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A Habit is as Dangerous as Anything: Incarcerated Student Perspectives on the Transformative Power of a Liberal Arts Education

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Abstract

Scholars and practitioners have argued that higher education in prison (HEP) can help transform incarcerated people and prepare them to re-enter society in productive ways. Viewing education as a mechanistic device that can help incarcerated students attain jobs or skills without engaging with larger questions of personal growth and fulfillment, however, does a disservice to incarcerated students. Fundamentally, education is about change and growth, but what changes and how cannot be left solely up to practitioners. We argue that programs should partner with students to understand their personal transformation using the key components of an undergraduate liberal arts education, including critical thinking, understanding human behavior, and exploring social structures. For this study, we used a mixed-methods design with undergraduate students in one college-in-prison program, and we explored transformation as a category of analysis with a particular focus on four variables: open-minded thinking, civic attitudes and skills, hope, and sense of belonging. Although we found few differences between first-year and upper-class students on our quantitative measures, qualitative results suggest that a liberal arts education within the prison can be transformative in measurable ways. We suggest that administrators and professors view students as partners and active participants in their education, and we discuss ways administrators and professors can support student growth and explore the transformative potential of HEP in the prison environment itself.

Keywords: higher education in prison, program evaluation, transformation, personal growth, liberal arts

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Introduction

There is consensus among practitioners and researchers that a liberal arts education is valuable for incarcerated people when they are released back into society. The fiscally-minded point to reduced recidivism as the primary reason for offering education to those incarcerated (Rand, 2013). Social justice advocates argue that offering education in prison is a necessary antidote to the rampant race and class inequities embedded in the United States criminal justice system (Dolan & Carr 2015; Flores, 2018; Harlow, 2003; Western & Pettit, 2010). Educators, scholars, and students claim that education has the ability to prepare incarcerated people to take an active role in their families and communities upon release (Lageman, 2017). We dispute none of these claims. We carry these arguments further and ask: *What is the value of a liberal arts education for individuals while they are incarcerated?*

The value of differing types of education and the pitfalls associated with education in prison have received significant attention from researchers, but persistent questions remain (Baranger et. al., 2018; Binda et. al., 2020; Castro and Gould, 2018; Nally et al., 2014). If we believe, as studies have suggested, that people are more prepared to be citizens after receiving a liberal arts education, when does this 'transformation' begin? And how does education allow incarcerated students to form communities in the restricted space of a prison? We believe there is a healthy, empowering way to approach transformation within the prison and that this form of transformation is valuable to students while incarcerated.

Transformation is an amorphous idea and does not lend itself well to measurable outcomes. There is no consensus on what, who, or how anything or anyone is being transformed, nor is the idea of transformation wholly positive. To believe that higher education in prison (HEP) is a vehicle for social change ignores the many areas that education leaves untouched—poverty, racism, trauma, addiction, and abuse—to name a few. Education is not a panacea to a society that is unwilling to invest in mental and physical health, poverty amelioration, and other measures that would create a more equitable society. The discourse of transformation can also be utilized by authoritarian corrections regimes who view 'transformation' or 'change' from a narrow perception of control or public safety. However, rejecting the idea of transformation or change is not a solution either. Viewing education as a mechanistic device that can help incarcerated students attain jobs or skills without engaging with larger questions of personal growth and fulfillment does a disservice to incarcerated students. Fundamentally, education is about change and growth, but what changes and how cannot be left solely up to practitioners.

We argue that colleges-in-prison should partner with students to learn their goals and help them on their personal journey using the tools of a liberal arts education. To do this, schools need data collection systems to measure student engagement, student satisfaction, and other metrics to successfully capture student input in ways that protect student identities. In this paper, we discuss students' views about their education and recommend best practices for educators and administrators to support students.

Transformation as a Key Variable in HEP

Transformation is a word that comes up often in discussions of liberal arts education on campus and in the prison setting. In this paper, we will confine ourselves to the way it is used in HEP studies and evaluate the promise and pitfalls of using 'transformation' as an outcome. Some practitioners argue that transformation discourse can be damaging for students and irresponsible for programs (Ginsberg, 2019). But for others, transformation—as a goal and an outcome—is an explicit purpose of their work. Transformation can be valuable as both a goal and a measurable metric for colleges operating in the prison space. But there is also a danger that educators will push their own views of what should be 'transformed' which can harm students by violating their autonomy, limiting their potential, and centering the goals of the institution over the needs of the student (Robinson and Crow, 2008). Behen (2014) writes that these authoritarian models instrumentalize education eroding the liberatory power of the liberal arts and amount to little more than "brainwashing" of the incarcerated students.

Many practitioners pursue transformation as an explicit goal of education within the prison, but there is little consensus about what or who is being transformed. Jody Lewen, Executive Director of the Prison University Project that operates at San Quentin, claims higher education in prison should lead to social transformation. She sets up a "theory of change" that envisions a staggered goal system for higher education in prison (HEP). In Lewen's words, "The ultimate goal of the work of prison higher education is building a more just society; the intermediate goal is overcoming the harm that is perpetuated by our prison system" (Lewen, 2014, p. 354). In this model, the thing being transformed is ultimately society, and, in the interim, the prison space itself, not necessarily the students. Transformation occurs by giving incarcerated students the chance to speak for themselves through interviews and writing assignments and by bringing privileged people from outside into the prison space. These actions, in Lewen's view, transform the prison space and could lead to the transformation of society as a whole.

