FIS in college tended to be qualitative studies ranging from single case studies (Brower, 2015; Custer, 2013) to sample pools of a dozen or more (Halkovic et al., 2013; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Owens, 2009; Potts & Bierlein Palmer, 2014). One RAND study (Davis & Tolbert, 2019) was an outlier with a much larger sample pool than other studies (n = 165). Taken together, these qualitative studies offered an emerging picture of the opportunities and challenges facing students who pursue higher education after incarceration.

College Is Transformative

The most significant finding that was repeated throughout the literature on FIS was the transformational nature of a college education for students re-entering the community. Owens argued that higher education "facilitates social transformation" of FIS by creating opportunities that mitigated the stigma of incarceration (2009, p. 336). Halkovic et al. (2013) reported that one of the "gifts" formerly incarcerated students brought has been "a strong desire to learn and build

a platform for change" (p. 16). Brower (2015) described a college education as an "opportunity to change" (p. 11). Giraldo (2016) found identity change taking place in the support programs supervised by East Los Angeles College and Homeboy Industries. In perhaps the strongest declaration of the transformative potential of higher education, Livingston and Miller remarkably argued that, for many men of color, a college education was a more effective pathway to community reintegration than employment or marriage, two of the most common means to reentry cited in criminology studies (2014).

Assets and "Gifts"

Fortunately, formerly incarcerated students entered college equipped with multiple assets. Many studies found FIS to be focused and mature students, intrinsically motivated by several factors including a desire to give back to society and becoming a role model for family members (Brower, 2015; Davis & Tolbert, 2019; Halkovic et al., 2013; Potts & Bierlein Palmer, 2014). Data from the CCC seemed to support these findings. Silbert and Mukamal (2020) found that Rising Scholars from six California community colleges had a higher mean GPA than the campus average (spring 2018 and summer 2018), and a greater percentage of Rising Scholars in the study carried a full-time unit load than either their campus average, or the average of the entire student body in the CCC.

Resilience. One common theme in the literature was FIS demonstrating resilience in the face of systemic barriers in higher education. Most studies reported FIS building their own support networks in college in the absence of institutional reentry support (Brower, 2015). Livingston and Miller (2014) found family support and family resources were key to college success for FIS. Halkovic et al. (2013) found that FIS who developed relationships with faculty

were more likely to be successful, though the decision whether to disclose one's prior incarceration to an instructor was always difficult. These stories of FIS resilience resonated with Yosso's theory of Community Cultural Wealth (2005), in which Black and Latinx students used skills derived from their experience of living across two cultures to find the strength to succeed in education.

Barriers to College

Although higher education holds great promise for formerly incarcerated students, the transformation from incarcerated person to college student and community member is not easy nor guaranteed. In fact, Laub and Sampson (2001), who have been conducting one of the longest ongoing longitudinal studies on former prisoners in the literature, explicitly noted that the process of desisting from criminal activity was not linear and may include both progress and setbacks. Research on FIS pursuing a college education similarly found they experienced positive interactions on campus while enduring social and systemic barriers in the classroom and in interactions with college staff. These barriers included culture shock, interference by correctional supervision, stigma, and racist microaggressions.

Culture Shock

Several studies reported FIS experiencing a jarring transition moving from the rules and norms of prison life to the social codes and hidden curriculum of the college campus. This discordance started with the discrepancy between the social and academic freedom on a college campus and the carceral environment in which they were taught (Runell, 2016). Key and May (2019) succinctly described the oppressive discourse of the prison environment as experienced by incarcerated students:

> Prisoners are stripped of their autonomy. They are required to appear when ordered, to demonstrate their complacency and compliance to authority, and even when they seek education, their mere presence is viewed as a threat. Their clothes, their belongings, even their ability to grow their hair is taken from them. The prison system, then, circulates a discourse in which prisoners are threats in need of surveillance and control. (Key & May, 2019, p. 6)

For FIS to suddenly transition from an environment marked by exercises in control to an open-ended college campus upon their release led to what Miller et al. described as "culture shock" (2014, p. 72). Other studies described formerly incarcerated students feeling a sense of marginalization or outsider status in college (Brower, 2015; Copenhaver et al., 2007; Halkovic et al., 2013; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2014; Potts & Bierlein Palmer, 2014).

Stigma

The stigma of incarceration could interrupt a student's education at several steps, starting with the disclosure of their criminal history. Many states and private universities still required disclosure of criminal history, which interrupted and even deterred students from applying to college (Brower, 2015; Custer, 2013, 2016; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). California, New York, and some other states prohibit inquiring about criminal histories during admissions, but they are in the minority.

But the stigma of a criminal history does not end at admissions. Financial aid and work study awards for FIS were curtailed by restrictive anti-drug provisions in the *Higher Education Amendments of 1998* (1998) that denied students with a drug conviction access to Pell Grants

(Hirsch et al., 2002). Although Pell Grant eligibility was finally restored in 2021 (Burke, 2021; *Consolidated Appropriations Act*, 2021), Hirsch et al. (2002) noted that FIS may have internalized these restrictions and simply refrained from applying for financial aid, assuming they did not qualify. Other nearly invisible government requirements that have been taken for granted by non-system impacted people, such as Selective Service registration, have become time-consuming barriers that forced formerly incarcerated students to rehash their criminal history regardless of the length interval since they were convicted of an offense. Beyond the immediate academic concerns, FIS faced challenges finding adequate housing and employment, both of which have been vital to academic success and successful parole (Alexander, 2012; Davis & Tolbert, 2019; McTier et al., 2017). Fortunately, the California Fair Chance Act (2017) permitted FIS in college to apply for work-study without having to subject themselves to a background check (Corrections to College CA, 2017b; Perez, 2018).

Microaggressions

Multiple studies noted that interactions between FIS and college faculty and staff have proved to be a barrier to higher education. Halkovic et al. called for a new focus on reducing administrative barriers, noting that campus institutions and policies were "not equipped to understand" a formerly incarcerated student's process of transforming from an inmate to a college student (2013, p. 19), while McTier (2015) showed that college staff were unaware of the ways their policies affected FIS. In a recent survey of California Community Colleges for Corrections to College CA, Curry et al. (2018) found that 88% of the responding colleges without a support program for formerly incarcerated students identified "professional development on serving FIS" as their largest non-financial need. Giraldo (2016) presented this

problem in a different, and more significant, light, arguing that breakdowns in cultural competence by college faculty and staff resulted in racial microaggressions toward FIS, who were challenged to interpret these interactions as disrespect, according to the cultural codes of their past identity, or tap into community cultural wealth resources to persist (Giraldo, 2016; Giraldo et al., 2017).

Need for Support Programs

Most studies on FIS have called for increased support for re-entering scholars. The literature has identified several areas of need, including professional development for faculty and staff about systemic barriers (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Davis & Tolbert, 2019; Giraldo et al., 2017; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier et al., 2017); creating support groups and on-campus counterspaces for FIS (Brower, 2015; Copenhaver et al., 2007; Giraldo et al., 2017); and employing dedicated institutional navigators to guide FIS through the institutional college system (Davis & Tolbert, 2019). Despite the numerous inspirational stories of FIS in these studies who found a path to success, do not mistake resilience and determination in the face of institutional neglect for a successful reentry system. These students who have succeeded were the outliers, the most resilient individuals who persisted where others gave up, or they enjoyed advantageous resources from their life before incarceration (Livingston & Miller, 2014).

As of 2021, there were at least 50 on-campus FIS support programs or student clubs in the CCC, and the number has been increasing (Mukamal & Silbert, 2018; Murillo et al., 2021). However, even though most of these programs emerged in the last few years, this group represents a little less than half of the 116 colleges in the CCC system. Formerly incarcerated students in California are facing a critical moment of opportunity. On the one hand, thanks to the

passage of S.B. 1391 (Cal. 2014) and the advocacy of institutional actors like the Campaign for College Opportunity (n.d.), support programs have grown steadily. California emerged from 2020's COVID-19 lockdown with an economic surplus, and the legislature passed A. B. 417 (Cal. 2021) which formally established the Rising Scholars Network in the CCC with a statutory funding authorization for at least 50 programs in community colleges across the state (*Governor Newsom Proposes 2021-22 State Budget*, 2021; McCarty, 2021).

On the other hand, no state or federal administration is secure from political backlash, or simply change. California's governor survived a recall election in 2021 (Willon & Luna, 2021). Even so, the combined political will supporting FIS in the Governor's mansion, the CCC Chancellors Office and the CDCR could potentially be swept away if the top political leadership in the state switched sides in a future election. Even with A. B. 417 (Cal. 2021) signed into law, there is no guarantee a future governor or legislature would allocate funding to fully implement it. At this historic juncture in which continued support for FIS is hopeful, yet still fragile, this study filled a needed gap in the research into formerly incarcerated students by amplifying the voices of FIS who have interacted with campus support programs during their college experience. It is my hope that these students' narratives will act as counter-stories to the current carceral and educational system's reliance on recidivism as the sole justification for continued support.

Conclusion

Thirteen years after President Bush signed the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008), the Rising Scholars Network was formally established by California statute (California A. B. 417, Cal. 2021). Without diminishing any of the difficult lobbying work that made this achievement

possible, a harder road lies ahead. For too many years, formerly incarcerated students have had to erect their own support networks. They sought the transformative potential of a college degree in the face of daunting parole/probation requirements. They faced stigma, cultural barriers and microaggressions on campus. And despite their carceral experiences (or perhaps because of them), they were more focused and had higher GPAs than the student body average. What started as a pragmatic effort to reduce recidivism costs after forty years of mass incarceration has become a formal reentry support program for Rising Scholars in California's Community Colleges. It is time to listen to their voices.

In the next chapter I will discuss the research design of this study: its frameworks and methodology, protocols for data collection, and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study asked three questions:

1. What are the experiences of Rising Scholars attending a California community college?
2. How do Rising Scholars use the services of a reentry support program at a California community college?
3. How do Rising Scholars perceive themselves as they participate in a reentry support program at a California community college?

To answer these questions, this study used a narrative inquiry framework informed by theories of Critical Race Theory and Desistance Theory. This chapter will discuss the different frameworks informing the study, followed by the methodology of the study, its limitations and delimitations, and the steps taken to safeguard the rights of the participants.

Conceptual Frameworks

This dissertation topic intersected two historical manifestations of systemic racism: mass incarceration, which Michelle Alexander described as the third iteration of "racialized social control" in America after slavery and Jim Crow (2012, p. 58), and postsecondary higher education, which has subjected students of color to a deficit cognitive frame "embodied within foundational theories on student success" (Wood et al., 2015, p. 12). Furthermore, the current growth of reentry programs across the country was initially made possible by the passage of the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008), a bipartisan bill authorizing pilot reentry programs based on the interest convergence of "compassionate conservatism" and individual redemption, liberal

social justice desires for prison reform, and a bipartisan desire to save money on correctional costs (Bush, 2008). Navigating the intersections of mass incarceration, higher education via community college, and reentry into the community required a framework informed by Critical Race Methodology as well as Desistance Theory.

Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology

Critical Race Theory (CRT) grew out of the antithetical tradition of Critical Legal Studies, in particular the critical scholarship of Derrick Bell, who pioneered the critiques of interest convergence and colorblindness in civil rights scholarship that later became commonly accepted tools in CRT (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Khalifa et al., 2013). Ladson-Billings and Tate introduced Critical Race Theory (CRT) drawing from the theoretical traditions of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which interrogated the way laws and legal scholarship maintain a status quo that validates white privilege (1995). Khalifa et al. (2013) offered five tenets that are indicative of most applications of CRT:

- Acknowledging that racism is an invisible norm and White culture and (privilege) is the standard by which other races are measured.
- Committing to understanding that racism is socially constructed, and an inclusive worldview is required for true social justice.
- Acknowledging the unique perspective and voice of people of color as victims of oppression in racial matters and valuing their story telling as a legitimate way to convey knowledge.
- Engaging interdisciplinary dialogue and discourse to analyze race relationships.

- An understanding that racism is systemic, and that many current policies and laws are: (1) neither ahistorical nor apolitical; and (2) are situated to privilege Whites and marginalize minoritized groups.

Storytelling and counter-storytelling played a key role in this study. Delgado (1989) reminded his audience that stories form the backdrop of political and legal discourse, and counter-stories are needed to challenge the status quo mindset. Solórzano and Yosso argued for a Critical Race Methodology which uses counter-storytelling as "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (2002, p. 32). By restorying and promoting the narratives of Rising Scholars in community college, this study challenged the status quo narratives about formerly incarcerated students, reentry, and recidivism. And to advance those goals, this study was also informed by desistance scholarship.

Desistance and Identity Change

Desistance theories combined the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and criminology to examine how some people successfully transitioned from incarceration to community while others returned to prison. Klingele defined desistance as "the process by which individuals move from a life that is crime-involved to one that is not" (2019, p. 769). Although there are multiple explanations for how this process worked, the following key studies offered useful guidance for a conceptual framework of desistance (see Table 1). Prochaska and Velicer's Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change (1997) emerged from a comparative analysis of leading psychotherapeutic behavior change theories, identifying 10 distinct "stages of change" which they then applied to twelve studies of health behaviors ranging from quitting smoking to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) prevention. Their key finding was that

"behavior change is a process that unfolds over time through a sequence of stages" (1997, p. 41). Maruna (2001) conducted a narratological analysis of the life stories of formerly incarcerated persons in the Liverpool Desistance Study, finding that a person's self-narrative, including the identification of personally significant "turning points," affects their desistance (or "persistence" in criminal behavior). Laub and Sampson (2001) argued that desistance should be examined from a life-course perspective, which embraces a variable and dynamic view of the individual as influenced by individual traits as well as exterior events and social forces over time. They argued that desistance should be viewed as a life-long process of identity transformation that is not irreversible and may sometimes resemble a zigzag more than a straight line. Stevens' (2012) semi-ethnographic study of a prison support group built on Maruna's (2001) study of desistance and self-narrative, finding that constructing a supportive therapeutic community enabled identity transformation, leading to a "constructive re-imagining of self and concomitantly, refashioned narrative trajectory" in the community members (Stevens, 2012, p. 541).

Klingele (2019) applied desistance theory to the current conversation about reentry support in the wake of the *Second Chance Act of 2007* (2008), arguing that "markers of desistance" should be used for assessment of reentry programs instead of recidivism data alone as markers of desistance examined progress toward reintegrating into the community rather than a single binary measure of reincarceration (2019, pg. 769). Notably, Klingele argued that the mainstream use of recidivism data to validate reentry programs was as unreliable and controversial as the use of high-stakes testing in school districts to measure student success (2019, pp. 802–804). Taken together, desistance theories viewed reentry as a dynamic lifelong process of behavior change involving identity transformation and re-framing of one's internal

self-narrative. This process proceeded in stages, subjected to external social forces, and was enabled by community support.

Table 1

Elements of Desistance Theory

Study	Key Finding
Prochaska & Velicer (1997)	Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change: "behavior change is a process that unfolds over time through a sequence of stages" (p. 41).
Maruna (2001)	Self-narrative, and "turning points" affect desistance (p. 75).
Laub & Sampson (2001)	Behavior change is a dynamic, social process of identity transformation best analyzed from a life-course perspective.
Stevens (2012)	Community support enables identity transformation and narrative re-framing.
Klingele (2019)	"Markers of desistance" are better than recidivism data for measuring real progress from crime involvement to community integration (p. 769).

Note: This table lists key concepts from influential studies of desistance. Adapted from "Measuring Change: From Rates of Recidivism to Markers of Desistance," by C. Klingele, 2019, in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 109*(4), pp. 489-513, copyright 2019 by Cecilia Klingele, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3142405; "Understanding Desistance from Crime," by J. H. Laub and R. J. Sampson, 2001, in *Crime and Justice, 28*, pp. 1-69, copyright 2001 by The University of Chicago, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3226958; Making Good: How Ex-convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives, by S. Maruna, 2001, copyright 2001 by the American Psychological Association, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/10430-000; "The Transtheoretical Model of Health Behavior Change," by J. O. Prochaska and W. F. Velicer, 1997, in *American Journal of Health Promotion, 12*(1), pp. 38-48, copyright 1997 by American Journal of Health Promotion, Inc., https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wayne-Velicer/publication/285440305_The_transtheoretical_model/links/5662ed8008ae418a786b963c/The-transtheoretical-model.pdf; ; "'I am the Person now I was Always Meant to be': Identity Reconstruction and Narrative Reframing in Therapeutic Community Prisons," by A. Stevens, 2012, in *Criminology & Criminal Justice 12*(5), pp. 527-547, copyright 2012 by the author, https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895811432958.

Although the choice of Critical Race Theory and Desistance Theory may have seemed an awkward fit as conceptual frameworks for this study, they shared important common elements. Both frameworks focused on the lived experience of the individual. Both resisted a neoliberal analysis that reduced the individual's lived experience to quantifiable data sets such as test scores, recidivism rates, or budget savings. And both frameworks prioritized elevating the narratives of people who have been historically silenced by society as a counter-story to challenge the status quo narrative. For this reason, it seemed only appropriate in a study of the experiences of formerly incarcerated community college students to have adopted a research methodology that centered on narratives as well.

Methodology Framework: Narrative Inquiry

Studying the educational experience of Rising Scholars through a narrative inquiry framework has been consistent with educational scholarship going back a century. John Dewey described the study of education in phenomenological terms he dubbed "the study of life," i.e., "the study of epiphanies, rituals, routines, metaphors, and everyday actions" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxiv), as opposed to the study of educational behaviors popularized by researchers like Edward Thorndike. Clandinin and Connelly have continued this tradition, arguing that "we see individuals as living storied lives on storied landscapes" (2000, p. 24) in opposition to a measurement-based view that reduced experience to seemingly objective quantifiable data (referred to by the authors as "the Grand Narrative"). In keeping with their focus on lived experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identified five areas of tension (see Table 2) between research as narrating experience and research as measured behavior: "temporality" or the perception of events and things as rooted in time as opposed to being unmoored to a temporal context; "people" in narrative inquiry were likewise rooted in a temporal

Table 2

Narrative Inquiry Research Versus Grand Narrative Research

Boundary	Narrative Inquiry thinking	Grand Narrative thinking
Temporality	People, things rooted in time	People & things are viewed as outside time
People	Individuals are in a state of change through time	Individual history is irrelevant.
Action	A narrative sign to be interpreted in context of an individual's history	Direct evidence of meaning absent any context.
Certainty	All narrative inquiry is an interpretation by the researcher, which is tentative at best.	Causality trumps interpretation. Knowledge is certain.
Context	The accumulation of personal history, temporality, and causal uncertainty.	Context is overlooked and ignored.

Note: Adapted from *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* by D. J. Clandinin and F. M. Connelly, 2000, Jossey Bass, copyright 2000 by Jossey Bass.

context that was in a constant state of change from past to present to future; "action" was a narrative sign to be interpreted in a historical context of the participant rather than objective evidence with a fixed meaning; "certainty" was a reminder to the narrative inquirer that all narratives are interpretative, which also meant they could be wrong and are thus should be tentative; "context," the conditions of time, space, and circumstance that affected the meaning of a person's actions.

The Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) synthesized these five elements into a concept they called "a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" (see Figure 2). The first dimension reflected the "backward" and "forward" nature of temporality. The second dimension, "inward" and "outward," indicated the internal and external context surrounding a person's actions. The third dimension, "place," acknowledged the spatial context of an action or event. And in the spirit of the uncertainty of interpretation, this inquiry space applied equally to the participant in the inquiry as it did to the inquirer seeking to interpret the event. I used this concept to design the structure of the interview protocol (see Appendix B), moving backward to ask about early educational experiences before college and moving forward to inquire about how the participants perceived themselves as a student today compared to their self-perception in the past. I also invited the participants to describe the inward and outward contexts of their experiences as a Rising Scholar.

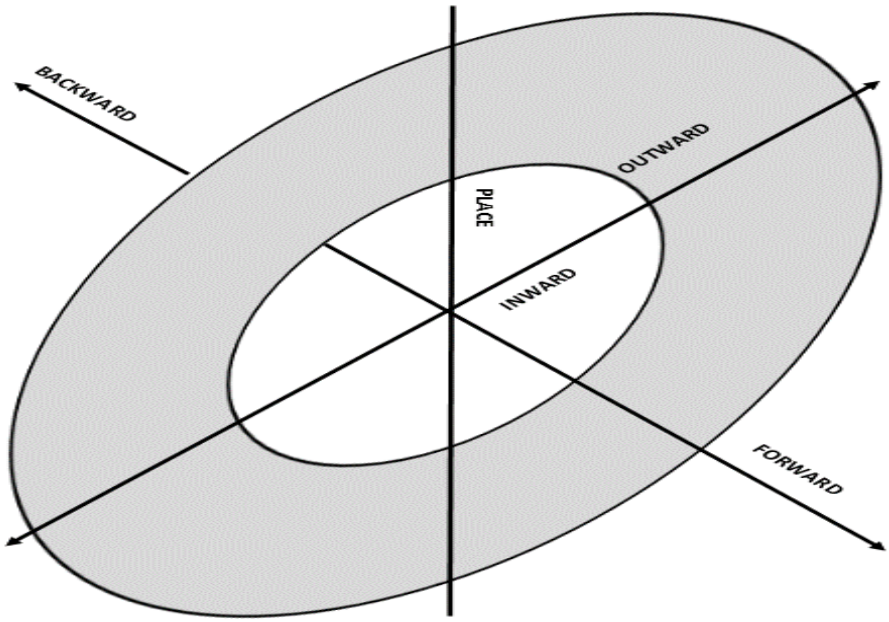
Research Design

This study interviewed six formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students who were either currently or recently enrolled at least part-time in a community college, and who were

registered members of a FIS support program in the Rising Scholars Network of the California Community Colleges system. Most on-campus FIS support programs also serve students who are "system-impacted," meaning students who have experienced incarceration, students who were convicted but did not experience incarceration, and students who have been directly impacted by a close family member being incarcerated (see Glossary of Key Terms). As such, I included students from this category in my sample pool.

Figure 2

The Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space



Note: Adapted from *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, D. J. Clandinin and F. M. Connelly, 2000, copyright 2000 by Jossey Bass. Figural design by author.

Data Collection

As Principal Investigator (PI), I developed a working relationship with one community college district's FIS support program prior to IRB approval. I met with the program coordinator

multiple times online (due to COVID). I also collaborated with the coordinator on the design of the program's intake forms, and I co-led a "meetup" workshop for participants on writing English papers and conducting research through the campus library. Following IRB approval of the study the coordinator generously offered to let me use the program's mailing list for recruiting participants. Working with the program coordinator and staff helped me better understand what services and referrals the Rising Scholar support program offered on-campus which provided me a fuller picture of the intersectional forces at work during the formerly incarcerated students' college career and would provide a source of information for future triangulation of Rising Scholar narratives.

Having established trust with the coordinator and counselors, and upon IRB approval from both Loyola Marymount University and the participating college site, I designed a recruitment flyer which the support program sent out via campus email to its list of current and former students (Smith & Digard, 2020). By reaching out to students who had already joined the support program by submitting an intake form and meeting with a program counselor, I was able to validate their eligibility for the study without risking further trauma by inquiring directly about students' history within the carceral system. Students who responded were sent an invitational participant packet that contained a description of the study, a copy of the Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights, a preview of the semi-structured interview questions, and signable copies of the IRB consent forms for LMU and the college site (see Appendix D). The participants signed and returned the consent forms by digital signature using Adobe Sign (www.Adobe.com/sign.html; security compliance specifications are listed in Appendix C). I received a notification through

AdobeSign when the signed consent forms were returned. Nine potential participants responded to the initial recruitment, and six signed the consent forms and scheduled an interview.

As of June 2019, male prisoners made up 95.5% of the in-custody population at CDCR and female prisoners represent 4.5% (Gabbard et al., 2019). In contrast, the CCC 2019 Student Success Scorecard noted female students made up 53.8% of the statewide student body and male students represent 44.9%, with 1.3% answering "unknown" (Student Success Initiative, 2019). There were also significant differences in the ethnic demographics between the CDCR prison population and the CCC student population, but unlike the gender ratio, these numbers varied significantly from college to college. The current state of the CCC student body suggested that more women with carceral and system-impacted experiences were likely to be participating in FIS support programs than their portion of the current incarcerated population would have suggested (Silbert & Mukamal, 2020). In my original design, I had planned to use a stratified sample to better represent the demographics of the college student body. Since the final number of participants was so small, I had to rely on convenience sampling, though the final demographic makeup of the sample was diverse (see Table 3 in Chapter 4).

I collected demographic data verbally from the participants as part of the warm-up stage of the interviews, which I conducted online via the video conferencing site Zoom (www.Zoom.us). I chose to align my demographic terms to the terms used by the California Community Colleges Student Success Score Card (Student Success Initiative, 2019), though some terms (such as "Hispanic" and "American Indian") may seem dated. At the start of our Zoom meeting, the participants selected a pseudonym for themselves to maintain their confidentiality. Once the participants entered their pseudonym into the screen caption, they

turned their camera off and we started recording the interview, with the participant identified only by the pseudonym on the screen.

Interview Protocol

I conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant, approximately 60-90 minutes in length, using questions drawn from the theoretical and methodological frameworks. The list of interview questions is posted in Appendix B. Due to the ongoing risk of COVID-19 infection and the virulence of the Delta variant at the time of the data collection (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), interviews were conducted online via the online Zoom application. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have noted that there is an inherent inequality in research interviews, a fact noted by Seidman (2013) and Mills & Gay (2019). To contribute to equality of voice, I forwarded a preview copy of the interview instrument to the participants in the recruitment packet, and I asked the participants if they had any concerns about the questions prior to the start of the interview (see Appendix D).

At the start of each interview, I reviewed the IRB consent form with the participants and asked them if they had any questions. I also asked whether they had any concerns about the interview protocol. I reminded the participants they had the right to opt out of answering a question or to withdraw at any time. During the interview, I monitored the demeanor of the participants for any signs of discomfort, and I offered to pause the interview if they appeared to show signs of distress. Seidman (2013) observed that any interviewing relationship is troubled by issues of inequality and reciprocity between interviewer and participant. Following Seidman's example, I acknowledged the value of my participants' time with a small token of appreciation in the form of a $20 e-gift card, which I emailed to the participants immediately upon the end of the

interview. To avoid any sense of coercion, if a participant had completed the interview but later elected to withdraw from the study, they still would have received the token gift.

Finally, in keeping with Father Greg Boyle's concept of "no-matter-what-ness" (Boyle, 2017), I exercised unconditional positive regard towards the participants, and I refrained from asking specifically about any criminal charges, judgements by the court, or experiences during incarceration that were not directly related to their educational journey. Participants were given multiple opportunities to "opt out" of speaking about any topics that made them uncomfortable (see sample interview transcripts in Appendix E).

The interviews were saved to a cloud-based storage maintained by Zoom and secured by a username and password. Zoom generated an automated draft transcript of the interview, powered by Otter.ai transcription software (https://otter.ai). As a backup, I recorded participant interviews with the Otter.ai application on my Samsung Galaxy A71 mobile phone. Security certifications for Zoom, Otter.ai, and Samsung are all listed in Appendix C. I edited the draft transcripts for accuracy, comparing the texts to the recording of the interview on Zoom. The recorded interview and the transcripts were saved in a dedicated folder which will be password-protected on my home PC and backed up to Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault (https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/onedrive/personal-vault, see Appendix C). I sent each participant a copy of their edited transcript as a "member check" to confirm accuracy and the intent of their dialogue (Shenton, 2004). All data files pertaining to this study were saved to my Personal Vault on Microsoft OneDrive.

Supplemental Data

A key element of narrative inquiry is the entangled role of the researcher during the research process. Just as the participants are reconstructing their narratives in the three-dimensional narrative space during the interview process, the interviewer is doing the same in their own writing. As Clandinin and Connelly observed, field texts "slide back and forth between records of the experience under study and records of oneself as researcher experiencing the experience" (2000, p. 87). During the interview, I wrote down field notes manually on a printed copy of the interview protocol and scanned them to a file in the Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault. After each interview I wrote a field memo (Mills & Gay, 2019) and maintained a reflective journal of my own experience in the three-dimensional narrative space using Microsoft Word, saving the journals to the Personal Vault.

Risks

The Belmont Report established three ethical principles that must be observed in research with human beings (Seidman, 2013, p. 61):

1. Respect for Persons: Respect the autonomy of individuals and protect those with reduced autonomy.
2. Beneficence: "do no harm," maximize benefits and minimize risk when conducting research on humans.
3. Justice: research must be conducted with equity and fairness to all.

Similarly, the Nuremburg Code was built on the premise that participants freely volunteered to participate in research, which required that the investigator disclosed enough information about the study to permit the participant to make an informed decision about whether to consent

(Seidman, 2013). While participating in an interview did not pose any risk of physical harm to the participants, I still had a duty to discuss with them the possible risks that may result from in-depth discussions about their experiences.

Risk of Exposure

Participants risked exposure if elements of their personal story allowed others to infer their identity. To minimize the risk of a loss of privacy, I converted all consent forms with identifying information to digital form and stored them securely in the Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault. The recordings of interviews were shared with only the participants (on request), the investigator (myself) and the chair of my doctoral committee. All interview transcripts used a pseudonym, and the name of the participants' home college and the Rising Scholar support program have been changed to maintain confidentiality. Finally, during the member check process, I reminded the participants that they had the right to request I withhold any part of the interview. After the dissertation is accepted for publication, I will erase the original recordings of the interviews that directly identify the participants, and I will retain the anonymized transcripts and coded analysis for future follow-up research in my Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault.

Risk of Emotional Distress

Interviewing invites participants to reveal details of their lives that could cause emotional distress (Seidman, 2013). I scheduled the interviews at a time and place that maximized the comfort of the participants. Before each interview (and any follow-up conversations), I reviewed the IRB Consent Form with the participants, and I monitored the session closely to see if we needed to take a break or reschedule a time to continue. Finally, I provided contact information for the campus psychological services and the campus 24-hour emotional crisis line in the

participant packet, should any participant feel the need to speak with a trained psychological counselor after the interview.

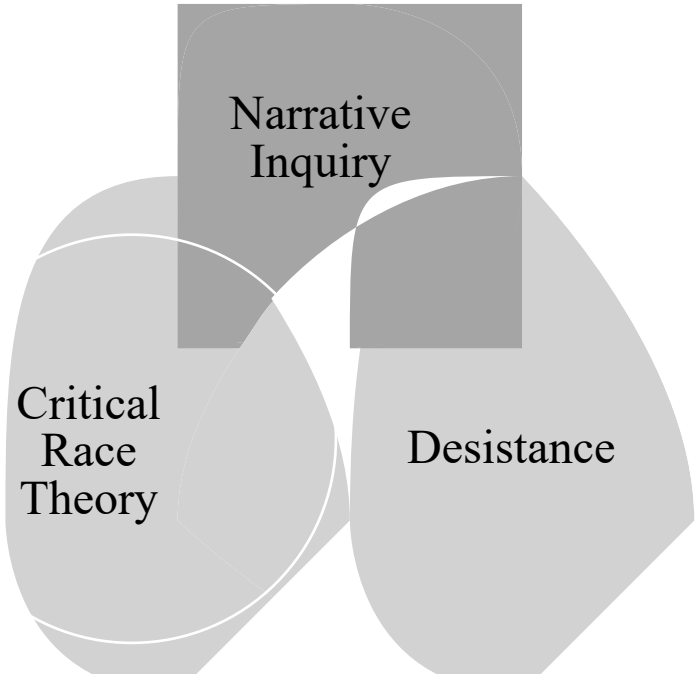
Analysis Plan

This study relied on theoretical frameworks that centered storytelling at the center of their work, from counter-storytelling in CRT (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to identity transformation in self-narratives in desistance studies (Maruna, 2001; Stevens, 2012). Accordingly, it made sense to center storytelling in the analysis plan. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative inquiry as taking place in a "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" that combined the analysis of interior and exterior influences on the narrator with the dynamic element of time. This analytic framework worked well with CRT's contextualization of Black and Latinx people's experiences within systems that favor White people and the restorying of self-narratives in Desistance (see Figure 3).

The data from the interview transcripts was coded and analyzed using the Dedoose web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (Dedoose software tool version 9.0.46, 2021-2022). The security compliance statement for Dedoose is listed in Appendix C. Since this study employed a narrative inquiry methodology, the data was coded for both thematic analysis and structural analysis. Thematic analysis addressed how participants "experience and interpret a given phenomenon," looking for commonalities and differences in "the construction of identity" (Foste, 2018, p. 24). Structural analysis focused on the storytelling elements of the narrative, looking for evidence of how the interview participants constructed their story and what elements they found significant (Foste, 2018). The results of this analysis were saved in the Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault.

Figure 3

Storytelling as a Critical Thread Between Theoretical Framework and Methodology



Note: Storytelling is a practice that crosses through the disciplines of Narrative Inquiry, Critical Race Theory, and Desistance. Adapted from *Narrative inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, by D. J. Clandinin, and F. M. Connelly, 2000, copyright 2000 by Jossey Bass; "Measuring change: From rates of recidivism to markers of desistance," by C. Klingele, 2019, in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 109(4), pp. 489-513, copyright 2019 by Cecilia Klingele, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3142405; "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research," by D. G. Solórzano, and T. J. Yosso, 2002, in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), pp. 23-44, copyright 2002 by Sage Publications, https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103.

After coding and analyzing the interview transcripts, I composed a draft narrative for each participant. As an additional member check, and in the spirit of the co-creation of the narrative between interviewer and participant, I emailed a copy of the draft narrative to the participants, inviting comments and clarification of any emerging inferences from the dialogue (Shenton, 2004). At the end of the study, I will make a copy of the final report available to all participants upon publication of the dissertation.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research does not appeal to claims of generalizability. Instead, the results are deeply rooted in the context of the participants' position at the time and circumstances of the study. This is even more true in the case of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly famously claimed that narrative inquiry is meaningful when "they bring literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research they permit" (2000, p. 42). Nevertheless, I wanted to make sure that the narrative inquiry texts are reflecting the reported experience of the interview participants. Or as Foste put it, "The researcher ought to provide enough data to allow the reader to make their own informed interpretation and rendering of the narrative" (2018, pg. 25). Trustworthiness in the results of this study were ensured along four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For the record, I received no financial support or grant money to conduct this research (other than the small amount of financial support Loyola Marymount provided to all School of Education Ed.D. cohort participants).

Credibility

There were several measures put in place to ensure internal validity of this study (Shenton, 2004). The interview instrument was based on prior successful studies of incarcerated persons and formerly incarcerated students, though there was no single interview instrument used as a model (the theoretical framework reference key for the instrument is available in Appendix A). I established a familiarity with the culture of the on-campus Rising Scholar support program by participating in activities in one community college district and serving on a

Rising Scholar support working group to establish a program in a separate district. I invited feedback on my interview questions by the staff of the support program (Seidman, 2013).

