

Reentry Research in the First Person

# HIGHER EDUCATION AND REENTRY: THE GIFTS THEY BRING

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By Alexis Halkovic and Michelle Fine, Critical Psychology and  
The Public Science Project at the CUNY Graduate Center;  
John Bae, Leslie Campbell, Desheen Evans, Chaka Gary,  
Andrew Greene, Marc Ramirez, Robert Riggs, Michael Taylor,  
Ray Tebout, and Aenora Tejawi

Edited by Sarah K. Hogarth

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virtually every study of the impact of college on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people demonstrates a positive effect on income, civic engagement, family and personal health, and dramatically reduced recidivism rates. College in and after prison offers a singularly effective strategy for redeveloping individuals, families and communities, reducing crime and lightening the tax burden of incarceration.

To date, there has been little research documenting the individual experience of men and women who come home from prison and decide to change their lives through higher education. In order to better understand the challenges that formerly incarcerated students face when applying to and entering college and the unique strengths that they bring into our classrooms, the Prisoner Reentry Institute initiated Participatory Action Research to elevate the voices of students addressing these questions. *Higher Education and Reentry: The Gifts They Bring* documents the post-prison journeys of students whose lives and education have been interrupted by periods of time in prison. It explores their motivations, challenges, supports, and the policy implications of their experiences. The study finds that:

- **These women and men confront numerous policy, structural, and programmatic obstacles** as they seek access to higher education. In addition to the considerable difficulties faced by everyone who returns to society after spending time in prison, these students often face discriminatory admissions practices. Once enrolled, they encounter uneven support and sometimes even feel hindered in their educational pursuits by probation and parole officers. They encounter rules against “fraternizing” with other formerly incarcerated people, even when they are other college students. The support services to assist with navigating these challenges are limited or nonexistent. These students must also learn how to “manage stigma” in a society that is deeply suspicious of people who carry criminal convictions on their record—an attitude that extends to some faculty and peers.
- **Nonprofit organizations and other community supports can increase the likelihood that these students will be successful in college.** Support services designed for students with criminal justice backgrounds can play a key role by providing concrete and emotional support that aids them in meeting their basic life needs and managing the additional demands on them as college students. However, few jurisdictions outside of New York City offer these services, and the services available in NYC are not funded at a level that is sufficient to meet the need.
- **These students bring gifts** of enthusiasm for learning, desire to give back to their communities, persistence, diverse personal experiences, and a determination to transform their lives.
- **Many of these students worry that disclosure of their status as formerly incarcerated students may adversely affect their academic progress.** These students report academic environments that are unevenly welcoming and, at times, chilly. They are deeply ambivalent about whether and how to make themselves visible and share their experiences, wisdom, insecurities and knowledge.

- **These students also report having transformative experiences on campus.** Many have found wonderfully supportive faculty, good friends, and classes that inspire them and feed their thirst for knowledge. College provided a context for forging new identities as students and citizens, parents and neighbors, workers and community members—people who were delighted to be home, and to give back.

Students with criminal justice histories are uniquely positioned to forge new pathways and, in doing so, to pave the way for the next generation of students with criminal justice histories to be able to attend college after prison and be “just students.” Their growing presence provides colleges with a valuable opportunity to fulfill their mission of providing quality higher education that appropriately reflects and serves our communities. By considering the personal experiences of people who have successfully made this transition, we can learn how to more systemically support others in doing so.

# INTRODUCTION

After four decades of soaring incarceration rates, public discourse across the political spectrum has begun to address the profound implications of our reliance on imprisonment as a response to crime.

The United States incarcerates a higher percent of its population, and for longer periods of time, than any other country.<sup>1</sup> There are 2.3 million people behind bars<sup>2</sup> and an additional 4.9 million people living under some kind of supervised release—either parole or probation.<sup>3</sup> Racial disparities exist at every stage of the criminal legal system,<sup>4</sup> affecting low-income communities of color disproportionately and profoundly.<sup>5</sup> We are well on our way to imprisoning one in every three Black males, and one in every six Hispanic males, at some point in their lifetimes.<sup>6</sup>

The compound impact of race and education level is dramatic, with incarceration rates three to four times higher for people who did not complete high school than for those who went to college.<sup>7</sup> Consider that in light of another shocking statistic: 35% of young Black men in the U.S. are unable to complete high school due to being incarcerated.<sup>8</sup>

These numbers illustrate a harsh reality, but there is reason to be hopeful. There is a growing national movement to reevaluate our criminal justice policies. Many states are seeking ways to reduce the financial burden of high incarceration rates. Low crime rates have combined with increasing public unease in the face of mounting evidence of racial and economic disparities in our policing and prison systems. This has made the “race to incarcerate” a less prominent refrain in electoral political campaigns. But, according to John Jay College President, Jeremy Travis, perhaps the first person to articulate the growing reentry challenge facing the U.S., “There is also a deeper, more profound shift occurring: we are beginning to come to terms with the enormity of what we have done—the harms we have caused—by quintupling the rate of incarceration in the past generation.”<sup>9</sup>

Fifteen years of work by the reentry movement has helped to shape this new national policy discussion into one no longer focused solely on avoiding risk but also on creating opportunity. We are beginning to ask, “How can we encourage people who are striving to transform their lives, while building a more compassionate and just society for us all?” Education is key to answering this question.

People are coming home from prison in record numbers, and access to education upon return is one of the few clear roads to a more successful reentry. Research has established the value of education, and particularly higher education, as a key to lower recidivism and higher social mobility—contributing to enhanced earnings, increased civic engagement, and stronger families.<sup>10</sup> A factor in this success is that colleges are designed to encourage pro-social personal development—to be places where people can find themselves and discover the larger world of opportunity that is available to them through education.

Even though the demise of Pell grant eligibility for prisoners reduced the number of prison-based college programs by 90%, a number of creative and dedicated educational institutions have found ways to sponsor programs inside. In the last few years, several new models have emerged with a focus on reentry, preparing



prisoners to continue their studies when released.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these programs, many former prisoners will try to find their own way to begin college in the years after they are released.

Beyond the benefits of college that accrue to formerly incarcerated students and their families, there is a growing consensus that full participation by students with diverse backgrounds and experiences enriches the university community as a whole. Research demonstrates strong, positive relationships between the experience of college diversity, and learning and citizenship outcomes, especially when the institution actively seeks out the unique talents that each participant contributes to organizational life.<sup>12</sup>

To value diversity—and, in this case, the “new diversity” of people with criminal records who are engaged in higher education—requires taking steps to fully include students with criminal justice histories in universities and colleges. Without this, the foundational precept of the integration-learning framework<sup>13</sup>—opening a space for learning and change—would remain absent, and the contributions that these students could make to the learning environment would be lost. The continued alienation of this group of students is having an impact that extends to the children of incarcerated parents and the thousands of people with a loved one in prison. In fact, all students are being deprived of the learning and democracy outcomes that are possible when people’s cultural backgrounds and personal experiences are cultivated as central to the learning environment.<sup>14</sup> The benefits of deep inclusion—for the students, their classmates, the faculty, college institutions, and society as a whole—could be quite significant.

Universities have an obligation to invite students who are pursuing education after prison to engage fully. They have a unique opportunity to benefit from effectively welcoming them into higher education. However, there is a paucity of research on the internal experiences of this group of students and prospective students.<sup>15</sup> What does it take to successfully change the trajectory of their lives? What types of supports make the most difference? What are the obstacles they face? What affirmative steps can we take to make our colleges and universities more welcoming to this growing population of students? The Prisoner Reentry Institute decided to bring these questions to the experts: current and prospective college students who have spent time in prison.

*The Gifts They Bring* explores the lived experiences of previously incarcerated students when they come to college. It documents what these students report as the factors that encouraged and supported them, and the factors that discouraged and, in some cases, blocked their transitions to college and their achievements there. Utilizing participatory research methods, this report highlights the voices of these students and draws on their knowledge to offer invaluable insight into the collateral consequences—economic, structural, racial, familial, and personal—of mass incarceration. *The Gifts They Bring* presents a compelling counter-story about the power of education, even for those whom many would discard.

# METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to better understand the journeys that individuals with criminal records take when they decide to become college students; to uncover the motivations that drive them, the obstacles they face, the supports that sustain them; and to examine the contributions that these students bring to the university and to their communities. Utilizing a research team rich in knowledge about prison, and education in and after prison, the study sought to chronicle the journeys of a diverse sample of students who had spent time in prison. The goal was to learn how to shift policies and practices to support, rather than discourage, highly motivated students who seek to transform their lives by pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees.

*The Gifts They Bring* draws on evidence from four sources:

1. A literature review on the higher education experiences of formerly incarcerated students.
2. Focus groups with snowball samples of formerly or currently enrolled college students, and students preparing to apply to college.
3. Analysis of a video archive of reentry experts and formerly incarcerated students discussing college as a part of reentry.
4. White papers authored by co-researchers about particular policy concerns affecting formerly incarcerated college students.

## The Research Team

*The Gifts They Bring* was designed as a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. PAR challenges traditional assumptions that expertise can only be found in “professionals” or academics. Instead, it advances a rigorous process by which the knowledge of the academy is in conversation with the knowledge of the streets, the institutions, policies, programs and, in this case, knowledge of prison life.<sup>16</sup>

The research team for *The Gifts They Bring* was comprised of ten students at various levels of postsecondary study (undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral), all but one of whom have experience in the criminal justice system, and one faculty member with many years of experience conducting research on education and incarceration.<sup>17</sup> The study was designed to allow these distinct forms of expertise to inform every level of the research, from construction of the research questions, to design, methods and products. The team worked closely with the Prisoner Reentry Institute of John Jay College. They also drew on the expertise of the College and Community Fellowship and College Initiative, two significant New York City based post-prison college programs.

## Focus Group Sampling

This project documents the journeys of two groups of students who had served time in prison or jail: current or former students who attended college within the preceding five years, and prospective students who were participating in a college preparatory reentry program and were in the process of applying to CUNY colleges. The full sample was diverse by age, race/ethnicity, institution, level of education, length of incarceration and experience of the “stigma” of having been in prison (total N = 37). Many had already begun some higher education while in jail or prison.

There were two sets of sampling criteria and recruiting methods:

The sample of students with college experience was generated using a snowball sampling strategy, instituted from three original nodes: students and faculty in public universities, students in two post-prison reentry programs and students in private universities in New York City. This generated a group of 25 participants, including eight who had already completed a bachelor’s degree and five who had earned a master’s level degree. Of those that were currently enrolled in college, two were in the process of pursuing associate’s degrees, six were completing their bachelor’s degrees, three were in master’s programs, and three were enrolled in doctoral programs. Several people in this group had plans to continue on to advanced degrees, including two who planned to go to law school and two who intended to enroll in doctoral programs. These participants were diverse in age, race/ethnicity, and number of years served in prison: 62% identified as Black, 22% Latino/a, 10% White, 5% mixed race, and 3% Asian. Nine were women and 16 were men. This group had served an average of 10.5 years in prison and ranged in age from 25 to 70.

The second group of study participants included 12 prospective college students from the New York City Justice Corps (NYC JC),<sup>18</sup> a program designed to reduce recidivism and improve the economic well-being of young people involved in the criminal justice system. These participants were recruited through a College Initiative program that provides preparation and support to formerly incarcerated students in their journey to college.<sup>19</sup> These prospective students had an average age of 21, had all been released from jail or prison in the past 24 months, and were living in “high risk” communities in New York City (in the Bronx and Harlem). All of the prospective students were people of color and two were women. Four members of this group had high school diplomas and the rest (eight) had not able to complete high school due to being incarcerated or in juvenile detention. Of these eight, six completed their GEDs in prison or a juvenile facility, and two completed a GED after getting out of prison (having a GED is a prerequisite for enrollment in this pre-college program). Eleven had already applied to college programs and one was still preparing to apply.

