Sponsoring Support: Community Colleges Influencing Returning Citizens

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Community colleges are gateways to employment for many students, including underrepresented populations. One group who has received little to no attention in the community college research literature is the formerly incarcerated, known as returning citizens—one of the most marginalized and yet motivated groups of students. Robust social support is needed for returning citizens to manage the re-entry process. This literature review gives an overview of the importance of social support for ex-offenders. By examining literature from three disciplines—criminal justice, sociology, and communication as well as experiences from formerly incarcerated students—this article summarizes the needs of returning citizens students and specifically identifies the community college campus and resources as a solution. This article concludes that community colleges are one of the most sensible organizations to assist returning citizens pursuing success. Offering classes and advising is not enough; social support is critical to the re-entry process. Community colleges collaborating with government agencies and non-profit organizations will support completing students, lowering recidivism rates, and fostering civically responsible communities.

Keywords: social support, returning citizens, community college

Introduction

As an African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." A significant portion of any community college mission is to support the community, which requires collaboration and clear communication. Any endeavor done well unites parties who share the same purpose. Today, more than 600,000 people are released from prison and jails each year in the United States, and the chances of them returning to prison are up to 40% within three years if they are without appropriate housing, sufficient employment, and a steady support network (Carson et al., 2018). Community resources and a returning citizen's family and friends *might* be enough to keep some of them thriving. However, many of these motivated women and men are without those resources and, most importantly, without a social support system that allows them to move forward in ways most take for granted. Joan Petersilia (2003), a leader in the discussion of criminal justice since the 60s, substantial social support is one of the determining factors in lowering recidivism rates. Since education and employment are powerful factors for success as well, returning citizens are likely to need community colleges. Returning citizens are generally first-generation, low-income students facing high rates of illiteracy, mental and emotional disorders, and learning challenges (2003). Health scholars concur that "support, validation, and assistance we receive from our social network members can have considerable influence on our mental and physical health" (Wright et al., 2014, p. 82). As such, educational institutions may find additional opportunities to serve the community by building a strong, qualified and healthy workforce of returning citizens.

Literature Review

Challenges Facing Returning Citizens

The challenges for a person re-entering society from prison are many, and success is not the norm. Therefore, dodging recidivism is the first hardship for an ex-offender. An unfortunate truth in almost any city in the United States is that the justice system and the societal counterparts are not collaborating (Valera et al., 2017). The most important predictors of recidivism are employment, age, and education level (Nally & Lockwood, 2012). Many resources report the asset of education for an inmate

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while incarcerated; those who participate lower their odds of recidivism by 43% less than those who do not participate in education (Chen, 2015; Irving, 2016; Mastrorilli et al., 2016). In addition to housing and employment, statistics of education and skill levels report that both men and women need educational services upon release.

Offenders usually enter prisons from toxic social networks, so most ex-offenders need to create a new support system that allows them to gain social capital by utilizing networks of people and agencies (Opsal & Foley, 2013). "Social capital reflects the depth and extent of social bonds, connections and ties as well as the embeddedness of individuals in relationships of trust and their integration into the participatory structures of civil society" (Brown & Ross, 2010, p. 220). Studies link desistance of crime with positive family relationships, but all relationships matter, not just family. And given these stable relationships, returning citizens tend to make good or better choices when a negative behavior might threaten the strength of the supportive relationship (Jardine, 2017).

Because so many ex-offenders leave prison without support networks, public policies and systems are overwhelming and can lead to immediate failure. Without proper housing, transportation and supportive people helping through these challenges, failure can happen within the first few weeks because of the difficulty completing tasks for survival—things like acquiring identification or a visit to the probation office or food shopping (Denney et al., 2014). The most trying task is to gain employment with wages substantial enough to provide safe housing and basic needs. The label of felon and possible lack of skills make employment difficult at best.

Opsal & Foley (2013). Also found many women, more than men, do not return to their families or secure housing due to previous victimization and substance abuse; therefore, women experience more frequent homelessness. Additionally, women tend to be less educated and with fewer employable skills than men and make lower wages In addition, invisible costs like depression and anxiety, loneliness, unhealthy relationships, and low self-esteem exist as the returning citizen struggles to subsist (Denney et al., 2014).

During incarceration, an inmate's dignity is stripped, and normal interactions are removed. Therefore, the damage to a person's sense of self is in need of repair as well as the ability to build and maintain relationships (Middlemass, 2017). Women, especially, often leave prison without any relationships intact (Jardine, 2017). Relationships, according to scholars across multiple disciplines, (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Brown & Ross, 2010; Marcus, 2014; O'Brien, 2001) may be the best source of life fulfillment at all ages and stages of life. In studying the imbalance of needs to resources, experts find inmates are "developmentally frozen" and lose their identification with normal ways of living because of identifying with a subculture (Helfgott, 1997, p. 21). Consequently, the pathways most citizens find simple are much more taxing for those after incarceration.