In my interview protocol, I encouraged forthright participation by establishing a rapport with the participants and I offered them opportunity to withdraw if they did not feel they could participate freely. Establishing an equitable relationship with the participants was challenging, especially working under the constraints of Zoom interviews, but I mitigated the challenge of long-distance interviewing by redoubling my engagement during the interview (Seidman, 2013). I also maintained internal validity by using "member checks" in collaboration with the participants.

Finally, I interrogated my own bias and positionality in the study by maintaining a reflective journal throughout the study and participating in debriefing sessions with my dissertation committee chair during analysis and composition of the narratives (Seidman, 2013).

Transferability

The criterion of transferability resisted the idea of generalizability in narrative research and embraced an increasing awareness of the contextual circumstances of the study in question. Whether the term was "transferability" or "wakefulness" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the purpose was to make the context of the study visible to the reader. The best way to achieve this contextual visibility was through rich descriptions of the data that placed the narratives in context (Foste, 2018). As an added measure, I included extensive excerpts from the interview transcripts to show the context of my findings (see Appendix E).

Dependability

Dependability is enhanced by providing a detailed description of the research design and implementation, leaving an "audit trail" for readers to follow and assess (Shenton, 2004). The detailed descriptions of the underlying theoretical frameworks for this study in the literature review, the discussion of the research methodology, the detailed description of the interview protocol, the procedures for securing and managing the data through Zoom, Otter.ai, Microsoft OneDrive, and Dedoose offered readers an auditable record of this study's process.

Confirmability

As Foste noted, "Steps must be taken to ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (2018, p. 72). As mentioned earlier, by interrogating my own positionality through reflective journaling during the progress of the study, by relying on member checks during the writing process, and by offering detailed descriptions of the methodology that produced the results, I endeavored to mitigate the influence of my own bias as researcher.

Conclusion

This study lifted the storied lives of six Rising Scholars seeking a higher education with the assistance of a community college support program for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. Combining the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Desistance Studies with a Narrative Inquiry methodology allowed me as the researcher to present their story so that others may hear their testimony and better understand the needs of this growing population in the California Community Colleges. By taking the necessary steps to

ensure the study's trustworthiness, I acknowledged my own positionality while keeping these scholars and their story the center of this work. In Chapter 4, I will present the narratives of our six participants, based on the transcripts of the recorded interviews, followed by an analysis of the findings as they relate to each of the interview questions.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings of the participant interviews. The chapter begins with narratives derived from the interviews with the participants. Next, I will discuss how their interview responses informed the research questions. At the end of each section, emerging themes from the research question will be identified.

This study asked three research questions:

1. What are the experiences of Rising Scholars attending a California community college?
2. How do Rising Scholars use the services of a reentry support program at a California community college?
3. How do Rising Scholars perceive themselves as they participate in a reentry support program at a California community college?

Study Site

To protect the confidentiality of the study participants, the names of the college site, the reentry support program and the counselors running the program were all changed. “Gordon Manor College” (GMC) was a public community college located in Los Angeles County, one of the 116 public colleges that comprise the California Community Colleges, an institution that serves nearly two million students across the state. According to its most recent annual report, GMC enrolled a little over 30,000 students. The community college district was composed of nine cities representing 530,000 residents. A freeway cut a diagonal swath across the district like a concrete wall, separating the coastal suburban communities from the landlocked “urban”

neighborhoods (one of eight interstate highways that traversed the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area). Rothstein (2017) demonstrated that the interstate highway system was used as a tool to reinforce *de jure* racial segregation in towns across America by erasing and isolating Black and mixed-race neighborhoods through the placement of freeways. The freeway in GMC's district is no exception from this legacy.

The student body at GMC reflected the class and racial divisions represented by that divisive freeway. Forty-three percent of the student body identified as Latino. Fourteen percent identified as African American. Twelve percent identified as Asian. Ten percent identified as White. Seventeen percent chose not to identify their ethnicity. Less than one percent identified as Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, or American Indian.[7]

GMC received grant money from the California Community Colleges Chancellors Office in 2019 to start a reentry support program for Rising Scholars. The Rising Scholar support program at GMC (designated in this study with the pseudonymous moniker "ARISE") serves formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students attending Gordon Manor College in person and online. The program was in the process of implementing its first year of operation when the COVID-19 pandemic forced faculty, staff, and students off campus and into a distance education format. ARISE continued to enroll students while offering counseling and support services online. At time of publication, ARISE was led by RG, the program coordinator and a student success coach; IG, a counselor/student success coach who is also a Rising Scholar; VF, a counselor; and YR, a counselor.

[7] All identifiers of ethnicity were quoted directly from Gordon Manor College's annual report.

Methodology

After the study received IRB approval from Loyola Marymount University and the study site, I coordinated with ARISE to contact current and former Rising Scholars at GMC using the program's mailing list. Out of the thirty students on the mailing list, nine responded by email. Out of those nine, six agreed to schedule an interview (see Table 3). Due to the small response size, I was obliged to use convenience sampling to select participants. Using Adobe Sign (www.Adobe.com/sign.html), I sent the participants a digital packet that included the interview protocol, a copy of the Bill of Rights for Research Participants, and copies of permission forms for GMC and LMU. The participants digitally signed the permission forms and returned them electronically.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Status
Natalie	36	Female	White / Hispanic	Formerly incarcerated
George	41	Male	Hispanic	Formerly Incarcerated
Dre	38	Male	African American	Formerly Incarcerated
Janet	35	Female	Hispanic	Formerly incarcerated
Penelope	45	Female	Hispanic	Formerly incarcerated /System impacted
Martha	35	Female	African American	Formerly Incarcerated

Note: Nine participants in the support program responded to the recruitment; six agreed to participate in an interview.

The participants ranged in age from 35 to 41 years old. Four participants identified as female, two as male. Two participants identified as African American, three as Hispanic, and one as White and Hispanic. The ethnic descriptors were drawn from the CCC Student Success Scorecard to maintain consistency with institutional demographic reporting (Student Success Initiative, 2019). All participants had been incarcerated, either in prison or in county jail. One identified herself as formerly incarcerated and system-impacted, meaning that family members close to her had been incarcerated as well.

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom due to the social distancing measures in place during the fall of 2021 as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of each interview, I invited the participants to select a pseudonym for the study, which they then entered into their profile on Zoom so the name would appear on the recording transcript. When we were ready to start, the participants turned off their camera and we recorded the interview. I also made backup recordings of the interviews using the Otter.ai app on my mobile phone. All interviews were conducted between October, 2021, and November, 2021. Since the purpose of this study was to tell the stories of Rising Scholars as they pursued a college education, I did not inquire directly about any of the participants' carceral experiences, nor did I ask about any activities or actions that led to their incarceration. However, some participants elected to share their carceral experiences as they related to their education. To establish narrative context, I inquired about the participants' educational experiences before college and how they perceived their educational experience looking back from their present situation (the full interview protocol can be viewed in Appendix B).

Before each interview I printed out a copy of the interview protocol and took notes next to each question during the interview. After the interview I wrote a field memo to capture my first impressions of the session. I downloaded the auto-generated transcripts from Otter.ai and Zoom and edited them while listening to the original recordings. I uploaded the transcripts to Dedoose for coding and analysis. To assist my analysis, I listened to each interview multiple times on the Otter.ai app as I drove to my classes, taking advantage of the notoriously long freeway commutes in Los Angeles to become familiar with the rhythm and flow of the interviews. I started my analysis with initial codes drawn from the research questions and added

emergent codes as I listened to and reflected on the transcripts. Using the data from the transcripts, I wrote a narrative overview of each participant's experiences as reported in the interview, and I identified excerpts and emergent themes that responded to the research questions.

Participant Narratives

All the participants attended or were currently attending Gordon Manor College, a public community college in the California Community Colleges system. In the following narratives, some filler words and filler sounds have been edited from the interview quotes for easier reading, but overall, the text followed the original cadence and style of the participants. Exclamations have been added in brackets where they add context to the quotes.

Natalie

Natalie (36, Female, White/Hispanic) lived with her grandparents until she was five years old. "I don't know why. Nobody will tell me," she said. Natalie's mom emigrated to the United States from Cuba when she was eight years old and never attended college. Natalie's stepdad was a college graduate. After her grandparents moved to Florida, Natalie moved back in with her parents.

Natalie did not remember many stories from her early education, and the ones she did recall paint a picture of a school career marked by conflict. Her first memory of school was an incident in first grade where the teacher refused to let her use the restroom even though she couldn't wait for recess.

> I raised my hand to go use the restroom and the teacher wouldn't let me, and I peed in my seat. And I was so humiliated and so embarrassed. I cried, and I went home. And then I

> wouldn't even tell my grandma why she picked me up. I wouldn't. I didn't want to tell her, and I just played on the slide. And finally, I remember telling her because she asked me. She said, "You're not going to be in trouble. I just need to know why you wanted to leave school so bad. What happened?" And so, I told her, and I don't really know how I changed schools. I don't remember that part. But next thing I know, I never went back to that school, ever.

Natalie moved back in with her parents when her grandparents moved away.

Natalie continued to have conflicts at school. Natalie recalled her sixth-grade government class using a cash-based ticket system to incentivize student performance. Unfortunately, the incentives turned into liabilities for Natalie. "We would get tickets for things, like if we were late to class and if we didn't turn in our homework and things like that, or it was incomplete, and then we get money if we were always good, and I would always be broke because I was always paying off tickets," Natalie said.

By the time she entered high school, Natalie had fallen into a pattern of daily conflict with teachers and administration.

> I was always, always getting in trouble every year on the first day of school, never failed. I was on the golf cart on the way to the principal's office. I don't even know why I'm at or maybe I don't remember. I don't know. All I know is it never failed.
>
> The Dean used to call my cell phone at like seven in the morning to see if I was going to school. And I don't know how she got my number. I think my mom gave it to her, but my mom would never admit it. [Laughs.] So, um, I just remember always being

in trouble. I don't really know how I could have even really been considered a student. I literally never went.

During her senior year, Natalie frequently ditched campus, telling her teachers she had a work experience job off site. "I scooted by like with that, getting out of school at like 11, and just leaving for the day." When her lie was found out, she received a permanent form of on-campus suspension: "My last year of high school, I had to sit in the principal's office from like 11 a.m. until like 3 p.m. after they caught me." Natalie said she still cannot explain how she graduated high school. "My theory is that the teachers just got really kind of tired of me and was like, 'just let her go.' It's not funny. But it's, you know, it is what it is."

Natalie attempted college for the first time in 2005, at her stepfather's suggestion. She started in remedial classes, but she began to enjoy going to school after she cleared that hurdle. During one difficult set of final exams, Natalie's roommate brought Adderall to help them cram for finals. "I read a whole book in a night for my final." Unfortunately, that experience led Natalie back into partying rather than academics. "And obviously that led to other things which, essentially, I was just too busy partying and drinking and you know, whatever else I was doing, to continue school." Natalie's mom issued an ultimatum: pick a major and finish or lose her parents' financial support. Natalie chose to drop out instead. Natalie explained her decision as a way to avoid dealing with her own uncertainty in college.

I didn't have a direction really. And then, um, and that's kind of what led my mom to bringing up the "you need to pick a major and you need to stick to it because if you're going to transfer, I'm only paying for it one time." There's no changing majors. There's no anything. You need to pick what you're going to do. And that's it. And that just

> wasn't an option for me. And it was a really good excuse just to stop. So, it kind of all happened at one time. And it was kind of an unfortunate circumstance, but that's the way it went down. And I just chose so I didn't have to make that decision and I can continue doing what I wanted to do and to stop going.

After dropping out, Natalie did not consider returning to college until the birth of her son. After Natalie served a jail sentence and entered probation, she met her son's father and got pregnant "way too soon."

> I had turned 35 when I had first gotten pregnant, and so I really wasn't sure if I waited to have a baby if I was going to be able to have one, or if I would have been too old the next chance that I got, you know? So, I decided that you know, I mean, why not? I would rather have it now and struggle a little bit than regret not having a child later in life and not being able to do anything about it.

Natalie recalled feeling uncertain about her decision throughout her pregnancy, but the moment she held her baby, "everything changed."

> I remember them putting him on my stomach right after I had had him, and I looked at him and I didn't even touch him at first. I, I just was in shock. You know, I just looked at this thing looking at me and he was just sitting there in my hands and my mom was in the room and she said, "Well, are you going to grab him or not?" And I just kind of went, "Oh my God' He's—it's a human and he's here." [Laughs] So, when I grabbed him for the first time, and I sat up to hold him and everything kind of changed at that moment. Um, I can't really explain it. I can't really explain it. That's probably one of the only times that everything has been so emotionally overwhelming that it's unexplainable. The

> feeling, the feelings, the emotion, the attachment, the love the . . . yeah. I mean, it just changes your entire world.

Raising a newborn son as a single parent proved a turning point for Natalie that led her to reconsider attending college. She said she was motivated by a desire to do more than just survive for her son.

> [H]e has things, he has toys and food and clothes. And you know, we have places to go and stuff like that. But we don't have a place of our own. Um, obviously, this led me to basically think like, well, I don't want to struggle. Like I looked at my mom basically, and I see her and what she's gone through, and I said, "I don't want to do that the rest of my life," you know. Not saying that there's anything wrong with what my mom did, she sacrificed a lot for us. I'm just saying that I don't want to struggle like she did. And if I have the option of not doing so, that's what I'm going to choose.

Natalie said that her desire to provide for her son was the deciding factor in her decision to get a degree and recommit to pursuing her interest in the law.

> I want to provide a life for my son. I want to make sure that he gets a college education, and he doesn't have to struggle the way I did, you know, working and going to school. I want to be able to provide for him. I want to be able to pay for his college. I want him to not have to struggle. Not have to worry about work and really get his life together and be on the right track from the get-go. And that takes money. You know what I mean? So, um, I had to make a decision in what I wanted to do. That's when I decided it was time to pursue my, this career in the law field and I re-enrolled in school.

Natalie's probation officer helped her expunge her record, and Natalie started looking to return to college. But planning for college at a late stage in her life was difficult. Her mother had never attended college, and she hadn't learned anything about college from high school. In addition to not knowing how to navigate returning to college, Natalie says she was "overwhelmed" with feelings of fear and embarrassment about returning to school.

> I didn't like school. I was never good at it, because I didn't go or because maybe I didn't go because I wasn't understanding. I just know that I didn't know enough about college or how to apply or anything like that to be able to move forward. And I was scared and embarrassed to ask for help.

Natalie found the ARISE program by searching online for registration information at GMC, and she decided to contact the program counselors. After jail, and the COVID lockdowns, and the father of her child leaving, Natalie said she needed some form of connection when she contacted ARISE: "I was just looking for really anybody to reach out to like, help like to [say], 'Hi, I'm here.'" The ARISE counselors coordinated Natalie's registration and helped her access the resources of the college. "They helped me enroll; they helped me put my classes together. They helped me change my major. They helped me I mean, literally, without them I don't know what I would have done." Natalie said that the ARISE program took a more hands-on approach to serving Rising Scholars than the other student counseling programs available to all students on campus. "ARISE really steps in there and they really handle what that is for you, and they make sure they hold your hand through the process, which is what I need right now."

Natalie described several challenges during her return to college. Chief among these was raising her son alone. Natalie has had to coordinate the time she spent on her paid work, the

unpaid time she spent in the labor of childrearing, and the study time she paid tuition for, all without a regular babysitter. Online courses have been a major help during the COVID-19 pandemic but juggling the demands of motherhood has been a challenge.

> I feel like sometimes I just get started doing something and then the baby needs something and then I just get started again and then the baby needs something. Um, so it doesn't make for a super productive day. But it makes, it basically extends what should be maybe a 9- or 10-hour day into like a 13- or 14-hour day.

This strenuous pace has impacted Natalie's capacity to spend time with her son.

> So, not only is it a huge issue for me, like trying to move forward, but it's a huge issue for my son who unfortunately, has to sit by himself all day and play by himself and, you know, wants my attention. And there's been times where I just have to, I just have to sit there, and I'd have to let him cry. You know, and I am sorry, you have eaten, your diaper's changed. You have toys, you have your water and your snacks. There is nothing that I can do for you right now. Like I if I don't do this, I'm going to get fired or I'm not going to pass it's horrible It's not a good feeling. And it doesn't make studying any easier. I have taken to though, instead of versus like reading him children's books, sometimes I have taken to reading him my books, so I am still doing my homework.

Throughout her interview, Natalie referenced her need for an affordable babysitter as a missing but crucial element in her ability to continue successfully as a student. In fact, navigating the financial aid system, or not successfully navigating it, has been a significant part of Natalie's difficulties acclimating to the college culture at GMC. In her first semester, Natalie found she needed $900 worth of textbooks, and she had only $300 in waivers from financial aid. The

resulting scramble to find additional textbook funds set Natalie back several weeks in her classes and she had to spend the remainder of the semester deciding on a daily basis whether to keep reading ahead to meet current homework requirements, or to try to catch up with previous readings she had missed when she did not have the books.

Despite her commitment to getting a college degree, Natalie said she still felt alienated from the campus community. Part of this alienation stemmed from her long-standing conflicts with her teachers, which had followed her throughout her primary and secondary school career.

> I haven't had good experiences with teachers, and I haven't, um, it's kind of made me afraid or not want to do things. Which I think was a big, a huge part of the way I felt about school. That first memory that I have in school, was that I never even went back to that school. You know, because of the situation that I was put in. All because I needed to go to the restroom. I mean, what was I like five? Yeah. I mean it's just you know, so I feel like that kind of just stuck with me and I'm literally since then, there's really no memory I have with a good teacher.

Natalie said she also felt stigmatized returning to college as a parent, a mature scholar, and a formerly incarcerated student. These overlapping conditions made it difficult for Natalie to feel comfortable collaborating with other "normal" students in her classes.

> I don't want to have to answer questions. I don't want them. Well, why can't you do this? Or why can't you, why is this harder? Why is that? I don't—it's embarrassing. And it's scary, and to share that with people that I don't know, that have such, you know, or maybe not perfectly normal lives or whatever normal is, but . . . it's shameful kind of to be in my position and it's hard.

When asked about reaching out to professors for support, Natalie said the same fear has held her back from disclosing her status to her instructors.

> So, I was lucky that I had the guts to even really reach out to ARISE and ask something like that. It's embarrassing. I feel like I mean, I'm 35 years old, just in college. Like, why don't I know how to do these things? I mean, that's a basic skill. That's a basic skill. Like why can't I figure that out? But you know, so, and then being you know it's also kind of harder for me to talk to my, um, teachers a little bit not because of anything they're doing, it's on me and my fear, but I'm, you know, I'm playing catch up. I don't want to have to answer questions about why my life is the way it is and why it's so hectic.

Throughout these challenges, the counselors at ARISE continued to check up on Natalie. Two female counselors, IG and Velma, contacted her regularly, shepherding her through the dates and deadlines of the semester and helping her when she felt overwhelmed.

> So, again, they helped me kind of enroll, they really held my hand through the things that are most difficult. If I need help with anything I mean, literally, like, it doesn't matter what it is, I can text or call them, and they get back to me right away. And they always seem to have a solution. And if they don't, they say let me get back to you in 10 minutes and they always do and they have some form of solution to whatever the case may be.

Despite the challenges Natalie faced returning to college, and the numerous difficulties that have continued to complicate fulfilling her triple roles of parent, student, and wage-earner, Natalie has remained steadfast in her determination to succeed in college and find a career in the law, for the sake of her son. When she spoke about her goals for her son, the fear and uncertainty melted away and was replaced with determination.

> I don't have a choice. I mean, I *have* a choice. I can you know, screw my life up and my son's. That's not fair to him. And I want him, like I said. I want to provide a life for him. I want him. I want to be able to have him go to college. College is not a choice for him. I literally have printed out a checklist, starting from preschool all the way to 12th grade of everything I need to make sure he does, in order to prepare him for college. So, like college is not an option for him. Period. End of story. I don't care how I get him through it. He's going, and that's going to be instilled in him to where he doesn't even think not going to college as an option.

Natalie referred to this planning for her son as part of the rewriting of her own story, which she called "breaking the chain."

> I just kind of I want to break the chain, you know? I don't want him to think it's okay to go out and have a baby with somebody he just met and then just kind of work for the rest of his life and like maybe, maybe raise a kid. Like that's not okay. I want to be an example for him, and I want to make sure that he doesn't make the same choices that I made. And I want him to enjoy his life and really, really being able to you know take care of himself and provide a life and have a family and just be happy, you know, and be able to buy you know a boat for his family, or you know, just go on vacation and not have to worry about missing work because I need the money and yeah, I really want him to be able to enjoy his life and do all the things that I missed out on.

For the sake of her son, Natalie was willing to brave her fears of returning to college, despite all the bad history with school and the uncertainty of raising a child alone.

George

George (41, male, Hispanic) grew up in Wilmington, California, a majority Hispanic community squeezed between Pacific Coast Highway and the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. George said his first school memory was entering an English as a Second Language (ESL) program in first grade. "I remember it being awkward because if I recall correctly, I *spoke* English. [Laughs] But because I guess Spanish was my primary language, my household language, they placed me in the ESL program." Despite feeling that he was misplaced in ESL, George said he approached school the way he approached his other responsibilities in life: proactively.

> I would say when it comes to my assignments, I treat it like just how I treat my responsibilities at the workplace. I like to take care of things immediately. I like to front load: I don't like to procrastinate, and I like to be dependable.

George recalled two main turning points early in his education. The first was a brief placement in a "gifted class" in third grade (aka "Gifted and Talented Education," or GATE).

> I remember, I had to take a bus to a different school where I was the only Hispanic kid. I still went to the school that I always went to, except that I did not go inside. I waited for a bus to pick me up and take it to take me to a different city, and I do not recall which city that was at this point. I just remember I went to a different city where me and the whole bunch of different kids from different places and the curriculum in that class was completely different.

However, George did not stay in the GATE class for long.

> It was only one semester; I think my parents moved after that. My parents moved a lot, so I didn't get to keep . . . maintain myself there to provide . . . there was one semester I managed to attend this class and then my parents moved.

This brief stay in a gifted class had a significant impact on George as a young student, however., George said the GATE class was his first exposure to a diverse classroom.

> It was uncomfortable at first, this is so long ago that I really don't recall. I remember, of course, the initial awkwardness because that's when I experienced Black kids, White kids, Asian kids. You know I came from Wilmington in the 80s, where it's completely Mexican. I mean we had one White kid or two. No Black kids at all. No Asians at all. So, they were my first experience in a diverse classroom and there was a little unusual. I felt a little out of place at first.

George says this discomfort quickly passed as he "built relationships" with his classmates, and soon he was "just one of the kids."

In addition to introducing George to students from outside his neighborhood, George's time in GATE gave him a taste of academic challenge, and he liked it. "I remember that I was—that's when I became aware that academics was easy to me or that I excelled academically. You know that's I guess some self-awareness, with respect to my ability to apply myself in academics." Even though George participated in GATE for only a brief amount of time, it was a positive educational experience that he still remembered nearly thirty years later.

> We would do science projects; we would do preparation for spelling bee contests. I enjoyed the science projects. I did not enjoy the spelling bee contests. [Laughing.] I

> remember that. Having to learn all these different words and their origins, it was annoying, but I loved the science projects. I remember enjoying that a lot.

Unfortunately, family relocations pulled George out of the GATE classes and landed him in a very different educational environment by middle school, which led to the second turning point in his school career.

George said the second turning point in his academic career was junior high school, where he rejected academics.

> That's when I gave up academics altogether and the social standard of the time was more important, I guess, which was hanging out, ditching, experimenting with drugs, gangs, it was . . . if going to the gifted class was a positive turning point in my life, going to junior high school was the complete opposite of that. And so, it was definitely a turning point that led me all the way to present.

When asked if he felt anything else important happened during his early education, George simply said, "Nothing that would top those two."

George did not reconnect with academics until he was in prison. But the path from incarceration to scholar was a long one.

> The reason I went to prison was for me to get away from all the dysfunction and the chaos going on in my life at a specific moment. So, once I came into prison it was relief because everything ended. And I remember, I went through getting rid of the drugs in my system. I remember being in the hole for months, and I was in my depression, I wanted to be left alone. I was enjoying the solitude and a library lady handed me a *Reader's Digest* and you know, in the back of the page there's quotes and it was a quote that's from J.K.

> Rowling that said, "Rock bottom becomes a solid foundation upon which I rebuilt my life." And that had such an effect on me, and after that everything I did was like, "Okay I gotta rebuild, I gotta rebuild, I gotta rebuild." I got out. I got my GED, and I got out and attended this drug programs and self-help programs, and lastly college.

George described attending college in prison as the last step of his reconstruction.

> College was the last thing, like "Okay I got all these programs. I'm no longer in need of drugs. I'm no longer interested in any type of criminal elements. What am I going to do to play catch up [laughs] with what I was supposed to be?" And that's where I started attending college and I enjoyed it. I loved it and it . . . to me it felt like I should have done this a long time ago. [Chuckling]

George enrolled in college-level correspondence courses (i.e., PSCE). The first course he took was Child Growth and Development, which brought George face to face with the trauma of being separated from his daughters by incarceration.

> So, I took everything. I really started diving into psychology; that's what I really enjoyed. I had to take the math. I had to take an arts and philosophy that was okay, but the very first one was Child Growth and Development if I'm not mistaken, and at the time in prison, a big burden to me was what I've cost to my children. What could they be going through? What's their experience? How have I failed them as a father, being that I'm incarcerated and left them by themselves. So, in gaining a Child Growth and Development [class], and understanding all the different processes they go through, the development of their mind . . . that, you know, their ability to be resilient and all that

> really, really spoke to me. So, from my early college experience, it's me getting that course, the Child Growth and Development that really, really spoke to me.

By the time he was released, George had earned 80 units towards his bachelor's degree while incarcerated.

Ironically, release from prison did not mean an easy return to campus for George. COVID-19 had shut down in-person, on-ground teaching across California to the point where at the time of this interview, the only time George had spent on campus grounds so far was his visit to register for classes in the Fall of 2021. But COVID-19 restrictions are a minor barrier compared to the navigation required to switch from correspondence classes taken inside prison to registering as a community college student on the outside.

George said he first contacted a Project Rebound chapter at a nearby California State University campus, but the timing for admissions was off. His contacts at Project Rebound suggested he try a year of community college first. With the help of the ARISE program coordinating phone calls between the school, George, and his brother, George said he was able to arrange financial aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and register for Winter classes, all while processing out of prison

> I didn't want to miss anything [chuckles]. I wanted to do a smooth transition. I was getting out in December. So, getting out in December, and I want to start class in January, my brother contacted Gordon Manor and they directed him to the ARISE program. He got in touch with RG, and RG was a godsend. I was able to do a smooth transition. I got out of prison, three weeks later I'm in Community college.

George said the coordination through ARISE and his brother helped him avoid significant delays in pursuing his education. He called the support program “instrumental” in his transition.

> My brother would tell me, I spoke with RG this, RG did that, okay RG called me yesterday, he said that you’re all signed up, and so I only knew him by name. I couldn’t put a face to the name, but I was ecstatic when I finally got to have a Zoom meeting with him.

Looking back on his release, the challenges he faced trying to enroll remotely during his transition, and the help he got from ARISE and RG, George said of the program coordinator, “I still owe him.”

> I would have easily missed the semester and I would be delayed six months. You know you miss one semester it’s not like, oh no, you have to wait half a year too. You know, so I didn’t lose that six months because of my brother’s activities, while I was incarcerated.”

Once enrolled as a community college student, ARISE helped George acclimate to the norms and practices of navigating the college system.

> Any questions I had, I text them, I get an answer. "Hey, ah, this application thing I don’t know what I’m supposed to do here.” Boom, I get an answer. Now I’m pretty, you know, I could sustain myself. Now I’m familiar with the process. I know how to fill out the FAFSA and all that, but initially I knew nothing of that. And I was asking questions and I would get answers. So, the fact that there was a satellite program within the college that specifically met my needs, it was instrumental in me continuing my education.

George said that he rediscovered his love of learning as he worked through his college courses, from prison correspondence to community college, to the California State University.

George realized that he had an aptitude for academic study, just like he felt back in his childhood GATE classes. At first, he dismissed these feelings, but over time he realized he could excel in academics.

> When I was doing all this work in prison it was simple to me, and in the back of my head I'm like, "Okay, obviously, because I'm in prison they gave me a little baby work." This is not what college is about, you know what I mean, like it's just too easy to be true. But once I did in Gordon Manor College, I got the course working, it was still easy. And then now at Cal State [California State University], the same thing with all the supposed to be upper division classes and it's still easy. So, it's told me that it isn't that in prison, I was given easy work. It's that, that *this* you know, I was meant to do stuff like this. I should have been doing it a long time ago, instead of going to gangs and oooah [sighs], everything that goes along with them.

Looking back, George said he turned away from his potential once before, and that returning to college is allowing him to rewrite his life path in a positive direction.

> I remember, being a kid going to gifted classes, and so I was made aware that academically I could be—perform a certain way, you know. I guess academically I could do good. I could, I had the potential to grow up and go to college, have a good job, you know, the whole thing, and when I was a young kid, I knew that that was feasible for me. In the school, in the ghetto, kids aren't usually, at least back in the 80s, we weren't told that we…you know, I mean people can say, "Oh, you could grow up to be anything you want," but I was growing up in the ghetto. Growing up to be anything we want is what? Gang banger? You know what I mean? Sell crack in the corner? You know those were

> the objectives, and I knew that I could be better than that and throughout my life I've told myself the opposite. Ah, I basically became the one thing that I knew that I was better than. My going to college and not just going to college, but actually doing well. Like the work is simple to me, it's not difficult. I am thriving in school. It kinda—I know that I'm doing what I was supposed to be doing a long time ago and that's gratifying.

Gaining a college education has altered George's perception of not just himself, but also the way he values the different knowledges he has developed over the years. In particular, the value of the "street smarts" he relied on earlier has changed for him.

> It was not useful, I mean I know when, you know, street smart, when, I know how to deal with somebody who might try to shoot me or might try to stab me or be able to understand when somebody is trying to sell me an eight-ball whether it's underweight or overweight…that's not applicable.

After taking college courses, George said his street knowledge couldn't be put in a resume, and it doesn't compare to the "actual knowledge" he's learned in college.

> The foundation [of street knowledge] is applicable but, but you can't put that in a resume. You're learning to use the skills to a certain extent, and now I'm gaining actual knowledge. I know how the brain functions. I know how societies, the systems in society function, and everything that goes with that, so it's granted me a level of knowledge base that I've been going off throughout my life.

When asked how he sees himself today, George says he is a "work in progress." He sees himself in a transitional stage in his life.

> The future looks bright and that's a new…that's…it's usually uncertainty, now it's looking good. I'm going to graduate and going to go to grad school get a master's [degree] and then I can finally have an actual career and have something that my children can be proud of. Like my children have a real dad, not somebody who I don't tell my friends about because it's embarrassing.

George transferred from GMC to a campus in the California State University system. Recently, George traveled to the main campus for orientation. "I had to actually go on campus to go pick up my stuff, and I actually got to walk amongst the students and, you know, go pick up my ID." The experience of being outside and entering a state university campus as a registered student, after years of prison and COVID lockdowns, moved him deeply. "That kind of added the visual element, to actually be a student and being part of something. I like, actually belong."

Dre

Dre (38, male, African American) said his first significant educational memory happened in third grade when he and his younger brother moved in with their grandparents and started private school.

> My grandmother and my grandfather took me and my brother in because my mother has 12 kids and my father died when I was six, so the support network was, it was great. At their age, they really couldn't connect to us, in the usual way as a parent probably could, you know being closer in age, but they did provide the basics. I was a good student; personally I had other things going on. You know living in a neighborhood I lived in, I had a lot of pitfalls waiting for me to avoid, and it goes back to the support network. My grandparents pretty much kept me sheltered and able to focus on school. They definitely

drove the importance of school. And them paying for school, they definitely had higher expectations paying for the tuition.

Dre entered the Los Angeles Adventist Academy, which he says introduced him to "some really good teachers. "

They were very patient, they had some small classes, but each subject I was able to really maximize and stay on track, where I should be at each grade. And they set me up, for you know the rest of school, in a college preparatory education. And I had my grandmother, who is a teacher also, to study with me afterwards and to be a tutor for me, make sure that I stayed with the pace of the class and actually be ahead of the class with the extra help.

After primary school, Dre transferred to Verbum Dei, a Catholic high school, and his grandparents continued to support him by paying his tuition.

I was able to learn more, you know, and the focus was more on us as a small class, where I was able to really be prepared to go to college after high school, so I had a lot of mentors around me from third grade up, had a lot of good teachers who really care.

Dre said that attending college was a given at Verbum Dei, and he felt prepared academically, but he did not have a specific plan or purpose for attending college. “Time just move along, and college was an expectation.” But those uncertain plans were derailed when his grandfather passed away just as Dre was finishing his education at Verbum Dei. Dre says the loss of his grandfather affected him deeply.

Toward the end of high school my grandfather passed away, so in my mind the mental effects of that took my mind away from pretty much life itself. You know, my father died when I was six. He died from cancer. My grandfather died from cancer. So, I’m looking

> at myself as the next man in line, when is my time? So, I kind of gave up on life and started just floating through life in a way.

This trauma at the transition from high school to college left Dre adrift, questioning his own purpose and mortality. Dre attended some classes at Santa Monica College, "but I didn't have a career goal in mind. It was just continuing to go to school." Dre described himself at this time as "getting lost" and "getting off track."

Dre said he has pursued a college degree so he can live for other people and honor the support that his family "invested" in him during his incarceration.[8] Throughout his 17 years in prison, Dre says his family never stopped supporting him and keeping his hope alive.

> I think of my grandmother for one, who kept God as a part of my life. Kept me focused and kept me a hopeful in prison, being around so much negativity. And then I have my brothers and sisters. I have seven brothers and four sisters who are always there for me, no matter what. Visits when they could come, and you know sending me money, even though I didn't need much in there, but $100 a month can go a long way in a package. Go a long way, so just that support network and them listening to me talking about you know one day coming home and also being there to motivate me spiritually basically to stay, you know, upright…15 years ago, before we even made it to the 17-year mark, that fueled me throughout the whole process. So, that's where I'm dedicated myself to that same spirit to give be able to put myself in a position where I can help other people.

[8] As I explained in Chapter 3, the interview protocol for this study did not ask direct questions about carceral experiences, and neither Dre nor any other participant explained the reason for their incarceration.

Dre found a new purpose in working for prison and criminal justice reform. “I want to be a part of that change, and I also want to help other people who have been . . . for kids especially who’ve been through some of the things I’ve been through.” Dre decided to pursue a sociology degree in the service of helping others like himself.

While in prison, Dre attended correspondence classes through Coastline College (a community college located in Orange County, CA), but he found the classes unsatisfying compared to the face-to-face college classes he remembered from Santa Monica College.

> In prison, it was different because, like you know as a professor, you can change your curriculum at any moment. When it came to me taking midterm and a final it was almost like I had the wrong book, you know, things have changed so much throughout the Semester. With the Professor not being here on campus or even being able to email the professor, and it was just not…but the thing for me because I had college experience before I went to prison, and I knew that, I knew the difference. I knew how it was. I knew I was missing out.