## Focus Group Interviews

To get a sense of the journey from prison to college, the research team conducted focus groups in which participants were asked to draw a map of their life journey through higher education, or for prospective students, to the point of deciding to pursue higher education. (See Appendix B for examples of these maps.) The maps provided a starting point for discussion as well as a way to enliven the memory of the story,<sup>20</sup> providing an additional lens through which to interpret what was said, and revealing a more nuanced image of the transformation of identity through experiences with higher education.<sup>21</sup>

## Analysis of Videotaped Interviews

The research team reviewed and coded video interviews, conducted by Benay Rubenstein, Open Society Institute Fellow, and Jeremy Robins for the film *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, which explores barriers in the college admissions process.<sup>22</sup> The people interviewed for this film had spent an average of 13.5 years in prison and were at various stages in their journeys through higher education. Many of these students were pursuing graduate degrees, some were in the process of applying to college, and several were professionals in the reentry community. The co-researchers generated a set of codes (see Appendix A, Chart 3) for identifying key policy obstacles and potential supports for students transitioning into higher education.

## Policy Papers

Drawing from their direct experience, a number of co-researchers authored white papers on specific policy related obstacles to higher education. These papers consider significant issues including: licensing restrictions imposed on formerly incarcerated applicants; how the documentation of private psychiatric histories in prison may follow a person well beyond release into job and college applications; the impact of higher education in prison, networks of support, and parole practices. (See <http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/?p=2057> for policy papers.)

See Appendix A for additional details on methodology.

## The Challenge of Studying Stigma

*“When I first heard about the research, I didn’t know that everyone sitting in that room—all those people—had been to prison before. I had not been around that many people who had been to prison until I went to that meeting. . . . For me it was therapeutic—I felt like I could say anything. It was like a therapy bond—and it helped me. It helped me quite a bit. I hadn’t had anything close to that up to that time.”*

— Michael, a student who served time in prison

Formerly incarcerated people are likely to feel ambivalent about participating in research about something that they may have chosen to keep private. The research team was concerned that stigma—the legitimate and psychological fear of disclosure—might make people reticent to participate in the research project or in other support initiatives at a college. Participants expressed that studying this shared stigma was challenging and stressful but also, at times, energizing and comforting. While having a criminal justice history is concealable on the surface, in many other ways it is hyper-scrutinized, and participants were acutely aware of the dangers of telling (or not telling) the wrong person too much, or of not giving enough information. This ambivalence—the desire to share their story as well as their concern about doing so—was felt by many of the participants who agreed to assist in this research. Many also described their participation as liberating.

Substantial research has already documented that college reduces recidivism rates.<sup>23</sup> Building off of this groundwork, *The Gifts They Bring* aims not to simply measure the “success” of these students, but to document their journeys from prison to college, to discover the institutional constraints and facilitators that these students encounter, trace the motivations and gifts they bring to our campuses and consider how colleges could better benefit from inclusion of people with criminal justice histories.

# RESULTS

## Journeys

The stories of three of the women and men who participated in this study provide a glimpse into the experience of navigating higher education after prison. They describe a mosaic of struggle, commitment, disappointment, frustration, academic thrill, and lingering sense of debt to society, family, and the generations to come. These are stories of individuals with lives in motion and transition. They tell of women and men anxious to contribute in meaningful ways, stabilize their own precarious lives on the outside, make it up to their families, give back to their communities, and participate fully in the academic life of their colleges.

### HENRY:

Henry served 25 years for a crime he says that he did not commit. He continues to fight to clear his name. The challenges he faced trying to fight his legal case made him realize his need for education:

*I got my associate's degree in Coxsackie Correctional Facility. That was in 1992. My family always promoted education. . . . I always wanted to improve myself. I experienced a lack of ability to deal with my lawyers because my education level was so low that I couldn't even help myself. I saw that education was necessary—mandatory. I started studying on my own even before I went to school.*

Currently enrolled in a Master's in Social Work program, Henry works hard to improve himself in many ways—through education, meditation, mentoring, and helping others. He values the “mutual inspiration of other students who have spent time in prison” as essential to his academic persistence:

*It's funny about environment . . . We had a circle of guys that took school seriously. Some of us got associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and one got a PhD. I still don't know how he did it, but one of my best friends got his PhD. What I learned from him was the will—the determination. If you put your mind and your heart into something, as they say, the universe conspires to help you.*

**“ I knew that school would be a place for me to adjust back to society in a healthy environment. ”**  
— Henry

Henry says he has always seen school as “a way out of no way.” He used it both as a way to prepare for getting out of prison and as a way to manage the challenges of being out:

*When I was on the inside, I prepared myself to, hopefully, one day come home. I knew that school was something I wanted to do to improve myself. I also knew that school would be a place for me to adjust back to society in a healthy environment. I utilized school in so many different ways. It gave me a chance . . . to unwind, to decompress . . . so that I can figure out all these other steps that are in front of me. I knew if I was sitting at a desk with a book, I would not only figure out my lesson plan, but other things in life as well.*

He sees himself as “strange” in the college environment outside of prison due to the depth of his interest in learning and helping others. This is something that he believes often distinguishes people who have been in prison:

*I enjoy my classes. I think I add a whole lot to my classes. I notice a lot of the students are not engaging—maybe because they’re caught up in the world—I don’t know. I know I do things at another level. I know people that are still doing their bachelor’s degrees and they’re saying: ‘You’re in grad school already!’ I’m a motivation to them. I feel sometimes I’m strange. A lot of people just want the [piece of] paper . . . I talk about the work—about the information. I talk about how we improve ourselves, how to implement these ideas and see if they work and, if they don’t work, to try to find new ideas that do work.*

Having served time in prison makes Henry live life “on another level”—having an appreciation for even the most routine daily actions:

*I know the value of just walking down the street. I probably walk down the street in way that you just couldn’t imagine. I know the value. I know the value of opening a refrigerator. When I go to school, I go to school. Everything I do—I believe is at another level from the average person.*

For Henry, reentry has been disorienting and challenging, but he gets support from others who have been in his situation and are doing well:

*I am fortunate to have a good understanding of myself and to be patient and work through problems. But I swear I don’t know how individuals are able to do it: coming out after being inside an enclosure just the size of this room or a bathroom for years and years—just getting on the bus and not knowing how to turn your metro card. There’s a line of people behind you getting frustrated thinking you don’t know what’s going on—because you don’t know what’s going on. I am impressed by individuals who can do all that time and get themselves together and be successful. I know friends who have and we talk and we uplift each other and I get energy from them—they get energy from me. It’s amazing to me. It’s amazing.*

Like many study participants, Henry’s involvement with a nonprofit organization made all the difference when applying to college. College Initiative (CI) was instrumental in his ability to get into college:

*It’s because of CI—the people there—they knew how to navigate [the system]. If I had to do it on my own I wouldn’t have known the paper trail. They were there. They took all the paperwork—all my information—and I got in.*



This is Henry's message to college administrators:

*You can't feed into your fears. Everyone is not the same. We [people who have spent time in prison] make the best students. Everybody I know is on the Dean's List. We are serious about our education. I didn't suffer all those years just to come out here and waste it. I came out here to enjoy the fruits of freedom and liberty. Do the research before you allow your fears to dictate. You don't want to deny a person an opportunity to change and grow. I am glad I had an opportunity to go to school.*

**“We are serious about our education. You don't want to deny a person an opportunity to change and grow.”**  
— Henry



## LESLIE:

Leslie spent two years in prison and built a network of support from community-based organizations while she was incarcerated. She has been out for 12 years and works fulltime at a nonprofit helping other formerly incarcerated people make the journey from prison to college. Walking us through her map during the focus group, she begins her story with the coffin:



*That's a coffin—that's when my dad was murdered when I was little. That says 'Rest In Peace.' That's me crying before I started grade school. I think that set off my bad attitude. I was really angry at the world. I was fighting a lot. In school I think I fought half the time. But, I always got really good grades so I think that my teachers overlooked my behavior because I was so bright.*

Leslie didn't graduate from high school due to her involvement with drugs and getting arrested. Again, describing her map:

*I lived in an abusive household. So, I was running the street. That's the street and there's me running—and that's my graduation cap falling off [because] I didn't finish school—it got tossed to the side. And that is alcohol—the brown bottle—and that is weed. So there was a period of drug/substance abuse there...and then I had a baby—that's a pink carriage—a baby girl.*

Leslie explains that, as for many people in reentry, getting appropriate support from community-based organizations and other intermediaries was instrumental to her success:

*I went to jail after being in a drug-filled, abusive relationship. I got out and I got a lot of help from CBOs—community-based organizations. Actually, while I was in jail I reclaimed my dreams—that [the map] says 'dreams' on the bars. I absorbed and utilized quite a few, not just one [CBO]. Everyone I knew was in the streets, including my family. So those CBOs gave me hope. Eventually I went to community college.*

She was the first generation in her family to go to college:

*You know—I came from a family of hustlers—including my dad and my mom. No one in my immediate family believed in me or wanted to support me. My aunts were really negative: "You ain't going to college. What you talking about college for?" I guess it wasn't realistic for them since no one on the maternal side of my family had ever gone to college. It was really tough.*

Leslie also felt conflicted about going back to school because of having been away from her daughter for so long:

*When I got custody of my daughter back, she started acting out. Children of formerly incarcerated people or children of people who have a history of substance abuse often act out and feel like you owe them for abandoning them. My daughter was really acting out a lot. I wanted to quit school—I felt guilty. How dare me, you know, go to school and ignore her? But I wasn't really ignoring her. I was building a life for us. I need to support her. I really wanted to quit but I stuck it out.*

*When faced with challenges, Leslie has a lot of resources to call on, because, "I always keep myself in a network... That's a lit up support sign [in the map.] Even though I'm going through a lot right now, I've still got a lot of support." Accessing this support network has been essential for Leslie to continue on her journey. Leslie has her Bachelor's Degree in Forensic Psychology*

and is working on her Master's in Forensic Mental Health Counseling. Having received so much support from CBOs, she now supports others in their reentry process. In the focus groups, many people mentioned her as a valued resource to them.

*“Even though I’m going through a lot right now, I’ve still got a lot of support.”*  
— Leslie

## JAMES:

James<sup>24</sup> is a prospective student in the process of applying to college. At age 21, after two years in prison, he discussed his own ambivalence towards college because, like many of the people in this study, neither of his parents went to college:

*I’m from Philly. The only hope I had was selling drugs. Looking at my father and my mother, they didn’t go to college. My dad was a truck driver. He made a good living. In 2003, I started high school and everyone was like, “Oh! College this, college that.” I thought, “I don’t want to do that.”*

But having a son has changed how he feels about college, which for him now symbolizes a better life: “In 2010 my son was born, so I want better things for him. In order to get that for him, I have to make things better for myself.”

James explained that his son and his younger sister were his most important sources of inspiration. Like many of the people interviewed, getting arrested as a teenager interrupted his education. James’s sister, who just completed her associate’s degree in social work, is one of the few people in his life who has been to college. Striving to live up to her expectations is one of the main factors motivating him to get into college:

*My little sister motivates me. That’s the reason I went to school. She looks up to me. I’m the only positive thing in her life on a regular basis. My little sister pushes me to go to college. I love my little sister—I’d do anything for her. If it means I need to go to college and work at the same time, it’s going to happen.*

*“I want better things for [my son]. In order to get that for him, I have to make things better for myself.”*  
— James

He also indicated that the support he is receiving from the New York City Justice Corps is essential to going back to school, because he needs the encouragement: “I like the program—they provide a lot of good benefits. I don’t really motivate myself, but everyone else is motivating me to go to college.”

Like many of the Justice Corps participants, James indicated that completing high school was one of the proudest moments in his life:

*I graduated from high school in 2009 even though I [had] stopped going. I was working at Pathmark and I went to school to get the student metro card and I wasn’t on the roster and I*

said, “You kicked me out?” Then they told me that I had graduated and that’s why I wasn’t on the list. . . . I was so proud—I started crying.

