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The Value of Prison Education: Evaluating the Impact of Education Through Desistance

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The Value of Prison Education: Evaluating the Impact of Education Through Desistance

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Abstract

The United States faces an epidemic of incarceration, draining resources, disrupting families, and hindering societal participation. Prison education emerges as a method to address this cycle, with vocational and academic programs being pivotal. While vocational programs are more common, their long-term efficacy remains uncertain. Academic education, exemplified by programs like the Bard Prison Initiative, provides incarcerated individuals with an opportunity to change. Typically, the success of these programs are measured using recidivism. However, recidivism has become too narrow of a measure to properly capture the nuances of an education. There has been an emerging body of scholarship studying desistance and how the process can be facilitated. This thesis investigates the value of implementing college programs in prisons, utilizing qualitative methods to explore personal development, skills acquisition, and social bonds. The findings suggest that vocational programs can provide certain degrees of change for individuals, but these changes are limited and less in-depth than the change a liberal arts education can foster. However, disparities in programming, particularly concerning gender, highlight systemic challenges. Moving forward, equitable access and deeper exploration of the link between a liberal arts education and desistance are imperative. This research underscores the necessity of holistic approaches to reform the incarceration system, prioritizing academic education as a pathway to break the cycle of imprisonment and offer incarcerated people a chance for redemption.

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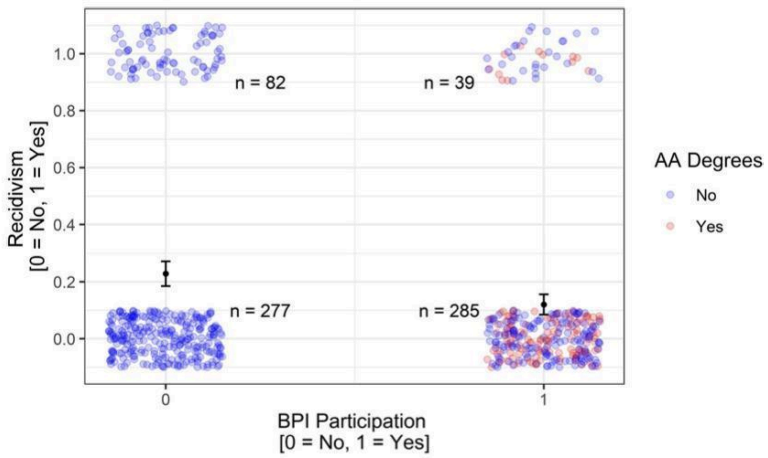
Introduction:

Incarceration in the United States has become epidemic as it drains our government of resources, disrupts family structures, and debilitates citizens' ability to participate in our society. The traditional view of incarceration must be reconsidered as this method proves to be counterproductive and create a cycle of imprisonment. Upon release, the lack of resources and support lead many to the same conditions that led to their initial arrest. Current public policy must focus on how to end this cycle and give formerly incarcerated people a chance to be productive citizens when they are released.

Prison education has become a method for activists and policymakers to address the cyclical nature of incarceration. Supporters of prison education have cited its benefits in reducing recidivism and providing incarcerated citizens with employable skills. Prison education can take two forms: vocational programs and academic programs. Vocational programs have often been the 'go-to' method for carceral institutions. However, the empirical research behind these programs remains largely inconclusive on the effectiveness of such programs (Lipsey & Cullen 2007; Newton et al. 2016). Such findings may be due to the heterogeneity of these programs and the variability in implementation, participant criteria, and participant length. The main concern of these vocational programs should be their viability in providing incarcerated citizens with long-term adaptable skills. In other words, the skills learned in vocational programs are often limited and specific to a certain trade. They do not necessarily translate to long-term employment and these skills may become obsolete soon. Vocational programs alone cannot give incarcerated citizens the proper standing to build another life for themselves following incarceration. The favoring of vocational programs over other forms of intervention plans ignores the long-term benefits of a quality academic education for incarcerated citizens.

Academic education programs in prisons have a long-standing history that is often ignored or unknown by many policymakers. The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) is arguably the nation's current foremost program that provides college degrees for incarcerated students. BPI is established in seven correctional facilities across New York State, while also helping other colleges and universities establish similar programs through the Consortium for the Liberal Arts Prison. Through BPI, incarcerated students work towards an associate degree or towards a Bachelor's Degree upon completion of their Associate's. The success of education programs is measured by recidivism. Figure 1 illustrates the effect of BPI's program on recidivism rates. The scatter plot visually lays out the positive effects of an education program on recidivism.

Figure 1: Scatterplot Visualizing BPI Participation and Recidivism



Note: The scatter plot represents participants of BPI and recidivism. Each dot represents an individual who applied to BPI and was selected for an interview and had been released for more than 3 years at the time of data collection. The dots on the left indicate those who did not participate in the program and the dots on the right indicate those who did participate in BPI. The dots on top represent those who recidivate within 3 years of release. The dots on the bottom represent those who did not recidivate within 3 years of release. The red dots indicate those who earned an associate degree. The blue dots indicate those who did not earn an associate degree. From Denney, M. G. T., & Tynes, R. (2021). The effects of college in prison and policy implications. *Justice Quarterly*, *38*(7), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2021.2005122.

The effect of education on recidivism is undoubtedly positive (Steurer et al. 2000; Vacca 2004; Esperian 2010; Denney and Tynes 2021). However, studying the effects of prison education

solely through the scope of recidivism is limiting and does not properly capture the nuances of students who decide to undergo an education program.

More recently, criminologists and scholars have used desistance as a form of analyzing prison education. What recidivism fails to do in some respects, desistance makes up for. Desistance is a peculiar concept to capture as it is the *absence* of an activity. In criminology, desistance is the process by which an individual ceases to participate in criminal activity and opts for a lifestyle free of participating in crime. While recidivism is more easily measured (one either recidivates or not), desistance is a much more difficult phenomenon to capture and measure. There are conceptual questions that many researchers still do not agree upon. However, framing a prison education through desistance may provide a more nuanced analysis of how prison education prevents recidivism, prompts the desistance process, and stimulates personal growth.

The focus of this thesis is to answer the question: What is the value of implementing a college program inside of prison? Using a general theory of prison education as outlined by Szifris, Fox, and Bradbury (2018), the thesis frames the effects of education through a desistance framework. The broadness of the question allows the researcher to remain general and open to the different possibilities that education has on an individual. The research, however, remains focused on three general impacts that education may have for an individual: personal development, employable skills, and social bonds.

This thesis uses a qualitative method of design to answer the above research question. Using a qualitative approach allows for a more nuanced analysis that allows each participant to provide the details of their experience. The interview was guided by three sections that focused on the personal development, skills gained, and the relationships created (or strengthened) of each participant. Given Virginia's limited programs of higher education in prisons and the

researcher's access to such populations, the interviewees of this thesis have *only* undergone a vocational education, and completed their GED or similar programming rather than an extensive higher education program like BPI. The focus of the thesis is to demonstrate what vocational training and such programs *can* offer, what the *limits* of those offerings are, and how they *compare* to the experiences of those who have participated in an extensive liberal arts education. Ultimately, this thesis argues that education programs, specifically those with a liberal arts curriculum, provide deeper transformative opportunities than vocational programs can offer. This deeper transformation is the development of a 'new self,' a key factor in the process of desistance.

Problem Statement:

The United States has the highest incarceration population in the world. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the U.S. had a staggering population of 1,230,100 incarcerated people (2022). Furthermore, every year, more than 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons, with an additional nine million released from local jails (Benecchi 2021). However, within three years of their release, two out of three individuals will recidivate, and more than 50 percent are incarcerated again within an eight-year period (Benecchi 2021). These numbers demonstrate the cyclical nature of our criminal justice system. The question for policymakers and prison officials is how to disrupt this cycle and facilitate a transition back into society for formerly incarcerated people.

Education has become the fundamental approach to rehabilitation in prisons. Vocational education has received much more attention from prison officials compared to higher education. However, the results of vocational education remain inconclusive, although research does lean

towards more positive outcomes (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007; Newton et al., 2018). Compared to the research on higher education which has repeatedly affirmed that it does indeed improve recidivism rates (Steurer and Smith, 2003; Vacca, 2004; Esperian, 2010; Denney and Tynes 2021). Policymakers and prison officials alike must critically examine the favoring of vocational education over academic programs. Vocational education *alone* cannot create the identity-based change often needed for an individual to desist. It must be supplemented with a rigorous academic curriculum to produce this change.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework that guides this thesis is by researchers Kirstine Szifris, Chris Fox, and Andrew Bradbury in their "A Realist Model of Prison Education Growth, and Desistance: A New Theory" (2018). Using a realist review method, the researchers sketch out a general theory of prison education, focusing on *how* prison education impacts incarcerated people, especially in terms of personal development. The researchers remained general in how they defined "education" and "personal development." In their work, education was defined as "engagement in a structured period of learning within an intention of gaining new knowledge, new skills, or a specific qualification" (Szifris et al. 2018). Similarly, personal development was defined as "the process of growth an individual undertakes during their life course" (Szifris et al. 2018). They situate the effects of education on personal development within the desistance paradigm. That is, focusing on how the effects of education facilitates the process by which people choose a "new (offending-free) lifestyle."

Using Pawson and Tilley's (1997) realist review methodology, the researchers developed an initial theory in the form of Context-Mechanism-Outcome configuration (CMOs). Szifris et al. identified three initial CMOs that guided their review:

A. 'Hooks' or Personal Factors: This configuration, termed as the 'hook' CMO, delves into the subjective processes involved in shaping and adopting a new identity. It examines the individualized aspects of education, whether through formal instruction, self-study, or participation in classes, courses, or other educational activities.

B. 'Qualifications' or Skills and Knowledge: This configuration, referred to as the 'qualification' CMO, outlines how prison education can enhance prisoners' 'employability' by equipping them with transferable skills, critical thinking abilities, and recognized qualifications, thereby facilitating their integration into the workforce.

C. 'Safe Space' or Environment and/or Behavior: The 'safe space' CMO configuration shifts focus to the external outcomes of educational engagement, including interactions with the environment, developing coping skills, the role of education as an avenue of escape within the prison context, and its influence on prison culture. It adopts a social perspective, examining the impact of educational settings such as classrooms, education departments, or informal learning spaces, as well as the dynamics of engaging in education alongside others.