Furthermore, life in the carceral system impeded Dre’s ability to access the resources he needed to advance his education.

> I wouldn’t have gotten a degree with the same knowledge that I would have gotten being in class or being out here in the free world. I can do research where I can actually do the projects, you know, go to the library, and things like that and have those options. And yeah [in prison] we’d be on lockdown pretty much five days out of the week.

After his release, Dre said that finding housing and employment posed a significant barrier to continuing his educational goals.

> And coming from prison, you know we were eight cent an hour jobs when we come out that that doesn't go towards our credit history or work history, so we come out with no credit history. No recent job history so housing is definitely difficult. Another thing with housing. If you have a violent felony, you can't move into somebody's house that are associated with California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. So, housing is very difficult, and then I came out and I went into a six-month transitional house where that time was spent to save money, hopefully, get a job and be able to move into your own apartment. But even getting an apartment is difficult and after that six months you're free to go, you're out of here. Hopefully, you have some families still alive after 20 years 30 years in prison. and, hopefully, you have some kind of support network, but without that, housing is like the number one thing. There's no way I can go to school without you know, having a peaceful place to study and do what I need to do to achieve my goal of getting an A in every class.

Dre entered a transitional housing program in Victorville, CA and focused on working and saving up money, but he had not forgotten his goals of higher education and helping others. "I knew that those jobs I was working was not what I really wanted to do, so I had to go to school." Researching his college options online introduced him to the ARISE program at GMC.

> First, I looked up "Rising Scholars" online, because I was living in Victorville, California and I found a college out that way, but I saw more opportunities down in L.A., so I changed my parole out to L.A. and moved in with my grandmother.

Dre said his first contact with the ARISE program convinced him to enroll right away.

> I talked to IG at the ARISE program and just talking to her, man, and hearing her story and her same experiences of being formerly incarcerated, I didn't even look at any other colleges. I had plans to look at Cerritos and Long Beach and I just told her, man, "You know what, I'm gonna enroll here, at [Gordon Manor] and I'm gonna stick with this." It was just so supportive. And she was just so helpful, where she even before I even enrolled you know, and it wasn't like a recruitment, either. It was just great human-to-human connection. And I just liked her. She is telling me she's a counselor, and she would be there working with the school for a while. And just her sharing her experience it was so welcome.

Dre resolved his housing challenge by moving back in with his grandmother while attending college.

> Well, I moved to my grandmother was 94 years old, so I take care of her, help her around the house and go shopping. And take her where she needs to go, to her medical appointments, help her pay her bills online, most things are online. She didn't know how to use a computer that way. Just stuff like that. Just being here [you] have an opportunity where you know even doing you know fixing things around the house and upgrading the house and things like that had been neglected. She can't do it.

Dre said his grandmother welcomed him back home. "I talked to her almost every day that I could when I was in prison, so she was definitely there as a supporter, and still continuing to support me." Still, Dre's goal is to save up and buy his own house "And not waste money renting."

In all his interactions with the ARISE staff, Dre found them "supportive," "welcoming," and "just always available." After deciding to enroll at GMC, Dre met with RG in person during the school's incoming student orientation.

> When I went and met with him, he helped me with some ed planning in the beginning too. And I know he's very busy. I can just look at him, and I see that he's busy, people coming to the door, while we're in there meeting. And that was just a great experience actually being in person with them, um this was during Welcome Week, and he helped me to register for another class pretty much last minute because I made a decision to go to the school pretty late in the game. School would have been starting in about three weeks. Just expedited, it made things so simple for me and I go with saying I don't even know how to really use a computer. and they showed me everything, step by step, showed me how to do emails, and to attach files, send them some of the things I need to send to them and stuff like that, it was just so time consuming. It was nice.

Since the campus was still under COVID-19 protocols, all of Dre's courses were asynchronous, and these computers skills were essential to his ability to participate in the upcoming semesters classes.

Beyond registration, Dre said ARISE helped him learn to navigate the college bureaucracy to unlock crucial benefits and access the support he needed.

> My financial aid process was delayed because I didn't click one button to submit it. And I didn't see it because the bottom of the screen didn't show that. So, I was connected through the ARISE program with IG to somebody that she knew in the financial aid office, and IG told me that, but I had already been to the financial aid office, and they

didn't even tell me that. They just told me that it was pending. And three weeks later, the other lady, she told me that "Oh, you didn't submit so that was delayed.[9] " So, I'm learning now, you know how to get these done in a timely matter because I could have used that money months ago.

Dre said that the ARISE program supported him throughout his college career at several levels.

> Helping me with the application process, helping me with the financial aid process, helping me with some of the housing issues I was having. They even have mental health meetings where we can know they have a program to help with some of the mental health challenges. And then, tutoring so just the counseling that's one of the biggest things that's helping me. And a shared experience, you know, connected kind of in a friendship way. Definitely supportive. Showing there's lot of care there, a lot of sympathy, a lot of empathy.

Dre said he wants to use his degree to be a positive example to young people in his community, especially since he had been a "negative example" in the past.

> A lot of the things that are going on, I want to be a part of that change, and I also want to help other people who have been—for kids especially—who've been through some of the things that I've been through. With the mental illnesses and just getting lost and getting off track. I want to be able to educate myself to help them the best way that I can an educated way with an educated approach.

[9] Non-support program staff names were redacted to maintain confidentiality.

> It's not to necessarily erase my past, but my past lets me know, if you don't have a foundation, if you don't have a goal in mind, you be out here floating and lost. There's a lot of pitfalls waiting for you out here, basically doing the devil's work.

Looking back over his educational career, Dre described the difference between his first attempt at college and his return after incarceration as a "change in mindset."

> Number one thing is having a goal, I know where I want to go. As a kid I had no clue. I knew I wanted to be a business owner and I didn't take advantage of the opportunities of the counselors and the mentors who were there at Santa Monica college at that time. Uh, but now, knowing how to find and connect with the people who want to help me, and having that goal and that approach is just the biggest change in mindset where there's just so much productivity that comes out of that.

When asked about any other turning points after incarceration, Dre said moving back in with his grandmother has afforded him the "peace" to follow his plan.

> I'm just happy that I have my grandmother to let me live with her, so I can have that peace, even some financial support, being her beneficiary. She also looks at it, like "you're my beneficiary, everything that I have you have access to." But just a major turning point is actually just sitting down, not trying to be out and about, running around, and you know kind of enjoying my freedom now, to stay in focus and you know sticking to my plan.

Janet

Janet (35, female, Hispanic) grew up the oldest of four siblings in an immigrant family that spoke primarily Spanish. Janet said her parents had only a little formal education, but they were very clear about their goals for their children.

> They just wanted, they just said, you know, we came here so you can get a better future than they did because my parents didn't graduate, not even Elementary. Like my parents, my dad has, I think, like a second grade, third grade education? And my mom has like a fourth-fifth grade of education. So, they only have the basic elementary education. So, their thing was like, education, well it was huge, it was essential for them because it would get, you know, bring their children, for them to have a better future.

Janet started school in Spanish-speaking classes and then transitioned to a dual-language class in third grade. Janet's parents were in favor of her taking the dual-immersion track, but in the classroom, Janet said the teacher singled out the Spanish-speaking students in class.

> Third grade, it was very, very hard for me. That's why I'm not personally, because in my personal experience, I don't, I'm not in favor for dual program like you know, for elementary kids. Because it you know, the parents were like, "Oh, we have that [option], oh they'll have two languages blah, blah, blah." But if you know, and we kind of we want to push your kids but if you have not been through it, like for example myself, it's very hard. You know, my instructor just when she heard like, "Oh, you guys are, you guys are the Spanish speaking kids." And like she would isolate us from the remaining of the class. And then she would put us like in a corner, and then what she just would get really, really frustrated with us. She would like, make us turn our desks around and like we're

> kind of like scolded or punished because we weren't able to process correctly or we just couldn't understand her lecture because of that language barrier. So, I remember really, really struggling with you know, just the transition and like, just like learning the language.

Janet said her classroom reflected the neighborhood: a slim majority of White students, with the other half comprised of different non-White students, and the teacher's comments usually focused on the first-generation Hispanic students.

> It was a bit of, she, it was just the lack of maybe empathy or the stereotyping. I definitely felt like there was some sort of discrimination. I remember when we moved into the neighborhood that my parents own our home, the majority of the kids that attended school, half of—fifty percent, I would say, of the attending students were Caucasian and then you had your Hispanics, you know, your minorities, your other 50% were minorities, which was Hispanics, Blacks, and few, maybe one or two Asians. Yeah, but the majority of it was Caucasian. And I remember when I looked around the roommates, like the class, and it was like, when she referred to the Spanish kids, it was we were all of Hispanic descent. We were all first generation. And then when I looked at the remaining of the class, there were just Caucasian. Or, you know, like, maybe second, third generation Hispanic. Yeah, I felt some type of just like, not, there was no equality. That's how I felt.

Janet said there was one supporting resource who helped in her education: her neighbor and his encyclopedias.

> Growing up I didn't have the support of my parents because again, they're immigrants. But I did have my neighbor that before the internet, he had a whole collection of encyclopedias, and so like, that was my internet growing up. The encyclopedias, his dictionaries and yeah, so that was my tutoring and so he also because of that neighbor, he you know, suggested [I] stay in the after school, like for tutoring and stuff like that. And that's how I, I just excel in that high school. I've always been the type of the child that I wanted my parents' approval and I wanted to make them proud.

By middle school, Janet was taking GATE classes, where she found a community of peers.

> It was for the first time, it was, it really helped my social development because I was able to find some type of support within my peers. That I was able to lean on or for the first time, in my educational years. I can say, I had a group of peers that were, understood where I was, you know, level wise, but also, if I needed any type of assistance with like math, or English or science or whatever the case may be, we would like study together. And so, we were basically that was the first time in junior high where it had that, it was like seventh grade, where I have that support within my peers.

When she graduated eighth grade, the GATE classes ended, and Janet took Advanced Placement (AP) classes through high school. In high school, Janet said she participated in numerous after school clubs. She ran for an Associated Student Body (ASB) office and lost, so she sought other leadership activities.

> I was like, what, in what way can I make an impact? And our school had limited programs that were involved. LULAC[10] was one of them. And through LULAC, I also

[10] League of United Latin American Citizens

got involved with a student leadership project, student leadership, Future Leaders of America, that's what it was called. And that was my freshman year. And then with our sophomore year, we also got to go to the University of Mexico. And so, that that's what I was involved in until practically my junior year.

Janet also got involved with a pilot program mentoring students to enter college.

Yeah, I was very involved. And then from there in junior year, I got reached out by the Orange County Bar Foundation. I don't know how; I'm assuming because of my involvement in the community. Um, someone reached out and said, we're starting a pilot program. It's new and we're gonna have about 10 youth to see how it goes. And it was it was basically a mentoring. And you had people that were in admissions for California State University and University of California and part of being board members and also mentors for us. We basically would meet once a week and we had workshops of like, how to put a high school portfolio or how to put a resume or how to basically or what are the classes requirements that if we haven't taken them that you would need to take by the time you graduate high school?

Janet said she was on track for college success until her plans were derailed by an abusive partner who cut her off from friends and family.

I actually had the opportunity—because building up to my junior year, I had the opportunity. I was connected with the right people. And you know, I had the networking, the right people that have the tools, but I then found myself in a DV relationship at that time. At that age, I didn't process what was going on. It wasn't now until fast forward after going to therapy that I realized, "oh, this is what happened" or "this is why I was

manipulated." I was—since the age of 15, I was in a relationship with a 20-year-old, and I found myself in a domestic violence relationship. At the time that I turned 18, I moved out with him, and then a few months later, we got married. So, then that's what changed my direction from being, going from, you know, a UC or Cal State or even out of state. I had gotten a stepped up to go to university, the University of Arizona State. So, um, that's what changed my thing, was a fork in the road, you could say, and a big one.

Janet said living under her husband's abuse left her feeling hopeless and isolated, cut off from her support networks.

Man, it was stressful. If you want to narrow down it was stressful. It was. I felt like at times I felt I felt like just discouraged and hopeless because I just didn't, even though like I had been groomed and I had been given all these tools previous to set on a college, I just felt so isolated. And I felt like if I were to reach out for so and so's help, like and if, if my husband at that time were to find out, like I just was always trying to avoid confrontation. Or like I was trying to avoid like, just yeah, the avoidance and hen my family wasn't aware of what's going on until the after the fact because you know—when you're in a domestic abusive relationship, they first isolate you from your peers, which are your friends, then from your family. And then it's like, and don't get me wrong. I reached out to his family for help but because of their religion, which is Jehovah's Witnesses, according to their religion, you need to do what the husband says because the Bible says that. So, also the cultural belief that they have just made it so much more harder for me to have an education because it's like well, if your husband's telling you not to have an

education, then you can't go to college and so just having that was very, it was it was discouraging, it was stressful, and it was just felt hopeless. Yeah.

Even in the midst of this abusive relationship, Janet said she tried to take classes at Santa Ana College. In the end, though, she dropped more classes than she passed.

> And so, then I decided, well, I still want to continue my education…So, that's how I went to Santa Ana College in the midst of everything, the whole chaos. That's why I kept on withdrawing from classes. So, it was just me going to doing general ed. And the reason I didn't really keep up or do very well was because I had to be home at a certain time. I had to be home certain days. So, that just really affected my education at the beginning at Santa Ana College. So, if you were to look at my transcript, you'll see a bunch of Ws and it was because you see that I only completed like four courses within those two years, and it was because you know it, you know, if you haven't seen it in black and white, you see a whole bunch of Ws and completion of just four courses. But if you want to know the background story, it's because I was involved in a domestic violence relationship.

Janet said being groomed into an abusive relationship was an early turning point in her life. After she left her first husband, a second turning point was the birth of her daughter.

> Once I left that situation, then that, that was another turning point was, you know, when I got pregnant with my first daughter. I said, I need to make sure that I can give my daughter a better future. And that was the turning point in my life that I said, I need to go back to school.

This time, Janet had a partner who supported her desire to return to school "irregardless of the odds, regardless of the challenges," but the stigma of dropping out earlier made her uncomfortable about returning to Santa Ana College.

> So, I went back and I, after a year later, after I split with my ex-husband, a year later with the father of my girls and he was like, you know, it was a 180 [degrees]. So, it was like, I was like I want to go back to school. And he was more supportive this time. So, I was like, well, I was kind of ashamed to go back to Santa Ana College. There was some shame in that because I was like, "How can I go back to school where I withdrew all these classes. Like, what are they gonna think of me as a student?" And so, I went to a whole new program. I actually reached out to American Career College, and I said, you know, if you can give me the financial aid, like I'm all for it, so I did it for 18 months. And then I did. I did. I got my LVN, LVN license, my vocational nursing license, and I did that and that's been active until 2016. Because in 2016, that's where I was intake for. I got incarcerated.

Janet was released in 2017, and one challenge Janet struggles with after her release is the loss of support from within her own family.

> I am the first person in my family to be incarcerated. And as well as a background, I am the oldest and I'm a female of a Hispanic family. In our culture is seen for the oldest female to take care of the parents when parents get older. So, as at a young age, I was I was given a lot of responsibility. At nine years old, I was given a responsibility to take care of my younger siblings. So, you know, that meant picking them up from the babysitter taking the whole feeding and bathing them. And then I did my homework. So,

> I lost that respect. I it was I was, I lost. According to them. I no longer have the respect or saw there for when even like, let's say I need them to, like, pick up my kids from school one day. They're not. They are not willing to do that.

Janet said she's become an "outcast" in her own family, and the experience of familial stigma has helped her better understand the systemic stigma for other formerly incarcerated people.

> And I understand why people would go back to jail because when you come out, you're already an outcast. You're seen differently and you're already—I felt like they're waiting for me to mess up again. Like "When is Janet gonna mess up again?" Like yeah, she's doing good. For how long is she going to get to good before? And I feel like if my family who was supposed to be my biggest support feels that they're just waiting for me to mess up again, like what does society feel like? Oh, she's a formerly incarcerated, when is she gonna mess up again?

Inspired after attending a women's conference, Janet decided to pursue a degree in psychology as part of her reentry. Looking around Orange County colleges, though, she couldn't find support for formerly incarcerated students. Absent family support, and with the father of her daughters no longer in the picture, Janet turned to her church community. She met VF from ARISE through a church connection, who helped her fill out the FAFSA form and register for college. Janet said that the counselors at ARISE have a different approach than other reentry support programs she had experienced.

> Meeting with these people that are like—for once since I was released in 2017 these people have . . . I was *seen.* They saw me as a human being and not as a case number or

another booking number. They actually saw me as a human and actually treated me like that and not—it wasn't just like a handout. It was like, "How can we help you?" or "how, what can, what do you need to be equipped to succeed as a student?" Like, just let us know and if we don't have it here or like we don't offer it in a program. We will connect you with other programs that can help you with that.

So, it wasn't just like, "Oh, we're part of ARISE and that's it." Like, now they're like willing to go beyond the scope of just ARISE and using all the college resources like "Oh, you're part of CalWORKs[11], so how are you connected with the program?" No. Like I didn't even know that existed, so they're like, "Oh, well, let's connect you." Doing the connecting the dots, you know, connecting that was just like wow, like I didn't even know there was all these other programs. And they were that bridge, you could say, you know of a lot of the gaps that that students have.

Janet said this difference has encouraged her to persist in her college studies:

I got this. I can continue to be a student. No matter my age, no matter my background, no matter if I was formerly incarcerated. Like, I can still be a student and I can still have an opportunity to have an education.

ARISE helped Janet navigate through registration. They connected her to the assistant director of financial aid and got her FAFSA status revised to reduce the amount of her "family contribution." IG helped her register with EOPS and CARE and CalWORKs (California Department of Social Services, 2022), based on the new findings from the FAFSA application.

[11] California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (California Department of Social Services, 2022)

At the time of the interview, Janet was meeting with an EOPS counselor to consider her options for schools that offer a master's degrees in psychology.

Janet left an office job she said left her "unfulfilled and questioning" to pursue her college degree, despite the financial uncertainty. She said she didn't regret her decision though.

> I wanted to do something that fulfilled me. Something that I'm passionate aboabout, and I can make, it's like, if I leave tomorrow what is the legacy or imprint that I'm leaving this world? And when I reflect, I pretty much look and I say "nothing" until now because now I've decided to go back to school. Now I'm at [GMC]. But if I were to die tomorrow, it's like "no," you know, and my daughters can reflect this, "Like my mom made a lot of mistakes. She did what she did, but she was going back to college because not only did she go back to college, but she's been helping out our community." And I can't say like I went to college to go back to my community and give my community? No, I've, I am going to college because I've never left my community. I've stayed within my community. And I want to continue to give back to my community.

Janet said she's working on "breaking those curses" that have stigmatized herself and other formerly incarcerated persons and she's hoping that her success will open doors for others that were closed in her face before she met the people at ARISE.

> And I want to open the doors to those that come after me because there was a lot of doors going back to school that were shut in my face. I had a lot of "no"s and a lot of just doors that shut in my face and ARISE was the program that open has opened a lot of doors or little windows for me.

Penelope

Penelope (45, female, Hispanic) describes herself as "extremely system-impacted": "My very first picture of me and my father is me visiting him in the California State Youth Authority." Both of her parents had been in and out of incarceration, and her mother was addicted to heroin. From the very beginning of her schooling, Penelope said she was taught to keep her home life private. Although her father was incarcerated for most of her youth, he was home when she had to start kindergarten.

> Two days prior to me entering into kindergarten, I remember being told I was going to be going to school by my mother and my father. So, happened the night before, my dad physically assaulted my mother, that he hit her in the face and she, she had two black eyes. A broken nose and two black eyes. And so, I was sat down, and this is prior to going to school, I was sat down and I was told not to make a scene with that, you know, that I was going to have to stay [with the teacher] but not to make a scene because I wasn't to draw any attention to our family. And so, I recall they said that I would go off with the teacher, I can't remember the exact words but that was the gist of like, "Hey, we're going to take you to school, don't draw attention to our family."

Penelope said her parents' insistence that she hide this family abuse from her teacher impacted her attitude towards school from that point on.

> And I worked out something that was ingrained in me, like you don't talk, and you don't ask a question. You just—you're there because you need to be there. And so, that was my first experience of going to school. And also my first experience was, "There's things that I cannot talk about, there's things that I have to hide, so if you're going to school on

guard." You kind of like, I feel looking back on my education, I can see how I wasn't fully engaged because I had to kind of, I went with that mentality.

Penelope said this push to hide what went on at home left her feeling never able to engage as a student. As Penelope got older, this feeling only was heightened by having to cope with her mother's addiction to heroin, including the times she overdosed.

I didn't feel safe at school because my mom was, she was addicted to heroin. And, um, I felt as a child and knowing this and growing up, there were several times when as a child, you know, second third grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade–that I would have to—my siblings and I, and I'm the oldest sibling, so this like eight-year-old little girl, right? Little small little girl, my siblings and I would have to resuscitate our mother from her heroin overdose. We'd have to, like, put her in a bath and do all these things.

While at school, Penelope said she worried about her mom overdosing so much she learned to judge the distance of a passing emergency siren to determine whether it was headed for her house.

So, in the fourth grade when the sirens were going off, I would, go stand near the window, and I would gauge how far the ambulance went. And . . . if they stopped like what I would gauge two blocks away, I knew, I felt at least, my mom was in the clear.

Penelope said she developed stomach aches at school worrying over her mom, but these too had a purpose.

The whole day my stomach was hurting and now I share this with my family members. I was always in the in the nurse's office because I always wanted them to call home and I

didn't know then that's what I was doing. But I want you know; I was trying to get them to make sure she was alive, to get a response.

Despite these traumatic experiences, Penelope said she rejects feeling sorry for herself as a child.

Children are resilient, and I'm just, I'm not saying like, "Oh, I'm so strong," but I didn't know that that was not life. That was life for me. So, that was something that—so I don't feel sorry for myself at all.

Penelope said one of the few positive memories from her elementary years was her love of reading. She said reading was her escape, and Penelope spent the entire summer after third grade in the public library.

I didn't learn to read until about the second grade I started, but third grade. Third grade, that was like my escape was reading. So, again, my you know, my life looked the way it did with how I shared. One of my outlets was, well, because my mom was going through her own things, I had a lot of freedom. It was the first year that LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District] and the public library piloted their summer reading program. And so, I just remember going to [the library] during the summer, and again I learned in second grade to read, so when third grade, I love to read and then I was at the library every Monday through Friday, checking out books, reading books, and you know, filling out this little log and receiving all these certificates. So, from third grade to fourth grade that summer, I was at the library every day.

After summer, the local librarian came to visit Penelope in her fourth-grade classroom.

This lady walks in and [my teacher] said, "Does anybody here know she is? Who this is?" And I remember getting so happy to see this lady and everybody looked on like "We

don't know who this lady is," and she smiled at me, and I smiled at her. I had won the most books read. I won like the biggest prize for San Pedro community reading like for the summer reading program, and I got like a book, a book bag, and pencils or whatever, but I just remember that. That was a big thing in our small school, and I remember the teacher saying, "Penelope? What?" Like they couldn't wrap their mind even, I just remember that being like, "Well, you're a good reader." Like that was just something that everybody always said.

Penelope said she enjoys sharing this story with her son:

And I believe that it's by the grace of God that I know how to read because nobody really even cared enough to teach me, but, yes, that was a positive thing in elementary that I could think of. And I tell my son about it all the time. He loves when I tell the story because it does grow back positive memories, you know, of school.

Penelope said she experienced another turning point right before middle school when her father returned to prison and her mom was hospitalized after a motorcycle accident. However, Penelope said her primary reaction to these events was relief.

He'd be incarcerated at least for the next four years. So, I kind of felt like he was safe, and when my mother returned from prison and again, when we, when I was gauging, you know, how I would find her, my mother was in a motorcycle accident, she received it, she was in a coma.

Penelope moved in with her paternal grandparents, and freed from having to worry about her parents, she said she finally felt like she could be "aware and present" at school. "However, I believe I was so far behind, I didn't know how to be a successful student. I didn't know, and I

was checked out and went to live with my grandparents." Despite feeling unprepared for junior high, Penelope said at least her living arrangement was stable.

> I think I went to about six or eight elementary schools, so I didn't have, I wasn't academically prepared for middle school. But [my grandparents] being present and being able to be there and just be, I think that was a turning point and being able, my home environment I guess, being with my grandparents and knowing that they were going to be alive, and not worrying whether or not they were not going to be.

Unfortunately, the time she lost changing schools during primary school as her parents cycled in and out of incarceration affected her in middle school.

> I think I took notice of that that some kids knew things that I didn't know like I wasn't comprehending, so therefore I kind of just started well, I guess for the first time, people started talking to me about my grade. And so that's where I noticed that my grades were bad. Prior to that, in elementary, in my mom's case, I don't even think that was ever a topic.

Penelope said she feels fortunate that she and her siblings had grandparents "who stepped up and took care of us when our parents were in prison," but she soon requested to move in with her maternal grandmother because she was less strict than her paternal grandparents.

> I believe, I honestly believe, my life may have turned out different if I would have stayed with my paternal grandparents. Because they had expectations like you need to—I think that's why I left too because I was like, forced to go to school and things like that. Of course, I wasn't allowed to go hang out with friends.

Living with her maternal grandmother, Penelope said she had more free time to herself in middle school, and she started getting into trouble with the legal system.

> So, I'm [in] middle school. I turned when I moved back with my maternal grandmother, being uh the supervision was less than what was at my paternal grandparents' house. She was a single grandmother worked, you know, full time jobs. She had my other cousin so other grandchildren living with her. So, I was pretty much able to do whatever I wanted to do, I guess, that's just the way it was. And so, I, for whatever reason, chose to run with um, you know, people weren't choosing to stay in school. People who looked a lot like me whose parents were in prison, or whose parents were on drugs. And so, we didn't have the guidance that, you know, somebody in our shoes could have used so therefore, I started skipping school and being arrested and being put into juvenile halls. So, yeah, so that started about seventh eighth grade. I'm not excusing myself or I'm not blaming anybody else. I just feel like the guidance, and it just wasn't there. And even to be said, I feel like it was kind of learned behavior and modeled behaviors, so not to blame my parents or anything. That's not what I'm doing here. What I'm saying is I didn't, I wasn't given any other navigational skills, on like, "This is what we do. We go to school," you know.

Penelope said the stigma of her interactions with the legal system followed her right into high school.

> The high school would not accept me unless my probation officer would come and enroll me and say that I was going to be an okay fit to be there. And so, my probation officer came, and he enrolled me. I had been arrested and I was detained in a lockdown

placement called Dorothy Kirby centers out there in Commerce. So, somewhere down the line, they say like, “Hey, this girl’s been coming through these juveniles for a long time, and she don’t have parents, so let’s get her therapy.” So, they sent me there anyways, they had me contact this probation officer and he had to go enroll me which was so annoying to me. I just remember thinking like, “Geez, I am not even getting a fresh start here at this high school either.” Like here’s this probation officer like you’re just like, what does he have to do with my life? So, this probation officer who you knew was not my dad because he was a Black man, you know, he used to wear African attire. I just felt so like they didn’t even allow me to get a fresh start. No, they being the system. It’s life.

Despite this initial embarrassment, Penelope said she was doing well in high school until pregnancy detoured her plans and she ultimately dropped out of high school.

Lo and behold, I didn’t allow myself to get a fresh start either. So, I started you know, I started off pretty well I at this point, you know, I don’t NOT know how, I mean, I know it’s by the grace of God, but how I was able to just, I was getting really good grades and you know, I got pregnant with my first son. And so, then just things change from there. So, you know, you’re pregnant, and I did go to a pregnancy, a maternity school for high schoolers. And I did really well, and I got ahead credit there and, and then I went back to school after I had my son. I went back to the high school but kind of just wanted to be home with my son so I kind of like flip flop between there, so it just was like you know, I honestly say at that point, it’s all on me. I even though there was no direction there. I kind of knew like I needed like, I needed to get my stuff together, but I just didn’t and so yeah, so I dropped out of high school.

After the birth of her second son, Penelope finished her high school credits through homeschool, but due to a clerical problem with LAUSD records, she took the GED anyways.

Looking back over her primary and secondary schooling, Penelope said she saw herself as a smart student who could get through her challenges on the strength of her reading skills, even as she struggled in math. “I was telling myself, don’t worry about math, English, all your reading will get you through, that’s actually what I was, really down on myself.”

After school, Penelope said she was working in a “secure” but not “I have arrived” job at an HMO where she was mentoring teens. Interacting with these teens, and seeing how their backgrounds resembled her own, inspired her to consider returning to college, if only to set an example for these young people.

> And in mentoring students who look a lot like I look, as far as lifestyle, and their parents look a lot like well my parents looked like. I would ask them like, oh, you know, we talk about school or whatever, you know, this is a volunteer position that leadership. I would say about 99% of the teens that I mentor were hoping and that’s quote unquote, “hoping” to get into something as far as like maybe working on the docks, or “hoping” quote, unquote, to know somebody to get them into the refinery, or quote unquote, hoping to work for so and so’s doctor’s office without going to school or whatever the case may be. So, I thought to myself, well, maybe I should show them like, like people like us. I know. That’s exactly what my thoughts were like people like us can go to school and so I’m a big believer, in um not just talking it but walking it and showing, being an example. So, I said, “Well, I’m go to school.” This is my thought: I’ll go to school so I could show them that they can do it too. And yeah, so that’s what brought me back.

Penelope said she found a welcoming community at GMC where she was encouraged by both faculty and student support programs, even before she met the counselors in the ARISE program. Several professors stood out as positive influences. Penelope said her transfer-level English professor "pushed me to where I was" but she was really "fighting with myself."

> I was like fighting with myself, like, shoot, her assignments, and she would expect more and she said what she expected but she also gave you the tools on how to reach those expectations. So, it was like fighting against myself. Do I really want this grade? Or do I really want to succeed, or do I just not want it?

Penelope said other professors pushed her in a positive direction. Her social work professor pushed her to turn in her best work.

> I remember him saying to me, is like, okay, well, I'm gonna push you a little bit more. He's like, you could turn this in, but I encourage you to take that back and think about it a little bit more.

Another professor noticed Penelope's test results did not match her participation in class and so referred her to the Student Resource Center (SRC).

> She saw that, you know, I came to every class. I was taking notes diligently. I you know, during discussion and class discussions, I was able to be engaged and able to communicate. And we did…one of my first tests and I just stalled like, I just, I wasn't able to, and I did really bad on that exam. And she pulled me aside. She emailed me and asked me to come and see her, and she pulled me aside and she referred me to the SRC center.

Penelope said that this professor's attention to the disconnect between her class participation and her test-taking ultimately helped get the support she needed to succeed: "Had I not been referred to the SRC center by her, I don't believe that I would have been able to graduate school with honors." Penelope said she found a similar generosity when she met the head of the math department after an unsuccessful tutoring session at the math lab.

> He saw the calculator that I had, and I was using the wrong calculators. I was just doing the math lab calculator and so he said, "Well, maybe I can try to help you." So, he sat, and he showed me like he said, "Well, let me let me go back to my office really quick. I'll be right back." And he said, "Here, I'll let you use this for this whole semester." I was like, "Oh, he let me use the calculator." And I thought he was gonna let me up. Of course, he showed me how to work it. He never said like, "Hey, I'm the director over the whole math division," you know, and he just sat with me, and he showed me.

Although these faculty were not formally associated with ARISE, Penelope credited a large part of her success to the care and interest they showed in her as a person.

Penelope was introduced to the ARISE program through IG, one of the success coaches who was still working part-time at EOPS/CARE. IG mentioned she was joining the new program for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. "And she shared, and I said, 'Oh my gosh, I'm formerly incarcerated and extremely system impacted,'" Penelope said. ARISE provided Penelope assistance in a number of ways.

> They were an academic support, a financial research support for the grounds that they offered, and also, they also provided emotional and mental awareness support as far as identifying triggers and coping mechanism. So, they were a holistic support for me.

But what stands out to Penelope the most is the one-on-one assistance from Vilna, one of the program coaches.

> But what I want to say is one thing that ARISE, the individual academic planning with Vilna the academic counselor, her patience and her explaining, and just her encouragement was really something.

Penelope said this encouragement extended beyond academic planning and helped her transition to her transfer college. Penelope was planning to study Social Work at a California State University school. “But when I heard how hard it was to get into the Social Work program, I kinda was like, ‘Am I gonna fly?’ I just didn’t know but anyhow, just her encouragement.” ARISE followed up this encouragement with connections to Project Rebound to help Penelope transition smoothly from GMC to California State University, Long Beach. “So, it was like the ARISE program handed over to the team at Cal State Long Beach, which has been a tremendous academic and resource support for me while at Long Beach. I’m grateful to that as well.”

Although she had high praise for the people and programs at GMC, Penelope did speak about some of the external challenges that made getting her education more difficult. Penelope said one of the challenges of pursuing college for her was navigating the time demands of the court as a student. Her own experience as a parent of an incarcerated child placed time demands on her, but Penelope said all formerly incarcerated people have to deal with conflicts like this during parole or probation.

> My family are still, you know, overcoming challenges as far as incarceration and court cases and so, having to having to attend court cases and things like that, the structure outside of school weighed heavy a lot, you know. But I feel like I mean, those are, those

> are things that you know, maybe a lot of people not only necessarily formerly incarcerated students or system impacted students have to deal with. I think, maybe professors could remember that, too. Yes, this is our goal, and this is what we signed up for being students signed up for an education and yes, hold the bar for education, but remember that students do have outside rights. Remember that, you know, there are, you know, especially working with the reentry community population, that there are things that they must adhere to, be it probation, parole, treatment classes, there are you know, I'm just thinking of students. I was fortunate not to have just recently been released and having to, you know, participate in classes and structures that way, but people who are recently re-entering into the community have tons of things that they need to do to show that they are being productive members of society.

Penelope also pointed out for many Rising Scholars there is a need to better coordinate between their professors and their parole/probation officers about the amount of time students are expected to spend in a class.

> I think for our population that is just re-entering and do want to get ahead, I just think to keep that in mind. Or have something carved out to like maybe to work hand in hand with parole and probation like hey, they're full [time students]. They, you know, these hours that you want them to attend, they should be, "These are study, these are the hours that we expect," because I think about our syllabus, all my professors, most of my professors have indicated amount of study hours in the syllabus. Like "you should be expected to be studying such XYZ hours."

Another external factor that impacted Penelope was dealing with the stress and trauma of living in a family that is system-impacted. Penelope credited ARISE for helping her recognize the way

carceral stress had affected her personally. Penelope told the story of attending an ARISE "meet-up" for a presentation on incarceration and post-traumatic stress.

> As I mentioned, my parents were in and out of incarceration my whole adolescent years. And so, visiting, just that whole experience, just being with incarceration, you know, being lined up, facilities, and things like that, that whole experience. And as I mentioned, I didn't feel sorry for myself. I didn't know that was the only way of knowing, however. What I wanted to share is the ARISE program they had a speaker come in… sharing just about PTSD, incarceration, and things that formerly incarcerated person and or system impacted person may feel or may experience, you know.