For James, education is a way out of the neighborhood he lives in, which he considers to be dangerous. He measures success in part by having a safe place to live with his son—something he hopes college will afford him:

*If you live in the ‘hood—it’s dangerous at night. . . . I’ve got a kid at home. I want to walk my son to school, make as much money as I can, and move out of the ‘hood. You’re more likely to get shot taking your garbage out in the ‘hood than in the suburbs.*

## Higher Education as a Catalyst for Transformation

*“Education represents life to me. It represents growth and development. It represents a free mind. It represents critical thinking—deep thought. It represents all the things that allow a person to make a good decision.”*

— Henry, a student who served time in prison

Coming out of prison marks a time of dramatic and often abrupt changes. It can be traumatic. The stories of the study’s respondents illustrate that reentry does not unfold as a single event. Rather, it’s an ongoing process of navigating public and private identities, of moving through a maze of new technologies and learning code words. It comprises a range of experiences that includes institutional mandates, angry and/or supportive families, ambivalent employers and landlords, parole or probation officers that can be a help or a hindrance, and efforts to parent children who are suddenly “too grown up.”

The **experience of finding and transforming one’s self**—of claiming a positive personal and civic identity—makes the process of reentry challenging for all, a positive experience for many, and frustrating for some. So many of these women and men describe themselves as works in progress, transformed selves still in

transition. They are aware of the time and the experience that they missed while incarcerated, and are intent on making up for it now that they are out.

“*The process of re-acclimating oneself never ends—never ends.*”  
— Matthew

Chaka told the group, “I was 16 years old when I got locked up. I’m 37 now. I never had the opportunity to be a man—I thought I was a man, and now I’m in this very difficult

position.”<sup>25</sup> Matthew echoed, “I was incarcerated in 1978 and I was released in 2003. It is 2012 and I’m still transitioning. I’m one of those guys that the process of re-acclimating oneself never ends—never ends.”<sup>26</sup> After years of reflection, these students understand that reentry, transformation and transition as an ongoing process.

Prospective students often express an eagerness to jump into the skin of a new self and install a change in their identity. Many students, including those with years of post-prison college experience, approach college as a way to redeem themselves: to make up for lost time, to gather precious experience, to develop

new networks, to give back to society and to grow a new, more mature sense of self:

*There comes a time where you have to say, “Okay, I did what I did. I need to get past this experience. I want to make something of my life. I want to help other people. I want to do something. I want to have a career. I want to feel like I’m worthy.”<sup>27</sup>*

## VIEWING REENTRY EXPERIENCES THROUGH AN ACADEMIC LENS

Glenn describes higher education as a context for transformation of self, and also a space where he developed an intellectual and ethical sense of responsibility for others, including toward the victims of his crimes:

*The big thing for me was I felt like it was okay because I didn’t relate to the victims of my crimes. After going to school and learning about the Holocaust, and learning that we are all more alike than we are different, it really makes it impossible to transgress against other people because you start seeing the humanity in them. You start seeing yourself in other people, and for me that was life changing. That, and the fact that someone believed in me and said you could go to college; you could get a college degree.<sup>28</sup>*

*“You start seeing yourself in other people, and for me that was life changing.”*  
— Glenn

Cory, who is now attending a private university in Manhattan, describes college as the place where he first explored the history of his people, Black people, which led him to embrace a fuller sense of all of humanity:

*I began to understand my history, about the suffering and struggle—not only of Black people in America but of all human beings. That deepened my sensitivity for human life. I saw how important it is that I should be respectful and responsive to empowering human beings. So it was inside [prison] that I really became this person that I am today and it took a lot of sacrifice. It took a lot of soul-searching and a lot of my transformation had a lot to do with being incarcerated.<sup>29</sup>*

Aspiring to be a writer, Derek recognizes college not only as an opportunity to generate new perspectives and gather credentials, but a chance to rewrite his own story:

*My incarceration made me look at everything differently—people, what I eat, what I say, how I think—just everything across the board. Education is something that nobody can take from you. The more you learn, the better off you are in the long run. I get this education and I can do things with it. I’ve got a whole bunch of ideas, but you need degrees backing you up. Everyone says they want to be successful but you can’t do anything without an education.<sup>30</sup>*

Cheryl offered the group an existential view of college, in prison and on the outside. She explains, with some irony, that college in prison allowed her to feel “free,” where she found “purpose in life,” and she could begin to imagine working in civil society for policy change

*“I didn’t have a purpose in life before I looked at the things that I thought may need changing in my community.”*  
— Cheryl

*I had the opportunity to go to prison and achieve an undergraduate college degree. I was free inside prison. I couldn’t leave prison physically, but mentally it freed my mind because I learned so much about the community I came from. I learned about what might have brought me into prison in the first place: childhood issues, economic issues—and it basically freed my mind. I found my purpose in life through achieving a college education. I didn’t have a purpose in life before I looked at the things that I thought may need changing in my community. So I pursued a degree in policy so I could affect a large amount of people and change policies that affect my community.<sup>31</sup>*

## EVOLVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

For both the students with experience in college and those still looking ahead to it, college is not only an opportunity for self-improvement but also a strategy for nurturing the educational dreams of others. Many respondents commented on their desire to serve as a positive role model for children, siblings, nieces, nephews, the children of other women and men still behind bars, and various young people in the community:

*It wasn’t until I got custody of my son that I decided to change. I was selling drugs on Long Island and I wanted something better for my son. It was very tough at first—going to school, going to work, sleeping three hours a day sometimes. I just held onto my son. He’s not going to grow up and see me as a loser. At times when I was going to give up, he kept me grounded.<sup>32</sup>*

Teresa also described the motivating force of being a parent: “When I came out, my son was my biggest thought. I wanted to make a better life for him. That’s one of the biggest reasons why I’m pushing forward.”<sup>33</sup>

Many who had been through college understood the value of establishing new networks, both with peers who had also spent time in prison, and other friends they never could have imagined having before. College built networks, which opened doors. In the words of one participant looking forward to college:

*It’s basically [why] I want to go. I know I’m going to be able to meet a lot of different people and be able to network. It’s opening up more doors for me. College is definitely going to help me. I know it. I feel it. I’m not in even in college [yet] and I’m hanging around with college kids right now. That has already opened up doors for me, so I know that when I actually get my foot in the door it’s going to be a totally different story.<sup>34</sup>*

*“College is definitely going to help me. I know it. I feel it.”*  
— Davon

## THE IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

*“If we tell the truth, none of us made it on our own. We were inspired to define a future for ourselves and given assistance along the way through our families, our schools, and extended networks of support. We had social capital that gave us access to possibility. Community-based organizations can really make the difference for people who come from less resourced communities and whose experience did not include this kind of encouragement.”*

— Ann Jacobs, Director, Prisoner Reentry Institute of John Jay College

Many participants stressed how critical the support from community-based organizations has been to their success in applying to and/or attending college. Like other people in reentry, it was common for them to struggle to meet basic life needs like housing, employment, and sometimes to address substance abuse or mental health issues. But then there were new and additional challenges of being a college student at the same time. Organizations and programs that are specifically designed to meet the needs of formerly incarcerated students are able to provide practical assistance in both domains.

These organizations provide specialized services, like academic tutoring and assistance with complex college and financial aid applications. They also provide an equally important opportunity to associate with a community of other people who are confronting similar challenges as they work towards the same goal: success in college. This understanding community can provide important emotional support.

These services may be housed at external organizations or exist as programs within a college or university. There was some discussion among respondents about whether formerly incarcerated students should be considered a “special category” with separate services from other students or integrated throughout the institution. Some, like Efram, argue that there should be a way to acknowledge the need for both specialized supports and fully integrated services:

*“We should be able to have our own organizations and support groups.”*  
—Efram

*I think we are a special population just like veterans—and we should be able to have our own organizations and support groups—just like veterans and women—who have their own groups in college. People need to see that. There needs to be some re-training for social service providers. No one trains you how formerly incarcerated people get past barriers.<sup>35</sup>*

# The Gifts They Bring

*"I fear that you have failed to notice the gifts I, and many others, can bring to university life."*

— Andrew Cory Greene, a student who served time in prison

When asked to describe the gifts they bring to the university, the students were initially surprised. They are more accustomed to questions about the liabilities they might bring and the risks that they might present. Yet over the course of this study, the wisdom, unique experiences, hunger to learn, compassion, capacity to reflect and express remorse, and a deep sense of responsibility possessed by the participants were all recurring themes.

## DESIRE TO LEARN

*"For many formerly incarcerated students college is about much more than education—it's about shifting the narrative—their own internal narrative and the external narrative of failure and stigma. That's why our students are so incredibly motivated."*

— Michael Carey, Director, College Initiative

Higher education is not taken for granted by people who have experienced jail, prison, or interrupted educational lives. For the most part, they come to college with a strong desire to learn and build a platform for change. Marc argues that formerly incarcerated students' high level of motivation should be acknowledged:

*When we [students with criminal justice backgrounds] show up it's because we want to learn. We're not there to hustle. We shouldn't be held to a higher standard.<sup>36</sup>*

Kevin described how prison interrupted his early goal of attending college: "I always cared about this, but I did the wrong thing and got arrested. Bad environment. I always had a 90% average. But I got arrested. I'm back on the right track [now]."<sup>37</sup>

Davon, a prospective student, explained that his mother inspired him to get a GED and now he is eager to see the possibilities it can provide for him:

*I always wanted to go to school. When I got my GED, I was in juvenile [detention]—in boot camp. My mom told me: 'Just get it!' So I did. I had all my credits from 10th grade. It was just the negative that got me down, but I always had school on my mind. I want to do this and see where it gets me. It might not be for me, but I want to see how far it gets me.<sup>38</sup>*

***"Nobody wants to waste time anymore."***  
— Davon

Justice Corps participants, who were preparing for college post-prison, spoke with regret about the interruption of education due to incarceration. Many described how college had always been a goal, although not “realistic” because of family circumstances and/or a lack of role models in the family or community. Many participants indicated that their proudest moments were associated with achieving an educational goal (for example completing their GED’s or graduating from high school). They expressed enthusiasm for their next educational challenge as well as a sense of urgency:

*There’s no time to waste. I think all of us wasted enough time. All of us are 21 or 22. A lot of [us] went to prison when we were 16 or 17. So that’s a lot of time wasted. We should have already been in college when we were 18. Nobody wants to waste time anymore.*<sup>39</sup>

## DRIVE TO EXCEL

*“For reentry students, college is an opportunity to re-define, re-design and re-align their identity to one that is internally rewarding and socially acceptable. Given the chance to be happy and respected through positive achievement, most students take it, and take it seriously.”*

— Ray Tebout, Director of Counseling and Mentoring, College Initiative

Many participants spoke of a lingering sense of debt to family, friends, victims, communities, the next generation, and the larger society. They expressed a commitment to “learn more and do more,” to repay society and challenge the stigma that haunts them due to having criminal convictions. They described wanting to change visibly so that people, institutions, and strangers know they have transformed and so that other formerly incarcerated people can learn from them and alongside them. Passionate and proud, Alvaro echoed this sentiment:

*Most formerly incarcerated men and women who apply to college go on to be on the Dean’s List and excel in other ways on campus and help enrich the culture. Just going to college is not enough.*<sup>40</sup>

Many of these students also bring a commitment to civic engagement and community empowerment to the classroom and the university:

*We are always taught to enter the classroom or wherever we go from a humble position, not to be arrogant, but to empower the people that are around us. We change people’s lives. We take the knowledge that we have gained through reading and education and use it to empower people.*<sup>41</sup>



## EXPERIENCE OF MARGINALIZATION

Students who have spent time in prison bring life experiences quite outside the mainstream cultural narrative. In fact, their experience may be largely unfamiliar to most college students and professors, or be not fully understood by them. Like the wisdom of immigrants who can see a new culture through a critical lens, these students import to the university perspectives that have historically been excluded. They can utilize their college-level learning to articulate and employ these views to the benefit of the college community:

**“That’s the gift: we have the tools to challenge existing beliefs.”**  
— Matthew

*With our background—one of the things I always noticed even when I was locked up is that we have a way of challenging paradigms. We get the tools to construct an argument that’s legitimizing acceptance of those [underserved] communities in a language that’s acceptable at the academic level. . . . That’s the gift: we have the tools to challenge existing beliefs.<sup>42</sup>*

There is a growing consensus that educational institutions benefit from diversity, and that diversity is maximally productive when the organization seeks out the unique talents that each participant contributes to the college community. Organizational theorists have found that diversity is most productive when it is valued as a resource and not treated as problematic or something to be ignored.<sup>43</sup> One study participant explained that he believes this “intellectual diversity” is going unrecognized in college:

*My life experiences and sheer determination inform my participation in classrooms and the larger college/university climate. The intellectual diversity and non-traditional additives that I, and others with criminal histories, contribute to colleges/universities are seldom appreciated.<sup>44</sup>*

**“I think from the standpoint of compassion.”**  
— Christina

Christina described ways that her life experiences help her to have compassion for others and motivate her to take her studies seriously:

*I think from the standpoint of compassion. I think I have more of that than other students. I’m not saying that they aren’t compassionate, but most of the students are very young. The median age at Touro is 25, and most of students that I go to school with haven’t had, or haven’t disclosed that they have had, a domestic violence situation. . . . I think from the standpoint of having been through an abusive relationship, and having gone to prison for it.<sup>45</sup>*

# Navigating the Rough Spots Toward Freedom: Institutional mandates, public policies and program rules

*“It’s a big blow to one’s self esteem to get rejection after rejection. When you get the door shut in your face so many times, I can see how some people might get discouraged and might even go back to whatever it is that they did to go to prison.”*

— Christina, a student who served time in prison

Students with criminal records can be highly motivated, reflective about themselves and others, transformed and transforming, and **trying to repay a debt to others**. Simultaneously, they must navigate day-to-day interactions with institutions, policies and authorities that, for the most part, are relatively static and not equipped to understand this transformative process, not inclined to give the benefit of a doubt, or that may not credit the changes as genuine or sufficient. These stories of navigating the rough spots toward freedom illustrate the many obstacles and dilemmas these students confront on their journeys to education. Some barriers to full participation in education are related to requirements imposed by probation and parole. These include curfews, an emphasis on employment at the expense of education, and restrictions on “fraternizing” with other people who have criminal justice histories. Other commonly cited difficulties included housing, family pressures, the need for employment, and/or psychological struggles. On top of all this, there are the challenges specifically associated with college, like getting financial aid, the admissions process, and finding an appropriate support system while enrolled. Each of these domains renders the reentry process exceedingly challenging.

## PROBATION AND PAROLE:

Michael spoke for many when he explained that the goals of probation and parole do not typically seem to include higher education, but instead focus upon getting a job, paying back child support, mandated programs, curfews, mandatory drug testing, etc. These requirements can make it difficult to also include higher education:

*What has got in the way? Number one is complying with the probation requirements. I was in federal prison—on supervised release. . . . They lay out everything they think you need to do and education isn’t worked into what they want. I understand—getting a job, that makes sense. In my case, also paying a fine and urinalysis. There’s all this that’s in place and makes it a little more difficult to work school in, [especially] because school isn’t free.<sup>46</sup>*

*“They lay out everything they think you need to do and education isn’t worked into what they want you to do.”*

— Michael

Participants spoke of the often very different views of individual parole and probation officers (PO’s) on the importance of higher education. Some probation and parole officers are very supportive, and others can pose substantial barriers to success in college:

*In the beginning, my parole officer told me not to go to college unless I was taking a trade, because no one was ever going to hire me in a professional job. (This is now my third job in*

administration). He said, “Go take welding or be a plumber.” I said, “Dude, I have 24 business credits that I got in prison.” Then I had to transfer [my supervision] to the county my college was in and had to wait six months until all my paperwork went through.<sup>47</sup>

**“In the beginning, my parole officer told me not to go to college unless I was taking a trade, because no one was ever going to hire me in a professional job.”**  
— Bruce

The enforcement of rules, as reported by the study participants, is based on the PO’s frame of mind and on the relationship that an individual has developed with his or her PO. Several people indicated that their PO’s attitude changed over time—starting out tough and becoming more understanding after coming to realize that the person was making a positive change:

*I like to say my story was a little bit on the blessed side because my parole officer was able to see kind of early on that I was . . . doing the things that I needed to do so she gave me a little leeway. But at first it was, “You’re [just] a number, 048. . . I don’t know you. You need to do what you need to do here first.” So my first six, seven, eight months on parole were like, “Check in. Do what you need to do. I don’t care about school. You really need to go to work.” After the first six months when she realized I was doing things that made her job easy, then she backed off a bit.”<sup>48</sup>*

**“[Parole says,] “Check in. Do what you need to do. I don’t care about school. You really need to go to work.”**  
— Cory

Because parole mandates where you can live, changes in residence may require a change of parole officer and district. Thus, moving to attend a college in a different town was considered impossible by most, attainable by a few. The amount of discretion individual officers wield was notable. Consider the difference between Kevin’s and Matthew’s experiences. Kevin described:

*I would say parole has been a barrier for me—only because I really want to go away to school—I really want to go outside New York City, but I can’t because of parole. If I go away for school, I can get away from that negativity. Now I want to go to City Tech—New York City College of Technology. Before I got arrested, I had my eyes on Stony Brook.<sup>49</sup>*

Matthew had a parole officer who encouraged him to pursue his PhD and looked for ways within the law to facilitate his move from upstate to New York City in order for him to do that. His PO pushed to make sure Matthew did not give up an opportunity to get his PhD:

*My PO said, “Are you outta your mind? You’ve got a full education! What do you mean you aren’t going? Get down there and get a job. How many Black men get to do what you’re going to do?” He actually got mad. I was out for three years and he actually got mad that they don’t take you off parole for good behavior.”<sup>50</sup>*

Parole and probation officers are in a unique position to be able to assist people endeavoring to make positive changes in their lives if they recognize the positive impact of college education and help to facilitate that journey.

## ANTI-FRATERNIZING RESTRICTIONS PERPETUATE ISOLATION

It is a common condition of release from prison that parolees are prohibited from fraternizing with other parolees and/or people with criminal records. This restriction on socialization between students with criminal justice histories makes it difficult for them to develop positive networks with other students and faculty who personally understand the struggles and the hunger to be educated: “They think the only reason that we get together is to commit crimes—like we can’t get together to talk about anything else besides committing crimes.”<sup>51</sup>

Many participants expressed the importance of creating and maintaining supportive networks with other formerly incarcerated people: “We have to set the pavement for those who are coming behind us. So my advice would be: connect with those who have been through the road that you have been made to travel.”<sup>52</sup>

There is considerable confusion about the scope and enforcement of rules about fraternizing. One policymaker indicated that even when “anti-fraternizing” has been articulated as a condition of parole or release, it is only likely to be enforced if that person is under suspicion of engaging in criminal conduct.

This ambiguity and discretion around enforcement keeps everyone anxious about doing something that could potentially send them back to prison. This is an important issue because many participants identified faculty members and peers who had spent time in prison as central to their success. These networks serve as lifelines and should be encouraged rather than being a reason for penalizing someone. As Malcolm explained:

“We have to set the pavement for those who are coming behind us.”  
— Lynette

*I found a professor who’s an ex-offender. In my dealings striving for higher education, it’s going to be an ex-offender that’s going to have the same paradigm as you. Sometimes you have to think outside your parole officer. If I thought that I was not supposed to talk to [this professor], I wouldn’t have made it through.*<sup>53</sup>

## HOUSING

Men and women returning from prison have to construct a complete life for themselves. In this pursuit, study participants most often cited housing as a source of stress and instability. Many struggled just to be housed; those who did have housing usually found that it was not conducive to studying. Some are able to live with family—although the situation may be overcrowded and far less than ideal. People with criminal justice histories whose families live in public housing are likely to be precluded from living there with them.<sup>54</sup>

*My mother was living in NYCHA [public housing]. I got a letter when I was in prison that I couldn’t live there. That disturbed me since my daughter was living with her. I sent an appeal while I was in prison, so that I could at least get visiting rights if I wasn’t able to live with her.*<sup>55</sup>

Many people returning to New York City from prison end up living in three-quarter houses.<sup>56</sup> These are essentially privately-owned illegal boarding houses that accept the \$215 shelter allowance provided

through New York City social services. While these residences are not licensed nor government sanctioned, they typically impose rules on all residents that can interfere with attending school. These include mandated attendance at drug treatment programs, whether or not residents identify as substance abusers or need treatment. The residences are generally crowded, unsafe, and do not provide an environment conducive to studying. As Michael explained, “They don’t try to support you in any kind of way.”<sup>57</sup> Another study participant reported that there was no computer in the facility where she lived immediately after being released and that she was forced to move after only two months.<sup>58</sup> This further destabilized her already fragile new life.

According to Cory, neither the atmosphere nor the rules of his three-quarter house supported his efforts to get back on his feet or his transition to college:

*I was in a three-quarter house. It still has prison life in it. If you leave something out you might [have it stolen]. If you have a quiz you might not be able to study that night. You have to go to welfare—they don’t care about your school schedule, you have to make your welfare appointment. That was what was going on my first two years of school.*<sup>59</sup>

It is even harder for people who live in shelters to be successful college students.

## The Chilly Climate of Higher Education

*“Our public institutions exist for a reason. They exist so that people from all different backgrounds—economic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, races—can have access to the things that they need. Education is a thing that we know people need in our society. If our public institutions are going to fulfill their missions they have to consider that the large majority of people who are impacted by the criminal justice system are the very people that they have a mission to serve. Unless they make that connection they are going to miss the mark. I think it is up to us to make them see that connection.”*

— Vivian Nixon, Executive Director, Community and College Fellowship

Higher education is our society’s primary avenue to expanded opportunity and social mobility. This creates great responsibility, especially for publicly supported institutions, which, as expressed in the founding documents for New York’s public colleges, must provide “the broadest possible access, fully representative of all segments of the population”<sup>60</sup> and “reflect the diverse communities which comprise the people of the city and state of New York.”<sup>61</sup>

Yet for the hundreds of thousands of citizens who return to our communities from prison each year,<sup>62</sup> this remains an unfulfilled promise as they encounter a series of obstacles when applying for admission to colleges, seeking financial aid and in the attitudes of some faculty and students.

## ADMISSIONS

*Similar to the long walk to our parole board hearings, again our desire for freedom/access to higher education rests precariously in the hands of others, whose visions are often tainted by racism, classism, and preconceived judgments of the spaces individuals with criminal histories should occupy in society: prisons, street corners, project hallways, and graveyards...but probably not college.<sup>63</sup>*

Most colleges and universities in the U.S. ask prospective students about their criminal justice histories, or to “check the box,” and one fifth of colleges conduct background checks on all applicants.<sup>64</sup> Students with a history of criminal justice involvement typically encounter additional steps in the application process, such as requirements for supplemental documents and/or personal interviews.<sup>65</sup> As one study participant explained:

*We have no way of knowing for how many ‘the box’ serves as a deterrent; a discursive speed bump in the application process suggesting, delicately, please stop filling out the application because you have been spotted.<sup>66</sup>*

Schools that have created these elaborate procedures for applicants with criminal justice histories sometimes expand the admissions process to include deans, special committees, campus security personnel, legal counsel, and/or mental health professionals. For students that are successfully admitted through one of these methods, many schools impose conditions and continued restrictions, including special programming or supervision requirements and restricted access to student services (limited access to student housing and work-study assignments, etc.). Some schools even include an annotation on college transcripts disclosing the students’ criminal justice status.

Analysts considering the public policy rationale for heightening the admissions bar for applicants with a criminal record should consider findings from recent research:

- Colleges and universities that restrict access to students with criminal justice histories do not have lower crime rates than those that do not screen.<sup>67</sup>
- Sexual assault and the rare other types of violent crimes committed on campuses are overwhelmingly committed by first-time offenders.<sup>68</sup>
- High-profile crimes on college campuses have been committed by people who do not have criminal histories.<sup>69</sup>

Some administrators view background checks in the admissions process as “active discrimination”<sup>70</sup> that disproportionately targets students of color, Muslim students, and those with criminal justice histories. One participant in this study takes a similar view:

*The invitation to “check the box” sits in a long history of racialized policies that may appear to be race-neutral but have fundamentally shaded the U.S. criminal justice system and, increasingly, the higher education system, severely redlining the educational options for those*

*men and women of color who have been disproportionately targeted by mass incarceration. The “check the box” policy bleeds racialized criminal justice policies into the sphere of higher education.<sup>71</sup>*

For the participants in this study, the increased scrutiny during the admission process created significant barriers. In Chango’s admissions process he had to sit for an interview with a special panel whose role was to assess whether or not he was a risk to the campus:

*They called it an interview, but it felt more like an interrogation than an interview. There were five people there—the criminal justice department, school safety, the head of the counseling department, and a few others... They wanted detail, and I didn’t know what kind of detail. I felt like it was a parole hearing—like it was an interrogation. They were concerned about the safety of the school and I was already at the school. They could look at my record. I had several jobs. I had no conflicts at the workplace or anything like that.<sup>72</sup>*

Students who want to “put things behind them” are often confronted by authorities who treat them as if they continue to present a risk. Other programs discourage applicants based on what they argue will be barriers to future employability or licensure issues. As Aenora explained, “I was applying for clinical

psychology programs and one had a statement online that says, ‘If you have a criminal record, you should reconsider applying for clinical psychology programs as you will not get an internship.’”<sup>73</sup>

During these expanded admissions processes, some students described receiving misinformation or no information, and some were asked to disclose too much information. For example, while Lettisha was applying for admissions she was asked for

her rap sheet—a document that contains confidential information including a sealed Youthful Offender Adjudication. Ironically, she was told earlier in the process that her conviction would not bar her admission:

*I had to fill out a particular application for a person convicted of a violent crime, so I was placed in a category inside a category. Not only did I have to give a letter from my parole officer, they wanted a narrative of the crime itself. It was like going in front of the parole board all over again. It was intrusive. It was degrading. And then they wanted my rap sheet.<sup>74</sup>*

**“It was like going in front of the parole board all over again. It was intrusive. It was degrading.”**  
— Lettisha

It is very problematic when a college demands—which they do with increasing frequency—that an applicant provide his or her own rap sheet (official criminal history record) as part of the admissions process. An individual’s record will

include information that is not intended to be available to the public: dismissed charges, Youthful Offender Adjudications, sealed records, expungements, and, more rarely, mental health information. If the college requested the record from the state authority itself, it would get a more restricted version of the record than they do by requiring the applicant to provide it.

For those applying to schools that do not require disclosure of criminal justice status, disclosure is optional, and applicants must weigh the potential consequences. In a lively discussion about whether or not to reveal criminal justice histories in the personal statement portion of the college application, participants reported getting conflicting advice from mentors: “The one professor who wrote a recommendation said that you are a fool if you write that you are convicted felon on your application—you are shooting yourself in the foot. The other professor said it was fine—that it can actually help your application.”<sup>75</sup>

## SEEKING FINANCIAL AID

Substantial misinformation circulates about eligibility for financial aid for students with criminal justice histories. Since 2006, the access to federal financial aid is barred to students who were convicted of a drug related offense if that conviction occurred while they were receiving federal financial aid.<sup>76</sup> In addition, people are ineligible for Pell Grants if incarcerated in a state or federal prison or if confined in an institution as a result of civil commitment from a sex offense conviction.<sup>77</sup> Study participants reported concerns about these policies, about seemingly inconsistent implementation of these policies in practice, and the widespread misinformation about exactly how having a criminal record affects eligibility for student financial aid. This confusion discourages otherwise qualified prospective students who may be eligible for federal financial aid from applying.<sup>78</sup>

Malcolm describes how the questions on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form have changed over the years:

*I noticed when I first went to college at Howard—the question on the application wasn’t there: ‘Have you ever been convicted of a felony?’ It wasn’t there when I came out in 1995. It wasn’t there for my undergrad. It was there for my graduate. But if you said yes, they will go on to ask you: ‘Did you complete your sentence successfully and did you complete a program?’ I guess they feel like you haven’t matriculated far enough to be fruitful with their money. That is a question on the FAFSA now. That was one barrier.<sup>79</sup>*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FACULTY SUPPORT

Many students reported the significant impact of strong relationships with faculty. As Bruce described, “When I found [one professor], based on her research I felt comfortable telling her I had been in prison. And she was very supportive.”<sup>80</sup> For Chaka who had been out of prison less than a year, having a supportive advisor was almost a revelation:

*I’m supposed to go and sit with [my professor one] Tuesday. I was feeling [awful] because I didn’t do what I was supposed to do. I called her to let her know I’m not coming. I get an email back from her: ‘Listen—don’t ever cancel on me. I understand. You’re putting too much pressure on yourself. You don’t have to run from us because we are here as a support for you . . . I’ve got a professor who is part of my support system. That’s an extension of the college.’<sup>81</sup>*



“I’ve got a professor who is part of my support system.”  
— Chaka

Faculty support includes practical support, such as connecting people with jobs and financial opportunities: “Where I had support was from a professor that hired me for work-study last semester. I was unemployed before that. I wouldn’t have been able to stay [in school] without it.”<sup>82</sup> It can also make a huge difference in the comfort level of a student:

*I got out of prison and went straight to college and I got extremely lucky and hooked up with a professor who was the chair of the department. . . . I didn’t feel shunned. . . . I think that can be a big issue for us.*<sup>83</sup>

On the other hand, there were examples reported of times when faculty were not supportive when learning of a student’s criminal justice background: “I had this professor who was real cool—and she socialized with someone who knew my past and all of a sudden—it was a 180 [complete turnaround].”<sup>84</sup> It is not known whether the faculty member’s change in attitude was related to learning this information or to the fact that the student had previously concealed the information from her. When institutions are not explicit about the imperative to fully include these students, then faculty and students are less likely to openly engage these issues with ease. In the absence of an affirmative and affirming environment, negative stereotypes circulate unchallenged.

## The Weight of Stigma and the Gray Zone around Disclosure

*“It is so sobering to realize that these remarkably gifted, dedicated and persistent men and women are forced to import a structurally imposed stigma into the university setting. This is of course a disservice to them. But even more so, the university community is denied access to their rich understandings of responsibility, remorse, and transformation; their embodied thirst to be educated; their deep desire to give back and their outstanding conviction to revise a life. The structural violence of institutionally induced shame deprives us all of the wisdom they carry in their bones. I just keep thinking, how much punishment is enough?”*

— Dr. Michelle Fine, Professor, CUNY Graduate Center and Co-principle Investigator

For people who have spent time in prison, every step in the higher education process is fraught with ambivalence about disclosure: when applying, seeking financial aid, and even after being admitted. The student is always contemplating whether to “come out” or not about one’s history—with faculty and other students, when applying for awards, internships and then with prospective employers after graduation. This uncertainty is pervasive.

A profound ambivalence about “this population” hangs in the air of academic life. Some schools exclude, others provisionally include, and a few don’t ask—and don’t want to know. Thus, affected students are often wary of revealing their criminal justice involvement in an environment so deeply conflicted or ambivalent about this new cohort of students. This group of students has dramatically shifted “who they are” but they fear that others do not acknowledge their transformation. They feel that the stigma still holds and stings. Chango described wondering if this feeling of difference is visible to other students:

*I think that entering a classroom as a person who is formerly incarcerated, you automatically feel different. You feel that you're different than everybody else and you do wonder about the other students, where they're at and if they can actually tell that you are formerly incarcerated. It's like you wear it like an invisible coat. You feel it and you wonder if anyone else can see it and tell.<sup>85</sup>*

*“You wear it like an invisible coat. You feel it and you wonder if anyone else can see it and tell.”*  
— Chango

This question of disclosure was not an issue for those who attended college in prison. At least while they remained in prison this circumstance was shared by all. In contrast to students who attend college post-prison, students in prison were able to speak and write, in class and in papers, about their complex transformation through the psychology of guilt, remorse, responsibility, knowledge, wisdom, identity shift, and debt. This is the material of intellectual, ethical, and existential growth.

Ironically, however, now that they have been released, most of them feel that these same topics must be censored from their classroom discussions—revealed only in the most intimate settings. This is a mark of an inhospitable academic environment.

Many students reported struggling with this gray zone around disclosure, even well into their college years. Not everyone agreed on the right approach. For example, some argued that prison dramatically and significantly transformed their lives and would need to be discussed in an application to graduate school. One of the students, now an undergraduate, asked:

*If I want to apply to law school or a PhD program—should I mention my time in prison, or not? If it will be held against me, I guess I shouldn't, but that's where I developed my maturity, reflection, sense of responsibility . . . that's where I grew up. Without that piece of my history, there is no story to tell.<sup>86</sup>*

A graduate student described an incident relating to a planned class trip that had her worried for weeks:

*I am in a course now where we are taking a class trip to a facility and I can't get the nerve to say out loud: 'Will I be allowed in?' It's funny. I am really open about my history—but in this class, I can't get up the courage to just say: 'I did time. Will they keep me out?' Closest I get is saying: 'Has anyone been kept out?' and the teacher said, 'One woman who was wearing an underwire bra.' I can't believe I can't do it. But I can't.<sup>87</sup>*

## “INVISIBLE” STIGMA

There is a small but growing literature on “invisible” stigmas, how people manage a detail of life that, while not outwardly visible, may bring them disrespect, disregard, or rejection if revealed. People with invisible stigmas report lower self-esteem and more negative affect than either those with visible or no stigmas.<sup>88</sup> While the presence of similar others improves self-esteem and mood, those hiding a stigmatized identity cannot look around a room and identify similar others—even if they are there. This leads to feelings of

isolation, guilt (about hiding an identity), and cognitive distraction due to the constant engagement in the attempts to control disclosure of identity.<sup>89</sup> While the pre-occupation with concealing a stigmatized identity has psychological aspects, including cognitive, behavioral, affect, and self-evaluation outcomes, concealment is most difficult when the stigma is salient, the risk of being discovered is high, and consequences of discovery are severe.<sup>90</sup> Revealing identities does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes; the effect depends on whether or not there is a positive response to the disclosure.<sup>91</sup>

This means that it is not enough for students with criminal justice histories to let faculty, students, and administrators know they are there. There must also be safety in such disclosure, as measured in terms of the identifiable presence of supportive individuals and an institutional commitment to the lack of punitive reaction.<sup>92</sup> There need to be people who can provide the positive response required for students to maintain a positive self-concept in a challenging context.<sup>93</sup> This could lead to an overall more supportive and collegial environment because those with invisible stigmas have been shown to possess enhanced mindfulness, being more sensitive and tuned in to the psychological needs of others than those who do not possess invisible stigmas.<sup>94</sup>

Some students respond to this stigma by choosing to keep to themselves the fact that they have spent time in prison: "I'm comfortable but I don't need to tell anyone my history. I did 20 years, and that's behind me. I am entitled to my privacy."<sup>95</sup> Others are more public about that aspect of their identity: "When I came out I never shied away from [the topic of] prison, I always was able to tell my story . . . [prison is] me and I kind of embrace it. Without that experience I wouldn't be where I am today."<sup>96</sup> Consider a discussion in one of the focus groups between Michael and Cory:

*At Columbia—even stronger than at the community college—I wasn't going to let anyone know that I had a conviction. Especially sitting in the classroom with all these privileged young white kids. There's no way I was going to have that label—to let them know there's a convicted felon sitting with them in the classroom.*<sup>97</sup>

Cory replied:

*I was listening to you, Mike, that you didn't want people to know that you had been in prison. When I came out of prison—I had the total opposite response. The people I'm around they've done a lot of work and they are sharp—these dudes could be teaching at Columbia. I'm not a one in a million sub-case. There's a lot of us like me. This is my scream to society: 'Listen. A dude like you—getting 4.0 [GPA]—people need to know that you were in the cell!'*<sup>98</sup>

Another participant explained:

*It's not a badge of honor to me—it's just an experience that I went through. I'm not proud of that experience—that situation. I will share it if it's called upon, but I won't go into a class talking about how I have been in prison, like it's a good topic of conversation. Some of my professors know because the relationships are that close and we became friends somewhat. Some of my professors. So, there's a degree of people that know.*<sup>99</sup>

Across participants, it was important to them to be able to control how and to whom this information is released. Matthew described a situation in which his host family decided for him to reveal this information as they introduced him to their religious community. Wrenching the choice about disclosure out of his hands, Matthew lost the opportunity to control the flow of this very personal information: “I don’t mind exposing who I am, where I have been—let me disclose what I want to disclose. They said, ‘This is [Matthew]. He just came out of prison.’ They told that to the WHOLE CONGREGATION!”<sup>100</sup> Even well-intentioned people can violate the boundaries of privacy and the sensitive process of disclosure.

“There’s no way I was going to have that label—to let them know there’s a convicted felon sitting with them in the classroom.”  
— Michael

# CONCLUSION

*“They’re making the biggest sacrifices in putting their hopes and dreams on the line and saying, ‘I can do this despite what happened to me in my past’ or ‘I don’t want my children to go through that and I don’t want to live like that . . .’ College administration should encourage that and not make it harder for a person who has already had a lot of obstacles in their life.”*

— Chango, a student who served time in prison

This report offers a compelling story about the power of education for people with criminal records. They are trailblazers—another group of historically marginalized “others” entering the academy. The evidence presented in *The Gifts They Bring* suggests that reentry students have much to contribute to our colleges and universities: knowledge, reflection, a sense of debt and a biography of transformation. Each of these qualities is a valuable resource for institutions of higher learning.

**Women and men who have served time in prison have overcome many obstacles.** They carry a thirst for higher education and a commitment to achieve, a strong sense of obligation to “give back,” and a hunger for community. While students with criminal justice histories face enormous challenges in their struggle to be educated, they may be among the most motivated students on college campuses.

While the cases reviewed in this study may be exceptional in that each individual has overcome incredible obstacles to get into and through college, their stories are also diverse—indicating that a wide range of people with varied backgrounds and criminal justice experiences have been successful in their transitions—and they have defined that success in their own terms.

This report speaks to the obligation of our social institutions to support the *re-enfranchisement* of these women and men. It is time for colleges and universities to open our doors, educate our faculty, staff and student body, review our policies, relinquish unfounded fears, and welcome these new students. There is a parallel obligation for the criminal legal system to recognize the value of higher education for people under post-release supervision and to realign its practices to be more supportive of their participation in school. There is also a desperate need for housing, employment, and the other basics that are needed by all people seeking to construct a life for themselves after incarceration. At stake is not only the well-being of the millions of adults being released from prison, but also of their children and grandchildren, and our society as a whole. At stake is our commitment to racial justice and economic opportunity. As one participant in this study put it, “We do not carry risk; we carry hope.”<sup>101</sup>

**“We do not carry risk; we carry hope.”**  
— Cory

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

While this project was designed to raise issues rather than resolve them, it does point to a number of productive avenues for follow-up. The research team suggests the following components of a strategy for increasing the number of people with criminal records that go to college and succeed there:

1. Discussions with college administrators focusing on barriers presented during the admissions process as well as other restrictions that disallow or discourage full inclusion of people with criminal records on college campuses.
2. Conversations with faculty and students focused on raising awareness of inadvertent or subtle ways that exclusion of students with criminal justice backgrounds occurs.
3. Information and training for probation and parole officers about college as a significant aspect of reentry and the potential for them to have an important role assisting those who choose this route.
4. Explicit conversations with professional organizations about barriers to licensing and eligibility for internships in fields including psychology, social welfare, education, and law.
5. Investment in affordable housing options that are conducive to residents' participation in higher education.
6. Investment in supportive services to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals seeking to go to college, including assistance in preparing applications for school and for financial aid, tutoring and mentoring.
7. Inclusion of people with criminal convictions as a target population in the development of national, regional, and local education policy.

# APPENDIX A: RESEARCH DESIGN

## METHODS

A multi-method design was undertaken, including a series of focus group interviews with current and prospective students; collection of maps of their journeys from prison to college; systematic analysis of video interviews with formerly incarcerated college students and reentry experts, and policy papers written by individual co-researchers about specific obstacles to higher education.

### Charts:

Chart 1: Project Creation Team\*

	Total	Persons with Criminal Justice History	Public University	Private University
Reentry Experts	3	1	1	
Faculty	4	1	4	
Students	11	10	10	1

\* Note: some people are included in more than one category

Chart 2: Summary of Methods

Method	How	Who	Results	Recruitment
Framing Research Question	Dinner and discussion of research needed on reentry and college. Creation of initial draft shared with all and revised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N=18</li> <li>• Faculty=4</li> <li>• Students=11</li> <li>• Reentry Experts=3</li> <li>• Grad students=1</li> <li>• Persons w/criminal justice histories=12</li> </ul>	Use of narratives to identify barriers (public policy and University), networks of support, stigma, success, and gifts to colleges.	Invited by Ann Jacobs of the Prisoner Reentry Institute (PRI) based on interest/commitment to college as reentry.
Co-Researcher Team	Held series of meetings to revise research question and design research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N=12</li> <li>• Women = 3</li> <li>• Co-facilitator=2</li> <li>• Interview coding=6</li> <li>• Policy papers=6 (2 completed)</li> </ul>		Volunteered – participants in initial meetings and word of mouth. Expressed interest in specific project role.
Interviews	Benay Rubenstein gifted 15 interviews done for documentary film on barriers in college admissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N=15</li> <li>• Corrections officer=1</li> <li>• Women=4</li> <li>• White=2</li> <li>• Black=8</li> <li>• Persons with/criminal justice histories=14</li> </ul>	Seven co-researchers watched, transcribed and coded the interviews using the themes generated in Chart 3.	Recruited by Benay Rubenstein– through College Initiative (CI) and College and Community Fellowship (CCF).
Focus Groups	Used mapping to Track journeys through higher education. Focus on: barriers, supports, and gifts they bring to colleges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N=37</li> <li>• NYC JC=12</li> <li>• Women=2</li> <li>• Avg. age=22</li> <li>• Avg. education=GED</li> <li>• Formerly incarcerated students=25</li> <li>• Women=7</li> <li>• Age range: 25-70</li> <li>• Education: AA - PhD</li> </ul>	Formerly incarcerated faculty and student support, formerly incarcerate diversity category, research group as a positive/therapeutic community, college as new/supportive community	Recruited through Reentry organizations – CCF, CI, PRI and snowball methods (word of mouth).
Policy Papers	Co-researchers identified areas of particular interest to them, based on personal experience or policy issues that emerged through analysis of videos and focus groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-researchers pursuing advanced degrees.</li> </ul>	4 policy papers addressing: what we know about college in and after prison, what information travels, licensure, and parole: policy vs. procedure.	Self-selected based on personal experience.



## Videotaped Interviews

Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins donated a set of interviews with experienced students conducted for the film *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration* on barriers in the college admissions process. The research team extended the study design to include a secondary analysis of the 15 interviews.

The entire co-researcher team watched selected segments of the interview videos and identified the codes (see table below) associated with the research questions (What are the barriers and supports encountered getting into college after prison and what gifts to these students bring to the campus and beyond?). In addition to themes that were identified from the videos, themes that were seen as important to the co-researchers from their own experience and knowledge of the reentry field were added. The co-researchers then used these themes when watching, transcribing, and coding both the interviews and focus groups, adding additional themes as needed.

*Chart 3: Videotaped Interview Theme Codes:*

Theme	Examples
Pre-incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Failed educational policies</li><li>• Success before prison (place to return to)</li></ul>
Incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• College</li><li>• GED</li><li>• Lack of access</li></ul>
Motivation/meaning of college	
Tenacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extraordinary measures taken</li></ul>
Support systems/community programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• College Initiative</li><li>• College and Community Fellowship</li></ul>
Admissions process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Financial aid</li><li>• Why are you asking those questions?</li><li>• Unreasonable delays and hurdles</li><li>• Disclosure</li></ul>
Parole/supervised release/program compliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Curfew restrictions</li><li>• Fraternizing</li><li>• Job stipulations (and others)</li><li>• Discretionary</li></ul>
Positive outcomes (college)	
College Duty	
Gifts	
Collateral Consequences – invisible punishments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Housing/No Section 8</li><li>• Licensure</li></ul>
Stigma	

#### Chart 4:

Analysis: Themes and examples of barriers and supports to getting through college

Through analysis of both interviews and focus groups, the research team identified four broad levels of analysis, specifically: *Public policy (probation and parole, anti-fraternizing, financial aid, housing)*, *University Policy (admissions, diversity initiatives)*, *Social Dynamics (Family, faculty, and FI-peer support)* and *Psychological Dynamics (shifts in identity/sense of self and stigma)*. It is important to note that none of these categories is discrete. For example, institutional factors such as the admissions policy of having students “check the box” assigns risk as well as stigma, which can affect the sense of self.

Analysis: Themes and examples of barriers and supports to getting through college

Themes:	Examples
Public/Social Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Probation and parole</li><li>• Anti-fraternizing</li><li>• Financial aid</li><li>• Housing</li></ul>
University Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Admissions</li><li>• Access to internships/scholarships</li><li>• Diversity/support initiatives (lack)</li></ul>
Social Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family</li><li>• Faculty</li><li>• Peer support</li><li>• Student body</li><li>• Faculty support</li><li>• Classroom environment</li></ul>
Psychological Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sense of self</li><li>• Identity shifts</li><li>• Gifts</li><li>• Stigma</li></ul>

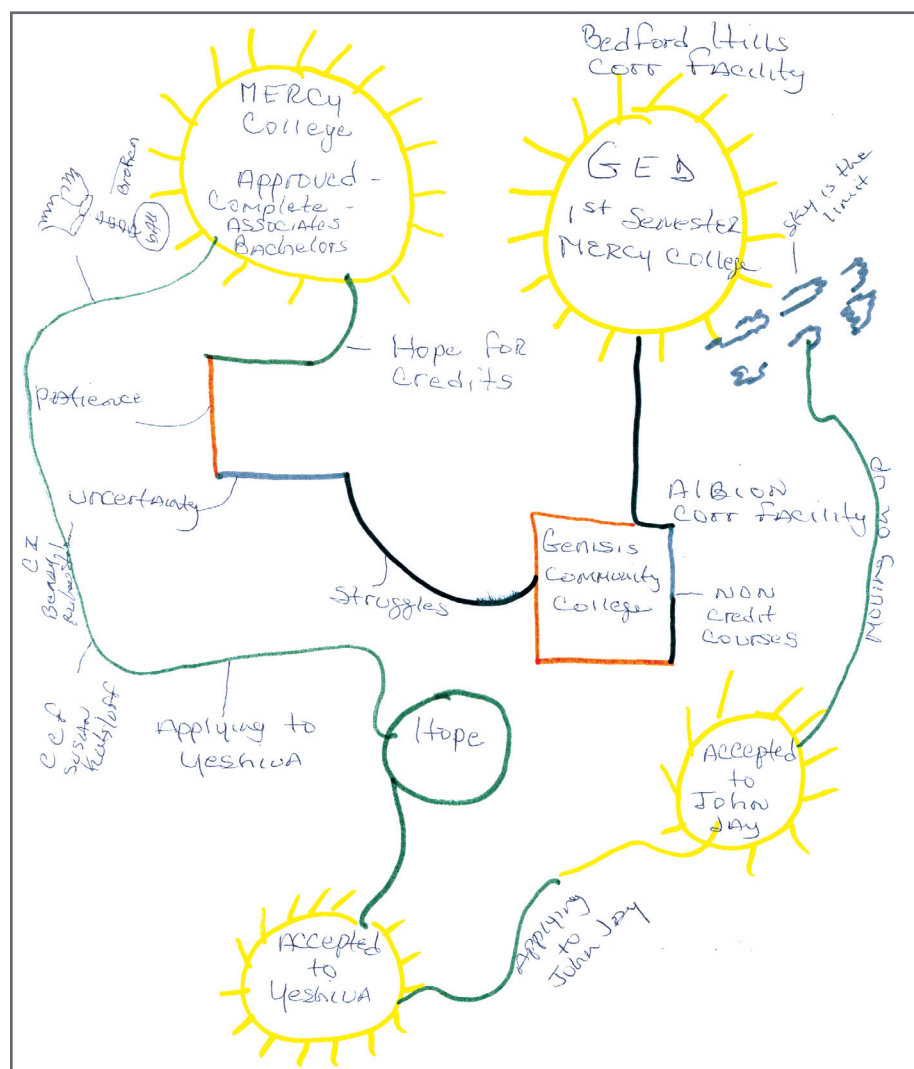
## APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP MAPS

The research team conducted six focus groups with an average of six participants each. The focus groups were co-facilitated by one co-researcher and a co-principle investigator and lasted for two hours. The focus groups were transcribed and coded, using the codes created by the team with additional codes being added as needed.<sup>102</sup> All 37 study participants were part of a focus group.