Using these three initial CMOs, researchers began reviewing the literature to understand how accurate their theories were. The researchers concluded that prison education could serve as a 'hook' for change; as a way of gaining 'qualifications' that validate an employable identity; and as a 'safe space' for incarcerated people to develop and 'test' a new social identity. Although, their research found stronger evidence for the 'hook' and 'safe space' CMO than the

'qualifications' CMO. They attribute this to the lack of available data on the mechanisms of prison education.

In this paper, I utilize their CMOs ('hook,' 'qualifications,' and 'safe space') to guide how I analyzed the effects prison education had on my interviewees. Szifris et al. locate these changes within a desistance framework. Similarly, I discuss how these three identifying markers of change can potentially facilitate the desistance process for individuals.

Literature Review:

The Historical Argument: Rehabilitation vs. Punishment

Throughout the 20th century, the penal system was torn between supporting rehabilitation or punishment for incarcerated people (Anstiss 2003). The 1970s presented a moment in which these conflicting thoughts came to a head. Prior to the 1970s, rehabilitation became a staple in offender intervention. The rehabilitative ideal was rooted in the medical model of understanding criminality (Phelps 2011; Cullen 2017). Reformers believed that with the right treatment, criminals could be 'cured' of their offending behaviors. During the early 20th century, these ideas began to shape the modernization of the correctional system. Advances in the social sciences provided confidence that the root causes of crime could be identified, and the political climate favored social reform (Cullen 2017). Criminal treatment often took the form of counseling and group therapy (Hollins 2000). The rehabilitative ideal greatly shaped how incarcerated people were treated and the benefits allocated to them.

However, the penal system took a drastic shift beginning in the 70s. With the rising crime rate and growing prison population, the public and policymakers became disillusioned with the possibility of truly 'curing' criminals (Cullen, Fisher, and Applegate 2000; Cullen 2017). The publication of Robert Martinson's (1974) "What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison

Reform" gave further fuel to opponents of the rehabilitation movement (Hollins 2000; Anstiss 2003). Martinson reviewed 231 studies evaluating rehabilitation programs and concluded that treatment was largely ineffective. He wrote, "education…or psychotherapy at its best, cannot overcome, or even appreciably reduce, the powerful tendency for offenders to continue in criminal behavior" (p.49). A year later, Lipton, Wilks, and Martinson (1975) reviewed the same studies as Martinson and came to the same conclusion: rehabilitation does not work. Their publications coincided with a political period where liberals and conservatives alike began to attack the rehabilitative model of parole boards. Liberals believed that parole boards lacked the expertise and "political insulation" to determine who was deserving of parole (Jonson and Cullen 2015). While Conservatives believed that the parole system would allow felons to 'con' parole officers into a premature release (Jonson and Cullen 2015). The combination of Martinson's publication and growing political hostility ushered in a period of shifting government funds away from rehabilitation to primary crime prevention and deterrence (e.g. policing) (Anstiss 2003).

Punitive measures began to be reflected in our laws. Between 1993 and 1996, the federal government and 25 states passed what are known as the "three strike" laws (Austin and Irwin 2012). The legislation mandated substantial increases in sentences for individuals with prior convictions, including life sentences without parole upon conviction of a third violent felony (Kovandzic et al. 2004). Proponents of the legislation based their support on the established research conducted by scholars (West and Farrington 1977; Shannon et al. 1988). Additionally, they believed that by increasing the sentences of repeated offenders, guaranteeing the completion of these extended terms, and minimizing the likelihood of early parole, these laws would curb judicial discretion. Thus, parole boards were less likely to release 'dangerous' offenders prematurely, ultimately leading to lower crime rates through deterrence, incapacitation, or both

(Kocandzic et al. 2004). Despite this growing sentiment, there remained a small body of researchers and officials who continued to support and practice rehabilitative methods.

Higher Education in Prisons

The history of higher education programming in prisons goes as far back as 1789. These early prison education programs were known as the "Sabbath School." Reflecting the Puritanism framework of the colonial period, incarcerated people were expected to be literate to read the Bible (Gehring 1997). The Sabbath Schools were meant to teach incarcerated people scripture from the Bible in the hopes that they would find salvation in God and ask for forgiveness.

In 1834, thirty tutors from Harvard worked weekly with incarcerated people at Massachusetts State Prison. Reformers believed in the power of education in transforming people and their behaviors better than religious scripture could (Norweg 2021). In 1913, the first college-in-prison program was established in Leavenworth, Kansas. According to a *Washington Post* article, more than fifty incarcerated people were enrolled at the State Agricultural College taking courses in civil engineering, agriculture, and other various fields.

New York would become one of the leading states in supporting higher education in prisons. In 1932, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Walter Wallack as the educational advisor to the New York Commission on Prison Administration and Construction (Gehring 1997). Wallack, a teacher with a PhD in education, released a report suggesting the expansion of educational programs in state facilities and encouraging faculties from nearby universities to bring material inside prisons. After this report, universities across the country began to work with prisons to offer college coursework to incarcerated people (Gehring 1997).

Expansion of higher education into prison continued into the 1960s. President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program marked an even more progressive turning point in the federal

government's involvement in higher education. Under Johnson, the federal government began to fund programs in states like Oregon, Minnesota, New Mexico, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania (Taylor 1992). By the 1990s, seven-hundred and twelve state and seven federal prisons offered a form of higher education coursework for incarcerated people to pursue.

Unfortunately, federal support for college coursework inside prisons was suspended with the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. The act disallowed incarcerated people from accessing Pell Grants. Soon after, state governments followed suit and began to stop funding in-prison programs. This "tough on crime" era sparked public hostility towards incarcerated people and the higher education programs that were afforded to them. Incarcerated people became 'undeserving' of such opportunities and raised public concern over the prioritization of incarcerated students compared to nonincarcerated students.

The 1994 Act had a drastic effect on the available prison education programs. Prior to the 1994 Act, there were a total of 772 programs operating in 1,287 institutions across the country (English and Robinson 2017). But by 1997, there were only eight programs in operation across the country, relying on individual and philanthropic support to continue running (English and Robinson 2017).

There have been efforts by the federal and state governments to reverse some of the effects of the 1994 Act. The Second Chance Act (SCA) of 2008 received bipartisan support to authorize federal investments in state and local governments to fund initiatives and programs aimed to reduce recidivism. The SCA authorized up to $165 million dollars in grants for state and local governments and nonprofit organizations to support their efforts in reducing recidivism amongst formerly incarcerated people. While the Act did not exclusively outline funding for educational programs, it heavily focused on the reentry programs afforded to incarcerated people

to support their transition back into society. The Act also brought attention to the possibility of education programs in reducing recidivism and rehabilitating individuals. In 2010, the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) set aside funding under the SCA to conduct an extensive study of correctional education. The OJP awarded the RAND Corporation the grant and tasked them with three goals of their study: (1) examine the current state of correctional education and the direction it is headed in, (2) which programmings are effective, (3) and how these effective programs can be implemented in different settings (Davis et al. 2013). Their study found that incarcerated people who participated in a correctional education program were 43% less likely to recidivate than those who did not (Davis et al. 2013). Additionally, they found that for every $1 spent on prison education programs, agencies can save $4-$5 on reincarceration costs. The RAND report's findings helped to fuel reforms pushing for prison education programmes.

Building from this momentum, former President Barack Obama announced the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program in 2015. The main purpose of the program was to provide incarcerated adults with access to Pell Grants, allowing them to participate in postsecondary education programs. The Department of Education invited higher education institutions to participate in the pilot program and over 200 universities did. On June 24th, 2016, John King, Secretary of Education, revealed the 67 schools across the country that were chosen to participate in the program (English and Robinson 2017). Approximately $30 million in Pell Grants were given to incarcerated students in 27 different states (Douglas-Gabriel 2016). This equated to less than 0.1% of the $30 billion Pell Program and would not affect the eligible Pell recipients who were not incarcerated (Douglas-Gabriel 2016). The DOE made the following requirements for universities who were participating in the pilot program:

1. Program design*:* Create one or more coherent programs of study by curating educational content from one or more non-traditional providers of postsecondary education that are not currently participating in the Title IV, HEA programs. At least 50 percent, and up to 100 percent, of the program's content and instruction must be provided by one or more non-traditional providers through a contractual arrangement with the participating institution. The institution must award a certificate, degree, or other recognized credential to students who successfully complete the program, and the certificate, degree, por credential must have externally validated value in the workforce, for academic transfer, or both.
2. Quality assurance*:* Identify a QAE with the capacity to review, monitor, and report on the proposed program and ensure the quality of the providers and their program components as outlined in this notice under 'Quality Assurance Questions and QAE Role.
3. Accreditor review*:* Submit the program created in collaboration with one or more non-traditional providers to the applicant institution's recognized institutional accrediting agency for consideration for inclusion in the institution's existing accreditation.
4. Disclosure*:* Clearly disclose to prospective students' information about the experimental nature of the programs, the possibility of termination of the programs, and how a teach-out to provide the remainder of the program will be conducted should a program or the relationship with the non-traditional provider(s) be terminated.
5. Title IV disbursement*:* Only disburse title IV aid to otherwise eligible students under the option chosen by the institution.
6. Consequences of low quality*:* Take immediate action to improve, suspend, or terminate programs or non-traditional providers that the Department, the QAE, the accreditor, or

the institution determines are not meeting the quality standards established by the QAE. In the event that a program is suspended or terminated, a teach-out plan, as generally defined under 34 CFR 600.2, must be developed to provide the remainder of the program by the institution, or for the provision of the remainder of the program by another title IV-eligible institution, at no additional cost to students.

7. Protections for students and taxpayers*:* For those programs in which students will have access to Federal student loans in addition to Pell Grants, submit detailed plans describing how students and taxpayers will be protected in cases where programs are suspended, terminated, or otherwise limited in their participation in the experiment by the Department, the QAE, the accreditor, or the institution, for any reason, including poor student outcomes and low quality" (DOE 2015).