Penelope said she quickly realized this presentation directly related to her own experiences with her incarcerated son.

> My son is incarcerated and I'm going to visit him, I would get sick on, you know, I would be all excited going you know that are going to see him. Coming home, I get a headache all the way up there. I mean home, I would be so sick, like literally I'd have headaches and my stomach would be nauseous and I didn't understand. I just used to think like the change of climate. I don't know, those are the things that I was saying to myself. Yeah, but having speaker not share, you know, the trauma again, just things that to look out for you know, just, you know, things that you know, can be beneficial, like you know, talking about and realizing that you're not alone and these things do impact your life and your body and so had I not heard that. So, I heard that and so happy that we had that. That guest speaker on an ARISE meeting, and I that weekend, I went to go visit my son and I started to recognize different signs. And I said to myself, "Okay, you're,

you're this and you're feeling upset. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to you know, you're sad." I was able to identify what I was experiencing and put a name to it.

Penelope is currently studying at California State University Long Beach, with plans to earn a master's degree in Social Work. She said her main strength as a college student is her resilience to persist through the difficulties in her life.

> I think my resilience, and actually my joy, I have like indescribable joy that the Lord has given me and my resilience to, to push past everything that not only have I put myself through, but that others have also put me through, but you know, a lot of those choices were mine.

Penelope said her purpose is to do more than get an education for herself. She wants to demonstrate the value of higher education for others and ultimately transform her community so that it doesn't need re-entry support.

> I have purpose and I feel like my purpose right now would be to get my education to show that, to not only show others, but yeah, to show the world and to be able to get a degree and then to have one more number like, I don't want to just be a number, not that. I like to have the evidence that education works and that it can work if we invest in education and investment may look like investing in low SES communities early. It doesn't have to be when they're re-entry, it could look like reinvent like investing, you know, proactively investing in communities. So, that it doesn't have to be a re-entry community.

Looking back over her decision to return to college, Penelope said she sees a change. Before returning to college, she got by with a good job, but little more than that. "But I know that I felt

that I felt like I was just surviving that. I felt like I was given a lifeline to survive. And I was just riding the motion of survival, riding the motion of going to work every day." Penelope said that after returning to college she sees her life differently.

> But now looking at where I'm at now, I believe that I'm thriving. I believe that not only am I thriving and being able to see, be able to understand things that are going around me in a whole different light again, when I felt like I was throwing that lifeline and just riding the wave. Now I know what the waves are like, where the waves are coming from, I should say. And so, I feel like I'm thriving and no longer am I just surviving.…I feel like I am thriving and I'm learning how to not only thrive in the waves, also learning how to I can't control waves but how to ride them I guess you would say. Like, you know, so I just think I see myself in a different way and I feel more confident and being able to express myself.

Martha

Martha (35, female, African American) describes herself as having "a beginners mind": "I've always been curious. I've always been involved. I'm a people person." She attended primary school at K. Anthony, a small private school in Inglewood, California.

> It was a small community. A lot of the preschoolers, we went all the way. We graduated sixth grade together, so we knew each other our whole lives. The principals of the school were very close to my grandparents. The school prepared us for college. I was in third grade; I was reading a book called *Gold Journey*. Reading at a college level. So, let's see. It was a happy community. It was mostly—ALL—African Americans that attended that

> school. And I just remember really enjoying how to learn. Yeah, they made learning fun and it really set a foundation for me as I got older.

Most of the students, Martha said, stayed together as a cohort from preschool through to sixth grade. "[We] still keep in contact to this day, a lot of us and they're like some of my best friends to this day."

After finishing elementary school at K. Anthony, Martha was accepted at several prominent private schools in Los Angeles, but they were too far away. "After sixth grade accepted to Westlake, Brentwood, and Crossroads. But since those schools were far out and I did not have a ride, I ended up attending a Catholic school for one year. Maria Regina in Gardena." Martha continued to attend local schools through high school. "And then in eighth grade. I went to Madrona in Torrance. Ninth grade, I went to Perry Junior High in Gardena. And then my high school years I attended Phineas Banning High School in Wilmington."

Martha said this switch from elite to public schools affected her education significantly. "And that's where I feel that the Los Angeles Unified School District, now that I'm older, has failed me and a lot of others because it was totally different from my foundation." After sixth grade, Martha described her education as un-challenging.

> And then just like after sixth grade, um, this let's see. I, as far as like learning, I didn't take it as serious. It was just, let's see. I excelled a lot in seventh grade because there were multiple choice questions. And I already knew the answer. So, I didn't, I was more of a talkative type of person in seventh grade.

After transferring to Torrance USD, Martha said she tried getting involved in student government, but she lost the election for eighth grade class president by one vote.

> I ran for President, and they told me that I lost by one vote to, wow, to Julie Tamashiro who had been going there since the sixth grade. So, they were like "we're gonna let you into the student body anyway." I was like, you know what, I really feel that I won. It's just the fact that since I just arrived there and Julie Tamashiro had been going here for two years, they're like, okay, we're just gonna go ahead and give her the presidency. [Laughs.] So, I think I really won secretly but they were just like, oh, okay no, one vote, but we're still gonna allow you and it's like, "Uh huh." [Laughs.]

Martha continued to attend magnet classes through ninth grade and high school, but they weren't the same as K. Anthony.

> So, I was still learning at a little accelerated level. But still, it wasn't, compared to my foundation in elementary school. It was still just a breeze. And I've just really, you know, looking at these questions and looking back, is really ever since seventh grade, I have not taken my studies seriously because of multiple choice questions and all I have to do is just read the material once and the answer is on the test.

Martha said the lack of challenge at school affected her as a student. "So, you know, just slide by with the C average and that's, you know, that's why, that's all you need. So, I was all about having fun. And playing sports: basketball, softball, and volleyball."

After high school, Martha said she knew she was expected to go to college (both of her parents had college degrees), but she did not have a clear goal for her education at the time.

> When I entered into college in 1994, I was not prepared. I really had to go back and remember my foundation, what I learned in elementary. And so, it's like I had been out

> of practice for so long. And then here it is, I'm at [GMC], I'm playing basketball, I'm taking 12 units, and I wasn't prepared for that load.

Martha said her early college transcript was "an embarrassment" that revealed the diverse collection of courses she tried but dropped: accounting, business, fashion, even Japanese. The pace of the college courses overwhelmed her, and she did not know how to get support.

> On the academic level, even though I was in the magnet program, I still, when I came to the community college level, it was still advanced for me. And so, it seems like the professors expect you to know how to study this information, grasp this information or you already know this information and it's just full steam ahead. And I know that I can actually, I see on the website now you can actually get tutoring. I didn't know, I thought if I needed tutoring, I will have to pay someone. I didn't know it was available to me. So, I just gave up. But it was at a very fast pace. And I was afraid maybe if I would have asked questions or maybe if I would have told the teacher you're going too fast or something like that. But I didn't know how to communicate with the teacher. It's just like you know, you go in, you read the chapter, you study, take the test and move on. So, I really didn't know how to do my academics, they were just too advanced.

Looking back over her early school experiences, Martha contrasted in stark terms the insistence on college preparation she experienced in her primary school with the lackluster preparation she experienced in middle and high school. "I feel the counselors, my parents, the teachers, and how the L.A. Unified system is set up that they need to prepare the students more for higher education, even at a community college." Martha pointed to the extensive supports available to college students today, asking why they weren't available to her in high school.

> I've noticed since I've returned to [GMC] you have a lot of things that are available online. Like you have the support programs, you have the Student Learning Center, you are able to explore your passions, you're able to get academic advising and this type of stuff they need this at the high school level at LA Unified School District

Martha said this failure to prepare students for higher education ultimately sets them up for a very different result: "Because it seems like, okay, just like really like the bottom. Why? It seems like how the public education system is set up. It's set up for you to fail, and then you end up becoming incarcerated because of the lack, because a person's mindset, yes."

After dropping out of college, Martha said her life entered a period of "hibernation" that included enduring more than a decade of homelessness.

> I've been in hibernation since 2001. I was homeless from 2001 to 2013. So, then, I got into unhealthy relationship in 2013, got married and this unhealthy relationship led to my incarceration, but being incarcerated has actually saved my life. And I'm becoming a better me. And I'm happy that COVID's around because it's slowed things down, and I'm able to have more time to work on myself.

Now working her way towards release in a transitional reentry program, Martha is attending classes online at GMC, with the support of the ARISE program.

Martha said her motivations to attend college have changed since her first attempt out of high school.

> In the beginning in '94, I was raised by both of my parents and of course, they've had college education, and that's what it's been my whole life is "Knowledge is key." And so, of course, I went for my parents. And that's how I learned that that's how you can make

more money. I wanted to know what the college life was like, because I was a little at sea even though I traveled and went different places. Still, I was like a little secluded from the world. I didn't know a lot of what was going on and I wanted to not be under my parents' roof. So, that's another reason why I went to college and then I really enjoy learning. I enjoy networking. And that's why I went to in that I went to college in the beginning too to play basketball, and I thought that I could somewhere transfer and get a scholarship for basketball.

Transitioning out of incarceration has changed Martha's perspective on college.

> This time around I'm 45. I was interested when I was 40 before I was incarcerated, because I've been incarcerated since 2016. I was like "I'm 40, I need to get my life together. I have a [child]. And I need to be a good example to him and teach him things and share knowledge with him so he can not be in the position I was in at my age." Okay, so yes, so I needed to be a good example to my son because of course I wanted him to go to college. I wanted him to experience what I experienced but in a different light. Because now that I've had this experience in college, I know which way to guide him and direct him and it's like there's so much information online and there is so much support. And the fact that I'm into entrepreneurial studies and I saw the ARISE program and it's like, oh my gosh, you're working with formerly incarcerated people and then I've heard of Project Rebound. So, I definitely want to network, see where the void is and reach out to my community.

Martha said she discovered the ARISE program while browsing the college's website. She saw RG was online and made a virtual appointment to meet him. The facility limited their online conversation to texts, but that didn't stop RG from helping her.

> Oh, my gosh, it was just, he was just so open. He was a very informative. Like I've never done this whole Zoom meeting thing. And so, we, he's very patient because here, I can talk to you through a microphone but there, we can't do video. We can't do mic. So, he was very patient, and we just typed everything. I mean, I just typed everything, and he led me to how to register. He just showed me everything to actually become a student at [GMC] and he continues to reach out to me and let me know what workshops they're having but he just led me step by step into getting enrolled into school and that was beautiful.

Martha said the commitment demonstrated by the staff at ARISE has inspired her.

> I saw how much passion they had in helping and serving their community. So, I want to do something that they're doing. I want to network with them. I see how IG she's at Long Beach State, so it just really shows me, gave me, uh, just ambition to continue my education and that I'm not alone and that there is a program out there for us…So, if you have been incarcerated, you know, the road has not ended.

As a participant in a residential reentry program supervised by the CDCR, Martha has only been able to attend classes at GMC remotely. However, she can take only one class at a time, and access to the facility computer lab is limited. Nevertheless, the ARISE program has helped her navigate the college's support resources. ARISE helped her apply and register for classes. She

has attended workshops for Rising Scholars focused on career development and reentry, such as a workshop on perfecting one's "elevator pitch" for job interviews.

> Martha said has returned to college with a renewed purpose, inspired in part by her own desire to be useful and serve her community. Okay, actually what I'm fighting for is to grasp as many skills, tools, resources, knowledges that I can obtain throughout this lifetime and share that wealth of knowledge with whomever I come across. It's about sharing your story, your experience. And I just really, it's all about serving and I want to serve my community, especially the ones that have been incarcerated, and then I want to help.

Martha said her carceral experience allowed her to form community with other women, which gave her insights into how young women become incarcerated and how to prevent it.

> Since I've been in, I haven't been around this many women in my life and I did have a daughter while incarcerated. This is kind of why this whole thing went down. And now I know what to do and what not to do in raising her. So, I want to work with young ladies. So, I can prevent, um, the recidivism. Young ladies maybe from ages 9 to 12 and like I just I just want to know what's out there. Of course, I've been getting kind of close, and I just really want to be around people that have been formerly incarcerated so I can hear their stories so I can know where the void is. And, and, you know, stop this. Stop this thing from happening. Stop the recidivism.

Martha said she was inspired by the stories she heard from other incarcerated women to target pre-teen young women for intervention.

> From attending groups when I was in LA County jail, I was in a program that was a part of HealthRIGHT 360 called gender responsive rehabilitation. And so, in that program for two years at the county jail, I was able to hear people's stories and it's really about changing the behavior and then too that, a lot of the kids at that age at nine they started doing drugs. And I learned that when you start doing drugs, I remember in my day, you know, It was the DARE and you're the AA and everything but then being in group I learned like, oh my gosh, your brain stops growing. So, it's just a lot of knowledge that I've learned since I've been in group, if I feel that that's where that area needs to be touched between nine and 12 before they think that they know everything at, you know, 13. I think that too, when I was 12, just graduating from elementary school and so, I believe that that's a good age because at nine I was in fourth grade. I started learning cursive and then at 12, right before I got out there and into the world a little bit. So, I believe that that's a good age that you can kind of grasp and you're still willing to learn and they don't think that they know everything

Martha said she was earning an Entrepreneurial Studies certificate and she hoped to start a business that licenses t-shirt designs by formerly incarcerated women.

> I want formerly incarcerated women of color to design their logos and to license their shirts, and they will have like a sense of ownership, a sense of signature, and I believe through this, this will kind of stop the recidivism. This will give women of color, ah, self-worth.

Martha also describes being inspired by her desire to help her own son navigate college better than she did. Martha wants to be an example for her son so that he gets a college degree. "I

want him to experience what I experienced but in a different light. Because now that I've had this experience in college, I know which way to guide him and direct him."

Looking back over her experiences, Martha said she has a new mindset going into her plans for college.

> I'm just more willing to, to fight in I'm walking to see through all my life experiences, from 2001 to now I've just been a totally different mind frame. And there's no excuse for me to not educate myself. There's just so, so much, so much out there. So, many resources, you just really have to go one by one to grasp them and obtain them. So, it's just really like just the wealth of knowledge that I find through the websites and that I've been introduced to. I've attended different seminars. I'm reading more. And definitely, there's just really no excuse right now and I have so much time on my hands. And I'm trying to get into the habit of being structured and disciplined more. So. There's just a wealth of information out there. That's all I have for school, and I'm just really want to take advantage of it.
>
> As far as returning, I needed to do something with my life. I needed to feel like I've accomplished something now that I am aware of things. I feel that if you you're responsible for what you know. So, because I am self-aware now, I need to take charge and I can't be stagnant. And there's a wealth of information out there. And I want to share my story and I just want to help others and I want to serve, and you have to have skills, tools, resources to know how to do that. And how to help others you have to help yourself first before you can help others. So, that's why since I've, I've been so isolated for so many years. Now I'm ready to come out of my cocoon and blossom and serve.

Conclusion

These six narratives gave us a window into the storied lives of Rising Scholars pursuing their goal of a college degree. While these stories were not representative of all formerly incarcerated/system-impacted community college students, they did offer a counter-narrative that complicates the neoliberal narrative of college education and reentry that is driven by solely assessing recidivism rates. And while these qualitative narratives are not generalizable, there are enough overlapping themes and patterns in their narratives that I can hope we can gain some insights from their stories. The next section of this chapter will focus on how these themes and patterns address the three research questions of the study.

Research Question 1: College Experiences of Rising Scholars

The first research questions asked about the experiences of Rising Scholars in college. All participants were required to attend college remotely online through the Spring and Fall of 2021, due to COVID-19 protocols mandated by the State of California and administered by the County of Los Angeles Health Department and the administration of GMC. Although each participant's early educational experience leading up to college was unique, an unexpected thread emerged: most of the participants enrolled in college and then dropped out prior to their incarceration. As a result, the analysis of the findings for question 1 needed to be separated into two parts: experiences with college before incarceration, and experiences with college after incarceration.

Early Educational Experiences and the First Attempt at College

Most of the participants described positive early school experiences. Dre and Martha, for example, both attended private schools with a strong academic focus. Dre's grandparents not

only paid his tuition, but they also invited him and his brother to live with them from third grade through high school. Martha attended an all-Black private school until sixth grade, which she credits for providing her a strong academic foundation that she relied on all the way to college. Four of the participants participated in some form of advanced instruction in public school (i.e., Magnet school, GATE, AP classes). Martha attended magnet programs through high school, but she said she never felt challenged like she had in private school. While Penelope did not describe attending GATE or Magnet classes, she recounted a story of winning the regional prize for summer reading at the local public library the summer after third grade. George attended GATE classes during third grade until his parents moved and he could not continue with the program. Janet described herself as an excellent student who attended GATE classes through eighth grade. Janet said the found a peer group there that helped with her social development. In high school, Janet took AP classes and participated in student leadership clubs after school, including a college-prep mentoring program. Out of the entire cohort, only one participant, Natalie, described no positive early educational experiences (she later attempted college nonetheless).

Most participants also described a successful secondary school career. Four out of the six participants reported completing high school. George reported completing his GED in prison, and Penelope reported dropping out of high school after giving birth to her son, but she took the GED exam later when returning to college. Educational experiences like these are rare, but not uncommon among formerly incarcerated college students. Livingston and Miller (2014) reported that discrepancies in educational opportunity tied to differences in race, class, and geographic residence impacted the participation in post-secondary correctional education. In a nutshell, the people most likely to succeed in college before their incarceration often benefitted most from

college education during and after incarceration. The stories recorded in this study would seem to align with Livingston and Miller's findings. But this picture is incomplete.

Dropping Out and Early Trauma

Despite the academic promise suggested in their primary and secondary schooling, four out of six participants reported dropping out of college early in their academic career. This is not unheard of among formerly incarcerated students. Livingston and Miller (2014) noted that a small but measurable percentage of their participants had prior post-secondary experience (i.e., "some college"). The authors did not specify whether their participants dropped out, but neither did they specify that they graduated. But in this study fully two-thirds of the participants attended college once before incarceration. At first glance, the reported reasons for withdrawal seemed to be too variable to make any sense. Yet each participant told stories of traumatic impact at or around the same time as their first attempt at college: Dre lost his grandfather to cancer in his senior year of high school; Martha experienced homelessness shortly after she dropped out; Natalie survived years of negative confrontations in school and spent much of her senior year in "in-house" suspension. Janet reported a domestic violence relationship in which she tried to take college classes during the day so her husband wouldn't notice. Table 4 shows the reported experiences of the participants, sorted by form of high school completion and college attempts. To gain more insight into these first attempts I also included their stated reasons for withdrawing from college and indicated whether they reported any traumatic events around the period of completing high school and starting college. Four out of six participants reported withdrawing from college once before. Five out of six reported traumatic life events. With one exception, those traumatic events occurred either before or in proximity to the participants' dropping out of

college. It is difficult to determine to what extent the experience of trauma correlates with dropping out of college (with one significant exception), but descriptions of both form a common thread for most of the participants before they were incarcerated. Trauma will return as a topic in the participants' experiences as they return to college after incarceration.

Table 4

Precarceral Educational Experiences and Reporting of Trauma

Participant	Early Schooling	Secondary	College	Reason for Withdrawal	Trauma
Janet	Public/GATE	Diploma	CC	Domestic violence & pregnancy	Y
Martha	Private, Magnet	Diploma	CC	Not academically prepared; Lost eligibility to play basketball	Y
Dre	Public/Magnet	Diploma	CC	Lack of focus; "Didn't use resources"	Y
Natalie	Public	Diploma	CC	Loss of focus; Conflict w/parents	Y
George	Public/GATE	GED	PSCE	Transferred to community college	N
Penelope	Public, Maternity HS, Homeschool	GED	N/A	Pregnancy (2 children)	Y

Note: This table compiles the reported educational experiences of the participants prior to incarceration, including whether they earned a high school diploma and the reported reasons for dropping out of college. These experiences are cross-referenced with descriptions for trauma. Key: CC—Community College; GED—Test of General Education Development; PSCE—Post-Secondary Correctional Education.

The Return to College: Experiences of Rising Scholars

This section will discuss the second part of Question 1: participants' stories of returning to college after incarceration, their different motivations to return to college, the barriers they faced navigating college as formerly incarcerated students, and the support they received from faculty and staff on campus. Since the second research question focuses specifically on the ARISE program, any stories related to the reentry support program will be discussed in the next section. This section will finish with a discussion of parenthood and trauma, two topics that emerged multiple times in the interviews.

Motivation

All participants expressed a powerful desire to succeed in college that formed before they enrolled in classes. The participants' comments on motivation centered around two themes:

succeeding for the sake of their children and serving the community by helping others. Often these motivations overlapped and fed each other as the participants described their inspiration for succeeding in college.

"Something that my children can be proud of." Five out of six of the participants reported that parenthood played a large role in their motivation to succeed in college. For the women in this study, parenthood came with the additional challenge of raising children without a partner. Nevertheless, they were even more motivated to succeed in college. Janet described how she was raising her children without a father or the support of her immediate family, which had ostracized her after her incarceration: "Not only do I need to be a parent, but I also need to be a good role model in their life." Janet imagined her daughters rewriting her life as a story of redemption: "Mom made mistakes in the past. But mom learned from those mistakes, and she redeemed herself, and like she's come a long way and she is a different person than what she was years ago."

Martha said she wants to use her experience in college to guide her own son through the process. "Because now that I've had this experience in college, I know which way to guide him and direct him." Natalie credits her son as the impetus for her return to college: "If I'm being completely honest, if it hadn't been for my son and me needing to provide a life for him, I probably wouldn't have gone back to school for a law degree."

George described his paternal motivation as a competition with his college-age daughters. During the interview George stated he was in a race to earn his master's degree before they finished their bachelor's degrees. But at the end of the interview, George described his vision of the future through the lens of his daughters' eyes:

> I'm going to graduate and going to grad school, get a master's degree, and then I can finally have an actual career and have something that my children can be proud of, like my children have a real dad, not somebody who I don't tell my friends about because it's embarrassing.

What first appears as a friendly inter-generational rivalry between family members takes on a deeper meaning as George uses his education to "rebuild" himself and his relationship with his daughters.

"I never left my community." Another theme that often overlapped with parental motivation was a desire to serve the larger community. Four of the participants (Martha, Dre, Janet & Penelope) discussed their motivation to succeed in terms related to helping their community. Dre spoke of wanting to be an example to young people in his community to honor the support his own family showed him during his 17 years in prison. Dre said, "So, that's where I'm dedicated myself to that same spirit to give be able to put myself in a position where I can help other people. Yes, I'm most definitely fighting for the people who are coming behind me and the people who look up to me as a mentor or just an example of how to live." Martha said that her incarceration introduced her to a community of women she did not have outside of prison. Based on her experiences on the inside, she plans to serve her community by working with young women between the ages of 9 to 12 to help them avoid prison. Penelope decided to return to college so she could show the teens she mentors that getting a higher education is possible. She said she wants her success to show that everyone deserves a second chance, especially people who are system-impacted. "I want to live in a beautiful community where I don't look around and see people cycling in and out of prison doors." Janet said she is pursuing a

psychology degree so she can redeem herself by serving her community. She said she draws the strength to succeed from her own pain, and "from the pain of my own community." Significantly, Janet said she does not see her return to college as a return to her community but rather as a recommitment to her community in the face of adversity:

> I am going to college because I've never left my community. I've stayed within my community. And I want to continue to give back to my community.

Janet credits the ARISE program as one of the few groups that opened a door to her, and one of her long-range goals is to bring a program like ARISE from Los Angeles into Orange County.

Pregnancy as a Turning Point

Many participants reported that pregnancy acted as a turning point in their academic careers. Penelope dropped out of high school after her first child was born. Janet dropped out of Santa Ana College when she got pregnant at 20. Martha gave birth while incarcerated, and she credits the network of women who supported her during that time as an inspiration to finish her degree and help other young women like her. After her partner left, Natalie found herself at 35 raising a newborn solo, at which time she decided she needed to return to college. Based on the participants descriptions in the interviews, none of these pregnancies were planned. For some participants, pregnancy derailed their initial plans to attend college, while others found their pregnancy a call to action to return to college for their children's sake. Although the individual stories vary, all the women in this study experienced pregnancy in a way that changed the educational trajectory of their lives, for worse and for better.

Trauma and its Consequences

Trauma emerged as a notable theme in the interviews. Nearly all the participants reported traumatic events during secondary school which correlated with their first attempt at attending college. Upon returning to college, three participants spoke about coping with traumatic experiences related to college or reentry. Janet and Natalie described struggling with feelings of shame and stigma as they navigated a return to college dating back to their first attempts at a college education. Penelope talked about how her experiences of growing up in a system-impacted family continue to affect her as she copes with the trauma of her own child being incarcerated. Whether caused by the act of incarceration itself or events prior to their incarceration, trauma and its effects are a significant factor in the stories of these Rising Scholars.

At age 15, Janet said she was "groomed" into a "domestic violence relationship" with a 20-year-old. Shortly after her 18th birthday, Janet married and found herself progressively isolated from the support of family and friends by her husband. To make matters worse, her husband did not want Janet attending college for religious reasons, and her in-laws backed him. Janet resisted this pressure, signing up for classes at the local college during the day, but she often dropped the class rather than risk a confrontation with her abusive husband. As a result, Janet said she completed only four courses in two years of attempts: "if you were to look at my transcript, you'll see a bunch of W's. But if you want to know the background story, it's because I was involved in a domestic violence relationship." Janet said she felt "isolated" and "hopeless" at the time, unable to find any support outside of her husband's insular circle. After Janet got out of the relationship and started planning a return to college, she said she felt ashamed to return to

campus. “I was like, how can I go back to school where I withdrew all these classes? Like what are they gonna think of me as a student?” Looking for an alternative to her local college, Janet found the ARISE program at GMC.

Natalie said she was “never good at school.” Recalling her early school experiences, Natalie described a series of conflicts with teachers and disciplinary administrators throughout her secondary school career. Her stepfather wanted Natalie to attend college, but Natalie was stuck with no guidance. “I just know that I didn’t know enough about college or how to apply or anything like that to be able to move forward. And I was, I was scared and embarrassed to ask for help.” Throughout her interview, Natalie used the word “overwhelmed” to describe this feeling of needing assistance while fearing to ask for help. Speaking about her current experiences in college, Natalie said she has difficulty participating in traditional forms of academic support due to a fear of being stigmatized as a formerly incarcerated student who is not only older than fellow students but also is out of touch with digital commonplaces like emojis and communicating online. “It’s hard to be a part of a normal study group with normal college students when um, again, I don’t want to have to answer questions. I don’t want them. Well, why can’t you do this? Or why is this harder? I don’t, it’s embarrassing, and it’s scary.” Natalie said she counted herself “lucky that I had the guts” to reach out to the ARISE program at all.

Penelope described a different kind of trauma related to her experiences with incarceration and reentry. Penelope described herself as “extremely system-impacted,” growing up in a household marked by incarceration and drug addiction, a pattern of incarceration that continued with herself and her son. The stories she told about her early education revolved around navigating the impact of her parents’ experiences with incarceration and drug addiction

on school rather than any teacher or subject. Penelope said she even faked stomach aches during the school day just so the school nurse would call home and confirm her mom had not overdosed that day. Penelope insisted in the interview that she didn't want anyone to feel sorry for what she experienced as a child. However, it's also worth noting that Penelope did not attempt college after high school, and the cycle of incarceration that had impacted her and her parents continued with her son. Nevertheless, she realized she was still coping with the stress of her trauma, when she learned at an ARISE-sponsored "meetup" that incarceration could cause symptoms of PTSD in formerly incarcerated or system-impacted people. Penelope said that she always felt nauseous every time she went to visit her son in prison. She had attributed her symptoms to the change in climate, but now she said she recognized that her body is manifesting symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Thanks to ARISE arranging the meeting, she realized she "wasn't alone" with these feelings, and she understood better how carceral stress was impacting her health.

College Barriers: Collateral Consequences of Reentry

Participants reported some barriers that were uniquely tied to the challenges of reentry after incarceration. George's story emphasized the precariousness he faced as a reentering Rising Scholar transitioning from a carceral system that is highly structured to an unfamiliar college system that is informally structured and self-directed. Although college lacks the top-down power structure of the carceral system, and the threat of violence that ensued if one did not comply with orders, navigating college is no less perilous for the uninitiated, at least academically. Students are expected to manage their class workloads, meet registration deadlines, financial aid applications, tuition payment deadlines, add/drop and withdraw deadlines, and more, all on their own self-directed volition. And failure to navigate this calendar

of pitfalls could result in the loss of GPA, registered classes, funding, or even attendance in college entirely. George was keenly aware of this risk: “I could easily miss a semester, because I forgot to, you know, turn in the FAFSA by this date, or I missed a deadline, or I’m still short classes because they didn’t sit down with me to discuss my education plan.” But the ARISE counselors did more than introduce George to navigating college; they shepherded him through it. “They did that. They kept tabs on me, and most importantly, if I would send a text with a question, within the hour, I would know that I have a response,” George said.

Some of the challenges emerged as Rising Scholars navigated attending college with the realities of reentering the community after incarceration. Penelope described herself as “extremely system-impacted”: her parents were in and out of incarceration during her childhood, and her son is currently incarcerated. As a result, much of her time was taken up navigating the schedule of court appearances and appointments related to her son’s case as well as her own. These dates conflicted with her class schedule. Penelope identified another challenge in seeking higher education during parole: coordinating between the school and the parole/probation officer. Penelope noticed that many class syllabi only listed the on-ground hours of a course without disclosing the number of hours of work the student was expected to do outside of class. As an example: a 3-unit class at a California community college lists the three hours of lecture time, but students are also be expected to complete up to six hours of work outside of class, and that assumption is built into the estimated course time in the Course Outline of Record. If a syllabus does not explicitly state this expectation, Penelope said, then parole officers might expect FIS to use that time working instead of studying.

College Support

Despite the significant challenges and barriers complicating their educational journey, the participants reported multiple positive experiences in their college career so far. Experiences with the ARISE support program will be reported shortly in the next section of this chapter discussing research question 2. It should be noted that direct in-person interactions on college grounds was limited by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the college's shift to online teaching and other distancing measures mandated at the time by the state of California, the County of Los Angeles, and the administration of GMC. Table 5 shows the frequency and percentage of the participants reporting supportive interactions with different resources on campus not directly related to the ARISE program. Between two and three participants referenced positive experiences with several student support programs, including tutoring services, financial aid, academic counseling, EOPS/CARE, and SRC. Five out of six participants spoke directly about the impact of a faculty member. Although each participant described a

Table 5

Participant References to College Support

College Support	N	%
Faculty	N=5	83.3
SRC	N=1	16.66
Counseling	N=3	50
Tutoring	N=3	50
EOPS/CARE	N=3	50
Financial Aid	N=3	50

Note: This table shows the number of participants who referenced college support systems, sorted by provider.

different mix of supports, their stories overlapped in their descriptions of the way that the faculty and staff at GMC supported the Rising Scholars. Penelope's story about a visit to the Math tutoring lab illustrated this point. Penelope was having trouble during a math tutoring session. "I

just, it wasn't just working between the tutor and I and I, you know, of course, I wasn't going to be rude or anything. I just must have been sitting there, maybe looking complexed." Then someone new sat across from Penelope and started talking to her about her problems with math. He noticed she was using the wrong calculator for her calculations, and he immediately found her a replacement. "He said, 'Well, let me let me go back to my office really quick. I'll be right back.' And he said, 'Here. I'll let you use this for this whole semester.'" Penelope did not learn until later that she had been talking with the dean of the Math Department. Dre had a similar experience of feeling included when he attended the "Welcome Day" student orientation before the semester started. Dre said "it was a great experience" seeing all the different tents offering resources to relieve his stress about starting the semester.

> I just felt like it was just walking on a campus and how many people had tents set up who were actually welcoming me to the campus and having so many different opportunities to feed off of, just, you know, get my career started in college and also to propel me to the end to help me see the finish line.

Dre described other interactions with college staff that were similarly welcoming, including a conversation with a member of the counseling staff after the Counseling Center had closed, and a conversation with one of the diving coaches about mentoring kids.

Faculty

Five out of six participants reported positive interactions with their professors supporting their college education. Dre talked about how he appreciated the helpful design and pacing of the online English class he took during the COVID pandemic. "I just liked the way the professors set up their curriculum to where the models are already there, you can see what's coming next and

the purpose of each assignment." Penelope said her English professor challenged her to write better but in a way that forced her to confront her own commitment to success:

> She would expect more, and she said what she expected but she also gave you the tools on how to reach those expectation. So, it was like fighting against myself. Do I really want this grade? Or do I really want to succeed, or do I just not want it?

Other professors created positive memories with Penelope as well. A Sociology professor gracefully encouraged Penelope to revise her paper once more rather than turn it in, saying:

> "Okay, well, I'm gonna push you a little bit more." He's like, "you could turn this in, but I encourage you to take that back and think about it a little bit more." And so, I remember when he did that, like just the grace that he did, you know, and I did.

Another English professor introduced noticed a discrepancy between Penelope's in-class participation and her performance on tests. The professor introduced Penelope to the staff at the Special Resource Center (campus disabled student services, aka SRC) who arranged support and accommodations for her classes. Penelope said this referral made it possible for her to graduate with honors. Even Natalie, a student whose entire pre-college career was marked by conflict with her teachers, had high praise for her college instructors: "My teachers are amazing. I meet with them and, um, you know, see where I'm going and where I'm at…they've helped me every step of the way." It is worth noting, however, that at the time of the interview Natalie had not yet felt comfortable enough to disclose her status as a formerly incarcerated student to any of her professors.

Taken together, the participants' descriptions of their interactions with faculty and staff underscored the importance of developing Rising Scholar allies throughout the institution. From student orientation to the tutoring labs to the classroom, GMC's staff and faculty welcomed the Rising Scholars in this study, pushed them to excel, and made sure they had the resources they needed to succeed, whether it was access to a scientific calculator or access to disabled student services. These interactions reinforced the support provided by ARISE.

Conclusion

So, what can be said about these Rising Scholars' experience in a community college? Most of the participants started their educational career in encouraging environments that supported their own academic ability. Most of the participants attempted to attend college once before, often directly out of high school. For many of the women in this cohort, pregnancy was a significant turning point that either led them to drop out of college or motivated them to return to college. The Rising Scholars in this study pursued an education while they simultaneously navigated the demands of parole and probation, either for themselves or for others in their family. Single parenthood was a significant challenge for most of the female participants as they pursued their degrees. While incarceration itself was a traumatic event, some participants carried additional traumas from their earlier education and family life that have continued to impact their educational career.

Despite these diverse and complex challenges, all the participants were highly motivated to succeed. Sometimes that motivation was rooted in the students' desire to be a role model for their own children, while others wanted to help others in their community avoid the trap of prison and recidivism. And in the face of their challenges, these Rising Scholars described being

welcomed to their campus, supported by a wide range of programs, and warmly pushed by supportive faculty to help them reach their goals. The next section will examine the experiences of the participants with a dedicated reentry support program.

Research Question 2: Experiences With a Reentry Support Program

The second research question asked about the experiences of Rising Scholars with a reentry support program.