Other practitioners disagree with transformation as a goal. Costelloe (2014) argues that there has been too much emphasis on the *outcome* of higher education in prison rather than seeing education in prison as an end unto itself. She argues that rather than focusing on the "raging debate on the objectives of prisoner education," we should focus "on the educative process by and through which the prisoner navigates his way through his sentence" (p. 30). She also counsels that we should avoid "asking too much, and expecting too much, of education" (p. 31). The issues facing incarcerated people, within prison and upon their return, are numerous and range from trouble finding housing, to continued substance abuse issues, and a host of poverty-related issues. It is naive to claim that one thing–a liberal arts education–will cure all of these problems. But this does not mean that education cannot be of significant value to incarcerated students as they navigate these systemic issues.

Costelloe argues in favor of personal, not social, transformation, and she makes assumptions about incarcerated individuals that can be harmful. In her paper, Costelloe (2014) argues that the object of transformation within higher education in prison is the students' views of learning itself. As students' relationships with learning change, they have new ways of engaging their world. This will bring "the disenfranchised, the marginalized, and the disaffected 'back into society'" (European Commission, 2010; UNESCO, 2002; Government of Ireland, 2000 as quoted in Costelloe, 2014, p. 31).[i] For Costelloe, it is not society but the student who is transformed—from a disaffected lawbreaker into an active citizen. But Costelloe makes assumptions about incarcerated students that inhibit the kind of student-led transformation we promote.

Similarly, Peterson (2019) cautions that "this work is deeply transformative, as well as risky and limited" (p. 180). She writes, "Healing and transformation are not finite destinations at which we arrive; they are processes of becoming that must be nurtured over time" (p. 179). Time is a key factor here. If transformation takes time, then long-term investment in HEP is vital to transformation. Process is another important factor. If we, as educators, think of transformation as a destination, then we risk making decisions about our students' characters, selfhoods, and futures that usurp their autonomy. However, if we think of transformation as a process, then we can focus more on offering the tools for transformation such as critical thinking, understanding human behavior, and exploring social structures. An example of this can be found in the methods employed by the Inside Out program of Portland (Reitenauer, et. al., 2018). Within this program, students are brought from Portland State to participate in the classroom with incarcerated students with the explicit goal of creating an educational environment that is transformational for all the participants, not only the ones 'inside.' This is part of a larger institutional goal to effect change through community-focused experiential learning. Once we view transformation as a process of human flourishing, students and educators have the space for exploration and productive engagement.

Teaching for transformation and measuring transformation are both possible for colleges in prison. In this paper, we define transformation as a process that requires that colleges engage with their students as they set personal and communal goals. This study was part of a larger project supported by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) that included the collection of a wide variety of student indicators of success in four areas: Student Outcomes, Academic Quality, Civic Engagement, and Soft Skills (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020). For this paper, we asked: *What is the value of a liberal arts undergraduate education for individuals while they are incarcerated?* Specifically, we explored three questions:

1. If, or when, does 'transformation' begin in an educational environment?

2. Who, or what, is being transformed?
3. By what methods can that transformation be measured?

Expecting that personal transformation takes months, even years to occur, we hypothesized that first-year students would show lower mean scores than upper-class students on our measures of open-minded thinking, civic attitudes and skills, hope and sense of belonging. Specifically, we expected that incarcerated students who had been enrolled in the college longer would demonstrate greater civic engagement, be more accepting of diverse opinions, perceive more faculty and peer support, and have more hope than those in their first-year of undergraduate studies in the college.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted in a college-in-prison program located in a mid-sized, Midwestern city. The college administration is housed at a small, liberal arts college; faculty who teach at the prison are drawn from both the college and a larger, research university with an emphasis on undergraduate liberal arts education. We collected student surveys and conducted interviews with college students incarcerated at a Level 2 state penal facility (i.e., release dates ranged from two to ten years). A mixed-methods research model was employed in order to offset the limitations and utilize the strength of different research methods (Anderson, 2016, p. 234). Given our small *n* within one prison program and the possibility, due to the pandemic and the instability of HEP programs, that we would be unable to recruit the numbers of respondents we hoped, we supplemented with qualitative research methods. Qualitative research allowed for greater nuance than quantitative research alone given our small sample size (Anderson, 2016, p. 235), and offered incarcerated students the opportunity for to speak for themselves on issues that concern them. This allowed us to leverage the particular expertise that comes through the lived experience of the research participants.

We recruited students in-person in the space used by the college in the correctional facility. Everyone enrolled in classes, as well as those who recently graduated and were waiting to transfer to other programs or go home, was given the opportunity to participate in the research (n=52). We conducted interviews (n=41) and surveys (n=48). This represented 92% of the student body. For the purposes of data analyses, we considered two groups: first-years (n=16) and upper-class students (n=32). The college is at an all-male facility.

Table 1 includes demographic variables collected from all participants. The mean age of our participants was 37 years (range = 27 to 58); 63% of students were single, 54% reported having children, 25% had one child. Racially, this college student body nearly reflects that of the prison population in our state: 61% of participants were European-American or White; 22% were African-American or Black; 6% were Latino or Hispanic; and 2% were Asian or Asian

American. Most of our students (80%) hail from a rural or “small town;” 56% report coming from a “lower or working class” home; 94% were in public schools; and 51% of participants are first-generation college students. During their primary education experiences, 71% were suspended or expelled, although most of them (57%) report that they “enjoyed high school.” About half (46%) report having some college; most of that was vocational. Some (16%) report having been “never employed;” and 8% had some military service.