Aside from these requirements, programs were given plenty of autonomy over the eligibility and curriculum for their specific program. While 43 schools had already been operating a prison education program before the 2015 pilot program, the 2015 Act allowed many more accredited universities to begin their own operations and provided thousands of incarcerated students the chance to enroll in such programs. Programs all looked different from each other, but they all had the same goal: to provide educational opportunities for incarcerated people.

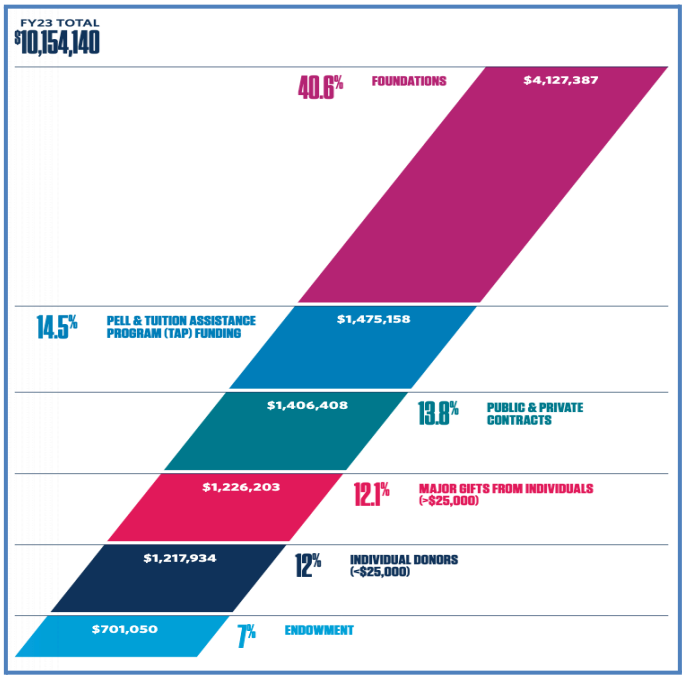
Case Study: Bard Prison Initiative

Of all the current prison programs that exist today, one program stands out given its longevity and extent of its impact: the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) of New York. It is worth investigating how this program has operated and what makes its programming effective.

As of 2020, New York had a total of 34,128 incarcerated people under state or federal correctional authorities with a recidivism rate of 43% (BJS 2020).

BPI's work began with a group of undergraduate students from Bard College in response to the decline of prison education programs across the country. In 2001, equipped with limited

Figure 2: BPI Funding Breakdown During the 2023 Fiscal Year



funding and access to the New York State prison system, Bard College launched BPI as a pilot program with 16 students. The program has since grown and issued their first associate degrees in 2005 and their first bachelor's degrees in 2008. BPI is spread across seven prisons in the New York State correctional system, enrolling over 400 students, offering more than 160 courses per academic year. BPI continues to expand their work, both nationally and globally.

During the 2023 fiscal year, BPI had a total of $10,154,140. Most of their funding relies on donations from large foundations such as the Ford Foundation, Northstar Foundation, and the Tow Foundation. Only about 14.5% of BPI's 2023 budget came from Pell Grants and the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). Figure 2 from their 2023 report breaks down the percentage of sources for their funding.

BPI has a highly selective process. Only about one out of every ten students who apply are admitted; students can apply up to two or three times before they are ever admitted (Lagemann 2011). To apply, students must submit an essay as well as complete an interview. Students are given two hours to complete the essay in response to a prompt that is typically, a "a poem, an excerpt from a major work of social science, or a passage from an historical document" (Lagemann 2011). Other than the prompt, students are not instructed about what to write or how long it should be. Upon completion, five faculty members independently read and rank the essays.

After evaluation, around 60 of the 200 essays are chosen to be selected for an interview. These interviews typically last only ten minutes with 2 faculty members of BPI. According to staff, there are no defining characteristics or markers they are looking for in candidates. Instead, they are looking for people who "have the personal qualities—courage, desire, realistic expectations, and determination—that are likely to sustain them through the long, intense, and difficult years of study" (Lagemann 2011).

After they are admitted, students first work towards completing an associates degree (A.A.). Their first year, students are required to complete two classes in writing composition and two in grammar; a third of their classes for their A.A. are writing intensive. Additionally, students must pass one class in quantitative reasoning such as advanced algebra or statistics. Once their semester begins, first-year students are enrolled in regular classes alongside second- or third-year students. Students are expected to take classes across all four disciplines which include: (1) The Arts, (2) Languages, Literature, and the Humanities, (3) Science, Mathematics, and Computing, and (4) Social Studies, and are given the opportunity to choose an elective in a

subject of their choosing. Once a student has completed their A.A., students then work towards earning a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.). As a bachelor's student, they are expected to participate in advanced seminars, select a major, and write a year-long senior thesis.

Beyond their curriculum, there are many other features of BPI that makes it a stand-out program. They have extracurricular programs that students are given the chance to participate in including the BPI Debate Team, Arts and Culture Events, and becoming a Tutoring Fellow. BPI also offers an extensive reentry program following an individual's release. This includes the ConnectEd Workshop, a six-week long paid intensive program designed to meet the needs and support long-term planning for the first several months after release. BPI also offers a number of fellowships and internships that students are eligible for upon completion of their education. Every year, 60-70 BPI students return home. BPI also boasts an 85% employment rate after two months upon release.

The work that BPI does is undoubtedly impactful and remains one of the best college-inside-prison programs in the country. BPI only has a 3.5% recidivism rate compared to the state's 43%. For the students enrolled, BPI has become a safe space in an institution determined to rid them of their identity. Being a student compared to a prisoner is one that allows them to remain grounded in their humanity.

Rehabilitative Education

The research supporting education's rehabilitative effects is undoubtedly positive. Many qualitative research and interviews with incarcerated students demonstrate the tangible benefits people have received after their education. In Appleman, Caligiuri, and Zang's (2014), work, a collaborative piece between an educator, a formerly incarcerated student, and a currently

incarcerated student, respectively, highlights the transformative opportunities a liberal arts education can provide. Caliguri wrote:

> Being cut off from much of the world and having a lot of idle time, education is priceless. It is a breath of fresh air and it gives me purpose. Learning and doing something productive makes me feel like my time is not wasted. I wish we had more options and avenues for education. Education is like the parts of a machine. The prison programs are the tools. When you use them together, you can assemble the best chance at succeeding once released from prison. It has been essential to my rehabilitation. Without it, I would most likely still have the same mindset and habits as I did before going into prison (2014).

Zang reflects on his ability to write and communicate to tell his story:

> others expressed themselves through other forms of visual art, the written word was the only expression I had to say something that might move tangibly into the hands of someone else who wasn't tortured by the same things that tormented me. I was fortunate enough to have educators who came in, told me what I was doing was relevant, and encouraged me to keep going. In time, it started to become a re-humanization process by which I started to re-conceive my own humanity and self-respect. It is easy for those in power, those associated with the law, to tell you that you are wrong and then expect the only way for you to get back right again is to spout off a reinforcement of the ideas that got you locked up rather than constructing ideas of your own (2014).

Other researchers have found similar results. In Pelletier and Evan's (2019) research, their participants found an increase in their confidence, gaining leadership skills, developing a positive self-image, and strengthening their bonds with others and social institutions. In Lerman and Grumbach's (2012) work, they interviewed participants of California's Prison University Project (PUP). One participant summed up the experience of learning in his response:

> Everything that I learned, it's just that, in prison and outside of prison, the way [PUP staff and other students] rubbed off on me, changed me. I always use the word 'baptism,' because I believe the word baptism isn't just something Catholic or Protestant; it's being baptized with the spirit. At PUP I was baptized with the spirit of education. By being around [people in PUP] most of my day, as much as

> I could. And it wasn't just classes. We had a lot of guest speakers, and I always signed up….We had so many important politicians spend time with us, come in our classrooms, ask us questions. So it transforms you. It changes you. You're no longer the same person, and so those people's values become your values and you line up with them. And you're not doing it blindly! You're realizing, if you use your critical thinking it makes sense. It was just resonating with the values I had already learned as a child. It was like finding myself again in, of all places, prison (Lerman and Grumbach 2012).

These responses illustrate the many effects higher education can have on incarcerated people. It can stimulate change, facilitate growth, and humanize incarcerated people in an institution that sees them as another body in the system. Measuring the success of these programs solely through the scopes of recidivism or taxpayer savings ignores the "fundamental aspects" of education (Gould 2018).

The Problem with Recidivism Rates

The National Institute of Justice defines recidivism as "a person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after the person receives sanctions or undergoes intervention for a previous crime." Recidivism is often used as the sole metric of the success of our criminal justice system in 'reforming' individuals and the programs that prisons have to offer. However, the measurement of recidivism provides a very narrow scope of 'success' and does not fully capture the nuanced process an individual undergoes upon leaving prison.

For one, recidivism is an inconsistent measure (Jancic 1998). That is, researchers and methodologists each define recidivism differently based on their research and available data. Despite its inconsistency, it is still hailed as the 'ultimate' indicator of success by policymakers. This could be attributed to the fact that recidivism is a much more quantifiable phenomenon: one either recidivates or not. However, it is this exact binary-response that makes the measurement problematic, especially when applied to measuring the effectiveness of education programs.

Education is all about a *process* compared to recidivism which is all about capturing a single event. It would be impractical to use recidivism as a measurement of a process if it is focused on identifying a single moment in a person's journey.

Recidivism is also narrow in that it is limited to one realm: the criminal justice system (Rosenfeld and Grigg 2022). However, individuals lead lives that are intertwined with their communities and go beyond simply avoiding confrontations with the system. Additionally, the primary objectives of our criminal justice system extends beyond punishment to encompass public safety and rehabilitation, aspects that are not fully addressed with an exclusive focus on recidivism (Rosenfeld and Grigg 2022). In order to create a more holistic view of an individual's post-release outcomes, we must explore other domains of an individual's life, beyond their interactions with the legal system, to include education, housing, employment, civic/community involvement, and support from family and friends.