The ARISE program at Gordon Manor College was staffed by a quartet of counselors and success coaches. RG, the coordinator and program director, was a success coach who stepped into the program leadership role when the counselor who wrote the winning program grant took a job at another college. IG, a success coach, and formerly incarcerated student herself, was working on her master's degree in sociology at a nearby California State University campus. YR and VF were success coaches with ARISE. Yet these four counselors, in just a few years, have created a support program that attracted reentering Rising Scholars to GMC from areas far beyond the district's service area. In just the participant cohort for this study, ARISE inspired one Rising Scholar to change his parole location from Victorville, CA to Los Angeles just to attend GMC. Another participant stated she chose GMC because she could not find any programs comparable to ARISE in central Orange County, where she resides. A third attended GMC online while in a pre-release transitional housing program in San Diego County. What drew so many from so far away? This section will discuss how the participants experienced working with the ARISE program and its counselors.

At first glance, the ARISE program appeared to offer services just like other the counseling and support programs on campus. Participants described ARISE assisting them by

navigating a variety of support services on campus. Table 6 shows the range of assistance the participants described in conjunction with the ARISE program. Since this study focused on self-described experiences of Rising Scholars, it is possible that some participants received additional forms of support other than what was described, but these were the supports that stayed in the memory of the participants and were reported in the interviews. Nearly all participants received assistance arranging their enrollment and financial aid. But in other ways, the support described from ARISE was quite varied and individualized. Two participants needed help with their book vouchers. Two others required assistance navigating the FAFSA application process. Two noted ARISE helping them with mental and emotional support. Three described receiving academic support. One described

Table 6

Navigational Assistance by Support Program

Support	Enrollment Assistance	FAFSA	Financial Aid	Book Voucher	Mental Health	Academic Support	Housing	Technology Assistance
Dre	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
George	X	X	X					
Janet	X		X	X				
Martha	X					X		X
Natalie	X		X	X				
Penelope			X		X	X		

Note: This table shows the breadth of navigational support offered by ARISE, organized by participant and type of campus support.

assistance in arranging housing, and two described receiving assistance learning how to use computers and the online conferencing application Zoom.

"How Can We Help?"

What stands out in the participants' descriptions of their interactions with ARISE is not just the range of support services the counselors navigated. Rather, it is the interactions

themselves between these Rising Scholars and RG, IG, YR and VF that were significant. A quick look at the most frequent keywords in the descriptions of ARISE provides some clues. Table 7 shows the most frequently used keywords in the interviews (only words used ten times or more were included). The one word the participants used most in conjunction with ARISE was "help," which appeared 42 times in the participants' narratives about the ARISE program, far more than any other word they used in discussions of the program. The next most frequent words were the

Table 7

Keyword Frequency in Support Program Descriptions

Keyword	Frequency
Help	42
RG	16
IG/IG	14
Enroll	13
Everything	13
Financial	10

Note: Frequency determined by a keyword search of the combined interview transcripts of all the participants.

names of "RG" and "IG," the program director and the formerly incarcerated counselor, respectively. Next in frequency were some of the specific forms of support, such as enrollment and financial aid (mentioned 13 and 10 times, respectively. However, the word "everything" occurred just as frequently as "enrollment," each at 13 times. These results suggest that the interactions with the people running the ARISE program may be more significant to the participants than the student aid programs they benefitted from.

As noted earlier, the word "help" appeared more than twice as much as any other word. Natalie said, "they've helped me with absolutely everything. Everything I need, they're always texting me." George said, "So, the fact that there was a satellite program within the college that

specifically met my needs, it was instrumental in me continuing my education." But the individual stories give a more nuanced picture of the exact nature and manner of this "help."

Martha was researching college programs from the computer lab in the transitional reentry facility where she was preparing for her release date. She noticed the ARISE acronym on the campus website and started messaging with RG, who happened to be online at the same time. The facility computers had no microphone or video capabilities, so RG and Martha conducted the entire meeting through typed messages. Martha said, "So, he was just very patient, and we just typed everything. I mean, I just typed everything, and he led me through how to register. He just showed me everything to actually become a student at GMC…he just led me step by step into getting enrolled into school and that was beautiful."

George had already earned 80 units of college credit inside prison, and he was eager to continue his studies as quickly as possible upon his release. He had missed the deadline for the local CSU campus, but the Project Rebound program for that school suggested he attend a community college until he could apply again. George was arranging his enrollment with his brother's help on the outside in-between visits and phone calls. George's brother started talking about a guy named "RG" from GMC who was helping get George enrolled and registered for the next semester, even though the two had never met yet. With RG's help, George successfully enrolled at GMC while transitioning out of prison. "RG was a godsend. I was able to do a smooth transition. I got out of prison, three weeks later I'm in community college."

After her release from jail, Natalie had become pregnant and was now facing raising a child on her own and the isolation of COVID-19 social restrictions. After living virtually isolated for over two years, Natalie was thinking about returning to college. She had attended an online

workshop about enrolling at GMC and she ran across a reference to ARISE on the college website, so she emailed them and started talking to IG and VF. When it was time to register for classes, IG called Natalie and asked her, "Are you ready to get enrolled? Because it's time." As Natalie and IG discussed her semester schedule on the phone, Natalie's son, Ryder "started throwing a fit," and Natalie couldn't stay on the call. IG told Natalie "I will take care of this." The counselor completed Natalie's enrollment for her and sent Natalie her new schedule by email. While GMC offered traditional student support programs, Natalie knew she needed this more intrusive form support. "ARISE really steps in there and they really handle what that is for you, and they make sure they hold your hand through the process, which is what I need right now."

Dre was living in Victorville, CA, after his release from prison. He planned to attend the local community college. Then he learned about the ARISE program, and he relocated his parole to Los Angeles so he could attend GMC. Due to the difficulty of people with criminal convictions obtaining housing, Dre moved back into his grandmother's house, which also allowed him to spend more time studying instead of working to pay rent. Dre contacted ARISE about three weeks before the semester started. He met with the counselors in person during "Welcome Week" (campus student orientation), where they sat down with Dre and walked him through the registration and enrollment process, including showing him how to use a computer, send an email, and attach documents. This personal touch did not end after their first meeting. A few weeks later, IG used her contacts at the financial aid office to discover that Dre had forgotten to click one button on the application. Without IG's intervention, Dre's financial aid would have been delayed indefinitely, requiring him to return to work instead of attending college classes.

Janet met VF through a conversation at church and enrolled at GMC with her help. The first semester was a difficult transition for Janet. She needed about $900 worth of textbooks, but the school had no book vouchers listed for her. While she met with IG and VF to find money for books, Janet fell behind in her English class because she did not have the books for several weeks. Janey didn't until late in the semester whether she would pass English or not, but IG and VF stayed in contact with Janet throughout the semester, updating their two-semester schedule moment to moment. In the end, Janet passed English, and she said she feels better prepared for her second semester now after narrowly surviving the first.

Penelope grew up in a family severely impacted by incarceration. She had been incarcerated, as had her parents before her, and her son is currently incarcerated. Every time Penelope traveled to visit her son, she got sick. Even though she was looking forward to seeing him, headaches and nausea would set in during the trip up and the days after. Previously, she assumed the change in climate or elevation had something to do with the symptoms. Then Penelope attended an online workshop sponsored by ARISE about PTSD and the trauma of incarceration. The speaker spoke about how trauma affects people mentally and physically, and the experiences formerly incarcerated people may feel as they deal with that trauma. Then Penelope made a connection. After listening to the speaker and others share their experiences with post-carceral trauma, Penelope realized the symptoms she felt when visiting her son were related to her own feelings of trauma. Thanks to ARISE and the speaker they brought to campus, Penelope began to understand what was happening to her: "Talking about and realizing that you're not alone and these things do impact your life and your body…so happy that we had that."

"A Program Out There for Us":

These stories of ARISE assisting the Rising Scholars placed the data in Table 6 in a greater context. Each Rising Scholar required their own combination of resources to succeed in college. Furthermore, each story above shows the counselors at ARISE—RG, IG, YR and VF—reaching out to their students in ways that go beyond conventional counseling support. Illuminated by these stories, "help" seems an underrated word. The counselors at ARISE tailored their assistance to meet each Rising Scholars specific needs, often beyond the traditional borders of staff support. From these stories of extraordinary outreach, a few threads emerge. Based on the reported interactions in the interviews, ARISE made a positive impact on the participants by expressing authentic care, offering authentic support from people with experience in reentry, and connecting the students to the resources they needed.

Care, Sympathy, and Empathy

One thread that emerged from the interviews is expressions of authentic care. All the participants remarked that the ARISE counselors treated them with respect, an occurrence that was noteworthy in the experience of many participants. Janet said, "They actually saw me as a human and not as a case number or another booking number." Dre said talking with IG "wasn't like a recruitment either, it was just great human to human connection." At ARISE, this respect was coupled with an intense level of engagement between counselor and student. Every participant spoke about contacting RG or one of the other counselors with a question and receiving an answer almost immediately. Natalie said, "It doesn't matter what it is, I can text or call them, and they get back to me right away. And they always seem to have a solution." Martha said, "It's just like they're really open. If I have any questions, they're like, you know, you can

talk to someone." Even when they did not have questions, the counselors would reach out proactively to make sure they were progressing. Penelope spoke of IG "working closely connected" with her as they planned her educational plan, "making sure I was on track." Natalie said that in addition to arranging financial support, "They have been, you know, hold[ing] my hand through everything to help me make my schedule." Dre said the counselors "connected" with him in "kind of a friendship way" that showed "a lot of care there, a lot of sympathy, a lot of empathy." Taken together, these comments would suggest that these warmly intrusive interventions by the program are an expression of authentic care.

Authenticity

All the participants found IG's history as a formerly incarcerated student an important part of the credibility of the program. Dre said, "Just talking to IG, and hearing her story and her same experiences of being formerly incarcerated, I didn't even look at any other colleges. And I just told her, 'Man, you know what? I'm gonna enroll here.'" Janet said, "She makes it so she can relate to all of us. And we can, as a person coming into this program and knowing, just knowing that there's someone in their staff that has lived and walked in our shoes, it just makes us trust that program." Participants also found IG's pursuit of a master's degree in sociology inspirational and a validation of their own academic goals. Martha said, "I see how IG, she's at [California State University] Long Beach so it just really shows me, just gave me ambition to continue my education." For Dre, seeing IG pursuing a master's degree while working at ARISE encouraged him to persist in his own goals for higher education: "Connecting with someone who has the same goals that I have and she's ahead of me already in the master's program, so she knows where I am right now." Martha also found IG's graduate work inspiring: "It just really

shows me, gave me uh just ambition to continue my education, and that I'm not alone and that there is a program out there for us . . . so if you have been incarcerated, you know, the road has not ended."

"Connecting The Dots": Navigational Support

In addition to expressing care and building trust, the ARISE program served the Rising Scholars by activating navigational capital to "connect" them to whatever support they needed, even if that required networking beyond the conventional boundaries of the program. Natalie said, "I can't tell you the amount of times that, um, when I'm overwhelmed or when I need to get something done, I reach out to them and they're like, well, here's what we can do. Let me get you to this person or to this person." Instead of merely offering information and advice, the ARISE counselors acted as navigators to coordinate with multiple entities to find solutions to each student's unique challenges. Janet called this enthusiastic navigation "connecting the dots." RG arranged George's transfer from PSCE to community college while he was still incarcerated. They showed Dre how to use the school computer systems and communicated through staff back channels to troubleshoot his financial aid application. They registered Natalie for her so she could focus on her child at a critical moment. They patiently guided Martha through her enrollment, text message by text message, until she was registered. They met repeatedly with Janet as she struggled through her first semester back in college. They helped Penelope recognize how her own post-carceral trauma was affecting her when she visited her son in prison.

Altogether, the ARISE counselors used their connections across multiple support programs, including Housing support, financial aid, EOPS/CARE, and mental health/student

wellness to help these Rising Scholars navigate their return to college. George said the support of the ARISE encouraged him to persist in his education.

> It was encouraging to be like, okay, then yeah, I got this. I can, I can continue to be a student. No matter my age, no matter my background, no matter if I was formerly incarcerated. Like, I can still be a student and I can still have an opportunity to have an education.

These Rising Scholars demonstrated they were highly motivated before returning to college. The ARISE program enabled this motivation by taking an intensely personal approach to providing navigational assistance for these Rising Scholars. Furthermore, the program developed trust with their students through expressions of authentic care, while including a formerly incarcerated student as a counselor elevated their authenticity. Finally, the program promoted student success with their unconditional "connecting the dots" approach to procuring whatever support the Rising Scholars needed. In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss how the participants perceived their own academic self-narrative.

Research Question 3: How Rising Scholars See Themselves in College

The third research question investigated the self-perception of Rising Scholars as they returned to college. The purpose of this question was to focus on how these Rising Scholars constructed their own meaning out of their experience. Or, to put it more simply, what was the self-narrative of these formerly incarcerated students? This section specifically focused on the participants' responses that addressed the elements of the desistance framework: turning points, lifelong process of change, identity transformation, and desistance from criminalized activities. As always, not every participant addressed each of these elements, but each participant did offer

enough of a response to suggest an overall theme to their own storytelling. The six participants expressed several "markers of desistance" in their narratives. Table 8 shows a compilation of key elements of the desistance framework and the number of participants who demonstrated these elements in their narrative. Five out of six participants spoke about ways their lives were changing as they pursued their college education. Six out of six participants identified significant turning points in their lives. Six out of six participants used language that suggested they were

Table 8

Markers of Desistance in Participant's Self-Narratives

Markers of Desistance	N	%	Selected Phrases
Process of Change	N = 5	83.3	"Joy that the Lord has given me resilience" "Things change within you" "I am self-aware now, I need to take charge and I can't be stagnant" "It's granted me a level of knowledge base" "Work in progress" "A transitional stage"
Turning Points	N = 6	100	"I wanted to do something that fulfilled me" "Give my daughter a better future" "Dedicated myself to that same spirit" "I had never taken anything seriously, including myself"
Rewriting Narrative	N = 6	100	"Thriving in the waves" "Open the doors to those that come after me" "Mom redeemed herself" "Ready to come out of my cocoon and blossom" "The old lady going to school" "The future looks bright and that's new"
Desistance	N = 4	66.64	"Deserve a second chance," "breaking that curse" "Stay in focus and sticking to my plan" "Break the chain," "I was meant to do stuff like this," "I can show them this is how I got it"

Note: This table shows different markers of desistance sorted by type and the number of participants who referenced them.

rewriting their internal self-narrative. And four out of six used terms that related to desistance and recidivism. While the narratives demonstrated that the process of life course change began long before these Rising Scholars entered college, enrolling in college is offering many of the participants the means to make their motivation in support of change into meaningful degrees and careers, with the support of the ARISE program.

Writing Their Own Story: Narratives of Desistance by Rising Scholars

The following short narratives summarize each participant's expressions of markers of desistance. Longer excerpts of the interviews as they relate to desistance are available in Appendix E.

George: A Work in Progress

George described three turning points in his story before college: his exposure to an academically supportive environment in his third grade GATE class; the turn away from academic life during middle school; and his decision to rebuild his life during incarceration. Looking back now, George said he saw himself as "somebody who wasted their ability." He said, "growing up in the ghetto" offered limited opportunities besides gangs and drugs, and he "basically became the one thing that I knew that I was better than." By comparison, prison "was a relief," as it allowed George to remove himself from gang life and drug addiction and start to rebuild his life.

George said that as he rebuilt his life, he became more and more concerned about the effect his incarceration was having on his daughters. "What could they be going through? What's their experience? How have I failed them as a father?" One of the first classes George took in prison was a course in Child Development, which gave him insights into his daughters' experiences. The college classwork George was doing brought back memories of being in the GATE class, and George rediscovered that he was good at academic work. "I was meant to do stuff like this. I should have been doing it a long time ago, instead of going to gangs and everything that goes along with them." All told, George earned 80 units of college credit in

prison before transferring to GMC. He is continuing his education at a nearby California State University campus, where he is a member of Project Rebound.

Comparing his current experiences to his past, George described himself as a "work in progress." Today, he sees most of the "street smarts" he accrued from gang life as no longer useful: "The foundation is applicable, but you can't put that in a resume." In contrast, George said he's "gaining actual knowledge" in college: "I know how the brain functions. I know how societies, the systems in society function, and everything that goes with that, so it's granted me a level of knowledge base that I've been going off throughout my life." When asked to clarify the meaning of "work in progress," George described himself as in a transitional stage of his life. He had plans to graduate and earn his master's degree, and this was a new, more positive outlook for him. "The future looks bright, and that's a new . . . that's . . . it's usually uncertainty. Now, it's looking good."

Natalie: Breaking the Chain

Natalie's early experiences with school were traumatic. "I haven't had good experiences with teachers, and I haven't, um, it's kind of made me afraid or not want to do things." She traces this fear to an incident in grade school where she was humiliated by a teacher who refused to excuse her to use the restroom. "Since then, there's really no memory I have with a good teacher." Natalie's recollections of middle and high school instead tell a story of confrontations with teachers, routine trips to the principal, and extended terms of detention. In fact, Natalie's description of on-campus detention in her senior year closely resembles the types of "in-house" detention criticized by Wood, et al. (2021) in their critique of school discipline policies that target Black and Brown youth. Looking back on her younger self, Natalie said that fear

interfered with her education. “So, not being able to handle my emotions properly or be able to recognize them properly made it really difficult to obviously make decisions because I didn’t know what the problem was.”

Two turning points have impacted Natalie’s college career. The first occurred when she opted to drop out of college rather follow her mother’s demand that she choose a major and finish the degree. Natalie said she enjoyed her college classes, which was the only time she used those words to describe school. However, after being introduced to the stimulants by a roommate during final exams, Natalie said she was spending more time partying than studying, which led to the confrontation with her mother and her subsequent decision to drop out.

The other turning point came when Natalie became pregnant. “I was faced with this huge decision, and then I was left alone to deal with it. And that wasn’t the game plan.” Though Natalie had not planned on being a single parent at 35, the birth of her son gave her perspective and a motivation to change her life. “I was kind of a hot mess up until that point, you know, my, I mean I had never taken anything seriously, including myself.” Faced with the challenge of raising a child by herself, Natalie decided she needed to pursue her original interest in the law so she could support her son. “I don’t really even know if I would have gone back to school had I not had him. He was a definite determining factor in what I needed to do to move forward and be able to provide a life for him.”

When Natalie described how she saw herself as a student, she joked, “as the old lady going to school and everybody else that gets to be in sororities?” This joke revealed an ongoing concern Natalie expressed about fitting in with the college environment as a returning mature student and a Rising Scholar. Natalie worried about being able to participate with younger

students in the class, and she expressed fears about sharing her formerly incarcerated status with her instructors. But as she struggled with these fears, Natalie also expressed a determination to persist for the sake of her son: “I don’t have a choice. I mean, I have a choice. I can, you know, screw up my life and my son’s. That’s not fair to him. And I want him, like I said. I want to provide a life for him.”

Natalie said she wanted to “break the chain” by setting an example for her son with her own college success. Looking forward, Natalie talked about a future in which she provided her son with the direction and mentoring she missed in her first attempt at college. Natalie said she had a checklist with items from preschool through 12th grade to prepare her son for college. “I don’t care how I get him through it. He’s going and that’s going to be instilled in him to where he doesn’t even think not going to college is an option.”

Dre: Sticking to My Plan

For Dre, a major turning point in his life was the death of his grandfather. Dre and his brother had been living with their grandparents and attending private Catholic schools in South Los Angeles. Then as Dre was nearing the end of high school, his grandfather died of cancer. Dre said the loss “took my mind pretty much away from life itself,” especially given the fact that both his grandfather and his father had passed away from cancer. Dre said he saw himself as “the next man in line” not knowing when he would die and just started “floating through life.” Dre went to a local community college after high school, but without a goal, he did not take advantage of any of the counselors or mentors there and dropped out. “If you don’t have a goal in mind, you’ll be out there floating and lost. There’s a lot of pitfalls waiting for you out here, basically doing the devil’s work,” Dre said.

During his 17 years in prison, Dre relied on his siblings and his grandmother to keep him spiritually strong and hopeful about returning home. His family, and especially his grandmother, "had my back" and "invested so much in me" while he was incarcerated. Dre said their support "fueled me throughout the whole process," and their unwavering support inspired him to pursue his college degree. "So, that's where I'm dedicated myself to that same spirit to be able to put myself in a position where I can help other people."

Discussing how he saw himself looking back over his college career, Dre said his education could show others a pathway to success without illegal activities. Imagining a conversation with kids in the community seeing him "driving a nice car," Dre imagined showing them an alternative to criminalized activities to get his nice things. "I can show them that no, this is how I got it. I worked, I went to school, I got a job. I developed skills and I built a network of people who can help me to help them." At the time of the interview, though, Dre was focused on "sticking to my plan" by helping his grandmother around the house and earning As in his classes: "Not trying to be out and about running around, and you know kind of enjoying my freedom now, to stay in focus and, you know, sticking to my plan."

Martha: Coming Out of Hibernation

At the time of her interview, Martha was attending college from a transitional housing facility, working towards a release date in Spring 2022. She had attended GMC briefly in the 1990s to play basketball, but then she dropped out after withdrawing from too many classes and losing her eligibility to play sports. Martha describes the nearly two decades in-between as a period of "hibernation" where she was cut off from the outside world: "I was homeless from

2001 to 2013l. Then I got into an unhealthy relationship in 2013, got married, and this unhealthy relationship led to my incarceration, but being incarcerated has actually saved my life."

As she planned for her reentry into the community, Martha said she felt a need to accomplish something with her life. "So, because I am self-aware now, I need to take charge and I can't be stagnant. I want to share my story and I just want to help others and I want to serve." While in prison Martha gave birth to a daughter. This experience, and the women she met on the inside during that process, inspired her to focus on reaching out to pre-teen women between 9 and 13 to break the cycle of incarceration and recidivism.

As a returning college student and a Rising Scholar, Martha said she was eager to learn and gain as many resources as possible to help her serve others. At the time of the interview, Martha was earning a certificate in entrepreneurial studies, and she had plans to start a business selling t-shirt designs to support incarcerated women, but she said she knew she needed to get her education first. "I want to share my story, and I just want to help others, and I want to serve, and you have to have skills, tools, resources to know how to do that." Nevertheless, Martha is committed to moving forward in her life and her career. "I've been isolated for so many years. Now I'm ready to come out of my cocoon and blossom and serve."

Janet: What is the Legacy I'm Leaving?

Janet described two turning points early in her career. The first was an abusive relationship that separated her from her family and friends and sidelined her plans to attend a university after high school. Janet attempted to attend community college despite her husband's opposition, but she successfully completed only four classes in two years. The second turning point, according to Janet, was her pregnancy with her first daughter. Even though she had

already left her abuser, the arrival of a child spurred Janet to seek higher education in pursuit of a better life. “I said, ‘I need to make sure that I can give my daughter a better future.’ And that was the turning point in my life that I said I need to go back to school, like I need to, irregardless of the odds, regardless of the challenges that I’m going to face.” Janet first went to a trade school to get certified as a licensed vocational nurse (LVN). After Janet was incarcerated in 2016, she decided to return to college to pursue a degree in psychology and enter a residency program, even though that choice meant walking away from a job that supported her and her two daughters.

Not only was Janet raising two daughters alone, but her incarceration had also altered her relationship with her parents. Where once she had been treated as the eldest daughter who was expected to shoulder additional responsibilities, now she was stigmatized as an “outcast” who had lost the respect of the family. Janet’s parents are still refusing to help with their grandchildren, and Janet said her family is just waiting for her “to mess up again.” Reflecting on the personal impact of her family stigmatizing her, Janet said she understood why some people would return to incarceration rather than face the rejection on the outside: “Like, when is Janet gonna mess up again? Like yeah, she’s doing good for, how long is she going to get to good before? Like what does society feel like?” Janet said that pursuing a successful career for her daughters was her way of “breaking that stereotype and that curse.”

Prior to returning to college, Janet said she saw herself as “unfulfilled and questioning” in a 9-to-5 job that she wasn’t sure she wanted to do the rest of her life. Even though walking away from a steady job to pursue a residency in psychology meant a loss of job security, Janet sees her choice as the one that fulfilled her. “I wanted to do something that fulfilled me. Something that

I'm passionate about, and I can make. It's like, if I leave tomorrow, what is the legacy or imprint I'm leaving this world? And when I reflect, I pretty much look and I say 'nothing' and more until now because I've decided to go back to school."

Janet said she saw herself as a different person after her incarceration. She was more assertive and goal oriented. "This is the road that I need to take, and this is what I need to do." She said that after the trauma of an abusive marriage, followed by therapy for both her and her daughters, "things can change within you." Twice during the interview, Janet talked about her legacy as reimagined through the eyes of her daughters. The first time Janet said she needed to be a good role model for her daughters: "Mom made mistakes in the past. But mom learned from those mistakes, and she redeemed herself and like she's come a long way and she is a different person than what she was years ago." Later in the interview Janet reiterated her re-imagined legacy, saying her daughters could say she made mistakes, but she went to college and was serving her community by opening doors for formerly incarcerated people after her: "And I want to open the doors to those that come after me because there was a lot of doors going back to school that were shut in my face. I had a lot of "no"s and a lot of just doors that shut in my face and ARISE was the program that has opened a lot of doors or little windows for me."

Penelope: Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Penelope grew up in a system-impacted household where "both my parents cycled in and out of incarceration," which prevented her from being able to focus on school. For Penelope, an early turning point in her academic career happened when she moved in with her grandmother after her father was incarcerated and her mother put into a coma as the result of a motorcycle accident. For the first time, Penelope didn't have to worry about what would happen to her

parents, and she could just be a student as she entered middle school. “So, I feel like that was a turning point for me as far as being aware and present in learning.”

But by then, Penelope was behind academically and getting in trouble at school. Penelope recalled being escorted to enroll in high school by a probation officer rather than by her own parents, stating that she felt she was never given a chance at “a fresh start” at the new school. Penelope entered a maternity high school when she became pregnant with her first child, and soon after she dropped out of high school, opting to homeschool instead. Despite the significant traumas in her childhood (including having to revive her own mother when she overdosed on heroin), Penelope insisted that no one feel sorry for her. Penelope said that her strength as a college student is her resilience. “I have like indescribable joy that the Lord has given me, and my resilience to push past everything that not only have I put myself through, but that others have also put me through.”

When asked how she saw herself looking back, Penelope said that prior to returning to college she saw herself as “surviving.” She had a good job that paid well, and this served as a lifeline to stability, but there was no larger meaning in her life. “I was just riding the motion of survival, riding the motion of going to work every day.” Internally, though, Penelope felt the need to do something more with her life and earning a college degree would not only help her personally, but it would show other incarcerated family members and the larger community that it’s possible to succeed in college. When those family members “come home,” she wanted her degree to be not just a validation of her own success, but to serve as an example that they can succeed and that they deserve a second chance.

Looking at her status as a college student in the interview, Penelope saw herself in a different light. Rather than merely clinging to a lifeline and riding out the waves of life, Penelope said she was thriving. She felt more confident and was willing to express herself. “I’m learning to how to not only thrive in the waves or in the, you know, also learning how I can’t control waves but how to ride them, I guess you would say.”

Summary and Conclusion

These three research questions examined the experiences of Rising Scholars from three different perspectives: their experiences with college in general, including academic experiences preceding college; their experiences with a reentry support program embedded in a community college; and the narratives they told themselves while earning a college education. In regard to the first question, four participants described early academic experiences that would suggest they would be ready to enter college; two did not. Four participants described attempting to enroll in college right out of high school, but they dropped out and returned after release from incarceration. Five participants described traumatic events in their lives before they were incarcerated, and four of these correlated to the decision to drop out of college. Upon returning to college, some participants experienced feelings of stigma, and all struggled to overcome different barriers to their education. But nearly all experienced supportive interactions from faculty who acted as allies in their pursuit of a college education. Two significant external factors correlated with the participants access to college: experiences of trauma and turning points arising from pregnancy/parenthood. In response to the second question, the reentry support program played a significant role in assisting the participants reach their academic and reentry goals. The counselors acted as navigators, coordinating support from multiple resources to meet the unique

needs of each Rising Scholar. Participants reported they were treated with care, sympathy, and empathy by the counselors. They said that having counselors with carceral experiences increased their feelings of trust with the program.

In response to the third question, participants described their self-perceptions of their academic career, from early experiences to their current college enrollment in ways that align with commonly recognized markers of desistance. Nearly all (five out of six) described themselves using terms that suggested a lifelong process of change. All participants (six out of six) described turning points in their self-narrative and engaged in rewriting their own story. Most participants (four out of six) talked about desistance and/or avoiding recidivism.

Chapter 5 will discuss the significance of these findings, limitations and delimitations of the study, and recommendations for action and/or further research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study started with a problem: too often reentry programs for formerly incarcerated persons had been justified by promising reductions in recidivism rates, a binary quantitative metric that offered no context for the lives of people reentering the community. And while the California Community Colleges had succeeded in establishing a Rising Scholars Network, there was little quantitative research formerly incarcerated college students, and much less on Rising Scholars attending a California Community College using a newly minted on-campus support program. Chapter 4 lifted up the stories of six Rising Scholars in a Los Angeles area community college navigating higher education with the assistance of such a program. This section will discuss the significance of these scholars' stories and analyze how their themes identified in Chapter 4 add narrative context to the research on Rising Scholars. After the discussion I will review the limitations and delimitations on this study and offer policy recommendations for TK-12 schools, for colleges and for the state. The section will end with questions for further study and a personal narrative reflection.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of Rising Scholars attending a California community college?
2. How do Rising Scholars use the services of a reentry support program at a California community college?
3. How do Rising Scholars perceive themselves as they participate in a reentry support program at a California community college?

Discussion

Like Chapter 4, the discussion is organized around the responses to the three research questions, starting with early educational and college experiences, followed by experiences with the reentry support program, and finishing with a discussion of the markers of desistance reported by the participants.

Research Question 1: College Experiences

Taken together, four major themes emerged in the responses to question 1: dropping out of college; experiences of trauma before college; the unique experiences of formerly incarcerated women; and the importance of faculty and staff as allies.

Dropping Out

Statistically speaking, Rising Scholars seeking a college degree (and their counterparts in Project Rebound and Underground Scholars) represent a very small slice of the overall carceral population. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, 58% of formerly incarcerated people either did not complete high school or earned only a GED. Only 23% of formerly incarcerated persons have taken at least one college course, and only 4% attain a college degree (Couloute, 2018). However, as Livingston and Miller (2014) pointed out, formerly incarcerated students seeking a college degree often enjoy advantages prior to incarceration that make college success more likely, including advantageous community placement, prior experience with school, and family support. Many of the participants in the study fit this description. If the cohort in this study is representative of other Rising Scholars attending GMC (something that cannot be assumed in a qualitative study with a small sample), then the early waves of Rising Scholars entering college may be statistically more likely to succeed in college compared to the overall carceral population

that is eligible to reenter through college. Once again, one has to be cautious drawing inferences from qualitative data, but as Rising Scholars and the other college reentry programs grow, they will need to make sure they make college accessible to all eligible formerly incarcerated persons, and not those with the best chances at succeeding in college already.

A second question arises when considering the advantageous prior educational experiences in this cohort: why did they drop out of college the first time around? Only one participant in the interviews reported interactions with the criminal legal system during school, suggesting that none of the other participants who attempted and then dropped out of college had prior carceral experience. As such, they would have been seen by teachers, coaches, and counselors at the time simply as young people who "lacked focus" or who partied too much, or who were not academically prepared for the rigors of college. Nevertheless, when they dropped out, their life trajectory altered significantly in ways that led to their incarceration.

Could this outcome have been averted? Were the course policies and institutional practices in place at the time designed to retain as many students as possible to ensure their success, or were the institutions following the default model of "weeding out" students who fell behind in work and/or attendance to keep the class rosters accurate and avoid chargebacks by the state? It is a commonplace in traditional college culture that the student is ultimately responsible for their success in their courses. In the early stages of my teaching career, I distinctly remember being told by a department dean that "our students have a right to fail." But this pedagogical chestnut reinscribes a deficit cognitive frame that masks the ways the institution creates negative outcomes for students of color by placing the "locus of causality" for their success on the traits and background of the student alone (Wood et al., 2015, p. 11). Building on Bensimon and

Malcolm's theory of the Equity Cognitive Frame (2012), Wood et al. argued that student success and failure should be examined instead through a cognitive frame that examines an institution's "context, actions, and outcomes" (2015, p. 14).

Admittedly, these initial attempts at attending college happened up to two decades ago, so the context of these individual incidents would be difficult to reconstruct. Nor is it possible to ascertain the level of student support that was available at the time, whether these students would have used that support, or how well that support would measure up in an equity audit today. Whether the ultimate responsibility for the failure to progress lies with the student, the instructor, or the larger institution, it cannot be denied that for these four college students, this missed opportunity came at a great cost: incarceration, the loss of productive years of these students' lives, the impact on the lives of their family members, and the collateral impacts that follow a criminal conviction, just for starters. If we who work in the college system knew for a certainty that a specific student would either succeed in college OR face incarceration, how hard would we fight to prevent that outcome? What outreach would we be willing to extend to avert that alternative? For four participants in this study, that is exactly what happened. How many struggling first-year college students are standing in their shoes today? And this is no idle thought experiment: per course repetition guidelines, the CCCCO permits community college students only three attempts to pass a transfer-level course (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2013), so a failed third attempt to pass a course, regardless of the cause, even in the case of a withdrawal, means students every semester are facing just such a precipitous moment as the participants in this study did.

The possibility of study participants attempting college and then dropping out prior to incarceration was something that did not occur to me during the design of this study. Neither Livingston and Miller (2014) nor Couloute (2018) addressed the issue of dropping out of college (although the Prison Policy Initiative study did indirectly acknowledge the practice by measuring incarcerated persons with "some college"). Murillo (2021) indirectly referenced dropping out as he reported on the results of focus group interviews of formerly incarcerated California college students, but even in this case the dropouts were referenced as an outcome, not as the subject of inquiry. Furthermore, none of the studies of formerly incarcerated college students I reviewed specifically discussed students dropping out of college and then returning years later. However, the idea of students attempting college, dropping out, and then retaking college at a later point in life would be a pattern of behavior consistent with the life-course theory of change described by Laub and Sampson (2001). If Rising Scholars and other formerly incarcerated students require multiple attempts at enrolling in college before they succeed, this could significantly change the way reentry through college education is imagined, implemented, and assessed by stakeholders.

Trauma

Trauma emerged as a significant theme in the interviews, both as adverse childhood experiences and because of incarceration. It should be noted that this study, by design, did not inquire directly about carceral experiences, so the descriptions of carceral trauma will be less direct, but that does not diminish their significance.

Many participants described multiple instances of trauma during their primary education and before entering college (or incarceration, in many cases). Dre lost his grandfather to cancer during his last year of high school, and this loss was compounded by the fear that the cancer that

took his father and grandfather was hereditary. Penelope spent her early education hiding the abuse in her family from her teachers. Natalie passed through secondary school in a nearly constant state of conflict with the school. Janet was groomed into an abusive relationship while still in high school. As Table 4 showed, these experiences coincided with or preceded the participants' attempts to enroll in college. While these individual examples of adversity differ in the details, childhood trauma is generally recognized as a significant external factor that can negatively affect young adults. Specifically, childhood trauma. In one representative study from this field, Tinajero et al. (2020) found that childhood trauma activates stress in areas of the brain that comprise executive function (EF) such as the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and the amygdala, negatively impacting EF behavioral control, but not cognitive control. Put simply, the study found that participants with experiences of childhood trauma had the cognitive control to plan for their future and make goals, but their capacity to follow through on those goals was compromised. Furthermore, compromised EF behavioral control would lower the cognitive safeguards against reckless or impulsive behavior (Tinajero et al., 2020). In a college context, this means that incoming college students suffering from trauma could be compromised in their executive function capacities at precisely the time they need them the most, i.e., navigating college and avoiding dropping out. This should be a concern for all faculty, staff, counselors, and health professionals in the college system.

It also needs to be noted that many of the traumatic incidents reported by the participants were perpetrated by teachers and administrators in school settings. Janet and her fellow Spanish-speaking classmates were shamed by their "dual language" classroom teacher. Natalie described a series of ongoing conflicts with teachers throughout her career. Unfortunately, Natalie's story,

(complete with daily calls from the vice-principal and a description of in-house administrative suspension during her senior year) is not that unusual for Black and Latinx students. The Black Minds Matter Coalition released a study documenting in detail how disciplinary practices in California's schools have subjected students of color to disproportionate punishment, even as early as preschool, building the framework for the school-to-prison pipeline starting as early as kindergarten (Wood et al., 2021). For students like Natalie, school was the cause of her trauma. Those of us who teach and work in the community college system need to remember that our students carry this history of trauma into the classroom if we want to help them succeed.

Of course, trauma is not limited to adverse childhood experiences among Rising Scholars. The act of incarceration is itself a traumatic experience, as DeVeaux (2013) demonstrated in his eloquent testimony. In this study, Penelope described feeling nauseous every time she traveled to visit her son in prison, and it wasn't until she attended a presentation on post-carceral stress that she could place her physical symptoms in a context that made sense. Natalie reported feeling overwhelmed by a fear that her professors and younger classmates would not accept her as an older, formerly incarcerated student, despite no direct evidence of being stigmatized by her teachers or fellow students. Janet described being stigmatized by her own parents, who she said were just waiting for her to "fuck up" again and recidivate. This is why ally training, such as that provided by the Breaking Bars Community Network (Morton, 2020), reminds faculty, staff, and administrators in the college system to recognize the impact of post-carceral stress as a factor that needs to be considered by when working with formerly incarcerated/system-impacted students. If Natalie's professor had built into the course syllabus a statement that welcomed Rising Scholars and explicitly invited her to talk with the professor if

she felt comfortable to do so, perhaps her fear could have been put to rest. Although Penelope was the only participant in this study who grew up in a system-impacted household, it is important to remember that all Rising Scholars are system-impacted as survivors of incarceration. Furthermore, as colleges find their way into a future with COVID impacting the lives of their students, the need for a trauma-informed approach to all students will only increase.

Faculty and Staff

Most of the participants reported receiving support from faculty and staff. In some cases, the participants credited individual faculty with pushing them to grow as students, accelerating their identity transformation into college scholars. Although these stories are anecdotal, they underscore how much any one faculty member can impact a student's trajectory, whether it's giving a paper back and saying, "I know you can do better," or committing an act of kindness in the Math Lab by making sure a student gets the right calculator without jumping through a bunch of administrative hoops. Even Natalie's story about worrying about what her professors would think if she disclosed her status illustrates the central role faculty and staff can play in helping Rising Scholars achieve their educational goals. Research into men of color in community college has shown that building relationships with faculty outside the classroom can have a significant impact on their persistence and success (Wood et al., 2015). These stories are a reminder that the Rising Scholars support programs need allies across the campus, from the classroom to the boardroom. Resources like the Breaking Bars Community Network (Morton, 2020) are a vital component of a successful college-wide approach to building institutional support for Rising Scholars.

The Perspectives of Female Rising Scholars

When I proposed this study, I planned for the ratio of male-identified to female-identified students to resemble the demographics of the California Community College system, meaning that there should be slightly more female students than male students in the study, since female college students outnumber males in the current student body. However, I did not fully appreciate just how different the experiences of the women in this study would be compared to the men. This section will discuss some of the gender-specific issues facing the Rising Scholars in this study. It needs to be repeated that as a qualitative narrative study, this study cannot generalize. However, the issues facing the women in this study are significant, and to the extent they affect other women in college, incarcerated or not, they deserve greater attention.

Gendered family roles. Two participants (Penelope and Janet) reported that their families expected them to take greater family responsibilities at an early age as the eldest daughter in the family. Janet, for example, described taking over duties such as care and feeding for her younger siblings as early as age nine. In the context of system-impacted families, the responsibilities may seem extreme to an outsider. Penelope reported experiences at home where she, as the oldest child, took charge of reviving her mother when she overdosed. Unfortunately, playing such an important role in the family can also be a liability. Janet reported that despite years of fulfilling her duties as the eldest daughter, once she was incarcerated, she was treated as an outcast. After Janet was released, her parents refused to help her with raising her daughters. In contrast, Dre's family stood by him throughout his 17 years of incarceration. After release, Dre moved back in with his 94-year-old grandmother, who, like the "giving tree" in Shel Silverstein's famous children's book (1964), continued to support him despite her advanced age.

Although these stories are anecdotal, they are connected in the sense that both women served their families within traditional gender roles, even though that duty was not reciprocated when Janet took on the stigma of having a conviction and being incarcerated. It is also unclear from two anecdotes (and my limited experiences in this area as a White male) whether this expectation, and the family conflicts that arose from the breaking of these gendered roles by conviction and incarceration, is culturally specific to Latina women (perhaps as an extension of *marianismo* as argued by Nuñez et al., 2016) or if these roles are common to all women with family ties.

Relationships. While both male and female participants spoke about parenthood in the interviews, it seems clear that relationships, parenthood, and child-rearing play a qualitatively different role for the women in this study compared to the men. Relationships played a significant role in the stories of the women in this study, often acting as a turning point in their stories. Martha reported that a bad relationship led to her incarceration (though she did not provide details). Janet reported that she was groomed into an abusive relationship that diverted her from attending college after high school. Natalie met the father of her son shortly after she was released from jail and got pregnant "way too soon." Penelope got pregnant in high school and transferred to maternity school, to home school before dropping out.

One of the oldest conventions of reentry literature is "the marriage effect" (Laub & Sampson, 2001), or the idea that a formerly incarcerated person can successfully reenter the community with the love and support of their partner, a reflection of scholarship that once focused exclusively on the reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated men. Women in the carceral system, however, are often put at risk by their partners, either through abuse or by

involvement in activities that put them in legal liability (Cobbina, 2010; Cox, 2012; Sered & Norton-Hawk, 2019). In some cases, incarceration itself acts as a "safe haven," allowing women to sever ties with abusive partners (Cox, 2012, p. 207).

Pregnancy and childrearing. The female Rising Scholars also reported significant experiences with pregnancy and childrearing. All the women in this study identified the birth of their children as major turning events in their self-narrative, but pregnancy and childbirth acted as external factors that both took the Rising Scholars off track when younger, and they acted as motivators for these women to return to college. At the time of their interview all four women in the study were raising their children on their own, though Natalie appears to be the only participant actively raising an infant (with the sometime assistance of her mother). Natalie's example demonstrates how navigating childrearing adds additional challenges for women who are already navigating reentry, maintaining a job (or arranging financial aid to mitigate the need to work full-time) and attending college. Natalie reported reading her college textbooks to her baby, for example, because she didn't have the time to do both storytelling and homework. She also reported that she did not have time to participate is as many campus activities as she wanted because she was raising an infant. Ironically, the college's turn to online teaching due to COVID-19 alleviated the pressures of balancing motherwork and schoolwork temporarily. Conversely, the return to on-the-ground teaching is a stressor because of the difficulty of arranging affordable childcare. Sadly, Gordon Manor College had once maintained a childcare center open to students and faculty as part of its Child Development department that could have alleviated this stressor. After 21 years of operation, the Board of Trustees voted to close its doors due to operational budget deficits.

Unfortunately, these reported experiences align with research on the experiences of other formerly incarcerated women, especially women of color (Cobbina, 2010; Gurusami, 2019; Sered & Norton-Hawk, 2019). The percentage of incarcerated women are growing (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022), and it is more important than ever make sure reentry programs are gender-inclusive in their approach (Ajunwa, 2015; Cobbina, 2010; Heidemann et al., 2014), including meeting the needs of transgender and nonbinary FIS, who were not represented in this study. There is a growing body of research on the experiences of formerly incarcerated women, including new research on formerly incarcerated women specific to the California-based collegiate reentry programs (such as Lendrum, 2021) and this research needs to be integrated into the development and implementation of Rising Scholars programs.

Research Question 2: Reentry Support Programs

This section will discuss the significance of the ARISE program, as described by the participants. Most of the research on Rising Scholars until very recently only called for the creation and expansion of on-campus reentry support programs (Murillo et al., 2021), but very few discussed how participants interacted with the on-campus support programs. This is an emerging area of research, with new studies being produced by formerly incarcerated students themselves as they earn master's degrees and doctorates as part of their own reentry process . The following themes reflect what the participants in this study had to say about the impact of the ARISE program.

Navigators

In her interview, Janet stated the key feature of the ARISE program elegantly: they "connect the dots" and "bridge the gaps," to make sure each Rising Scholar gets what they need

to succeed. The staff at ARISE built an extensive network of support, developing relationships both within the bureaucracy of GMC and outside the college with affiliated reentry support programs. Then they used those networks to coordinate the support for each student, making connections and navigating the support network to meet their unique needs, much in the same way benefits coordinators work within the health care networks to manage care for clients across different health care providers. Put another way, ARISE provided navigational capital to help participating Rising Scholars move through the college system as seamlessly as possible.

These descriptions of staff navigating the college system and using their connections on the behalf of their students aligns well with policy recommendations for building a successful support program for formerly incarcerated students.

Authenticity and Trust

Many participants stated that IG played a significant role in building their trust in the ARISE program. All the participants spoke highly of her. They said they trusted the program because she had walked in their shoes. Several participants commented that her pursuit of an advanced degree inspired them to continue in their studies. IG's name was the third most frequently used word, after "help" and "RG." As a program feature, advocates for Rising Scholars have long argued that it is essential to include staff who have carceral experience precisely because they build trust with formerly incarcerated students (Corrections to College CA, 2017a). In this case, though I would argue that IG builds trust both as a formerly incarcerated student and as a female formerly incarcerated student. One study of reentry success among formerly incarcerated women (Heidemann et al., 2014) found that support networks the women relied upon before incarceration, such as family and partner relationships, could become

unreliable and counter-productive after the women returned from incarceration. On the other hand, these women found more supportive networks in peer support groups and relationships with reentry agency staff: people who had walked their path and understood them. Based on the stories from the participants, IG's role in ARISE illustrates this analysis.

Care, Sympathy, and Empathy

One of the most notable features of the ARISE program, as described by the participants, is the way RG and the other counselors demonstrated authentic care for the Rising Scholars. In all the interactions described in this study, the staff at ARISE showed again and again that the Rising Scholars came first in their priorities. Furthermore, these interactions asserted the fundamental humanity of the participants, helping them to claim their identity as college students and scholars instead of a "convict" with a criminal record. Janet described the ARISE program's validating and empathetic approach succinctly:

> They saw me as a human being and not as a case number or another booking number. They actually saw me as a human and actually treated me like that, and not—it wasn't just like a handout. It was like, "How can we help you?" or "How, what can, what do you need to be equipped to succeed as a student?

Dre stated the core of ARISE's success even more directly: "And a shared experience, you know, connected kind of in a friendship way. Definitely supportive. Showing there's lot of care there, a lot of sympathy, a lot of empathy."

Discussion

The ARISE program is only in its second full year of operation at the time of this writing having transitioned from pilot program to full implementation just as the COVID-19 pandemic

shuttered on-the-ground teaching and closed offices on campus. The stories recorded here are reflective of a new reentry support program conducting its first full year of operation entirely online (though some participants interacted with the program before lockdown). Nevertheless, the program has managed to implement many of the key recommendations advocated by advocates of the Rising Scholars Network (Corrections to College CA, 2017a; Murillo et al., 2021): the program has a formal onboarding process for incoming Rising Scholars; the program provides intrusive, targeted support to help each student succeed; the program coordinates financial aid and other campus resources, using cross-campus relationships to advocate for each student individually; and the program offers online programming to educate and create community among the program participants.

However, growing a successful support program is not simply a matter of ticking off boxes in a policy proposal. On paper, ARISE has all the right elements: a full-time director with a funded staff; at least one formerly incarcerated person on staff who can relate to the students, counselors who are well-versed in navigating the college, etc. What is not captured in these policy papers is the way these services are provided. Put bluntly, you cannot require the staff to care. Wood et al. (2015) have been advocating for years that, to seriously promote equity on campus, faculty need to build relationships with students of color outside of class. They need to demonstrate care for their students, particularly men of color. A similar principle is at work in the narratives of the Rising Scholars in this study. The connections and navigation assistance they received from ARISE are invaluable, but underlying this targeted support is authentic care. Over and over again, RG, IG, VF, and YR demonstrated a desire to go above and beyond their job descriptions to make sure these students had the full measure of opportunity to succeed, even

if that required unusual interventions, such as registering a mom offline because her kid was having a meltdown or conducting an intake session entirely by text message because the halfway house did not have the bandwidth to do a Zoom session. All the connections and institutional knowledge would be for naught if the staff looked for bureaucratic ways to say "No" instead of always seeking out creative ways to say "Yes." Their counseling and support were successful because they cared, and that part cannot be supplemented in a flex-day workshop. It must spring from within.

Research Question 3: Markers of Desistance

This study began with a statistic that became a shibboleth: a RAND meta-study on correctional education reported that incarcerated students (i.e., incarcerated persons who pursued any form of correctional education) had a 43% lower chance of recidivating (Davis et al., 2013). But this memorable soundbite has severe limitations. Not only was the finding significantly revised in later years (Bozick et al., 2018) but recidivism rates are a problematic binary metric that has a history of being gamed by public entities for political or fiscal reasons (Klingele, 2019). But the most rigorous statistical analysis doesn't communicate the risk of recidivism as clearly as Janet's story about losing her family support after she was incarcerated:

> And I understand why people would go back to jail because when you come out, you're already an outcast. You're seen differently and you're already—you're—I felt like they're waiting for me to mess up again. Like when is Janet gonna mess up again? Like yeah, she's doing good for, for how long is she going to get to good before? [Pauses]. And I feel like, if my family who was supposed to be my,

> my biggest support feels that they're just waiting for me to mess up again, like what does society feel like?

As Janet so eloquently shared, recidivism is a recognition that for many formerly incarcerated people, real inclusion back into the community is withheld, and is replaced by an expectation that they will "mess up again." Nevertheless, Davis et al.'s (2013) statistic becomes the key justification for increasing college access for formerly incarcerated students, well beyond the context of the original finding and long after more rigorous studies offer a more nuanced assessment. The injustice inherent in a formerly incarcerated person's family and community just "waiting for me to mess up" is exactly why we need more than a binary metric to discuss the process of reentry.

Question 3 prompted the participants to reflect on key markers of desistance: dynamic change unfolding over time, identity transformation, turning points, and changes in self-narrative. As the narratives in Chapter 4 showed, most of these markers were present in all the responses. All the participants were highly motivated to succeed in college. Significant numbers of the participants were motivated to return to college by turning points like the birth of a child, while two (Martha and George) found their motivation while incarcerated: one as the result of being connected to a network of supportive women; the other as part of a personal reconstruction to get out of addiction and gang life. All the participants demonstrated active rewriting of their self-narrative and identified turning points in their story, while majorities discussed desistance and aspects of a lifelong process of change.

The nuanced and colorful stories told by these six reentering Rising Scholars stands in vivid contrast to the quantitative data of lower recidivism rates, a statistic that has been replicated

for years, despite being pulled out of context and having been corrected by rigorous research. On the other hand, the stories in this study show us students who were smart and (sometimes) successful in school. Most experienced trauma early in school; some endured tremendous traumas. They enrolled in college, and then dropped out for various reasons. The women returning to college experienced a significantly different path than the men did. Many were diverted from their college path by those traumas previously mentioned or by partnerships that left the women Rising Scholars pregnant and alone. Yet the same forces that pulled them off the college track returned them to college after incarceration. Only this time they were highly motivated to succeed for themselves, their children, and their communities. These stories provide rich context to the statistical mantra of reducing recidivism through higher education. They show us that the path to a college degree is messy and difficult, and that Rising Scholars require allies to assist them as they navigate through the college system.

The stories of desistance uplifted in Chapter 4 and encapsulated in Table 8 offered a compelling portrait of six Rising Scholars navigating the transition from incarceration to sustained self-actualization through higher education. Other research reported that college offered formerly incarcerated students opportunities for social transformation (Brower, 2015; Giraldo, 2016; Halkovic et al., 2013; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Owens, 2009). But it is unclear where and how this transformation occurs and to what extent the college experience is responsible for this transformative process. Silbert and Mukamal (2020) directly ask the question implied in earlier research: is the motivation of formerly incarcerated students intrinsic, or is it a result of the support they receive from a campus reentry program? Although this qualitative

study cannot offer generalizations, the stories reported by the participants can at least offer their own contextual responses to this question.

Looking back over the stories of the participants, and their descriptions of identify transformation, George most clearly identified his transformation as an outcome of the process of gaining a higher education. The other participants described personal epiphanies that were connected to experiences and motivations prior to reentering college, such as childbirth, the support of family, the desire to do something meaningful with their life, or wanting to redeem themselves for their children's' sake. However, as the participants' responses to the second research question made clear, whether their identity transformation began before reentering college or as the result of higher education, the ARISE program was essential in helping all of these motivated Rising Scholars adapt to the norms of college life: learning how to use campus IT tools, enrolling in classes, navigating financial aid, connecting to the full range of campus support resources, and problem-solving any snags in the coordination of these resources. GMC's reentry support program helped (and is helping) these Rising Scholars manifest their identity transformation through higher education by turning what have historically been barriers to access into ladders helping them achieve their goals. To make the promise of that soundbite statistic a reality requires the motivation of Rising Scholars partnered with the combined support of family, support staff, allies in the college system, and cooperative partners outside campus to smoothly synchronize the pursuit of a college education with other reentry requirements like parole/probation, employment, and housing (to name a few). And as the stories by our participants show, this support is effective when it is delivered with intentionality, empathy, trust, and authentic care. Reentry through a college education isn't a silver bullet or magic: it's a

second chance that needs to be nurtured and supported so Rising Scholars can realize their goals and achieve the transformation noted in previous studies.

As this discussion draws to a close, I will address the limits of the study, explore policy recommendations, pose questions for further research, and reflect on my own self-examination that developed over the course of this dissertation.

Limitations and Delimitations

Several factors limit the generalizability of this study. As a qualitative narrative study, it focused solely on the stories told by the participants. While this was important in assessing certain aspects of the research questions, such as self-narratives of identity transformation, it also limited the view of the study to just the experiences reported in the participant interviews. The study also was limited to six participants (20% of the available sample pool), and it represented the participants most willing and able to conduct the interview. This study also limited its scope to one community college district in Los Angeles County with one campus (and reentry support program).

This study focused primarily on the educational experiences of the participants. By design, the interview questions did not inquire directly about the participants carceral experiences, although some participants chose to share parts of their experience in the context of the interview. As a result, certain details about their experience were not explored, such as the nature of their criminal conviction or the length of incarceration.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this study, just as it disrupted on-the-ground teaching in California, starting in Spring 2020. The interviews for this study were recorded online in the Fall of 2021. As a result of this historical event, most of the experiences discussed in the

interviews were limited to remote interactions with the reentry support program, either by phone or online. On-the-ground interactions were extremely limited within the time frame of this study, which also affected the experiences reported by the participants. However, the shift to online meetings via Zoom increased the accessibility of the program's activities for some participants.

Recommendations

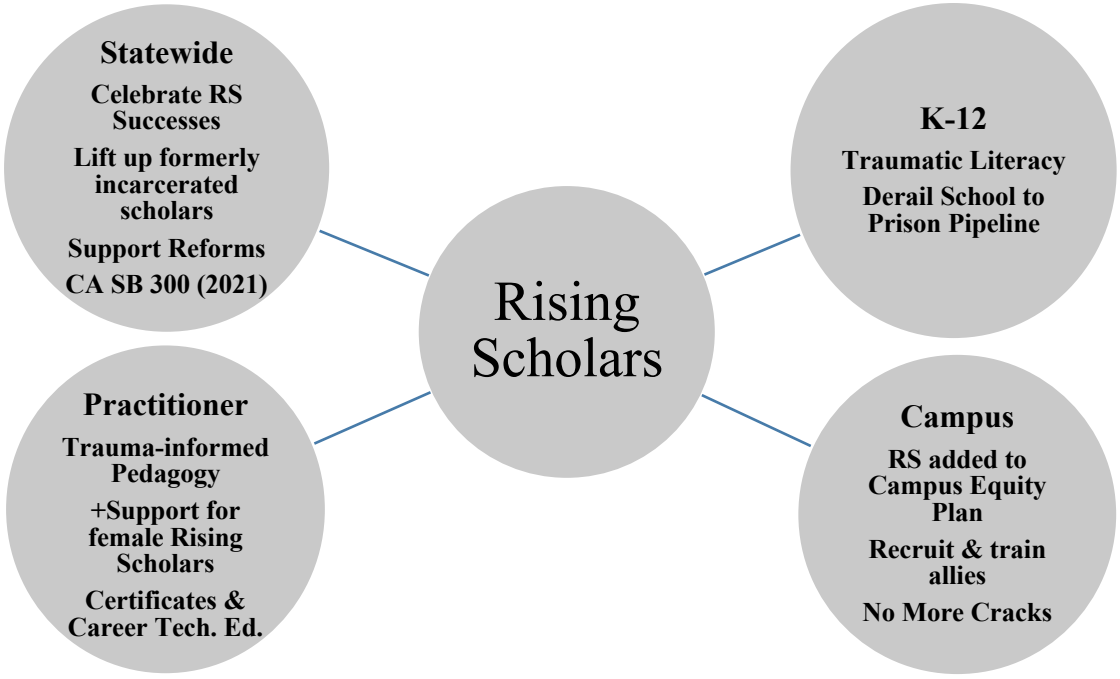
This study lifted up the stories of Rising Scholars, putting the difficult process of reentry for formerly incarcerated students through higher education in a narrative context. The stories these Rising Scholars told were messy and complex, with issues from their past and present intersecting and crossing boundaries. Any policy recommendations drawn from their stories are likewise intersectional and "messy," but if they can improve the outcomes for other formerly incarcerated students seeking higher education, or better yet, prevent students from entering the carceral system in the first place, a little messiness is a fair price to pay. As Figure 4 illustrates, many of these policy recommendations traverse from one topic (i.e., place) to the next, reflecting the narratives of the participants themselves. Just as events which took place in primary school had repercussions in higher grades, so too must we see issues facing students in college as interconnected with policy patterns set in place years earlier.

TK-12 Policy Recommendations.

Many participants shared painful stories of traumatic events early in their academic career. This trauma persisted with the students even into their interactions with college instructors. As such a holistic approach to improving the chances of academic success for Rising Scholars (and traumatized non-incarcerated students as well) should include addressing these problems where they started: in primary and secondary schools.

Figure 4

Policy Recommendations for Rising Scholars Program Persistence



Note: The issues affecting Rising Scholars traverse the educational landscape, from primary & secondary school policies to practices in the college classroom, to initiatives adopted across the campus community as well as across the state. California Senate Bill (SB) 300, Reg. Sess. 2021-2022 (2021), https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220SB300

Adopt Trauma-informed Practices

While this study is not the place to diagnose any individual student's mental health, the participants themselves reported that the traumatic events they experienced impacted their educational experiences. Nevertheless, their stories highlight the need for teachers and administrators in the primary and secondary schools to develop "traumatic literacy" and a trauma-informed pedagogy (Blitz et al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2015) so that student responses to trauma are not dismissed as willful misconduct, or worse, become the basis for excluding students from an education by funneling them through the "school-to-prison

pipeline" (Wood et al., 2021). As our schools struggle to emerge from under the shadow of COVID-19, it will be even more important to understand how students respond to trauma (as well as teachers) and how those responses intersect with school policies lead students to an education rather than incarceration.

Dismantle the School-to-prison Pipeline

Unfortunately, as the Black Minds Matter Coalition demonstrated yet again in 2021, school discipline policies across California continue to disproportionately impact Black and Brown children (Wood et al., 2021), depriving them of their right to an education guaranteed by the 14th Amendment (U.S. Const. amend. XIV), *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka* (1954) as well as throughout California by *Mendez v. Westminster School District* (1946) which preceded the *Brown* decision. California's schools at all levels, from the classroom to the district boardroom, need to adopt antiracist discipline policies, in conjunction with traumatic literacy and cultural literacy.

College Policy Recommendations

At the time of this writing, support for formerly incarcerated college students from the state and the CCCCO is at an all-time high with the passage of legislation enacting the Rising Scholars Network and establishing grant money for additional programs across the CCC. While Murillo et al., (2021) offered a more complete set of policy recommendations for growing support of Rising Scholars, Project Rebound Scholars and Underground Scholars in California, this section focuses on issues raised through the stories of the participants.

Institutional Responsibility for Student Dropouts

Four participants in this study "slipped through the cracks" and dropped out when they first attempted college. After twenty years it is difficult to diagnose exactly how these individual students could have been supported in a way that continued their education, but the fact remains that they missed an important opportunity to improve their lives rather than endure incarceration. Colleges need to continue to work on enacting policies that shift the campus culture from a deficit cognitive frame that blames students for falling through the cracks, to an institutional equity frame that examines how the practices across the college system promotes or hinders success by students of color. One tool useful for assessing institutional responsibility for the success of Black and Latinx students is the "Equity Scorecard" (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012).

Develop Allies in Faculty, Staff, and Administration

The participants in this study reported multiple engagements with professors who encouraged them to grow as college scholars. They also related how the staff at ARISE connected them to allies in other departments within the college system, such as the financial aid office and EOPS/CARE. These allies are essential to the success of any support program for reentering students. Not only can allied faculty and staff encourage Rising Scholars with inclusive language, but they can promote policies that understand the demands put on students still under correctional supervision (i.e., parole or probation). Furthermore, as more instructors and gatekeepers across the campus become educated in the needs of Rising Scholars (Morton, 2020; Murillo et al., 2021), they can act as "champions" for Rising Scholars by promoting training across departments or generating institutional support within the Academic Senate. Finally, support for Rising Scholars should be written into campus equity plans and endorsed by

the district Board of Trustees, so that the success of formerly incarcerated students is measured as an official component of the college's institutional equity.

Trauma-informed Pedagogy

As has been discussed previously, Rising Scholars are trauma survivors, both from their incarceration and also from their experiences prior to incarceration. Therefore, the need for a trauma-informed pedagogy does not end with high school. The necessity of recognizing trauma in our students has been heightened by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also brought the issue of trauma care for students and faculty into sharper relief.

Gender-inclusive Reentry Support

This study demonstrated that women have a very different experiences of incarceration and reentry than their male counterparts. Reentry support programs need to be responsive to the needs of female Rising Scholars and support networks need to be developed to better support them. As just one illustration: arranging childcare is an expensive stressor that can disrupt a single mothers access to a college education. As the CCCs increasingly return to an open campus in the wake of COVID-19, women juggling reentry with college and motherwork will need more direct material support.

Continue to Grow Access to Certificates

As noted earlier, only a small percentage of incarcerated persons obtain a college degree (Livingston & Miller, 2014; Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). However, as one of the participants in this study demonstrated, community college can offer multiple pathways to reentry besides an AA or four-year degree. Investing in certificate programs, and ensuring those certificates offer employment that is open to formerly incarcerated students would grow enrollment in the

programs while making the reentry support at the community colleges even more accessible to people coming out of incarceration.

State Policy Recommendations

Access to college for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students is rapidly expanding across California. But nothing lasts, especially in politics. Part of the inspiration for this study was a concern that merely relying on recidivism rates to justify increasing access to college may one day not be enough to guarantee its continued support for reentry programs at the state or federal level.

Support Legislation to Undo Mass Incarceration Policies

While it is important to grow access to college for formerly incarcerated students, we cannot forget the importance of dismantling the structures that maintain the carceral system itself. California Senate Bill (S.B.) 1437 and California Senate Bill (S.B.) 775 were signed into law (Cal. 2018; Cal. 2021) which allow for resentencing of persons convicted under the "felony murder rule," within certain circumstances. At the time of this writing, *California Senate Bill 300* (Cal. 2021), introduced during the 2021-2022 California legislative session, would effectively make any person convicted under the felony murder rule eligible to apply for resentencing. As we work to build the "prison-to-college pipeline," bills like this could stem the flow of people into the carceral system in California, and they deserve our support.

Lift Up Voices of Rising Scholars, Rebound Scholars, and Underground Scholars

Allies for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students need to maintain positive pressure to keep up the support for reentry through post-secondary higher education. We need to uplift their voices in news reporting and research. We need to celebrate their achievements. We

need to promote the growing body of research by formerly incarcerated scholars who have reentered community and earned advanced master's degrees and doctorates (see Appendix F for a selection of recent research by formerly incarcerated scholars). And we need to continue to express support for formerly incarcerated students to our state and federal elected representatives so that this pathway to reentry is not taken away again like it was at the height of the moral panic over crime in the 1980s and 1990s.

Questions for Further Research

As I progressed through this dissertation, a number of follow-up research questions emerged (listed below). In many cases, these questions crossed over into areas of research not covered in the original study, so it is likely there is already a body of prior literature that addresses at least a part of the following questions, even if they have not been applied to the topic of Rising Scholars.

1. How do the staff working with Rising Scholars perceive their interactions with the students and what makes these interactions so meaningful? What can other reentry support programs (or colleges looking to develop a program) learn from this example?
2. What are the experiences of female Rising Scholars? How do their gendered experiences differ from those of male Rising Scholars and how can a support program like ARISE best enable them to succeed?
3. What is the correlation between formerly incarcerated scholars and gifted students, or students who were overlooked in local GATE programs?

4. How many Rising Scholars have dropped out of college while receiving campus-based support, and what are their stories? How does dropping out and reentering college factor into a formerly incarcerated person's reentry process, especially if viewed from a life-course perspective?

Personal Reflection

I am incredibly grateful to the Rising Scholars who shared stories from their lives. George, Martha, Penelope, Dre, Natalie, and Janet were so generous with their time and their trust. I have tried to be faithful to their voices so that their perspectives shined through and informed people about their experience of seeking college and reentry into the community. But as I worked with their stories, I couldn't help reflecting on my own. In fact, I discovered that I had forgotten most of my own story, and I didn't begin to reconstruct it until I entered the Ed.D. program at LMU School of Education and started work on this dissertation. I would like to share my recollections below and reflect on how it relates to the study.

I grew up in the 1970s in a working-class enclave on the eastern edge of Garden Grove, California, called "Eastgate Park." My grandparents both lived in Garden Grove: you could stand in the backyard of my Grandma Bostick's house and see the evening fireworks from Disneyland, just across the city line in Anaheim. My parents, Tom and Lorraine, met at Garden Grove High School, graduating classes of 1963 and 1964. They were youth volunteers at Reverend Robert H. Schuller's Garden Grove Community Church, which became the Crystal Cathedral, home of Rev. Schuller's weekly "Hour of Power" telecast (Pedersen, 2015). Dad went to California Institute of Technology and worked as a computer programmer. Mom went to Mount Holyoke

College but didn't finish her bachelor's degree. By the time I was born, she was staying at home to raise me and my younger sister Michelle.

Garden Grove at the time was majority white and working class. I had some Hispanic friends, but I recall only one or two Black students at George Patton Elementary in the Garden Grove Unified School District. Within the decade, however, Garden Grove and the surrounding area would transform into one of the largest enclaves of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States and home to some blatant anti-immigrant racism. I recall that when the neighborhood of "Little Saigon" in Westminster was recognized with a highway exit sign on the 22 Freeway, it was quickly defaced with graffiti. A common bumper sticker (what passed for memes in pre-Facebook days) was "Will the last American leaving Orange County turn out the lights?"

I was an avid reader, and noticing I had some academic ability, my parents got me tested to see if I was "gifted." I remember my grandparents driving me to Arizona State University to take a series of intelligence tests supervised by Sandy Cohn, a researcher in gifted education. Back in Garden Grove, I was put on a waiting list for a gifted class in second grade, but for first grade I was still in the "regular" class.

One incident in first grade stands out in my memory. Our class used two adjoining classrooms separated by one of those old vinyl dividers which latched shut. I remember the class sitting down and taking turns giving presentations on books we read one at a time, and I remember feeling so frustrated as I got passed over again and again.[12] After sitting through

[12] My mother recalled this incident differently. Apparently, we were giving reading presentations that involved a display. I had been dragging my display back and forth from home for days waiting for my turn to present.

another session of not being allowed to take my turn, we were dismissed for recess. On the way back to class, the boy behind me in line stepped on the back of my tennis shoe, causing the heel to fold flat under my heel—what we called a "flat tire." I lost it. As the class filed in and sat in the room to the left, I veered into the empty room to the right, grabbed the nearest chair I could find, and flung it across the room, shouting, "I hate this school!"

I don't know what was said to my parents, but the next thing I remember is meeting Miss Bramley, the teacher at Patton Elementary for the first-third grade gifted classes. She was going to be my teacher next year for second grade. I remember her telling me she understood my feelings, but the school couldn't afford to go replacing a chair every time someone got mad. That made sense to me.

As I worked on this dissertation, I thought a lot about this moment. How did I make it through school without hardly a blip on my record? Was it because I was White? Was it because it was the 1970s? Did the fact I had parents who advocated for me full time, and an ally teacher trained in gifted education play a role? Probably "all of the above." But I also know that this story would not have ended this mildly if some of my participants acted this way when they were kids. I also know that if my own son had pulled that chair stunt in first grade at LAUSD, he would have been suspended.

I remember the emotion much more vividly than the details: frustration like I wanted to burst. I know, looking back, that I felt the pace of that non-gifted class had been bugging me for a while. How many smart first grade Black or Brown boys today have been afforded the same grace and understanding when (not if) they got frustrated? The research says an outburst like this

would set them on the discipline track and inform the perceptions of all future teachers in their school career (Wood et al., 2021).