Focus group participants were asked to draw a map of their journey through higher education or until the point of making the decision to pursue higher education for the prospective students. Below are three examples of these maps:

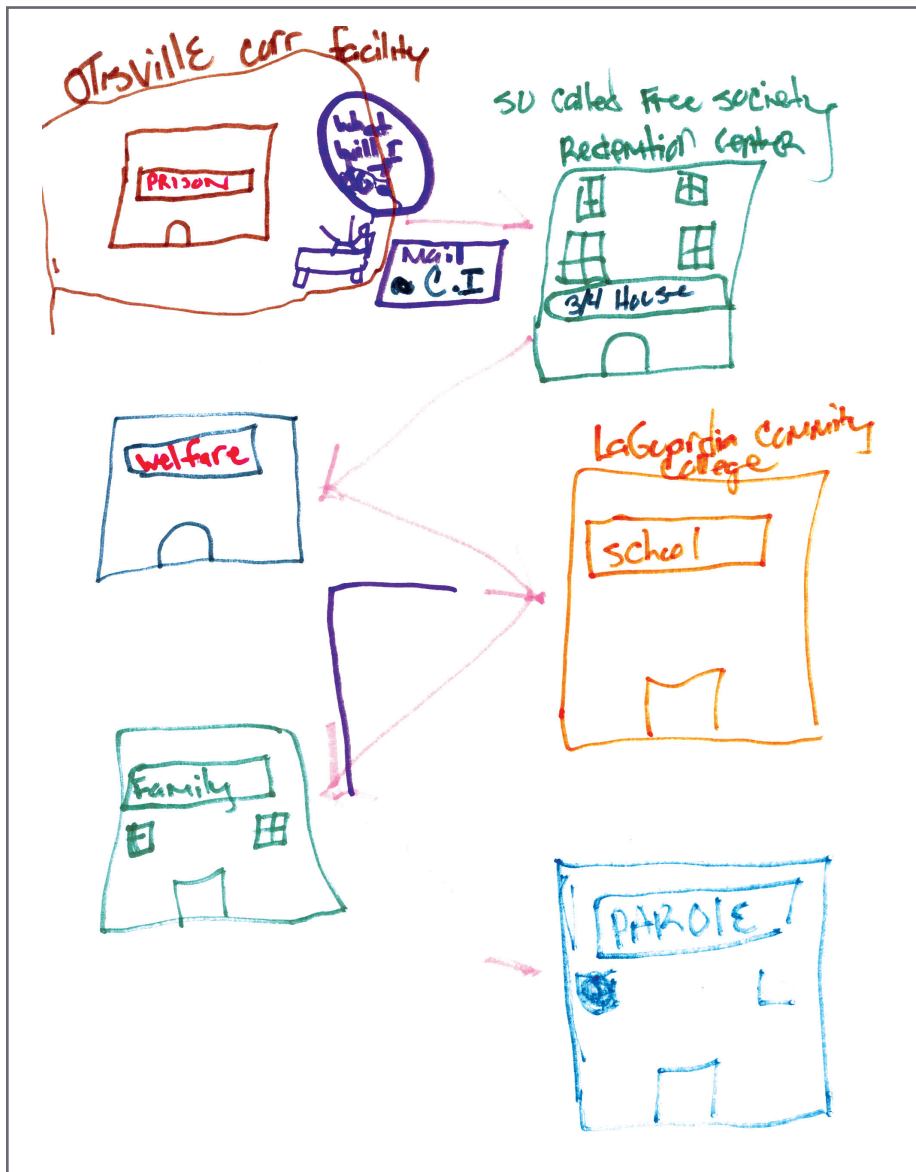
## Map 1:

Desheen's focus group "journey through higher education" map (experienced student).



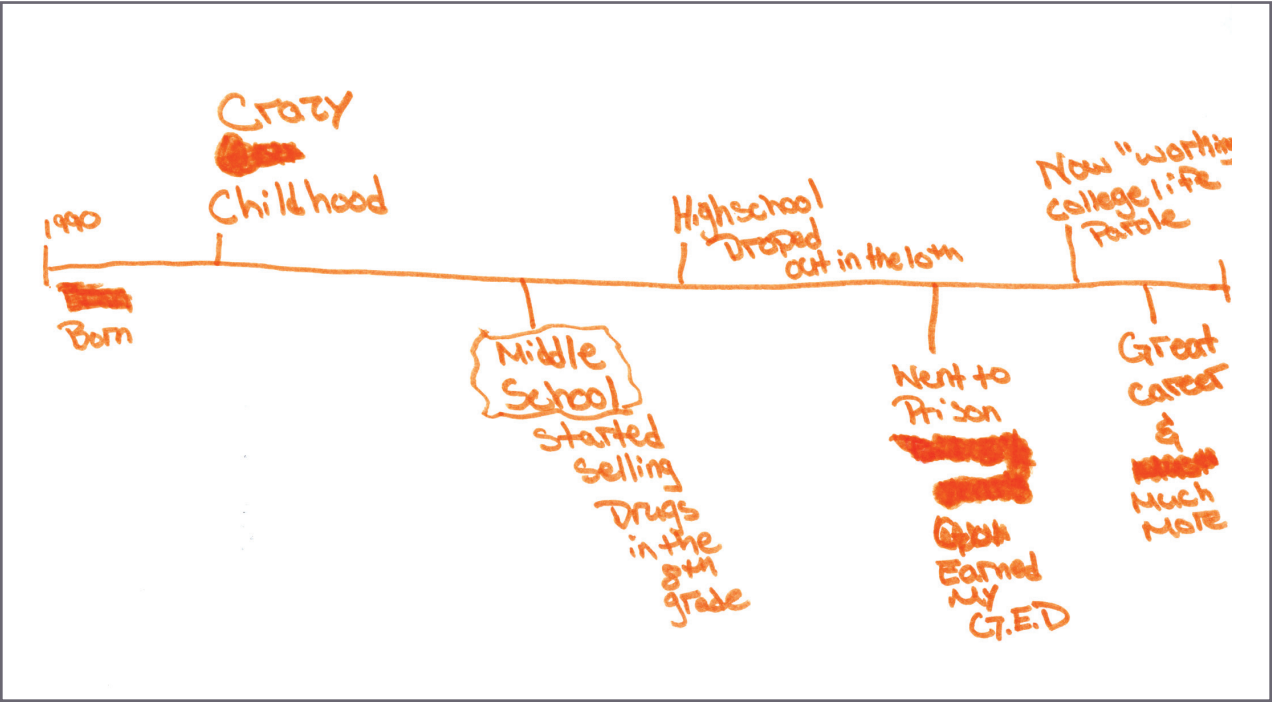
## Map 2:

Cory's focus group "journey through higher education" map (experienced student).



# Map 3:

Eduardo's focus group "journey to college" map (prospective student).



# APPENDIX C: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## **Center for Community Alternatives' Justice Strategies Initiative**

The Center for Community Alternatives promotes reintegrative justice and a reduced reliance on incarceration through advocacy, services and public policy development in pursuit of civil and human rights.

[www.communityalternatives.org](http://www.communityalternatives.org)

Recent Publications:

*The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions Reconsidered*, Center for Community Alternatives, Inc., November 2010.

*A Guide for Attorneys Representing College Applicants and Students During and After Criminal Proceedings*, Center for Community Alternatives, Inc., January 2013.

## **Center for Institutional and Social Change**

The Center engages in action-research projects with institutional, community, and student leadership to advance full participation and public problem solving. Their collaborative projects and networks develop actionable knowledge, expand organizational capacities, support broader policy change, and increase collective impact.

[www.changecenter.org](http://www.changecenter.org)

Recent Publication:

*Pathways of Possibility: Transforming Education's Role in Reentry: Conference Report*, Center for Institutional and Social Change, July 2013.

## **College and Community Fellowship (CCF)**

The services, programs and projects of CCF exist to eliminate individual and structural barriers to higher education, economic security, long-term stability, and civic participation for women who have criminal convictions (including those currently and formerly incarcerated) and their families. CCF guides women seeking to reclaim their lives through the stages of higher education while promoting their leadership, self-advocacy, artistic expression, and long term success.

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1626, New York, NY 10115

Tel: (646) 380-7777

Email: [info@collegeandcommunity.org](mailto:info@collegeandcommunity.org)

[www.collegeandcommunity.org](http://www.collegeandcommunity.org)

## **College Initiative (CI)**

CI is a community of successful, positive and supportive students, alumni and staff dedicated to creating pathways from criminal justice involvement to college and beyond. Together, they create life-changing college opportunities for men and women in New York City with criminal history and a high school diploma or GED. CI's work reflects their deep passion and strategic commitment to empowering men and women involved in the criminal justice system to become stabilizing forces in their communities, advocates for change, role models and engaged citizens working for a safer New York City.

P.O. Box 966, New York, NY 10016

Tel: (212) 691-7554

Email: [info@collegeinitiative.org](mailto:info@collegeinitiative.org)

[www.collegeinitiative.org](http://www.collegeinitiative.org)

## **Education from the Inside Out Coalition**

The Education from the Inside Out Coalition is a nonpartisan collaborative of advocates whose mission is to remove barriers to higher education facing students in prison and when they come home. The Coalition seeks to educate policymakers to re-establish Pell grant eligibility and the opportunity for people to earn college degrees while in prison.

Tel: (646) 380-7777

Email: [eiocampaign@gmail.com](mailto:eiocampaign@gmail.com)

[www.eiocoalition.org](http://www.eiocoalition.org)

## **New York City Justice Corps (NYC JC)**

The goals of the NYC Justice Corps are to reduce poverty and recidivism among young men and women, ages 18-24, who reside in communities with high rates of poverty and criminal justice involvement. The program brings young adults who have been involved in the justice system together with their communities to identify and address unmet community needs through meaningful and reparative service. Following three months of service, Justice Corps members are placed in internships and then in jobs. Corps members also participate in educational services and job training programs to develop their academic and employment skills. It operates at four sites in New York City:

[www.nycjusticecorps.org](http://www.nycjusticecorps.org)

Bronx Justice Corps (Serving the South Bronx)

Phipps CDC, Turning Point, 1409 Fulton Avenue, Bronx, NY 10456

Tel: (347) 329-4004 ext.\*5052

Harlem Justice Corps (Serving Central and East Harlem)

127 West 127th Street, Room 419, New York, NY 10027

Tel: (646) 593-8520 ext. 3102

[www.harlemjusticecorps.org](http://www.harlemjusticecorps.org)

Brooklyn New York Justice Corps (Serving East New York, Brownsville, Bushwick)  
Center for Community Alternatives  
100 Pennsylvania Avenue, 2nd Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11207  
Tel: (929) 234-3636 ext. 305

Queens Justice Corps (Serving Jamaica)  
Center for Alternative Sentencing & Employment Services, Inc. (CASES)  
89-31161st Street, Jamaica, NY 11432  
Tel: (347) 474-1896

### **Reentry Education Network**

The New York Reentry Education Network is a growing coalition of individuals within community-based organizations, government agencies, and institutions of higher education that have made a collective commitment to changing the landscape of reentry education in New York and beyond.