Desistance

Many researchers and criminologists have turned to the desistance framework to better understand the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals and the impact prison programming has. Desistance from crime is a new concept, only emerging in the past 30 years amongst criminologists. Prior to the 1970s, desistance was never used to describe the termination of crime. It was not until Wolfgang et al. (1972) research on a birth cohort in Philadelphia did the term "desistance" appear and be used in the way criminologists understand it today. Early desistance scholars believed desistance to be an event, something that 'just happened.' Shover and Thompson (1992) defined desistance as the "termination of a criminal career." While Blumstein and Moitra (1980) defined desistance as "not recidivating." These early conceptions of desistance measured it as a natural occurrence, especially in relation to age. Desistance did not

occur over time, instead, it was measured as a singular event that took place when an individual ceased participating in criminal activities.

However, Sampson and Laub's (2001) seminal research began to consider desistance as a process. They write:

> We believe that, just like quitting smoking or uncoupling…desistance is best viewed as a process rather than a discrete event. The process is a social transition that entails identity transformation, as from a smoker to a nonsmoker, from a married or coupled person to a divorced or uncoupled person, or from an offender to a nonoffender. (Sampson and Laub 2001).

Sampson and Laub's work also raises conceptual questions of desistance. For example, can desistance occur after only one act of crime is committed? How do we distinguish between 'genuine desistance' and 'false desistance'? How long of a time frame is needed to establish desistance? There are also questions of measurement. How do you 'measure' desistance? Is it by behavioral change? Or by the number of years a person last committed a crime? Sampson and Laub leave these questions up to individual researchers to clarify in their works. They argue that, "In short, by focusing attention on the conceptual, definitional, and measurement issues surrounding termination and desistance from crime, we urge researchers to make their definitions more explicit and provide details regarding the measurement of these concepts" (Sampson and Laub 2001).

There are many theories proposed by researchers as to how people desist. Importantly, in the study of desistance, it is more pertinent to investigate *how* people desist rather than *why* (Maruna 2001). There are three main theoretical lenses in desistance research: the role of age and maturation, life transitions and 'conventional roles' (being a productive worker or faithful spouse), and changes in personal and social identities (Maruna 2001). This first school of thought

is primarily rooted in the age-crime curve. Sheldon and Eleanor Gleuck's (1943) work first explores the relationship between age and criminal behavior over time. With this approach, desistance is often considered as a termination point. Once offenders reach a certain age, they will reach a level of 'maturity' that allows them to finally desist (Glueck and Glueck 1943; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985).

The second framework considers how social bonds influence the desistance process. According to the social bond theory, informal ties to social institutions like family, employment or educational programs can account for the shifts in criminal behavior (Maruna 2001). Sampson and Laub's work consider the structural factors that facilitate the desistance process. They found that these 'turning points' were "crucial in understanding processes of change in the adult life course" (2001). Of these major life events, their work concludes that stable employment and good marriages were the most significant. Their research makes an important note that desistance does not solely rely on the existence of these social bonds but also on the strength, quality, and dependence of these attachments (Sampson and Laub 2001).

Finally, some scholars argue that agency and identity play an important role in the desistance process. Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) research developed a more individualistic theory of desistance. They argued that an individual takes on a "working self" (or their *present self*) as a criminal offender. And that in addition to the working self, there is a future that consists both of what a person hopes to become (*the positive possible self*) and what they fear they could become (*the feared self*) (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). When individuals reach a point where they see themselves becoming what they feared, an initial decision is made to change the self. This initial decision is accompanied by a change in decision-making and social networks that "stabilize the newly emerging self" (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). Unlike the other two

frameworks, their research emphasizes the role of agency and a cognitive change that includes the creation of a new identity.

Methodology:

This thesis uses a qualitative approach to investigate the value of a prison education in the context of a desistance framework. The rationale behind a qualitative design was to understand individual accounts of how education has affected a person's personal development. Quantitative analysis of prison education programs affirms that these programs 'work' in that they reduce recidivism (Steurer et al. 2000; Vacca 2004; Esperian 2010; Denney and Tynes 2021). However, researchers have not focused on *how* these programs work and what its effects are on individual learners. A qualitative approach allowed me to learn individual names and stories, something that gets lost in quantitative research.

A purposive sampling method is used to determine which participants to include in the study. This method of sampling allows the researcher to identify "information-rich" cases that fit the aims and objectives of the research (Palinkas et al. 2015). This research is focused on the effects of a prison education; thus, interviewees must have had some previous experience with an education program while incarcerated or insights concerning education in prison.

There is no definitive number to the 'right' number of participants to achieve saturation in qualitative research. Such sample size is dependent on several factors including the research question, phenomenon's complexity, and the richness of data (Hennink and Kaiser 2022). Saunders et al. (2018) also notes that an underlying conceptual question of saturation is whether to consider it as an "event" or a "process." Therefore, it is best to consider saturation in relation to the quality of the gathered data rather than as a fixed number. For this research, a sample size of 10-15 was considered appropriate given the timeline of the thesis and the sampling method.

After gaining approval from the University of Richmond's International Review Board (IRB), I began collecting data at Real Life, a reentry center based in Richmond, VA. With the help of Dr. Sarah Scarbrough, the director of Real Life, I went into the center and conducted interviews on-site. Neither Dr. Scarbrough or the researcher selected specific individuals to participate. Instead, individuals self-identified themselves for the interview based on the given criterias: (1) at least 18 years or older, and (2) had participated in an education program while incarcerated. No other specific criterias were identified.

Limitations:

One of the key limitations to this study is the fact that none of my participants participated in a formal college curriculum while incarcerated. Most of their experiences came from either vocational training or GED courses. However, their responses demonstrate what these kinds of educational programming *can* offer and, more importantly, its *limits* compared to the offerings of a liberal arts curriculum such as BPI.

Another limitation is the lack of racial and gender diversity amongst my participants. Of the ten people I interviewed, two of them identified as Black and the rest were White. I interviewed seven men compared to only three women. This may make it difficult to draw conclusions to apply to a whole population. However, the interviews gave the researcher a general picture of the stories and experiences of individuals, highlighting the potentials of prison education.

Introduction of Participants:

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Length of Sentence
Mr. A	29	White	Male	3 years
Mr. B	22	White	Male	4 years in juvie, arrested 10 times since he was 18 for periods of 1 week-1 month.
Mr. C	43	White	Male	18 years
Mr. D	38	Black	Male	5 years
Mr. E	57	Black	Male	On and off since he was 28 for short periods of time. Longest was six months.
Mr. F	35	White	Male	9 years
Mr. G	33	White	Male	11 years, 6 months
Ms. H	35	White	Female	8 months
Ms. I	50	White	Female	7 ½ years
Ms. J	31	White	Female	3 years

Mr. A:

Mr. A is a 29-year-old White man who served a total of three years. Mr. A took two five-week vocational courses, a solar panels program and a flaggers program, while incarcerated. He received a certification in both courses upon completion.

Mr. B:

Mr. B is a 22-year-old White man who was in juvie for four years. He has been arrested a total of ten times since he was 18 years old, for periods of one week-one month. Mr. B finished high school while he was in juvie. He did not participate in any formal education programs while incarcerated but engaged with the educational videos provided to him on a tablet by the prison.

Mr. C:

Mr. C is a 43-year-old White man who served a total of eighteen years. Mr. C took a small engine repair vocational course while incarcerated. The program lasted for a total of 40-weeks. After graduating the course, he continued working as a teacher's aide assisting other students and the instructor.

Mr. D:

Mr. D is a 38-year-old Black man who served a total of five years. Desmond participated in a service aid class that deepened and sharpened his culinary skills.

Mr. E:

Mr. E is a 57-year-old Black man who was incarcerated for short periods of time since he was 28. He received his GED while incarcerated.

Mr. F:

Mr. F is a 35-year-old White man who was incarcerated for nine years. Mr. F received his GED while incarcerated.

Mr. E:

Mr. E is a 33-year-old White man who was incarcerated for seven and a half years. He participated in various vocational courses including: bricklaying, service aid, and janitorial work.

Ms. H:

Ms. H is a 35-year-old White woman who served a total of eight months. While incarcerated, Melissa took a parenting course and a Changing Offender Behavior course.

Ms. I:

Ms. I is a 50-year-old White woman who served a total of seven and a half years. She took an introductory English course and a yoga course.

Ms. J:

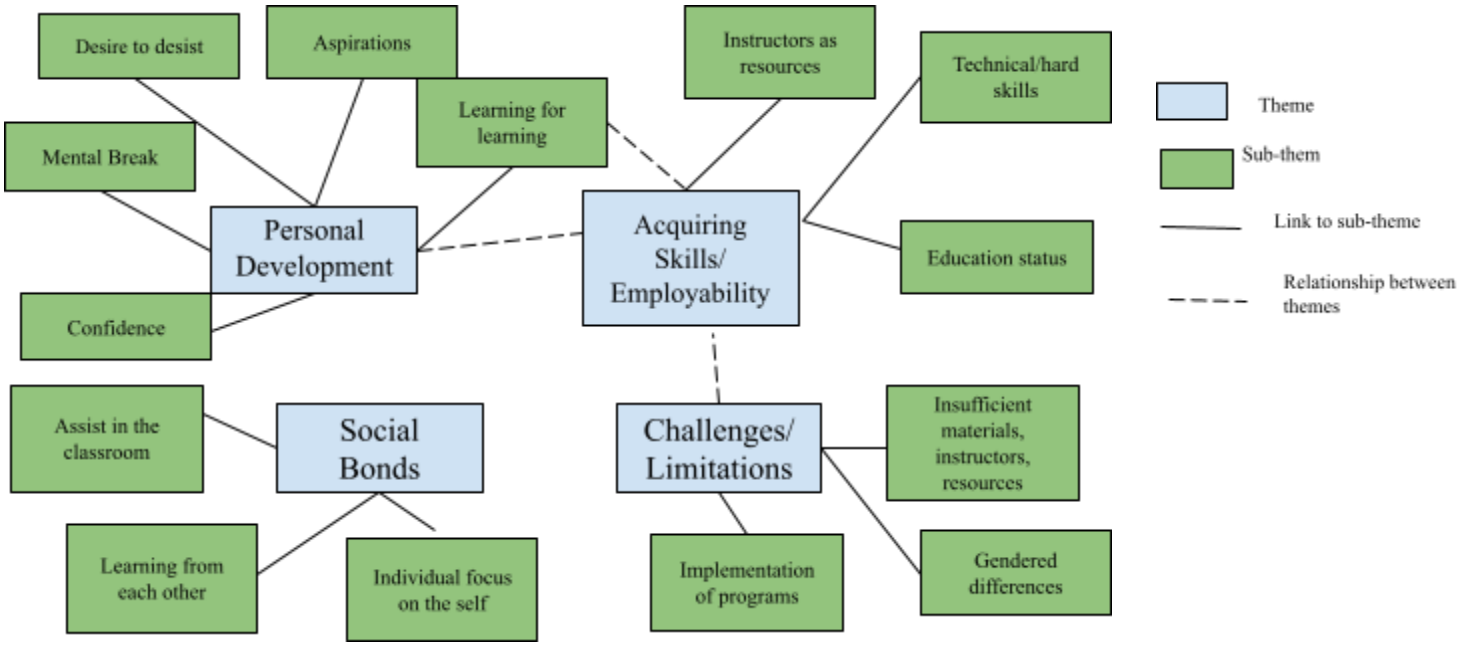
Ms. J is a 31-year-old White woman who served a total of three years. She did not partake in any education courses while incarcerated and discussed why she chose not to participate and the challenges of these courses.