Next year, I got to go to Miss Bramley's class. I remember building a model of an airport, laying out the lines and markings for the runways. We did a class musical each year. Really, it was just singing along with the soundtrack, but we enjoyed ourselves. Second grade was *Mary Poppins*; in third grade, I got the lead in *Oliver!* (Bart, 1960; Sherman & Sherman, 1964). Meanwhile, Ms. Bramley got married and became Mrs. Duhamel. Our class sang at her wedding on the Queen Mary. Imagine a chorus of eight- and nine-year-olds belting out John Denver's "You Fill Up My Senses" (Denver, 1974) to the accompaniment of the Queen Mary's vintage organ wheezing like a circus calliope!

At home, my parents got even more involved in advocacy for gifted kids. Mom went to Cal State Long Beach to finish her bachelor's degree and then Cal State Los Angeles for a master's degree in Special Education/Gifted Education. I sat in the back row of her classes doing my homework. My parents became active in the California Association of the Gifted (n.d.) and they worked on the ad-hoc committee that wrote the language for California Assembly Bill 1040 (1980), new legislation for gifted education in California, soon to be called GATE (Gifted and Talented Education). One of our allies was Dennis Mangers in the California Assembly. He was such a frequent presence in our household that once I even asked for a "Dennis Mangers" themed birthday cake one year. Unfortunately, Mangers lost his reelection campaign during the "Reagan Revolution" of 1980 that swept many Democrats out of office. I remember that election because Mom was still working the phones for Mangers when Jimmy Carter conceded the election prior to polls closing on the West Coast.

During this time, my mother decided to start a business offering supplemental classes for gifted kids on the weekends. She and a partner, Laura Katz, founded Pegasus Programs Inc. which eventually grew into a residential summer school program for gifted kids housed in the Middle Earth dorms at UC Irvine.

I don't recall much notable about the rest of my elementary school, except that I took a real liking to musical theater. I started performing with a community theater group owned and directed by a man named John Plastow. We performed at Grace United Methodist Church in Long Beach and then the productions moved to the studio theaters in the basement of the Crystal Cathedral (formerly the Garden Grove Community Church).

I qualified to skip eighth grade and entered Pacifica High School in Garden Grove as a freshman a year early. The next year we moved to Costa Mesa, and I got an inter-district transfer to attend University High School my sophomore year because Pegasus had a partnership with UC Irvine.

When I was 13, my parents divorced. The actual divorce was amicable and did not require the use of the courts, but it was no less traumatic for me or my sister. I don't know how long I listened to my parents fighting after I went to bed before they finally split up. I remember sometimes I would sneak into my little sister's room to comfort her in her crib when they fought. I used to keep score. Looking back on my younger self, it felt at the time like Mom always won the fights, and I couldn't understand why Dad didn't push back more. That's not a fair assessment, I know. But nothing is fair when you're a kid listening in the dark to things you don't want to hear.

While my parent's marriage failed, Pegasus was succeeding. Our house seemed to be always full of teachers. Planning a summer program is a year-round endeavor, and Pegasus hired gifted teachers from districts across Orange County. I remember one night in my senior year I was working on a paper about William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for English class, when Bob Stolte, (then GATE coordinator at Edison High in Huntington Beach) stopped by to say hello after a planning meeting at the house (Shakespeare, n.d.). He asked what I was doing, and I told him my Hamlet paper was due the next day. He said, "I have tickets to see *Hamlet* tonight at Orange Coast College. Why don't you come see the play and then write the paper after?" I decided to put off my paper for a few hours to watch the production (Shakespeare, 1986). It was the first time I had seen a live Shakespeare production in modern dress. I was so inspired that I wrote a fifteen-page paper that night.

In junior year, I noticed Mindy, a cute girl sitting next to me in the front row of English class, engrossed in a book. I thought it would be funny to waggle my fingers between her nose and the book just to see what would happen. She jumped out of her skin. I thought it was so funny that I kept bugging her and we became friends, then we started dating. Seven years later I proposed.

Back home, Pegasus had become the family business. It was my first job. I started by doing office work, but by the time I graduated high school, I was teaching a Study Skills class in the summer program. We had an office in Costa Mesa near the house. If you've ever worked for family, you know how it can be a blessing and a curse. Your parent is your boss, so where do you go when you want to get away from the boss? For me, the answer was Mindy.

Unfortunately, the fortunes of Pegasus took a turn for the worse as the eighties ended. The company eventually folded, but not before everyone left, except me and my mom. I fielded calls from creditors and read the payment due notices in the mail. We moved out of the office and boxed everything up in a storage locker. One day mom gave me a check to deliver to the storage company to make up for our past due rent. When I tried to pay, they said the storage locker had been cleared out. Pegasus was done.

I moved out of my mom's house after my first year of college. The turning point was my 18th birthday. Mindy and my mom had planned a surprise party for me. A family friend who was a chef was going to host a gourmet dinner for me and some friends. They just needed my younger sister Michelle to keep me busy while they set up. We went to the nearby $2 theater featuring late-run movies and saw *Field of Dreams* (Gordon et al., 1989). When Kevin Costner asked his ghost-dad to play catch, five years of father-hunger that had bottled up inside me after the divorce came uncorked all at once. I started sobbing in the theater. My sister, all of 12 years old, was completely nonplussed. We walked home, and when we opened the front door, everyone yelled "Surprise!" I burst into tears and cried, "I don't want a surprise party! I want my dad!" I moved into my dad's apartment in Garden Grove a short while later.

The relationship between me, my mother, and Pegasus was messy. Pegasus got its start with my parents advocating for me as a gifted kid in school. Then it became a full-time business. But between the divorce, and working for my mom, and the rise (and fall) of the family business, there was a lot of strife. In the years that followed, I worked hard to put most of these memories behind me. I built a life with Mindy. After college, she left the state to pursue a Master of Health Science degree in Connecticut. I decided to follow her and get my master's degree in English at

Southern Connecticut State University. I proposed to her before we moved in together as grad students. We married on our return to California in 1994.

Looking back, I received a tremendous amount of support from the connections I enjoyed through Pegasus. As a kid, I had participated in a program called the Western States Talent Search which signed up gifted kids to take the SAT test as early as sixth grade (Center for Bright Kids, n.d.). By the time I took the SAT for college admissions, I had taken it at least four times before. I had my own personal English tutor sitting next to watching *Hamlet* on stage the night my essay was due. I was teaching college-level study skills before I graduated high school (Shakespeare, n.d.). My transition from University High School to UC Irvine felt seamless, but I had been training with experts in college skills all this time. Unfortunately, all the benefits of my parents' hard work that smoothed my journey through college were inextricably mixed up with the after-effects of the divorce and the messy personal ties to Pegasus. I didn't have the courage then to quit and separate my mother from my boss, and the effects of that period lingered with me for years.

But there is one last story to tell about this time in my life. Mindy and I graduated grad school in 1994. We packed up our apartment and drove home cross-country the first week of June. As we crossed the desert into California, we started to hear news reports about a robbery that had resulted in the death of one of the victims. One of Mindy's cousins was a suspect and her family worried he would reach out to Mindy as we drove through the state. The local media was just starting to take an interest in the story until O.J. Simpson embarked on his infamous "slow speed chase" in the white Bronco. The media frenzy over the OJ case overshadowed Mindy's cousin's case, where he was put on trial and sentenced to Life Without Parole under the

felony murder rule (he wasn't the shooter). He's been in prison a little longer than we've been married. While I worked on this dissertation, we re-established contact with him. We support him financially and speak weekly on the weekends.

Mindy and I grew up in lives overshadowed by divorce. This young man lost his father to a rare disease as a young teenager. We had strong family support. His mother was estranged from the larger family, so no one was around to explain that his father died of complications related to a recessive gene in the family line. With no family support or explanation for why his father died so young, he lost hope and started acting like he was going to die young, too. This path ultimately led to his incarceration. In many ways, his story tracks with Dre's story of losing his father and grandfather to cancer, with the resultant loss of hope and incarceration.

Looking back, I cannot help noticing that my life was incredibly privileged. I did not see it at the time, and there was plenty of emotional turmoil that obscured my view until I was older. There were plenty of turning points, but I also enjoyed the kind of access to social capital that was normally reserved for kids in private school. I had crises in my life, but the people around me (the family I was born with, and the one I chose) supported me through them. I occasionally acted out (very occasionally), but the institutions I attended were not looking at me with suspect gaze, waiting to criminalize my reactions to stress. Instead, I received care and encouragement. I cannot give back this care and privilege, but I owe it to my students who have not enjoyed such support to look for ways to pass forward the care, encouragement, grace, and love that sustained me.

As a final note of reflection, I must acknowledge both the debt of thanks I owe to the Rising Scholars in this study for sharing their stories so openly with me and the burden that came

with such forthright transparency. I experienced something similar a few years ago. As part of reflecting on my praxis, I had been making a concerted effort to strengthen my relationships with my students, and it was working for the most part. I was communicating better with my students. Then, a young lady reappeared after being missing a week of classes. We met after class in the shared part-time faculty offices. She apologized for the absences, and then she said, "They're deporting my mom back to El Salvador today." There was nothing I could say or do to fix this. I could only listen, let her tell her story, and offer her the empathy of a fellow human. But what bothered me more was the fact that this young woman was so committed to getting her degree that she didn't let her mother's deportation stop her from coming back to class. I don't know if I would have that fortitude. Father Boyle reminds us that we should stand in awe of the burden carried by the marginalized rather than in judgement of the way they carry it (2010), but until that moment I did not fully appreciate his wisdom or recognize the emotional cost of bearing witness.

There were several moments during these interviews where the pathos and trauma embedded in the participants stories became overwhelming. With the greatest respect to the participants, I have to admit that sharing in their stories came with a cost. At times I had to reach out to my dissertation chair just to debrief and unburden some of the emotional load. I fully understand that any personal toll was miniscule compared to the lived experiences of the Rising Scholars, but as someone who has opened themselves up to share the storied lives of others, I need to acknowledge that toll and the personal impact it exacts as well.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I started with a problem: the state of California was investing in a grand expansion of campus support programs for formerly incarcerated students seeking a college degree, largely on the promise of reduced recidivism based on a statistic about in-prison college education. Beyond recidivism rates, the literature had a limited number of qualitative studies of formerly incarcerated college students that suggested college could be transformative, and that FIS needed formal institutional support. Even fewer interviewed students in California. This project interviewed six Rising Scholars in a Los Angeles-area urban community college who had worked with a support program to uplift their voices and add context to this growing conversation about using college education as a de-facto reentry program.

Looking back over the narratives shared in Chapter 4 and the themes discussed in Chapter 5, it seems clear that college indeed has the potential to transform formerly incarcerated students' lives, but that success in this endeavor is far from guaranteed. The participants in this study were already in the process of transforming themselves before enrolling in college, though a college degree is a significant milestone in their process. They also entered college with socioeconomic advantages that made their academic success more likely. However, all participants required whole-spectrum support from the staff at ARISE and campus allies like instructors and EOPS/CARE. Furthermore, the most salient feature of this support was not just the forms of navigational assistance (which covered a wide range of needs), but rather the expressions of authentic care by the support staff that motivated them to meet the needs of these Rising Scholars creatively and under circumstances that went beyond the call of duty (or at least the end of shift). For these participants, college can be transformative AND their chances of

success were substantially increased by a support team went "all out" to help them any way they needed. Thinking about the larger Rising Scholars Network, I can only hope that the other campus support teams are as equally invested in their mission.

Coda

Summer 2022: I'm finishing revisions to this dissertation, and I ran across a press release from the U.S. Department of Education. The Second Chance Pell pilot program has been expanded a second time, making Pell Grant funds available to even more incarcerated students seeking a college degree. Better yet, the Department of Education states its intention to fully restore access to Pell Grants in July 2023. Then I notice this line in the press release: "Providing education in prison is proven to reduce recidivism rates and is associated with higher employment rates, which will improve public safety and allow individuals to return home to their communities and contribute to society" (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The link in the text takes me to the 2013 RAND study claiming, "Inmates who participate in correctional education programs had a 43 percent lower odds of recidivating than those who did not" (Davis et al., 2013). The statistic that started this study has reproduced itself yet once again, this time with the blessing of the entire United States Department of Education.

Technically, there's nothing "wrong" about this statistic. The program has such a low break-even threshold, that any reduction in recidivism still pays for itself, even if it doesn't match this statistic exactly. The difference is in the fundamental distinction between quantitative and qualitative data. The Department of Education cites this statistic with all the certainty of a government agency backed by the full faith and credit of the United States of America. The truth

is spoken into existence by its recitation. And they're right that any money spent on correctional education is going to pay dividends worth much more than the cost.

But when I look at that statistic now, I don't see "43% lower odds" of recidivism. I see Martha planning to start a business that employs formerly incarcerated women and helps preteen girls avoid the carceral system. I see George wanting to get a degree so he can prove to his adult daughters he's a good dad. I see Penelope coming to terms with the traumatic stress from her family's history of incarceration. I see Dre wanting to show kids in his neighborhood there's another way to be a success. I see Janet persisting despite the stigma from her own family so she can bring a version of ARISE to colleges in Orange County. I see Natalie reading textbooks to her baby boy because she wants to make sure he goes straight to college when he grows up. And I see RG, IG, VF, and YR moving heaven and earth to help them all succeed, by any means necessary.

These stories act as a counter-narrative, bringing the struggles of Rising Scholars to life in a way that that a balance sheet never could. Instead of reducing formerly incarcerated students to recidivism rates and dollars-saved, these stories celebrate the humanity of our Rising Scholars, Project Rebound scholars, and Underground Scholars and the duty of all of us in higher education to stand *with them*, using our privilege to aid in their success. Furthermore, these stories remind us of the humanity of all those impacted by 40 years of discriminatory mass incarceration policies, and our duty to bring them home. Finally, to return to the words of Father Boyle, let this document expand the circle of compassion, "moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased" (2010, p. 190) and may our policies and pedagogy bring this prayer into praxis.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS REFERENCE KEY

Theoretical Framework	Elements
Critical Race Theory (CRT)	1. Systemic Nature of Racism 2. Interest Convergence 3. Sociocultural context of laws & policies. 4. Rejecting "colorblindness": challenges traditional research paradigms used to explain experiences of students of color (master narrative) 5. Storytelling, Counter-storytelling 6. Interdisciplinary Analysis 7. Challenges separate discourses on race, gender, class by showing intersections of all 3 8. Commitment to social justice 9. Liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, class subordination
Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)	1. Aspirational Capital 2. Linguistic Capital 3. Familial Capital 4. Social Capital 5. Navigational Capital 6. Resistant Capital 7. Cultural Capital
Desistance (Des)	1. Dynamic, social process of change that unfolds over time 2. Identity transformation 3. Turning Points, Changes in self-narrative 4. Markers of desistance
Critical Race Methodology (CRM) Solórzano & Yosso (2002)	1. Focuses on racialized, gendered, or classed experiences of students of color 2. Views these experiences as sources of strengths 3. Interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, humanities, & the law to better understand the experiences of students of color 4. Counter-storytelling as resistance
Narrative Inquiry (NI) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)	1. Personal and Social interaction 2. Temporal continuity: past, present, future 3. Place/situation 4. Inward: internal conditions 5. Outward: environmental conditions

APPENDIX B

RISING SCHOLARS INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Question	Theory	Interview Questions	Comments
Warm-ups	NI	1. What is your earliest memory of school? Can you describe what that was like? 2. In those early days at school, were there any memorable turning points in your education? Can you describe them? 3. Before college, how would you describe yourself as a student?	
1. What are the experiences of Rising Scholars using a support program at a California community college?	CRT	4. What led you to decide to pursue a college education? Can you tell me more about this turning point in your life? 5. What events (positive or negative) stand out to you when you first entered college? Can you describe them? 6. Has anything complicated your educational journey or made it more difficult? Can you tell me some examples of these challenges? 7. How did you get introduced to the [FIS support]* program? 8. What stories can you tell me about your experiences with [FIS support]? *The specific name of the support program will be changed as it could help identify the location of participants.	CRT5 CCW1 CRT 1 CRT 3 CRT 5 CRT 5

2. How do Rising Scholars perceive themselves as they participate in a support program at a community college?	Des	1. Before you decided to attend college, how did you see yourself? What would you say was your personal story up to that point? 2. What stories can you tell me about your first experiences with college? 3. What turning points have you experienced in your college experience? 4. Was there ever a moment when you truly felt like you were a member of the college community? What stories can you tell me about that moment? 5. Looking back over your time in college, how do you see yourself now? What personal stories can you tell me about this change?	Des4 Des2 Des3 Des2 Des1

APPENDIX C

SECURITY COMPLIANCE

Adobe Cloud Security Compliance. https://www.adobe.com/trust/compliance.html

DEDOOSE Security Overview. https://www.dedoose.com/about/security

Microsoft 365 App Security. https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/security/?view=o365-worldwide

Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault Security. https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/protect-your-onedrive-files-in-personal-vault-6540ef37-e9bf-4121-a773-56f98dce78c4?ui=en-us&rs=en-us&ad=us

Microsoft OneNote Security. https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365-app-certification/onenote/onenote-apps

Zoom Security. https://zoom.us/trust/security

Otter.ai Terms of Service (Data Privacy and Security are in Appendices 1-4). https://otter.ai/terms

Samsung: Knox Security. https://www.samsungknox.com/en/knox-platform/knox-certifications

https://www.samsungknox.com/en/knox-platform/supported-devices

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Note: all references to the school site have been removed to maintain confidentiality.

STUDENTS!

YOU'RE INVITED

Hi there! My name is Jason Bostick, and I teach English at College. As a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University School of Education, I am seeking 8-10 formerly incarcerated/system-impacted students who have worked with the support program to participate in a study of their educational experiences.

This confidential study will lift up the narratives of "Rising Scholars" at to counter stereotypes about reentering formerly incarcerated and system impacted community college students. I also hope to build more understanding and appreciation for Rising Scholars seeking a college degree.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

This study is seeking:

- **Formerly incarcerated/system-impacted college students, age 18+**
- **Who are current or former students registered at College**
- **Who have participated or are participants in the program.**

WHAT WILL I DO?

- **You will participate in a confidential 60-90 minute interview on Zoom (camera will be muted for privacy).**
- **The interview will ask about your educational experiences before and during college, your experiences with , and your perceptions of your pursuit of a college degree.**

WILL I RECEIVE COMPENSATION?

- **Participants who complete the interview will receive a $20 gift card.**

HOW DO I SIGN UP?

- **For more information, contact Jason Bostick at jbostick@ .edu. If you are eligible and available for scheduling an interview, you will receive a list of survey questions, a consent form, and information about your rights as a study participant.**

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

Approved by College IRB from September 24, 2021 to September 23, 2022. LMU IRB 2021 FA 08-R.

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

1. I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.

2. I will be given an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the medical experiment, and any drug or device to be utilized.

3. I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.

4. I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study, if applicable.

5. I will be given a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures, drugs or devices that might be advantageous and their relative risks and benefits.

6. I will be informed of the avenues of medical treatment, if any, available after the study is completed if complications should arise.

7. I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.

8. I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

9. I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.

10. I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, coercion, or undue influence on my decision.

Approved by [redacted] *IRB from September 24, 2021 to September 23, 2022.*

Appendix B

Rising Scholars Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Research Question	Theory	**Interview Questions**	Comments
Warm-ups		**1. What is your earliest memory of school? Can you describe what that was like?** **2. In those early days at school, were there any memorable turning points in your education? Can you describe them?** **3. Before college, how would you describe yourself as a student?**	
1. What are the experiences of Rising Scholars using a support program at a California community college?		**1. What led you to decide to pursue a college education? Can you tell me more about this turning point in your life?** **2. What events (positive or negative) stand out to you when you first entered college? Can you describe them?** **3. What events or external forces have complicated your educational journey or made it more difficult? Can you tell me some examples of these challenges?** **4. What events or external forces have made your educational journey easier or more successful? Can you tell me some examples of these supports?** **5. How did you get introduced to your college's Rising Scholars* support program?** **6. What stories can you tell me about your experiences with your Rising Scholars support program?**	* The specific name of the support program will be changed to preserve confidentiality.

Approved by [redacted] *IRB from September 24, 2021 to September 23, 2022.*
LMU IRB protocol number: LMU IRB 2021 FA 08-R.

2. What social and cultural assets sustain Rising Scholars in community college, and to what extent does a support program enable these assets?	CCW	**1. What personal stories can you tell me about how you stay motivated in college? What or who are you fighting for to succeed?** **2. Looking over your college experience, what do you see as your personal assets?** **3. What stories can you tell me about the support systems that sustained you in college?** **4. What stories can you tell me about your experiences with the college system?** **5. What stories can you tell me about experiencing challenges during your college experience?** **6. What, from your perspective, were the ways your Rising Scholars program supported you as a college student? What assets do you see the Rising Scholars program bringing to your college experience?**	
3. How do Rising Scholars perceive themselves as they participate in a support program at a community college?		**1. Before you decided to attend college, how did you see yourself? What would you say was your personal story up to that point?** **2. What stories can you tell me about your first experiences with college?** **3. What turning points have you experienced in your college journey so far? Did the support program play any role in these turning points?** **4. Has there ever been a moment when you truly felt like you were a member of the college community? What stories can you tell me about that moment?** **5. Looking back over your time in college, what has changed in your view of yourself from when you started to where you are now? How do you see yourself now?**	

Approved by [redacted] *IRB from September 24, 2021 to September 23, 2022.*
LMU IRB protocol number: LMU IRB 2021 FA 08-R.

Loyola Marymount University
Informed Consent Form

TITLE: **Rising Scholars: Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated/System-impacted Community College Students in an On-Campus Support Program**

INVESTIGATOR: **Jason D. Bostick**
Loyola Marymount University
School of Education
310-560-8961

ADVISOR: Dr. Elizabeth Reilly
School of Education
Loyola Marymount University
310.258.8803

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the experiences of formerly incarcerated and/or system-impacted community college students using an on-campus support program. You will be asked to complete a brief intake survey and, if selected, you will be asked to complete a confidential interview that is digitally recorded with the video muted and the screen name changed to a pseudonym. After the interview, you will be asked to review the interview transcript to correct and verify the content that may be used in the study. You will also be invited to read the narrative based on your interview for addition verification and comment. The interview will take approximately an hour to ninety minutes of your time. The review of the transcript and narrative could take about half an hour, depending on whether you choose to comment.

RISKS: Risks associated with this study include: identification of your identity; reliving any anxiety or trauma related to incarceration or prior educational experiences. To minimize these risks, your identity and any identifying details (such as the name of the support program or your college) will be kept confidential and all names/identifiers will be removed/changed in the study.

If you feel the need to talk to someone after the interview, [redacted] Student Health Services offers confidential, short-term telemental psychological services and an after-hours emotional crisis help line. For more information about psychological services offered through [redacted] Student Health Services, please visit https://www.[redacted].edu/student/studentservices/health/telemental-health.aspx.

BENEFITS: Contribution to scientific knowledge about formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students attending community college, a growing but under-studied segment of the student body of California Community College.

Your stories can help community college faculty, staff and administrators better serve "Rising Scholars" succeed in their educational goals.

INCENTIVES: You will receive a $20 gift card by email at the end of the interview process (your choice of Amazon, Walmart, or Starbucks). Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you. If you complete the interview and later decide to withdraw, you will still receive the gift card.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your name and identifying information from the intake survey (age, gender, number of years in college, etc.) will be kept confidential. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc.). All research materials and consent forms will be stored in an encrypted cloud service known as Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault (MSOD). Interviews will be recorded on Zoom with a pseudonym screen name and the video camera muted to preserve confidentiality. A backup recording will be made on a Samsung A71 mobile phone. Audio transcripts and the interview recording will be downloaded from Zoom and stored in the MSOD. Digital notes and journals will be kept on Microsoft OneNote and stored in the MSOD. No one else will be permitted access to these records, except for my Dissertation Committee Chair, Elizabeth Reilly, who may review transcripts after all identifying information has been changed. When the research study ends, any identifying information will be removed from the data, or it will be destroyed. All of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary* and *confidential*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled, your class standing or relationship with [redacted] College.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. My phone number is 310-560-8961. My school e-mail address is jbostic2@lion.lmu.edu. My [redacted] e-mail

address is jbostick@[redacted].edu. The summary will be made available to participants when the dissertation is published or by September 1, 2022, whichever is earlier.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I understand that my participation is voluntary and confidential. I also understand that my participation in this study will have no effect on my standing with [redacted] or any other student support program.

I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. If the study design or use of the information is changed, I will be informed and my consent obtained again. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any further questions, comments or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact Dr. David Moffet, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659 or by email at David.Moffet@lmu.edu.

_____ _____

Participant's Signature Date

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Rising Scholars: Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated Community College Students
in an On-Campus Support Program

My name is Jason Bostick. I am a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University School of Education, Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Social Justice.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a formerly incarcerated or system impacted community college student, currently or formerly attending [redacted] College, a participant in [redacted], and you are over the age of 18 years old. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the experiences of formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students using an on-campus support program in community college. By sharing the narratives of Rising Scholars, I hope to change the narratives of people reentering after incarceration and break down barriers to their educational success in college.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, your experience will include the following:
- You will be asked to participate in one interview that will be audiotaped and video recorded on Zoom
- You will be asked questions about your experiences in education before and during college.
- The interview will take place online via Zoom.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about 60-90 minutes

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

Some reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts or inconveniences include discussing possibly uncomfortable educational experiences from your past or present. If a topic is too uncomfortable to discuss, you have multiple options, including taking a break or requesting we move to a different topic. Counselors from the [redacted] program and psychological services will be available to you as a student if you feel the need to talk to someone.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you will only share information that you feel comfortable sharing. You can, at any time, request to skip a question, to stop the interview, or to withdraw from the study without consequences.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You will not directly benefit from participation in this study. Potential benefits to society are a greater knowledge of the experiences of "Rising Scholars" in the California Community Colleges and reducing the stigma against formerly incarcerated students by sharing these narratives.

Approved by [redacted] IRB from September 24, 2021 to September 23, 2022.

Will I be paid for participating?

As a token of my appreciation for your participation, you will receive a $20 gift card immediately following the completion of the interview. You can also receive a copy of your audio file interview if you request it.

Will information about me and my participation in this research be kept confidential?

Your personal information (your name, voice, location, and school) will be kept confidential in a password-protected secure Microsoft OneDrive Personal Vault. An alias (made-up name) will be substituted for your real name and the name of the college in the study. Any video or audio files will be destroyed within one year after completion of the study.
If you wish, a link to the dissertation will be sent to you when it is published.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled, including the gift card appreciation token.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **Loyola Marymount University School of Education:**
  If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to my dissertation advisor. Please contact:

  Elizabeth Reilly, Ed.D.
  LMU School of Education, Doctoral program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice
  Email: Elizabeth.reilly@lmu.edu
  Phone: (310) 258-8803

- [redacted] **College:**
  If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please contact:

  [redacted], Ph.D., IRB Chair
  (310) [redacted]-3593, ext. 5354
  or email to: [redacted]s@[redacted].edu

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Approved by [redacted] IRB from September 24, 2021 to September 23, 2022.

Consent to participate

By signing this form, you are agreeing to be interviewed and have your interview audio-recorded.

I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I AFFIRM THAT I AM AT LEAST 18 YEARS OF AGE and I agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this form.

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

_____
Name of Participant

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

_____
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

_____ _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

Approved by [redacted] IRB from September 24, 2021 to September 23, 2022.

APPENDIX E

DEDOOSE CODING EXCERPTS

The following interview excerpts represent portions of the participants' narratives coded in Dedoose as representing "markers of desistance": a dynamic process of change over time, process of change that unfolds over time, identity transformation, identification of turning points and changes in self-narrative, and desistance from activity that could lead to reincarceration. The coded responses were put in context by adding the interviewers question and selecting the entire response by the participant. As a result, many excerpts contain responses that bridged multiple codes beyond just the ones related to desistance, including early school experiences, trauma, parenthood, and experiences with the Rising Scholar support program. The excerpts were edited to best represent the spoken dialect and cadence of the participants, so some lines may be grammatically imperfect, yet authentic representations of the conversation. Sections of the interviews are marked with an ellipsis (…) to show breaks in the transcript.

Dre

JB: You were talking about high school at Verbum Dei?

Dre: Yes, it was, but the first time I went to college I didn't have a career goal in mind, it was just continuing to go to school. Time just move along, and college was an expectation. Toward the end of high school my grandfather passed away, so in my mind, the mental effects of that took my mind away from pretty much life itself in the meaning of, you know, my father died when I was six. He died from cancer. My grandfather died from cancer. So, I'm looking at myself as the next man in line—when is my time? So, I kind of gave up on life and started just floating through life in a way, but now these days, you know, taking college courses and going after a sociology degree leads into some of my work in the prison reform, criminal justice reform, a lot of the things that are going on, I want to be a part of that change. And I also want to help other people who have been, for kids especially, who've been through some of the things that I've been through with the mental illnesses, and just getting lost and get off track, getting off track, I want to be able to educate myself to help them the best way that I can. An educated way, with an educated approach.

. . .

JB: Anything outside of school like challenges with parole or anything like that?

Dre: Not necessarily parole, but trying to work, to be able to pay my car note. Work those hours. I was working in construction, so coming home tired, trying to actually get to my work. I had to stop working, so that was one of the biggest challenges is trying to you know, keep the income going at the same time make an A grade, cuz I'm shooting for As in every class, so I'm also not going to miss any assignment, so just being so tired after work. Definitely complicated.

JB: If you don't mind sharing, how did you work the income angle?

Dre: I would get up at five in the morning. Work up until about eight, had to be at work at nine and do what I can do in the morning, and then I would get home around four. By the time I eat and shower, it's already five [or] six o'clock, and then I'm already dog tired, so just push. I just had to push myself and focus on the things that I learned in Human Development class and actually, you know, just driving myself with the positive mindset knowing why I'm doing what I'm doing. And uh you know just, just prioritizing and obviously it's not a lot of time for fun, but I had to just basically cut off everybody and cut down on social activities and just focus in on school. School and work.

. . .

JB: What was that feeling like, I know it's limited in-person experience, but walking around campus doing the whole Welcome Day experience meeting with the counselors?

Dre: That, it was a great feeling man, was a welcome. It made me get rid of some of the stress that I would have had doing all these things on my own, so I just felt like it was just walking on a campus and how many people had tents set up who were actually welcoming me to the campus and having so many different opportunities to feed off of, just you know, get my career started in college, and also to propel me to the end to help me see the finish line, what is it that I'm actually wanting to do with myself and in school, it was just a great experience.

JB: That's nice.

Dre: Even gave me a food voucher for the day, so it was a lot of support.

JB: What stories, can you tell me about how you stay motivated to make it through college?

Dr': Well, one reason is my past. It's not to necessarily erase my past but my past lets me know, if you don't have a foundation, if you don't have a goal in mind, you'll be out here floating and lost. There's a lot of pitfalls waiting for you out here, basically doing the devil's work and, on top of that, I know what I want to do in life, and I

know that the things that I'm learning in college, that education, it makes things so precise in my conversations with other people in the community, especially the kids. I can be an example, at the same time, because I've been such a negative example in the past, so that's one of the biggest motivations, and I want to prove it to myself that I can make all As.

Dre: And it's also about the people who have supported me throughout the years, 17 years in prison, I didn't want for anything in there they had my back and to live with a purpose to live for other people, people who invested so much in me.

JB: When you say people who invested in you and had your back who do you think of when you say that?

Dre: I think of my grandmother for one, who kept God as a part of my life. Kept me focused and kept me hopeful in prison, being around so much negativity. And then I have my brothers and sisters. I have seven brothers and four sisters who are always there for me, no matter what. Visits when they could come, and you know sending me money, even though I didn't need much in there, but $100 a month can go a long way in a package. Go a long way, so just that support network and them listening to me talking about, you know, one day coming home. And also, being there to motivate me spiritually, basically to stay, you know, upright you know. Listen to me and hear me talking about these laws and I'm studying and the progress that I'm making in life. Uh we can go back 15 years ago, before we even made it to the 17-year mark, that fueled me throughout the whole process. So, that's where I'm dedicated myself to that same spirit to give to be able to put myself in a position where I can help other people.

. . .

JB: Any other turning points that you've experienced during college that we haven't talked about yet?

Dre: So, far, no. Just housing. I'm just happy that I have my grandmother to let me live with her, so I can have that peace. Even some financial support, ah, being her beneficiary, she also looks at it like, "You're my beneficiary. Everything that I have you have access to." But just a major turning point is actually just sitting down, not trying to be out and about running around, and you know kind of enjoying my freedom now, to stay in focus and you know sticking to my plan.

. . .

JB: I would encourage you to think back to like how you saw yourself as a young student and then up through high school and now, after prison, you know, coming back to college: what has changed in your view of yourself from when you started to where you are now?

Dre: Number one thing is having a goal. I know where I want to go. As a kid I had no clue. I knew I wanted to be a business owner, and I didn't take advantage of the

opportunities of the counselors and the mentors who were there at Santa Monica college at that time. Uh, but now, knowing how to find and connect with the people who want to help me and having that goal and that approach is just the biggest change in mindset where there's just so much productivity that comes out of that.

. . .

JB: So, you've probably answered this indirectly but I'm going to ask the question. Do you feel like you are fighting for someone or something now in terms of staying motivated?

Dre: In terms of staying motivated, yes, I'm most definitely fighting for the people who are coming behind me and the people who look up to me as a mentor or just an example of how to live. You might see me driving a nice car. First thing they might think is selling drugs or rob somebody to get it, when I can show them that no, this is how I got it. I worked, I went to school, I got a job. I developed skills and I built a network of people who can help me to help them. You see things in better and brighter light man. And also to see there's going to take work to do, it's not easy.

Natalie

JB: So, what's interesting is even though you've never felt like you're—you're always feeling like you're catching up, but you keep pushing. I've done that breakneck pace. I experienced it for the first year or two, you know, going back to school for the doctorate. And it's horrible, you know, just each morning you get up knowing that you have more to do. So, I'm still kind of curious: how do you keep pushing, you know?

Natalie: Choice.

JB: Okay.

Natalie: I don't have a choice. I mean, I have a choice. I can you know, screw my life up and my son's. That's not fair to him. And I want him, like I said, I want to provide a life for him. I want him, I want to be able to have him go to college. College is not a choice for him. I literally have printed out a checklist, starting from preschool all the way to 12th grade of everything I need to make sure he does in order to prepare him for college. So, like college is not an option for him. Period. End of story. I don't care how I get him through it. He's going and he—that's going to be instilled in him to where he doesn't even think not going to college as an option.

JB: Got it.

Natalie: So, um, so I just kind of I want to break the chain, you know? I don't want him to think it's okay to go out and have a baby with somebody he just met and then just kind of work for the rest of his life, and like, maybe raise a kid like that's not okay. I want to be an example for him, and I want to make sure that he doesn't make the same choices that I made. And I want him to enjoy his life and really, really being able to, you know, take care of himself and provide a life and have a family and just be happy, you know, and be able to buy, you know, a boat for his family or, you know, just go on vacation and not have to worry about missing work because I need the money. And yeah, I really want him to be able to enjoy his life and do all the things really that I missed out on.

. . .