[www.reentryeducationnetwork.org](http://www.reentryeducationnetwork.org)

Recent Publication:

*Strategies for Engaging Students Involved in the Criminal Justice System*, New York Reentry Education Network, June 2012.



# ENDNOTES

- 1 International Centre for Prison Studies, *World Prison Brief*, (October 2013), [http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb\\_stats.php?area=all&category=wb\\_poprate](http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb_stats.php?area=all&category=wb_poprate).
- 2 L.E. Glaze, *Correctional Population in the United States*, 2010, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, (December 2011), <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2237>.
- 3 Laura M. Maruschak and Erika Parks, *Probation and Parole in the United States*, 2011, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, (November 2012), <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=4538>.
- 4 These include heightened police presence in neighborhoods where Black and Latino people live and go to school, race-based policing practices like stop-and-frisk, higher overall arrest and conviction rates, and harsher sentencing for people of color.
- 5 Marc Mauer, "Addressing Racial Disparities in Incarceration," *The Prison Journal* 91, no. 3 (September 2011): 87-88S. African American males are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white males. See also Rachel Pfeffer, "In Post Racial America Prisons Feast on Black Girls" *New American Media* (March 15, 2011), <http://ethnoblog.newamericamedia.org/2011/03/in-post-racial-america-prisons-feast-on-black-girls-1.php>. Young Black women have among the fastest-growing incarceration rates of any demographic group in the country.
- 6 E. Ann Carson and William J. Sabol, *Prisoners in 2011*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, (December 2012): 8 tbl.8, <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=4559>.
- 7 Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in US Incarceration," *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 2 (2004): 151-169. White men between the ages of 20 and 34 have an overall incarceration rate of one in 57, while for members of that group that have neither a high school diploma nor a GED it rises to one in eight. The rate of Black men in prison in that age group and with that education level is one in three.
- 8 Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, "Incarceration & Social Inequality," *Daedalus* 139, no. 3 (2010): 8-19.
- 9 Jeremy Travis, "Restoring College Education to the Nation's Prisons: Assessing the Prospects for Change," (keynote address to the Conference on Education for All: Improving Educational Access in Correctional Facilities and Beyond, United States Institute for Peace, Washington, D.C., April 29, 2013).
- 10 Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders and Jeremy N. V. Miles, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266). People who participated in correctional education programs were 43% less likely to recidivate than those who did not. The likelihood of obtaining employment was 13 points higher for people who participated in correctional education than those who did not.
- 11 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *A Reentry Education Model: Supporting Education and Career Advancement for Low-Skill Individuals in Corrections*, (Washington, D.C.: 2012), <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/reentry-model.pdf>. See also Pathways from Prison to Post-Secondary Education Project, <http://www.vera.org/project/pathways-prison-postsecondary-education-project>.

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- 15 Susan Sturm, Kate Skolnick and Tina Wu, *Building Pathways of Possibility from Criminal Justice to College: College Initiative as a Catalyst Linking Individual and Systemic Change*, Center for Institutional and Social Change, Columbia Law School, (New York: June 2011), <http://www.changecenter.org/publications/building-pathways-to-possibility> is a notable exception.
- 16 María Elena Torre, Michelle Fine, Brett G. Stoudt, and Madeline Fox, "Critical Participatory Action Research as Public Science" in *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*, ed. Harris Cooper (Washington, D.C.: APA 2012). See also [www.publicscienceproject.org](http://www.publicscienceproject.org) for a bibliography on Participatory Action Research, and research on education in and after prison.
- 17 See Appendix A, Chart 1: Project Creation Team.
- 18 The NYC Justice Corps seeks to develop leadership skills and civic awareness/engagement among young people such that they become agents of positive change in their communities. The NYC Justice Corps is funded by the Center for Economic Opportunities (CEO) in partnership with the Prisoner Reentry Institute. <http://nycjusticecorps.org>.
- 19 The College Initiative, with support from the Young Men's Initiative through the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College, expanded its services to help young men and women ages 18-24 who are returning from the criminal justice system, to enroll in and succeed in college.
- 20 Valerie A. Futch and Michelle Fine, "Mapping as a Method: History and Theoretical Commitments," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, forthcoming.
- 21 D. Katsifas, V. Futch, M. Fine, and S. R. Sirin, "Everyday Hyphens: Exploring Youth Identities with Methodological and Analytical Pluralism," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 8, (2011): 120-139.
- 22 Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (New York: 2012), DVD. Available at <http://vimeo.com/51358967>.
- 23 See for example M. Fine, M. E. Torre, K. Boudin, I. Bowen, J. Clark, D. Hylton, M. Missy Martinez, R.A. Roberts, P. Smart, and D. Upegui, *Changing Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum-Security Prison. Effects on Women in Prison, the Prison Environment, Reincarceration Rates and Post-Release Outcomes* (New York: CUNY Graduate Center, 2001). See also M. Fine, M. E. Torre, K. Boudin, I. Bowen,

J. Clark, D. Hylton, M. Missy Martinez, R. A. Roberts, P. Smart, and D. Upegui, "Participatory Action Research: From Within and Beyond Prison Bars," in *Working Method: Research and Social Justice*, ed. L. Weis and M. Fine (New York: Routledge, 2004).

- 24 "James" is a pseudonym. Where requested by the study participant, pseudonyms are used throughout this report to protect his or her privacy.
- 25 Chaka Gary, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, April 19, 2012.
- 26 Matthew (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 27 Christina Nankervis, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
- 28 Glenn E. Martin, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
- 29 Andrew Cory Greene, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 30 Derek (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 31, 2012.
- 31 Cheryl Wilkins, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
- 32 Esteban (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 31, 2012.
- 33 Teresa (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 31, 2012.
- 34 Davon (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 31, 2012.
- 35 Efram Thompson, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, April 19, 2012.
- 36 Marc Ramirez, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 37 Kevin (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 31, 2012.
- 38 Davon (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 31, 2012.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Alvaro Cumberbatch, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
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- 42 Matthew (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
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- 45 Christina Nankervis, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
- 46 Michael Taylor, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 47 Bruce (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 48 Andrew Cory Greene, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 49 Kevin (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 31, 2012.
- 50 Matthew (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 51 Andrew Cory Greene, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 52 Lynette (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.

- 53 Malcolm (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 54 Code of Federal Regulations - Title 24: Housing and Urban Development, § 960.204, Denial of admission for criminal activity or drug abuse by household members, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/24/960.204>. Federal and local laws restrict access to public housing for people with certain types of convictions. These restrictions extend to roommates and family members, and effectively close the door on the most likely source of housing: supportive, affordable living arrangements with friends or family.
- 55 Leslie Campbell, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 3, 2012.
- 56 "Three-quarter houses" are one- and two-family homes, apartment buildings, or other residential structures that rent beds to single adults. While their name appears to link them to "halfway houses," they are unlike halfway houses in that they do not offer in-house services to tenants and are not licensed or regulated by any governmental agency. They are also known as "sober homes" or "sober living houses" in some cases, and housing advocates often refer to them as "illegal boarding houses" or "illegal rooming houses" in order to draw attention to the ways in which they frequently violate tenancy laws, building codes, and housing maintenance codes. These houses are by definition private sector entities whose apparent goal is to generate profit. For more information see Robert Riggs, *Three-Quarter Houses: The View from the Inside* (New York: Prisoner Reentry Institute, John Jay College, 2013).
- 57 Michael Taylor, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 58 Evangelene (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 59 Andrew Cory Greene, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 60 State University of New York (SUNY) "Mission Statement," [http://www.suny.edu/about\\_suny/mission.cfm](http://www.suny.edu/about_suny/mission.cfm).
- 61 N.Y. EDN. LAW § 6201: NY Code - Section 6201: Legislative findings and intent, paragraph 5. <http://codes.lp.findlaw.com/nycode/EDN/VII/125/6201>. The founding legislation for the City University of New York (CUNY).
- 62 Jeremy Travis, *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2005). Approximately 700,000 people are released from prison each year.
- 63 Andrew Cory Greene, "Checking the Box: Enduring the Stigma of Applying to Graduate School Post-Incarceration," (white paper, Public Science Project, Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, 2012), 2, <http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/?p=2057>
- 64 Marsha Weissman, Alan Rosenthal, Patricia Warth, Elaine Wolf, Michael Messina-Yauchzy, *The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions Reconsidered*, (New York: Center for Community Alternatives, 2010), [www.communityalternatives.org/pdf/Reconsidered-criminal-hist-recs-in-college-admissions.pdf](http://www.communityalternatives.org/pdf/Reconsidered-criminal-hist-recs-in-college-admissions.pdf). A recent survey of 273 colleges and universities found that 66% ask applicants about their criminal justice histories. Over 90% of these institutions require a letter of explanation of the crime, 63% require a letter from a corrections official, 54.2% require a personal interview with the applicant, 38.5% require the completion of community supervision before an applicant can be considered, and almost 16% require that applicants produce documentation of their criminal justice histories, for example their "rap sheet."
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Andrew Cory Greene, "Checking the Box: Enduring the Stigma of Applying to Graduate School Post-Incarceration," (white paper, Public Science Project, Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, 2012), 6, <http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/?p=2057>

- 67 Marsha Weissman, Alan Rosenthal, Patricia Warth, Elaine Wolf, Michael Messina-Yauchzy, *The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions Reconsidered*, (New York: Center for Community Alternatives, 2010), [www.communityalternatives.org/pdf/Reconsidered-criminal-hist-recs-in-college-admissions.pdf](http://www.communityalternatives.org/pdf/Reconsidered-criminal-hist-recs-in-college-admissions.pdf).
- 68 Ibid. See also Timothy C. Hart, *National Crime Victimization Survey, 1995 – 2000: Violent Victimization of College Students*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, (December 2003), <http://secure.ce4alliance.com/articles/100877/ViolentVictimizationCollegeStudents.pdf>. See also Katrina Baum and Patsy Klaus. *National Crime Victimization Survey, 1995 – 2002: Violent Victimization of College Students*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, (January 2005), <http://www.ocpa-oh.org/Campus%20Safety/Violent%20Victimization%20of%20College%20Students.pdf>.
- 69 U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Department of Education and Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Campus Attacks: Targeted Violence Affecting Institutions of Higher Education*, (Washington, D.C.: 2010), <http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/CampusAttacks041610.pdf>.
- 70 Associate Executive Director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers quoted in J. Epstein, “Probing Students’ Pasts,” *Inside Higher Ed.*, July 1, 2010, accessed October 27, 2012, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/07/01/background>.
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- 72 Chango Reese, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
- 73 Aenora Tejawi, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 74 Lettisha Boyd, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
- 75 Michael Taylor, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
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- 78 More information on this topic is available from the National Reentry Resource Center [www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/faqs/employment-and-education](http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/faqs/employment-and-education).
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- 80 Bruce (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 81 Chaka, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, April 19, 2012.
- 82 Bruce (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 83 Bobby, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, April 19, 2012.
- 84 Matthew (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
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- 94 Deborah E. Frable, Tamela Blackstone, and Carol Scherbaum, "Marginal and mindful: deviants in social interactions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 1 (1990): 140.
- 95 Marie (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 96 Andrew Cory Greene, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, March 29, 2012.
- 97 Michael Taylor, PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
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- 99 Henry Smith, interview by Benay Rubenstein and Jeremy Robins, *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration*, unedited footage, (New York: 2012), DVD.
- 100 Matthew (pseudonym), PAR focus group, New York City, NY, May 16, 2012.
- 101 Andrew Cory Greene, "Checking the Box: Enduring the Stigma of Applying to Graduate School Post-Incarceration," (white paper, Public Science Project, Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, 2012), 7, <http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/?p=2057>
- 102 See Appendix A, Chart 3: Interview Theme Codes.