Data Analysis

I utilized a deductive and a thematic analysis approach to analyzing my data. I relied on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2021) thematic analysis guide to analyze my data. Their approach includes six steps: (1) become familiar with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define themes, (6) and write-up (Braun and Clarke 2006). This six-step process is, however, not linear. Researchers often move back and forth between these stages, and they often collapse into each other. After rereading the transcripts of my interviews multiple times, I began to code my data. As this research was guided by a theoretical framework, I had three preconceived themes in minds as guided by Szifris et al's research: personal development, gaining skills/employability, and social relationships. Using these three themes, I began to highlight segments of data that either related to one of these three themes or to my research question.

After identifying and sorting codes, I noticed a common trend amongst the codes. This led me to develop several sub themes of each larger theme and I found one general trend that resulted in a 'surprise' theme. Below is a thematic map that contained the original themes and sub themes from this first analysis:

Figure 3: Initial Thematic Map



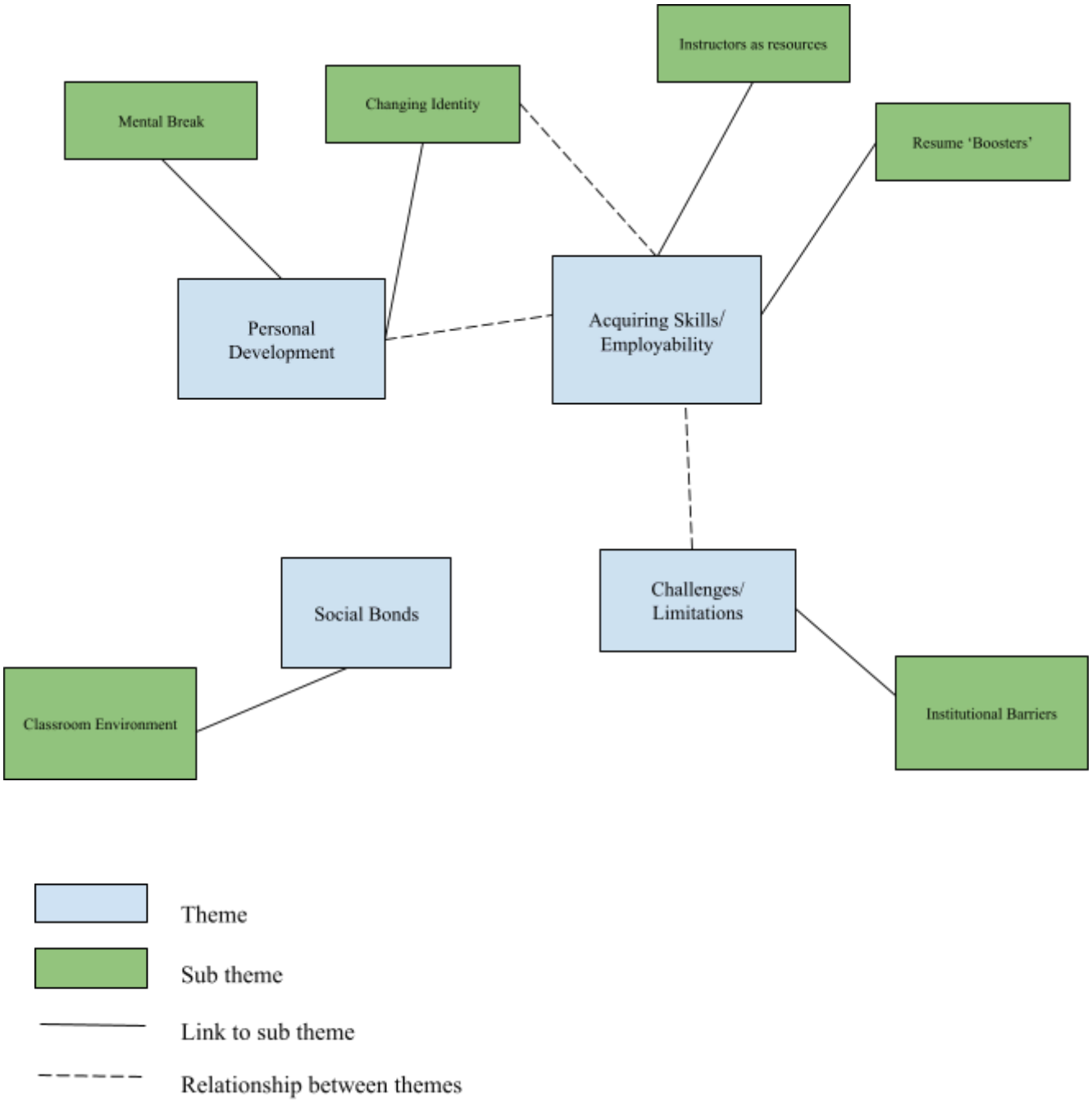
After sketching out a general thematic map, I utilized Braun and Clarke's (2012) guiding questions to refine my themes:

> Is this a theme (it could be just a code)?
> If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?
> What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
> Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?
> Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?

Refining my themes included narrowing my subthemes. For example, the subthemes "assist in the classroom" and "learning from each other" both speak to the general classroom environment. Separating the two would create a weaker subtheme when they both speak to the context in which learning occurs. Similarly, the sub themes of *Challenges/Limitations* all relate to the

institutional barriers that exist for incarcerated people. After making these changes, and several other, I created my final thematic map:

Figure 4: Finalized Thematic Map



Findings

Personal Development

The theme *Personal Development* refers to Szifris et al.'s 'hook' CMO. This includes the "subjective processes involved in forging and forming a new identity." The changes each participant underwent was varied and diverse. Some of these changes were very minimal, with some feeling unchanged as a result of their education programming. For others, these changes were much more visible and they saw a notable difference in themselves.

Subtheme 1: Changing

This subtheme refers specifically to the specific changes people saw in themselves as a result of their education. This subtheme remains general in naming changes. As people's experiences with education were very diverse, the changes they saw in themselves followed a similar pattern. Some people found that their education gave them a future aspiration. In this manner, the subtheme directly relates to the *Acquiring Skills and Employability* theme. People often described their aspirations in terms of their ability to gain employment or a future career:

> *Get your mind set, hey, when I get out, I'm gonna get a job and I'm gonna succeed in life. I'm not gonna go back out there selling dope and this other shit.* (Mr. A)

> *Yeah, I'd like to further educate on becoming a diesel mechanic. Like you start with the small engines and you work your way up, you know, to bigger and bigger.* (Mr. C)

> *It actually inspires me to own my own restaurant one day, but it made my desire to cook more, even more…It gave me an aspiration to actually pursue my goals in life. Still in my top five things to do lists.* (Mr. D)

> *Well, before prison, I couldn't get a job for holding down and taking these classes really taught me to enjoy what I'm doing and to…love it. At the end of the day, [it] gave me more of a drive and I now have no issues ever getting jobs. They come a dime a dozen.* (Mr. G)

> *But I actually want a career, you know, I want to do something more than just host in a restaurant for the rest of my life or serve or something…*(Ms. J)

For others, their education was directly related to an increased confidence in how they saw themselves:

> *Yeah, I'm more confident. A lot of people saw I'm cocky and confident…I used to be so insecure….I used to be shy. I didn't talk to a lot of people. And just, I didn't want to expose myself to the possibility of bullying and shit…I don't know. it's like I…flip the switch a little bit one day.* (Mr. G)

> *A lot of times it's about confidence like if you know you're good at something or find that you're good at something or that you have talent in this one thing you're gonna wanna explore it. And go and do it. Because they're gonna have confidence that they've found something.* (Ms. H)

On a more simple level, participants' education revealed to them that they enjoyed the process of learning. Mr. C remarks about his class, "I just learned that I liked, I enjoyed learning." On a similar note, Mr. A said, "Yeah. Just learning, learning in general…I wish I knew that then that the more I learn, the more I can succeed in life."

Some participants also noted how their GED courses had little to no effect on them. Mr. F says, "I don't really feel like it's affected me really, you know what I'm saying like, any of the things that I did in there hasn't had no major play in my life now." Sharing a similar sentiment, Mr. E said, "Because I felt like I didn't need it. That's what I felt like because, like I said, I always worked. So all I had to do was just work."