Natalie: So, another thing to take into consideration is now um, you know, obviously, financially, I'm not super well off. So, I have this baby. I like college. From here anywhere I transfer, I'm limited. Not to say that we don't have amazing colleges around here. One of my dream schools luckily for me is nearby, um, but I'm kind of, I wouldn't be able to go to an out of state school or, you know, have a bigger university elsewhere. Sure, um, I've kind of had to limit myself to what is here. Luckily, I have, like my main choices would be Loyola Marymount and UCLA which are here, so I just got lucky in that sense. Not a lot of people do, and I feel like these are things that a lot of people don't take into consideration, especially the traveling abroad. I've never been able to travel. It's always been a dream of mine. And when I first started, I thought it would be good for me just to get me out of where I've been surrounded my whole life. I've grown up here, so I'm in the same place that I'm in when I was getting into all this trouble. So, I thought it would be good for me to get out of here, at least in my first semester of school. That way I could really just focus and there was nothing to, you know, kind of steer me out in the wrong direction.

. . .

JB: So, before you decided to attend college, how did you see yourself and what would you say was your personal story up to that point?

Natalie: I was kind of a hot mess up until that point, you know, my, I mean, I had never taken anything seriously, including myself. And, um, I don't know. I just I was faced with this huge decision, and then I was left alone to deal with it. And that wasn't that wasn't the game plan. And this is time number two now where my 10-year plan has fallen apart. And after the first 10-year plan fell apart, I never thought I'd make another one, you know? So needless to say, there's no more 10-year plans in my future like, there's no point. Essentially, if I was on the outside, looking at my life, just a mess. I mean, I had never made any serious decisions. I'd never really done anything to be really proud of exactly, you know.

. . .

JB: So, what has changed in the way you view yourself as a student from in the beginning to kind of where you are now, and how do you see yourself now?

Natalie: So, from my first memory of school, there's been a lot of things that—there's been a lot of fear instilled in me, and a lot of, you know, I haven't had good experiences with teachers, and I haven't um, it's kind of made me afraid or not want to do things. Which I think was a big a huge part of the way I felt about school. That first memory that I have in school, was that of I never even went back to that school. You know, because of the situation that I was put in. All because I needed to go to the restroom. I mean, what was I, like, five? Yeah, I mean, it's just you know, so I feel like that kind of just stuck with me and I'm literally since then, there's really no memory I have with a good teacher. Um, so I think that's been a huge part in my educational experience. And, um, but I also feel like there should have been a point as I got older where I could have made a decision not to let that stuff deter me and, you know, kind of lead me in other ways, you know, um, but essentially, when you're dealing with a teenager, who I mean, I had no idea what was going on, and fear of something not really understanding what fear was, to deal with it is just a losing battle. So, not being able to handle my emotions properly or be able to recognize them properly made it really difficult to obviously make decisions because I didn't know what the problem was. So, now that I'm that much older, unfortunately, it's taken this long for me to really get to know, like, what those feelings were and what I could have done then. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to go about them because I didn't know what situation I was in. Now that I have more knowledge of that I'm able to kind of deal with the problem and move forward from there.

JB: Okay. And so, that final part is, how do you see yourself now as a student?

Natalie: Um, as the old lady going to school and everybody else gets to be in sororities? [Laughs] Um, I have a lot of regrets. I have a lot of regrets. So, I'm just doing what I can, and hopefully I don't have too many wrinkles when school does come about and we can be in person where I'm really not looked at as that old lady in school. Maybe I kind of squeeze by you know?

Martha

JB: Okay. Um, what external forces have made returning to college more difficult or acted as obstacles?

Martha**:** But seeing right now, my obstacle is the fact that I am incarcerated in a reentry program. And I'm limited because I'm only taking one class. I cannot come over, okay, because I'm only taking one class and that's only three units. So, three times two is six. So, the computer lab is not really meant for college students. So, I can only

come over to the school for like six hours because I'm only taking one class. So, then the facility is afraid that we will use Facebook and Twitter. So, so people mess it up for others. And the computer lab is open from nine to four and they have vocational, they have computer skills, and they have keyboarding. Okay, so that's what's limiting me. And because if I have more computer time, I can do more research. I can really do more assessments because now there's assessments and I can get to know myself more, because I've been in hibernation since 2001. I was homeless from 2001 to 2013. So, then, I got into an unhealthy relationship in 2013, got married and this unhealthy relationship led to my incarceration, but being incarcerated has actually saved my life. And I'm becoming a better me. And I'm happy that COVID's around because it's slowed things down, and I'm able to have more time to work on myself. And like with the Rising Scholars, they have "crafting your elevator speech," which was beautiful. They had "developing your strengths." So, I have, when I say in hibernation, I haven't been in touch with the world, really since 2001. So, I have a lot of catching up to do. And so, that's my limit is because I don't have a lot of time to do my research. And find, you know, find my opportunities. Okay, so I don't have that long to go right now. It's April but because of the 33.3% and "30 for 30" it should be sooner than that, as far as my release date.

. . .

JB: What are some of the things either external forces or events that have made your transition back to college more successful, you know, ladders instead of obstacles

Martha: The fact that I am able to attend school online, the workshops, the SSP [specialized service provider] workshops, the satisfactory, uh, when you're in academic—that's satisfactory academic probation, they provide you to do some workshops. So, those were very informative. Let's see, I'm just me now that I say that it's like I'm just more willing to, to fight. I'm willing to see through all my life experiences, from 2001 to now, I've just been a totally different mind frame. And there's no excuse for me to not educate myself. There's just so, so much, so much out there. So, many resources, you just really have to go one by one to grasp them and obtain them. So, it's just really like just the wealth of knowledge that I find through the websites and that I've been introduced to. I've attended different seminars. I'm reading more, so. And definitely, there's just really no excuse right now and I have so much time on my hands. And I'm trying to get into the habit of being structured and disciplined more. So, there's just a wealth of information out there. That's all I have for school, and I just really want to take advantage of it.

. . .

Martha: Oh, my gosh, it was just, he was just so open. He was a very informative, he, like I've never done this whole Zoom meeting thing. And so, he's very patient because here, I can talk to you through a microphone but there, we can't do video. We can't do mic. So, he was very patient, and we just typed everything. I mean, I just typed everything, and he led me to how to register. He just showed me everything to actually become a

student at Gordon Manor and he continues to reach out to me and let me know what workshops they're having but he just led me step by step into getting enrolled into school and that was beautiful.

JB: That's that sounds terrific. Um, do you have any other stories that that you could share about your experiences with the ARISE program?

Martha: Let's see. Oh, I saw how much passion they had in helping and serving their community. So, I want to do something that they're doing. I want to network with them. Let's see, I see how IG, she's at Long Beach State, so it just really shows me, gave me, uh, just ambition to continue my education and that I'm not alone and that there is a program out there for us and that people like when you mentioned earlier, as far as the story about being young fella that had been incarcerated. So, if you have been incarcerated, you know, the road has not ended. They're just, because you are a felon you know, they're like, oh, I can't get a job. I can't do this. I can't do that because you're a felon and it's just that, you know that it's wide open. All you have to do is just strive and show that you're serious, you're dedicated, you're reliable, and you can pursue whatever you want.

. . .

JB: First, what led you to pursue a college education? And I think you could answer that both for 1994 and then for 2020.

Martha: Okay. Okay, um, in the beginning in '94, I was raised by both of my parents and of course, they've had college education, and that's what it's been my whole life is "knowledge is key." And so, of course, I went for my parents. And that's how I learned that's how you can make more money. So, and two, I wanted to know what the college life was like, because I was a little at sea, even though I traveled and went different places. Still, I was like a little secluded from the world. I didn't know a lot of what was going on and I wanted to not be under my parents' roof. So, that's another reason why I went to college and then two: I really enjoy learning. I enjoy networking. And that's why I went to college in the beginning too, to play basketball, and I thought that I could somewhere transfer and get a scholarship for basketball. So, and so then this time around I'm 45. I was interested when I was 40 before I was incarcerated, because I've been incarcerated since 2016. I was like "I'm 40. I need to get my life together." I have a sibling. And I need to be a good example to him and teach him things and share knowledge with him so he can not be in the position I was in at my age. So…

JB: It sounds like your sibling's younger than you?

Martha: Wait, I said sibling? Oh, my gosh, my offspring, my son.

JB: Okay.

Martha: Okay, so yes, so I needed to be a good example to my son because of course I wanted him to go to college. I wanted him to experience what I experienced but in a different light. Because now that I've had this experience in college, I know which way to guide him and direct him and, um and 2, it's like there's so much information online and there is so much support. And the fact that I'm into entrepreneurial studies and I saw the ARISE program and it's like, oh my gosh, you're working with formerly incarcerated people, and then I heard of Project Rebound. So, I definitely want to network, see where the void is and reach out to my community, just really be formerly incarcerated community. Now that I've had that this experience, and in order for me to do that, I have to pursue a higher education and share that wealth of knowledge and tools and skills and resources. And I think maybe because of COVID is just like really a perfect time now to be in school because I'm pursuing the Entrepreneurial Studies Certificate, but with Mr. Chow, he, there's a lot that's being provided for entrepreneurial studies. And so, I want a t-shirt business and I want formerly incarcerated women of color to design their logos and to license their shirt, and they will have like a sense of ownership, a sense of signature, and I believe through this this will kind of stop the recidivism. This will give women of color, ah, self-worth. And I've never done the social media thing, but I know there's about likes and followers and so maybe through that channel, they can perfect their design or see how their design is doing. You know some way like that they guess. So, that's a little brief reason why I want to pursue college entrepreneurship is to share with my offspring, my loved ones, and my local community.

…

JB: What stories can you tell me about how you stay motivated in college? And do you have someone or something that you're fighting for?

Martha: Okay. Actually, what I'm fighting for is to grasp as many skills, tools, resources, knowledges that I can obtain throughout this lifetime and share that wealth of knowledge with whomever um I come across. It's about sharing your story, your experience. And I just really, I, it's all about serving and I want to serve my community, especially the ones that have been incarcerated, and then I want to help. Since I've been in, I haven't been around this many women in my life and I did have a daughter while incarcerated. This is kind of why this whole thing went down. And now I know what to do and what not to do in raising her. So, I want to work with young ladies so I can prevent, um, the recidivism. Young ladies maybe from ages 9 to 12 and like, I just I just want to know what's out there. Of course, I've been getting kind of close and I just really want to be around people that have been formerly incarcerated so I can hear their stories so I can know where the void is. And, and, you know, stop this. Stop this thing from happening. Stop the recidivism.

. . .

JB: Um, looking back to college for a moment. What do you see as your personal assets, personal strengths?

Martha: Innovative. I'm definitely flexible. I have a beginner's mind. I'm reliable now. Responsible. And I have, I'm making a good decision—decision-making now, and I'm confident, and I'm more passionate and ambitious.

. . .

JB: How did you see yourself and how would you describe your personal story leading up to college?

Martha: Saw myself and I still see myself as aa go-getter. I am optimistic, and I've always been taught to speak, think positive. So, I didn't listen to my intuition, or I didn't apply what I learned. And so, I've learned from my mistakes and through life experiences. I'm the survivor. And then, repeat the question again?

JB: I said what would you say was your personal story leading up to college and maybe in particular, I'd say college in 2020?

Martha: As far as returning, I needed to do something with my life. I needed to feel like I've accomplished something now that I am aware of things. I feel that if you, you're responsible for what you know. So, because I am self-aware now, I need to take charge and I can't be stagnant. And there's a wealth of information out there. And I want to share my story and I just want to help others and I want to serve, and you have to have skills, tools, resources to know how to do that. And how to help others, you have to help yourself first before you can help others. So, that's why since I've been so isolated for so many years. Now I'm ready to come out of my cocoon and blossom and serve.

. . .

JB: Okay, um, last question, we made it. Okay. Looking back over your time in college, what has changed in your view of yourself, from when you started—and for that I would go all the way back to you know, when you were at K. Anthony's—but what has changed from how you saw yourself when you started to how you see yourself now'

Martha: I'm more self-aware. I'm not afraid to speak up. I am more of a team player. I'm more responsible. Let's see. I make better choices. I'm definitely sober. I haven't even talked about that. But yeah, sober. ''I'm more, I'm more involved. And I'm more passionate about, and I'm just, I just want to know more and do my own research and find out the truth on different topics.

George

JB: Um again still thinking of kind of those early days of school, were there any memorable turning points in your early education?

George: I could think of two turning points. One is when I was placed into a gifted class. I believe I was in the third grade. I want to say third grade. I remember, I had to take a bus to a different school, um, where I was the only Hispanic kid.

JB: Okay

George: And I . . . remember that's when I became aware that . . . that academics was easy to me or that I excelled academically.

JB: Interesting.

George: You know, that's I guess some self-awareness, with respect to my ability to apply myself in academics.

JB: So, you mentioned that you had to go on a bus, um, was this like a pullout program for gifted where . . .

George: I guess that's what it was. I mean at the time I really didn't know. All I knew was that I still went to the school that I always went to, except that I did not go inside. I waited for a bus to pick me up and take it to take me to a different city, and I do not recall which city that was at this point. I just remember I went to a different city where me and the whole bunch of different kids from different places and we would, um . . . the curriculum in that class was completely different. We would do science projects; we would do preparation for spelling bee contests.

JB: Cool!

George: It was different. Definitely different.

. . .

JB: Okay, were there any other significant events that you remember from your early education?

George: Um, it was my introduction, when I was introduced to junior high where it was the complete opposite. I remember that from . . . that's when I gave up academics up together and the social standard of the time was more important, I guess, which was hanging out, ditching, experimenting with drugs, gangs. It was . . . if going to the gifted class was a positive turning point in my life, going to junior high school was the complete opposite of that, and so it was definitely a turning point that led me all the way to present.

. . .

JB: What led you to decide to pursue a college education?

George: Well, there's definitely not one thing to point to. It's built up of different things. I started my college experience in prison, and everything leading up to that is . . . when say . . . the reason I went to prison was for me to get away from all the dysfunction and the chaos going on in my life at a specific moment. So, once I came into prison, it was relief because everything ended. And I remember, I went through getting rid of the drugs in my system, I remember being in the hole for months, and I was in my depression, I wanted to be left alone. I was enjoying the solitude and a library lady handed me a Reader's Digest and you know, in the back of the page there's quotes and it was a quote that's from JK Rowling that said "Rock bottom becomes a solid foundation upon which I rebuilt my life." and that had such an effect on me and after that everything I did was like, "Okay, I gotta rebuild, I gotta rebuild, I gotta rebuild." I got out. I got my GED, and I got out and attended this drug programs and self-help programs, and lastly college. College was the last thing, like "Okay I got all these programs. I'm no longer in need of drugs. I'm no longer interested in any type of criminal elements. What am I going to do to play catch up (laughs) with what I was supposed to be?" and that's where I started attending college and I enjoyed it. I loved it, and it…to me it felt like I should have done this a long time ago. [Chuckling.]

JB: What kind of classes, what kind of college classes, did you take while incarcerated?

George: Well, I took basically all the general education ones. So, I took everything. I really started diving into psychology that's what, what I really enjoyed. I had to take the math. I had to take an arts and philosophy was okay, but the very first one was Child Growth and Development, if I'm not mistaken, and at the time in prison, a big burden to me, was what I've cost to my children. What could they be going through? What's their experience? How have I failed them as a father being that I'm incarcerated and left them by themselves. So, in gaining a child growth and development, and understanding all the different processes they go through, the development of their mind . . . that, you know, their ability to be resilient and all that really, really spoke to me. So, from my early college experience, it's me getting that course, the child's growth and development that really, really spoke to me.

. . .

JB: Before you decided to attend college, which I guess would be you know, while you were still incarcerated, how did you see yourself and what would you say was your personal story up to that point?

George: Ah, I saw myself as somebody who wasted their ability. You know, because, like I said I remember being a kid going to gifted classes, and so I was made aware that academically I could be . . . perform a certain way, you know? I guess academically I could do good. I could, I had the potential to go, to grow up and go to college, have a good job, you know, the whole thing, and when I was a young kid, I knew that that

was feasible for me. In the school in the ghetto, kids aren't usually, at least back in the 80s, we weren't told that we . . . you know, I mean people can say "Oh, you could grow up to be anything you want," but I was growing up in the ghetto. Growing up to be anything we want is what? Gang banger? You know what I mean? Sell, sell crack in the corner, you know? Those were the objectives, and I knew that I could be better than that, and throughout my life I've told myself the opposite. Ah, I basically became the one thing that I knew that I was better than. So, my going to college and not just going to college, but actually doing well, like the work is simple to me. It's not difficult. I am thriving in school. It kinda . . . I know that I'm doing what I was supposed to be doing a long time ago, and that's gratifying.

. . .

JB: What kind of feelings were you going through, you know, just walking on campus like that?

George: I, like I actually belong. I'm not, you know, when I was doing all this work in prison is, you know, it was simple to me, and in the back of my head I'm like, "Okay, obviously, because I'm in prison they gave me a little baby work." This is not what college is about, you know what I mean? Like it's just it's too easy to be true. But once I did in Gordon Manor, it was still easy, and then now at Cal State, the same thing with all the [unclear], and supposed to be upper division classes in, it's still easy. So, it's told me that it isn't that in prison I was given easy work. It's that, that this, you know, I was meant to do stuff like this, I should have been doing it a long time ago, instead of going to gangs and oooah [sighs] everything that goes along with them.

JB: You feeling all right there?

George: I am.

. . .

JB: All right. Um, so this is kind of our last, last question. Um, looking back over your time in college, which I would extend all the way, you know, to, to your correspondence classes as well. What has changed in your view of yourself from when you started to where you are now?

George: My knowledge base has expanded dramatically. I was, throughout my life I developed a street smart. One that is [not] useful in real society

JB: I'm sorry, "was useful" or "was not useful?"

George: It was not useful. I mean, I know when, you know, street smarts when, I know how to deal with somebody who might try to shoot me or might try to stab me or be able to understand when somebody is trying to sell me an eight-ball whether it's underweight or overweight or how I could break it and sell it in teeners. And flip, you know, and

all the things that comes with street smarts. It's, that's not applicable. I mean, the foundation is applicable but, but you can't put that in a resume. You're learning to use the skills to a certain extent, and now I'm gaining actual knowledge. I know how the brain functions. I know, you know, how societies, the systems in society function and everything that goes with that, so it's granted me a level of knowledge base that I've been going off throughout my life.

JB: Okay um so kind of our last question and you know I asked you earlier, how you saw yourself, you know when you started college and how you saw yourself as a student when you were younger. Um, how do you see yourself now?

George: Ah, work in progress. I'm still you know, like this is not, so I guess that's the transition we're developing a new person who I intend to be until I get old, you know. So, I'm see myself as a transitional, in a transitional stage in my life at this moment.

JB: Okay, all right. Transitions can be scary, but is it a good transition, or is it a bad transition, or is it neutral…

George: A great one, it's a great one. The future looks bright, and that's a new, that's, it's usually uncertainty. Now it's looking good. I'm going to graduate and going to go to grad school, get a master's and then I can finally have an actual career, and have something that my children can be proud of, like my children have a real dad, not somebody who I don't tell my friends about because it's embarrassing.

Penelope

JB: What stories can you tell me about how you stay motivated in college? And are you fighting for anyone or anything?

Penelope: One story I can say keeps me motivated for college and it's stories like yours Professor Bostick. The stories that are, no, I'm serious, like, stories that I hear that people are coming or realizing that that the population that you know, just this reentry population or system impacted population, that there is a place for people like me, that for you know, to go to Cal State Long Beach and to have Project Rebound there and to have to see different policies and different conversations happening amongst those people that are you know, making these new. It's just, you know, that's what makes me keep going because I want to be another, I don't want to be like a success story for like, oh, "we get to now be successful," like no, I want to be because like I said, I have family members who are incarcerated. So, when they come home, they know that they're not gonna only be like, oh, oh, "My Tia Penelope made it because she's so smart and she tested better than I." No, no, like, I went, I feel that the conversation looks like, "Hey, give people a chance and you see what they can do."

Give them a chance, like, don't do it for them, you know, give them a chance, you know, and so, that's what is like a real motivator for me right now is to, and yes, it is for my education because I love it. I'm like, I know that like I learned this bag. It's mainly because I want and I believe that if we give people, if we give all communities, all populations, the chance to succeed. If we say, hey, we believe in you, and you can do that, I believe our nation will be a better place. I believe our society and our communities will look different and better. If we say to our people, we believe in you. Oh, man, that was wrong. What you did, you've already paid that fine or that penalty. Like that's, you know, I, that's just what I've done. I mean, I guess that's what drives me to want to be successful and to, you know, drives me is and yet I'm calling me a little selfish. I want to live in a beautiful community where I don't look around and see people cycling in and out of prison doors. They call me selfish, but that's what it is. I want to look around and see people thriving to the best of their ability, you know, so yeah, that's what it is. Sorry. I got a little passionate.

JB: Are you okay? Do you need a break?

Penelope: No.

JB: Okay. Um, so, looking at your experience with college so far, what do you see as some of your strengths or assets?

Penelope: My strength? Like my personal strength or just like strength in community'

JB: Once again, however you choose to define it, but I'm, but I'm thinking about like, how you perceive yourself as a college student and what do you see as your strengths?

Penelope: Okay, so for my personal strength as a college student, I think my resilience, my resilience, and actually my joy. I have like indescribable joy that the Lord has given me and my resilience to push past everything that not only have I put myself through, but that others have also put me through. You know, a lot of those choices were mine. And yeah, they were useful and ignorant choices that I made, but my resilience to be able to say, like, you can do, like you can, and I just, I believe that that's one thing that that has helped me is being resilient. And also, I feel like, I know I'm saying I tell other people be easy on yourself, but like, I think no one knows how hard I am on myself. And I don't look like it because I let myself get away with a lot of stuff. But internally, there's an internal person inside there saying to me like, "Come on, you need to get it together to do this." Like you weren't just here to, you didn't just grace the earth, just to land you know, you know. That I have purpose and I feel like my purpose right now would be to get my education to show, not only show others but yeah, to show the world and to be able to get a degree. Like I don't want to just be a number, not that. I like to have the evidence that education works, and that it can work if we invest in education and investment may look like investing in low SES

[socio-economic status] communities early. It doesn't have to be when they're reentry, it could look like investing, you know, proactively investing in communities. So, that it doesn't have to be a reentry community.

. . .

JB: I was just thinking specifically about ARISE, um, do you have any stories about your experiences with them?

Penelope: So, um, as I mentioned, I'm extremely system-impacted. In fact, I didn't share this with you, but my very first, my very first picture of me and my father is me visiting him in the California State Youth Authority. So, that's how far back I go as well, right? So, anyhow, um, many years, you know, as I mentioned, my parents were in and out of incarceration my whole adolescent years. And so, visiting, just that whole experience, just being with incarceration, you know, being lined up, facilities, and things like that, that whole experience. And as I mentioned, I didn't know at the time, I don't feel sorry for myself. Didn't know that was the only way of knowing. However, what I wanted to share is the ARISE program, they had a speaker come in, you know, of course it was via zoom because of the pandemic, and the speaker was speaking about PTSD, incarceration, and things that formerly incarcerated person and/or system impacted person may feel or may experience, you know, and I myself I didn't, I didn't, had I not gone to that Zoom meeting, had there not been that evidence and that or not even just evidence had that not been related to me to recognize what I was going through, like I just felt a fool when the person spoke about . . . so my son is incarcerated and I'm going to visit him. I would get sick on, you know, I would be all excited going to see him. Coming home I get a headache all the way up there. I mean home, I would be so sick, like literally I'd have headaches and my stomach would be nauseous and I didn't understand. I just used to think like the change of climate. I don't know those are the things that I was saying to myself. Yeah, but had the speaker not shared, you know, the trauma again, just things that to look out for, you know, just, you know, things that you know, can be beneficial, like you know, talking about and realizing that you're not alone and these things do impact your life and your body. So, I heard that and so happy that we had that. That guest speaker on an ARISE meeting, and that weekend, I went to go visit my son and I started to recognize different signs. And I said to myself, "Okay, you're feeling upset. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to you know, you're sad." What are you gonna do when you're sad? And for me, that looks like prayer. So, now I can honestly say that well, unfortunately, I haven't been back to visit since the pandemic but, visiting prior to the pandemic, and when I got to go visit my son, I was able to identify what I was experiencing and put a name to it. And have my coping mechanism for me was realizing and saying "Okay, I know why my stomach hurts. Like I'm, you know, this, this hurts me." So, that was a big thing for me, and I wish that that could be offered to everybody in the future because PTSD is real. Because I know you know, it's like post-traumatic stress disorder. Yeah, we all experienced something. We may have all experienced

something traumatic in one way or another. For me it just happens to be all those years as a little girl going to visit your parents in prison and leaving them there, you know, now leaving you're saying like, of course you're gonna be upset, right?

. . .

JB: So, we've gotten to the last chunk here. And this is a little more of a reflection on how you've seen yourself over the years as a student. So, first question, before you decided to attend college, how did you see yourself and what would you say was your personal story up to that point?

Penelope: I believe I saw myself as surviving. I saw myself, like I mentioned, the job that I had, the career that I had at the time working for an HMO, I was blessed with that. But I feel like I've got to stop surviving. Maybe surviving as far as like, okay, I'm surviving I was given this job. Like, don't get me wrong, but surviving. And just okay, I have this job. I learned how you know, it's good job. But . . . so that was the question right? How do I see myself?

JB: Actually, not yet. It was just like, if you had sort of a personal narrative, like an internal narrative, you know, what would that have been? So, you know, if your self-perception was that you were, you're surviving. It was good that you're employed, but it sounds like you're implying that you weren't necessarily fulfilled. That you were getting by.

Penelope: So, I felt as though I was surviving. I felt as though I was given, you know, those shows, like, oh, let's reach out, give you a lifeline. I felt like I was given a thrown a thrown a life whatever…

JB: Lifelines, right? Probably the right word.

Penelope: Yeah. I felt like that was given to me and I felt like maybe like that my mind was kind of just weak, kind of how…gosh, now I feel bad. But I know that I felt that I was just surviving that. I felt like I was given a lifeline to survive. And I was just riding the motion of survival, riding the motion of going to work every day, riding the motion of like, you know, although I was blessed like I said, but like, this is just how I felt like.

JB: What has changed in your view of yourself from like when you started in school, to where you are now, and how do you see yourself now?

Penelope: So, I'm glad you asked that question. Because when I gave my synopsis of how I felt prior, I was like, wow, that's kind of bad. But now looking at where I'm at now, I believe that I'm thriving. I believe that not only am I thriving and being able to see, be able to understand things that are going around me in a whole different light again, when I felt like I was throwing that lifeline and just riding the wave. Now I know what the waves are like. Where the waves are coming from, I should say. And so, I feel like I'm thriving and no longer am I just surviving. I feel like I'm thriving and

those waves like, I feel like now that I've been exposed to just different disparities and just different things. It's just not about disparities, because we hear that a lot now. Right? Um, that's a big topic now. Sure. Just being exposed to like, I guess it is, but it's okay to say like, "Hey, I lived for a long time in disparity but like now I feel like I'm, I feel like I am thriving" and I'm learning how to not only thrive in the waves or in the you know, also learning how to I can't control waves but how to ride them, I guess you would say like, you know, so I just think I think I see myself in a different way and I see my, I feel more confident and being able to express myself.

Janet

JB: So, what led you to enroll at Santa Ana College the first time around?

Janet: So, I found myself in um. So, background, I actually had the opportunity because building up to my junior year, I had the opportunity. I was connected with the right people. And you know, I had the networking, the right people that have the tools, but I then found myself in a DV relationship at that time. At that age, I didn't process what was going on. It wasn't now until fast forward after going to therapy that I realized, oh, this is what happened or this is why I was manipulated. You could say by an, this adult, so…

JB: Forgive me. I apologize for interrupting. When you say DV, does that stand for domestic violence?

Janet: Yeah, domestic violence. Okay. Okay. I was, since the age of 15 I was in a relationship with a 20-year-old, and I found myself in a domestic violence relationship. At the time that I turned 18, I moved out with him, and then a few months later, we got married. So, then that's what changed my direction from being, going from, you know, a UC or Cal State or even out of state. I had gotten accepted to go to university, the University of Arizona state. So, um, that's what changed my thing, was a fork in the road, you could say, and a big one. And so, then I decided, well, I still want to continue my education. So, that's how I went to Santa Ana College in the midst of everything, the whole chaos. That's why I kept on withdrawing from classes. So, it was just me going to doing general ed. And the reason I didn't really keep up or do very well was because I had to be home at a certain time. I had to be home certain days. So, that just really affected my education at the beginning at Santa Ana College. So, if you were to look at my transcript, you'll see a bunch of Ws and it was because you see that I only completed like four courses within those two years, and it was because you know it, you know, if you don't see it in black and white, you see a whole bunch of W's and completion of just four courses. But if you want to know the background story, it's because I was involved in a domestic violence relationship.

. . .

JB: Okay. Um, the question I was going to ask was, were there external forces that complicated your educational journey? I think we've hit on a big one.

Janet: Early, my early college years, it was definitely being in a domestic violence relationship. And then after that, it was just, you know, I, once I left that situation, then that that was another turning point was, you know, when I got pregnant with my first daughter, I said, I need to make sure that I can give my daughter a better future. And that was the turning point in my life that I said, I need to go back to school. Like I need to, regardless of the odds, regardless of the challenges that I'm going to face because literally for those 18 months at American Career College, I only slept like honestly like three to four hours each day, because I had to work my schedule around my child, which was, you know, a few months to a year old. So, that was very challenging. That was another outside as you could say, external factor that it was…

JB: Pregnancy and raising the child?

Janet: Yeah, but also at the same time, gave me that fuel to continue my education. And then along the way things happen. And then in 2016, I was incarcerated between 2016 and 2017. And while I was incarcerated, I kind of was, you can say I was um, I came from a sheltered kind of Catholic family. So, I, there was a lot of things that I was exposed to that I wasn't aware of before prior to all this. So, when I, again, tried to come back like, I redeem myself, I tried to, you know, redo my life, and barely now in May, I went to a woman's conference and I said, well, how can I help my community? And then that's when I said I need to go back and get my psychology background. I have, now I have short, mid-term and long-term goals. And yes, all my goals have the DAPPS rule [Dated, Achievable, Personal, Positive, Specific]. So, I've added deadlines, made it personal, stuff like that. So, one of my long-term goals is to have my nonprofit and that one I've made it a goal by 2025, but I'm registering it this January of 2022. And because one of the things that as an external factor for me this time around, going back to school was the challenge of the assistance of a formerly incarcerated. I didn't find that assistance here in Orange County.

. . .

JB: Okay, so you mentioned that you spoke with everybody: VF, RG, IG. If I heard correctly, it sounds like one of your one of your external supports was also church community and that that's what led to your first connection to VF.

Janet: Yeah, so I, um, I started a residency program and in September of 2021, so just a few months ago, actually two months ago, I started a residency program. And I'm, I'm working with Local and Global Initiatives, who is a group that works for the community. And not just Santa Ana, but Orange County in general and the

community director, he was the one that because he knows people in the community, he was the one that reached out to VF.

JB: Got it.

Janet: But these people that provide classes for the community, free classes on Wednesday nights, that during the pandemic have been doing food drives every Friday, and also just been like a support system. Whether you know, as a single parent, I don't have a support system within my immediate family. I no longer have a support with my immediate family. Since being incarcerated, I lost that. I came out and for them, I was just like, you can say an outcast in better words,

JB: I'm sorry to hear that.

Janet: Yeah. So, I was, yeah, I lost that support. And so, I then turn to, turned to church, but at the beginning, I also felt like I didn't belong. So, I would just go to the service on Sundays and then I would run away, like I would just take off. But it wasn't until, it only took one person to sit with us and share and listen to her story. That's where I was like, okay, you know, as a single parent, we have to be interdependent…You have to be interdependent person. And that was kind of something I'm learning too. I'm taking Human Development class this semester. And makes sense because growing up as a child from a very young age too, I was always it was embedded in me that I had to be self-sufficient, self-independent. And now coming back to Gordon Manor College, it's like, I'm also learning like, no, it is okay to be interdependent and like, reach out to your community, whether that be church or school, or the Writing Center or the tutoring hub like you, in order for you to be successful and you have to, you know, rely on your network of support system.

. . .

JB: I believe you mentioned earlier that you also felt you needed to be a role model for your daughters?

Janet: Yes, I need to, yeah. Their dad is absent from their picture. And my immediate family because of my situation is not really that involved with them. So, I feel like that as a parent, not only do I need to be a parent, but I also need to be a good role model in their life. So, when they say yes, like they can see you know, "Mom made mistakes in the past. But Mom learned from those mistakes, and she redeemed herself and like she's come a long way and she is a different person than what she was years ago."

. . .

JB: So, um, before you decided to attend college, how did you see yourself, and what would you say was your personal story up to that point? And let's, let's make this the recent, you know, that the most recent version of college

Janet: I was an office manager accounting in the investment industry. And I was just like, I thought of the routine, and I found myself unfulfilled. But in better words, unfulfilled and questioning, "Is this something that I want to do for the rest of my life? And is this something that I like, do I want to continue doing this nine-to-five job for the rest of my life?" And I struggled because, yes, I was at a comfort zone. And I knew that. Me going back to school and getting psychology, you know, I was like a nonprofit in all honesty. Sometimes it's not the best paying job, but it's more fulfilling. So, I had to make that drastic change and, you know, talk with my daughters about like, you know, I am making this change and for the next couple months, you know, I'm just establishing this year and I said, I'm gonna not only you know, quit my job and because they were not letting me do like a medical leave to take care of my mom, so, I had to. They said, "Okay, well then we're going to have to"—basically they terminated my employment because I was gonna go on medical leave. It was fine. Yeah. And then they took away my title and they outsourced what I was doing, you can contract any accounting person. And I told the girls, "I am going to not only go back to school, but I'm going to do a residency program," basically, in their words, they said, "Mom, we're going to be broke." But I want it leading up to school. I wanted to do something that fulfilled me. Something that I'm passionate about, and I can make, it's like if I leave tomorrow what is the legacy or imprint that I'm leaving this world? And when I reflect, I pretty much look and I say nothing and more until now because now I've decided to go back to school. Now I'm at Gordon Manor College. But if I were to die tomorrow, it's like no, you know, and my daughters can reflect this, like, "My mom made a lot of mistakes. She did what she did, but she was going back to college because she, not only did she go back to college, but she's been helping out our community." And I can't say like I went to college to go back to my community and give to my community? No, I've, I am going to college because I've never left my community. I've stayed within my community. And I want to continue to give back to my community. And I want to open the doors to those that come after me because there was a lot of doors going back to school that were shut in my face. I had a lot of "no"s and a lot of just doors that shut in my face and ARISE was the program that open has opened a lot of doors or little windows for me. So, I would like to have or like, you know if I can sit down with RG today, it'd be like RG, help me: how can I bring an ARISE to Orange County, you know? How can we have—mix ARISE and Homeboy Industries and bring that to Orange County? Like that is my goal.

APPENDIX F

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FIS SCHOLARSHIP

The following short bibliography represents a sampling of scholarship by formerly incarcerated scholars, most of whom are based in California and are working with students in the California Community College system.[13]

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