TABLE 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

	N	**Mean**	**%**	**Range**	**SD**
Gender male	48		100		
Age in years	48	37 years	100	27-58 years	7.20
Race					
White or European-American	30		61		
Black or African-American	10		22		
Latino or Hispanic	3		6		
Asian or Asian-American	1		2		
Other	1		2		
Marital Status					
Single	31		63		
Married	3		6		
Divorced	14		29		
Children					
One child	12		25		
More than one child	14		28	2-4	
Hometown (all that applied)					
Rural	19		39		
Small town	20		41		
Suburban	9		18		
Urban	21		43		
Family of Origin SES					
Lower Class	13		27		
Working Class	14		29		
Middle Class	15		31		
Upper-Middle Class	4		8		
Other (poor)	2		4		
High School Education (all that applied)					
Public	45		94		
Private	2		4		
Other (did not attend HS)	1		2		
HS Suspension/Expulsion	35		75		
Some College before this HEP	25		51		
Employment prior to Incarceration					
None	8		16		
Part-time	3		6		
Full-time or more	34		69		

Military Service	4	8

Procedures

We recruited students in-person in the educational wing that the college uses for classroom space. Electronic communication is difficult for students to access and all communication, electronic and physical, is monitored by prison officials. We felt that in-person communication was the safest way to protect student identities and give them the opportunity to participate without coercion. Permanent administrators within the college (Director, Assistant Director, and Assistant Director of Re-entry) did not recruit or collect any data with students in order to protect student confidentiality and to avoid coercion. Permanent administrators were not given access to any identifiable student data, nor did they receive notification of who did and did not participate.

The research process began with informed consent of all participants, including consent to be recorded. Because incarcerated students are a highly vulnerable population, researchers regularly reminded students of their right to change their mind or decline to participate in any data collection that made them uncomfortable. Researchers first distributed surveys then conducted interviews. Upon completion of our data collection, all students (regardless of participation) were given a pizza party as compensation. This was in accordance with DOC rules for research. Interviews were recorded with both video and audio. Audio files were separated from video files by the study coordinator (Lindsay) and housed on a university server. Audio only files were sent for transcription. Transcripts were de-identified by the study coordinator and the video files were destroyed out of an abundance of caution to protect student confidentiality. All procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board and by the state Department of Corrections.

Measures and Materials

Surveys

Students were given a packet that included ten measures, a scale to assess COVID-related life stressors, and a demographic survey. The complete packet took approximately one hour to complete. For this article we analyzed four measures related to the moral and ethical qualities of an undergraduate liberal arts education.

Actively Open-Minded Thinking Scale (AOT; Sά,West, & Stanovich, 1999; Sά, Kelley, Ho, & Stanovich, 2005). This scale is used in conjunction with an interview/focus group component and measures how individuals think and come to conclusions. Cronbach’s alpha for the 36 item Actively Open-Minded Thinking Scale was .78. The AOT has four subscales: *Openness Values*

Facet (Revised NEO Personality Inventory; 8 items); *Flexible Thinking Subscale* (10 items); *Belief Identification Subscale* (9 items); and *Dogmatism* (9 items).

Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ; Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002). The CASQ is a well-used measure of student engagement and attitudes in civic and social life. It has high reliability, and each section can be administered singly or in conjunction with other subscales. Researchers have recommended its use among diverse student populations. The CASQ has three subscales: *Civic Action* (8 items; α=.86); *Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills* (12 items; α=.79); *Diversity Attitudes* (5 items; α=.70).

Adult Hope Scale. The Adult Hope Scale is a 12-item measure of hope, defined as 'a positive motivational state' based on a sense of 'successful agency' and planning to meet goals (Snyder, 1991; 2002). It is a widely used scale with an internal consistency that ranges from .74-.84 (Snyder, 2002); Cronbach's alpha in our study was .70.

Sense of Belonging Scale: Sense of Belonging has been identified as an important factor in student retention and success (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). The Sense of Belonging Scale has 26 items and four subscales: Perceived Classroom Support, Perceived Isolation, Perceived Faculty Support, and Perceived Peer Support. Cronbach's alphas range from .72 to .94.

Interview

First-year students were interviewed in two groups and upper-class students in five groups. Each focus group had between three and six participants. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of sixteen questions in areas of *Civic Engagement, Student Engagement, Critical Thinking, Time Management,* and *Other* (see Appendix A). Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

Analyses

For the data compiled through the interview process, the project coordinator used a closed coding process to explore the value of education for incarcerated students prior to release. The data was manually coded. The data went through three rounds of coding. The first round explored how students discussed personal expectations and value of their education. This round focused on the language students used to discuss their education. The second round focused on previously identified examples and began the process of exploring analytical categories. The final round synthesized the answers of students into two broad analytical categories: *Transformation* and *Community Formation*.

Results

Quantitative Data

Means and standard deviations for all quantitative measures can be found in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Means and standard deviations for the actively open-minded thinking scale, civic attitudes and skills questionnaire, adult hope scale, and sense of belonging scale

		N	Mean	SD
AOMT: Dogmatism	First-year	15	27.13	5.04
	Upper-class students	30	29.03	6.52
AOMT: Fact Resistance	First-year	16	25	6.43
	Upper-class students	31	24.68	5.68
AOMT: Liberalism	First-year	16	16.63	3.34
	Upper-class students	31	17.10	2.47
AOMT: Belief Personification	First-year	15	13.20	4.07
	Upper-class students	31	11.71	4.24
CASQ: Civic Action	First-year	15	28.47	6.58
	Upper-class students	28	30.36	5.00
CASQ: Interpersonal	First-year	16	45.69	5.53
	Upper-class students	30	44.70	4.76
CASQ: Diversity Attitudes	First-year	15	18.20	3.95
	Upper-class students	31	18.26	3.51
CASQ: Total Score	First-year	14	91.21	12.81
	Upper-class students	28	93.21	10.45
Hope Scale	First-year	14	51.93	5.29
	Upper-class students	30	52.30	6.32
Belonging: Classroom	First-year	16	16.25	4.61
	Upper-class students	32	16.91	4.24
Belonging: Isolation	First-year	15	7.60	2.69
	Upper-class students	32	6.47	2.87
Belonging: Faculty Support	First-year	15	36.67	7.10
	Upper-class students	29	38.93	8.12
Belonging: Peer Support	First-year	15	32.07	5.64
	Upper-class students	31	34.71	5.21

We found no significant differences between first year students and upper class students on any variables considered for this paper. This could be due to the small sample size, and we hope to see more studies comparing students experience and perception at different stages of their educational journey.

Qualitative Data

Our qualitative research captured two sub-categories of Transformation and two sub-categories of Community Formation. The sub-categories of Transformation are *Self-improvement* and *Personal Growth*. The sub-categories of Community Formation are *Environment* and *Peer and Mentor Support*. While we initially considered 'peer support' and 'mentorship' separate categories, student focus groups almost invariably linked external support, peer-to-peer support, and mentorship between upper-class students and first-year years and identified them as vital and interconnected aspects of community formation.

Transformation

We found that transformation is a word students use to describe their educational experience. Students discussed transformation as both an aspirational quality and something they experienced in the program. There were two related categories of transformation that most students discussed: they wanted to grow/improve as people and they wanted to effect change in their lives during and after release. There was variation in both categories, and they sometimes blended into one another. Below, we discuss how students talked about self-improvement and how it affects change in their lives and situations.

Self-Improvement

Self-improvement was a key driver of enrollment as well as an aspirational outcome for many students within the college. This was a topic among both upper class and first year students. Rather than giving students personal goals, the data suggests that HEP offers many students a place within the prison to pursue goals they already have that are not met in other areas of prison education or programming.[ii]

One student explicitly argued that the college served a purpose that was not met anywhere else within the prison. Joaquin, a first-year, argued that the DOC environment, by prioritizing compliance, inhibits the skill set students need to succeed outside. Because everything is prescribed—dinner, shower, appointments—he believed that incarceration creates "grown babies…You are a little baby, and then you get out on the street. There's nobody to remind you every day…So now they messed you up in here." The college program, as described by Joaquin, offers students the opportunity to be in control of key areas of their lives. Like on the main campus, students are given their syllabi, assignments, and expectations, but they must decide how to study, when to seek help, and how to incorporate feedback.

Students talked about a host of skills that they have honed after even a short amount of time in the college and the self-empowerment that comes with that. Lorne, another first-year, said this education "opens the door to being able to do what you want to do, because you know you're capable of learning it." Amari, a first-year, said school was his top priority. He stated, "I have to make real sacrifices now to get to where I want to be in life, to never come back here, ever." However, their improvement was not for themselves alone. Amos, an upper-class student, talked about self-improvement as a way to better his community and, ultimately, the world. Others talked about self-transformation in service of their children, families, and the wider community. Education gave them the opportunity to improve themselves, which, for some, improved their relationships with the people they would return home to. These processes all began within prison.

Students linked success at school with both internal transformation and a better chance at succeeding on the outside.[iii] Jacoby emphatically stated, "I can't claim education and it not better my condition in all aspects of life. If it doesn't do that, then I wouldn't even qualify that as an education. In order for education [to exist], something transformative has to happen. And if it don't (sic) equate to better conditions in my life, what the hell is the point?" No one in the focus groups had a negative perspective of transformation. While many discussed personal growth and self-improvement, no one argued *against* change or transformation. Similarly, no one mentioned that they felt pushed or forced to change by college administrators. On other topics, students felt comfortable criticizing administrative decisions, so we do not have reason to believe students were holding back in this area. Anecdotally, head nods often accompanied discussions of change, transformation, and improvement through education. David linked both failures at college and returning to prison to negative habits. In a profound statement, he said, "A habit is as dangerous as anything," and argued that negative habits trapped people in cycles of failure and incarceration. Students told us that a liberal arts education gave them opportunities to create new and helpful habits on the inside that they could then take to the outside.

Personal Growth

Students wanted to effect change in their lives in a wide variety of areas. Many students mentioned wanting to learn and think better, two areas that a college education is designed to improve. But many students saw a college education as an opportunity to set a new life trajectory and linked the change they wanted to make to external social roles. Amari said he wanted to "make sure my next fifteen years will be different than my previous fifteen years." Reginald, an upper class student, said a college education "seemed like the best opportunity to do something positive…they say education is the best way to become something." He added, "[If you're] on a negative path, you're in prison. You want to change it. … [In my opinion], this program is going to keep a lot of people from returning to prison as well…You have opportunities to pursue your education and...I really like doing this school and actually getting good grades…I could have done this this whole time. How far should I take it?" This student and others talked about change not only in tangible things—better jobs, economic advancement, stable housing—but of intangibles like giving them new ideas of what they are capable of and the paths that are open to them in life. Hope is an important marker of mental health and a liberal arts education appears to tie into feelings of optimism and hope in their future post-reentry.

While many students used the word "opportunity" to describe their initial thoughts on higher education, others questioned the value of a liberal arts degree in the beginning. Dylan said, "I was skeptical at first about even doing the program because getting a degree in liberal arts…I had to ask myself, 'How is this beneficial or helpful?' And now I realize not only is it teaching me a lot about myself, but it's teaching me how to interact with other people." Jeremiah, another upper-class student, offered an interesting perspective on the role his education played in affecting change. He talked about tools, such as critical thinking, that allow incarcerated students to recreate their lives from the ground up. He said:

> You're starting over from scratch, which is scary, because there's nothing. But at the same time, you're an artist and you get to paint and create your own life for the first time…Here [prison] I took ownership of [my life]…and here [college] I learned the tools to make it how I want…I'm going home better than when I came in…[we're becoming] better individuals through education and understanding that there is a better way of doing things, a better way of living, a better way of life.

Jacob stated succinctly. "Ultimately, what education does for a lot of us, it makes us unfit for the environments that we came from."

Community Formation

Student conversations on forming new and healthy interpersonal attachments within the prison lead to the analytic category of 'Community Formation.'[iv] Community is not typically associated with prisons and most research explores the prison as a harmful place that is antithetical to human flourishing (Edgmone & Clay-Warner, 2018; Infante et al., 2023; Kupers, 2008; Piper & Berle, 2019). The focus for DOC officials within the prison is on security, as defined by the DOC and the state, and this focus seldom creates opportunities for healthy relationships or attachments. However, our research participants discussed how they formed communities in the educational space through changes in the physical *environment*, which fosters opportunities for *peer and mentor support*. We discuss these two categories below.

Environment

Participants discussed the vital importance of a physical designated study and living space in their ability to create community. This college operates in its own wing of an educational building. The only people allowed on the wing are students enrolled in the college. The students in this college also have a designated dorm. Everyone enrolled in the college resides in the same physical dorm space.[v] Students in nearly every focus group talked about the importance of a separate space for their ability to study and work in peace, and they discussed the value of being housed in a separate place with other like-minded people. Physical space was an important foundation for any sort of community to emerge.

Some students had lived and studied in prisons that did not have separate living spaces and they contrasted that experience with the more positive experience of living in the same dorm with their classmates. Amos said that when students are not housed together, problems in different dorms that keep people from attending class lead to students falling behind. He said, “But here it’s different, we’re all in the same dorm.” He added:

> When I did college the first time, I was in a dorm with 400 people, like the cell house. And maybe a couple of them were in college, so if I wanted to go to someone there, it was rare I would find somebody that would know about what we're learning…So this environment with living together is way better. I [heard from the director] that they [DOC] are flirting with the idea of moving us back into population. That would be the worst. It would just be the worst decision, period.

Another student, Ethan, highlighted the shared dorm space as an important factor in limiting distractions. He said,

> Some people would get paired in a room with a roommate that's not in college. Which is part of the original issue of: it's a distraction, it takes you away from your proper focus. And I suffered that one year. It drastically changed the experience, but what was different in that facility, those of us in college were not in the same dorm. We were spread out throughout the facility so that made it even more difficult. For me I was the only person in my dorm in college.

He highlighted the role of the dorm in providing a more positive experience and contributing to his academic achievement.

Other students agreed that shared dorm space was an important component of their academic success and overall experience. Monty said, “For everybody to actually get the most out of it, you need to be in a dorm with your fellow students.” Joaquin highlighted segregated dorm space as a safety feature for students who stand to lose a lot if they are caught up in rules violations or disturbances. He said, “You don’t have to worry about the other guy next to you doing something that is not related to what you’re doing. You’re in there with everybody on the same page.” Other students highlighted the role of the shared dorm as contributing to their personal success as well. Oliver stated, “This environment is more or less instrumental in becoming a better person for society.” Students signified through nodding and verbal cues that they agreed with other students on the importance of the dorm to the academic experience.

Peer and Mentor Support

A separate physical space provides the foundation for community formation, but physical space alone will not create community. Students discussed the importance of peer-to-peer interactions and support within, but especially outside, the classroom. This section offers student perspectives on the interactions they found helpful and supportive in the college and the shared dorm space. The qualitative data showed that students were actively trying to utilize the college to build community within and outside the prison.

Interaction with professors is an important element of this college education and a draw for some students. Several students had previous encounters with education through correspondence courses. None of the students who had experience with correspondence or tablet-only courses preferred it to in-person classes. Monty, a first-year, who had done correspondence work, said, “I applied so I could actually get the hands-on experience of actually being in a classroom, actually having peers that you can discuss and work on things with. And being able to get better interaction with your professors and real feedback.” Joaquin said, “Anyone can pick up a book, and read, and break it down…But you get a lot more from reading that book and breaking it down as a group, like we do here.” He went on to say, “I think you get more from the experience of us sharing interaction with the professor…I think that’s the important part…the interaction we get from class.”

Other students stated that the ability to make connections with people and build new communities is a reason for their enrollment in the college. Hector, an upper-class student, was from the town where the main campus is located. He said, “I knew that if I was to join this program that I would eventually brush shoulders with people that are from my community, right?” And Daryl, another upper-class student, said, “I think that’s going to be a big reason why I won’t return to prison. It’s not only do I have a degree, but I have that support system out there in the world too.” Students showed a keen awareness of the hurdles facing them when they return to their communities. And they recognized the value of creating community connections *before* they re-enter society.

Community building does not have to wait for re-entry into society. Students mentioned camaraderie and support within the prison as beneficial in the present. Samuel, nearing completion of his BA, also had previous correspondence experience. He said, “This was a difference for me when I came into this college. I had the camaraderie of the men here and they were willing to help me to get through certain subjects. And we always was (sic) sitting around with each other. And like, ‘What’s the next step? What’s the plan for when we get out?’” This support can be crucial for students inside and out.

The college also offers students the ability to practice healthy forms of attachment and care within the prison that will be vital outside. When asked where they turn for help, students in every focus group answered that they turned to their peers. This was true for upper-class as well as first-year students. When they need help, they turn to each other. This is partly a matter of resources. Students noted that they do not have access to Google or research databases, so they must utilize other arenas of information, such as professors and their peers. However, students also pointed out that time with professors is severely limited, making student networks the primary arena for them to gain knowledge and support. As Amari described it, "It's not about you coming to college thinking you're smarter than the next person or trying to compete…No. We are all a community for a reason. We're here for a reason." Martin said, "I feel like everyone in prison has a circle of people that they're involved with. And no matter how big or how small that circle is, that's who I turn to when I need help."

A circle offers an interesting juxtaposition to the notoriously hierarchical prison culture. Students in the college described healthy networks based on mutuality and respect. Students reported creating healthy micro-communities that could serve them outside of the prison. Upon release, students leverage the communities they create inside for tangible support with housing, jobs, and transportation. However, students also talked about more intangible benefits, like emotional support prior to and upon release and having ready-made support systems in the community that continue to affirm them as students and community members, not prisoners or offenders. These micro-communities also serve an important function within the prison that should not be overlooked. It offers students opportunities to support one another, to be vulnerable with one another, and to create new and positive identities for themselves. Jacob described his community as follows: "This is a unique situation, being in prison and being men asking for help…One thing that is present is that we've built relationships with each other on a different level…because we've been around each other for so long." The value of their education goes far beyond critical thinking skills or even personal growth into opportunities to build healthy, affirming relationships in a notoriously asocial space.

This college also offers students a chance to engage in mentoring activities that help upper-class students expand on the skills they have learned and transmit the values of the community they have created to the next cohort of students. Hector described it as follows:

> Peer support's a big thing. I remember coming in as a freshman, feeling a little overwhelmed at times. And it's like how do I write this paper? And then upperclassmen would help out. Now we have freshmen coming in, so now we're helping them out. It's like a progression. You should always be mentoring somebody and somebody should always be mentoring others, helping each other rise up.

This sort of reciprocal relationship is a healthy way for incarcerated students to practice healthy relationship styles that could help them succeed on the outside, but more studies of re-entry are necessary to understand the full value of higher education in prison in areas unrelated to educational outcomes. Students within this program experienced the value of these relationships in immediate and tangible ways as they navigated life within the prison and the rigors of obtaining an education. One student described this as learning from someone “in my shoes.” Another student said that, particularly in technical fields like math, younger professors sometimes cannot teach in ways accessible to the whole class. Peer mentors can be a means of both academic and emotional support.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the value of a liberal arts undergraduate education for individuals while they are incarcerated. Specifically, we explored three questions:

1. If, or when, does ‘transformation’ begin in an educational environment?
2. Who, or what, is being transformed?
3. By what methods can that transformation be measured?

We conducted our research in a small liberal arts college at a correctional facility in the Midwest; over 90% of the incarcerated student body participated in the study during the academic year of data collection. Quantitative results yielded no significant differences between first-year and upper-class students, although four statistical trends emerged. We found one particular finding interesting and worthy of further investigation. Although we hypothesized that upper-class students would be more hopeful than first-year students, we did not find this to be the case. Our data suggests that simply being admitted into the college makes students hopeful about their future, as hopeful as students who have been in the college for several years. Anecdotally, we have noticed that as students anticipate graduation and potential transfer or release, their anxiety increases. This is especially true of alums who are going home; anxiety about impending release seems to trump all other emotions—for better or worse.

The focus group data revealed that students discussed their educational experiences, ways they found and offered support within the prison, and how their education helped them meet their personal goals. Their answers highlighted the value of a liberal arts education and showed how students utilized their classwork to create cooperative, supportive communities within the prison space. Our findings suggest great value in a liberal arts education for ‘returning citizens’ and individuals during their incarceration.

Education, from the student’s perspective, is not a passive experience. Nor is education responsible for giving people drive, determination, or goals. Our qualitative data suggest that education can provide students with the tools they need to achieve their goals, as well as offer new ways of understanding themselves and the world that can enlarge their perspectives and even their dreams. In order to accomplish that, students must be empowered throughout the educational process. Administrators and educators must view their students as partners, not vessels, in the educational experience. The outcomes can be truly transformational, but only if the *educational* experience provides space for the personal goals of its students in the process.

Our sample size was small, which likely affected our statistical power. More research is also necessary to evaluate HEP's personal and social impact, a topic we will discuss in the next section. However, from our experiences with surveys and focus groups, we can begin to answer our three research questions. Based on our study, we argue that ‘transformation’ is a legitimate if challenging category of analysis and that ‘transformation’ does occur. However, HEP administrators must avoid transferring their own ideas of ‘transformation’ onto students. Students often enter HEP with their own goals for either personal or social transformation. Making assumptions about students and creating goals for students based on these assumptions risks turning HEP into an authoritarian endeavor that inhibits student growth and autonomy. We recommend that programs interested in capturing ‘transformation’ as a category focus on creating the type of environment that allows students to grow and explore by fostering independence and providing opportunities for students to give candid evaluations of their educational experiences.

We found that many focus group discussions of ‘transformation’ dealt with the prison environment as much as the individuals themselves. While much of the discourse of ‘transformation’ focuses on individual transformation, we found the transformation of the prison space to be an interesting and more accessible area to evaluate than individual or personal growth. Evaluating student transformation can be tricky and risks putting students into the difficult situation of trying to please administrators rather than exploring their own transformation process. Evaluating the types of activities best suited to transforming the prison space (segregated dorms, designated education space, opportunities to receive and give support, etc.) is a more accessible and safer approach. It puts the onus for change on the college, not incarcerated individuals.

Having a school within the prison can create new opportunities that may not be possible in the general prison space. The school can be a place of student-led transformation, but administrators must actively invest in building a firm foundation for that sort of growth. To do that, we have several recommendations. The first is the designated space. Having this clearly delineated physical space is an important prerequisite for community formation. In order to develop a community, individuals must come together with shared goals and values. If other people from the general population are allowed access to this space without regulation, it could limit the value of the liberal arts experience by forcing students to conform to the normal ‘rules’ of prison rather than the liberty of college. In addition, new tools for measuring student engagement will be necessary as administrators work to ‘transform’ the prison space in ways that allow students the freedom to explore, grow, and learn. However, we highly recommend that administrators and

DOC officials create a separate place for the college that is only open to students and, as much as possible, place all of the college students in the same dormitory or living environment.

Finally, we found that an in-person liberal arts education provides a solid foundation for creating a transformative environment and allowing students the space to make and meet their personal goals. Classes that promote critical thinking and encourage differing perspectives are core to a liberal arts education and allow students to connect their experiences to the wider world, as well as construct and understand their own identities within and (hopefully) outside the prison. Our discussions with students suggest in-person classes are important for creating a transformative learning environment. Interaction with professors was an important element of this college education, and it was a draw for some students.

Similarly, the opportunity to mentor and work with one another outside of class is all-important to creating healthy attachments and communities. The college proactively fosters mentorship through a Writing Center staffed by upper-class students. Students who excel in particular subjects are trained by college staff to serve as tutors who help other students. This creates opportunities for high-achieving students to advance their knowledge and skill set through tutoring and helps other students hone their own skills. This peer support is especially important for students who historically have had negative experiences with people in positions of authority. Incarcerated students might need some time and positive experiences with professors to see them as a resource not connected to corrections. Some students said working with fellow students rather than professors was easier.

In summary, we found that students often bring a desire for personal growth into the program, and it was not something that was placed on them by outside sources within the college. Administrators should focus their attention on creating the kind of liberating environment that allows students to affect their own transformation. An important way to lay the foundation for personal transformation is to focus on transforming the prison space itself, especially by creating educational and living spaces only for college students. This can facilitate healthy interpersonal relationships between students that will support them within and outside of the prison. The benefits of these relationships can be as tangible as finding housing, obtaining employment, or seeking references, to more intangible aspects such as having people who hope and believe in them. We recognize that some of these recommendations are outside of the scope of the college and depend on DOC's cooperation.

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge the limitations of our study and the need for more research on this topic. Our sample size was small, and we consider this more exploratory than definitive. We were hurt by pandemic delays, and the lack of released alumni representation limits our ability to connect transformation within the prison to outcomes outside. Much more comparative research is necessary on the types of education offered within prison—particularly studies between in-person and online education—before we can make strong contentions about ideal education delivery. Our experiences trying to capture student experiences through surveys suggest that colleges-in-prison need specific scales designed to measure student engagement, and we have been working with colleagues to design such measures.[vi]

Transformation can be difficult to measure and a challenging goal for colleges to achieve. What educators or administrators want to ‘improve’ in students may be different than what students change or improve within themselves. Faculty and administrators need to avoid placing classist, racist, or political notions of self-improvement and transformation on students. Instead, college administrators can focus on intentionally transforming the prison and educational space into something truly liberatory. In-person liberal arts education is ideally suited to the type of lessons that can transform penal spaces and offer opportunities for healthy relationship building and community formation.

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Appendix A

Actively Open-Minded Thinking Scale

Openness Values Facet

1. Believe in the importance of art.
2. Have a vivid imagination.
3. Carry the conversation to a higher level.
4. Enjoy hearing new ideas.
5. Am not interested in abstract ideas. (R)
6. Do not like art. (R)
7. Avoid philosophical discussions. (R)
8. Do not enjoy going to art museums. (R)

Items on the Flexible Thinking Subscale

1. Changing your mind is a sign of weakness. (R)
2. A person should always consider new possibilities.
3. Intuition is the best guide in making decisions. (R)
4. If I think longer about a problem I will more likely solve it.
5. Basically, I know everything I need to know about the important things in life. (R)
6. Considering too many different opinions often leads to bad decisions. (R)
7. People should always take into consideration evidence that goes against their beliefs.
8. Difficulties can usually be overcome by thinking about the problem, rather than through waiting for good fortune.
9. There is nothing wrong with being undecided about many issues.
10. Coming to decisions quickly is a sign of wisdom. (R)

Items on the Belief Identification Subscale

1. What beliefs you hold have more to do with your own personal character than the experiences that may have given rise to them.
2. It is a noble thing when someone holds the same beliefs as their parents.
3. One should disregard evidence that conflicts with your established beliefs.
4. Someone who attacks my beliefs is not insulting me personally. (R)
5. It is important to persevere in your beliefs even when evidence is brought to bear against them.
6. Certain beliefs are just too important to abandon no matter how good a case can be made against them.

7. Abandoning a previous belief is a sign of strong character. (R)
8. Beliefs should always be revised in response to new information or evidence. (R)
9. It makes me happy and proud when someone famous holds the same beliefs that I do.

Items on the Dogmatism Subscale

1. Of all the different philosophies which exist in the world there is probably only one which is correct.
2. Even though freedom of speech for all groups is a worthwhile goal, it is unfortunately necessary to restrict the freedom of certain political groups.
3. There are two kinds of people in this world: those who are for the truth and those who are against the truth.
4. Often, when people criticize me, they don't have their facts straight.
5. No one can talk me out of something I know is right.
6. A group which tolerates too much difference of opinion among its members cannot exist for long.
7. There are a number of people I have come to hate because of the things they stand for.
8. My blood boils over whenever a person stubbornly refuses to admit he's wrong.
9. Most people just don't know what's good for them.

Appendix B

Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire

1. I do volunteer work.
2. I am involved in my community.
3. I participate in a community action program (ex. service days, community organizations, PTAs, etc.)
4. I am an active member of my community.
5. In the future, I plan to participate in a community service organization.
6. I help others who are having a difficult time.
7. I am committed to making a positive difference.
8. I am involved in programs to help clean up the environment.
9. I can listen to other people’s opinions.
10. I can work cooperatively with a group of people.
11. I can think logically when solving problems.
12. I can communicate well with others.
13. I can successfully resolve conflicts with others.
14. I can easily get along with people.
15. I try to find effective ways of solving problems.
16. When trying to understand the position of others, I try to place myself in their position.
17. I find it easy to make friends.
18. I can think analytically when solving problems.
19. I try to place myself in the place of others in trying to assess their current situation.
20. It is hard for a group to function effectively when the people involved come from very diverse backgrounds. (R)
21. I prefer the company of people who are very similar to me in background and viewpoints. (R)
22. I find it difficult to relate to people from a different race or culture. (R)
23. I enjoy meeting people who come from backgrounds very different from my own.
24. Cultural diversity within a group makes the group more interesting and effective.

Appendix C

Adult Hope Scale

1. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.
2. I energetically pursue my goals.
3. I feel tired most of the time. (R)
4. There are lots of ways around any problem.
5. I am easily downed in an argument. (R)
6. I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me.
7. I worry about my health. (R)
8. Even when others get discouraged, I know that I can find a way to solve the problem.
9. My past experiences have prepared me well for the future.
10. I've been pretty successful in life.
11. I usually find myself worrying about something. (R)
12. I meet the goals that I set form myself.

Appendix D

Sense of Belonging Scale

1. I have met with classmates outside of class to study for an exam.
2. If I miss class, I know students who I could get notes from.
3. I discuss events which happened outside of class with my classmates.
4. I have discussed personal matters with students who I met in class.
5. I could contact another student from class if I had a question.
6. Other students are helpful in reminding me when assignments are due or when tests are approaching.
7. I have developed personal relationships with other students in class.
8. I invite people I know from class to do things socially.
9. I feel comfortable contributing to class discussions.
10. I feel comfortable asking a question in class.
11. I feel comfortable volunteering ideas or opinions in class.
12. Speaking in class is easy because I feel comfortable.
13. It is difficult to meet other student in class.
14. No one in my classes knows anything personal about me.
15. I rarely talk to other students in my class.
16. I know very few people in my class.
17. I feel comfortable talking about a problem with faculty.
18. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help if I do not understand course-related material.
19. I feel that a faculty member would be sensitive to my difficulties if I shared them.
20. I feel comfortable socializing with a faculty member outside of class.
21. I feel that a faculty member would be sympathetic if I was upset.
22. I feel that a faculty member would take the time to talk to me if I needed help.
23. If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a faculty member outside of class time (office hours etc.).
24. I feel comfortable seeking help from a teacher before or after class.
25. I feel that a faculty member really tried to understand my problem when I talked about it.
26. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help with a personal problem.

Appendix D

Student Focus Group Questions

Civic Engagement Questions:

1. Describe your awareness of current events and issues facing the nation.
2. Have you taken a course that informed your awareness of current events or issues facing your community?
3. Would you like to be involved in the political process?

*Adapted from the CASQ

Student Engagement Questions:

1. Why did you apply to college?
2. Do you feel like you work hard inside and outside class?
3. If you are having trouble in school, how do you go about understanding the information?
4. Who do you turn to for help?
5. How would you describe your participation in class?

*Adapted from the Student Engagement Metric by Lam et. al.

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. Why do people fail at school?
2. Why do people return to prison after being released?

*Adapted from Sa´et. al. (2004)

Time Management Questions:

1. Tell us about your time management skills?
2. How do you go about turning in your assignments on time?
3. How do you prioritize your responsibilities?

Other

1. Did you ever have a class canceled due to a lockdown or for any other reason?
2. Were you ever unable to complete a class due to the correctional facility environment? (Please explain.)
3. Did you ever have a class change its format due to a lockdown or for any other reason?

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[i] We would argue that for many incarcerated people, this ‘bringing back to society,’ if it does indeed occur, could more accurately be viewed as their first entrance into society. For many incarcerated people, poverty, trauma, abuse, and inadequate social services barred them from taking part in society early on in their social development. A

colleague of ours once observed that for many, education in prison was not a ‘second chance’ but rather a first chance for many of the students we encounter.

[ii] We differentiate between ‘education in prison’–which is controlled by the college or non-profit and not tied to DOC goals–and ‘prison education’—which we define as education or programming which is offered by the DOC and conforms to DOC priorities.

[iii] We want to acknowledge the need for more studies of student outcomes upon release. We have begun a study to conduct these same surveys and focus groups with students upon release, but we have not had enough participants to make any generalization.

[iv] We found the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (Moely, et al., 2002) to be the most helpful tool, but there were limitations since it was not designed for use within the prison.

[v] During this study non-students were also housed in that dorm space. Post-pandemic admissions have enabled the college to fill the dorm with all college students, so it is no longer the case that non-college students reside with college students. In our interviews, students raised issues with non-students living in the dorm space. Students complained that their study time and goals were not respected and they faced taunting and interruption from other incarcerated people who were not part of the school undermining the closed space the school sought to create.

[vi] We have worked on such a scale with colleagues at the Center for Postsecondary Research (IU Bloomington) and the Center for Community College Student Success (UT Austin). This project is in the early stages of development, but we are hopeful the new scale will fill a key data gap for colleges in prison (Bolig, M., Gonyea, R., & Seroczynski, A.D., 2023).