Subtheme 2: Mental Break

The prison environment is one that impedes the ability to develop one's identity or growth. Many individuals noted that their education classrooms provided a temporary relief in their routine. Whether it was getting out of their pods, being in a smaller environment, seeing other people, the classroom became a 'break' in their mundane routine:

> *It gets your mind not doing, get your mind off prison. Gets your mind off barbed wire fences, COs, you know what I'm saying?* (Mr. A)

> *They have a tablet. Okay, so as soon as you get into jail, as soon as you check in, you'll get your tablet. And there's a whole educational section on there. And I actually really enjoyed the videos that they have on the educational section because there's not much to do in jail. And so I didn't have the money to watch movies on tablet, but I just go through and watch the educational videos, So that would actually be beneficial if somebody put more education videos on there. Because I know there's a lot of people in there are sitting there watching because they got nothing better to do.* (Mr B)

> *…once I became a teacher's aide, I was able to, I worked all day from like eight in the morning until four in the afternoon. So that whole time you're in the classroom workshop. You know, it's, it's kind of like having a real job. It was alright.* (Mr. C)

> *So it took me out from being around 60 something people to a smaller group with all the same aspirations. So it was a breath of fresh air for a while.* (Mr. D)

> *It helped me not feel like I was incarcerated. Because I was doing something that normal people do.* (Ms. I)

One participant notes that while he did not find his GED course stimulating, he found books to become an escape for him. He says:

> *Well, when I was in school I really didn't like to read. I only got into reading when I got locked up. Because I thought that if it didn't have no pictures in it, how can I understand? So I was never really interested in reading. Until I got locked up and books took me somewhere else. It took me from prison…like I was really into the story*. (Mr. E)

Acquiring Skills/Employability

This theme looks at the hard skills that incarcerated people developed and how it affected their outcome in terms of employability. As noted in the *Personal Development* section, many interviewees saw that their ability to change was directly linked to their ability to gain a job, demonstrating how deeply intertwined these two themes are. However, in this section, I am

concerned with looking at the technical or hard skills that they may have possibly gained while incarcerated.

Subtheme 1:Resume 'Boosters'

This subtheme looks at the skills and certifications that individuals gained as a result of their programming. These qualifications give incarcerated individuals a chance to 'boost' their resume upon release–an ability to demonstrate that they have something to bring to the table. Many of these individuals took vocational courses, and as a result, received their certification in different trades. Mr. A received a certification in solar panel and flaggers. While he does not work in either field anymore, he accredits these certifications with his ability to gain employment. In his words:

> *Then at the end of the course, the course is like maybe five weeks,they give you a test and they give you certificates and [you] take a certificate and go to a job interview like, Hey, I'm already to certified to work on this. You know to get you a step ahead of a game when you're coming out…The more people that take a course and get out, they're gonna get jobs.* (Mr. A)

Similarly, Mr. C enrolled in a HVAC certification course where he received his OSHA, EPA608, and EPA609 certification. He was, however, unable to finish the entire course due to the pandemic. Mr. G took a bricklaying and mason course that allowed him to gain experience in the field. Additionally, he took a service aid course that gave him further knowledge on how to properly handle and store food.

For Mr. F, his GED course did not provide him with any technical skills that directly translate to the possibility of employability. However, he is able to mark on his resume his level of education:

> *I guess everybody says that like if you don't have your high school diploma or GED, that it's harder to get a job. I guess because they don't know if you can read and write and all this other stuff. Yeah. so I guess it's*

probably helped me when it comes to that. (Mr. F)

Subtheme 2: Instructors as Resources

This subtheme highlights how instructors played a role in providing participants with a chance of employment. These instructors were noted for their helpfulness in either providing participants with resources, being a point of contact, or a general support system while incarcerated:

> *See, the guy that really taught me he'd come from Lunenburg, which is another prison. And he…was hands on. He teachers more than just that solar panel class. He teaches flaggers class, he writes resumes for you, all this other stuff. So yeah no. He was great.* (Mr. A)

> *My instructor for the small engine class actually helped me get a job. And he was, he's well known in that community. He owns his own business and stuff. And I applied at a place and didn't even know that he knew the people and then I put him down as a referral. And they were like, Yeah. We know this guy.* (Mr. C)

> *Yes. She [was] very helpful. As a matter of fact, she was the one that was telling me about you know, when I get out, [to] pursue a degree in culinary arts. So she was very, very helpful.* (Mr. D)

> *…there's actually somebody there facilitating the class that are full of resources. Like, upon release, the woman that facilitated was like here's my email address. You can reach out to me once you can get to the outside, I'd be happy to help you.* (Ms. H)

Social Bonds

This theme considers how education classes can potentially impact an individual's relationship with other incarcerated people and outside institutions. The participants acknowledged the peers in their classroom and how they often helped each other with assignments. However, several participants mentioned the limits of their interactions with other students, especially as their bonds did not extend outside of the classroom.

Subtheme 1: Classroom Environment

For the most part, many participants described the classroom to be a positive environment. Many felt comfortable asking another student for help and some mentioned how students would learn from each other:

> *You would, you'd ask if you didn't know something. The next man might know something…They might have read a little bit further in the book than you did…So you would, you know, you would just learn from each other and try to get it done.* (Mr. A)

> *Yeah. Um…mostly it was just people that were in the same dorm. If you know, they needed help anything they'd come ak. Studying for tests, needed tutoring or anything like that.* (Mr. C)

> *Well, we did help the ones that stayed in the program. Yeah. We did…help each other out. Like if one didn't know something they could call for somebody else.* (Mr. D)

> *So I'm like, we're in a group, we're in a classroom…like I'm learning from what other people are saying. I'm learning from their stories of what they went through versus me and like when I'm doing the Changing Offender Behavior by myself, like I already know about me. But it's nice to hear other people's stories or other people's answers to questions. Like, oh my god, I can relate to them. I can see what they're saying.* (Ms. H)

> *You live in different buildings but if you have someone that's taking the same class, you get together and get going and work together on homework and things like that. So there was some community building going on.* (Ms. I)

However, participants also informed me that this bond was only limited to their classroom. People rarely interacted with each other outside of the classroom. And if they did, it was only in relation to their class. Some individuals also made clear that their peers had little to do with their own education. Despite collaborating in the classroom, Mr. D also said, "It didn't discourage me any because I wasn't there for them I was there for myself." Mr. E had a fairly clear response when asked about any potential community formed through the classroom: "It's prison. No."

Mr. G also talked enthusiastically about his instructors and how they helped shape his experience in the classroom:

> *When you're in there and you're surrounded, I mean, I've always thought That my teachers are great. Having outside people come in there and take Time and teach us? Some undesirables or deadbeats, whatever people want To call us. Convicts. Criminals. It meant a lot, because, who the fuck are we?*

Challenges/Limitations

I did not intend to find such a pattern in the data or when I began my interviews. However, many participants noted the challenges they faced completing their education. Many of the barriers they discussed were institutional challenges including insufficient materials, instructors, and a lack of courses available. Most notably, my interviews with the women revealed the deep gender inequality when it came to the programming made available to them.

Subtheme: Institutional Barriers

This subtheme explores the challenges the participants discussed. All of the limitations they faced were institutional barriers. That is, these are systemic and systematic issues that prevent individuals from fully accessing a comprehensive education. Many individuals talked about how insufficient either their instructors, resources, or the courses themselves were:

> *Like the ones I had were more just supervisors. They had a curriculum they followed. They were definitely less educated than public school teachers. So the teachers that they had probably didn't even know a lot of the material that they were teaching. I don't know what their requirements for teaching was but it couldn't have been so high because they, I mean, they weren't really teaching the class. They were reading the book, almost like a substitute teacher would do. It's more like that* (Mr. B)

> *I think it made it harder to do, like the NA or the Changing Offender Behavior because there wasn't somebody there. Like, if I had questions or list of questions, it wasn't like we were going to class once a week where I can ask these questions or get more like enlightenment on certain things, like sometimes*

> *the way things are working or the way they want it, I'm like I don't know exactly what you want from me. It's not in-depth and so there's not even anybody there to be like well how do I do this? Or to ask for help.* (Ms. H)
>
> *They were fine for me. I felt like…the English class that I took, I felt like maybe it was kind of dumbed down…I wasn't the greatest English student, but I took this class and it was like, You got 100, you got 100, you got 100. And I'm like…I think it was kind of like getting an award for participating.*
>
> *It was just, it was very basic. The readings that we had to do were not stimulating.* (Ms. I)

Participants made clear that these challenges made it difficult for them to complete their education or felt unfulfilled by it. Another limitation people mentioned was the long waiting lists or the demanding stipulations in order to get into certain programs. The women noted:

> *But because I had an institutional charge pending, which was eventually dismissed, they wouldn't let me sign up for the college classes…it's really disheartening because it can affect your education. Something that small and even if you're not found guilty.* (Ms. I)
>
> *Yeah. And so…like the cosmetology program, I know they only accepted like, it was eight girls into it. So out of the whole compound, eight girls. And then these went for so long you weren't getting in it. And the girls that did get in that they weren't trying to get put out of it. But you also had to meet a lot of criteria to go in there. So like you had to be charge free…And I'm talking about just simple infractions of like, you know, being out of your cell at an inappropriate Time. Little small things, not having your blues on in the day room. This can prevent you even from getting on the waitlist to even be in the class.*
>
> *But there was girls that have been in there for like 5, 10 years and still weren't enrolled in anything and had been waiting. But something as simple as a simple charge. Gosh, you took off that list and then you would have to wait another year, six months, whatever the stipulation was at that time.* (Ms. J)

Long waiting lists and such requisites prevented Ms. J from even trying to sign up for a class. She said, "I didn't sign up for them because I knew they were pointless and useless" (Ms. J).

There was also a very deep gendered divide in the programs offered for individuals. None of the women had access to vocational courses or training at their institutions. In Ms. J's words:

> *Because I know with the men, they have a lot of trades I want to say going on in there. Women really don't have that. Like, the only thing I seen while I was there, like I said Darden and Cosmetology…it's half-assed.*
>
> *…I know my brother, he's in prison, and a lot of my friends, they're in prison that are males and they're going to school for like welding…all these certifications. But they'll have those when they get out and can go get a job for those things. Women really don't. And I always say DOC is geared more for men than women. Like, men get anything and everything. And it's catered to them, they offer more. Women's prisons, they don't offer none of that. Like, if you bring it up, they don't even want to hear it.*

Discussion of Findings:

Theme 1: Personal Development

This theme investigates the potential of prison education for transforming individuals and stimulating personal growth. Participants described how their education courses opened up new horizons and broadened the possibilities they had for their future. For example, Mr. A took several vocational classes. He cites these courses as changing his 'mindset.' They gave him a new direction in life to get a job and to stop "selling dope and shit" (Mr. A), suggesting a desire to desist. Similarly, Mr. C's small engine class gave him the aspiration to become a diesel mechanic. He acknowledged the role his instructor played in securing him a job and teaching him these skills that led to such a goal. Mr. D's service aid course deepened an existing passion, encouraging him to open his own restaurant one day. These findings align with the experiences of other incarcerated students. Prisoners' Education Trust's "Theory of Change" (2015) highlights how education gives people the ability to move forward and develop a mindset that pushes them towards achieving their goals, despite barriers or setbacks. Similarly, Ismael Bonano, a contributor of *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons,* describes his education experience as giving him "something to look forward to" and a belief in himself to achieve anything (2016).