Social Support Up Close

Researchers in criminal justice as well as sociology have recognized the importance of social support. The communication field defines social support as conduct used for the purpose of aiding others who need help (Webb et al., 2015). Social support includes having a neighbor who greets over the fence or family members who help with babysitting or a teacher who offers advice. These supportive resources also include companionship or a person offering financial assistance. Cullen (1999) believes anyone with high levels of social support will be at lower risk for engaging in unruly behavior. Bazemore and Erbe (2003), criminal justice scholars, having strong social relationships can be an incentive for returning citizens to maintain continued support, asset building, and aptitude over situations. Communication scholars also long believe the benefits of social support, trusting that it "enables people to manage the uncertainty associated with stress and to increase a sense of personal control over their environments" (Albrecht et al., 1992, p. 149).

While many factors contribute to recidivism, my experience and research suggests that family and related social support are the most important determinants for successful reentry. "Social support is linked to multiple positive health, mental health, and behavioral outcomes in populations of interest to many

disciplines" (Pettus-Davis et al., 2014, p. 4). Additionally, "positive family support was the top reason for not re-offending" (Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009, p. 326) was stated in a study of gender differences and offender reentry. Hiram (2014) found that stable, supportive family interactions were most associated with successful reintegration and is the strongest predictor of success for both men and women. Social support improves relationships, reduces stress, maintains mental health—all things lacking in a newly released ex-offender's life. Important in the life of a person recovering from incarceration and other traumas, communication scholars endorse social support in this recovery both mentally and physically (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). In addition, a strong social support system provides social capital.

Process of Understanding

Because I have been teaching interpersonal communication inside of a women's prison since 2011, I have heard countless stories of both hope and tragedy. I often note some of the most striking, unsolicited remarks and accounts. After only a short time of interacting with these women, I began writing about my experiences. I also wrote about my impressions of the prison staff and the facility itself. From my experiences of knowing these women through listening in class and reading their assigned coursework, I began to understand more about the plight of the nation's prison system. I began to build relationships with some of the women after their release from prison, and I was stirred to make a difference in helping people understand who these women really are—not just a statistic or a bad person to avoid. I wrote more essays and poems to describe how they came to be behind bars and the effects it had on them. In an effort to share my perspective with those not associated with someone in prison, I created a piece of art so that audiences who were interested in hearing could view the art and understand without listening to a lecture or reading a series of written pages. I asked the women for permission to use words I had written about them, and all of them were eager for me to share with others. In fact, the incarcerated women I interacted with were my most fierce supporters.

Then, I asked formerly incarcerated women who were back in society and leading successful lives to share some of their own words with me. I sent a request through social media to the women I have kept in contact with outside of prison. After someone expressed an interest, I sent a set of question prompts for use in responding. Some of these stories were captured face-to-face and some were shared electronically. I edited the audio to eliminate dead space and phrases causing confusion and tightened the stories' content through editing. Eventually, I was able to incorporate the voices into the art, titled *Revealing Panes, Reflecting Pain* using audio clips loaded onto an iPod Touch which was available next to the visual art piece. These stories and voices have left powerful impressions on audiences including faculty and staff of colleges, church members, community activists and even on the women themselves. When possible, I invite a woman or two to attend speaking engagements with me. Encounters with audiences of all backgrounds are usually met with tears and dropped stereotypes and attentive listening ears. Knowing a story, and more importantly knowing a woman, changes how we understand the world and how we behave.

Returning Citizens Speak

Interviews of ex-offenders provided insight about the need for social support. Ex-offenders said what they desired most was a mentor "to guide them to make everyday decisions, peers with whom to share struggles, and a support system to hold them accountable for their lifestyle and behavior" (Denney et al., 2014, p. 47). Fitting back into society, alone without a friend or two, after years of institutionalization is difficult if not impossible. When I ask returning citizens who have been recently released from prison about the role of family, they report reintegration to only be possible with family assistance. Even those with family by their side say reintegrating is a battle that feels impossible to win (Arnold, 2017).

Prison is a highly-structured system, and civilization outside of the barbed wire fence is not naturally organized. I hear examples of this regularly as I interact with women who have been released

and are struggling to meet all of the obligations of success. For example, Jasmine had been out of prison for several years and was gainfully employed, living in an apartment, and close to finishing a college degree. She stumbled down old paths of negative people and behaviors. Because of this, she quit school, quit her job, and quit making good decisions. One phone call to the right person secured a counseling appointment and the encouragement she needed to get back in school, secure a new job and let go of the negative people and behaviors in her life (Arnold, 2017).

Because of addiction and dysfunction and incarceration, "bridges with family members have often been burned" (Heidemann et al., 2014, p. 537). Lashay's dysfunctional family disengaged after her sentencing because she was no longer valuable to them in providing money. Five years later and upon her release, she opted to live in an unfamiliar city to protect herself from her toxic family. She says without the help of a professor and the family of a friend she met in prison, she would never have managed reentry. Similarly, Linda says: "After being incarcerated for five and a half years, I received no support or encouragement from my family because they were embarrassed of me going to prison." Linda's best friend drove from Florida to Ohio to pick her up from prison and eventually invited her to live in her home. "Without her love and support, I would've been homeless and destitute. When I left prison, I had very little self-esteem and was afraid of everything: every phone call, every decision, every noise, and every knock on the door. I couldn't hold my head up anymore," Linda said (Arnold, 2017).

Filling the Need

Community colleges provide not only education but holistic resources: counseling and accessibility services, tutoring, a variety of clubs to join, veteran services, career counseling, services for the LGBTQ community and some provide an early childhood education center. Community colleges have the potential to fulfill many of the needs of students who are leaving prisons with and without support systems.

Education and Job Placement

Limited or no educational background impedes employment for a returning citizen; therefore, a community college is a welcomed service. Returning citizens must have jobs, and community colleges specialize in educating for the jobs that are available in the local region. Community colleges are in the business of decreasing unemployment and raising earning potential (Middlemass, 2017). Not only do classes, counselors, and job fairs assist in finding jobs, but the social network a student can grow while on campus can help him or her secure a job. Anita, who is incarcerated and enrolled in college classes, has realized she can be a student and learn just like everyone else. After years of prostituting and catering to others she said, "I was a hood rat and now I'm a scholar" (Arnold, 2017).

Social Capital

The student body as well as faculty, staff and administrators offer a built-in social network for returning citizens who are so often in need of the network that exists within any community college (Middlemass, 2017). "The three most important words for ex-offenders are relationships, relationships, relationships," says Krannich (2015, p. 19) who specializes in advising people on career choices. Because of previous dysfunctional and unhealthy relationships, returning citizens need to not only learn how to build trust but to build good connections for resources. "Creating a web of social relations is intrinsic to developing an enabling environment niche for women in transition from prison" (O'Brien, 2001, p. 64). Long-standing communication research views relational support as "critical to handling life stress, crisis, transition," and more (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, p. 3). Community colleges bring a variety of people together with a common goal; the student intending to cultivate social capital can build relationships on campus. And therefore, create a network which may allow them to find jobs (Krannich, 2015).

Building Self-Esteem

Ex-offenders need a way to raise their self-esteem and realize their own abilities. Interviews with inmates tell of "how a teacher in the prison influenced them, gave them confidence, and encouraged them to obtain an academic degree upon release. They also related how their educational success contributed significantly to their self-esteem and hope for themselves" (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013, p. 142). An example is Amy who realized after taking a few classes while she was incarcerated that she had no idea who she was; she spent her life up to that point pleasing others and changing who she was to meet every occasion. Upon release, she valued herself more than ever before and knew she could conquer the reentry process with her newfound confidence (Arnold, 2017).

A lack of connection with key individuals who are valuable sources of information and support may negatively impact a student's ability to remain enrolled in college. For instance, Kayla left prison and immediately enrolled at the local community college. She enjoyed classes and the normalcy of the structure the college offered. However, outside issues arose, and she found herself homeless and unable to attend class for several weeks. If she had utilized campus resources, she might have been able to avoid absences. Furthermore, research shows that community college leaders recognize that the resulting sense of shame a student feels may lead to isolation, which further discourages students from seeking out relationships with peers and instructors (McNair et al., 2018). Therefore, those campus connections can be life changing.

Faith-Based Support

With religious initiatives and offices of faith becoming more popular on community college campuses, college chaplains and campus ministries should not be left out of this conversation. Communities across the globe utilize faith-based organizations to assist with the reentry process. Interviewed inmates and released offenders tell how faith-based ministries can help with the emotional upset of being without family support (Denney et al., 2014). A study conducted at Wheaton College, providing full tuition for returning citizens, expressed the importance of faith in the students' success at transitioning back into society. Students believed faith balanced perceived liabilities and to allow persistence (Leary, 2018). Knowing how clergy who visit prisons become valuable to inmates, I can attest to the frequent result of assistance for the offender on the "outside." Clergy and their staff provide social relationships and advice to returning citizens and often help after release with housing and employment and social support through people of faith (Arnold, 2017). This strong connection can be mirrored on most community college campuses that provide an office of faith. Mentors and a support system give returning citizens a sense of what is normal and speak a story of survival and hope (O'Brien, 2001).

Place of Inclusion and Safe Space

A sense of belonging is fundamental to a human's existence. College students seek belonging on college campuses in a variety of ways, especially if the students are in transition (Strayhorn, 2023). Community college research reveals when students feel a sense of belonging, then students feel a greater commitment to the institution and persistence to completion (Tovar, 2013). One returning citizen interviewed said a supportive community builds a sense of inclusion, which in turns builds self-perception (Hartnett et al., 2013). Other interviewees reported wanting to be loved and respected and free to spend time in a place with positive vibes. Those interviewed enjoyed professors and others who came into the prison to make connections and talk to them about something other than their criminal issues (Denney et al., 2014). Community colleges with opportunity to teach classes inside the prison can provide a sense of belonging to a campus before the student even reaches the campus outside the prison.

In my own experience with ex-offenders, one woman released from prison found a "home" in attending college. Though not the strongest student, Zaphora found satisfaction in navigating the campus and having a place where others knew her name (Arnold, 2017). This sense of autonomy is a necessary skill

for returning citizens (Burch 2016), the ability to be in control and make a route of action. Returning citizens need a safe space to make decisions and successfully navigate a system; community colleges can provide that space for healing from the trauma of incarceration and violence at home.

Service Learning and Volunteering Opportunities

Much of the literature suggests that formerly incarcerated people can combat the stigma and stereotypes of being labeled a felon by giving back to the community (Hartnett et al., 2013; Hinck et al., 2007). In addition to work and family, an area of identity transformation for returning prisoners is that of a responsible citizen which includes civic participation like voting, volunteer work, giving back, and neighborhood involvement (Fisher & Travis, 2003). Colleges that provide co-curricular activities, whether an honor society or a chess club, furnish occasions for giving back to a community. An opportunity for community-based service which reduces stereotypes of returning citizens is a college offering a service learning component as part of the learning experience while advancing curriculum.

Peer Support

Work in criminal justice research reports the best support peers for returning citizens are those who have experienced similar issues (Denney et al., 2014). Research that evaluates mentoring programs relates most failures to matching mentors with those who were not natural friends and could not understand a person's background and situation. Returning citizens prefer to be mentored by someone who has been in prison himself/herself (Brown & Ross, 2010). "Formerly incarcerated women's peers provide a great amount of support in the form of encouragement to keep going, a listening ear, and being there when they are in need" (Heidemann et al., 2014, p. 535). They welcome one another when entering a new program and establish a sense of camaraderie. This mutual understanding and sense of co-recovery means restoration may be more helpful to women than the support their family members and pre-prison friends are able to offer (Heidemann et al., 2014). Community colleges can connect people being released with those who have learned to live well after release as a way to inspire and stop recidivism. Decision makers and policy changers must believe that ex-offenders know how best to help. Research indicates that peers mentoring peers in prison is one of the most effective ways of offering support. In addition, recidivism who were involved in peer mentoring were less likely to recidivate (Walby, 2021). Mentoring does work to reduce recidivism and enable fruitful reintegration if ex-offenders are allowed to tell what is needed (Koschmann & Peterson, 2013).

What is Happening in Community Colleges Now?

Every person released from prison needs assistance, indifferent of the crime committed or the number of years served or the color of the skin or net worth. With more state and national funding, colleges are making strides to provide classes inside of prisons which *is* reducing recidivism. But more funding is needed. "As the U.S. labor force requires more people with college degrees and certificates, some colleges and states consider incarcerated people a largely untapped work-force resource that could help increase educational attainment rates overall" (Smith, 2018, para. 26). Currently, community college websites offer little to no evident of social support services for formerly incarcerated students. Most community colleges are open to ex-offenders registering as a student, but lack resources of social support for the often unidentified, returning citizen population.

A few community colleges are attempting to create programs that offer stable social support for returning citizens. In email responses from the 19 League for Innovations Board Colleges, two colleges are providing social support to returning citizens. Seattle Central College finds success in a mentoring program between ex-offenders and work-study students, while San Diego City College incorporates a learning community to build trust and support as well as co-curricular activities for returning citizens. Mentoring continuously shows positive relational benefits like assistance with references, government

paperwork, housing, court hearings, and similar processes (Leverentz, 2016). Most colleges provide assistance in the college application and financial aid processes as well as access to direct and indirect support services, specifically targeting returning citizens. Kansas City Kansas Community College is learning that re-entry is not an easy process and is participating in a role-playing simulation in the hope of making an effort to ease the process for returning citizens. Metropolitan Community College in Nebraska provides mentors, a clothing and food pantry and a job center. The state of Washington offers help with housing, groceries, daycare, and mentoring (Affordable Colleges Online, 2019). But more community colleges need to direct efforts toward this population. The Lumina Foundation interviewed Dennis Littky, a nationally known educator, who said, "Everyone says we have to be college ready. What we're saying is that colleges need to be student-ready" (as cited in Focus, 2016, p. 4).

Community Colleges Are the Answer

Community colleges serve at multiple levels in every state in the nation—training the workforce, preparing students for college, educating for careers, grooming students to transfer to four-year universities, and providing community enrichment programs. According to the Community College Resource Center (2019), 5.8 million students were enrolled in public community colleges in the fall of 2017. Millions of citizens are being shaped by the critical functions of a community college. In times of economic downturn, Americans have looked to community colleges for help. The purpose of community colleges has evolved through the years, and they should reflect the changes needed as our society continues to transform.

In addition to enrolling returning citizens and advising them through the college processes, the community college must provide strategies of social support to retain students and guarantee completion as well as productivity in society. Research of social support abounds and so do approaches; colleges must find the right fit for its students and their needs. Non-profit organizations and counties cannot bear all the burdens of reintegrating all of the 10,000 people released from prison each week (United States Department of Justice, 2019). Community colleges have systems in place and educated employees and wide-spread networks that enable them to assist the returning citizen population. Because the community college is approachable to both traditional and nontraditional students and boasts of low cost and flexibility, returning citizens fit well into the community college profile. The returning citizen population needs a welcoming entity that can assist with an economic payoff but also a positive appreciation for the desire to work and to move our communities forward.

Consequences

Without forward motion, communities suffer consequences. Communities across the continent face continued negative outcomes if agencies and institutions do not develop programs to assist formerly incarcerated individuals. The recidivism rates will persist, and communities will be filled with more and more underemployed and unemployable people. Crime of all kinds and drug use will continue, and the cycle will remain unbroken. The childhood traumas—substance abuse, neglect, and transient caregivers—causing many of the poor habits of today's inmates—will continue to infect our neighborhoods, schools, employment rates, and productivity. Failure of agencies to collaborate and exist only in silos will make it difficult or near impossible for returning citizens to participate fully in what is offered. "A felony conviction restricts social interactions and hinders felons' efforts to reintegrate into society because there is no equivalent curb ramp" (Middlemass, 2017, p. 2).

Considering all of the barriers, returning citizens need multiple arms of support in order to overcome those challenges and policies keeping them in failure. Employment helps develop life skills, strengthens self-esteem and makes social connections (Middlemass, 2017). Re-creating the support system to replace the toxic living situations from which men and particularly women come. "Support systems can function as a cushion to assist former felons in coping with the challenges that arise as they reintegrate into their communities and in developing the human capital that is necessary to overcome

adverse situations" (Opsal & Foley, 2013, p. 271). With the release of thousands of people in each state every year, communities can benefit by providing second-chance employment and avoiding the stereotypes and stigmas to provide a productive and positive society. Financially, it is more beneficial to help rather than hinder progress. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy reports for every one dollar spent on correctional education, the state of Washington saved $20 (Schaffhauser, 2017). All areas of incarceration need reform; however, Petersilia suggests needed changes in not only the in-prison education and release practices but also collaborations within the community after prisoners are released (2003).

Conclusion

Investing effort into future research focusing on how community colleges can best support returning citizens, thereby reducing recidivism and lowering unemployment rates, should be a goal of a community college. Community college staff should investigate strategies for creating those curb ramps—entry points at agencies and in communities—for returning citizens. Much research exists on what is good and what is possible, but little effort is being exerted on the practice of these methods on a community college campus. Communication, social work, and criminal justice disciplines point to the same basic principles of support—most of which are effective tools for retaining students of all identities. Mentoring programs work to retain African American men. Support groups aid students challenged by addiction. And social and educational programs aim to reduce bullying and violence in the LGBTQ community. Given all of the options of supporting returning citizens, none of them produce any negative outcomes—only positive ones in addition to *possible* success in completing degrees, staying out of prison, and communities filled with productive employees and civically responsible neighbors.

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