However, there were limitations to the degree in which people saw themselves changed. For example, only Mr. G and Ms. noted an increase in their self-confidence, similar to the findings of other researchers (Evans et al. 2017; Pelletier and Evan 2019). None of the other participants felt changed in any other way, especially in relation to their thinking. Some, like Mr. E and Mr. F, saw no change after their GED program. This marks a stark contrast to the experiences of incarcerated students of liberal arts education programs. These students not only developed aspirations and greater confidence in themselves, but the way they thought and behaved significantly shifted. For example, Johnny Page, a student at Danville Correctional Center who underwent a formal liberal arts education wrote:

> Over these twenty-plus years, I've acquired a number of vocational certifications such as custodial maintenance, print and press operating, and cosmetology. The skills I obtained through these programs will one day lead to my employment. However, through the liberal arts I have increased my consciousness, which has allowed/forced me to challenge my thinking and how I perceive the world and my place within it today. (Page 2015).

This "consciousness" is a key factor of the liberal arts education which gives incarcerated people a new way to see themselves in their social and political context. Another student, David Evans, writes:

> In my case, my destructive behavior inflicted injury upon another person, my family, and my community. My conscience is not clear, but today I ache to retrieve my humanity, end my destructive behavior, and fully be the man I am on the inside. Monsters cannot do that, and humans cannot do that alone. Higher education enables this personal transformation (Evans 2018).

Like Page, Evans describes a significant transformation after his education courses. None of my participants cited any change as significant like Page and Evans has. Some even remarked feeling unchanged or unaffected by their education courses. Many individuals expressed a desire to learn. They enjoyed their class because they were learning new things and skills. Opening a liberal arts education to incarcerated people is not only about giving them an opportunity to

change, but to stimulate learning itself. Vocational programs and GED programs can open up the pathway to learning, but the liberal arts can deepen it.

Theme 2: Employability

The data shows that many participants received hard skills or certifications after completing their vocational training. Mr. A, Mr. C, and Mr. G each talk about the experience they gained after completing their courses. However, for only a few has this training actually translated towards gaining employment. Mr. A currently runs and maintains construction equipment, accrediting his courses as helping him get "ahead of the game." And for Mr. C, with the help of his instructor, was able to secure a job in the field he studied in while incarcerated. These findings correlate to similar findings of past researchers. The RAND corporation found that for individuals who participated in vocational programs, their chances of being employed were 28% higher than those who did not participate once released (RAND 2013).

However, success post-release is not only determined by employment. By focusing on vocational skills, we are training incarcerated individuals how to become better workers, enforcing them to be 'docile bodies' as part of the labor force. Thus, our prison system becomes driven by market needs or norms (McCorkel and DeFina 2019). Education programs need to be developed beyond the focus of helping incarcerated individuals become employed. Programs should focus on the rehabilitation of individuals, helping them transition back into a community. As Page writes, "The direct benefit of the skills I obtained through the many vocational training programs in which I have participated is still yet to be seen (i.e., obtaining gainful employment); however, the impact that the liberal arts has had on me is visible in my everyday walk" (2015).

Theme 3: Social Bonds

For the most part, many participants found their classroom environments to be positive. Many of the interviewees noted how they would often help each other on assignments or study together for tests. For many incarcerated men, they have to make a conscious effort to put up a 'front,' adopting a hyper-masculine identity as a means to survive prison (Jones and Schmid 2000; Szifris 2018). The data suggests that the classroom environment can provide a temporary break, allowing incarcerated people to work together towards a common goal. There is no survival instinct to put up a front as individuals learn together. However, interactions were often limited to the classroom. This could be attributed to the fact that not everyone lived in the same pod. Mr. C said he mostly interacted with those in his pod and rarely saw other students outside of the classroom. Mr. D also talked about how the success or failure of other students had little impact on himself or his progress. Mr. E had a much more simple response: "It's prison." These comments imply that while the classroom environment leans toward positive social bonds, it rarely extends to the entire prison institution. For participants of college programs, their classroom network was much more extensive than those described by the above participants. For example, Bonano (2016) wrote, "Having a group of people who added to what I was learning and who were willing to assist me to facilitate my intellectual growth gave me the positive reassurance I needed to continue to move ahead…We found strength in unity, pushing each other as hard as we could in order to make sure that everybody was on the right track and keeping focused." This extensive network of support where students not only helped each other complete work, but to also feel accountable to each other and their success was missing from the accounts my participants gave. While their classroom provided them with help, this help only came in the form of classwork.

Beyond the prison, none of my participants said they felt any effects of their programming on their bonds with family or other social institutions. This is a stark contrast to those who participated in higher education programs. In Evans, Pelletier, and Szkola's research (2021), many of their participants talked about their families. One participant said, "They are definitely proud of me. My family was definitely happy that I got the education and used it to get a job. Everybody was happy back home" (Evans et al. 2021). The education participants received allowed them to slowly build back up relationships with their families. More generally, participants of higher education programs saw themselves in the context of their community and society. For example, Chad Walton (2016) wrote, "As a result of being afforded the opportunity to educate myself in prison, I realized that I had what it took to become a contributing member of society by becoming a better person in prison…In this way, education can help to foster a new purpose in life–to give back to the community some of what was taken through criminality." Understanding the self in the context of society and their community is what a liberal arts education can provide. This understanding was missing from my interviewees.

Themes: Challenges/Limitations

Many of the participants discussed the limitations and challenges they faced completing their education programs. Instructors, programming, and resources all played a role in participants' ability to reap benefits. While completing his high school diploma in juvy, Mr. B talked about how his instructors failed to produce any actual teaching instruction. Similarly, Ms. H shared that the instructor for her Changing Offender Behavior course merely dropped off homework for students to complete. His inaccessibility and absence made many students in the course feel disconnected from the work. Their experiences reflect how these components of

education programs all facilitate student's ability to learn. Their instructors not only have to be present in the classroom, but ready to actively engage with their students.

One of the greatest challenges participants faced was the gender division between courses available to the men and women. None of the women had any vocational programs offered in the prisons they were incarcerated in. For Ms. H, her education courses consisted of her Changing Offender Behavior course and a parenting course. Ms. I only took a couple of introductory college courses. And Ms. J did not even partake in any courses because the barriers she faced were so significant that she did not see the point in even trying to get on the waitlist. Historically, reintegration programs have focused on the needs of men because they have been incarcerated at a rate higher than women (Spjlednes and Goodkin 2009). However, women are the fastest growing population amongst incarcerated people (Foster and Sanford 2006; PPI 2024). Studies in the 90s have demonstrated that women's access to vocational programs are much more limited compared to men's. Arditi et al.'s (1973) research found that men were offered a greater number of vocational programs compared to women (men averaged 10.2 programs, women averaged 2.7 programs). There is also a difference in the kinds of programs offered. Women's prisons mainly offer training in clerical skills, cosmetology, housekeeping, or dental/nursing assistance. While men's prisons were offered programs in auto mechanics, carpentry, electronics, farming, horticulture, plumbing, or welding. These disparities reinforce societal gender norms of which occupations are reserved for women and which for men. The female participants' experience reflected this sentiment as many of them showed interest beyond what their prisons offered them.

Connecting to Desistance:

Ultimately, this thesis' focus is to examine the value of a college program in the context of desistance. The participants in this thesis, however, had no experience undergoing a formal higher education program. Instead, their experiences were in vocational training, GED classes, or similar programming. Their experiences demonstrated that these programs are capable of facilitating the desistance process as it allows people to change by gaining confidence or developing occupational aspirations, gaining hard skills, and developing positive bonds with other incarcerated people in their classes. Many also expressed an initial desire to desist, citing that they were tired of their past behaviors or wanting something more for themselves. For others, it was the desire to not spend the rest of their lives in prisons. Whatever the reason was, many participants demonstrated signs of desisting, specifically in terms of making that first decision to change their patterns. While these are indeed markers of desistance, a key aspect that was missing was the adoption of a new identity. Szifris et al.'s (2018) research emphasizes that the process of desistance involves more than that initial decision to change, but it also entails cognitive shifts and developing a meaningful concept of a future self. These latter two aspects are missing from the responses of my participants. This is not to suggest that these participants will end up recidivating or fall back into old patterns, or to diminish the progress they have made, but that there are limits to the change vocational training and GED programs can provide. There are opportunities for deeper change that can be facilitated by a liberal arts education. For Page, his education allowed him to develop a new "consciousness" (2015). He ends his essay by saying:

> We can no longer afford to allow segments of the population to continue to merely exist in caves or simply equip them to manage while within these caves. We have to give them—us—the opportunity to live, to see the world beyond the shadows, and to challenge thinking patterns. Access to the liberal arts gives those similarly situated like myself an opportunity to move outside

> of the cave, to be enlightened, to think critically, and to recognize the shadows for what they are. How we educate is just as important as who we educate. We can no longer ignore the value of a liberal arts education on underserved populations, particularly the incarcerated (2015).

Conclusion:

This thesis sought to understand the value of implementing a college program inside of prisons. To do so, a qualitative study was conducted, using one-on-one interviews with formerly incarcerated people to understand their experiences with education. However, individual's experiences were limited to vocational training, GED classes, and other similar course offerings. The findings shed light on the dimensions of change that these programs can offer, including occupational aspirations, increased confidence, acquisition of hard skills, and the development of a positive classroom environment. And while these changes are markers of desistance, there is an absence of a 'new' identity that was missing from the responses of interviewees. The liberal arts can help fill this gap as past participants have described feeling anew or 'awakened' by their education.

This thesis also found that the ability to benefit from programs are largely dependent on the quality of the program and instructors who run the classes. Furthermore, this thesis uncovered the gender inequality in Virginia's prison system, where equality in programming between men and women are lacking. That is, the experience of the women in this thesis demonstrated how few options are available to women in vocational courses and other courses more generally. The courses that were offered in women's prisons reinforced societal norms about gender roles.

Moving forward, further research is imperative to address these disparities and explore avenues for improvement. A deeper examination of gender differences in prison programming is

necessary to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities for all incarcerated individuals. Additionally, understanding the social and political institutions that contribute to Virginia's resistance to education programs is essential for implementing effective policy changes.

Furthermore, there is a need to advance the connection between a liberal arts education and the process of desistance. Recidivism can no longer be the sole metric of determining success in the criminal justice system. By doing so, we will never be able to build a robust and sustainable argument to advocate for higher education in prisons. By delving deeper into the transformative potential of a liberal arts education in fostering the development of a 'new self,' researchers can provide valuable insights into the mechanism through which education stimulates and facilitates the desistance process.

To conclude, the journey towards reforming the incarceration system in the United States demands a holistic approach that prioritizes academic education as a catalyst for positive change. By investing in comprehensive educational initiatives, policymakers can work towards breaking the cycle of imprisonment and giving incarcerated individuals a second chance on life.

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Appendix A: Approval from IRB

From: The University of Richmond Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (URIRB)

To: C Chan

Date: January 23, 2024

Project Number: URIRB231203

Project Name: The Value of A Prison Education: Evaluating The Impact of Prison Education Through Desistance

Project Mentor: Andrea Simpson

☐ Faculty ☒ Student ☐ Staff ☐ Faculty emerita

The IRB has reviewed your research protocol by ☒ full review ☐ expedited review or ☐ limited review.
You are responsible for reviewing and complying with the conditions of this review as described in this Notice of Action.
Please note:

- This project has been assigned a URIRB study number. Please reference this number in any future correspondence with URIRB.
- If you witness any signs of research misconduct, please notify the University's Research Integrity Officer, Kristine Henderson, at khender3@richmond.edu. Research misconduct includes falsification, fabrication, or plagiarism. For more details, see https://irb.richmond.edu/policies-resources/research-misconduct-policy.pdf
- If you will be compensating your respondents using University funds (e.g., gift cards), the University of Richmond Controller office's pre-approval may be required.

URIRB
The University of Richmond
221 Richmond Way
IRB@richmond.edu

Notice of Action

Your project has been determined to be:

☐	Excluded from IRB review	Your project does not require IRB approval. You can proceed with your project after reviewing this Notice of Action.
☐	Exempt from 45 CFR 46 regulations	Your project is exempt from the requirements of the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46) pertaining to human participant protections. You can proceed with your project after reviewing this Notice of Action.
☒	Approved	Your project is approved. You can proceed with your project after reviewing this Notice of Action.
☐	Approved with conditions	Amendments to your protocol are required and identified in this Notice of Action. Research may not begin until the conditions of approval have been met. After revising the consent document, please submit a copy to the IRB.
☐	Disapproved	The results of your project review are summarized in this Notice of Action. Your project cannot be approved at this time.
☐	Not approved	Review requires clarification and possible revision of the study protocol and procedures. Information needed is described below. Research may not begin until the conditions of approval have been met and you have received formal approval from URIRB via email.

Conditions of Approval

Your proposal has been approved by the University of Richmond Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (IRB). It is your responsibility to ensure that your research adheres to these conditions.

1. Review confirms that the work is not greater than minimal risk, in "that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests" [45 CFR 46.102(i)].
2. This determination is based on the information about the project provided to the IRB. Investigators are responsible for carrying out the project as they have described it. Changes shall not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects.
3. Approval is for a period of one year. Before the expiration date, the research is required to officially close the investigation by removing all identifying information from any data that have been collected; stored data sets must be de-identified once the project is complete. If this research project extends beyond one year from the date of this letter a request for renewal of approval must be filed at least 2 weeks prior to the expiration date; the URIRB is not responsible for issuing a notification of pending renewal deadlines.
4. The IRB requires all investigators complete training in the protection of humans in research, and that they renew that training every three years. The Principle Investigator is responsible for maintaining, in his or her project record files, documentation for all researchers engaged on the project. The IRB can assist the PI in making certain these records are accurate. For more information, please consult information regarding CITI training at irb.richmond.edu.
5. Any adverse reaction or other complication of the research which involves real or potential risk or injury to subjects must be reported to the Chair of the University of Richmond IRB as soon as possible but no later than three working days after the occurrence.
6. This determination pertains only to the requirements of 45 CFR 46 regulating research with human participants, and therefore does not address other local, state, federal, or international requirements or restrictions, such as regulations pertaining to the use of data (e.g., the guidelines set forth by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation from Dr. Sarah Scarbrough

REAL LIFE
Navigating a New Tomorrow

November 27, 2023

Dear Members of the Human Subjects Review Committee:

I am the director of a non-profit organization, REAL LIFE, in Richmond, Virginia. Our mission to create pathways to attain and sustain a thriving life for those wo desire change. This is done through recovery housing provided primarily to those exiting incarceration. We are pleased to cooperate with the project proposed by Cheryl Chan on the effects of education on incarcerated citizens.

I am writing to confirm that I am willing to serve as a mediator between the principal investigator and the subjects who are part of the study. This is important work, and it is our hope that it leads to more studies that point to the significance of education in rehabilitation.

Sincerely,

If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Sarah Scarbrough, PhD
Founder and Director

P.O. Box 27372, Richmond VA (804) 406-4111 RealLifeProgram.org

Appendix C: Consent Form for Interviews

University of Richmond Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Cheryl Chan, University of Richmond.
Email: cheryl.chan@richmond.edu

Purpose of the Research/Benefits:

The purpose of this research is to investigate the value of a prison education by focusing its impact on an individual's personal development, employable skills, and their prosocial bonds with other incarcerated individuals and outside social institutions. This study aims to contribute to the development of effective educational programs for incarcerated students.

While there are no direct benefits for participating in this study, you will be given the chance to reflect on your education and contribute to a broader understanding of how educational opportunities impact incarcerated people.

Participant Role/Procedure:

By participating in this study, you agree to an in-depth interview that will last approximately 45 to 75 minutes. As a participant, you will be asked to share your perspectives and experiences regarding your involvement in an education program while incarcerated. This may include discussing your personal journey, any challenges you faced, and how your education ultimately impacted your identity.

Our interview will be conducted in a private room where only you and the principal investigator will be present. Our interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. You have the right to ***not*** have your interview be recorded and can indicate this at the end of this consent form. Additionally, you have the right to request the recording to be stopped at any point during your interview.

Potential Risks:

While there are no physical risks associated with this study, you may experience some emotional stress or discomfort when talking about your personal experiences. You may choose to revoke your consent at any point in the study, as well as deny answering any questions posed to you.

Use of Information and Data Collected:

Your interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. No other individual will have access to these recordings other than by the principal investigator. These recordings will be deleted 3 months after the completion of the project.

Your identity will remain confidential and anonymous in the final paper. Your name will not be identified, and your name will only be known by the principal investigator.

Contact Information:

For any question about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact Cheryl Chan, the principal investigator, via email at cheryl.chan@richmond.edu. You may also contact the Chair of the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research at (804) 484-1565 or irb@richmond.edu for information or assistance. You may also contact Andrea Simpson via email at asimpson@richmond.edu.

Statement of Consent: The study has been described to me and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may discontinue my participation at any time without penalty. I understand that my responses will be treated only as described in this consent form. I understand that if I have any questions, I can pose them to the researcher or to the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I have read and understand the above information and I consent to participate in this study by signing below. Additionally, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

_____ _____

Printed Name Signature

_____

Date

By checking the box and signing your name below, you are indicating that you have agreed to have your interview recorded for transcription purposes. You reserve the right to request the recording be stopped at any point during the interview. (These recordings will only be

accessible to the researcher and will be deleted after three months upon completion of the study.)

- I agree to have my interview recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

_____ _____

Printed Name Signature

_____

Date

By checking the box and signing your name below, you are indicating that you would prefer ***not*** to have your interview recorded for transcription purposes. (Leave this section blank if you have signed your name above).

- I prefer to have my interview ***not*** recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

_____ _____

Printed Name Signature

_____

Date

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Interviewer Introduction:
Hello! I want to give you some background information about the project before I start the interview. My name is Cheryl Chan and I'm a current senior at the University of Richmond. The overall focus of my project is to investigate the value of education in prison. I'm hoping that these interviews will provide me with a chance to hear from actual students, learn from your experiences, and what it can teach me about prison education more generally. I'm grateful for your time and your willingness to share your experiences.

I will be recording our interview for transcription purposes. If at any point of the interview you would like me to pause the recording, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background:
Tell me about yourself. (Family, where you grew up, education history)

Educational Journey:

1. What kind of classes did you take while in the program? Did you have a favorite program?
2. Can you describe a specific moment, course, or teacher that had a lasting impact on your journey?
3. Can you describe the challenges you faced, if any, while participating in the education programs in a correctional institution?
4. Did you face any barriers or limitations?
5. What support systems or resources did you find most helpful while completing your education?

Effects of Education on Personal Development:

1. In what ways did your education affect how you see yourself?
2. How did your education influence your sense of control over your own life/decisions?
3. In what ways did your education influence your ability to set and achieve personal goals?
4. How do you think you have changed as a result of your education?

Effects of Education on Employable Skills:

1. Can you describe the kind of classes you have taken?
2. What are some of your biggest takeaways from the classes you have taken?
3. Can you describe any skills that you have acquired as a result of your education programming? What skills do you find the most valuable?
4. How did you apply these skills following your release?
5. Did you find that your education had a positive impact on your outlook for possible employment? Aspirations?

Effects of Education on Relationship with Others:

1. Do you feel that your education has affected how others have perceived you?
2. Have you noticed any changes in the way you interact with people (both inside and outside the prison) after your education?
3. In what ways have your personal relationships changed since leaving incarceration?

Closing Remarks:
Again, thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences. To conclude our interview, I want to ask if there was anything else you would like to add or share about your experiences. Is there anything you would like to discuss that I have not asked about?

Demographics:
Age:
Gender:
Length of time incarcerated: